

HOW TO GET OUT OF A DEVOTIONAL RUT

by: Matt Ward

Maybe you can relate ... you wake up with barely enough time to get yourself ready and after downing your second cup of coffee and glancing at something that may resemble breakfast, your eyes cross your Bible. It's been lying there, taunting you, for days now. Unmoved. Unread. Why? It wasn't always like this. What happened?

Might I suggest you are experiencing something that scores of Christians have walked through, often multiple times throughout their lives? This wave-like pattern of thirst for Scripture coupled with the dry rut of avoidance. No one likes ruts—dirt roads or spiritual, they are all disdained.

Consider this. Think back to that first day. The day you met Christ. Not the first day you went to church or were confirmed or any other church ceremony—I mean the first day you met Christ Jesus your Savior, Friend, Lord. What was that like? Was it dry? I imagine that it was anything but. After all, you joined up with this whole Kingdom of God thing because of this relationship you could have with the life-giving Creator of the universe. You looked forward to the part of your day where you were able to pour over the pages of Scripture that filled you in on this new relationship. So what happened between point A and point Rut?

Picture two trains headed down two tracks side by side. The first is called the "Relationship Train." You got on board when you entered into a relationship with Jesus. On the Relationship Train, you sit down next to other believers of varying spiritual maturity. You are new here so you try to soak it all in from every source. You receive awesome words of encouragement and truth, along with some well-meaning quips about what a "good Christian" should do. These statements aren't bad, and most likely the people who repeat them aren't doing it for the wrong reasons. The problem lies in the fact that as these critical aspects of the Christian life are being espoused, the reason why they are critical is never mentioned.

Then at some point in your journey, without even knowing it, you jumped trains. You switched tracks. You began to travel on the "Requirement Train." This train is filled with well-meaning people who have long forgotten why they do anything in the Christian life—it's all just a requirement to be a Christian. You stop reading the Bible because it is your connection to your Savior and the only way to develop your relationship with Him, and start reading it because you are supposed to read it. You do it out of requirement. The problem is that this is a relationship, and you can't treat a relationship like a requirement or it withers and dies.

You figure out that if the requirement is reading the Bible every day, then maybe 15 minutes is enough. This turns into five, then five every other day. Soon you find that this requirement is not producing the life that you were told it would, so you give up.

This issue is at the very core of Jesus' ongoing conflict with the Pharisees throughout the gospels. Consider this comment made by Jesus directed at the Pharisees from one such conversation.

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."—John 5:39-40 (ESV)

Was Jesus condemning them for their lack of effort in reading and studying scripture? No, they knew their Old Testament. The problem was why they read Scripture. Jesus points out that the whole reason we are supposed to read the Bible is to develop a relationship with Him. This is why the whole cycle is so frustrating.

When you observe and compare the basic actions of the people on the two different trains in the metaphor above, you will see similar behaviors. One train is filled with people who have a heart to know Christ more and more each day, leading them to seek Him in the Scripture with the outcome of growth in joy and peace. The other train is full of people who read the Bible every day because they know Christ, thinking the discipline itself is the goal, with the outcome of growing frustration and unrest, and, for many, ultimately giving up. One has the goal of relationship, the other requirement. The Pharisees started out wanting to be the keepers of the faith, to teach the Law and the Prophets so Israel would hold onto their spiritual heritage. At some point, they switched tracks. When Jesus showed up, they were fully entrenched in the whole requirement scene.

If we want to build a foundation to walk with Christ for a lifetime, we must develop the spiritual habit of reading Scripture motivated by our relationship with Christ. The Bible is an inspired means to reach the inspired end—worshiping and glorifying God forever. If we spend our lifetime studying Scripture without getting to know Christ better, we are missing the whole point. And worse, we end up riding the Requirement Train that is headed toward a spiritual dead-end.

What are some ways you have found to put the relationship back into your devotional life?

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