

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD



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A REVISION STUDY
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Rightly Dividing the Word

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Rightly Dividing the Word

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Welcome to *Rightly Dividing the Word*

We have seen that there are wrong ways of interpreting the Bible, and that if we don't get the "set of the saw" right in Biblical interpretation, and keep focused on the key to right understanding, we'll twist the Scriptures and miss the blessing of God.

Rightly dividing the Word of truth – to use Paul's expression – involves a seven-faceted process of reading, meditating, and studying the Bible under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. Any believer can learn to do this, and every believer should.

Because as we rightly divide God's truth, He opens its glories to work its transforming power in our lives, so that we grow in grace and live for the glory of God in every area of life.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Submit

*You are my portion, O LORD;
I have said that I would keep Your words.
I entreated Your favor with my whole heart;
Be merciful to me according to Your word.
I thought about my ways,
And turned my feet to Your testimonies.
I made haste, and did not delay
To keep Your commandments. Psalm 119:57-60*

Begin here

Every Christian understands that the Bible is central to the life of faith. The Bible is God's Word, His revelation of Himself and His will, to guide and empower us so that we may know, enjoy, serve, and glorify Him. Every Christian understands this.

But it's not enough merely to understand what the Bible is. To gain the benefit God intends for us from His Word, we need to learn how to get the most out of Scripture, how to handle the Bible through reading, meditation, and study so that we may apprehend and internalize God's Word. This is what the Apostle Paul refers to as "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) – interpreting Scripture so that the glory of God we encounter there can do its transforming work in our lives (2 Cor. 3:12-18).

As we might suppose, not just any old approach to the Bible will suffice for us to get the most out of it. As we've seen, it's quite possible to twist the Scriptures from their proper meaning and so lose all the benefit God intends. The Bible is God's Word, and if we are to gain what God intends for us from it, we shall have to approach that Word on God's terms. We shall have to discover the protocols, postures, procedures, and practices He prescribes for the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16).

I want to recommend an approach to getting the most out of Scripture which consists of seven aspects or facets of a disciplined approach to reading, meditating, and studying the Bible, so as to divide its text rightly, and open its meanings to us. This process will help you to focus on the key to sound interpretation – our Lord Jesus Christ – and to make sure the set of your "interpretive saw" is straight and true.

The place to begin – and in which to camp out throughout this process – is in submitting to the Word of God as such, as the inspired and authoritative Word of our Creator, Redeemer, Lord, and King.

Submit to the claims of Scripture

If we hope to gain the most out of our time in God's Word, we need to submit, to its claims. We're not free to pick and choose whichever aspects of the Scriptures seem clearest or most agreeable. All Scripture is inspired by God and given by His Spirit (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Our attitude toward the Bible must always be, not "What can I find for myself in here today?", as though we and our interests, needs, and concerns were the main point of Scripture. Such an approach, consistently practiced, will lead to a hermeneutic of convenience and of twisting the Word of God.

Rather, our attitude toward Scripture must be "What is God revealing about Himself and His will?" It makes all the difference whether, as we open our Bibles in the morning, we're prepared to listen to the voice in our own heads or the Word God has readied for us in the pages of Scripture.

Submit to the purpose of Scripture

At the same time, we must bring our own purposes for reading the Bible – whatever they may be – into line

with God's purpose for giving His Word. He is making Himself and His glory known to us in Scripture (2 Cor. 3.12-18). His Spirit intends to use that encounter with God to shape us increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ, to equip us with spiritual power for good works (2 Tim. 3.15-17), and to guide our feet in the paths of Christian discipleship and Kingdom living (Ps. 1; Matt. 5.17-19; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). If we have any other purpose in mind when we come to the Word of God, we will most likely, rather than gain the Scripture's meaning, instead twist it to address our own agenda, questions, or concerns. This is not to say that we should not have any of our own concerns in mind, but that they should always be kept in submission to the revelation of God and His will.

Submit to the narrative of Scripture

Next, submit to Scripture's narrative.

