



A 2012 research study commissioned by the American Bible Society and conducted by Barna Research revealed some good news and bad news about Bible reading and biblical literacy in America. First, here's the encouraging news:

» 85% of households own at least one Bible, with a household average of 4.3 Bibles.

» 69% of Americans believe the Bible provides answers on how to live a meaningful life.

But here's the bad news:

» 26% of Americans never read the Bible and 10% read it less than once a year.

» 79% of those surveyed believe they're knowledgeable about the Bible, but 54% couldn't identify the first five books of the Bible.

» 46% believe the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are different expressions of the same spiritual truths.

Survey participants also said their biggest frustration was they never had enough time to read the Bible. It's interesting, on the one hand, we know we need the Bible, but on the other hand, we don't always want to do the hard work of reading the Bible.

One of the priorities of this church has always been the Bible. If you look on our website, you'll find this is one of our core values. Today, I want us to take a closer look at what it looks like for the Word of God to impact us as a community and as individuals. I don't believe we can afford to be biblically illiterate. The state of the church, the state of our families, and the state of our lives depends on our commitment to the truth of God's Word. But what does that look like?

To answer that question, I want to go back to 445 BC. Many years earlier the Babylonians had invaded Jerusalem, dragging most of its citizens into exile in Babylon. It wasn't too long before Babylon fell to Cyrus, the king of Persia. Cyrus reversed Babylonian policy and allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem. Their main purpose was to rebuild the temple, which after a number of years they were able to do so. Now it's one thing to have a temple, but it's quite another thing to have a defensible city. So the next task was to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem so the city could be defended. This would be the job of a guy named Nehemiah. Nehemiah mobilized the people of Jerusalem in such a way that the walls were rebuilt in just 52 days.

But there was still more work to do. The walls were up but the people were still broken down. There was a need to spiritually rebuild the people of God. They lacked that kind of unquenchable faith and joy that God intended his people to know. They'd compromised in their walk with him. You couldn't tell them apart from the world around them. There was a need for an awakening among God's people. And that's what happened. God visited his people in a very powerful way, and he did it through a rediscovery of the Bible.

This rediscovery was led by a man named Ezra. He was a Scribe. Ezra had been in Jerusalem for about 13 years, long before Nehemiah had arrived. It was through the Word of God that this gentle, scholar-teacher named Ezra sparked a revival. Let's read from Nehemiah 8:1–8.

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from day-break till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

We Should Approach the Scriptures with Hunger and Humility

Notice how these people approached the Word of God with both hunger and humility. The people took the initiative to gather at the Water Gate. It says, *“all the people came together,”* as if it were a spontaneous meeting put together not by the leaders but by the people. And it says, *“they told Ezra the teacher of the law to bring out the book of the Law of Moses,”* as if they were impatient to get Ezra onstage and hear what the Word had to say. They were a little like an impatient audience at a rock concert, chanting “We - want - Ezra,” over and over, louder and louder. Repeatedly the text says these things weren’t done by just a few spiritually minded people, but by *“all the people.”* And notice their humility. When the book was opened the people stood as a sign of respect. From what we can tell, they stood and listened to Ezra for six hours. They worked hard at listening. They showed their humility by bowing low and worshipping with their faces to the ground. Even the high platform emphasized a sense of authority.

Do you approach the Scripture with hunger and humility? When we approach the Scripture in that way, how does it impact us? We see in this story it impacts us in three ways.

The Scriptures Impact Our Mind/Understanding

First, the Scriptures impact our mind or our understanding. Ezra took the book of the Law, stood on a platform so people could hear him, and after a brief time of worship he simply read from it. It sounds so simple, but we must read the Scripture. Maybe that’s why Paul told Timothy to *“give attention to the public reading of Scripture...”* (1 Tim. 4:13). Whether we’re alone or in church, reading the Scripture shapes our thinking. That’s why it’s a good idea you have your own Bible, and you bring that Bible to church. We put these words up here on the screen for those who maybe don’t have a Bible yet or who forgot, but don’t let that substitute for you getting accustomed to holding this book in your hands, knowing your way around it, and following along as we read.

But notice that Ezra didn’t just read it; it was also explained. His reading was periodically broken up by translation and explanation given by the Levites. The Law was written in Hebrew and many of these Jews had forgotten their own Hebrew language. For years they’d been speaking the Aramaic language of the people around them, so they needed translation.

