

BIBLE S.W.A.P. A Simple Method of Bible Encounter



S – SCRIPTURE

Open your Bible and read a scripture passage. It can be the reading for the upcoming or last week’s sermon, a reading from a scripture schedule, a devotional guide, or one you find some other way. Take your time reading it, listening for something God may be speaking to you. What verse, word, phrase, or thought seems to stand out to you? Write that verse, word, phrase, or thought in your S.W.A.P. journal.

W – WHAT DOES IT MEAN? & WHAT CAN I OBEY?

What do you hear God saying to you through this scripture? You may want to consult a trusted commentary or the notes in your Bible to hear the passage in its historical context. What it says now to you cannot be opposed to what it said then. But after discerning the text’s meaning, you’re not done yet with “what!”

Eugene Peterson, author of “The Message” Bible, says, “The MOST IMPORTANT question we ask of this text is not, ‘What does this *mean*?’ but ‘What can I *obey*?’” Identify what you hear the scripture calling you to obey or live more deeply into.

For both “What” questions, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you and reveal Jesus to you. It often helps to mark up your Bible and to paraphrase and write this Scripture down in your own words in your S.W.A.P. journal.

A – APPLY

Now, personalize what you have read. How does this passage and its meaning apply to your life right now? How will you respond to its call to obey? How will you live more deeply into the truth you discern? After reading and listening to the scripture, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and begin to contemplate the implications for your life. Boldly ask, “What is the Spirit of God speaking to me in this present moment?” You may hear a word of comfort, encouragement, direction, correction, or wisdom. Perhaps you’ll hear a new promise. You may find an immediate connection between the text and your own life. Or you may not. That’s okay. The key is to listen, believing in faith that God is speaking through his Word. Something may connect later.

If you need some direction, start with these questions:

What does this reveal about God?

What does this reveal about humanity, and specifically, me?

What does this reveal about the Christian life?

How does this contrast with the world I live in?

How does this call me to live differently?

P - PRAY

Finish by speaking with God. Ask God to reveal greater insight on what God may be saying to you, so that you may embed this Scripture deeply in your life, with whatever is going on in it. Ask God to help you obey and apply what you heard. For instance, if Jesus’ words on giving to the poor in secret stand out to you after you read the Sermon on the Mount, pray, “Father, teach me to give with a pure heart. May I seek a greater reward than the praise of people.” Remember, prayer is a two-way conversation, so be sure to listen to what God has to say! Now, write out your prayer in your S.W.A.P. journal.

EXAMPLES

S.W.A.P. Example #1

S-SCRIPTURE

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ... 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ... 1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ... 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9-10; 3:1-5, 13, NRSV)

W-WHAT

(DOES IT MEAN)

In Christ Jesus, all the fullness of God has come to dwell. He is the image of the invisible God. And I have come to fullness in Him.

(CAN I OBEY)

Therefore, I must put to death all that is earthly, including how I respond when someone has a complaint against me. I must bear with that person and forgive, recognizing that I may, in fact, be deserving of their complaint. But the fullness in me leads me to respond to that in a non-earthly way.

A-APPLY

Some time ago, I learned that _____ has a complaint against me. S/he feels ill-treated by me. S/he feels I have not honored her/him with dignity. The earthly part of me wants to be defensive, to justify my actions. Yet, I realize there is some truth in his/her words. I hear this scripture calling me to respond out of the fullness of Christ within me, not the earthly portion. I must bear with him/her. I must forgive her/him. I must want what is best for him/her.

P-PRAY

Thank-you, O Christ, that there is such a “connect-the-dots” application of this word available to me today! Help me to want what is best for _____, to be helpful. Help me to own what of me is true in what s/he says. Help us both to grow through this. In your name, I pray and act. Amen.

S.W.A.P. Example #2

S-SCRIPTURE

Concerning Almsgiving

1 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Concerning Prayer

5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

...

Concerning Fasting

16 “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Concerning Treasures

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, NRSV)

W-WHAT

(DOES IT MEAN)

“The word ‘piety’ in the first verse is ... a many-sided word, especially in Matthew’s gospel, but at the centre of it is the sense of the obligation which Israel had to God because of being his special people. ... In chapter 6, the focus is, to begin with, on the three things that Jews saw, and

still see, as standard obligations: giving money, praying and fasting. In each case Jesus' point is the same. **What matters is the motive. If these religious duties are done with an eye on the audience, they become rotten at the core.**

Jesus doesn't say that these outward things don't matter. Giving money to those in need, praying to God day by day, and fasting when it's appropriate – he assumes that people will continue to do all of these. **What matters is learning to do them simply to and for God himself.** All the Sermon on the Mount, in fact, is centred on God himself, who easily gets squeezed out of religion if we're not careful.

...Jesus, instead, wants us to be so eager to love and please God that we will do everything we should do for his eyes alone. Other eyes will be watching from time to time, and it's very easy, particularly for clergy and others who are involved professionally with leading worship, to 'perform' for them rather than for God alone.

For that reason he gives quite specific instructions about how to be sure of integrity, of the outward appearance being matched by the inner reality. When you give money away, do your best simply to forget about it. You may have to record it in your tax return, but even that could suggest a calculating spirit, and the point here is to match the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself. The best way to be sure is for nobody else to know.

The same applies to prayer. What you are in private is what you really are. Go into your inner room and talk to your father. You don't have to make a song and dance about it, and indeed the fewer people that know you're doing it the better. Nor do you have to go on mouthing pious phrases. You may find there are forms of words which help, as a framework or a starting-point; Jesus is about to give the disciples the framework he particularly recommends. But the point is to do business with God, one to one.

Jesus doesn't say what kind of reward we should expect. That, too, is part of the point. Simply knowing God better is reward enough; but there may be other things as well. You never know till you try. What is clear is that he is inviting his followers to a life in which inside and outside match perfectly, because both are focused on the God who sees in secret." (N. T. Wright in his "For Everyone: Matthew" commentary on Matthew 6:1-6)

(CAN I OBEY)

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Mt. 6:1)

A-APPLY

This passage shines a spotlight on not only right behavior, but right MOTIVE. N. T. Wright says, "it's very easy, particularly for clergy and others who are involved professionally with leading worship, to 'perform' for them rather than for God alone." Wow, this bites!

I will focus my attention in worship on WORSHIPING GOD, rather than performing for others.

P-PRAY

O God, in my experience, N. T. Wright is correct. It IS easier for me to “perform,” that is, to put my focus on others who are watching me and how they are receiving whatever it is I am doing when leading worship, than to actually WORSHIP YOU, to keep my attention on YOU. This is not how it should be. And as I approach retirement, I am going to have to learn to WORSHIP again since I won’t have the excuse of being responsible for leading worship. Help me learn to WORSHIP, even as I am leading worship. In Christ’s name. Amen.