In 1995 Demi Moore starred in a film adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. The movie was universally panned for taking liberties with the story line, so much so, in fact, that Hawthorne's entire purpose was obliterated for the sake of producing what amounted to a stock love story. A cartoon in *The New Yorker* shortly after the film came out featured the caption, "Moby Dick: The Demi Moore Version" and depicted the starlet posing alongside Captain Ahab, and the White Whale hoisted up by his tail over a scaffold.

The point is clear: Don't mess with the classic story lines! The same is true in getting the most out of Scripture: Submit to the Bible's own story line – creation, redemption, restoration, for God's glory through Jesus Christ – and don't try to force Scripture's narrative into your own.

Submit to the power of Scripture

One reason people don't get much out of Scripture is that they simply aren't willing to trust its life-transforming power. They can plainly understand what the Scripture commands, instructs, directs, or counsels. They just don't want to do what it says. This is just another way of saying they don't trust the power of God's Word to transform us in ways that make for full and abundant life. We think the Bible wants to burden us with its demands, or dislodge us from our comfort zone, or make us miserable. But that's not how God's power works, as the Word of God indwells us richly.

If we want to get the most out of the Bible we're going to have to come to it on our knees, with our hands and hearts open, submissive to God and ready to hear as He reveals Himself and His will into our lives and circumstances. Rightly dividing the Word of truth begins here, in complete submission to the Bible's claims, purpose, and narrative.

For reflection

1. What is the alternative to "submitting" to Scripture when we are reading, meditating, or studying in it?
2. How might you be able to tell when you were not submitting to Scripture?
3. How would you counsel a new believer, just getting started in the Word of God, to make sure he always comes to the Scriptures submitting to them rather than seeking to make them submissive to him?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about what it means to come to the Bible ready to submit to its claims, purpose, and narrative. How can you help one another to be more consistent in this?

2 Seek

*Let my cry come before You, O LORD;
Give me understanding according to Your word. Psalm 119.169*

Ready for the next step

In this series we're considering a seven-faceted approach to rightly dividing the Word of truth, getting the most out of our time of Bible reading, meditation, and study. We need to make sure that we come to the Word of God submitted to it as the inspired revelation of God and His will, and that we keep all our agendas and concerns secondary to what the purpose and narrative of Scripture can reveal to us.

We'll need to make sure, throughout the rest of this process, that this facet remains in place throughout. A good way to do this is by maintaining an attitude of listening prayer, waiting prayerfully on the Lord to bring you into His presence and glory through the teaching of His Word, and not merely mining Scripture for nuggets from here and there to support your views or garnish your ideas. There is a place for such systematic reading and study of Scripture, but even when this is appropriate, we must always maintain an attitude of submission to Scripture, letting God lead us into truth, rather than trying to force Scripture to support our views.

As we work at maintaining an attitude of submission to God's Word, we'll be ready for the next facet of our process, that of seeking the Lord in His Word, so that we may meet Him in His glory and be transformed.

Seek the text in context

God reveals Himself and thereby draws us into His glory through the plain words and meanings of the text of Scripture. The way into the presence and glory of God is through the words of Scripture, and the words of Scripture can only be rightly understood when they are read in their proper context.

Let's look at an example of why understanding the context of a passage is so important. Suppose, for example, that you are considering a particular action. Maybe you're thinking about a purchase, not of something you need but merely something you want. You're praying about whether you should hit that "shopping cart" button and place your order, but you hesitate. Maybe you should pray about this a little more. Or maybe you can get some guidance from Scripture. As you're flipping open your Bible you notice, at the bottom of your order, that so many thousands of people have bought this item in recent weeks. You look up at your Bible, just where it has fallen open, and you read Jesus saying, "Go and do likewise" (Lk. 10.37). Well, there's your answer. You click the "purchase item" button and go about your day, feeling entirely vindicated in this little shopping splurge.

Sound ridiculous? It is, of course. But people do some variation of this all the time, when they don't take the time to study the larger context – the passage in its grammatical, literary, historical, cultural, and larger Biblical setting. Instead, they allow some impulse, strong feeling, hunch, or intellectual bias to cause them to miss the plain meaning of the text. Yes, it takes time to do this properly, but we're waiting on the Lord to reveal Himself and His will in Scripture, not just to confirm some desire already present in our hearts.

