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Developing an Authentic Devotional Life

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Developing an Authentic Devotional Life

I have always told my assistant youth leaders at church, the youth leaders in the seminars I have taught and now my seminary students: "If you have a great devotional life, ministry is much easier. You will never need to worry about being unprepared for an impromptu devotional thought or sermon—all you have to do is talk about what you experienced with Jesus that day or week in your devotional time with Him."

In addition to that young people can spot fake from a mile away. They can tell very easily if what you are sharing is a "prepared study" or if it's something that you are actually living out in a relevant way in your life. Based on my experience working in youth and young adult ministry for 27 years, (including 8 years as NAD public high school ministries coordinator) high school aged teens are not struggling so much with doctrine as they are trying to decide if they want to be a Christian or not. Teenagers are

in that phase where they are deciding if they will personally accept the religion, they have been taught all their lives. They are determining if they will take that knowledge and use it to become truly spiritual people, with their own personal relationships with Jesus. I believe the best way to lead youth and show them how to live life out of their devotional time is by modeling and teaching devotional life every opportunity you get, just like we are told in Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the

doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deut 6: 4-9 NIV).

My favorite way to teach on devotional life is through applying Psalm 23 to my personal life every day and challenging others, including teenagers, to do the same (The following is adapted from *Authentic*, pp 79-84).

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

At first hearing I suppose this is to many people a very poetic introduction with all its imagery of the good shepherd watching his sheep. It's very idyllic and many are happy with the comfort of the familiarity of it. But this phrase is far more than soothing—it is the very foundation of the Christian life. For David it was true—the Lord was his shepherd. There is overwhelming evidence of this throughout the Old Testament. David followed the Lord faithfully. He learned to follow His Lord as a young shepherd on the hillside tending his sheep writing and singing

hymns to Him. Spending his time writing songs and praises to God is evidence that God was on David's mind and heart constantly. But what about me?

Every day I must ask myself if I am allowing the Lord to be my Shepherd. It is a choice. We do not have to follow God. We are often like the sheep that intentionally or unintentionally strays. We all know the stories of the lost sheep. The sheep make a choice and we must as well. It is foundational in my relationship with Jesus to ask myself each morning if I am committed to making Jesus "my" Shepherd for the day. Every day the choice is new. As I pray about this, I think through the choices I have been making and I ask myself where my choices are taking me—to the shepherd or away from Him. My goal is to pray, "Dear Lord, be my shepherd today. Guide my actions and choices and help me to follow You and Your ways." "The Lord is my shepherd" is not a given—it's a choice!

I SHALL NOT WANT

This is the promise that comes with the choice. When David first chose to follow the Lord, he still remained a poor shepherd boy for many years. Then he became a fugitive hunted like an animal for even longer. As one intimately committed to God, he definitely did not have everything his heart could desire—but he never "wanted" for the basic necessities of life. Through it all David remained faithful to his Lord and eventually became king. Scripture promises that if we are faithful through

the difficulties of our own lives as David was in his, we will reign with Christ in heaven (Revelation 20:6) just as David reigned as Christ's anointed king on earth. "I shall not want" is a promise for now and eternity when Jesus is our choice.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul...

Part of choosing Jesus as your shepherd is to choose to spend time with Him listening for His voice and observing His ways in nature. Obviously, we hear His voice in scripture—that is why we memorize and dwell on the 23rd Psalm—but we can also personally hear the "still small voice" that Elijah heard so many years ago.

The best way to hear God's voice is to unplug the technology, disengage other people and commitments and escape to nature. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork (Psalm 19:1 NKJV)." Sabbath is time away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and commitments. We take a literal Sabbath every week to spend time with God, friends and family at church, but we also need to take personal Sabbath breaks with God every day and at other regularly scheduled times as well. The concept of Sabbath is what personal devotional time is all about and engaging devotional practices is a key part of making the most of this time together with God.

Every morning I take time in a quiet place with God. Sometimes out in nature and sometimes in my office where I have paintings and photographs of nature scenes. I also love going to the prayer chapel at my church where there is a painting of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. Using nature and reproductions of nature to remind us of God's love and care for us is critically important in reminding us of our creator and His plans for our lives and His desire to live with us forever.

I also enjoy spending a half day of prayer monthly in a local Japanese garden where I can listen to the rushing water, see the variety of beautiful plants, trees and fish in the Koi pond while I breathe in the refreshing fragrance of a well-watered garden in full bloom. It is truly nourishing to the soul to sit in this environment contemplating scripture, crying out to God and listening for His voice. These times of refreshing are the central part of a devotional life that helps us to continually dwell in His presence and be filled with His peace and they lead to a truly restored soul that is filled with His Spirit.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Jonah was sent to Nineveh to tell the people there about God because they didn't know their right hand from their left. When we don't know God, we don't know His will, and we don't have any clue which path to follow either. This Psalm builds on itself. When we choose God

and make Him number one in our lives by spending time with Him regularly, He not only provides for us physically, but He gives purpose to our lives as well. Paths of righteousness are the missions God sends us on because of the desire He gives us to reach out to others both physically and spiritually. Every day as I pray this part of the 23rd Psalm I ask God where He wants me to go and what He wants me to do. As a pastor I have many missions I'm engaged in at any one time and I ask God if I'm focusing on His mission rather than my mission and pray for guidance on what to do more of and what to turn away from. I ask for God's blessing on all my activities praying that my activity will be a part of His activity in the world. To be working in our own power instead of God's is the surest way to burn out and fail. Jesus wants us to be like the 70 disciples He sent out with His power to preach, heal and cast out demons. "Christ in you," is the hope of glory—for us and for the world around us (Colossians 1:27).

