

Training Session 9 - BLESS Rhythms: Begin with the Bible

Objective

Inspire you to begin each day with the Bible so that it lights your path (as a candle), feeds your soul (like a croissant), gives you the gameplan for life (like a coach), takes you to Jesus (like a conduit), and creates change in your life (like a catalyst).

Key Scriptures

Psalm 119: 14-16; Psalm 119:72; Psalm 119:103-105; Isaiah 55: 8-11

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin was a wise man. He once said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” The goal of this week, to use Franklin’s word, is to *involve* you in daily rhythms of life that will *involve* God blessing you AND you blessing others. Biblically, God’s blessing always works this way: God blesses us to be a blessing. He doesn’t just fill our cup up with blessing, but he fills it up to overflowing so that the blessing extends to those around us (Psalm 23:5). He doesn’t merely light up the dark places of our lives, but He fills us with the light of the world and says, “Don’t hide my Son’s light under a bushel. Let it shine so that you bless others who are walking in darkness” (Matthew 5:14-16). This is our God—He blesses us to bless others!

To experience the blessing of God, we first need to know what His will is for our lives, which is why we spent the last two weeks discussing how we know the will of God. This training session builds on the last two weeks, but the emphasis is moving us from simply knowing God’s will to *doing* God’s will. This session is about doing the will of God, not just hearing about the will of God, and doing it over and over and over again for the rest of the year (and beyond) until God’s expressed will of desire becomes an established rhythm for your life.

Why? Because Ben Franklin was right. He was building on the ancient, proverbial wisdom that says, “I heard and I forgot; I saw and I remembered; I did and I understood.” You will not understand the ways of the Lord until you actually begin doing things He asks you to do. We all forget sermons, including me, and I preach them! But we don’t forget things that we do over and over again that become rhythms of life. Therefore, we’re beginning a new series aimed at establishing habits of the heart around things God has expressly commanded us to do, so that we in turn receive more of God’s blessing.

You may have heard the oft repeated mantra that it takes 21 days to establish a habit. Don’t buy it. This myth goes back to 1960 and the groundbreaking work of Dr. Maxwell Maltz on behavioral change in which he stated that the *minimum* amount of time required to form a habit

is 21 days. Stating a minimum and establishing an average are two very different things. So what is the average? Phillippa Lally, a health psychology researcher at University College London, after studying habits formed among 96 people, found that it takes, on average, 66 days to form a new habit. The variance, depending on the behavior, the person, and the circumstances, ranged anywhere from 18 to 254 days, with the average being 66 days.¹ That is why we are beginning to establish a habit of living according to God's rhythms early in our mentoring journey so that we can hold one another accountable to establishing these habits of the heart.

Make no mistake, God's rhythms for our lives will be distinctly different than the cultural rhythms of life that we see all around us. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--His good, pleasing and perfect will." The BLESS rhythms are about establishing different patterns for our lives, patterns that are Christ-centered not culture-centered. This involves a transformation of our mind as we think differently about how to live and then begin doing His will day by day, habitually.

BLESS is an acronym that describes five habits or rhythms right out of the Bible that we are all going to implement this year, so let's consider them each in turn:

Begin with the Bible

Love God and people

Eat with purpose

Sacrificial giving

Sabbath rest

The starting point for the BLESS rhythms is to begin each day with the Bible. Why? Why is it so vital to begin each day by listening to God speak to you through the Bible? This training session will offer five blessings that you will experience if you do:

The Bible will BLESS you by lighting your path (Like a candle)

Ps. 119:105 says, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*" That is what the Bible is for followers of Jesus: a lamp illuminating the path forward. For all of us, life gets really, really dark at times and we need to have a light that can, as Galadriel says to Frodo in the great trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, "be a light...in dark places, when all other lights go out."¹ The Bible, for followers of Jesus, is just that: a light that shines when all other lights go out. Not too long ago, I found myself in the middle of a dark, sleepless night. After tossing and turning for quite some time, I finally pulled out the Bible and a shaft of light pierced the darkness of my heart. That shaft of light came from Psalm 125:2 (MSG), which says, "*Mountains encircle Jerusalem, and God encircles his people – always has and always will.*" I sat back, closed my

eyes, and pictured myself encircled by God as the mountains encircle Jerusalem. Safe, protected, surrounded. Light broke through.

My experience isn't isolated. Billy Graham says, "*What a joy it is to wake up in the morning and know He is with me, no matter what the day has in store...Every day I turn to the Bible to give me strength and wisdom for the day and hope for the future. Its words have seen me through good times and bad--through times of happiness and grief, health and sickness, victory and disappointment. God's word can do the same for you.*"² In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom describes how a hidden Bible sent shafts of light to a band of prisoners in Nazi Germany. Corrie writes, "From morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible was the center of an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the word of God. 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.'"³ Their circumstances said they were defeated; the Bible said otherwise!

