

# **BUILDING YOUR DEVOTIONAL LIFE**

## **A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER**

One of the most significant life investments you can make is to develop and strengthen your own personal devotional life. By building your own personal devotional life I mean intentionally engaging solo in the kinds of activities that strengthen your ability to know and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. You will find that this becomes one of the most fulfilling and meaningful things you have ever pursued. I want to help you begin or begin again to build a personal devotional habit.

A most important thing to understand as you begin is something I have already alluded to. The purpose of all the things you do as part of your devotional life is to help you know and follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit all day every day. The activities themselves are not the goal. So always remember that the purpose of an activity like Bible reading is not just to read the Bible. You will engage yourself with the Bible because it equips you to accurately hear the voice of God's Spirit above all the other voices. The proof of a good devotional life in you will not be that you successfully put in a certain amount of time day in and day out doing certain activities. Your devotional life is successful if you find you are carrying out your various roles in life in God's way because you are sensing the leading of His Spirit. If you do not understand this, your devotional life will become meaningless religious routine. It will make you arrogant instead of more like Christ. You will have a false sense of your own spiritual health. A strong devotional life is evident in the fact that it makes us think and act like Christ.

I am suggesting a beginning point for your devotional life. Don't try to jump in the deep end immediately! Here's what I mean by that. Very often we try to start where others have arrived over the course of many years. The result is usually disastrous. It is best to set modest and realistic goals. By goals I am talking specifically about time. I think that your first step is to identify a block of time that you know you have a reasonably good chance of protecting. It doesn't matter when in the day it is. I would suggest a modest amount of time, 15 minutes to a half hour. I would suggest four or five days a week. You can always add time. Biting off too much will discourage you.

As you begin, there is something very important you need to know. You are destined to feel you have failed at this, many times. Your routine will be interrupted, maybe even set aside. Remember, the goal is not to faithfully stick with a certain schedule of prayer or Bible study. It is to become different. If you are seeing changes in your thinking and courses of action, you are succeeding, regardless of how well you've maintained the schedule. But keep restarting in terms of making it a scheduled event. That is the most important advice I would give anyone who is starting out. Keep on restarting. Don't be paralyzed by the false starts along the way. It is not uncommon to work at this for a decade or two before it feels right.

Your devotional life should be centered on interaction with the Bible. Notice I did not say it should be centered on **READING** the Bible. Reading the Bible is something you should do and will do. But you need to remember that some of history's most powerful Christian men and women were illiterate. Having a personal copy of Scripture is a relatively recent thing. So merely reading the Bible isn't the goal. The activity that the Bible itself says transforms a life is meditation on the Scripture (Psalms 1:1-3; Joshua 1:8).

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. — Psalm 1:1-3*

*This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. — Joshua 1:8*

In research done in the modern era, when people are asked to identify what they attribute their own spiritual growth to, the overwhelming majority point to personal interaction with Scripture. So your goal is not just to READ the Bible. Your goal is to process its words, to ponder their meaning and their implication in your life and relationships, and then to obey them. Reading is just the beginning. Your time in the Scripture should be aimed at taking something away to reflect on. Don't focus it on reading through a certain number of pages.

Here is what I would suggest as a starting point in your interaction with the Bible. Buy a spiral notebook and a pencil with an eraser—a big one! (I write everything in pencil, because my understanding is constantly evolving). Begin in the book of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. It is the first of four consecutive accounts of the life of Jesus. Read until you encounter something that is profound to you. It might be an action, an idea, a single word, or an entire paragraph. Write in your notebook that significant thing you observed, and write specifically what it means to you. Enter the date as well. The length of your entry is insignificant. Just write what adequately expresses your thought. That's it, you're done. Do the same thing the next time, picking up where you left off. If your routine falls by the wayside, just pick it up. Don't grovel or let guilt paralyze you. Just pick it up again. On some occasions you might observe a particular verse or phrase that you write on a card and reflect on later, perhaps when you're driving or when you have idle time. Such reflection is a very transformational activity that can happen "on the fly." I would imagine such "on the fly" devotional times explain most individual personal spiritual growth spurts over the centuries. When you have these you are entering into the real goal of the structured devotional time you adhere to.

Let me clarify three things at this point. The first is that I do not suggest devotional books as the mainstay of your devotional life. Learning to interact with the individual words of Scripture will change your life. Devotional books can be of value, but learning to process the words and ideas of God is better.

