

## **Stoking the Fire Spiritual Practices**

Some years ago my family gave me an outdoor fireplace for Father's Day. It was a great gift that has provided many hours of family enjoyment. Our model looks like a small barbeque with short legs supporting the fire pit. Each summer we buy several cords of logs to stoke the fire.

First, we gather small branches on the ground and use newspaper to light the fire. Then, once the branches catch fire, we start adding larger and larger branches until we can put on a full log. Finally, we periodically put on another log to stoke the fire and keep it going.

Your spiritual life is like the outdoor fireplace. To keep your walk with Christ burning brightly you need to provide fuel in the form of various spiritual practices. You start small, like the branches, and work your way up, like the logs, to additional practices and larger chunks of time.

Growing in Christ – becoming a more mature believer – doesn't just happen by itself. It takes more than weekly attendance at Sunday church services. Being a Christian is a 24/7 lifestyle that requires stoking the fire of desire throughout the week.

I became a Christian through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. The pastor of the church I was attending invited me to an adult Bible study class. The group was reading through a series of small booklets called "Transferable Concepts" that was written by Campus Crusade's president, Dr. Bill Bright.

The first booklet was entitled "How to be Sure You are a Christian." I scoffed at the title since I was positive I was a Christian already. After all, I went to church, put money in the offering plate, prayed before meals and at bedtime, and hadn't committed any felonies. Voila! I was therefore a Christian.

As I read and re-read the booklet, I realized that I believed everything it said about Jesus Christ. But I had never taken a step of faith and asked Him to be my personal Savior and Lord.

I knelt down in my living room and invited Jesus Christ to come into my life and make me His child. Lighting didn't flash and peals of thunder didn't crash; but somehow I knew that my life was different – and it would never be the same again. And it hasn't.

I'm grateful that God used the ministry of Campus Crusade to lead me to Christ. But it was another Christian organization – the Navigators – that helped me grow as a Christian by embedding within me certain spiritual practices. For over 35 years now these spiritual disciplines have been a vital part of my walk with Christ.

In this booklet we'll take a look at some of the most important spiritual practices. There are many others we could examine, but the ones we'll discuss are especially important. They include Bible reading, journaling, prayer, memorization, meditation, and spiritual retreats.

## **Stoking the Fire Spiritual Practices**

My hope is that by the end of the series you'll have begun incorporating at least one or two of these spiritual practices into your daily life. Countless Christians throughout the centuries would agree that spiritual practices have kept them grounded in their faith and growing more mature as believers.

## **Stoking the Fire**

### **Bible Reading**

When a child is born the infant is totally dependent on the parents. At first the baby may breastfeed or drink from bottles. As the child grows older, the feeding method changes to spoon-feeding from jars of baby food. Finally, when ready, the child moves to self-feeding. This milestone ranks right up there with successful toilet training as a celebration of the child's independence – and return of parental sanity.

The Apostle Paul uses this analogy to explain the spiritual growth process. “By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby's milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God's ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong” (Hebrews 5:12 Message).

When you are a brand-new Christian – a baby believer – it's acceptable to take in spiritual food solely by reading or listening to the teachings of others. But as you start growing in Christ, it's time to start feeding yourself. Like eating baby food from a jar, perhaps you start by using a daily devotional such as “Our Daily Bread” from Radio Bible Class or “My Utmost for His Highest” by Oswald Chambers. This approach is a step in the right direction, but it still isn't being independent.

At some point believers must switch to the obvious – read the Bible for themselves. In doing so they allow the Holy Spirit to be their teacher and discover biblical truths on their own. Here are some questions and answers about making the switch.

#### **Why should you read the Bible?**

The answer is simple. It's God's primary method of spiritual transformation – becoming mature in Christ. The REVEAL study, based on a survey of 1,000 churches conducted by the Willow Creek Association, reached an interesting conclusion. Whether you are a new Christian or a very mature believer, Bible reading is the only spiritual practice that brings about growth at each level of maturity. Other disciplines work better at certain phases of spiritual growth.

#### **What should you read in the Bible?**

The Bible states that all Scripture is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). But certain Bible books are more profitable at various stages of growth or during particular life circumstances. Your pastor can suggest which books to read, but here are a few recommendations.

