

**Under, Through, Around and Into
Directions for Living Well
"Under the Word"
Nehemiah 8:1-12 TNIV 3-30-08**

In her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of a South Dakota rancher and his bride who received an expensive Bible as a wedding gift from his grandfather. They wrote a thank-you note and (as happens to about 90% of all wedding gifts) it got "stowed" away on a closet shelf.

As time passed, the grandfather repeatedly asked the couple how they liked the Bible. The rancher was confused as to how to respond. Hadn't he already expressed his appreciation? But the grandfather persisted. Eventually, the young man dug out the gift. As he leafed through it, \$20 bills fluttered out, 66 in all—one at the beginning of each of the 66 books of the Bible. I've already done the math for you – that's (\$1,320). Turns out the Bible was a more expensive gift than he thought!

While the Grandfather had left a monetary treasure waiting to be discovered, he had placed them between something exceedingly more valuable and untouched between those pages: *Spiritual Riches*. All because he had not opened the Book. Have you opened yours lately?

In American homes the Bible has taken on the status of an icon with little practical value. When asked, "What book has most influenced your life?" In a recent Library of Congress survey, people gave the Bible the "Most Influential Book" rating! Yet only 34% of American Christians read God's Word on their own during the week, and of that group, only 13 percent claim to read it daily. That means that 87% of Americans are not showing up at God's break-fast table every day. Kind-of makes you wonder what they're hungry for. Jesus said, "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6 NIV).**

"Americans revere the Bible," says pollster George Gallup, Jr., "but, by and large, they don't read it." **Rabbi Daniel Lapin** once said, "*The Bible is Planet Earth's operating system thinly disguised as a piece of literature.*" In other words, there's more to this book than a collection of ancient stories and nice prose. It speaks of the one who gives us life and helps us understand the order and operation of the whole of God's creation.

So what does it mean and what does it look like to place our lives "UNDER THE WORD?" During the days of Israel's restoration and rebuilding, we capture a glimpse of a community of people who chose to do just that. We don't really know how active and engaged they had been in their own religious practices (whether it be those who had remained during the exile or those who had returned with Ezra (42, 360 cf. Ezra 2). Either they had become anesthetized to regular doses of public readings or they had been completely away from the word for a season of time. In either case, their response was altogether igniting and transforming.

They had been living in what could be described as a dead city—the rubble of Jerusalem. With broken down walls, burnt gates, a ruined and abandoned Temple, it had become a dark ghetto of despair. People who live in human ghettos often lose the original vision (the sacred memory) of who they are and to whom they belong. But all of that changed when God called His people back home – to *Reoccupy* the heartland, to *Rebuild* a broken and shattered society and to *Restore* the spiritual center of their

community life together. This is how the story unfolded: (***Read Nehemiah 8:1-12 TNIV***).

It was the Jewish Civil New year, October 8th 445 B.C. in our calendar. It was their annual Feast of Trumpets day (Numbers 29) – It was basically a New Years day party with some sacrifices and overtones of new beginnings (we call those “resolutions.” It was a day for sacred assembly, no work, the blowing of trumpets (the Shofar) and the barbecuing of offerings to the Lord (I prefer “BBQ” to “burnt”). New Years day becomes wrote for a lot of people, but this day, October 8, 445 was destined to be different: the Temple had been rebuilt, the wall had just been completed, community was being reborn and their dark ghetto vanishing.

At the crack of dawn, the entire city assembled as one. The people yanked Ezra the Bible Teacher out of bed, told him to bring the Book of Moses and said start reading to us. I want you to know, I’ve been in the ministry for 18 years and I’ve never had an entire town or city come get me out of bed at dawn and ask me to read the Bible and preach to them for five to six hours straight while they stand on their feet with wrapped attention. That amazes me. **“And all the people *listened attentively* to the Book of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:3b TNIV).** Come to think of it, I do remember standing with my Father and close to one million men on the Washington mall for an entire day at our nation’s national Promise Keepers “Stand in the Gap” event back on October 4, 1997. We too were wrapped in amazed and deep listening attention.

Ernest Hemingway once said, **“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.”** Unfortunately, research says Hemingway is right. Researchers tell us that the average person spends about 45 % of their waking hours *listening*, yet we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75% of that time. Marketing studies indicate that the average attention span for adults is only 22 seconds. When someone has finished speaking, we remember about half of what we heard. Within a few hours we can only recall about 20 percent. Given those realities, it doesn’t help that the number of adults who have had any kind of training in listening skills is less than 5 percent of our population. Good listening has never been part of the *curriculum* in most schools...just an *expectation*. After hearing those statistics, a business executive made this observation: **“This is very interesting. I just realized that I spend a great deal of time preparing myself to speak. I don’t think I have ever prepared myself to listen.”** Deep, attentive and patient listening is a lost art. But all of Jerusalem stood there that day, for 5-6 hours in wrapped attention, so engaged that they were weeping and falling down with their faces to the ground. That stuff just doesn’t happen---unless God is supernaturally up to something.