Study to understand the context of a text, and you'll be more likely to discover the Lord waiting for you there.

What to seek in the text

Once you've established the context of a text, the next question to ask is, "What is God trying to show me about Himself or His will?" Remember, Scripture is the revelation of God and His will. It is like a mirror, in which we may discern the glory and will of God. Unless we discern these, we're likely to botch the rest of the interpretation.

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Ask questions of your text, about what it reveals about God. For example, Jesus' comment about going and being a neighbor (Lk. 10.37) tells us some things about Him. He's a teacher. He has real authority. He commands and expects people to obey. He defines the meaning of *neighbor*. He speaks to us about what words and ideas mean, about truth as God knows it. And so forth. Jesus' words about being a neighbor tell us much more about Him than about us, and we'll be more inclined to accept what He says about *us* when we're clear in our minds about *Him*.

Next, in the light of what you are learning about God, seek what the text teaches about you and the world you live in. Jesus' having to teach us about being neighbors, for example, suggests that this doesn't come naturally to us. We're more like those men who walked past the wounded man, than the Samaritan who cared for him in a sacrificial manner. In what specific ways am I like those men? And how do I need to change so that I may be more like that Samaritan?

Finally, seek the path God would have you follow from this point, the next steps indicated in the text for you. What can you do today to be more a neighbor like that Samaritan, like Jesus Himself? In the light of what you are learning about God and yourself, summarize the primary teaching of the text and what it suggests about how to be a neighbor. Pray your summary back to God, with thanksgiving. Then, take that "Go and do likewise" and reduce it to immediate steps for your life that day, so that you can become a better neighbor to the people around you. If you'll take these next steps in faith, the Spirit of God will meet you as you are going and empower you to be more the person God wants you to be.

Take your time

This facet of seeking involves asking questions, looking to other Scriptures, waiting in prayer for the Lord to reveal Himself and His will, thinking carefully about yourself and your calling, and then making concrete plans to apply the text before you in your daily experience.

Such careful dividing of God's truth takes time, and we must be willing to make the investment. Seek God and yourself in the context of His Word, and He'll show you Himself and His will for you, for that very day.

It's as we seek the Lord and His will in Scripture that we come into His presence and glory, where the Spirit can transform us into the very image of Jesus Christ. Stay submitted to the Word, and seek its meaning for your life.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by seeking to understand a text in its context?
2. Why is it important that we should first seek the Lord and His will in our reading and study of Scripture?
3. Meditate on James 1.22-25. How should we expect to see ourselves in Scripture?

Next steps – Transformation: In your present practice of reading, meditation, and study of God's Word, how much "seeking" do you do? How could you improve your time in Scripture by taking the time to seek more carefully?

3 Savor

*The entrance of Your words gives light;
It gives understanding to the simple.
I opened my mouth and panted,
For I longed for Your commandments.* Psalm 119:130, 131

The pause that refreshes

Before we leave the facet of our approach to Scripture which finds us seeking God and His will, we need to insert the next facet in our process. That's the time we spend, submissive to God's Word and seeking Him diligently, when we savor the Word of God, delighting in it.

In the book of Job, Elihu declared, "For the ear tests words as the palate tastes food" (Job 34:3). You know what it's like to savor a particularly excellent meal. You let the food linger on your taste buds, chewing small bites slowly, letting the aftertaste swirl in your mouth as you swallow, thinking with anticipation about the next bite, taking your time, and so forth. Well Elihu says this is the way we should "test" the words we hear or read, especially those which are intended to reveal God and His will to us.

Savoring the Word of God is the pause that refreshes in the midst of our reading, meditation, and study of God's Word. You must be willing to do this, and you need to know what this involves. If you'll savor the Word you've submitted to, and through which you're seeking the Lord and His will for your life, your experience of finding what God intends will be vastly more enjoyable and rewarding.

What's involved in savoring the Word of God?

Savor each word

First, linger over the individual words of a text. Don't speed past them just because they're familiar: "Go and do likewise." What does "go" mean for you today? Where? To whom? With what opportunities for showing the love of Christ? How can you prepare for this "going"? What will you need to have at the ready to make the most of whatever opportunities the Lord presents before you? What did "go" look like for Jesus each day?

