

## **How can we Combat our Lack of Desire for God's Word?**

~ Psalm 119:33-40

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Sometimes, Christians struggle in reading the Bible. Sometimes we struggle to even want to read the Bible. How do I know that? Well, I hear about it from you. I hear how you find some parts of the Bible boring or hard to understand. I hear about how some parts seem totally out of touch with our world. I see it in my own life. There are times I struggle in reading God's Word. Sometimes I don't want to do it or I would rather do or look at something I think would be more exciting.

It can be challenging. It can be hard to read because of busyness with kids, sickness, exhaustion, work stress, school deadlines and many other reasons. So what do we do when we struggle in this area? Give up? Hope that something or someone will come along to inspire us? Hope that we'll feel like it tomorrow? That sounds like a pretty passive approach.

If God has communicated to us through His Word and we grow by seeing God's glory in His Word, you'd think God might be interested in helping us get to His Word. In fact, He is. There is good news today for anyone who is a Christian and struggles to keep connecting to God through His Word. There is help available from Him. Today we're going to see what it is.

We have been going through this series on the Bible this fall. We asked "What do you think of the Bible?" We discovered the change possible in our lives through reading the Bible. 2 Corinthians 3:18, which is on the front page of your bulletins states "And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the Lord's image from one degree of glory to another. This comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." So life transformation is possible as we see God's glory in the Word. Last time we asked - So how do we actually read God's Word with God? We need to come humbly to His Word. Jesus said "Apart from me you can do nothing", including reading God's Word in a way that will lead to life change.

When we approach the Bible humbly, we are more likely to hear from God. Tim Keller – "Contemporary people tend to examine the Bible looking for things they can't accept; Christians should reverse that allowing the Bible to examine us looking for things God can't accept." This is much more likely to happen when we approach God's Word humbly. But what else can we do? How can we combat our lack of desire for God and His Word? We will find an answer to this

question in the longest chapter of the Bible – Psalm 119 – 176 verses. Don't worry. We won't read all of it – just one 8-verse section that reveals God's help in reading His word.

**Psalm 119:33-40 (ESV)** (Page 446)

- <sup>33</sup> Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;  
and I will keep it to the end.
- <sup>34</sup> Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.
- <sup>35</sup> Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.
- <sup>36</sup> Incline my heart to your testimonies,  
and not to selfish gain!
- <sup>37</sup> Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;  
and give me life in your ways.
- <sup>38</sup> Confirm to your servant your promise,  
that you may be feared.
- <sup>39</sup> Turn away the reproach that I dread,  
for your rules are good.
- <sup>40</sup> Behold, I long for your precepts;  
in your righteousness give me life!

This is the longest chapter of the Bible. It is actually a collection of prayers about God's Word. The writer composed 22 poems of 8 verses each based on each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The author has spent much time reflecting on the importance of God's Word. He has also spent considerable time in God's Word.

Yet despite his great knowledge and experience with the Scriptures, this author recognizes his own needs. He asks for help, guidance, teaching and understanding. He does not only want to gain knowledge. He wants to live it out.

But he also recognizes a great struggle within him when considering God's Word. He mourns his unfaithfulness and tendency to wander from God. He acknowledges his lack of understanding parts of the Word. He repeatedly mentions those who taunt or mock him for his faith. He cries out for strength to persevere in the midst of such taunts. In a sense, this Psalm shows the honest reflection of a true worshipper of God. If you spend time in it, I'm sure you would find a few verses that would express the reality in your heart.

So let's look at a couple of the prayers found in our little text for today. In verse 33, the Psalmist prays "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes." He asks the Lord to instruct him. Statutes are laws or commandments. They are God's

prescription and description of a life that honors Him, a life that we were all created to live. They prescribe and describe God's ways which are best for us.

The Psalmist wants to gain knowledge of these laws and learn their nature. But he doesn't want just an information dump into his brain. He wants to act on what he learns. He does not request teaching just so he can pass a test and then forget everything. He wants to learn it so he can live it.

You see this in the second half of verse 33. "I will keep it to the end." This could mean the Psalmist intends to follow God's law completely so that he will reap the rewards found at the end. Or it could mean that he intends to keep the law to the fullest extent or far end of the law. He's not going to engage in some halfhearted commitment. He will keep the law fully. Or it could mean that he intends to keep the law until the end of his life. Whatever he means by "the end", it shows his seriousness in living out his learning.

He reinforces this in verse 34. "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." He does not only want to understand God's laws. He wants to fully embrace them and follow them completely. Talk about unusual for today. How many people do you know who strain every nerve to follow God's Word? It seems more that people seek ways they can get out from under God's laws. Some Christians can become experts at justifying why they don't have to follow God in some particular area.

