

Give God's Word First Place

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." NRS Joshua 1:8-9

Over the years I have collected many copies of the Bible in different translations. Perhaps you have done the same and now have many Bibles at home that you no longer use. Do you think our stacks of Bibles and the number of different translations we have are directly proportional to the importance we place on God's Word? Today I want to talk to you about the importance of God's Word. The Scriptures are clear that our main concern as Christians is God's Word. Our life is built upon that Word. So we need to give God's Word first place in our life.

This need to give God's Word first place in our life is highlighted by the arrangement of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. The Jews arrange the Scriptures a bit differently than in our Christian Bibles. They use the acronym TaNaK for the Scriptures. That word is made up of "T" for Torah or Law; "N" for Nebiim or Prophets; and "K" for Kethubim or Writings. So there are three divisions, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, the Tanak.

First comes the Torah, the 5 books of Moses or the Pentateuch. It's the foundation of the life and faith of the people of Israel. Although the Hebrew word Torah is usually translated 'law', Torah really has the broader meaning of 'instruction'. The Torah is much more than law. It begins with the creation of the universe and ends with the death of Moses. It establishes the nation of Israel as God's people, as his witnesses in the world and defines his relationship to them. The Torah is to the Old Testament what the Gospels are to the New. So it makes sense that, in the Torah, Moses says to the people of God, *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."* Deut 6:4-9. Definitely not a matter of secondary importance!

The second division of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Prophets. The Prophets begin with the book of Joshua and these words: *This book of the law [Torah] shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.*

The Writings or third division of the Jewish Canon begin with the Psalms and these words: *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law [Torah] of the LORD, and on his law [Torah] they meditate day and night.* Ps 1:1-2. So then, both the Prophets and the Writings begin with the exhortation to meditate on the

Torah day and night, that is, to ponder God's Word at all times, in all places and in all situations. So you see, the very order of the Hebrew Scriptures highlights the importance of God's Word. It tells us that the Torah was the source and norm for Israel's faith and practice, and that they were to give God's Word first place in their lives.

Has anything changed? Not really. In his instruction to his disciples, his Torah, Jesus says, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* Matthew 5:17-19.

After his resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he said, *"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.* Luke 24:25-27.

Then to all the disciples he said, *"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.* Luke 24:44-48.

How important then is God's Word? It's only the key to knowing and understanding everything that Jesus said and did! And so the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation are full of exhortations to hear, learn and obey God's Word. One would think then that we would all take to heart the words spoken to Joshua. *This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.* You'd think we'd all spend a great deal of time studying the Scriptures, that we would give God's Word first place in our lives.

But we often get sidetracked and give our attention to other things. Sometimes those things are *"the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things"* of which Jesus speaks in the Parable of the Sower. They *"choke the word and it yields nothing."* Mark 4:19.

Sometimes those other things are just bad theology, doctrines or practices that somehow become so important to us that they take first place in our thinking over God's Word. I recently read a devotion that spoke not of God's Word but of prayer as the means of progressing in the Faith, of making our way prosperous and being successful in God's eyes. The author said that we learn some about God from nature and history, more from Scripture and most from his revelation in Christ. But the Holy Spirit speaks the most to us when we "climb the mount of prayer!" From his perspective, the happy/blessed people are those who pray the most. (Baxter, *Awake My Heart*, p. 18.)

But what do the Scriptures say? *This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.*

Brothers and sisters, it is easy to get sidetracked and focus on the wrong thing. We all have done it and will do it yet again. I don't mean to belittle the importance of prayer or any other aspect of the Christian life, but it cannot become more important than God's Word. We can't imagine that the Holy Spirit works something greater in us or in the world by means of our prayer than by means of his Word. We must come back to the Word, the living word of God. For there is the Gospel; there is the promise of life and salvation!

Jesus' commission to his church doesn't highlight being "prayer warriors" or exorcists or miracle workers or speakers of so-called tongues. What does the Scripture say? *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* Mat 28:18-20.

That sounds very much to me like what God said to Joshua, *This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*

The truth we must all grasp is that God's Word is the instrument of the Holy Spirit and so the means by which we come to faith, stay in the faith and progress in the faith. The Apostle Peter writes, *You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." That word is the good news that was announced to you. Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.* 1 Peter 1:23-2:3.

So what does this mean for you and me? We need to develop a desire for the Word, a thirst and hunger for the Word. We need to say with David, *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.* Psalm 19:7-11.

With that attitude we need to read or hear that word. I don't mean just the lessons on Sunday morning. We need to make a concerted effort to hear all of the Word! Make time in your schedule to read and meditate on this book of instruction. It's more important than any TV show. Make a plan to hear God's

Word, all of it. Get a reading schedule or a One Year Bible. If you would rather listen than read, download a free audio Bible. Take to heart what you memorised from the Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

As you do that, I urge you to consider those who do not have God's Word in a language they can understand. It's hard to desire what makes no sense. Millions of people for whom Christ suffered, died and rose from the dead, cannot meditate day and night on his Word. So they cannot really know Christ and the path they should walk because Jesus' Torah is in an incomprehensible language. So pray for and support the work of Bible translation.

Brothers and sisters, what more need we say? By the Word of God the universe was formed. By the Word made flesh we have been redeemed. At the Word of God we shall rise to the resurrection! Everything depends on the Word of God. Therefore, *This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*"