THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Lectio Divina Praying the Word

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

THE DAILY BREAD

The Word Series

Lectio Divina

Praying the Word

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INTRODUCTION

The Book That Reads You

You have almost certainly been told to read the Bible. Somewhere along the way, a priest or a book or a well-meaning friend told you that a serious Catholic man reads Scripture, and you nodded, and you may even have tried. You bought the study Bible. You started in Genesis, made it through the flood and the patriarchs, hit the legal codes somewhere in Leviticus, and quietly stopped. Or you started in Matthew, moved along well enough through the Gospels, and then lost momentum in the letters. The Bible sits on the shelf now, a little reproachful, a project you began and did not finish.

Here is what almost no one told you: there is a difference between reading the Bible and praying the Bible, and the second one is what you were actually made for.

Reading the Bible is a good and necessary thing. You should do it. But reading is what you do to a manual, a history, a set of instructions. You extract the information and move on. And when a man approaches Scripture that way, as information to be extracted, he eventually runs into a wall, because the Bible was not primarily given to inform you. It was given to form you. It was given as the place where God speaks, personally, to the particular man reading it, today, in the situation he is actually in. Information you can get from a summary. Formation only happens through encounter.

Consider the difference in an ordinary key. A man can read a summary of his wife′s life: where she was born, what she studied, the shape of her days. He can know all the information and not know her at all. Knowing her happens somewhere else, in the accumulated hours of actual presence, in ten thousand conversations, in the slow mutual disclosure that no summary could contain. The information is real and even useful, but it is not the knowing. The knowing is a different order of thing, and it comes only through encounter, sustained over time. Scripture is like this. You can master the information about the Bible, its authorship and history and structure, and remain a stranger to the God who speaks in it. Or you can come to it, a few verses at a time, day after day, and slowly come to know him, not know about him but know him, in the way that only sustained encounter produces. Lectio is the method of the knowing, not the method of the information. That is the whole distinction, and everything in this book depends on it.

Lectio Divina is the Church′s ancient method of encounter. The name is Latin for divine reading, and it names a way of coming to Scripture that is closer to prayer than to study. It is old, older than the printing press, older than most of the religious orders, a practice

the monks refined over centuries and handed down precisely because it worked. It is the method by which the Word of God stops being a text you read and becomes a voice that reads you.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. — Hebrews 4:12

Living and active. Not a record of what God once said to other people, but a living word that is active now, in the present tense, in the life of the man who prays it. The author of Hebrews is not being poetic. He is describing what actually happens when a man stops reading Scripture for information and starts praying it for encounter. The word gets in. It finds the places you have hidden. It reads you.

This book will teach you how. We will look first at where Lectio came from and why it fell out of use for most Catholics. We will lay out the four classic movements, the heart of the practice, and walk through each one slowly with worked examples. We will address the specific obstacles that stop men, the wandering mind, the dry passage, the sense that nothing is happening. And we will end with the practical matter of how to actually build this into a life that already has too much in it.

The aim is not that you add one more religious task to your week. The aim is that you discover the practice the saints used to become saints, and find that it was available to you the whole time.

A word about who this book is for. It is for the man who has tried to read the Bible and stalled. It is for the man who prays but suspects there is a depth to prayer he has never reached. It is for the man who hears other people talk about God speaking to them and feels a mix of skepticism and quiet longing, wondering whether that is real and whether it could ever happen to him. It is for the man who is doing an Acts of the Apostles station on Scripture and wants to know what to actually do with the Bible once the session ends. And it is, frankly, for the man who has everything the world says should satisfy him and cannot shake the sense that something at the center is thin. Lectio speaks to all of these, because all of them are, underneath, the same hunger: the hunger to be addressed by God personally, and to know it is really him.

You do not need to be educated to pray this way. You do not need to know Greek or Hebrew, or the history of the ancient Near East, or the fine points of biblical scholarship. Those things are good and this book will not despise them, but they are not the price of entry. The price of entry to Lectio is only this: the willingness to slow down, and the humility to listen. A learned man who will not slow down cannot pray Lectio. An uneducated man who will can pray it beautifully. This is one of the mercies of the

practice. It is open to everyone, because it was designed for encounter, and encounter does not require a degree.

The Word is waiting to speak. Here is how to listen.

CHAPTER ONE

Where This Came From

The Practice the Monks Kept Alive

To understand Lectio Divina, it helps to understand that for most of Christian history, almost no one owned a Bible. Books were copied by hand, one at a time, at enormous expense. A single complete Bible could take a scribe the better part of a year to produce and cost as much as a house. The idea that an ordinary person would own a personal copy, carry it in a bag, leave it on a nightstand, was unthinkable for roughly the first fifteen centuries of the Church.

This creates an obvious question. If ordinary Christians could not own Bibles, how did Scripture form them? The answer is that they heard it, and they prayed it, and they carried it in their memory. The Word came to them primarily through the liturgy, read aloud, and through the practice of those who had given their lives to it: the monks.

The Monastic Method

In the monasteries, Scripture was the center of everything. The monks heard it chanted in the Divine Office through the whole cycle of the day, and they gave dedicated time to what they called lectio divina, sacred reading. But their reading was nothing like the way a modern man reads. They read slowly, aloud, often barely above a whisper, chewing on the words. A monk might spend an entire morning with three or four verses. He was not trying to get through the passage. He was trying to let the passage get through to him.

