

Spiritual Exercises
Study & Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

This week's exercises are all intended to invite us deeper into an understanding of the Scriptures and into an experience with God (and his will for our lives) as we read, study and meditate on his word. Study and meditation go together, so most of these exercises have elements of both. Please feel free to try these exercises on your own, as a family, with friends or in a Life Group setting.

These exercises are divided into two categories. The first category is specific exercises, in which detailed instructions are given for you to have a very specific experience of study and meditation. Some exercises emphasize study, others meditation. Some are specific studies, others are unique ways to approach different kinds of Scripture. Feel free to explore these all week. Doing the same exercise with different texts or doing different exercises each day.

The second category is general exercises, in which detailed questions are provided that can guide your study and meditation on any particular text. In this set of exercises, you will explore a single text all week long, rather than trying something new every day. You will slowly descend into a deeper, richer, fuller understanding of what God is saying that that text as God reveals new things each day.

Whichever you choose, spend quality time with God in his word this week, listening for his voice and responding with your life.

Specific Exercises in Study and Meditation

STUDY/MEDITATION ON “THINGS ABOVE”

(Colossians 3:2, Matthew 5:1-12, Galatians 5:19-26)

Colossians 3:2 says: Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, that our lives should be focused on, and shaped by, a perspective of reality the way that God envisions it. Our problem is that it is often difficult to keep God’s perspective in mind, given the influence of our culture. This exercise is intended to help us discern God’s perspective on our culture and its values. Either take some time one day this week to do this exercise in brief or in part, or take the entire week to slowly think through what the Scriptures say about what it would be like to meditate on “things above”.

- 1. What would you include on a list of “things above,” things that are consistent with how God would want humanity to live, with his values and desires?*
- 2. Read Galatians 5:19-26 slowly and consider the attributes described in the passage. How does this expand and limit your list of “things above”?*
- 3. Read Matthew 5:1-12 slowly and consider the attributes described in the passage. How does this expand and limit your list of “things above”?*
- 4. Spend time studying our culture. Notice what is in the newspaper, on TV, and on the blogs. How do the priorities of our culture relate to your list of “things above”?*
- 5. Create a Top 10 list of what you would consider to be the “things above” that are most relevant to our culture.*
- 6. Prayerfully reflect on what God is teaching your about these “things above” in your life. Carry your Top 10 list around with you in your pocket as a reminder of the life God is calling us to live.*

STUDY/MEDITATION EXERCISES ABOUT JESUS

In the ancient world, a name was intended to reveal something of a person's identity and character. More than simply a label, it was a description of the person's personality, of who they really were. In this exercise, we will spend an entire week studying various names given to Jesus in the Scriptures, exploring what each name could reveal to us about who Jesus is and wants to be in our lives.

Before you begin these exercises, consider your own name. If the person/people who named you are still alive, consider asking them why they chose your name for you. Are you named after someone and if so, how does that make you feel? Finally, consider looking up the meaning of your name on the internet. Does the meaning of your name reflect what you know about yourself?

1. Day 1: Read Isaiah 9:5-6

- a. Jesus is referred to by four different names in Isaiah. List those names.
- b. Of the four names listed, which name best describes Jesus as you know or understand him to be? Reflect on why this is.
- c. Which name does not describe Jesus as you know or understand him to be? Reflect on why this is.
- d. Pray or journal to God, asking him to reveal new aspects of his character to you during this week.

2. Day 2: Read John 6:25-40

- a. What does Jesus call himself? What does this symbol/metaphor reveal about Jesus?
- b. Read the miracle performed in John 6:1-14. Why do you think Jesus chooses this name for himself just after performing this miracle? How does this help us understand who Jesus is?
- c. How do you use/enjoy bread in your own life? Consider the texture, taste and smell of bread. How might your notion of who Jesus is be expanded in light of these reflections?
- d. Consider baking bread for or with someone else.

3. Day 3: Read John 11:25 – 26

- a. What does Jesus call himself? What does this symbol/metaphor reveal about Jesus?
- b. Read the miracle performed in John 11:38-43 and John 11:17-24. Why do you think Jesus chooses this name for himself just after performing this miracle? How does this help us understand who Jesus is?
- c. Given that you celebrated Easter a few weeks ago, what does Christ's resurrection mean to you? What does it enable you to do?
- d. Journal about how you have (or desire to) experience "resurrection" in your life. Where have you seen it in the lives of others?

4. Day 4: Read John 10:7 - 18

- a. What does Jesus call himself? What does this symbol/metaphor reveal about Jesus?
- b. Read Ezekiel 34. This was probably the text Jesus had in mind when he chose this name for himself. Why was it necessary for God to provide a different kind of shepherd?
- c. Read Psalm 23. What strikes you about the kind of Shepherd Jesus is? Beside Christ, who or what has shepherded you? How has this influenced your thoughts, beliefs and actions?
- d. As a family, you may want to consider visiting the Warm and Wonderful Sheep Farm in Wellandport. www.warmandwonderful.com Reflect on what you learn about this name of Jesus by watching the sheep.