Not only that, they were ignorant of the Word so they needed someone to explain it and apply to their situation. Ezra would read a portion and then the Levites stationed at various places in the crowd would take a smaller group and translate and explain it. There’s an emphasis in this chapter on the “understanding” of the people. Verses 2 and 3 speak of gathering *“all who were able*

to understand.” Verse 8 says the Levites translated *“so that the people understood what was being read.”*

This is why we’re committed to studying and teaching the Word of God. We want to make it clear; to be understood; to be applied to situations we face in lives. It’s this that changes lives. As we begin to understand the Scripture our false perceptions about life are exposed and we begin to perceive reality and the Spirit of God uses that to change us. As we read and study the Word, he opens our mind to the truth and we see how it connects with our own lives. When this happens, it’s the most exciting thing in the world. Have you ever been reading the Word of God or hearing it taught and suddenly you realize this book is about you?

About a year ago 75-year-old Marion Shurtleff bought a Bible in a used book store near her home in San Clemente, California. When she got home, she found a couple of yellowed notebook sheets tucked in the middle of the Bible. When she looked at them she saw a child’s handwriting that looked familiar. Then she saw her name at the top of the first page. As she looked closer she realized she was actually reading a four page essay she’d written as a ten-year-old to earn a merit badge for the Girls Scouts in Covington, Kentucky—more than 2,000 miles away! She said, “I opened the Bible and there was my name. I recognized my handwriting. I was shaking, literally. I was crying.” It’s a mystery how the essay ended up in a Bible in a bookstore half way across the country, but one thing is certain: when we read God’s Word we see ourselves. We see people just like us; people who also battle depression, doubt, lust, and pride. As we read the biblical stories about Abraham, Ruth, David, Mary, and Peter we see our own life story.

So here in verses 1–8 we see the illumination of the mind through the reading and study of the Word of God. We sometimes downplay the importance of the mind in changing our life, but no real change can come about in our lives unless our thinking is changed. That’s why it’s such a tragedy that there’s such ignorance of the Scripture in most of our churches today. Why is that? Some of us have been taught we really can’t trust the Bible in its entirety. We’ve read articles by so-called authorities that poke holes in the Bible. Or we’ve bought into the lie our culture feeds us that we should leave the technical stuff to the professionals. But all this leads to an ignoring of God’s Word. That’s why we’re often characterized by apathy and inertia in our spiritual lives.

The Scriptures Impact Our Heart/Emotions

But the Scripture not only illumines our mind, it also engages our heart.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.”

For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them (verses 9–12).

We see here that when the mind is opened up the heart is moved in an authentic way. There are two strong emotions in this story. The first is grief. As the Word of God began to sink in the people began to weep out of conviction of sin. That’s understandable; they’d lived in disobedience to the word for some time and they were overcome with a sense of the reality of sin. Sometimes the word of God does that. It pierces us. It corrects us. In 2 Timothy Paul not only says the Scripture is “*God-breathed*,” but it’s “*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness...*”

Usually, if we preachers can get some people to cry we think we’re doing a good job, but not Ezra. He and the other leaders went out and tried to get them to stop weeping and start rejoicing. This is the second emotion we see here—joy. Three times they say the same thing: “You’re not supposed to be crying, you’re supposed to be rejoicing. Why? *“Because this day is holy to the Lord your God.”*” It’s been set apart by God for rejoicing rather than weeping. What you’re doing is inappropriate given what God intended this day to be all about. It’s like someone getting up on Christmas morning, walking out into the living room where all the gifts are and crying. It’s an inappropriate emotion. So these leaders tell the people to go home and have a feast. Nehemiah says, “*Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*” What a great line! The joy that comes from knowing who the Lord is and what he’s done for us is a source of strength. And the only way we know that is through the Scripture.

There are times when our weeping ought to turn into rejoicing. Like these people in the story, if we truly understood who God is and what he’s done for us, and we only get that from God’s word, our weeping will turn into joy. Why are so many Christians joyless? Why do we think God is more pleased with our weeping than with our rejoicing? It’s like the bumper sticker that says, “God is back and boy is he mad.” Because we don’t understand the Scripture. The essence of authentic Christianity isn’t weeping but rejoicing. It’s not about what we haven’t done, it’s about what God has done for us. And we only learn that from the Word.

I can remember sitting in church one Sunday, struggling with a sense of my own sin and unworthiness. I was really feeling broken. Then the pastor started to preach from the passage in Jeremiah where the Lord is likened to a potter, and we the clay. He described that image and how even though the potter may crush the clay he still cups it in his hands; he holds it and he won’t let it out of his control. The greatest sense of comfort and joy came over me. I knew the Lord was dealing with me, but I knew he would never let me go. I’d come there weeping, but I left full of joy. That’s what the Scripture does.

The Scriptures Impact Our Will/Obedience

But that’s not the end of the story. The Scripture illumines our mind and engages our heart and emotions, but what about our will? What about obedience? Look at verses 13–18.