Then in verse 35, he makes a similar request for understanding with different language – "Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it." This is a humble approach. He doesn't assume he knows the path. He asks the Lord to lead him on the path like you would ask a guide to lead you up Mount Everest or a guide who would lead you through a museum and reveal all kinds of things that you would not even notice if they weren't there.

Yet if this section ended at verse 35, we might be quite discouraged. It seems like this Psalmist is a super-Christian. He thinks he can keep God's law to the end. He will observe it with his whole heart. He delights in God's law. Yet we sometimes fail to keep God's law. There are times we don't observe it with our whole hearts. There are times we don't desire God or His Word.

But look at verse 36. "Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain." Or the NIV says "Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain." Now he's getting to the heart of the issue – his heart. He realizes

that his heart is prone to wander. He acknowledges that his heart does not want to follow God's Word. He identifies that the #1 reason most of us don't come to God's Word is the state of our hearts.

John Piper writes this: "This basic prayer is more than teach me or help me understand. It grows out of admission of our helplessness at the most fundamental level. Without God's supernatural help, we do not even want to read the Bible, let alone cry out for full and deep understanding."<sup>1</sup> Maybe you've experienced something like this. You see your Bible sitting on your desk or maybe beside your bed or the app on your phone. Then you have a passing thought "I need to spend time with God and His Word." But \then you turn away to do something easier or seemingly more interesting. Do you think that is only a lack of discipline on your part? It's part of our fallen nature. It's a natural reaction from our sinful hearts. Of course we don't want to read our Bibles. Why would a sinful heart want to go to a book that might expose something we're comfortable doing even though it's wrong? Why would we want to disturb our comfort? Sometimes, only when what was once comfortable brings uncomfortable consequences will we gain motivation to go back to God's Word.

Piper also writes "Why don't we desire His Word? Because our hearts become cold, dull, hard and blind. We drift away from the desire to do it. So this verse is like the Psalmist praying 'O Lord, here's my heart – my drifting, cooling, wavering, fickle, hardening heart. Take it! Do whatever you must do to seal it for yourself forever. Keep it alive and yearning and loving and delighting and treasuring. Lord keep me from drifting from your word!"<sup>2</sup> Therefore, here is the answer to our question. **How can Christians combat our lack of desire for God and His Word?**

**We must ask God for His help to learn His Word and desire His ways.** We must ask God to turn our hearts to His Word and not to selfish gain. We must ask Him to change our hearts to desire His Word. We must fight when something else comes into our mind distracting us from God's Word. We fight through prayer and asking for the Lord's help.

But notice, the Psalmist does not only address one side of this battle. In verse 36, he asks for the Lord's help to turn his heart **towards** His Word. Verse 37 – "Turn my eyes away from looking at worthless things." Talk about a relevant verse for today's world. We have unlimited opportunities to look at worthless things. We can waste hours watching worthless TV shows. We can surf the web looking at worthless videos or posts. We can look at video games for hours. We can catch upon social media for an evening. Then we say we have no time for God's Word. But the reality is more

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, Reading the Bible Supernaturally, Wheaton, Ill., Crossway, 2017, 254.

<sup>2</sup> Piper, 254.

often we have no desire for God's Word. So we, like the Psalmist, must ask God to turn our hearts toward His Word and our eyes away from worthless things.

My friends, have you lost your desire for God's Word? If so, what are you doing about it? Hoping something changes or asking for God's help? I heard the story once of someone coming to a preacher and saying, "I really appreciate your preaching. It has revitalized my spiritual life. I was spiritually stagnant for a long time. But now your messages have brought life." Though the preacher appreciated those words in one sense, he was greatly concerned. It sounded like this person believed their spiritual life depended on the pastor's messages. If they didn't like the message or get fed by it, then they were spiritually stagnant. They just stayed there until they encountered a different preacher.

Christians can do the same with God's Word. "Oh, I don't feel like reading God's Word today. Or "I haven't wanted to read God's Word for a while. I've lost my passion. Maybe it will come back tomorrow. Maybe I'll recapture it at camp next summer or that retreat coming up. Or if I can experience some true worship somewhere, then I'll become spiritually alive." Have you ever thought that or done that? If so, you are being way too passive in your spiritual life. You are putting the responsibility for your spiritual life onto other people or other events. If they don't come through for you, then you blame them for your spiritual stagnation.