Start with the New Testament and tackle the Old Testament later. A new Christian should read the Gospel of John. Read the Gospels to understand the life of Jesus. Start with Mark because it's short and action-packed. The history of the early church is described in Acts. The Book of Romans explains deeper theological truths; thereafter, the Epistles deal with a variety of topics. Due to its complexity, it's better to read the Book of Revelation when you are more mature in Christ.

## **Stoking the Fire**

### **Bible Reading**

#### **How should you read the Bible?**

There are many approaches to Bible reading, but here's the one I use. Remember that your devotional time is interactive – you and God are both involved. Start by asking God, "What do you want to teach me today?" Then use the "Read - Listen – Stop – Respond - End" method. Just read until you sense that God has said something to you. Then stop and pray. Tell God what you heard Him saying. Ask Him to help you put into practice whatever He told you. At that point, end your reading altogether. I always conclude by asking Him, "What do you want me to do today?" His answers have led me on some exciting and meaningful adventure.

#### **When should you read the Bible?**

Read the Bible when you're at your best. Some individuals are morning people and others come alive at night. Choose the time of day that's best for you. Whatever time slot you select, read the Bible at a regular time and place. Moreover, find a quiet location where you won't be distracted and you are able to hear God's voice.

## **Stoking the Fire Journaling**

A spiritual practice is any individual, deliberate activity that helps you develop a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Among the most important spiritual practices are Bible reading, journaling, prayer, meditation, and spiritual retreats.

Journaling has been one of the most important spiritual practices in my life. I started writing a journal in 1988 and have continued to this day. It's a record of my spiritual journey recording highs and lows, joys and sorrows, victories and struggles, and hopes and dreams.

God encourages us in Psalm 62:8, "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge." A journal is the pouring out of your heart to God - to share the real you with Him - in the safety of His refuge.

### **Why should you journal?**

In his blog, Larry Baxter describes himself as "... a regular guy serving an awesome God." He lists 8 reasons that journaling is valuable ([link to Larry's blog](#)).

1. It helps in self-understanding and evaluation (Rom. 12:3)
2. It helps in meditating on the Lord and His Word (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-3)
3. It helps in expressing one's deepest thoughts and feelings to the Lord (Ps. 62:8b)
4. It helps in remembering the works of the Lord (Ps. 77:11-12)
5. It helps in creating and preserving a spiritual heritage (Deut. 6:4-7; 2 Tim. 1:5)
6. It helps in clarifying and articulating insights and impressions (1 Pet. 3:15)
7. It helps in monitoring goals and priorities (Phil. 3:12-16)
8. It helps in maintaining the other spiritual disciplines (1 Tim. 4:7)

### **What should you journal about?**

The simple answer is: everything. But remember that a journal is not a diary. To remind myself of this truth, I begin by writing, "Lord ..." Starting with that one word puts the focus squarely on God. I then go on to thank Him, write out my prayers, summarize my Bible reading, and tell Him what's going on in my life.

I'm vulnerable and transparent in my writing. There's no sense trying to fool Him. After all, He's God and knows the truth about me.

### **How should you journal?**

It's up to you. I use a 3-ring binder with loose leaf paper to record my thoughts. Some people buy a bound book with blank paper. Still others write their journal on a word processor. Most people maintain the same journal from January 1 to December 31, and then begin another one.

## **Stoking the Fire Journaling**

Your daily journal entries can be as long as you wish. It's best to start out with brief entries and increase the length as you find journaling more natural and beneficial.

It is important to keep your journal in a safe place since it records your most private thoughts and feelings. It's also wise to choose carefully with whom you share journal passages.

### **When should you journal?**

Journaling works best when you are at your best - morning, afternoon or evening. And it makes sense to journal while you're having your Quiet Time so you can record what God is saying to you while reading the Bible.

## **Stoking the Fire**

### **Prayer**

In 1836 George Müller founded an English orphanage for homeless children. His prayer journal was 3,000 pages long with over 30,000 requests, many answered in amazing ways.

