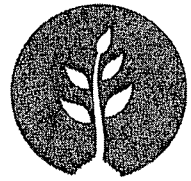

Chapter 10

C.L.O.S.E.R.

RENEW: H.E.A.R.ing from God

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."
2 Timothy 3:16-17

"More than almost any other discipline, journaling has a fascinating appeal.... One reason is the way journaling blends biblical doctrine and daily living, like the confluence of two great rivers, into one.... Although the practice of journaling is not commanded in Scripture, it is modeled. And God has blessed the use of journals since Bible times."
Donald Whitney

In order to produce lean muscle mass, bodybuilders are trained to eat six—that's right—six protein-filled meals every day. This causes the body's metabolism to work overtime, burning fat more quickly and building muscle. In my quest to be the next professional athlete (before I came to Christ), I consumed a

regular diet of eggs, tuna, eggs, chicken, eggs, turkey, and eggs. The last thing I dared put in my mouth was a candy bar. Why? Because what I put into my body was going to reveal itself on the outside.

Why Should I Read the Bible?

We all know that a healthy diet is the primary key to physical strength and fitness, and the same is true in our spiritual lives. The Bible is to the spirit what food is to the body. If we do not regularly—daily—take God's Word into our minds, hearts, and spirits, we will starve spiritually. Sound nutrition has established that we need to eat three balanced meals every day. Why would any less be true for our spiritual well-being? Many church members are malnourished believers who rarely, if ever, read God's Word other than on Sunday at church. Imagine eating only one meal a week! This, in effect, is the condition of those who only receive something from the Bible at church on Sunday morning.

What does this have to do with discipleship? Discipleship is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ through obedience to the will of God. A heart that obeys God is a heart that has first come to love Him. Our love for God grows as we know Him. The better we know God, the more we love Him. How do we know God? The primary way God has revealed Himself to us is through His Word. A heart that knows God is a heart that has been transformed by the renewing of the mind through the study and application of God's Word. Here, then, is the core of discipleship:

Study the Bible ➡ Know God ➡ Obey God

Figure 4

An episode out of Jesus' life demonstrates why we need to take God's Word into our hearts daily. Immediately after His baptism, Jesus was subjected to a grueling temptation, the fiercest

temptation ever experienced by any man. The Scripture records three temptations hurled by Satan at God's Son. Note the first:

> *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'"* (Matthew 4:1-4).

In each of the three temptations, Jesus resisted Satan by smiting him with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Here is the specific verse quoted by Jesus in Matthew 4:4:

> *And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD* (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Here is the story behind the verse. The book of Exodus records the life of Moses, whom God chose to lead the Israelites out of bondage to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and into the flourishing land that He had promised them. Through a series of demonstrations of God's sovereign power, the Israelites left Egypt and fled to the desert.

Without food or water, they were forced to rely solely on God for their daily sustenance. After the people complained to Moses about the absence of food, God revealed how He would provide the food they desperately needed to survive:

> *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go*

out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily" (Exodus 16:4-5).

The very next day, God did exactly what He had promised: He supplied food for the people in the form of manna (bread). When they first saw the flaky substance on the ground, the people asked if this was the bread that God had promised. Moses answered,

It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: "Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer [2 liters], according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent." And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over till the morning." But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank (Exodus 16:15-20).

Questions to Consider

Do you view the Word as spiritual nourishment for your soul? If so, in what ways?

Food for the Soul

The previous passage pinpoints two vital principles for us to apply to our lives. First, the people were required to gather their

own bread each day. Each individual had to personally make time to gather food, and then put forth the energy and effort to actually collect it. Second, the bread they gathered was only good for that particular day. Manna had a short shelf life—less than twenty-four hours! Every day, with the exception of the Sabbath, they had to repeat the process of gathering manna.

Every Jew knew the story of the manna. In His hour of temptation, Jesus connected the manna (bread) with the Word of God. Grasp the key points of Jesus' lesson to us:

- As spiritual beings, we need more than physical nourishment—bread—to survive
- Our spiritual nourishment—spiritual bread—is the Word of God
- God's Word is to us what the manna was to the ancient Jews: life-sustaining nourishment
- Just as the Jews had to make the time and effort to gather manna, we must set aside time every day to be spiritually nourished from the Bible
- Just as the Jews had to gather manna daily, we must read the Bible *every* day. What we read today is not sufficient for tomorrow.

In addition to bread, the Lord compares His Word to milk (1 Peter 2:2), meat (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12-14), and honey (Psalm 119:103; Ezra 3:1-3). The Bible supplies the complete spiritual nourishment we need: bread, milk, and meat. Additionally, it is not something we must force down—like spinach or broccoli—for our own good. It is sweet, like honey, and delightful to the taste.

