

Reading the Bible for Deep Delight

First Methodist Church of Tulsa

Spring 2024

**“Is not my Word like fire?”
– What the Bible does to us.**

Write down your concept of what a “devotional time” looks like?

How might your concept of “devotional time” change given the way “to devote” is used in the Bible?

In what ways is the Bible like a fire? How has it been a fire in your life?

In what ways is the Bible like a hammer? How has it been a hammer in your life?

In what ways is the Bible like water? How has it been water in your life?

In what ways is the Bible like a sword? How has it been a sword in your life?

“Is not my Word like fire?” – What the Bible does to us.

We're going to make this week a bit of an interlude between what we did last time and what's coming next week because I want you to be able to see what's happening as you enter into a reading of the text that's supposed to bring deep delight to your life. Last time, we looked at a lot of observational questions that move us past the kind of quick reading we often do. What I mean by that is that when I'm doing a read the Bible in a year plan like I'm doing now, I've got a certain amount of time in which I need to read four whole chapters, jot down a few observations or questions I have, and pray. That necessarily means a kind of cursory reading that is limited to information. This isn't bad reading.

One of the things that reading large amounts of scripture over the course of time does is to give us a big picture of what's going on. It allows us to see themes that develop. It allows us to see the structures of particular books and passages. It helps us to see the interplay between passages in the Old Testament that, in some ways, repeat themselves later on in the Old Testament and then again in the New Testament. It helps us to see prophecies made in the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus in the New Testament. So I will never ever say a bad word about a surface level reading of the Scriptures because they do help us in a lot of ways. But, every single one of us needs an encounter with scripture in which we dwell over shorter passages. I mentioned this a couple of weeks ago when I said that we need to wrestle with a text until we are changed by it.

Now, I assume every person in the room believes that we need that type of encounter with the word, an encounter that leads us to experience transformation deep inside of us. But one of the things that I have picked up as a habit over the last several months is to identify my assumptions into ask why I assume them and whether

they are good assumptions. I want to do that tonight as we talk about this transition from observation to application in a couple ways. One, I assume that something happens when we wrestle with a text, when God uses it to do something transformational inside of us. I also assume that of the purpose of Scripture is to do that very thing. I don't know if you remember last time but I talked about this chart that Fred Sanders uses in his Bible classes in which he says that the closest truth of why scripture exist is for communion with God. It's a means of grace. It's a meditative reading. It's devotional reading.

Oftentimes when we think about devotional reading, we think about a little book where we read one scripture and then someone else's commentary. But, I want to get as literal as possible when I talk about what devotional reading is. The very root of the word devotional is “to devote” and what are we devoting? In the Old Testament when you see the word “devote” used, many times it is it is used to describe destruction. When I searched the English word “devote” in my Bible software program, it came up with 19 hits in my translation of choice. Twelve of those uses in the Old Testament are tied to a phrase “devote to destruction.” So another words when God sends the people into the land as he preparing them to go into the land he tells them that they must devote to destruction the cities that they will take over what does God mean by that.

In the Old Testament to devote something means to consecrate it. It's almost like it's a cleansing. The devotion to destruction means to cleanse a city to make it a place where God can dwell. I think if we want to stretch our understanding of what devotion means that's one of the things that the word is supposed to do in us. It's consecrating our hearts by clearing out all that is unholy and does not belong to God. When we open the scriptures we're devoting our will, we're devoting our sin, we are devoting our misaligned

affections to destruction so that the Word of God may reform it and make it right for God's use in this world .

We see a little bit different use of the word devote in the new testament which is more aligned with our current English usage of the word “devotion” For instance, you may see that someone was a devoted wife in an obituary. What does that mean? It means that they gave all of themselves, they poured their time and their resources into her husband. A devoted church member means that they poured everything into a church. A devoted person might give all of themselves for an institution, or a way of life. We might say that gym rats are devoted to the gym. So in another sense our devotion also means that we are giving all of ourselves to God. I actually don't think that the Old Testament or New Testament usage in my translation, of the words that become “to devote” are really that far apart from each other in meaning. We're laying waste to everything that keeps our attention that keeps our affections away from God, and his purposes for us in this world.

So, I would like for us to think differently about what devotional time means. It's not some sugarcoated page of words out of a small little book—which I have I've got several myself—*Devotion* has nothing to do with reading a page out of *Jesus Calling* or *This Day with the Master* or *Take Time to be Holy*. It has to do with aligning our hearts with the God who made us in his splendor and his holiness in a way that changes us to be useful vessels in the service of his kingdom. And so we've got to move from cursory readings of the text into a way of understanding how God wants to use the text in our lives, which is application. We're going to talk about that next week, but I want us to bridge the two today so that we see that there's something that is happening inside of us as we actively engage in the kind of reading, in the kind of devotional reading, that the Scripture was meant to do inside of us.

So let's all take a look at a couple of passages today that talk about what the Scriptures are supposed to do in us. Last fall, and even last year in my last church, I taught a class on how to pray and in every one of those classes I shared a daily prayer that is more aspirational than that it turned out in practice. I don't actually pray this three page document every day –that's a discipline problem on my part— but I stole a saying from a preacher and teacher that I really like named Corey Russell when he reminds us that the Word of God is a fire, a hammer, it's water, and a sword. And so one of the things that I pray when I pray this prayer is “LORD God, I want to walk in humility and in holiness today. I want to be humble before the Word that I will read. May it be a fire, a hammer, water, and sword in me today. Burn away anything that is sin. Smash any hardness of heart. Wash me and purify me with your word, and pierce me to my own spirit so that anything that is not of you is removed.”