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.

This is a promise that hard times will come our way just as surely as they came David's way. Not that God wills it but because He knows the nature of the Devil and his evil desire to destroy us—often by the hand of others who

are strangers to the voice of God. The Great Controversy is very real. So, the question is not if we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but when and how often. We need to learn to expect and even anticipate trials as they come. Not in a welcoming anticipation but in a preparatory anticipation that reminds us to always be connected to God and filled with His Spirit so that we can be victorious in the battle against evil. Just as surely as trials will come, they will also send us down one path or another in the Great Controversy. If we are unprepared to meet them trials can fill us with bitterness towards God and others. But when we are engaged in an active and committed relationship with Jesus, God can use the trials to help us grown in our dependence on Him and His word, which leads to greater peace and joy. Yes, more trouble can bring more joy! As James said,

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you

know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So, let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing (James 1:2-4 NLT).

It is a comfort to know that God is always with us in times of trouble protecting and defending us.

This brings us to the rod and the staff. God has two tools to use as He walks with us through the valley of

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the shadow of death. The rod is for the enemies. The rod symbolizes God's protective care that doesn't allow us to endure any more than we can handle (1 Corinthians 10:13). God uses this rod far more than any of us realize. It won't be until we get to heaven that we hear all the stories of the countless times God has protected us so well we didn't even know we were in trouble!

The staff, on the other hand, is for God to use on us. The staff has a hook on the end and is what God uses to pull the straying sheep back on the path. This takes shape in God's disciplining activity in our lives. Sometimes we have to endure hard lessons before we change our ways. But just as a loving parent hates to discipline their child yet they know that without discipline the child's sinful nature will take over their whole lives—so, God is willing to use tough love to teach us lessons just as He did when He had to kick Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden helping them learn about the consequences of sin.

As I pray through this portion of the Psalm, I keep all these things in mind and ask God to guide and protect me through the trials I am in the midst of and the ones I see coming. I also try and remember to thank Him for the ones he's seen me through remembering what a great and loving personal God He is—His name is surely to be praised!

*Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil.*

When you are worn out and tired, when you feel like your prayers aren't getting past the ceiling, when trials have you so beaten down that you wonder if you ever really did have a connection with God—you must remember that God hasn't forgotten about you. Enemies can be very distracting and disheartening but Jesus always loves you. This phrase of the Psalm is so amazing! It is a promise that eventually—one day—God will lift you up and prepare a banquet just for you right in the face of those who hate you and plot against you.

This is also an assurance that if you have enemies you are not alone. Jesus Himself had so many enemies that they eventually overcame Him and won the battle against Him—or so it seemed for a while. David was hunted down like a wild animal for years and he was mistreated and disrespected by his own wife and children at times—yet he was exalted to the position of king of Israel. Jesus was mocked, beaten and killed—yet He reigns as King of the universe even now. Trials and enemies may pursue and persecute us now, but we have the promise that those who choose Jesus as their shepherd will be anointed princes and princesses of His kingdom and will reign with Him forever and ever amen (Revelation 20:6)!

*My cup runneth over. Surely
goodness and mercy shall follow
me all the days of my life: and I
will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

Keeping this in mind on a daily basis will help us to be constantly aware of our true identity and help us to act like princes and princesses of God's kingdom in all situations. This mindset will help us to approach life with an attitude that will help us to see that our cups are indeed full and running over with blessings our entire lives here on earth. It will also continue to run over throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity, if we continue daily choosing to make the Lord our Shepherd and King.

If we are to be connected with Christ personally, we must stop merely using scripture to prove doctrine or read about other people's relationships with Jesus. We must start using scripture as a guide for nurturing our own intimate connection with our Lord. We have seen here how scripture calls out to us from the 23rd Psalm inviting us to dwell on who the Lord is, to contemplate His loving deeds in the lives of Bible heroes and in our lives as well.

The invitation is to choose and follow the Lord our God, and make choices in accordance with His will, as revealed in scripture throughout our days as David did. Some days will be good, and others will contain mistakes but just like David, we can always recommit and start again. The invitation is to bask in the knowledge and experience that God will provide and protect us and to remember to rest in nature to hear His voice and experience His leading. This scripture calls us to remember that we are children of the King of the universe and that He is calling for us to join Him



for an eternity of joyful communion, love and peace. This is what a devotional, scriptural relationship with Jesus can bring to our lives.

For me, Psalm 23 has been life-changing as I have prayed it thousands of times over that past 7-8 years and as I have taught it to teens and adults. It has nurtured and directed my life and has helped me to live prayerfully and has helped me to always “be prepared to

share the faith that is in me” with those whom I find around me. I hope and pray that this Psalm will be a greater blessing than ever before in your life as well—especially as you lead, challenge and nurture the youths within your sphere of influence as they are in the process of deciding what role Jesus will play in their personal lives for the rest of their lives.



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For more on the devotional life from Scott R Ward see, *Authentic: where true life-changing Christianity begins*, R&H 2012.