From the beginning of Genesis through the end of Revelation, God's Word has always accomplished what He intended it to accomplish (Isaiah 55:11). Hebrews 1:13 says, *"God sustains all things by the Word of truth."* Then Hebrews 4:12 reveals, *"The Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, discerning the thoughts and intentions of our own hearts."* James 1:18 teaches that God chose

to give us birth—How?—through the Word of truth. The Word does the work in our lives.

Point to Ponder

Describe your pattern for reading the Bible over the past weeks or months.

Confessions of a Bored Bible Reader

People create a multitude of excuses as to why they do not read the Bible. While I was finishing my seminary degree, I flew back and forth every week for class. On every trip I asked the person sitting next to me on the plane the same question: "Why do you believe people are not reading the Bible? Or, for that matter, why aren't *you* reading the Bible?" The most common responses were: "I don't have enough time." "It doesn't have any bearing on my life." "I don't know what it means." "The Bible is confusing to me." "It is too old." "I have read it before and didn't get anything out of it." The most revealing excuse I heard was, "The Bible doesn't speak to me."

Polling the passengers on the plane caused me to question my own quiet time. After an honest examination, I realized that my own quiet time bordered on being routine and mundane. In an attempt to add fresh life to studying God's Word, I tried a number of different Bible reading plans. I began reading one Old Testament passage, one New Testament passage, and one Psalm every day. Before long, however, I found myself more interested in checking off boxes on my Bible reading calendar than hearing from God.

One year, I attempted to follow a plan of reading through the books of Scripture consecutively. This worked for a while,

but when I came to Leviticus, I had trouble concentrating on the Scripture for the day. Instead, I found myself dozing off, or thinking about an upcoming appointment or a meeting from the previous day.

Another plan was to read the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice during the course of a year. For the most part, every plan accomplished its purpose, which was to read through the Bible in a year. But with each plan, I never experienced spiritual fulfillment. I never saw God's true purpose for Bible reading accomplished in my life.

After much prayer, I realized that the problem was not with the reading plan, but with the reader following the plan. When I was brutally honest with the man in the mirror, I acknowledged that I was not listening for a word from God, nor was I looking for ways to apply God's truth to my life. What I needed was something that would help create an atmosphere where I could hear from God.

A Time to be Quiet

If you are going to be a disciple of Christ, you *must* have a daily quiet time with God. It is absolutely irreplaceable for your spiritual development. You must make it a priority in your life, setting aside time in your daily schedule for God to speak to you.

Many suggest rising early in the morning to spend time in God's Word. Indeed, an overwhelming number of Scripture passages recommend this discipline. A number of the Psalms, for example, speak of awaking early in the morning to communicate with God (See Psalms 5 and 88). Moreover, Jesus Himself rose before daylight for intimate communion with His Father (Mark 1:35). I know many, many believers who follow this practice from the conviction that we need to begin our days, before facing anything or anyone else, by seeking the Lord and receiving strength and wisdom from His Word. Two men whom I once mentored spent every morning before work in their vehicles, alone with God.

plan for reading and studying God's Word. Such a plan will keep you on course, helping you reach the destination of growing in your walk with Christ. Becoming a disciple of Christ requires planning.

When I was a new believer, I used the "OPRA" technique for reading the Bible: I would randomly OPEN the Bible, POINT to a passage, READ the verse, and try to figure out a way to APPLY it to my life. Thankfully, I didn't land on the Scripture that says, *"He [speaking of Judas Iscariot] went and hanged himself"* (Matthew 27:5).

Reading random Scriptures will not provide solid biblical growth any more than eating random foods out of your pantry will provide solid physical growth. An effective reading plan is required. While there are many plans out there, it is important to find one that works for you, and stick to it (Appendix 4 contains a sample Bible reading plan).

What is a good starting point for reading Scripture? I have often encouraged my discipleship groups to begin by reading 2 Timothy every day. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, whom he discipled, about many of the most important truths for the Christian life. Only four chapters long, 2 Timothy can be easily read in its entirety every day. After a week, you will have read through the entire book seven times. By doing so, you will be able to move beyond mere casual reading to uncovering the applicable truths of the book. Words that you might quickly pass over in casual reading will come alive with each additional reading. Another good way to begin your journey in God's Word is by reading 1 John every day. Like 2 Timothy, it discusses many of the basic truths of the Christian life in a few short chapters.

Many new believers ask how much time they should spend in God's Word each day. At certain times of the day, our quiet time might be limited by other priorities. This is especially true in the morning, as most of us have to work for a living! Generally speaking, however, we should not put parameters on God. I have spent as short as five minutes alone with the Lord, and as long as a few hours poring over the Scriptures. Because God is not bound by time, we should not put a time restraint on Him.

