

Open My Eyes

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[0 : 00] Well, here we are at the start of, whoa, I'm booming, a new year. And the new year is often the time that we look back on how we've lived and we think about how we want to change in the year ahead and maybe some new habits that we want to incorporate into our lives.

And if you haven't already done that, I want to encourage you to set aside some time this week for prayer, for meditation, for reflection on this past year.

And I want to encourage you to set some worthy goals for this year ahead. It's not a Bible quote, but it's one of my favorites. If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time.

So let's live with purpose in this year ahead. What do you hope to accomplish in 2023? How do you hope to grow in this year ahead? A few weeks back, I encouraged all of us to spend countless hours in God's Word in 2023, reading and meditating on what He said in the Bible.

And I shared with you five benefits that come into our lives through God's Word. Just a quick recap. I talked about how God's Word is at the heart of our relationship with Him.

[1 : 18] We talked about how the Bible is the place where our faith grows. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. We talked about how it's where we find everything we need for life and godliness.

We talked about how God's Word is full of very great and precious promises. And we talked about how it's full of the instructions that we need to stand firm in this year ahead, but also for the rest of our lives.

And at the end of that message on December 11th, I encourage you all to take a Bible reading plan from the table at the back. We now have those Bible reading plans on the mailbox table if you haven't got one yet.

And I encourage you to resolve to read through God's Word this year. Or if that's a big commitment, then to even just read through the New Testament, whatever fits where you're at in your faith journey.

This morning is going to be kind of a part two to that message. That message is kind of the motivating message. Why should we do this? What's the benefit to reading God's Word?

[2 : 20] But this morning, I want to just get really practical and talk about how we do this. Maybe some of you haven't read through the Bible in its entirety before.

Or maybe you've tried, but then kind of lost your drive getting into some of those difficult books of the Bible. Leviticus or Numbers or some of the genealogies.

And it could be just that maybe reading is not your thing. Maybe you struggle with reading and it's just not something that you really enjoy doing. So this morning's message, I hope, will be very practical.

I'm not going to be explaining a passage of Scripture. But I'll be sharing with you a few of the helpful things that I've learned over the years. Just about getting the most out of your time in God's Word.

So let's start by talking about frequency. Making a daily habit of spending time in God's Word is key. And it's important for two reasons.

[3 : 20] First, the Bible is a big book. And if you just look at that whole book or how much you're able to read in one day, you might think, man, I'm never going to make it through this thing.

Reading the Bible is almost like eating an elephant. And as the saying goes, the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. But don't let the size of this book deter you.

To get through this book in a year, you'll need to break it down into little pieces. And so a daily habit will do the trick. But there's another reason to make daily Bible reading a habit.

You want to get through the Bible. You want to achieve that goal of reading through it. But even more important than that, every time you open the Bible and read, you're engaging in relationship with God.

You're putting yourself into the place where He speaks to you. Where you hear from Him. And if spending time in God's Word is about relationship with God, then this is a good thing to do daily. [4 : 28] Not just once in a while. The more often that you take time to slow down and listen to God in His Word, the better. The more your relationship with Him will grow.

One author refers to Bible reading as a habit of grace. Along with prayer, it's one of those habits through which God gives to us.

So how often do you want to receive from God? Do you want to open yourself up to His grace every day? Then I want to encourage you to just make it a daily habit.

One of your core things that you do every day throughout the year. I think of Jesus and the time that He was tempted in the wilderness by the devil.

How did He answer that first temptation of the devil? When the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread for His hungry stomach. Matthew 4 verse 4.

[5 : 25] He said, I often think about this.

Jesus hadn't eaten in 40 days. Just imagine that feeling in your stomach. And here He is telling the devil that more important than food for His hungry stomach is food for His soul.

The sustenance that comes from above. God's Word. If you think back to that prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, He encouraged us to ask the Father for our daily bread.

And there I think just a general reference to provision and even to food. But how much more should we seek the words that come from the mouth of God on a daily basis if we need them even more than we need food?

Another author likened Bible reading and prayer to spiritual breathing. And I've always liked kind of his thoughts on this. He said, reading God's Word is like breathing in.

[6 : 32] And prayer is like breathing out. It's like taking air into your lungs and all the benefit and life that you get from doing that. For your body, reading the Bible is like that for your soul.

It's at the heart of our spiritual life and it's something that we need to do constantly. As a matter of habit again and again. Just to be spiritually healthy and to enjoy the spiritual life and relationship that God has for us.

So make it a daily habit to just take time to read your Bible. Now most of us have probably heard that before. What happens though if you miss a day?