Corrie continues, "I would look about us as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. More than conquerors. It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it, we experienced it minute by minute – poor, hated, hungry. We are more than conquerors. Not 'we shall be.' We are!"⁴ I love that. The light is pushing back the darkness and the darkness can't snuff it out. "Life in the concentration camp took place on two separate levels...One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived in God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory."⁵

The Bible illuminates the reality that there are *always* two paths: the world's path and God's path. Sometimes they merge and there is a path within a path. At other times, there is a fork in the road, and, as Robert Frost famously put it, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."⁶ Jesus said something similar to the way Frost's famous line has been commonly interpreted, "For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). The Bible lights up an alternate path that leads to an abundant and eternal life, which is sometimes a narrow path within a path or other times a divergent fork.

The Bible will BLESS you by feeding your soul (like a warm croissant)

The thought of biting into a warm croissant is a pleasant one (even if you are cutting out carbs!) The aroma, the soft, flaky texture, and the bread itself nourish you in different ways. That experience is what we are after when we come to the Bible. Psalm 34:8 says, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*" Jeremiah bit into the word of God and exclaimed: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight" (Jeremiah 15:16). As we discussed in a previous training session, Eugene Peterson encourages us to do what Jeremiah did with God's

word and eat the Bible much like a dog eats a bone or as a “lion growls over its prey” (Isaiah 31:4), pointing out that the Hebrew word for “growl” (*hagah*) is usually translated “meditate.”

When I read that metaphor I immediately went back to my days as a kid with Pop (my granddad). Pop had the biggest and softest heart in town. Much to the dismay of Gran (my grandmom), he never met a dog he didn't love, and he inevitably wound up bringing home a truck full of large, stray dogs. As soon as we were home, he would head to the kitchen and grab a pile of bones—chicken bones, steak bones, didn't matter. And when he got near the dogs, they would start salivating; tails wagging, drool coming out of their mouths, barking with excitement, jumping up and down and prancing back and forth, barking with enough excitement to wake the neighbors. And when he threw them a bone, they would go at it. Snarling and drooling and gnawing, content as content could be, for hours, sometimes days. That is meditation (*hagah*). That is reading the Bible. Enjoying it down in the marrow of your bones like a dog with a bone in such a way that it feeds you and forms you.

The Bible will BLESS you by giving you a gameplan for life (like a coach)

All of us want a coach in life. We want to be on a winning team, and we want to have someone who knows more than we do to come alongside of us and help us win in the game of life. Having grown up in Alabama, I grew up in the shadow of one of the greatest coaches of all time: Bear Bryant. Alabama struggled to find a replacement for the Bear because, well, who is going to fill those shoes, but they finally found their man in Nick Saban. His ability to recruit players is really unparalleled. Alabama was ranked #1 in recruiting seven years in a row with the streak ending in 2018. Why do recruits flock to Coach Saban? First, they think, “If I go to Alabama, we're going to win and I want to win games and play for a national championship.” Second, they believe that Coach Saban can help them get to the NFL. He knows how to develop players and he does so very well. Tradition, facilities – those factor in, but the two big reasons players cite for going to Alabama are winning and getting to the NFL (which is synonymous with player development).

We're all the same; we all want to win in life and we want to maximize our potential in life. In *Primed to Perform*, Neil Doshi cites studies showing that this phenomenon extends far beyond the gridiron. Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, Apple, Whole Foods, and many more high performing cultures are built around the concept of inspiring the three most powerful motives for work--play, purpose, and **potential**. Taken together, these three factors (play, purpose, and potential) create total motivation (TOMO) and lead to the highest performing individuals and companies.⁷

Frankly, It just isn't much fun to get kicked around by life. We need a coach who can help us win and we need a coach who can develop us into our full potential as image bearers of God. Isaiah 55:8-9 says that God is the ultimate life-coach. “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” God is saying: Listen, you don't know how life works. You're not smart enough to figure it out, but I

am. My ways and my thoughts are higher than yours. I am the greatest life coach you will ever find. And, here is the playbook. 2 Timothy 3: 16-17 says this: *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* Isn't that what a coach does? He or she teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains you in righteousness, right living, the way to walk in life.

Now, here is the deal. If God is your coach, then you must accept His authority as expressed in all of the Bible (not just the parts you like!) Imagine if a player at Alabama said, “Coach Saban, I like several of your defensive schemes. They look pretty good. But these last four coverages, they won't work. I am not running them.” Coach Saban would probably completely flip his lid like he does on the sidelines when his players don't do what they are supposed to do. He would say, “No, see, you aren't the coach of this team. If you are playing for me, then you will do what I say or you won't play and you won't be on my team very long. I know more about football than you do, and I am responsible for making all of this come together.”