A twelfth-century monk named Guigo, a prior of the Carthusians, wrote the classic description of this practice in a short work called The Ladder of Monks. He described Lectio as a ladder with four rungs, four movements that lift the soul from earth to God: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. His little book fixed the pattern that has come down to us. It is the same four movements we will learn in this book. They are not a modern invention or a program someone designed. They are the distilled wisdom of centuries of men who prayed Scripture for a living, written down by one of them so the rest of us would not lose it.

Guigo's image of the ladder is worth holding onto, because it captures something the four movements can otherwise obscure. A ladder is climbed one rung at a time, in order, but the point of a ladder is not the rungs. The point is where it takes you. Guigo said the ladder of Lectio reaches from earth to heaven, and that the four rungs, reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation, are how the soul ascends to God. He also observed, honestly, that the higher rungs are not in our control. We can read. We can meditate. We can pray. But contemplation, the top of the ladder, resting in God, is given, not achieved. We climb the first three rungs by our own effort, cooperating with grace, and then we wait, and sometimes God reaches down and lifts us the rest of the way. This is a humbling and freeing thing to know from the start. Your job is to climb the rungs you can climb, faithfully. The summit is God's to give. You are not failing when he does not give it. You are simply doing your part and leaving his part to him, which is the right arrangement in everything that matters between a man and God.

Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. — Psalm 1:1-2

Meditates day and night. The Hebrew word behind meditates is striking. It carries the sense of muttering, murmuring, speaking under the breath. The blessed man of the first Psalm is not thinking abstract thoughts about the law. He is muttering it to himself, turning it over on his tongue, keeping it moving through his mind the way you might keep a hard candy moving in your mouth. That is Lectio. That is what the monks recovered and preserved. And that is what the first Psalm calls the mark of a blessed man.

Why Most Catholics Lost It

If this practice is so old and so central, why have most Catholic men never heard of it? The answer is partly historical accident and partly a wound the Church is still healing.

For complicated reasons that unfolded over several centuries, personal reading of Scripture came to be associated in the Catholic mind with Protestantism. After the Reformation, when reading the Bible for oneself became a hallmark of the Protestant movement, many Catholics quietly concluded that Scripture was the priest's business, the theologian's business, not the ordinary layman's. The Bible receded to the pulpit and the seminary. Catholics heard it at Mass and left it there. A tradition of personal engagement with the Word, the very tradition the monks had preserved, went dormant for the average Catholic in the pew.

The Second Vatican Council tried to repair this directly. In its Constitution on Divine Revelation, the Council urged all the faithful to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ through frequent reading of the Scriptures, and it explicitly commended the

practice of Lectio Divina to everyone, not just monks. One of the great figures of the last century made the point with a memorable image, describing the diligent reading of Scripture accompanied by prayer as a conversation between God and the human person, because, as Saint Ambrose said, we speak to Him when we pray, and we listen to Him when we read the divine words.

So the practice is not only permitted to you. It is urged on you, by the Church, in her most solemn teaching. The dormancy is ending. This book is a small part of that recovery. You are not reaching above your station by praying Scripture. You are claiming an inheritance that was always yours.

A Practice Older Than the Monasteries

It is worth adding that while the monks refined and preserved Lectio, they did not invent the underlying instinct. Praying the Word is as old as the Word itself. The Jewish people, from whom we received the Scriptures, had prayed and murmured and memorized their sacred texts for centuries before the first Christian monk existed. The devout Jew of Jesus′s own day carried the Scriptures in his memory and turned them over constantly, exactly as the first Psalm describes. When Jesus was tempted in the desert, he answered the devil three times with Scripture, not because he was consulting a text but because the Word lived in him, ready, prayed and pondered so deeply that it rose to his lips at the moment of trial. That is the fruit of a lifetime of praying the Word. Jesus himself is the great practitioner of Lectio, the Word made flesh who had also made the words of Scripture his own.

Mary shows us the same thing. Twice in Luke′s Gospel we are told that she kept these things, pondering them in her heart. The Greek word for pondering carries the sense of turning over, putting together, holding and weighing. Mary took the events and words God gave her and she chewed on them, kept them, turned them over in her heart across years. That is meditatio. The Mother of God was a contemplative of the ordinary, praying the Word of her own life long before any monastery formalized the method. When you pray Lectio, you are doing what she did.

Why It Endured

Practices come and go in the history of the Church. Devotions rise and fade. Methods that seemed essential in one century are forgotten in the next. Lectio Divina has endured for the better part of two thousand years, through every upheaval, in every culture the faith has touched. That kind of endurance is not an accident. A practice survives that long because it delivers what it promises, generation after generation, to ordinary people who take it up. The monks did not keep Lectio alive out of nostalgia. They kept it because it

made saints, reliably, across centuries, and they knew there was nothing more valuable they could hand down. You are receiving something field-tested by two thousand years of use. It works. That is why it lasted.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading Versus Praying

What Makes Lectio Different

Before we walk through the four movements, it is worth being precise about what Lectio is not, because most men, when they first hear the practice described, quietly assimilate it to something they already know and thereby miss it entirely.