Or two? Or three? Or even more? Or inevitably life happens and each day is somewhat unpredictable. If you live with your family you will find yourself interrupted.

Or if you're traveling somewhere you'll get off your routine and maybe you'll get sick or something. I had a number of days last year where my first waking moment was a parenting moment.

[7 : 39] And before I knew it there I was laying my head down after going from one urgent responsibility to the next. The day was over and I had missed my time with God and the word.

That happens because life is dynamic. It's full of surprises. It's unpredictable. I want to encourage you not to beat yourself up over missing a daily habit. This kind of thing happens.

Don't be discouraged. Just do what you can to get back at it tomorrow. The best thing we can do is just to press on with it. Sometimes if we've missed quite a number of days.

We might look at the Bible reading plan and see that we've fallen behind. But don't worry about it. Just press on. Keep going. The devil would love to discourage you here.

He'd love to say, See? You're not a good Christian. You've fallen behind. You can't even read your Bible every day like you're supposed to. So might as well give up altogether and stop reading it altogether.

[8 : 39] You'll never make it through to the end. But don't listen to the devil. Don't give in to that doubt and discouragement in your own heart. This is the time to remember why you're trying to read the Bible each day in the first place.

It's not just about checking off boxes from the Bible reading plan. It's about connecting with God each day. It's about opening yourself up to His grace and to His power.

Last year, one of my goals from the start of the year was to read through a very challenging book. Not the Bible, but a book to help me read the Bible better. And it was a struggle. And I fell behind in my plan.

And things got busy on more than one occasion. And because it wasn't the core, most important habit like reading my Bible is, I had to let it go for a couple weeks here and there.

And then eventually I got to November and I just felt like I can't keep going on this. And so I let it go for the rest of the last year. I just kind of gave up on it. But I always have had the intention to get back.

[9 : 48] I'm going to finish that book in this new year. My goal was to read the whole thing. And I only managed to get through three quarters of it. But just because I didn't finish it doesn't mean that I didn't benefit from all that I did read in it all the way through.

And reading the Bible is like that. There's such great benefit in it every time you do it. So even if you miss some days, the best thing you can do is just keep going with it.

Keep at it. Every time you spend time with God and His Word is a chance to grow. It's a chance to be strengthened. It's a chance to hear wisdom from God.

Now, there are some ways that you can catch up if you fall behind in your Bible reading plan. And in one sense, you can't make up for those times that you chose poorly to, you know, scroll through some kind of online feed instead of reading your Bible.

But you can catch up in the plan and continue to hear the things that you've missed. This is where smartphones are such a helpful thing. There are all kinds of free apps, which some of you may have.

[11 : 01] If you don't have any, you can just go onto your app store. You can type in Bible or Audio Bible. And the Audio Bible is a great way to catch up on the plan.

You can listen to longer portions of Scripture all at once while you're driving on the highway. Or while you're doing some kind of a task that just doesn't involve a lot of concentration. And I use this probably almost every year to catch up or to make progress if I've fallen behind in a certain book. One of my favorite ways to use it is when I get to some of those chapters that are full of names that are difficult to pronounce. Why do all the hard work of having to figure each one out when you can just have somebody read it to you and listen to it?

So that's one of the things I like to do. And you can get all kinds of these Audio Bibles. My personal favorite is a dramatized one that's kind of almost voice acted. You can find these apps or you can download an Audible audiobook app and pick whatever one you like, whatever translation you want to listen to.

While we're on the topic of smartphones, let's talk about reading the Bible on your phone. I don't know how many of you do this or have thought of doing this or where you're at with this, but I always discourage people from using their phones to read their Bibles and to spend time with God.

[12 : 24] Unless you find yourself in a situation where it's all you've got, choose a paper copy of the Bible over your smartphone. The reasons are many.

Smartphones are full of distractions. They give us all kinds of notifications. Ding, ding, ding. All day long. And that's the last thing that we need when we're trying to focus on what God is saying and hear from Him in His Word.

I don't know about you, but many times I just open it up and I see all this glow and all these little red thingy, badges, saying, click here, press here. And before you know it, I forget why I even pulled the phone out in the first place because I'm off doing something else.

These apps are designed to get your attention and to draw you in. And so I would encourage you to use a paper copy of the Bible if possible.

You might think about spending time with God each day like pruning a tree. And you need to do some sawing on a good-sized branch.

[13 : 27] Are you going to choose the saw blade from this massive Swiss Army knife? That's kind of what your smartphone is. It's a multi-tool. It does a lot of things. Or are you going to choose the tool that's made just to do what you need to do?