One night George realized that there was no bread for breakfast. So rather than going to bed, he spent the night on his knees. At 3:00 a.m. a baker called. "I can't sleep so I'm baking bread. Would it be alright if I brought some over?"

#### **Why should you pray?**

Prayer is simply talking with God as you would to a friend. It should be a vital part of the Christian life. Believers are commanded to pray [see Matthew 6:5-7]. When Jesus taught the Lord's prayer, He told the disciples, "WHEN you pray ..." He didn't say IF you pray; Jesus expects you to pray.

Prayer is how you develop a deeper relationship with Christ. How do you build a friendship? You spend time together, share your thoughts and feelings, listen to one other, ask for help, and provide assistance.

#### **What should you pray about?**

Prayer should be more than your personal wish list. Paul reminds us, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4).

Therefore, you should pray with JOY: J = Jesus; O = Others; and Y = Yourself. Begin by focusing on Jesus - who He is and what He has done, is doing and will do. Then pray for the needs of others - salvation, spiritual growth, financial provision, etc. Finally, pray for your own needs.

#### **How should you pray?**

Prayer has always been hard for me. My mind wanders as I try to think about who and what I should pray. Furthermore, there always seems to be more to pray about than the time I want to spend in prayer.

Then someone shared with me a way to pray that revolutionized my prayer life. The idea was to pray for a different topic each day of the week. The topics corresponded to the first letter of that day of the week. Using this mnemonic I pray through the week as follows ...

#### *Sunday = Saints*

I pray for the Church around the world, and my church in particular. I don't pray for specific people, but for the impact of the Church in our community, nation, and world.

#### *Monday = Missionaries*

I know and support a number of missionaries. I bring them before God asking Him to protect them from harm and to provide for their needs.

## Stoking the Fire Prayer

### Tuesday = Tasks

I pray for the things I have to do - especially tasks related to my personal ministry,

### Wednesday = Workers

I pray for the full and part-time employees of our church. I focus on a different staff member every week, based on the urgency of their needs.

### Thursday = Thanksgiving

The focus is on Jesus Christ. I thank Him for all He's done for me - my life, family, friends, job, possessions, ministry, and many other areas.

### Friday = Family and Friends

I pray for my wife, my children, and the people near and dear to me. Each of them face challenges that I bring before God. I tend to focus on specific, on-going needs in their lives

### Saturday = Salvation

Many people in my life aren't believers. I pray that God would lead them to accept Christ as their Savior and Lord. Moreover, I ask Him to provide me with natural opportunities to share my faith.

### **When should you pray?**

You should pray at all times with an attitude of thanksgiving. "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NASB)."

I suggest that you read "The Practice of the Presence of God" by Brother Lawrence [\$4.99 Amazon]. It describes the amazing prayer life of a Catholic monk who centuries ago enjoyed a vibrant prayer life.



## **Stoking the Fire Scripture Memory**

Quick! What's your address? Phone number? Birthday? Social security number?

That wasn't hard. You knew the answers by rote because you use this information so often. By sheer repetition these facts are readily available because they're embedded in your mind.

Now imagine the difference in your spiritual life if you had a storehouse of Bible verses in your brain. You would be ready at a moment's notice to use the verses to guide, encourage, and keep you from sinning. You also would be better prepared to answer people's spiritual questions and lead them to Christ.

I know. I know. You have a hard time remembering what you had for breakfast. One friend jokes that he wears his ID badge upside down so he can remember his name.

But Bible memory is possible - even enjoyable. Sure. It takes work. But everything that's worthwhile takes effort. Listed below are some questions and answers about memorizing Scripture.

### **Why should you memorize Bible verses?**

Hiding God's Word in your heart gives you spiritual power, encouragement, guidance, and ammunition. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, the Lord used Scripture to thwart each attack. When Satan tempts you, the verses you have memorized will be your "sword of the Spirit" in resisting his attacks.

### **What Bible verses should you memorize?**

I recommend the Topical Memory System developed by the Navigators. It's available at Amazon for \$10.87.

