



Leadership Letter

Had a good spiritual meal lately?

This month I have asked Wilrens Hornstra to write the leadership letter. He is a member of our retreat team and has been involved in SBS (school of biblical studies) for many years. He has just started to write a monthly letter centred around the word of God.

What do you do to feed yourself spiritually? There is an unfortunate downside to asking this question. Too many of us respond with feelings of guilt. In a way, this is a strange reaction. Most of us will have dinner tonight. Let's assume that for some reason we forget or simply don't get around to it. How would that make us feel? Guilty? Or hungry?

I don't know about you, but I don't do breakfast or lunch so I have fulfilled a duty or an obligation. I do it because I am hungry, because I need energy for the day, and, well, because I like to eat. It does happen that I forget a meal. Sometimes I get so caught up in what I am doing that I lose all sense of time. At two or three in the afternoon Franziska comes home and asks me if I had had lunch yet. The immediate result is that I feel my appetite – not guilt.

So why do I feel differently when I forget to spend time with God? It cannot be his reaction. Whenever I have knocked on his door after missing one or more appointments, I never walked into an atmosphere of offended reproach. I actually felt welcomed and loved.

Apparently, we don't sense our spiritual appetites as keenly as our natural ones. It therefore does take a bit more effort and "intentionality", to use the new buzzword, to stay in shape spiritually. But we do need that intake or we will be weak and ineffective. Busy perhaps, possibly impressively so, but not truly fruitful. In this letter I will focus on one form of spiritual input only: feeding on the word.

Before I get practical, allow me to say something more theoretical, but absolutely foundational. Feeding on God's word is an act of receiving. Our attitude is therefore crucial. It only works if we are open to receive and ready to submit. Our natural tendency is to read for information. This leaves us in control; we decide what is relevant. But the primary aim of reading the Bible or receiving God's word through other channels is not information. As the evangelist D.L. Moody quipped more than a century ago, "The Bible was not given for our information, but for our transformation." (1)

One key passage in the Bible that brings this out is Isaiah 55:1-3a (NIV):

Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me;
hear me, that your soul may live.

Did you notice how many words here have something to do with food or with eating and drinking? Toward the end it becomes clear that all of this is not about filling your stomach. It is an image for listening or hearing what God says. All these words imply receiving. We don't determine what is being said, but we do have influence over how we receive it and respond to it. Unless we aim for total openness, we may miss out.

One place where God speaks is the Bible. It is not the only place, but it is an important one. So when we come to the Bible, this attitude or willingness to

receive is crucial. Without it, there will be no feeding.

Different Ways to Do This: Assuming we come to the text with the right attitude, what can we do? I wonder if one of the reasons why we find it difficult to be more consistent in our Bible reading is that we are trying to follow someone else's recipe. We are all different, and what works great for one person may not work for someone else. We each have to discover our personal preferences and find out what works for us. Here are some possibilities:

- **Meditate on Scripture.** I put this one first, because it can be done even if you have little time and will still produce tremendous gains. What I just shared on Isaiah 55 is an example. Choose a verse or a paragraph and read it through several times. Start asking yourself questions, such as: Who is this about? What does it say? What does this word mean? What do I not understand? If no questions come to mind, ask yourself: what question should I ask about this passage? What does this all of this have to do with me? Keep reading the text. First try to understand what you are reading, then ask God what he wants to communicate to you through the passage. Is there anything he would like you to know or understand more deeply? Anything to change or do? Meditation at its best ends in dialogue – but it is usually God who sets the real agenda (overruling ours).
- As a specific, more structured and traditional form of meditation, practice **Lectio Divina**. *Lectio Divina* literally means divine or godly reading. It is an ancient practice coming out of the monastic tradition. Its purpose is communion with God through the reading of Scripture, meditation, and prayerful response. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, *Lectio Divina* is “the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer [bringing] about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart.” (2)

In its classic form, there are four steps involved:

- *Lectio*: take a moment to calm down and place yourself in God's presence. Read slowly, giving attention to every word and phrase. Does anything stand out or speak to you?
- *Meditatio*: meditate on this word or phrase and 'chew' on it. As you ponder, enter into prayerful dialogue with God, the next step.
- *Oratio*: pray and enter into a conversation with God, sharing your thoughts, asking questions, and listening.
- *Contemplatio*: rest and enjoy God's presence. Adore him and receive what he has for you.

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina as a starting point for more.