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Here we have a group of leaders come to Ezra the next day for a small group bible study. They want to take a closer look at this book and, as they do, they make a discovery. They discover an ancient commandment in the law telling them to hold a celebration during the seventh month called the Feast of Booths. God had told his people that each year on the fifteenth day of the seventh month he wanted them to hold a week-long feast to celebrate how he’d brought them through the wilderness and provided food and water for them. During that time they’d live in little makeshift tents made out of tree branches and leaves. He wanted

the Jews to come to Jerusalem every year and make these tents and live in them for a week to remember his provision.

The Jews had neglected this commandment for years, but now out of obedience to God's word they prepared to celebrate this holiday again. Their insight led to obedience. The next 13 days were spent in preparation. Can you imagine what this would have looked like to the surrounding people? And so, when the fifteenth came they were ready and they celebrated the Feast of Booths for a week. Everybody was involved. No one said, "I'm not doing that..." It was a time of great joy and Ezra continued to read from the law each day of the feast.

Sooner or later the Bible has to impact the way we live our lives. It doesn't really matter how much you know or even feel; if it doesn't result in obedience it's a waste. Last week I was driving with my wife and son down to L.A. on Interstate 5. Now I like road trips, but when I'm on a road trip, I hate being in traffic. The priority for me isn't so much to enjoy the trip but to make great time. So I can be a very impatient driver at times, and I can frustrate my family who is in the car with me. So on this road trip I vowed to myself I was going to be good. I'd take my time and not get all worked up about making good time. Well, for the first half of the trip I was great. But then after lunch, it all fell apart.

There we were, stopped dead on Interstate 5, my blood pressure rising, when I noticed some cars passing me on the right. They were going off the road, driving on the gravel embankment, so they could sneak up to an exit about a half mile ahead. At first, I was indignant they'd do that. That's against the law, not to mention it was just wrong, like cutting in line is wrong. But the more cars that did it, and the longer we sat motionless on the freeway, the more attractive that option became to me. Finally, despite the loud objections of my family, I took the plunge and off I went onto the embankment. All I had to do now was advance about a quarter mile to the exit. But a few seconds after I ventured out, I heard a noise and then the ground beneath me felt very bumpy, and then we all realized I had flat tire! Now there are four words nobody should ever say: I-told-you-so. I heard those words more than once in the next few hours. Part of me just thought, "I wasn't the only one doing it. No one else got a flat tire! Why me, Lord?" But God graciously reminded me, "Mark, you're not anyone else. You're my son, and I discipline every son I accept."

Do you know what else happened? He provided a tire shop right off the exit. I drove right up to it and got a new tire and we were back on the road in no time. It was a \$120.00 mistake, but I learned a few things. I learned God is committed to teaching me obedience. I learned even when I don't obey him he's still

looking out for me. And I learned that instead of making vows about what I will or will not do, it's better just to walk moment by moment in fellowship with him.

Reading the Bible ought to result in obedience to God, even in things like how we drive. It should move our will to act. We should go out and do just what the Lord told us to do. And we can do it with great joy. Look at the end of verse 17 where it describes the people as they observed this Feast, "**And their joy was very great.**" There's a joy in obedience.

How should the Word of God impact us as a community and as individuals? First, as we approach it with hunger and humility it should inform our minds of who God is, what he's done and how we're to live. Second, it should engage our heart, bringing us joy. Finally, it should move our will to live in obedience to him. Being exposed to the Word of God should always involve all three things. When we leave one out we get in trouble. When the mind is informed without the heart being moved we fall into dry, dead intellectualism. When the heart is moved apart from the mind being informed by the Word we fall into emotionalism. And when the will is submitted without the two other things we fall into legalism.

In 2014 we're making a concerted effort as a church community to get the big picture of the Bible in our heads and our hearts through the E100 Challenge. As you take on this challenge in 2014 let me give you a few simple reminders revolving around what, who, why, where and when.

What? When you open the Bible, never forget what you're handling. This is the inspired Word of God. Every word breathed out by him. We don't get to pick and choose what we like and don't like.

Who? When you open the Bible, never forget who is speaking. We all appreciate recognized authority. We have parents and policemen and pastors, but ultimate authority is found in God's voice.

Why? When you open the Bible, never forget why you're doing this. You do it because you want to know and glorify God. You can't know him or glorify him without his Word in your heart.

When and Where? I'll take these two together. If we're going to rise to this challenge we'll have to commit to a time and a place. It will not happen if you don't carve out of your schedule a regular time and set aside a quiet place. Will you do that in 2014?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1392