Then "do likewise": What will "do" mean, so that you show the Samaritan's love to the people around you? Can you "do" with words, or will you need to take some action? What did the Samaritan "do," and what does "likewise" look like for you?

Imagine scenarios of you "going" and "doing likewise" with the people you're likely to encounter that day. Imagine Jesus watching over you as you "go" and "do." Imagine His angels standing ready to help you, His Spirit ready to empower you, the surprise and gratitude of those who experience your loving word or deed, your own feeling of satisfaction at having lived out the neighbor love of Jesus. Savor each word of the text like this, and you'll be more likely to discover yourself in the presence of God, being transformed by His glory.

Savor the forms of revelation

Your savoring God's Word will be enriched if you learn to savor the various forms in which His revelation comes to us. Jesus tells a story, then punctuates it with a command. Paul writes letters. Luke gives us history. David pours out songs and poems. Solomon waxes eloquent in aphorisms and philosophical speculation. How do these forms of revelation work? What makes each unique and important for God's purpose in giving us His Word? What keys do you need to keep in mind when you're reading one form as opposed to another?

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How can you delight in each of the forms of Scripture, and not just in those to which you readily gravitate?

Savor each truth

As you're reading and meditating in Scripture, make a note, if only a mental note, about any truths that spring out at you. For example, "Showing neighbor love pleases Jesus." Say it over and over to yourself. Put your name in that sentence somewhere: "It pleases Jesus when I show neighbor love."

Turn that truth over and over on your interpretive palate, and let its sweet flavor settle into your soul. Do the same for any other truths that might emerge, such as, "Jesus expects His commands to be obeyed."

Savor each wound

You'll find as you savor your encounter with God in Scripture that it won't always be pleasant. You'll hear the Spirit of God saying, "Look, you are nothing like that Samaritan! What's your problem?" Savor that wound. Let the pain of it sink in and go deep. Hold it out to the Balm of Gilead until, by His grace and healing power, He begins to turn that wound into a place of restoration, and you begin to find your outlook, attitudes, and priorities changing for the better.

Go ahead, let the Scriptures hurt you; they'll only make you stronger as a result.

Savoring the Word of God will lead us to slow down, reflect deeply, and think broadly about the text we're considering, as we seek the Lord and His will for our lives. You'll get much more out of your time in the Word if you learn to savor its words, forms, truths, and, yes, even its wounds.

For reflection

1. To savor the Word, we need to be willing to slow down in our reading and study. What does this mean?
2. What are some differences between the way poetry communicates God's truth, as in the psalms, and the way Paul does in his epistles? Why is it important that we try to understand how the various forms of Scripture work?
3. What does it mean to "savor the wounds" of Scripture? Should we really do this, really "enjoy" being wounded by the Word? Why or why not?

Next steps – Transformation: Today, take the time to savor your reading of Scripture, following the guidelines provided in this article. Share the results of doing this with a Christian friend.

4 Search

*I rise before the dawning of the morning,
And cry for help;
I hope in Your word.
My eyes are awake through the night watches,
That I may meditate on Your word. Psalm 119:147, 148*

So far

We're considering a seven-faceted approach to rightly dividing the Word of God, so that we get the most out of Scripture in the time we spend there. We come to the Bible ready to submit to it as the Word of God. We are seeking Him and His will in the words His Spirit has recorded, and so we want to savor every one of them, tasting and chewing like a cow does it cud, or a dog does over a bone (Peterson), to pull out as much flavor and nourishment as we can.

Thus the Word dwells in us richly, and becomes the joy and rejoicing of our heart.

So far we're just beginning to get into the Word in a way that will allow us to part the veil of our finitude and folly, so that we can glimpse the glory of God and be transformed. And there is a step further we'll want to take. That is the step of diligently searching the Word for more light on the text before us.

Search the Scriptures daily

The people of Berea were commended in Acts 17:11 because they listened carefully to the Word of God from the Apostle Paul, and then devoted themselves to searching out the truths and implications of what they'd heard. Search the Scriptures to understand the Scriptures: This is the next facet of our approach to getting the most out of God's Word.