- Write out the words you are meditating on; this will force you to really pay attention and notice them.
- Or, as you meditate, put your thoughts and reflections in writing, in the form of a journal. It may help you to keep a wandering mind more focussed.
- Memorize Scripture. Okay, I don't speak with authority on this one; I don't really practice it. And it seems to have gone out of vogue after the 1970s. But – maybe it is back. Some YWAM-ers are going around citing entire books from memory, and for some of us it just might be your 'thing', so I do want to mention it here.
- Read through the whole Bible. Google “bible reading plan” if you'd like a plan or schedule to help you. But be careful: if you have tried this before and failed, it may be wise to aim for something smaller. How about starting with one larger book that you have never read before or that you have not read in a long time?

- Read a different version or even a different language. I'm presently reading the Bible in Spanish in order to improve my Spanish. It is a stretch, and it is sloooooow going. But it also gives me a whole new, fresh reading of, at times, overly familiar passages. Plus, I see things I did not know were there ("does it really say that?"). I love it.
- Who says you have to read by yourself? You may find it easier to read together with others. Start a Bible reading group that meets for an hour or 30 minutes on a particular time of the day or week.
- Who says you have to read? You may find it easier to take the listening literally and look for an audible Bible. Check out [BibleGateway.com's](http://BibleGateway.com) audible Bibles if you'd like to give this a try.
- Read what you read more than once. For instance, choose a short book and read it through from beginning to end every day for a whole week. By then, you will really know what is in this book.
- If you are more creatively inclined: read a passage or a book, and turn it into a painting, a song, or other creative expression.
- Turn what you read into prayer. Can it be reformulated as a blessing for a person who comes to mind, as a plea or intercessory prayer for someone or something, or as a proclamation over a nation, church, organisation, or individual?
- Read a book about the Bible or an issue in biblical studies. Sometimes we get stuck and we fail to get anything out of our reading or studying. At that point it may help to get some fresh input that will unlock new perspectives on old and familiar passages. A good place to start is Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*](#). Or maybe a daily devotional book will help you get unstuck.
- If there is an SBS, BCC, or other Bible course on your base or nearby, why not join them for a study week?
- Study a passage, a book, or a subject you are interested in. This is the most time-consuming alternative, which is why I put it last. For leaders and other busy people: do your study on something you can use for your ministry (perhaps for those base meetings you are scheduled to speak?).

Since I have worked with the SBS for many years, I am of course a fan of inductive Bible study. I realise it is impossible to practice the full SBS method while involved in normal life and ministry. But here is the essence of it, in three simple steps:

Observation: what is in this text? What does it say?

Interpretation: what does this mean?

Application: on the basis of this text, what do I do? How do I respond?

Even with a demanding schedule, it is not impossible to take a verse, a passage (for instance, a Psalm), or perhaps even a small book, and ask yourself these three questions.

The point of this long list is not, of course, that we do all of these. It is to give us a taste of the breadth of possibilities and to get us thinking: what in all this is mine? "...That Your Soul May Live"

Before I close, I would like to add something for SBS staff and others who regularly study and teach the Bible: lucky us! We get to spend time doing this and call it work. But let me restate the warning in the introduction to this letter: it is not enough to study the Bible. By and large, the process of study leaves us in control. It does not require that attitude of listening or receiving I wrote about. It is good and necessary as far as it goes, but it is incomplete. This is true even if we include application as the

third step of inductive Bible study. After all, I may well be acting purely on the basis of *my* understanding, setting goals based on what *I* would like to change. So where does God get to chip in? Therefore, those of us who get to study regularly may not need more study time, but rather need more time to hear and receive. We need to make room to listen and let the word do its work in us. In other words, we need the practice of meditation and reflection next to and on top of our studying.

Let me finish with one more food analogy. When we look back, I am sure there are certain special meals that we remember. They were extraordinary and probably marked special occasions. I think of the buffet at our wedding, my first Christmas in Switzerland, and the pancakes my grandmother used to bake for me as a child. But let's face it, it is not these relatively few special meals that I still remember that enabled me to grow up and become who I am today. (What did you eat on 28 June 1998? I don't remember either.) It is the thousands of meals that I don't remember that made growing up possible.

It is what we do every day that matters most. According to Paul, the word of God is "at work" in us who believe (1 Thess. 2:13). It is wonderfully powerful to accomplish quiet transformations – but only if we give it time. So how about (re-)starting a habit of daily Bible reading and meditation (or whatever you choose to do) – *today*?

Wilrens Hornstra

Wilrens is starting his own blog and training letter in the area of biblical studies at [Create a Learning Site](#). If you'd like, you can sign up for his letter [here](#).

References

(1) At least everyone I have looked at claims D.L. Moody said it, but I have not been able to find a reference for this quote.

(2) Quoted in: Wikipedia, "Lectio Divina" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina 9. Mai 2014.

Disclosure of Material Connection: Some of the links in the post above are "affiliate links." This means if you click on the link and purchase the item, I will receive an affiliate commission.

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