But we must fight. We must battle against our natural desires to ignore God and His Word. We must battle the enemy. Satan will not leave you alone in your attempts to draw near to God. Colossians 3:5 states "Put to death what is earthly in you – passions, evil desires and covetousness." Remember what Jesus said - Parable of the sower – "The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word." Mark 4:19.

And we need to guard against justifying our lack of connection to God's Word by saying "well, I don't like the Bible, but I'm good with God." Piper writes this. "We deceive ourselves into thinking we deal only with God's Word and not with God. We don't let ourselves think that shrinking back from the fullest desire for the God's Word is a shrinking back from God. We allow ourselves the illusion that one can have a long term relationship with God while cultivating quiet idolatries in their heart."<sup>3</sup> Would you have a good relationship with someone if you ignored what they said all the time? Or to put it another way "Loss of interest in the Word of God is loss of interest in God."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 259.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

So we need to pray and ask God for his help to desire and follow His Word. But what do we pray? Piper has produced the I O U S acronym to get us started. Each one of these is a prayer from Scripture for God's help as we read His Word.

So the "I" comes from our passage today.

- **I – Incline – “Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain.” Ps. 119:36.** Incline, lean towards, turn.
- **O – Open – “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” Ps. 119:18.**
- **U – Unite – “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name.” Ps. 86:11.** Give me an undivided heart to fear your name.
- **S – Satisfy – “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” Ps. 90:14.**

Do you think you're Bible reading might change if God changed your heart and gave you a desire for it? Does that even happen? Is it even possible?

I remember one family that became part of our fellowship at a certain point in our ministry. They went through a very difficult time because of the actions of one of their children. This family would be considered in the upper class realm of society. They had it all from the outside. But they went through ups and downs and difficult trials. They began attending our church more and more because they just needed some community through it all. About a year into their ordeal, I remember one time when the Mom and I were talking. She said to me – “You wouldn't believe what I did Friday night.” “What,” I asked? “I stayed home and read my Bible. It was one of the best Fridays I've had in a long time.” She had found something that made a little sense of all they were going through as a family.

I came across this acronym - I O U S - a few years ago and have been praying these verse prior to my Bible reading on many days. It's not a magic bullet or an instant recipe for constant sight of God's glory. But I have noticed some changes in me. I used to look forward to getting my Bible reading over with so I could check the news and scores from the night before. But now, I often don't get to the news. There is so much more satisfaction in God's Word.

Yet there are times when it's still like an exercise or duty. I have been praying more in advance of my reading asking the Lord to open my eyes to see what God wants me to see. And to incline my heart to His testimonies. I confess that I

don't always listen. Or I am not really serious about that prayer. It's more lip service than earnest and honest. But in the times when I earnestly and honestly ask for help, there is often something God reveals to me.

This past week, I was downright sobered by some of what God revealed in His Word. Like Jeremiah 23:15. In this passage, God speaks about the unfaithful prophets in the land. He states "From the prophets of Jerusalem, ungodliness has gone out into all the land." Wow. A prophet who is supposed to be a person of God can spread ungodliness throughout a nation just by their own unfaithfulness and carelessness in following God's Word. Talk about a warning to me. I need to be careful and faithful to God every day lest I be a channel through which ungodliness can flow into others. In our lives, if we have no desire to go to God's Word, we must ask Him for desire and that change of heart.

I want to close with one more critical piece to this puzzle. We might look at this IOUS acronym and think – "Oh that's cute. Someone has come up with a way to remember some verses to pray before we read God's Word. Maybe I'll take advantage of that. Maybe it's a big extreme."

Remember that Christ died so your prayer for desire would be answered. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's promises about what He will do in the New Covenant. Deuteronomy 30:6 – "The Lord will circumcise you heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Jeremiah 31:33 – "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people. Ezekiel 11:19-20 – And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God."

So how do we get into the New Covenant? How do we receive this new heart? Only because of Christ's death. Only through Christ. Only by coming to Christ and admitting that we have been walking our own way apart from God. We have been following our sinful hearts away from Him. But now we come to Him by putting the trust of our lives upon Christ. We turn away from worthless things and turn to the One who came to give us life. If you've never done that, you can receive this new heart today by praying; turning away from your old life and putting your trust on Christ. Christian, if you have lacked desire for God's Word lately or the next time that happens, ask God for His help to turn your heart towards Him and His Word.

God is willing to teach, give understanding, lead in the path, confirm His word and turn our hearts towards what is helpful and away from what is worthless. So I'd like to give you some time now to talk with God about where you are at with respect to His Word. Maybe you need to confess your lack of desire or passive approach. Then ask Him to give you that desire and turn your heart towards Himself.