Personally, my private time with the Lord is at night, shortly before going to bed. It is a precious time when I replay the events of the day, take captive every thought, and focus on the Lord.

The point is simple: you must select a time of day that works best for you, and set it apart for the Lord. Choose a place where you can be alone with Him and His Word, a quiet place where you can listen to Him. If you will focus your full attention on His Word, He will speak to you through His Spirit, who lives within you. If the atmosphere is noisy or congested, then you will have a difficult time hearing from God.

God has extended to you, His child, an open invitation into His presence (Hebrews 4:16). What a privilege! Think of it: God invites you to approach Him whenever you would like. His door is always open to you. Additionally, He tells you not to be nervous or fearful, and not to be concerned with disturbing Him. Instead, He beckons you to approach His throne with boldness and confidence.

Why would you not accept this gracious invitation, issued personally to you from the Creator of the universe, who now just happens to call Himself your Father, because of your relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ?

If You Fail to Plan, then Plan to Fail

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the French poet and author of *The Little Prince,* hit the nail on the head when he said, "A goal without a plan is just a wish."[77] Nothing could be truer when it comes to our devotional lives and studying God's Word. In order to grow in your devotional life, you must have a plan.

When my wife, Kandi, and I go on vacation every year, we download directions from the Internet to our destination before departing. Most people now use GPS systems, or navigation features on their cell phones. These turn-by-turn instructions guarantee that we will travel to our actual destination. Before the technological wonders of today existed, most people carried a road map in their cars (still not a bad idea!). Why? Because a mapped-out trip saves a lot of headaches along the way, as does a

Remember that what you put into something determines what you get out of it. This is true in your devotional life. A quiet time is for more than just reading God's Word. It also includes waiting on God to speak and listening to Him. We cannot force God to speak or act within our schedules. The Lord speaks and works according to His perfect timing. He is not in a rush, and you shouldn't be either. While it is not always possible, plan some open-ended times into your schedule to spend with the Lord.

Question to Consider

Why is having a Bible reading plan important?

Choose Your Sword

We live in a time when many translations of the Bible are available. Many believers question which version is best, and which one they should use. Basically, translation teams take one of two approaches when converting the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) texts to English. Some translate the Scripture strictly word-for-word from the original texts. Simply put, others translate a thought or concept, rather than individual words. In theological circles, the process of literal, word-for-word translation is called *formal equivalence.* Formal equivalence also preserves the grammar of the preserved Scripture texts. The other approach, expressing an entire thought or concept, is referred to as *dynamic equivalence.*

A third category is the *paraphrase.* Essentially, a paraphrase is a version in which the translator (or author) expresses the Scripture in his own words. *The Message* and the *Living Bible* are popular paraphrases. Paraphrases can be helpful or inspirational, but it is best to read them alongside an actual translation of God's Word.

Many people prefer dynamic equivalents, such as the *New International Version* (NIV) or *New Living Translation* (NLT), because they feel they are easier to read and understand. However, these versions are more subjective than word-for-word translations, because they require the translators to inject their own understanding of Scripture into the text. This is not to say that these versions are untrustworthy, nor is it to say that they should be avoided.

I recommend that you choose a translation closer to the original languages as your primary version for Bible reading and study. God has not only imparted His divine, eternal truth to us in the statements of the Bible, but also in the words themselves. In studying God's Word, your desire will be to know the exact word used in the particular passage you are reading. For this reason, word-for-word translations such as the *English Standard Version* (ESV), the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB, which actually employs both formal and dynamic equivalence), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), the *King James Version* (KJV), and the *New King James Version* (NKJV) are preferable.

Ultimately, the best translation is the one that gets read. Many who argue for a particular translation over another may never read the one they are proposing. Overall, the translation that you will faithfully read and study is the best translation for you.

Creating an Atmosphere to H.E.A.R. from God

The H.E.A.R. journaling method promotes reading the Bible with a life-transforming purpose. No longer will your focus be on checking off the boxes on your daily reading schedule; your purpose will instead be to read in order to understand and respond to God's Word.

The acronym H.E.A.R. stands for **HIGHLIGHT, EXPLAIN, APPLY,** and **RESPOND.**[78] Each of these four steps contributes to creating an atmosphere to hear God speak. After settling on a reading plan and establishing a time for studying God's Word, you will be ready to H.E.A.R. from God.