The Holy Spirit is the One Who teaches us the Word of God. Paul says that He does this by "comparing" Scripture with Scripture (1 Cor. 2:12, 13; see the ESV margin note). The formal name for this is "the analogy of Scripture." What it means is that we can understand a passage of Scripture better if we search out other passages that help us in understanding the one we're considering. The more light we gain from other passages, the more the light of the passage before us will shine brightly into our soul.

For example, as we're thinking about being a neighbor to someone we don't even know – like the good Samaritan did – we remember Jesus saying that all the Law of God is given to teach us how to love Him and our neighbors. Perhaps there's something in the Law to shed light on the situation posited in Jesus' parable?

In fact, there is. In Exodus 21:18, 19 we read, "If men contend with each other, and one strikes the other with a stone or with *his* fist, and he does not die but is confined to *his* bed, if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck *him* shall be acquitted. He shall only pay *for* the loss of his time, and shall provide *for him* to be thoroughly healed." Overlay that passage to the story of the good Samaritan. He didn't strike that guy and leave him wounded. It wasn't his job to make sure he was "thoroughly healed," or to pay for his restoration. In a sense, that portion of the Law of Moses, which this Samaritan would have known quite well, didn't apply to him. But he took on the obligation of it anyway, because here was a situation in which love was demanded, and the Law of God guides us in how to love.

The Samaritan understood the *Spirit* of the Law, so that he was not bound merely by its *letter*.

We are our brother's keeper, Cain's petulant protest to the contrary notwithstanding. The Spirit of the Law, if not the letter, teaches us – the point Jesus was making – that any needy person within our reach is deserving

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of our love, even though we are not responsible for his hardship.

We could go elsewhere in Scripture and learn about such neighbor-love as well. For example, the love and generosity Boaz showed to Ruth, Abigail's generosity to David and his men, and even Solomon's wisdom in discerning the right mother of a disputed child. These are all examples of what it means to show love for our neighbors, following the Spirit of the Law of God and not just the letter. These were all certainly in Jesus' mind as he rolled out His teaching in Luke 10. The more we search out God's Word, using the analogy of Scripture, the better we'll understand why Jesus' teaching here makes sense and is perfectly in line with what the Bible teaches elsewhere.

Search the record

In addition to the analogy of Scripture, we can benefit from searching the teaching of our fathers in the faith, allowing the light of their understanding of the Word to inform our own thinking.

This discipline is referred to as the "analogy of faith," because by it we search the heritage of sound Biblical instruction in order to help flesh out our understanding of God's Word. And when we do this, looking to the wisdom of our fathers in the faith, we find gems like this, from Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the fourth century. He asks us to consider this further insight about the good Samaritan and the nature of neighbor love: "Who is [this Samaritan] except he who descended from heaven, who also ascended to heaven, the Son of man who is in heaven? When he sees half-dead him whom none could cure before, like her with an issue of blood who had spent all her inheritance on physicians, he came near him. He became a neighbor by acceptance of our common feeling and kin by the gift of mercy" (*Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.74*).

Of course! Jesus is the ultimate neighbor because He grants mercy to the undeserving – even to you and me.

Search the Scriptures, and search the record of sound teaching. If you do, you'll find the light of God's Word flooding your soul in ways that will help you to get the most out of your reading, meditating, and studying in the Bible.

For reflection

1. What is the "analogy of Scripture"? How do you practice this? Why should you learn to make good use of this discipline?
2. Read quickly through Romans 3. How can you see Paul using the analogy of Scripture here?
3. What is the "analogy of faith"? Why should you learn to make good use of this discipline?

Next steps – Transformation: What are some ways you could make better use of the analogy of Scripture and the analogy of faith?

5 Surrender

*I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes
Forever, to the very end. Psalm 119.112*

Lights coming on

In my own experience of reading and studying the Scriptures, the more consistent I am at the kind of approach we've been considering in this series, the more I experience the Word of God as the living, penetrating, transforming, joy-giving revelation that it is (Heb. 4.12; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; Jer. 15.16). Others have found this to be true as well. As we come to the Scriptures submitted to them as the very Word of God, seeking Him and His will by savoring every word and truth, and searching the Scriptures and the great teachers of the Christian tradition, something happens in our soul.