Which one's going to be more effective? Which one's going to help you make real progress and really do what you want to do? Smartphones are like this Swiss Army knife. You just turn it on and you get so taken in with all the different options and choices before you know it, you don't even know why you're in there anymore.

So I'll encourage you to use your paper Bibles. Why bring that unnecessary distraction into your time alone with God?

Others may try and read their Bibles while watching TV. I don't know if any of you are in that spot. I would encourage you, don't do that. Inevitably, you end up watching more TV than you do listening to what God has to say.

This is a bad idea. Think about it. How would you feel if you were trying to talk to someone and they're there just staring at the TV, watching it, and kind of every now and then looking back at you to kind of give you the sense that they're listening.

[14 : 43] But really, they're more tuned into the TV. And that's kind of how it is when we try to multitask and do these other things while listening to God, while reading our Bibles.

So try to eliminate distractions. Try to get focused just on God and His Word. And use a paper Bible.

I want to just encourage you with that. While we're on the subject of focus and being undistracted, let's talk about what kind of paper Bible you should use in your time reading God's Word.

I want to strongly encourage you not to read your Bible for your daily time with God from a study Bible. Now, this might sound a little weird, but you guys probably have experienced what I'm about to tell you about here.

If you have a study Bible, I brought one. And it's a wonderful tool. There's so many good things in here. But just look on the page.

[15 : 49] How much of this is the Word of God? And how much of this is the Word of man? This little piece right here, I've seen somewhere, it's just a teeny little, almost two sentences at the top, and the rest is all just comments.

It's just this little bit up here, and the rest is all just commentary. Now, commentaries are good. They're helpful. Cross-references can be helpful.

But oftentimes, they are a form of distraction too. I mean, you think about it. Who wrote these comments? Well, some scholar. Some Bible scholar, and they're good things.

I have a single volume commentary here on the letters of John. First, second, third John. This was written by a man named Colin Cruz.

But if you think about it, I mean, is that how you want to read God's Word? I mean, you're there to hear from Him, to listen to His heart. And sometimes we get into that trap where we, you know, spend 60 seconds reading two or three verses of what He has said, but then we spend 59 minutes reading all the stuff that Colin Cruz has to say at the bottom of the page.

[17 : 05] And instead of meditating on what God has said, we're spending more time thinking Colin Cruz's thoughts about what God has said. Now, there is a place for study and commentaries, but oftentimes these things distract us.

And so I would encourage you to just use a plain old Bible that just has the text of God's Word in it. Just read it. And maybe after you're kind of through that time and you spend some time in prayer, if you've got questions or things you don't know, pull out a good commentary and look in there, or the Bible atlas and look in there.

But don't let the thoughts of other people short-circuit your chance to hear from God each day.

When I read my Bible, I like a copy that has just God's words in it, maybe a few translators' notes at the bottom.

And I save the commentaries and the study Bibles and the Bible atlas for at the end, if I've got some extra time to delve into some questions or I'm confused about something.

So get yourself a copy of the Word of God without all the extras and the notes. And, you know, I'm going to just tell you something. This is a statistic I'm just making up out of thin air right off my feelings, so don't take it too seriously.

[18 : 26] But most of the time, isn't it true that the commentary in the study Bible just tells you what you already know or what you could already have figured out just by reading the passage? Or if you have a question, you read in those little comments in there, and it doesn't really answer your question.

It tells you about all sorts of other things, but it just doesn't have the answer to the question you have. I feel like for me that's like 85% of the time. So, you know, get yourself a good commentary and a good atlas, but save those for times of study.

Let's talk about translations for a minute here. I'm not going to go into great detail here about the strengths and weaknesses of various Bible translations. I did that in my sermon on March 7th, 2021.

That was the big, why are there verses missing in my Bible conversation? So if you want to know about that or be reminded of that, you can go on the website and look that sermon up. But I will say that the best translation for everyday Bible reading is one that you can understand and read with

relative ease.

I know some of you prefer the translation that you've grown up with or use for many years, but if you have to stop and look up words in the dictionary every other verse, then you're probably not making a lot of progress.

[19 : 44] Or you're just, it makes it more difficult to get to the meaning of the Word of God. I'm guessing most of you that are in that boat simply would skip over those words anyway or just guess at what they mean from the context.

But choose a modern translation that's easy to read and understand, one that doesn't turn your time of prayer and meditation into a study of English vocab and grammar.

This is a time for relating with God. It's about listening to His heart. And there's tremendous value when you come to that point where you want to do some study to comparing translations, using some of those more word-for-word translations.

But I always save that for deeper study on a passage when I'm looking for specific answers to specific questions. Here's a simple test that you can do to evaluate whether the translation you're reading from is easy and readable enough for you.