It Is Not Study

Bible study is a good thing. In Bible study, you are trying to understand the text: its historical context, its original language, its place in the larger story, what the author meant, how the Church has interpreted it. Study engages the mind. It asks questions and seeks answers. It is analytical, and it produces knowledge. A man should do it.

Lectio is not that. In Lectio, you are not primarily trying to understand the text. You are trying to let the text address you. The question in study is what does this mean. The question in Lectio is what is God saying to me, here, now, through this. Study stands over the text and analyzes it. Lectio sits under the text and receives it. The postures are different. The monk praying Lectio in the morning might attend a lecture on the same passage in the afternoon, and both would be good, but he would not confuse the two.

It Is Not Speed

The modern man reads fast. He was trained to. He skims, he extracts, he moves on, because the sheer volume of text in modern life demands it. Emails, reports, articles, feeds, all of it read at speed, for the gist, and discarded.

Lectio is the opposite of this in every respect. It is deliberately, almost absurdly, slow. You take a short passage, a few verses at most, and you stay with it far longer than seems reasonable. You read it, and then you read it again, and then you read it a third time, and you begin to notice that a particular word is catching, snagging, asking for attention. The slowness is not a limitation of the method. It is the method. You cannot skim your way into encounter with God. The Word yields its depths only to the man willing to slow down enough to receive them.

Be still, and know that I am God. — Psalm 46:10

Be still. The stillness is not incidental. It is the precondition. The man who cannot be still cannot know God, because the knowing that Scripture promises is not the fast knowing of information but the slow knowing of relationship, and relationship cannot be rushed.

It Is Not Performance

There is no way to do Lectio impressively. There is no audience. There is no output to show for it, no notes to compare, no progress to measure. This unsettles the modern man, who is accustomed to activities that produce visible results. Lectio produces nothing you can point to. Its entire fruit is interior and largely invisible, the slow reshaping of a soul by the Word it keeps returning to.

This means you cannot fail at Lectio in any way that would be obvious. You also cannot succeed at it in any way that would impress anyone. It is pure encounter, done in secret, for its own sake, for the sake of the God you are meeting. That is exactly what makes it prayer rather than study, and exactly what makes it so foreign to a man whose whole life has trained him to produce and to perform.

It Is Not About Feeling

One more thing Lectio is not: it is not about generating a feeling. Men sometimes assume that if the practice is working, they should feel something, a warmth, a peace, an emotional lift. Sometimes those come. Often they do not. And the presence or absence of feeling is almost irrelevant to whether the Lectio was real. The Word works whether or not you feel it working, the way medicine works whether or not you taste it. A man can finish a session having felt nothing and have been formed by it profoundly. A man can finish another session having felt moved and have been merely entertained. Feeling is not the measure. Faithfulness is. Come to the Word to meet God, not to feel a particular way, and you will be freed from the exhausting and futile business of trying to manufacture an emotional state. The encounter is deeper than emotion, and it does its work below the level where feeling reaches.

CHAPTER THREE

Before the First Word

How to Prepare to Pray

There is a step before the four movements that most descriptions of Lectio skip, and skipping it is why many men find the practice flat. Before you read the first word, you have to arrive. You have to make the transition from the man rushing through his day to the man sitting in the presence of God, and that transition does not happen automatically. It has to be made.

Settling the Body

You are not a disembodied soul. You are a man with a body, and the body has to settle before the soul will. This is not New Age nonsense. It is Catholic anthropology. Grace works through nature, and your nature includes a nervous system that has been running hot all day. So you begin by settling the body. Sit down somewhere stable. Let your shoulders drop. Take a few slow breaths, deliberately, feeling the air come and go. You are not doing a breathing technique. You are simply letting the animal of your body understand that the sprinting is over and the resting has begun. A minute of this is often enough. The man who skips it and tries to leap straight into Scripture from the middle of his day's momentum usually spends the first ten minutes fidgeting.

Quieting the Noise

Then there is the interior noise, which is louder than the physical restlessness and harder to quiet. Your mind arrives at prayer carrying the whole day: the unfinished tasks, the unresolved conversation, the worry running in the background. You cannot simply command this to stop. But you can acknowledge it, set it down, and tell God you will pick it back up when you are done. Some men find it helps to name the noise briefly, even to jot the three things clamoring for attention on a scrap of paper, precisely so they can stop holding them. The point is not to achieve perfect interior silence before you begin, which will never happen, but to stop actively feeding the noise so the Word has room to be heard over it.

Asking the Spirit

Then, always, you ask the Holy Spirit to come. This is not a formality. The same Spirit who inspired the Scripture is the one who makes it live for the reader, and Lectio without the Spirit is just reading. So you ask. A sentence is enough. Come, Holy Spirit. Open this Word to me. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. You are acknowledging that you cannot manufacture the encounter, that the initiative is God's, that you are here to receive rather than to achieve. This small act of dependence changes everything. It shifts you from the posture of a man analyzing a text to the posture of a son waiting on his

Father. The whole practice flows better from that posture, and it begins with a simple asking.