Lights begin to come on – some red, some yellow, some green.

When this happens, you know the Spirit of God is at work. He flashes red lights on certain aspects of our thinking, or certain of our ways, that simply must stop. We can plainly see, in the light of God's Word, that these thoughts or feelings, this way of treating others or that bit of conduct – these are not in line with what God wants us to be or do.

Some yellow lights may flicker as well, warning us that this way be dragons. Something we're pondering, some fear or doubt we keep avoiding, some otherwise harmless preoccupation we indulge – these could lead to sin if we're not careful. Pay attention here; don't fall through these temptations into sin, but learn to deal with them so that you will continue to grow in the Lord.

And then there are green lights: "Go ahead, do this," "Obey the will of the Lord," "You're free to speak or live this way," "This person needs a word of witness," "Go and do likewise," and so forth. All these lights come flashing on, sometimes all at once, and then we can know that the Lord is really unfolding His truth for us, and we're in a very good position to get the most out of our time in God's Word.

But for that to happen, we need to move quickly into the next facet.

Whatever is required

We must be willing to surrender to the Lord whatever is required by the various lights His Spirit shines into our soul.

Surrendering to God and His Word is a conscious, repeated act, not just a general frame of mind. It's something we must be ready to do every time we're meeting with the Lord in His Word. First, of course, we need to surrender the various components of our soul to the teaching of God's Word. We must affirm and confess with our *mind* the truth that God has shown us. We must give our *heart* to delight in that truth, so that we love it and long for it to be our truth. And we must resolve in our *conscience* or *will* to carry out whatever is required of us.

Such surrender is accomplished first in prayer, as we respond to God and what He has spoken clearly to us, committing our very soul to Him for obedience to His Word. Unless we set our soul on obedience, inclining not only our heart but our mind and conscience as well, to perform the Word of God, nothing of transforming significance is going to occur.

Next, we need to surrender our time to the Lord. Whatever He is requiring of us is going to work itself out in the time of our lives. Today. Right away, maybe even as soon as you have finished your time with the Lord.

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Look ahead to the day and consider where, in the time before you, you will carry out whatever the Lord has shown you in the light of His Word. Commit that time, that anticipated situation, to the Lord. Think about how you'll fulfill the requirements of His Word, and then plead with the Lord to make you willing and able to do what He is showing you (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17; Phil. 2.12, 13).

Your attention

Finally, as you head out into your day, surrender your attention to the Lord, so that you go into all your activities in communion with the Lord, praying without ceasing, walking circumspectly (Eph. 5.15), and listening for the prompting of His Spirit. Thus you will be ready to act in faith and obedience on the Word He has taught you for today.

Paul exhorts us to make the most of our time by paying careful attention for the opportunities we have for doing good (Eph. 5.15-17; cf. Gal. 6.9, 10). The Spirit will be present to guide us, but we must be willing to hear Him as He prods or directs us to speak or act in a way consistent with what we've committed ourselves to perform. The more we live this way, the more such a way of living becomes just who we are, and the things we are learning from God become part of our daily manner of being in the world.

Surrendering to God's Word will be more likely to occur in the time of our lives if we include this as part of our time in the Word. When the lights start flashing, listen for specific applications of His Word to your life, soul and body, and engage in conversation with the Lord, until you have committed yourself and your time to walking the path He is illuminating before you.

If you will surrender to Him while you're in the Word, you'll find that you are much more likely to surrender to Him when you're in the world.

For reflection

1. Give an example of the "lights coming on" as a result of your reading, meditating, and studying the Word lately. How did you respond?
2. What is involved in surrendering your soul to the Word each day?
3. Meditate on Psalm 90.12, 16, 17 and Ephesians 5.15-17. From these two passages, suggest an approach to surrendering your time to the Lord each day.

Next steps – Transformation: Try this today: Read this article again, asking the Lord to "turn on some lights" in your soul. Jot down any red, yellow, or green lights you see, then surrender yourself to them at once. Carry out what God has illuminated for you during the day, then pray your experience back to the Lord before you retire at night.