Let's assume that you begin your quiet time with the book

of 2 Timothy, and today's reading is the first chapter of the book. Before reading the text, pause to sincerely ask God to speak to you. It may seem trite, but it is absolutely imperative that we seek God's guidance in order to understand His Word. Remember, we need the help of the Holy Spirit to understand the truths that God has revealed to us in His Word (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). Every time we open our Bibles, we should pray the simple prayer that David prayed: *"Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law (Word)"* (Psalm 119:18).

After praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance, open your notebook or journal, and at the top left-hand corner, write the letter H. (Appendix 3 contains examples of completed H.E.A.R. entries.) This exercise will remind you to read with a purpose. In the course of your reading, one or two verses will usually stand out and speak to you. After reading the passage of Scripture, **HIGHLIGHT** each verse that speaks to you by copying it under the letter "H". Write out the following:

The name of the book
The passage of Scripture
The chapter and verse numbers that especially speak to you
A title to describe the passage

This practice will make it easier to find the passage when you want to revisit it in the future.

After you have highlighted the passage, write the letter "E" under the previous entry. At this stage you will **EXPLAIN** what the text means. By asking some simple questions, with the help of God's Spirit, you can understand the meaning of a passage or verse. The next chapter will teach you in detail how to understand the meaning of a passage. Until then, here are a few questions to get you started:

Why was this written?
To whom was it originally written?

How does it fit with the verses before and after it?
Why did the Holy Spirit include this passage in the book?
What is He intending to communicate through this text?

At this point, you are beginning the process of discovering the specific and personal word that God has for you from His Word. What is important is that you are engaging the text and wrestling with its meaning.

After writing a short summary of what you think the text means, write the letter "A" below the letter "E". Under the "A", write the word **APPLY**. This application is the heart of the process. Everything culminates under this heading. As you have done before, ask a series of questions to uncover the significance of these verses to you personally, questions like:

How can this help me?
What does this mean today?
What would the application of this verse look like in my life?
What does this mean to me?
What is God saying to me?

These questions bridge the gap between the ancient world and your world today. They provide a way for God to speak to you from the specific passage or verse. Answer these questions under the "A". Challenge yourself to write between two and five sentences about how the text applies to your life.

Finally, below the first three entries, write the letter "R" for **RESPOND**. Your response to the passage may take on many forms. You may write a call to action. You may describe how you will be different because of what God has said to you through His Word. You may indicate what you are going to do because of what you have learned. You may respond by writing out a prayer to God. For example, you may ask God to help you to be

more loving, or to give you a desire to be more generous in your giving. Keep in mind that this is your response to what you have just read.

Notice that all of the words in the H.E.A.R. formula are action words: **HIGHLIGHT, EXPLAIN, APPLY,** and **RESPOND.** God does not want us to sit back and wait for Him to drop some truth into our laps. Instead of waiting passively, God desires that we actively pursue Him. Jesus said,

> *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you* (Matthew 7:7).

Think of the miracle of the Bible. Over centuries of time, God supernaturally moved upon a number of men in an unusual way that resulted in them writing the exact words of God. God led His people to recognize these divine writings, and to distinguish them from everything else that has ever been written. Then God's people brought these sixty-six books together. The preservation and survival of the Bible is as miraculous as its writing. Then God gave men, beginning with Gutenberg's printing press, technological knowledge to copy and transmit the Bible so that all people could have it. All because God has something to say to *you*.

Yet many professing Christians never open the Bible, other than on Sunday. We will surely answer to God one day for what we did or did not do with His Word.

Evangelist Robert L. Sumner in his book *The Wonder of the Word of God* relates the challenging story of a man in Kansas City, who was badly injured in an explosion. After losing his eyesight and the use of both hands, the man was greatly distraught, for he could never read the Bible again. His distress turned into joy after hearing of a woman in England who read Braille with her lips. He searched and found a copy of the Bible in Braille. Sadly, he was discouraged again when he realized the nerve endings in his lips were too damaged to recognize the characters on the pages. One day, as he lifted the raised lettering up to his lips, his tongue

touched a few of the letters. He thought to himself, "I could read the Bible with my tongue."[3]

At the time of writing, Robert Sumner reported that the man had read through the entire Bible four times with his tongue. Prayerfully, this man will not be standing next to you (or me) when we are called before the Bema Seat of Christ. His diligence is a convicting reminder that there will be no excuse for laziness in regard to reading or memorizing God's Word.

Walking Point

Commit to logging a H.E.A.R. entry for the next five days.

H. E. A. R. journal suggestions for the week:
Read Psalm 119:1-18. Focus on vv. 10-11.
Read 2 Timothy 3:1-17. Focus on vv. 16-17.
Read James 1:1-27. Focus on vv. 22-24.
Read 1 John 5. Focus on v. 3.
Read 2 Peter 1. Focus on v. 21.

Memory Verse
John 1:1-2