If that is true of Nick Saban and his players, then it is infinitely more true of an omniscient (all-knowing) God and us. There will be times when we won't understand or won't like what He says in the playbook. Run the play. His ways are higher than ours, His thoughts are higher than ours. This is, admittedly, problematic for many. In fact, there are two major objections to accepting God's authoritative coaching in the Bible. First, some people object because they don't like what the Bible has to say. Second, some object because they don't understand what the Bible has to say. Let's consider both of these.

First, “I don't like what the Bible has to say.” St. Augustine's famous prayer reflects this same sentiment, “God grant me chastity, but not yet.” Augustine knew what God as coach was telling him about his sexuality, but he was a ladies' man and he just didn't want to change his life.

If we're honest, all of us have felt this way at some point. Why? Because we're sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. “Ah, God, it won't really hurt if I eat that fruit. Just one night of getting drunk with the guys. Just a little shading of the truth here. Honey, giving 10% isn't practical right now because we have kids. God, I can't really afford to take a Sabbath day for rest right now because we need the money and I need to get ahead in school.” What we all say, in different ways, is this: “God, I think I know how to run my life better than you do.” But God says, “No, you don't. My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. I'm the coach, you're the player, and here is the playbook. This is how we do things.”

Now, especially for those who are not yet followers of Jesus, this can sound and feel oppressive to submit to an authority, but it really isn't. Think about it. We all submit to authority. Every one of us. As an employee, you submit to the authority of your boss. As an American, you submit to the authority of the American government – you can't just decide not to pay taxes because you don't feel like it. You don't get to pick and choose what parts of the Constitution you want to submit to. The Supreme Court doesn't issue recommendations; they issue rulings. If we willingly

submit to bosses and to our governing authorities even when we don't like it, then how much more should we willingly submit to an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, benevolent God?

This is not, however, the problem for many of you. The problem is lack of clarity. Many of us struggle to submit to the authority of the Bible because we're not sure what it says on certain issues. For instance, should I baptize my kids or not? Many Christians read the Bible differently on this one. If we continue the coaching analogy – all Christians have the same coach but they think the coach is calling different plays on things like baptism.

A seminary professor of mine helped me address this question and others like it by giving me a framework to work through matters of uncertainty in the Bible. His name was Richard Pratt and he encouraged us to use what he calls the “cone of certainty” to address questions like this. At the top of the cone of certainty we have very little room to disagree. The only issues at the top of the cone are those that are central to followers of Jesus (the divinity of Christ, the Resurrection, etc.). These are pretty clear and so there is great certainty. If you don't believe Jesus is God and that He was resurrected from the dead, well, you aren't a follower of Jesus. As we go down the cone, we have more room for disagreement because there is less certainty across different traditions on issues like infant baptism or the ordination of women. Finally, at the bottom of the cone, there is the most disagreement, and, consequently, there should be the most charity. Translation: don't go beating someone up over their views on eschatology because faithful Christians are all over the map on this issue. Relax. If the Church hasn't reached certainty on an issue over thousands of years, then loosen your grip and season your speech with grace!

What this does is force us to read the Bible in community. We work out our theology (that is, what the Bible says about God) in community. We're shaped by what others in the group think; we're shaped by what the broader church thinks, the church universal. The Bible is an intensely personal book, but not a private book. It is meant to be read and lived together with other people.

The Bible will bless you by creating change in your life (like a catalyst)

We all have areas of our lives that need to change. Nothing creates change like the word of God. Isaiah 55:10-11: *“As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* There is no part of your life it can't touch. His word will not return empty. It will change you and me.

Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, Christian missionaries, were living examples of this truth. Jim Elliot believed that the word of God could change anyone, no matter how hard the person's heart. The Elliots moved to Ecuador, and Jim felt called to take the message of Jesus to the Auca tribe. These indigenous people were known for being very violent and dangerous. Jim and four other missionary men made several trips by airplane into the jungle and made contact with the Auca.

On their last trip, in January 1956, all five missionary men were slaughtered by Auca warriors. Not long after the men died, two Auca women came out of the jungle, and Elisabeth Elliot took them into her house to live with her. Remember, these are members of the tribe that killed her husband and friends. She grew to love the women, and they grew to love her. They lived with her for one year and taught Elisabeth the language of their people. Then, they asked her to return to the village with them, and she agreed to go and live with them (with her three year old daughter!) because she believed in the power of the word of God to change hearts.

In a documentary about these events, *Beyond the Gates of Splendor*, an anthropologist comments, “It is remarkable. Due to information” – *he* didn’t use the word Bible but that is the information he means – “at least a five-generation cycle of violence was broken (and probably more) just before the tribe became extinct. They reduced the homicide rate by 90%. Nothing changed – technologically, sociologically – other than this information brought by Elisabeth.”

