

Personal Devotions

Recently, I received a request from Mark Agan who lives in North Carolina, a young pastor I have known for several years. He wrote, "I am teaching a leadership meeting at our church and challenging our leaders to grow in their walk with God through personal devotions. I want to give them different ideas about how other godly leaders do their daily devotional time. If you could take a moment to answer the following questions, I would greatly appreciate it." There is only one time the word "devotions" (σεβασμα = sebasma) is mentioned in the Bible. It is defined as: whatever is religiously honored; an object of worship such as located in temples, altars, statues, idolatrous images, something adored, i.e. an object of worship (god, altar, etc). The verse in which "devotions" is mentioned is Acts 17:23, *"For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you."* Paul was informing the heathen Athenians that they had a heart for devotion but he wanted to take the opportunity to reveal to them the only true and living God whom they should worship. Like David, he understood there was a longing in the heart of man for worship to be given to God, *"My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?"* (Psalm 42:2). Of course our faith is not an empty religion requiring idols, trinkets, bells, smells or rabbit's feet. We do not superstitiously bow before objects or other men, as this is forbidden in the first two of the Ten Commandments! In the Old Testament, God said, *"Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations: they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save"* (Isaiah 45:20). David said, *"Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the LORD: he is their help and their shield"* (Psalm 115:2-9). Jesus said, *"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth"* (John 4:24). Our devotion does not require a temple and we are forbidden to use idols. Therefore, our act of devotion is a spiritual approach which can and should be done regularly and often.

I am going to share with you Mark's five questions as given to me and attempt to answer them for him and, hopefully, for your edification as well.

1. When do you have your devotional time?

As a rule, I have my devotions first thing after rising from sleep. If I have extenuating circumstances such as an extremely early flight or hospital call I compensate by finding the first available opportunity. The most important aspect of devotions to the Lord is not necessarily when, but that you have devotions. For instance, if someone works a night shift, he must naturally arrange his devotions

at a different time. Having said that, I do want to make a case for devotions to be at the start of your day, if possible. Having devotions first is arranging a schedule that says Jesus is first in my life. Matthew 6:33 says, *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* I have found that the devotions at the beginning of your day sets the pace for prayer throughout the day. Also, make no mistake about it, we are in spiritual warfare; get the first blow against the world, the flesh and the devil and you will be walking in victory for the rest of the day. I am reminded of dear Christians who have set a precedent for early devotions who make a pledge, “No Bible; no breakfast.”

2. How do you determine what scripture you will read each day? Is it different each day or are you reading through in a systematic way?

I constantly read through the Bible in my personal devotions. I begin at Genesis and read through Revelation at least once a year. It is amazing how God aligns what I'm reading to just what I need for that day. On the advice of my old pastor, often I add to my reading “Psalms for love, Proverbs for wisdom and Acts for power.”

3. Do you read a certain amount (like a certain number of chapters) each day or do you concentrate more on getting a thought for the day?

Dr. Lee Roberson challenged me in my youth with this statement, “Every Christian should read at least four chapters of the Bible a day. If you read four chapters of the Bible a day, you will have the Bible read through in less than a year.” Many a day I have read more, but I discovered early on that if we make a commitment to read something like fifty chapters a day or read the Bible through once a month, that we may become frustrated and because we cannot keep our overextended commitment, we give up. Some people read faster than others and reading the Bible in gigantic amounts is no problem for them and not as time consuming. A word of caution, however, is in order even for you fast readers: be careful that your determination to read through your Bible does not inoculate you to its message. For instance, did you ever hear a mom say, “Now slow down and chew your food carefully; you can’t even taste it. Give it time to digest.” The same application could be made for spiritual digestion of God’s Word! I always concentrate on four chapters a day...plus I am constantly looking out for His message to me through His Word. Sometimes I sense the Lord is telling me to read from a certain portion of Scripture or to read a good portion of Scripture until my heart is kindled. I believe this is basically what the Psalmist experienced when he said, *“My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned...”* (Psalm 39:3). Like eating, the best way to consume the Word is daily, regularly and constantly.

4. Without having to give specific things on your prayer list, in general, how is your prayer time structured, i.e., do you have a specific prayer list you go be each day?

As a rule, I do not use a specific prayer list; I pray for people and things as the Lord impresses me. I always pray very specifically for my family members.

And for this, I need no prayer list. As the head of the house, I believe it is my requirement to pray a hedge of protection around my family. I follow the example of the Lord's Prayer (better defined as the Model Prayer as given in Matthew 6). I begin with praise and hallow His name. This always sets the pace for my prayer. Praise is the door to prayer. Then I pray for His kingdom to come, His will to be done in my life, family's life and those with whom I am closely associated in God's work. Next, I pray for daily bread, which is categorized as the pressing needs of my family and church. Then I pray for forgiveness of sins and determination to forgive those who have attempted to offend and I pray for defense against the bitter spirit toward any and all who may offend today. I pray next for deliverance from evil by asking the Lord to help me equip myself with the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:11-20). Then I end in prayer by the same way I entered into prayer, which is by the offering of praise. I declare His is the Kingdom, the power and all the glory forever!

5. What advice would you give to other leaders (Sunday School Teachers, Ministry Leaders & Young Preachers) regarding how to have an effective Devotional Time?

My advice would be to treat your devotional time as seriously as you would any important appointment such as a doctor's appointment or work or school assignments. Don't major on the methods; just do it!

-Pastor Pope-