> *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.* — John 16:13

These three preparations, settling the body, quieting the noise, asking the Spirit, take perhaps two minutes together. Do not skip them to save time. They are the difference between Lectio that works and Lectio that stays flat. A man who gives two minutes to arriving will get more from ten minutes of Scripture than a man who gives none and gets twenty. Arrive first. Then read.

The Bible You Use

A brief practical note on the book itself. For Lectio you want a Bible you can pray with, which is not necessarily the same as a Bible you would study with. A heavy study Bible, packed with footnotes and cross-references and commentary crowding the margins, can actually get in the way, because the eye keeps dropping to the notes and the analytical mind keeps engaging when you are trying to pray. Many men find it helps to have a simpler edition for Lectio, one with the text clean on the page, so that nothing competes with the Word itself. A Catholic edition, of course, containing the full canon of Scripture, in a translation that reads well aloud, since you will often be reading aloud. The particular translation matters less than that it is a sound Catholic one and that its cadence suits your ear. Find a Bible that feels like a place of prayer rather than a textbook, keep it in your chosen spot, and let it become, over time, worn and familiar and yours, the way a praying man's Bible always eventually becomes.

CHAPTER FOUR

The First Movement: Lectio

Reading, and Reading Again

The first of the four movements is lectio itself, the reading. This is where the practice begins, and it is simpler and harder than it sounds.

You choose a short passage. Not a chapter, not a whole story, but a small unit, a few verses, sometimes a single verse. Lectio is not about covering ground. A man could spend a week of Lectio on the same five verses and come away richer each day. Choose a passage from the Gospel of the day, or work slowly through a single Gospel a few verses

at a time, or use the Psalms. What matters is that the passage is short enough to hold in your attention entirely.

Read It Slowly, and Aloud If You Can

Then you read it. Slowly. If your situation permits, read it aloud, or at least move your lips, because the ancient practice was vocal and there is wisdom in it. Speaking the words engages more of you than silent reading does. It slows you down. It plants the words in your ear as well as your eye. The monks murmured their Scripture for a reason.

Read the passage through once, gently, just letting the words pass. Then pause. Then read it again, more slowly still. Then a third time. You are not analyzing. You are listening, the way you would listen to a friend telling you something that matters, not planning your response, just receiving the words as they come.

Wait for the Word That Catches

Somewhere in the reading and re-reading, something will usually catch. A word, a phrase, an image will stand out, will seem to have a little more weight than the rest, will ask for your attention. It might be a word you have read a hundred times that suddenly seems addressed to you. It might be a small phrase you never noticed. The monks had a phrase for this: the word that presents itself. You do not manufacture it. You wait for it. You read attentively until something on the page reaches out.

When it catches, stop. That caught word or phrase is where the rest of the practice will unfold. You have found your doorway. Do not go looking for a better one. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the text, is also the one drawing your attention to this particular part of it today. Trust the snag. Follow it in.

A worked example will help. Suppose you take the moment on the road to Emmaus, when the two disciples, after Jesus has vanished, say to each other: Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures. You read it slowly, three times. And the word that catches, today, is burning. Not the road, not the Scriptures, not the vanishing. Burning. Something in you responds to that word today. That is your doorway. You have finished lectio. You move to the second movement.

Were not our hearts burning within us while he opened to us the Scriptures? — Luke 24:32

On Choosing the Passage

A practical word about selecting what to read, because men often get stuck here before they have even begun. There is no perfect passage, and the search for one is usually procrastination in disguise. Three approaches serve most men well. The first is to use the Gospel of the day, the reading the Church assigns for that date in the liturgy. This has the advantage of uniting your prayer to the whole Church praying the same Word, and it removes the burden of choosing. The second is to take a single Gospel, Mark is the shortest and a fine place to start, and move through it slowly, a few verses per day, over weeks or months. The third is to pray the Psalms, which were written as prayers and yield to Lectio readily. Any of these works. What does not work is spending your prayer time flipping around looking for something that grabs you. Choose in advance, or use the day's Gospel, and begin.

Resist the temptation to choose long passages. The instinct of the modern man is that more is better, that a chapter is more serious than three verses. In Lectio the opposite is true. The shorter the passage, the deeper you can go. A single sentence of Scripture contains more than you can exhaust in a lifetime of Lectio. The disciples on the Emmaus road, the sower and the seed, the one lost sheep, the woman at the well, any of these can feed a week of prayer. Take less. Go deeper. The goal is not coverage. The goal is encounter, and encounter happens in the small, attended-to space of a few verses held long enough to open.

A Second Example

Take another passage, to see the movement again. You choose the moment when Jesus, asleep in the boat during the storm, is woken by his terrified disciples. You read it slowly, three times. The wind, the waves, the water coming into the boat, the disciples shaking him awake, his question, Why are you afraid, have you still no faith, the calm that follows his word. You read it again. And the phrase that catches, today, is that he was asleep. Not the storm, not the calming, not the fear. Something in you snags on the image of Jesus resting in the middle of the storm that was terrifying everyone else. That is your doorway. You have finished lectio. And already you can feel where meditatio might go: the times God has seemed asleep in your own storms, the question of whether his sleeping meant absence or a peace you did not yet share. But that is the next movement. For now, notice only how the practice works: you read, you re-read, you waited, and a word reached out. That is all lectio is, and it is the doorway to everything that follows.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Second Movement: Meditatio

Chewing on the Word

The second movement is meditatio, meditation. This is where the word that caught your attention begins to open. And here we must be careful, because the word meditation has been badly muddled in the modern mind.