### **How do you memorize Bible verses?**

- Review. Review. Review.
- Use spare moment's during the day to go over your verses.
- Be able to recite them "word perfect" - no mistakes.
- Begin by stating a Category [you make up] and Reference. Then recite the verse and conclude by re-stating the reference. Focus on remembering the Bible reference because it's frustrating to know the verse, but not remember where it is in the Bible.
- Memorize verses with a friend. It's more effective and fun to memorize with someone, and your friend will hold you accountable for knowing your verse.
- Ask each other, "What's your verse?" But it's a good idea to be the first to ask the question. Once a friend and I decided to spend the week memorizing different verses. When I asked him, "What's your verse?" he replied, "John 11:35 - Jesus wept." Sure. He recited the shortest verse in the Bible!

## **Stoking the Fire**

### **Scripture Memory**

#### **When should memorize Bible verses?**

Morning, noon, and night. Repetition is the key. When you review verses frequently you will retain them for the rest of your life.

## **Stoking the Fire Scripture Meditation**

Depending on your age, when you hear the word “meditation” you probably think of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Your mind conjures up images of the Beatles in India listening to sitars and learning about Transcendental Meditation (TM). These two types of meditation are diametrically opposed (see this article).

One key difference is that in TM you EMPTY your mind of every conscious thought. This practice is dangerous as it allows Satan to gain a foothold in your mind. Instead, in Scripture meditation you FILL your mind with Scripture.

### **Why should you meditate on Bible verses?**

Scripture meditation is the only spiritual practice that comes with a promise. “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:5).

In this verse God makes two promises: 1) If you meditate you will have the power to obey His word; and 2) you will have “prosperity and success.” The second promise is NOT about financial and material blessing; instead, it’s a promise that you will experience prosperity and success in your spiritual life.

### **What Bible verses should you mediate on?**

Any verse in the Bible can be used for Scripture meditation. However, it makes the most sense, and will have maximum benefit, if you meditate on the verses you are memorizing.

### **How do you meditate on Bible verses?**

Some people compare Scripture meditation to a cow chewing its cud. A cow takes in food and chews it over and over again to draw out every ounce of nutrition.

The same process applies to the process of Scripture meditation. Take a verse and “chew it” over and over again in your mind. Listed below are 4 suggested techniques:

- Go over a verse one word at a time (ignoring prepositions and conjunctions) and reflect on the meaning of the word. For example, John 3:16 begins, “For God ...” Focus solely on the word God and ask yourself questions like, “Who is God?” “What has He done?” and “Why is He important?”
- Go over the verse a phrase at a time and think through what it means. For example, using John 3:16 again, “For God so loved ...” Once again, ask yourself questions such as, “What is God’s love?” “How is His love different than the world’s love?” and “Why does God love me?”

## **Stoking the Fire Scripture Meditation**

- Read the verse through several times, and then put the verse in your own words. For example, “God has deep, abiding, and eternal care, concern, and compassion for ...”
- Read the verse until you sense a prompting from God. Then stop and turn the part you just read into a prayer. “Dear God, thank you so much that you love me and everyone else with an incredible and irrational love ...”

### **When should meditate on Bible verses?**

Set a goal of meditate once a day as you begin the spiritual practice of Scripture meditation. The more you engage in the practice, the more you will naturally want to meditate. It’s not about the number of times you meditate each day; it’s about how the practice leads into a deeper, more vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

## **Stoking the Fire Spiritual Retreats**

On a Saturday morning I drove to a state park to spend the day with God. It rained all day long. Not surprisingly, I was the only person in the park. Fortunately, there was a covered picnic shelter where I could sit and meet with the Lord.

I began by singing worship choruses. Then I bowed my head and asked, "Lord, what do you want me to do with my one and only life?" I opened my Bible and started reading through John 13-17.

First I read the chapters quickly without stopping. Then I re-read them slowly and took notes. The third time through I read them devotionally. Whenever a verse jumped out at me, I stopped and asked, "God, what are You trying to tell me here?"

As I came to last chapter, I sensed that God was about to tell me something important. My anticipation grew as I read John 17:4. In this verse Jesus prayed to His Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."

All at once I saw the answer to my question. God gave Jesus work to do on earth. His work was to die so that I could live. Then I realized that His work was something only Jesus could do. He was uniquely qualified for the assignment God gave Him. The last thing I noticed was that Jesus completed his work and God received glory on earth.