6 Secure

*Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.* Psalm 119:11

Nail it down

Solomon wrote that the words illuminated to us by our wise Shepherd are like nails, securely set (Eccl. 12:11). What God is teaching us in His Word, we want to secure in our souls, so that what we're learning will always be there when we need it. Securing what God is teaching us is the next facet of our approach to rightly dividing the Word of truth.

The Scriptures themselves teach us to pursue this, hiding the Word in our hearts, as our text for today advises. Paul says we should seek to have the Word of God dwelling in us richly (Col. 3:16). Jeremiah took the Word to heart with great joy and rejoicing (Jer. 15:16). The writer of the book of Hebrews instructs us to pursue constant use of what we're learning, until we are shaped for discernment and obedience from the inside out (Heb. 5:14).

We need to allow God to drive the nails of His Word securely into our souls and lives, and I want to suggest a few practices that can help to make that a reality.

Sort it out

First, whatever God is teaching you in your time with Him, whatever lights He turns on in your soul, these are merely part of the larger picture of your life in Christ. How does what you're learning today go together with what you learned last week? Or a year ago? The more we put together the things God is teaching us, the more securely those things will lodge in our souls and lives.

So it helps to have some categories for your learning, some place in your imagination where the truth of God resides and does its work.

You might think of your soul as a library, with books on different shelves in different departments. Or like a grocery store, where you head down different aisles for the shelves that hold what God is showing you. I find using simple diagrams depicting the life of faith and my own life and calling to be a most effective way of aggregating the things I'm learning, so that the synergy God intends from His Word actually grows even when I'm not thinking about it.

Write it down

Journaling during your time in the Word of God is another way of helping to secure what you're learning. Write down what God has shown you from His Word, as well as whatever next steps you intend to take. You can also use your journal to categorize the things you're learning, organizing your learning topically, and then to review them from time to time.

Occasionally I will review my own journals as part of my time in God's Word, looking at notes I've taken in the past, updating my understanding of this or that text or truth, and seeking to pull together previous experiences in the Word for new insights and applications in the present.

Bury it in

As part of your journaling, find a verse or even part of a verse to memorize, then work to bury that seed of the Word in your soul, so that it can grow and bear fruit by its own inherent power.

I think it's very important that we work at Scripture memory. I find that having passages of Scripture

Rightly Dividing the Word

germinating in the soil of my subconscious makes it possible for the Word of God to bear fruit without my having to look up something to help me at some moment. The more of God's Word we can commit to memory, if only in loose paraphrase, and even without the Scriptural address, the more we'll be able to surrender to that Word when opportunities arise.

Talk it through

It can also help to secure God's Word in your soul if you have a soul friend with whom you can talk about what God is teaching you. Begin with your spouse. Set a time each week when you will share together from your time in God's Word. Be specific about what God is teaching you and how you are trying to grow, then pray for one another and encourage one another in obeying the Lord.

Having an additional soul friend of your own sex to meet with on a regular basis can also help to fasten the Word securely in your soul. Soul friends can be excellent as study or accountability partners, and for stimulating us in specific ways for love and good works (Heb. 10.24). Talking and praying with soul friends can be an excellent way of sinking the Word of God securely into your soul and life.

Everyday obedience

Unless we work to obey God's Word daily, we will never find the Word dwelling in us richly and nailing our souls for the Lord. When those opportunities arise for surrendering to the Lord, we need to go boldly ahead and do what we've planned, carry out what God has shown us, open our mouths or get moving toward a specific act, and let the Spirit of God fill our sails with His power and know-how. Just do it, and God will secure His Word in us as we follow Him in obedience.

Secure God's Word in your soul and life. This is an important part of the process of rightly dividing the Word and getting the most out of Scripture.

For reflection

1. How is the Word of God like well-set nails?
2. In which of the aspects of securing the Word are you currently involved? Which would you like to learn to use better?
3. How does daily obedience help to secure the Word in your soul?

Next steps – Transformation, Conversation: What will you begin to do to secure the Word in your soul? Share your plans for securing God's Word with a soul friend, and ask your soul friend to encourage you and hold you accountable.