Not Emptying, but Filling

When a modern man hears meditation, he tends to think of the Eastern practice: emptying the mind, releasing thought, seeking a kind of blank stillness. Christian meditation is close to the opposite. It is not emptying the mind but filling it, deliberately, with the word God has given, and turning that word over until it yields.

The classic image is chewing. You take the word that caught you and you chew on it, the way an animal chews the cud, working it over and over, breaking it down, drawing the nourishment out of it. You ask what it means. You ask why it caught you. You let it connect to your life. You turn it in the light and look at it from different angles. This is active. It engages your mind, your memory, your imagination. You are working the word.

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. — Psalm 119:103

Let It Touch Your Life

The crucial move in meditatio is to let the word touch your actual life. This is where Lectio becomes personal and stops being abstract. The word that caught you is not a general truth to be admired. It is a word for you, today, in the specific situation you are in. So you ask: why this word, now? What is happening in my life that this word speaks to? Where is God pointing with this?

Return to the example. The word that caught was burning. In meditatio, you chew on it. You ask what it means that the disciples′ hearts burned when Christ opened the Scriptures to them. You notice that their hearts were burning before they recognized him, that the burning was itself a kind of recognition their minds had not yet caught up to. And then you let it touch your life. When did your heart last burn like that? Has it gone cold? Is that why you are here, praying with a passage about hearts that burn, because yours has been dim lately and something in you recognized the word before your mind did? Now the passage is no longer about two men on a road two thousand years ago. It is about you. That is meditatio.

Use Your Imagination

For narrative passages, especially the Gospels, one of the richest forms of meditatio is to place yourself inside the scene. This is the method Saint Ignatius of Loyola developed and taught, and it is powerful. You imagine the scene fully: the dust of the Emmaus road, the fading light, the stranger walking alongside, the slow burn in the chest as he speaks. You are there. You are one of the disciples, or a bystander, or yourself somehow present. You let the scene become real to your senses, and you notice what stirs in you as it unfolds. The Gospels were written to be entered this way, not just analyzed from outside. Ignatius understood that the imagination is a doorway the Holy Spirit is glad to use.

Let the Word Ask You Questions

Another form of meditatio is to let the passage interrogate you rather than the other way around. Normally we come to a text with our questions. In this form, you let the text put its questions to you. When Jesus asks the blind man, What do you want me to do for you, you do not analyze the question historically. You let him ask it of you. What do you want him to do for you? Not what should you want, or what would sound holy, but what do you actually want, right now, in the real condition of your life? When Jesus asks Peter, Do you love me, you let him ask you, and you sit with how you would honestly answer. The Gospels are full of questions Jesus asks, and every one of them is still being asked, of the man praying the passage today. Meditatio often means simply staying in the path of one of those questions long enough to answer it truthfully.

This is uncomfortable, and the discomfort is a sign the practice is working. A text that only confirms what you already thought has not yet reached you. When the Word begins to ask you things you would rather not answer, to expose the gap between what you profess and how you live, to name the thing you have been avoiding, that is the living and active Word doing exactly what Hebrews said it does. Do not flinch away from it. The surgeon's blade that reaches the infection is doing you good, not harm. Let the Word cut where it needs to. That is meditatio at its most fruitful.

CHAPTER SIX

The Third Movement: Oratio

Answering Back

The third movement is oratio, prayer. And here is the beautiful logic of Lectio: the first two movements were mostly God speaking to you through the word. The third movement is you speaking back. Lectio is a conversation, and now it is your turn.

The Natural Response

If you have genuinely let the word touch your life in meditatio, oratio tends to arise on its own. Something has been stirred, and you respond to it, the way you would naturally respond to a friend who had just said something that landed. You do not need a formula. You just talk to God about what has come up.

If the word that caught was burning, and meditatio led you to recognize that your own heart has gone cold, then oratio is where you say so. You tell God, honestly, that the fire has gone out of your faith, that you are here because you noticed the word before you understood it, that you want the burning back and do not know how to rekindle it. That is oratio. It is the honest response of a man to a word that has found him.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. — Psalm 130:1-2

Let It Be Honest

The oratio that Lectio produces is often more honest than ordinary prayer, precisely because it arises from something real that the word surfaced. This is one of the great gifts of the practice. When you begin with your own agenda in prayer, you tend to pray the polished, acceptable prayers. But when the Word surfaces something in you, a longing, a grief, a conviction, a joy, and you respond to that, the prayer comes from a deeper and truer place. David's Psalms are oratio of this kind: raw, direct, unedited responses to what God had stirred. Follow him. Say the true thing, whatever it is. God can work with the true thing. He can do nothing with the polished thing you do not mean.

Petition, Sorrow, Gratitude, Praise

The oratio may take any form the word calls for. It may be petition, asking God for what the word has made you realize you need. It may be contrition, sorrow for what the word has exposed. It may be thanksgiving, gratitude for what the word has reminded you of. It may be sheer praise, adoration prompted by a glimpse of who God is that the word gave you. The word determines the response. You do not choose the form in advance. You let the word that God gave you draw out of you the answer it is looking for.