And so, as this first tribe began to give up their vendettas against others, then others began to do the same thing, and the good news of the Bible, Jesus Christ, began to spread through the tribes in the jungle in Ecuador like wildfire. They began to see that they no longer had to seek vengeance for every wrong or alleged wrong – that Waegongi (what they called God) would right all the wrongs of the world.⁸

The Bible will BLESS you by taking you to Jesus (like a conduit)

A conduit is an entity that carries one thing to another. A go-between. The conduit, the go-between, is Jesus Christ. The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is about Jesus Christ. You’ll never be that dog with a bone unless you somehow meet Jesus in the text. In John 5:39 Jesus says, “*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.*” Hear that: it is possible to have lots of knowledge about God and yet not know God. You believe in God, you have facts and information about him, but you haven’t come alive spiritually because you have missed Jesus, the whole point of every passage in the Bible.

Jesus went through a similar discussion with the disciples after His resurrection on the Emmaus Road in Luke 24. Verse 27 says, “*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.*” Even Moses and the Prophets – they were all talking about Him. John 20:31 says the same thing, “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*” The whole Bible is written to take you to Jesus.

All followers of Jesus who have really come alive in Him know this. Let me allow a few of them to speak to you. Martin Luther put it this way, “The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.”⁹ In other words, the entire point of the Bible is Jesus. Just as a cradle without a baby is empty (and pointless, sans decoration), so a Bible lesson without Jesus is empty (and pointless, sans decoration). Charles Spurgeon, who was deeply impacted by the Bible, says roughly the

same thing in a pithy way, “Don’t you know, young man, that from every town, and every village, and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London...So from every text in Scripture, there is a road to the metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business is when you get to a text, to say, now what is the road to Christ?...I have never yet found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if I ever do find one...I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savour of Christ in it.”¹⁰

In closing, let’s return to Corrie Ten Boom reflecting on her time in a Nazi concentration camp. She describes the Bible coming alive for her as she met Jesus in it and how He made sense of her surroundings. “Sometimes I would slip the Bible from its little sack with hands that shook, so mysterious had it become to me....I marveled sometimes that the ink was dry. I had believed the Bible always, but reading it now had nothing to do with belief. It was simply a description of the way things were – of hell and heaven, of how men act and how God acts. I had read a thousand times the story of Jesus’ arrest – how soldiers had slapped him, laughed at Him, flogged Him. Now such happenings had faces and voices.”¹¹

And then Corrie describes the humiliation of having guards inspect them completely naked, laughing at and abusing them. “But it was one of those mornings while we were waiting, shivering, (naked) in the corridor, that yet another page in the Bible leapt into life for me. ‘He hung naked on the cross.’ I leaned toward Betsie [her sister who was naked as well in front of her in the line]. Her shoulder blades stood out sharp and thin beneath her blue-mottled skin. ‘Betsie, they took His clothes too.’ Ahead of me I heard a little gasp. ‘Oh, Corrie. And I never thanked him.’”¹² Stripped naked, hung on a cross, for us. But death wouldn’t have the last word. There was a resurrection! And as a result, this is no history book; it is alive. And if you put your faith in the hero of this living story, the book will come alive and so will you. For it is an inextinguishable candle, a sumptuous croissant, a winning coach, a powerful catalyst, and the most life-giving conduit you’ll ever experience!

Study Questions

1. Read Isaiah 55:8-9. Describe what areas of your life you find difficult to submit to the authority of God’s word in the Bible.
2. According to this lesson, how does the Bible become *formational*, not only informational, in the life of the believer? Is there an example in your own life that illustrates the difference?
3. Read Psalm 119:105. Describe a time when this was true in your life.
4. Draw the cone of certainty. Put at least three issues at three different levels on the cone. Describe how this helps us know how to love others and be charitable toward others.
5. Discuss one area in which the Bible is currently functioning as a catalyst for you in life (i.e. an area that you need to change).

6. What is the danger of not experiencing the Bible as a conduit?
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Endnotes

1. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/140704-may-it-be-a-light-to-you-in-dark-places>
2. Billy Graham, *Hope for Each New Day* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012),
3. Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis: A Chosen Book, Special Film Edition, 1971), 195.
4. Ibid, 196.
5. Ibid, 196.
6. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/road-not-taken>
7. Neil Doshi and Lindsay McGregor, *Primed to Perform: How to Build the Highest Performing Cultures through the Science of Total Motivation*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015),
8. <http://www.historymakers.info/inspirational-christians/jim-elliott.html>
9. http://www.albatrus.org/english/potpourri/quotes/martin_luther_quotes.htm
10. Spurgeon, C.H., *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon, Volume 5: Sermons 225-285* (Delmarva Publications, 2015), digital edition, Sermon 242.
11. Ten Boom, 196.
12. Ibid, 197.