I realized these same principles apply to me. God has work for me to do. It's work unique to me – something only I can do. And when I complete it, God will receive glory on earth.

### **Why should you have a spiritual retreat?**

- To get escape the distractions of daily life to meet with Jesus Christ
- To develop a deeper, more vital relationship with the Lord
- To worship God in private for an extended time period
- To seek guidance from God on present issues and future direction
- To seek forgiveness, your return to the Lord, and repentance of your sins

The main reason you should have a spiritual retreats is because Jesus made time to get alone with His Father. For example:

- Woke up early, left the house, went to quiet place to pray (Mark 10:45)
- Identifying the Twelve
- Prior to walking on the water
- In Gethsemane before his arrest, trial and crucifixion

### **What should you bring on a spiritual retreat?**

- Bible

## Stoking the Fire Spiritual Retreats

- Journal
- Pen and paper
- Worship music
- Inspirational Christian books
- Scripture memory cards
- Fruit, vegetables and water (unless you are fasting)

### How do you have a spiritual retreat?

#### Purpose

- Clarify the reason you are having your retreat
- Write out a question that you want God to answer
- Select a section of the Bible where the question might be answered

#### Logistics

- Schedule your retreat
- Determine the length of your retreat (half-day; full-day; overnight)
- Pick a private place away from your home
- Take your cell phone for emergencies, but leave it in the car

#### Activities

- Confession
- Worship through music
- Thanksgiving
- Prayer
- Journal throughout, as appropriate
- Read the passage through devotionally
- Study the passage carefully - Pray your way through the passage
- Keep reading until God answers your question
- Summarize in writing what God has taught you
- List your action steps as a result of your retreat

### When should you have a spiritual retreat?

Whenever there is an issue in your life that you need extended time alone with God for guidance or forgiveness.

## **Stoking the Fire Right Motives**

If you're on Facebook you've probably seen posts that show a picture of something from long ago. You're supposed to click "like" if you know what the picture is. Recently, I saw a picture taken in the 1950s of a children's show called Romper Room. I clicked "like" because I watched it as a preschooler.

One segment of the show was called "Do Bee; Don't Bee." A character dressed as a bumblebee taught children what was right and wrong. For example, "Do Bee good boys and girls for your parents!" or "Don't Bee mean to others." Pretty simple stuff, but highly effective for preschoolers.

So on today's lesson is: "Do Bee Christians who use spiritual practices with the right motives; Don't Bee Christians who use them with the wrong ones."

### **Wrong motives for using spiritual practices**

When people accept Christ they tend to bring a lot of secular ideas with them. One of the most common is a "performance mentality." It goes something like this: "If I try really hard, and work even harder, God will reward me." Or, "God will bless me even more if I do the things He likes."

Although this approach may work in the secular world, it's not the way God operates. David wrote, "Going through the motions doesn't please [God], a flawless performance is nothing to [Him]" (Psalm 51:16 MSG).

Some examples of wrong motives include:

- Someone told you to use them.
- You know a mature believer who uses them.
- You want to impress others that you are spiritually mature.
- You're "supposed" to use them.
- God will "bless you" because you use them.

### **Right motives for using spiritual practices**

The Christian life is not about DOING; it's about BEING. We engage in spiritual practices to BE connected to Jesus Christ in a deep, abiding relationship. When we are connected to Him in a close, vibrant friendship, then DOING flows out of BEING. It doesn't work the other way around! Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Some examples of right motives include:

- To develop a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. The term "vital" literally means "that which gives life." Jeremiah 29:13 (GNT) promises, "You will seek me, and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart."

## **Stoking the Fire**

### **Right Motives**

- To be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9a NLT).
- To experience the power of God in your life. Philippians 3:10a (GNT) stresses, “All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection ...”

The spiritual practices we’ve examined in this booklet include: Bible reading; journaling; prayer; Scripture memory; Scripture meditation; and spiritual retreats. When you use them with the right motivation, they become powerful tools for your spiritual growth. May God bless you as you seek to apply them to your life.