When No Response Comes

Sometimes you reach oratio and nothing rises. The word touched something in meditatio, but when you turn to respond, you find yourself with nothing to say. This is not a failure. When words do not come, the response can simply be to hold up to God what the word surfaced, wordlessly, offering him the situation itself. A man who realizes his heart has gone cold and cannot find words to pray about it can simply hold that

coldness up to God and let the holding be the prayer. God reads the heart, not the eloquence. The offering of your actual condition, even in silence, is a complete oratio. You do not need to perform the response. You need only to turn, genuinely, toward God with whatever the Word raised, and let him receive it.

Following the Storm Example Through

Return to the passage of Jesus asleep in the storm, to see oratio arise from meditatio. The phrase that caught was that he was asleep. In meditatio you chewed on it and it touched your life: you thought of the storms in which God has seemed to sleep, the seasons of fear when you shook him awake demanding to know whether he cared. And now, in oratio, you respond. You tell him honestly about the storm you are in right now, the one where he has seemed asleep. You admit the fear, and the accusation underneath it, the quiet suspicion that his stillness meant he did not care. And perhaps, having said it plainly, you begin to wonder whether his sleeping in the boat was not indifference at all but a peace so complete that the storm could not disturb it, a peace he was inviting the disciples into rather than being roused from. And your oratio turns, as honest prayer often does, from accusation toward petition: give me that peace, the peace that can sleep in the storm because it trusts the Father completely. That is oratio flowing from the Word. It was not planned. It arose, because the Word had done its work, and the response came out of what the Word had surfaced. This is how the movements flow into one another, each giving rise to the next, until the whole thing is less a technique you execute than a conversation you fall into with the God who is speaking.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fourth Movement: Contemplatio

Resting in God

The fourth movement is contemplatio, contemplation, and it is the hardest to describe because it is the least active. The first three movements involved your effort: reading, chewing, responding. The fourth movement is where effort gives way to rest.

Beyond Words

Contemplatio is what happens when the conversation of the first three movements arrives at a place where words are no longer needed. You have read, you have chewed, you have responded, and now you simply rest in God's presence, wordless, receptive, still. It is like the moment in a deep friendship when two people who have been talking fall

into a comfortable silence, and the silence is not empty but full, full of a presence that no longer needs speech.

You cannot force contemplatio. This is important. It is not a technique you execute but a gift you receive. Sometimes, after the first three movements, it comes: a settling, a stillness, a sense of resting in a presence larger than yourself. Sometimes it does not come, and that is fine. You cannot manufacture it and you are not failing when it does not arrive. Your job is to be available for it, to leave space for it, to not rush off the moment the oratio is done. You linger. You rest. And if God gives the gift of contemplative stillness, you receive it. If he does not, the Lectio was still complete without it.

For God alone my soul waits in silence. — Psalm 62:1

The Fruit You Carry

Out of contemplatio, or simply out of the whole practice, comes a fruit that the tradition sometimes names as a fifth movement: actio, action. The Word you have prayed does not stay on the page or in the prayer time. It comes with you into the day. The man who prayed with burning hearts on the Emmaus road carries that word into his afternoon, and it quietly reorders things. He notices where his heart is cold and asks for fire. He pays attention differently. The Word has become active in him, which is exactly what Hebrews promised it would do. Lectio is not finished when you close the Bible. It is finished when the Word you prayed has become the way you live that day.

Not Idleness

It is worth distinguishing contemplative rest from mere idleness, because they can look identical from outside and are opposite within. Idleness is the absence of attention: the mind gone slack, drifting, half asleep. Contemplative rest is the fullness of attention that has passed beyond words: alert, present, focused entirely on God, but no longer needing to speak or think about him. The difference is the difference between a man dozing in a chair and a man sitting in silent, wide-awake love beside someone he cherishes. Both are still. Only one is present. In contemplatio you are aiming at presence, not absence. If you find you have merely drifted into sleepy vacancy, gently return to the word, or to a simple interior gaze toward God, and let the alert stillness resume. The stillness of Lectio is a full stillness, not an empty one.

And if it does not come at all, let that be fine. Most sessions of Lectio for most people do not culminate in some palpable experience of contemplative union. They end with a word prayed, a response given, and an ordinary quiet. That is a complete and fruitful Lectio. The extraordinary moments, when they come, are pure gift, and they come more often to

the man who has stopped demanding them. Pray for the ordinary faithfulness. Receive the extraordinary gift if it is given. Never measure the practice by whether the gift arrived.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Nothing Happens

The Obstacles, and What to Do

Every man who takes up Lectio runs into the same obstacles. They are not signs that you are doing it wrong. They are the ordinary friction of the practice, and knowing them in advance keeps you from quitting when they arrive.

The Wandering Mind

You will sit down to pray Scripture and your mind will go everywhere but the passage. You will be three verses in and suddenly planning tomorrow's schedule, replaying an argument, wondering if you left the garage open. This happens to everyone, including the greatest contemplatives, who wrote about it constantly. The mind wanders. It is what minds do.