5. Day 5: Read John 15:1-17

- a. What does Jesus call himself? What does this symbol/metaphor reveal about Jesus?
- b. Why do you think there are multiple references to the vine and branches in this passage? List everything that is said about the relationship between the vine, the branches and the farmer. What does this tell us about our relationship with God?
- c. What do you think it means to "bear fruit"? Have you been doing that? Why or why not? How could you bear more fruit?
- d. Consider visiting one of the vineyards in the Niagara region to examine the grape vines. See if you can get a tour to learn about vines and how they grow. Reflect on what you learn about this name for Jesus.

6. Day 6: Read Matthew 16:13-19

- a. In this passage, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Based on what you have read and thought about this past week, how would you respond to Christ's question?
- b. How could your relationship with Jesus be changed as a result of what you have studied this week?

THREE DIFFERENT WAYS TO STUDY/MEDITATE ON BIBLICAL POETRY

(Try Psalm 1, 139, 146 or Proverbs 1)

ONE:

Repetition is the first step of study. Commit the text to memory. Make it easier by writing it out and posting it in various places throughout your home or workspace. Recite it to yourself several times a day.

TWO:

1. Read the text slowly and prayerfully.
2. Read the text again highlighting the phrases or verses that especially speak to your present situation.
3. Read the text a third time, but only the highlighted passages. As you read, pray each phrase or verse, applying the words of the passage to your particular situation. Write a prayer of response in a journal. Be attentive to the Spirit's loving care and touch upon you.

THREE:

1. Read the text slowly and engage your imagination in the images it creates in your mind.
2. Reflect on the symbolism created through the word choices. Why were these symbols/metaphors specifically chosen for this text? Why do they create the responses they do in your imagination? What emotional responses do they illicit?
3. Create an art piece (sculpture, music, painting, poetry, story, etc) that captures your responses to the images and symbolism you've discovered.

TWO DIFFERENT WAYS TO STUDY/MEDITATE ON THE PROVERBS

(Choose any chapter of Proverbs, especially ones that feel “random”)

ONE:

1. Set aside half an hour per day to study and take a couple of days to read a chapters of Proverbs several times, each day journaling on what stands out to you.
2. Be fully present to God in these moment. Use them as a time for condensed prayer, speaking and listening to God. Discipline yourself to experience the “peace” in the “quiet” of these moments, to find rest in them. Be attentive to God in them.
2. Write all the self-contained sayings on separate slips of paper. Arrange the slips of paper into similar categories (for example, those that focus on relationships or on personal behaviour)
3. Read the Proverbs together in their rearranged form.
4. Journal about how this exercise challenged and deepened your understanding of these proverbs.

TWO:

1. Commit to reading a section of Proverbs several times during the day.
2. Reflect before going to bed and answer this question - How did repeatedly reading this passage several times in one day affect my spirit? How did it deepen my sense of the text and how it relates to life?

TWO OTHER IDEAS FOR STUDY/MEDITATION

ONE – A Word Study:

1. Choose a text such as the Exodus 20:1-17 (The Ten Commandments), Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes), or Galatians 5:22-23 (The Fruit of the Spirit) setting aside one day for studying each item in the “list.”
2. Try to find other verses where each word in the “list” is used (in the original language, if possible – try using Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance at www.crosswalk.com).
3. How do these other verses help you better understand the meaning of this word? How do they introduce new “shades” of meaning to this word?
4. Spend some time in meditation on this word, as you now more fully understand it, asking God to reveal himself, and his will, to you through it.

TWO – Re-writing the text:

Once you have finished meditating on a text, rather than journaling your observations, or a prayer of response, try writing your own version of the text, expanded and edited to speak directly into your circumstances. How would this text read if God was writing it specifically for you?

LECTIO DIVINA

1. Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily lectio divina one of the readings from the lectionary readings for the day (www.pcusa.org/lectionary); others prefer to slowly work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of “covering” a certain amount of text. The amount of text covered is in God’s hands, not yours.
2. Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Use whatever method is best for you and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.
3. As you open the Bible, be aware that you are in the presence of God. Turn to your text and read it slowly and attentively; read aloud or whisper in a rhythm with your breathing, one phrase at a time, with pauses and repetition when and where you feel like it. Do not hurry to cover much material.
4. When something strikes you, pause. This is God speaking directly to you in the words of Scripture. Do not hurry to move on. Wait until you are no longer moved by the experience. Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. God is simply teaching us to listen to him, to seek him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us. He gently invites us into his presence. So stop whenever...
 - You sense what it means to be healed by Jesus)
 - You experience God’s love
 - You are moved to do something good
 - You are peaceful
 - You are happy and content just to be in the presence of God
 - You are struggling with or disturbed by what the words are saying
5. Take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it, repeating it out loud, turning them over in your heart. Think about each word or phrase. Who said it? What does it mean? To whom was the word or phrase addressed? What was the speaker feeling? Allow them to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Do not be afraid of distractions. Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself that, when they rise up during lectio divina, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of yourself.