Try just reading through a chapter of the Bible aloud. And if you can read through a chapter smoothly and you're not getting hung up on where to put the pauses and where to take the breaths and how to pronounce those words that you just don't see very often, then you're probably good to go and have got a good one in front of you.

[21 : 08] Some of those older ones or some of the word-for-word ones are just better for study. One of the challenges that we often face with daily Bible reading is consistency.

I think we all know that it's a worthwhile habit, but the busyness of life often ends up just choking out our time with God and His Word. So how can we make this a daily habit when everything else in life is crowding in, trying to swallow up that time and space?

Well, here's what I've learned when it comes to daily habits. The most important daily habits in life have to be guarded. We have to put in effort to protect the time and the place and the space for them each day.

This means blocking out time for them. It means refusing to schedule things at that time when you plan to meet with God or do other important habits.

If the best time for you to read your Bible is in the morning and you're constantly battling fatigue and you can't keep your eyes open, it probably means that you need to start consistently setting yourself an earlier bedtime and getting to bed earlier.

[22 : 22] That's a way of guarding the habit. Another way we guard this habit is by seeking undistracted solitude. Finding a consistent place where we can just be alone to read and pray.

I was just reading this morning in Mark chapter 1. Jesus did this. He went out and he got alone so that he could focus, so that he could pray, so that he wasn't constantly being interrupted by the crowds.

And so we should seek solitude as well. This may take some careful thought and planning and even continual effort. I kind of have it easy because I can just kind of come to the church here and before I start my work I can have that quiet space right here in the office at the church.

But I didn't always have that. When I lived in Edmonton and worked for FedEx, I didn't have any space. We had this tiny little basement suite and so I would get up and get to work an hour before work started and I would sit there in my Shev Malibu with the windows rolled up and in the winter with it going a little bit to keep myself warm and that's where I had my time with the Lord.

It was the most private place that I could find consistently. It was always there. And I got the odd funny look from a co-worker but then I noticed there were some other co-workers who were showing up early just to listen to music before work started too.

[23 : 50] So I mean it wasn't all that weird to them. But these kind of habits they need to be guarded. And so I just want to encourage you and ask you what do you need to do to guard your time with God and His Word?

Is it about the place? Is it about the time of day? Are there other habits that need to kind of come together with it such as going to bed earlier or just getting out of the house for that time?

Are there things you need to do to your space to make it less distracting? Are there too much stuff in the place where you meet with God that every time you go there you just oh man I got to work on this thing here?

Another thing that's helpful when establishing new habits this is not a biblical thing but it's just something that I've learned from experience and from others who have studied these things you can incorporate your senses.

And these things are not necessary but they can be really helpful. They can be very powerful. Whenever I need to reset my Bible reading habits after vacation I like to do two things.

[25 : 09] I get here to the office I light a candle that I like the fragrance of and I put a pot of coffee on or in my case Keurig and I can't explain why but these things that bring in our other senses they just often help with establishing habits.

They become part of our routine and there's just something pleasing about those things that appeal to my subconscious. The moment I open my office door I see the candle and I'm just yes let's light that up let's get the coffee going and let's open the word and have that time with the Lord.

So maybe there's some of those things that you can incorporate as well into your time with the Lord. All of these things are helpful things but there's one thing that's been more helpful to me than anything else and it's I believe one of the great keys to having intimacy with God in his word.

And I learned this practice from Psalm 119 119 verse 18. It's a prayer to God most likely from David and it's simply this open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

I believe this is one of the greatest secrets to having rich and meaningful time with God while you read his Bible. A simple prayer that you pray before you start.

[26 : 37] how do you begin your Bible reading time when you read? Do you look at the reading plan and then look at the clock and then look at the passage and decide whether or not you want to read it and what kind of passage this is?

Or do you just start with a moment of quiet and prayer and pray something like this open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law?

One day as I was reading through Psalm 119 it struck me that this is a model prayer. It's not just a prayer for super spiritual people like King David. The reason it's in the Bible is to teach us how we too should approach the word of God.

And what do we see here in this just this simple request? There's a deep humility. It's like the psalmist is admitting his own inability even to connect with and see and feel the wonderful things in God's law.

It's like he's saying my eyes are closed to those things and I can't see them God without your help. Would you open my eyes to see them?

[27 : 54] There's also a childlike faith here. The psalmist is trusting and believing that there are wonderful things in there in the law in those things that God has spoken.

I may not be able to see them right now I feel cold I feel unawake to them at the moment but I know that they're there not just helpful things not just true things but wonderful things.