I think Fred Sanders would agree that that this is Scripture's purpose for us. It's what God wants to do in us when we come to his Word. Each of those things: fire, hammer, water, and sword, are scriptural images of the Word of God and I want to look at each one of those today.

First, let's look at Jeremiah 23:23-32:

“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? ²⁴ Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. ²⁵ I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ ²⁶ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell

**one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?
28 Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let
him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has
straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. 29 Is not
my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer
that breaks the rock in pieces? 30 Therefore, behold, I am
against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my
words from one another. 31 Behold, I am against the
prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and
declare, 'declares the LORD.' 32 Behold, I am against those
who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who
tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their
recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So
they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.**

In this passage, God is bringing charges against false prophets in Israel. Remember that there are so-called prophets who are saying, "everything is fine! God is going to rebuff the Babylonians and we're going to be okay!" God is saying, "no, that's actually not what I'm saying." It's a false word and Jeremiah is the one God has consecrated to bring the *real* word of God to the people. One of the reasons we know this is the case is because those words are in this book which 2 Timothy 3:16 says is "breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (Those are all things that the Word does in us, too, by the way!) God is near and won't tolerate people who tell lies in his name. These lies are the false prophecies. He says that his word, the words that Jeremiah is to speak to Israel, these words that we read when we read Jeremiah, are a fire and a hammer.

What does fire do? It burns. It purges. It refines. If we take the metaphor for refining gold and silver into account, fire allows the refiner to take out all the impurities in it. In Malachi 3:3, he says, "He

will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.” Purify. That’s one of the things that the Word is going to accomplish in us. We don’t have enough time to get into all the ways that this happens, but I think the most succinct way to describe it is that, going back to what I said in week 2, it reveals God to us and in revealing God it reveals our own hearts. Where we see the two not in alignment with each other, the Word gives us a choice: either keep going our own way, or submit to it. When we submit to it, it does a refining work in us. It burns away affections and actions that put distance between us and God.

The other thing Jeremiah tells us the word of God does is act like a hammer that shatters the rock. I’m sure we’ve all heard or read the phrase “hard-hearted.” This is what the Word does in us as well. When our affections are such that our sclerotic hearts are void of tenderness to God, when they are void of compassion for other humans, the Word can shatter that hardness and bring us back into alignment with how we were intended to exist and live. Again, this is the kind of thing the Word does when we read-wrestle.

So, the word is a fire and a hammer. It’s also water. In Ephesians 5:25-27 Paul writes: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

Here, Paul is connecting the way that husbands should love their wives with the way that Christ loves his church, who is his bride. Listen to what he says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing

of water with the word.” Right off the bat, we need to say that sanctifying is the work of God in individuals and in the church to make them holy as he is holy. That's not a throwaway idea because that is God's desire for Israel in Leviticus 19:2, which is what we find Peter quoting in first Peter 1:16 “since it is written, ‘you shall be holy for I am holy.’” Holy is what God is and so God’s sanctifying purposes are to make us like he is. In a more specific sense, because the fullness of his revelation to us is in his Son Jesus Christ, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is to make us like Christ. How does God make us like Christ, like his Son? He does it by washing us with his Word. The image of washing is all over the Bible and one of the reasons it makes sense to us today is because we wash ourselves all the time. That's why we take showers and baths. It's to get the grime and the dirt off of us so that we might be presentable and not smell bad to the people around us. And what God is doing by washing us with his Word is that he is using the Word to take away our internal grime, just like the fire takes away all the impurities within our hearts. When I was in college, our Wesley Foundation director used to give us a benediction from Jude that went like this: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and present you unstained before his glorious throne; to him be all glory and majesty, power and honor, to Jesus alone." God wants us to be presented unstained. The word gets the stains out! It washes us clean.

Lastly, the word is a sword. Arden suffered through a lot of wrestling I did with this text a few weeks ago and am still struggling with. The part I’ve had a hard time with is connecting the concept of entering into the rest of God with these verses from Hebrews 4: “¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” The word is a

sword. (As a side note for Arden, maybe the image of “rest” and the entering the land goes back to the idea of “devote to destruction” in that there was a rest after the conquest but not the one God’s talking about here, but there is a parallel idea that the rest comes through conquest, this time through the sword of the Word which devotes to destruction all the wicked and pagan parts of our hearts?) Anyway, the Word is supposed to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart, like we’re just flayed open. Then what? It devotes the wickedness to destruction. The Word destroys that which keeps us from the rest of holiness.

So, why is this important? Because as you read like we did last time and you formulate questions based on what you observe in the text, the next step, which we will talk about next week, is to apply it. This is a cooperative work between you and God as he refines, hammers, washes, and cuts. You’ll come to a realization in the application phase where you’ll have to decide, “Am I going to go God’s way, or am I going to continue to live my way?” If you allow God’s Word to do what it does, you’ll not only find your true purpose in this world, you’ll find a delight in living for God that no one will ever be able to take away.