6. If the passage recounts an event in the life of Jesus, enter into the scene as one of the participants. Speak with the persons involved: the blind man being cured or the disciples as they walk with Jesus. Share your attitudes. Respond to what Jesus is saying.
7. Speak to God. Whether you use words, ideas, or images--or all three--is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. And give to him what you have discovered during your experience of meditation. Experience God by using the word or phrase he has given you as a means of blessing and of transforming the ideas and memories that your reflection on his word has awakened. Give to God what you have found within your heart.
8. Rest in God's embrace. And when he invites you to return to your contemplation of his word or to your inner dialogue with him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

A General Outline for Study and Meditation

A GENERAL OUTLINE

Our temptation in approaching the Scriptures is often to confuse quantity with quality. We read the Bible in a Year (a noble goal) but found little change in my day. We skim the surface and in the process miss out on the real gold of Scripture because we don't take the time to dig deeply enough. This exercise is about slowing down and digging deep.

For this exercise, you will spend the entire week in a single passage of Scripture. Choose a passage of Scripture that you will read every day this week. If you don't know where else to start, you could try Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 146; Proverbs 13; Luke 10:25-35; or Philippians 2:5-11. Each day reflect on a different set of questions below to slowly plumb the depths of God's truth in that text.

1. Day 1: What does the text mean?

- i. Read the text slowly and carefully. If you have trouble understanding parts of it, go to www.biblegateway.com and read it in several translations to discover different possible ways of understanding the text. Which seems most likely?
- ii. If some parts are confusing, try exploring the study aids at www.crosswalk.com. Can you find answers to your questions?
- iii. What seems to be of central importance to your text? What question does the text seem to try to answer? What answer does it give?
- iv. Try to summarize the text in a short sentence. Make sure that your summary captures every part of the text.

2. Day 2: What does the text reveal about God?

- i. Read the text again slowly and carefully. Are there any changes you'd make to your summary statement?
- ii. What attributes of God's character seem evident in this text?
- iii. What does God expect us to do, think or believe? What does this tell us about what God is like?
- iv. Why do I need to know this about God? What difference does this make? How does this text reveal his love and that he has my best interests at heart?

3)Day 3: What does the text reveal about the sinfulness of humanity?

- ii. What attributes of God's character seem evident in this text?
- iii. What does God expect us to do, think or believe? What does this tell us about what God is like?
- iv. Why do I need to know this about God? What difference does this make? How does this text reveal his love and that he has my best interests at heart?

3. Day 3: What does the text reveal about the sinfulness of humanity?

- i. Read the text again slowly and carefully. Are there any changes you'd make to your summary statement?
- ii. Why/how have I seen people struggle with what the text teaches? What have been the consequences in their lives or the lives of others?
- iii. What creates this temptation in me? What habits do I have that contribute to my weakness in this area?
- iv. What does my struggle in this area teach me about me, about my faith or maturity?

4. Day 4: What does this text reveal about the potential of humanity to reflect God's image to the world?

- i. Read the text again slowly and carefully. Are there any changes you'd make to your summary statement?
- ii. What does this text reveal about what it means to be truly human, the way God intended humanity to be? How would this text give hope to the world if everyone lived this way?
- iii. Where do I have the chance to live out this teaching? What makes it hard for me to do so?
- iv. Who do I know who is an example of this teaching? How could I emulate their example in my life?

5. Day 5: What could keep me from living out this text?

- i. Read the text again slowly and carefully. Are there any changes you'd make to your summary statement?
- ii. In what ways does the enemy try to keep me from being obedient to God in this way? What lies does he tell me? How does he discourage me? What voices does he use to dissuade me? How can he use my past against me?
- iii. What circumstances in my life would make this text harder to obey? What circumstances (or prospective circumstances) are already making it hard?
- iv. How could someone else help me in being obedient in this way? How could I help someone else?

6. Day 6: What is God teaching me in particular at this point in my life?

- i. Read the text again slowly and carefully. Are there any changes you'd make to your summary statement?
- ii. What one or two changes can I make in my life to make the changes described in this text?
- iii. In what one or two ways can I challenge other people (with whom I am already in relationship) to make similar changes in their life?
- iv. In what one or two ways can these changes help to serve someone who is currently far from God with his love and hope?

End of Week Reflection

MOVING FORWARD

After a week of challenging ourselves to spend time studying and meditating on the Scriptures, consider the following questions for developing some perspective on incorporating study and meditation into the regular rhythm of our life with God. As a way of reflecting on your experiences this week, spend some time to answer any of the following questions that seem relevant.

1. What “worked” for you this week?

- a. What were your most meaningful experiences with God this week? What were your least meaningful experiences with God?
- b. How did a week of deliberately engaging in the study and meditation on Scripture affect your relationship with him?

2. What experiences would you like to maintain as a part of your regular rhythm?

- a. Are there experiences you’d like to keep doing regularly?
- b. Are there experiences you’d like to “tweak” to better suit your personality in studying and meditating on Scripture?
- c. Are there experiences you’d like to try from time to time?

3. Given your experiences this week, what else would you like to try as you move forward studying and meditating on Scripture?

- a. Are there specific books of the Bible you’d like to work through?
- b. Are there specific Scriptural themes you’d like to study?
- c. Are there specific questions you’d like to have answered?
- d. Are there specific encounters you’d like to have with God?