Second, The version of the Bible you use is not extremely important, but I would suggest a translation, not a transliteration. The difference is simple. A translation is an effort to give the readers words in their language that are the exact equivalent of the words of the original language. The goal is accuracy, not primarily readability. A transliteration values readability and understandability, attempting to lead the reader to a modern day understanding of the life meaning or application of the text. They add words and even phrases to do so. These transliterations, like The Living Bible, are an easier starting point, but you might as well rise to the intellectual challenge of processing words on your own for their meaning and application. It will serve you better in the long term. My personal choice for translation would be either The New American Standard Version (NASB), or the more recent English Standard Version (ESV). They give the reader an exact rendering of the words of the original text. The New International Version (NIV), and New King James Version (NKJV) are also translations. It is fine and helpful to consult any and all transliterations when you are stumped by the wording of a verse or section of Scripture. But start with any of the above translations all of which represent the closest representation we have to the original text. Remember that there is an index in the front of every Bible that will help you find the various books within the book. There is also other helpful information that will help you understand things like abbreviations and special features that are a part of your particular version.

The third thing I want to clarify is the practical necessity of Bible study and what it does. Through this kind of Bible study you are building a mental grid through which you can pass the things you hear, see, and think, to help you discern what is of the Spirit and what is of the flesh. Each insight you gain of God's thought adds to this grid and so you are able to sort incoming data more precisely. Without this grid it is impossible to move very skillfully in the things of the Spirit. You inevitably mistake your own thoughts and emotions for the leading of the Holy Spirit. You inevitably are deceived by false ideas. We cannot overstate the importance of the mental portion of the journey of faith. There are things we simply must learn and know in order to live as God desires (2 Timothy 2:15).

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. — 2 Timothy 2:15*

The knowledge of these things is not magically imparted to us by the Holy Spirit. He has brought them to humanity in written form, in a book we can consult. He brings them to us personally as we apply ourselves to the understanding of this written revelation.

Cultivate a personal habit in Scripture. Everything else you do to get closer to God will be enriched by this foundational activity. A second important element of your devotional life is prayer. Now the Scripture is clear that our prayer time ideally should never end (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But a special intentional prayer time is appropriate as a foundation. This prayer time is what I am primarily speaking to in the words that follow.

*...pray without ceasing... — 1 Thessalonians 5:17*

There are two purposes of such prayer. One is to ask God for the things you need to live as He wants you to live. We can expect to receive only what we ask for. God gives in response to what we ask for and what harmonizes with His own plan for us. The second purpose of prayer is that it is a means of God changing us. As we articulate needs and feelings to God, His Spirit stirs in our own mental processes and lead us to conclusions that we would never have arrived at on our own. Often, if we pray thoughtfully, God answers us through the prayer itself. We finish our prayer knowing exactly what we need to do.

There is no harder work than the work of prayer. I say this because it requires great effort to hold your mind on course. Expect that you will never feel up to speed in this area. You will go through seasons where your prayers are natural and flow easily. You will also experience seasons where it is a struggle to pray. Don't be confused, disillusioned or discouraged. Both are normal.

I would suggest that your prayers always include worship and thanksgiving. Worship and thanksgiving are things we can do for God that He cannot do for Himself! He choreographs these through us and they minister greatly to Him. They also dramatically change us. When you discipline yourself to worship, which is you articulating God's greatness, you remind yourself of how good and powerful He is. Your own faith and confidence is renewed. When you discipline yourself to identify specific things in your life to be thankful for, He is ministered to, and you gain confidence with regard to your present needs. Both worship and thanksgiving change your perspective on your present life. Problems shrink significantly, and the relative urgency of things becomes more apparent. But you must bend your mind toward worship and thanksgiving. Your tendency will be just to get to your urgent concerns.

I would suggest that your prayers be focused on others first. This is always a good spiritual discipline to practice within the spiritual discipline of prayer. Praying for yourself is both appropriate and good. But it is good for us to begin with important others in our lives. I would also suggest you zoom out and pray for the world, things all over the world. Remember that God sees the whole globe and all His children in a glance. This too will help your perspective. Your prayers for your own safety and welfare will be less self-centered and much more spiritual when you have thought of the desperate needs on far away continents. Again, these prayers for others will minister perspective to you.

You are now ready to pray for yourself, and no concern is inappropriate to bring before Him, as long as you are acknowledging His right to do it His way. These prayers should continue throughout your day. You should confess your own sins and failings, pray for things that are lacking in your character, pray for specific cares and anxieties you have, for your health, virtually anything that is on your mind. He relishes you emoting!

There are a number of things you can do to make your prayer time more effective. Listing prayer needs on paper and praying a list is very useful, even essential. Just be sure you freshen the list often, or it will get to be routine. Praying on certain days for certain parts of the world is a good ministry. Praying in different places can provide special dynamics to your prayers. There are a host of things you can pick up from other people to keep this part of your devotional life vital. You should interact with others on this and all elements of your devotional life.

These are two foundational steps we all must take in developing our personal relationship with God. As your walk with the Lord deepens He will lead you to do more with respect to His word. He will call you to extended times of prayer, to enter into times of fasting, perhaps to practice solitude, and a number of different spiritual disciplines. These will all become things you utilize to strengthen that experience that is the grand goal of it all, the moment by moment experience of the influence of the Holy Spirit. Start today, and enter a whole new world of spiritual growth.