Up on his wooden platform that day, Ezra got to see in one day what most pastor’s dream of and work towards for the entire life-span of their ministry...**REVIVAL!** He and a host of other dignitaries and Levites read and taught from God’s word. What followed was nothing short of a revolution of repentance and restoration of Spiritual authority over their lives. The question is, how and why did it happen?

Seems that through the rebuilding process, they had learned to live and work as one man. Somehow they had become awakened to the truth that if they were to put their lives UNDER the word, back under authority of spiritual guidance and faithful obedience—to really listen and take to heart what was spoken—things would change. And they did. This story is not about conformity to rules, it’s about liberty in listening that leads us into life. The Bible says, **“Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because *they***

now understood the words that had been made known to them" (Nehemiah 8:12 TNIV). Not just intellectually, but the implications of who they were, what their uniqueness was. Surely they heard Leviticus 26:12 that morning: **"I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12 TNIV).** We will be community together. You are special. One of the most important ways (not the only way) for us to connect with God and engage our lives in DEEP LISTENING is to place ourselves **"UNDER THE WORD"** on a daily basis, so that, and here's the most important point, we can gain (not bible information) but familiarity with God's heart, ways, purpose and plans for humanity. We want to grow accustomed to recognizing His voice against the drone and din of the world. Jesus said, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27 TNIV).**

Kathy Widenhouse, in her Christianity Today article entitled *"Back to the Book: Seven ways to ignite a passion for reading the Bible,"* explains how we can break through to a sustainable lifestyle of biblical encounter and place our lives "Under the Word!" In her article, she addressed some common problems or complaints head-on!

Sometimes people say (in this fast-paced, overly schedule life) **"I don't have time to read!"** What we really should be saying is that "I don't have time to read because of all the other more important commitments that take all my time and energy." The good news is, we do have time—if we read in disciplined, systematic spurts. *Unleashing Connection* reports that in one year, the average American reads 3,000 forms or notices, 100 newspapers, and 36 magazines—but only three books. That's why the *USA Today* format (which was predicted to fail) has been so popular. We like to get our information in short doses that are easy to digest. Half the books of the Bible can be read in 10 to 45 minutes each, and many of them can be read in less than 20. What about keeping spiritual reading materials close at hand (something in your car, at your office, by your nightstand, in your bag, backpack or briefcase).

Some people say, **"I don't know where to begin?"** Why not use the reading plan that I use. (***Show Image***) As you can see, the Scriptures are presented in systematic and manageable portions and you work through it in logical sequences over the course of an entire year. It's a daily regime that leads to the balanced diet of all seven "food groups" in the Bible: Law, History, Psalms, Poetry, Prophecy, Gospels and Epistles. By engaging in systematic reading, we can hear the whole heart and counsel of God.

Some have said, **"I hear Bible readings in church every Sunday. Isn't that enough?"** It's a start. But how many of you would eat only one meal a week? My guess is not many! Billy Graham once said, *"The Bible is the road map for life. When I examine a map, an expert like my pastor can show me the most effective route to take. But I become more familiar with how to navigate the road—life—when I read the map and follow it myself."* Instead of "googling" the answer, why not get out the map and find your way by reading. Isn't that what's celebrated in Psalm 19 (7-11)? Look at all the benefits of placing your life Under the Word!

"The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul...making wise the simple, ...giving joy to the heart...giving light to the eyes...They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:7-11 selections TNIV). Why would you

want to bypass all that with some quick answers and abbreviated information? The Kingdom of God is not about information, but "...*righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 14:17).

Some people have said, "**The Bible makes me feel uncomfortable.**" In fact, many people associate the Bible with negative experiences. Instead of examining Scripture on its own merits, and engaging our lives in the story, many cast it onto the "discard pile" along with narrow, outdated beliefs, hypocritical congregations, and insensitive Christians from our past. We'd rather label it and put it in a box than face up to what it might be telling us about ourselves. But *Conviction* is an important and necessary function of Scripture. "**For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword ... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart**" (Hebrews 4:12 NIV). Placing our lives "Under the Word" can also be like hopping up on an exam table under bright lights where we can diagnose problems and cure ailments.

As we read the Bible, we may find we have to face some hard truths about ourselves and our inner motives. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato once said, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." The people who were standing out there and laying prostrate for 5-6 hours had fallen under deep conviction about themselves and about God. They were hungry and ready for change. They were convicted to the point of weeping, but Ezra called them back into Joy. "**Do not grieve, for the Joy of the Lord is your strength**" (Nehemiah 8:10 TNIV).

According to statistics, 92% of all Americans have at least three Bibles in their homes. Perhaps like the South Dakota rancher, yours is stashed away in a closet. And like him, you don't suspect that there's a fortune hidden within its pages. Maybe it's time to take it out, open the pages and discover and follow the one it speaks of... "**In him was life, and that life was the light of all people**" (John 1:4 TNIV).