

The image in Psalm 1 is crystal clear in its truth: trees that are not watered wither. Like the tree, we need refreshment. To be perfectly frank, a lively faith needs more refreshment in a week than one hour on Sunday provides. In the handout I have provided a list of about 2 dozen passages that you can use to start a practice like this. These passages have been chosen particularly because they are very approachable and easily prompt self-reflection.

By taking on this spiritual practice of the meditative reading of scripture, you will come to see that your cup overflows.

Workshop: The Meditative Reading of Scripture

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Psalm 1, Psalm 23

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Spirituality is a big topic of our times. Studies show that half of Canadians have regular spiritual habits that they engage in weekly. It seems that many Canadians desire to feed their soul. Here is one small illustration of this: my spirituality workshop has 24 participants! Today I want us to consider one Christian practice for feeding your soul: refreshing our faith through the reading of scripture. So, rather than a sermon today, we are going to have a workshop. We are going to walk you through an experience of reflecting on scripture rather than just hear me talk about it myself.

A common approach to reading scripture is to gather information. For example, one can read a gospel to learn who the 12 apostles were. While it is good to have this kind of knowledge this approach may stop short of having significance for our faith itself. The Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton called this “the front porch reading of scripture” when you read it for information. It is when we shift to contemplating its meaning for us in our lives that we move from the “front porch” into the house itself. “Contemplation” is a form of meditation. To contemplate is to focus one’s attention on something for an extended period of time: to understand, absorb, to find meaning.

Contemplating scripture creates a spiritual space when you might know God's touch.

Taking time to contemplate passages of scripture provides a second kind of needed moment: one in which we stop doing life for a few minutes in order to reflect on our life. It is a strange irony that many people feel they have less and less time to do just that as people's lives have become busier in recent decades when that busy-ness should be prompting us to give time more and more often to sort out and set one's priorities for a meaningful life in the midst of busy-ness. Finally, contemplating the words of scripture can help us find renewal, faith refreshment, and to gather spiritual food for the journey of life.

Presbyterians, traditionally, have highly valued the contemplation of the Psalms. They are unique in scripture as the Psalms are themselves a collection of meditations on faith. Think of the Psalms as extracts from the personal journals of ancient people of faith. The Psalms include prayers, hymns, mini-sermons and a diverse collection of reflections on the real experience of faith. Because of this the Psalms are a rich source material for prompting our own reflections on faith. The Psalms speak of faith realities that in turn can help us reflect on our own faith reality. Because of this it comes as no surprise that Psalm 1 encourages the contemplative reading of scripture.

Psalm 1 begins "Happy are those whose delight is in the word of the Lord.... Who MEDITATE on it day and night". Happy are those who read scripture and contemplate what it says. The psalmist says there is a benefit for doing this. Using the image of a tree as an analogy, the word of God is like "streams of water". The tree needs water so its leaves will not wither... so the tree can bear its fruit. In other words, it brings life. How many of us live with a hollow sense to our faith, that feels dried out and brittle? We are the trees. Our need is to spread our roots into those streams of living water, that we might draw that living water in, we will find a renewal for our souls.

The author of Psalm 1 uses the word "meditate". The word appears in the Bible 22 times, and 19 of those instances are in the Psalms. In this context it means "contemplate... to look at something intently... to reflect on it for a period of time". One method for doing this is called (in our tradition) Praying the Scriptures. The Roman Catholic name for this method is Lectio Divina. It is the same method. It is a time when we extend hospitality to God, to come and be with me. It is a time when we close down the worries of our day, to be more present to God: to listen for God's still quiet voice within the words of scripture, to be inspired or affirmed or chastised or challenged or comforted or assured.

[Here we will engage in an exercise in the meditative reading of scripture, using the 23rd Psalm]