7 Stand

*I have chosen the way of truth;
Your judgments I have laid before me.* Psalm 119:30

A long obedience

One of my all-time favorite book titles is Eugene Peterson's essay on the Christian life entitled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Isn't that great? That title defines the Christian's calling to follow Jesus throughout the course of his life. It can also serve to remind us that, if we're going to get the most out of Scripture, in our time of reading, meditating, and studying God's Word, then we need to stand in a good place with respect to the Word of God, and to continue to stand there for the duration.

We have been considering an approach to rightly dividing the Scriptures that involves, first, submitting to the Bible as God's Word – refusing to argue with God, and accepting His Word as the final Word on all things. As we come to God's Word, we are determined to seek Him and His will for our lives. We want to encounter God in His Word, and not just to validate some idea or practice we hold dear. To meet the Lord, we need to savor every word of Scripture, and every truth that begins to emerge from that Word, searching the Scriptures for more light on the passage before us, and searching the teaching of others to help us learn even more. Then we need to surrender to the Word, even before we leave it, and to work hard to secure the teaching of Scripture in our souls and lives.

If we can learn to do these things consistently, we'll be in a good position to stand on this approach to getting the most out of Scripture for the rest of our lives. But how can we make sure to maintain such a long obedience in the same direction?

Make a plan

You should start with a good plan for reading and studying the Word of God. Write it down. Offer your plan to the Lord as a covenant for growth, and share your plan with your soul friends. Your plan should include such things as what you will read each day – how many chapters, and in which order. What categories will guide your studies, so that you'll know how to connect the things God is teaching you in their proper places in your life. What other resources you will need for your plan, such as a study Bible or a one-volume commentary on the Bible. How you will approach the task of securing the Word of God. By journaling? Memorization? With your soul friends? What group can you join to help you stay in touch with what God is teaching others?

Write all this down, date it, share it with others, then follow it assiduously. From time to time review your plan, but don't give up on it. All plans can be difficult to follow for a variety of reasons. But good plans, followed carefully in a long obedience, tend to yield observable results. Take your stand on getting the most out of Scripture by making, following, sharing, reviewing, and updating a workable plan for your time in God's Word.

Share the light

Next, talk with others about your time with the Lord in His Word. Share what you're learning, but also talk about the ways you're working to secure the Word in your soul. Invite others to share their own approach to getting the most out of Scripture. What can you learn from them?

As your plan becomes a more settled discipline and begins to bear real fruit, you'll have much more to talk about and share. You'll enjoy talking about your time in God's Word, and this will help to secure the Word and your approach more firmly, so that you are able to stand on your plan with greater confidence.

Rightly Dividing the Word

Gather your friends

Finally, get some friends together, share your plan and approach to getting the most out of God's Word, and challenge them to join you in this adventure. Lead your friends through the studies in this series, and show them what you're doing to make each of the seven facets of this process a working reality in your own life. Choose a book of the Bible to study together, all using the same approach, and come together regularly to discuss what you're learning.

Take a stand for a sound and consistent approach to getting the most out of God's Word. Don't just dabble in the process or merely try it out for a season. Make a commitment! Lay out a plan and start working your plan for the long haul. You won't always be able to do everything you've planned, but if you're on track with a specific commitment, you'll be able to come back to your plan whenever necessary.

Getting the most out of God's Word requires a lifetime of faithfully coming to Scripture and listening for the voice of God. The devil will try to discourage you, or make you feel like you're trapped in some form of legalism.

But don't listen to him. Just keep pressing on in the same direction, following the plan God has given you, rightly dividing the Word of truth, and taking your stand for getting the most out of Scripture.

For reflection

1. Where do you stand in your approach to getting the most out of Scripture? Where would you like to improve?
2. Why is "a long obedience in the same direction" a good way to think about your relationship to the Word of God?
3. How can believers help one another to get the most out of Scripture?

Next steps – Transformation: Draw up a plan to incorporate all the facets we have discussed in this series. Share your plan with your soul friends.

Rightly Dividing the Word

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why is it important that we understand the right way to interpret God's Word?
2. Summarize in your own words each of the seven facets of the approach to Scripture outlined in this study:
3. In which of these areas would you like to begin improving your study of God's Word?
4. How will you engage others to help you in rightly dividing the Word of truth?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.