The response is not frustration but gentle return. When you notice you have wandered, you simply come back to the word, without self-recrimination, the way you would gently turn a child's face back toward you. You will do this many times in a single session. That is not a failure of the practice. In a real sense, that is the practice: the repeated, patient return of your attention to God is itself the training of the soul. Teresa of Avila compared the wandering mind to an unbroken horse and counseled patience with it. Do not expect stillness to come easily. Expect to return your attention a hundred times, and count each return as a small act of love.

I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. — Psalm 131:2

The Dry Passage

Sometimes you will read, and re-read, and nothing catches. No word reaches out. The passage sits there, flat and closed, and you feel nothing. This too is normal, and it does not mean the practice has failed or that God has withdrawn.

When a passage is dry, you have a few options. You can stay with it anyway, reading it slowly, trusting that the Word is at work even when you feel nothing, because Lectio is

not measured by feeling. You can choose a different passage, one that may open more readily today. Or you can simply rest in the dryness itself, offering God the desert of a prayer time where nothing seemed to happen, which is itself a real and pleasing prayer. The saints are unanimous that dryness in prayer is not a sign of God's absence but often a sign of his deeper work, weaning the soul off the need for spiritual consolation so that it learns to love God for himself rather than for the good feelings. Do not flee the dry passage. It may be doing more than the sweet one.

The Sense That You Are Making It Up

Many men, when a word catches or a meaning opens, immediately suspect that they invented it, that they are reading into the text what they wanted to find, that the whole thing is a projection. This suspicion is worth addressing directly, because it stops men cold.

Here is the reassurance. In Lectio, you are not trying to determine the one correct scholarly meaning of the passage. That is the work of study, and it has its own safeguards. In Lectio, you are letting the Holy Spirit, who inspired the text and who lives in you by baptism, draw your attention to what he wishes to say to you today through it. The same Spirit is on both ends of the practice, in the Word and in you. That the word which catches connects to your actual life is not a corruption of the practice. It is the point of it. As long as what you draw from the passage is consistent with the faith and moves you toward God, you are not making it up. You are receiving. The Church's living tradition is the guardrail: a meaning that contradicted the faith would be suspect, but the fruit of genuine Lectio never does. It draws you deeper into the God the Church proclaims.

The Craving for an Experience

A subtler obstacle afflicts the man who has heard that Lectio can be powerful and therefore arrives each day expecting fireworks. When the fireworks do not come, he concludes the practice is not working and drifts away. The craving for a spiritual experience is one of the most reliable ways to ruin prayer, because it turns the attention back on yourself and what you are getting, when the whole point was to turn the attention toward God for his own sake.

The saints are severe on this point and also gentle. Severe, because they warn repeatedly against seeking the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations, against loving the gift more than the giver. Gentle, because they understand the hunger behind it and promise that the man who keeps praying faithfully through the dry stretches, without demanding experiences, is being formed more deeply than the man who gets the experiences and stops there. Lectio is not entertainment and not a mood you generate. It

is a relationship you tend. Some days in any relationship are warm and some are plain, and the plain days, faithfully kept, are what build the thing that lasts. Come to the Word for God, not for a feeling. The feeling, when it comes, is a grace. Its absence is not a failure. And the man who can pray faithfully without it has learned the thing Lectio most wants to teach: to love God himself, and not merely his gifts.

CHAPTER NINE

Building It Into a Life

The Practical Rule

A practice you admire but never do is worth nothing. The final question is how to build Lectio into a life that is already full. Here the answer is not inspiration but structure.

Time

Decide when. Lectio needs a time, protected and repeated, or it will not happen. For most men, the two workable windows are early morning, before the house and the day take over, and late evening, after everyone has gone to sleep. Morning has the advantage of setting the day's orientation before the noise begins. Evening has the advantage of quiet. Choose one, and guard it. Fifteen to twenty minutes is plenty to begin. This is not about duration but consistency. A faithful fifteen minutes daily will form you more than an occasional heroic hour.

Place

Decide where. A consistent place helps the soul settle, because the body remembers. A particular chair, a corner, a spot at the kitchen table before anyone is up. Ideally somewhere you can keep a Bible and perhaps a candle or an icon, some small marker that this is sacred time and space. The place becomes, over weeks, a trigger for the practice. You sit in the chair and something in you begins to quiet, because the chair means Lectio now.

Text

Decide what. The simplest and richest choice for most men is the Gospel reading of the day, which the Church provides and which ties your prayer to the liturgy of the whole Church. Alternatively, choose one Gospel and move through it slowly, a few verses at a time, over weeks. The Psalms are also ideal, written to be prayed. Do not overthink the

choice. A man who prays the daily Gospel with Lectio for a year will be transformed. What matters is showing up to the text, not selecting the perfect one.

The Place of a Journal

Many men find that keeping a simple journal deepens the practice considerably. Not an elaborate diary, but a plain notebook in which, after the prayer, you write a sentence or two: the word that caught today, what it seemed to say, what you asked God in response. This does several things. It slows you down and helps the fruit of the session settle. It creates a record you can look back on, and over months that record becomes remarkable, a visible trail of how God has been speaking to you through his Word across a season of your life. And it gives the wandering mind something to reach for, a small concrete task that anchors the practice. You do not have to journal. But if you are the kind of man who thinks with a pen in his hand, try it. Many men find it turns Lectio from something they do into something they can see God doing.