And let's remember that the psalmist is talking about the law like this is the first five books of the Bible. I think we need to come to God's word with this same faith every time we open the Bible.

We may not be feeling it we may feel cold unstirred our hearts might not be in it but if we come with that faith there are wonderful things in there that my soul needs.

I think that's the way. And finally there's a request here it's just a humble and sincere admission that God unless you do something in my heart I won't see it.

[29 : 01] I won't hear those wonderful things that you have to say to me. I'll just read it and I'll be cool I'll be unstirred and so it's like he's crying out God do that work of grace in me open my eyes that I might see those wonderful things in your word.

I pray this or something similar to this every time I sit down to read God's word and I believe that it almost I believe that every insight and all the wisdom that I've received from my time in God's word every truth I've come to believe has come in response to this simple prayer that I pray every day.

What was it that Jesus said time and time again to the crowds to the people that he taught to his disciples he who has ears to hear let him hear.

Now why did he say that so much? What response was he looking for from the people? He was looking for people to listen and not just to listen but to really listen to really hear the word of God that he was speaking and at the same time he was pointing out that not everyone has this ability by default.

There's a certain blindness there's a certain deafness there's a certain distractedness that we are all prone to because of the sinfulness of our hearts because of the world that we live in because of

our sometimes the stubbornness of our hearts and so we must come humbly to God and pray open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your word give me ears to hear that I may hear what you're saying to me that it won't just kind of hit me and just go in and out the other side help me to really hear it and if there's nothing else you adopt from this morning's message I hope it's this simple prayer that you learn to pray this afresh from your heart each day before you open God's word and I promise this prayer will change your life it will change every time you come to God's word it will transform the way that you see the Bible over time you'll see it come alive to you more and more and God will answer it he will do that he will give you the eyes to see what's in there that you need a couple final practical ways to get the most out of your countless hours with God in his word this year and these are two things to try maybe new to some of you the first is something that very few of us do read out loud this may seem strange but if you can find a good quiet place where you're alone and not waking somebody else up in your house

[31 : 57] I want to encourage you to read your Bible out loud as much as possible read it with your full voice if it's narrative read it like you're the one telling the story if it's dialogue read it the way that you imagine the words would have been spoken in that moment by that person this has been another hugely helpful practice it forces you to read properly it forces you to think through the words it forces you to slow down it forces you to think about what's the emphasis in the way that this was said this question this statement it involves more of you in the reading of God's word it's not just you seeing and thinking about it on the page but it's you seeing thinking speaking and hearing all at the same time and you know what tone of voice was used when he said that there's all kinds of dimensions that come alive when you read it out loud and on top of all that it makes you a better reader so I would encourage you to try it don't worry about what the people in that other room over there are thinking just go for it it'll bless their heart to hear you reading God's word out loud and maybe they'll start doing it too one final practice this is one that I've found tremendously helpful in the past

I still use it occasionally but I don't do I don't do it every day but many people have found it helpful to journal as they read through God's word to take time to just write out their thoughts about what they're reading or their prayers just straight to God as they're as they're reading it's a wonderful and helpful practice for spending time with God especially if you find it difficult to focus sometimes I'm just so tired I got a bad sleep last night and I can barely think two straight thoughts in a row and I'm off into la la land over thinking about this this is a way that helps me focus I just open up the page and I start writing and if I get lost in thought I look back at the page and oh that's where I was and I can just keep going and eventually I do get into that zone where I'm focused and I'm concentrated and I'm connecting with the Lord in prayer and thinking about the things that he has said so that's a good thing to try too if you haven't done that or if you've let it go by the wayside

I encourage you to think about journaling there's another way to do this that's really helpful too sometimes you can find these series of questions that help bring out the meaning of the passage some people like to take three or four of those questions and just the same questions every day and just write out the answers to those questions what does this passage mean what is God saying about himself what does it reveal about who he is what does he want me to do in response to this and sometimes just taking the time to slow down and write out some of those thoughts as you're reading God's word can make all the difference in just unlocking the treasures that are there so those are a few things that I wanted to just share with you today on the first day of the year and I want to encourage you let's go to the word as a church and let's feed let's feast let's grow I'm really looking forward to it and I hope that you are too let's pray Father in heaven thank you that you have given us your word what a privilege it is and I pray that we would be stirred again and again this year as we go to the Bible

I ask that you would transform every one of our lives so that we are markedly different people by the end of this year than we were at the start more like Jesus full of love full of grace full of truth and full of the wisdom that we need we just commit this year and this habit to you and ask for your help with it in Jesus name amen amen amen amen amen