Praying With Others

Lectio is usually solitary, but it can also be prayed in a group, and this is where it connects directly to a men's formation program. A small group of men can pray Lectio together: one reads the passage aloud slowly, there is silence, another reads it again, each man shares briefly the word that caught him, there is silence, it is read a third time, and each man speaks a short prayer aloud or in the quiet. Prayed this way, in a room of men, Lectio becomes a powerful thing, because each man hears what the Word said to the others, and the same passage opens in six different directions at once, and the brothers carry each other deeper. If you are in an Acts of the Apostles group, this is a practice worth bringing to your gathering. The Word that reads one man reads the whole room, and the men are knit together by the God who is speaking to all of them at once through the same few verses.

A Simple Order

When you sit down, the order is straightforward. Begin with a brief prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking him to open the Word to you, because he is the one who inspired it and the one who interprets it. Read the passage slowly, three times, listening for the word that catches. Chew on that word, letting it touch your life. Respond to God honestly about what it stirs. Then rest, wordless, for as long as the stillness lasts. Close with gratitude and, if you can, carry the word into your day. That is the whole practice. It is not complicated. It only requires that you show up and slow down.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. — Psalm 119:105

CHAPTER TEN

What It Does to a Man

The Fruits of a Praying Life

It is fair to ask what actually happens to a man who prays this way over time. Not in a single session, but over months and years of returning to the Word in Lectio. The tradition, and the experience of countless men, points to several fruits worth naming, because they are what you are actually after, even if you did not have words for them when you began.

Scripture Becomes Yours

The first fruit is that the Bible stops being a foreign text and becomes your own. The man who prays Lectio faithfully finds, after a year or two, that Scripture has moved inside him. Phrases surface unbidden at the right moments. A line from a Psalm rises when he is afraid. A word of Jesus comes to mind in the middle of a hard conversation. The Word he has been praying has been quietly taking up residence, and now it lives in him and works in him without his consulting a book. This is what happened to Jesus in the desert and to every saint who prayed the Word. It is not memorization, though memory plays a part. It is a deeper thing, the Word becoming part of the furniture of the soul, always available, always speaking.

Prayer Becomes Relationship

The second fruit is that prayer itself changes character. The man who once experienced prayer as a monologue, a list of requests fired upward into silence, begins to experience it as a conversation, a genuine back-and-forth with a God who speaks. This is the great gift of Lectio: it teaches a man that God actually communicates, personally, and that the primary place he does so is in his Word. Once a man has heard God address him through Scripture, even a few times, prayer is never again a monologue. He knows there is Someone on the other end, and he knows how to listen.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. — John 10:27

The Ordinary Becomes Charged

The third fruit reaches beyond the prayer time into the whole of life. The man who prays the Word carries it into his day, and the day begins to look different. The Word he prayed in the morning becomes a lens through which he sees his afternoon. He notices things he

would have missed. A situation at work becomes an occasion to practice the patience the morning's passage spoke of. A moment with his child becomes charged with a significance he would not have seen. This is the actio the tradition names, the Word made active, and over time it saturates a life. The man is not more religious in any showy way. His ordinary days have simply become the place where the Word he prays gets lived, which is exactly what Scripture was given for.

The Man Himself Is Changed

The deepest fruit is the slowest and the least visible, and it is the one that matters most. The man himself is changed. Not into someone else, but into more fully himself, the self God intended, gradually conformed to the Christ he keeps meeting in the Word. This is the promise underneath the whole practice. We become what we behold. The man who spends his mornings beholding Christ in the Gospels, letting the living Word read him and reshape him, is slowly remade in the image of the one he contemplates. It does not happen in a day and it does not happen dramatically. It happens the way water shapes stone, imperceptibly, faithfully, over years, until one day the people around him notice that something in him has changed, has softened and strengthened at once, and they cannot say when it happened. It happened in the quiet mornings, a few verses at a time, in the presence of the Word that is living and active and never stopped working on him.

CONCLUSION

The Voice That Was Always Speaking

There is a line in the First Book of Samuel, when the boy Samuel is sleeping in the temple and hears his name called in the night. Three times he hears it and runs to the priest Eli, thinking Eli called him. Three times Eli sends him back. And finally the old priest understands what is happening, and he tells the boy what to say the next time the voice comes: Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

That is the whole of Lectio Divina, reduced to a sentence. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. It is the posture of a man who has stopped treating Scripture as a text to master and started treating it as a voice to heed. The voice has been speaking the whole time. Samuel simply had not yet learned to recognize it, or to make himself available to it, or to answer.

You have the same voice available to you, in the same Word, every morning you are willing to sit down and slow down and listen. The Bible on your shelf is not a reproach and not an unfinished project. It is a doorway. Behind it is the God who has been trying to speak to you personally for years, through a Word that is living and active and sharper than any sword, waiting only for a man who will stop reading long enough to be read.

Tomorrow morning, sit down with a few verses. Read them slowly, three times. Wait for the word that catches. Chew on it until it touches your life. Say the true thing back to God. Then rest a moment in his presence, and carry the word into your day.

That is Lectio Divina. That is the practice the monks kept alive for you across fifteen centuries so that you would have it now. The Word is living. It is active. And it is, as always, waiting to speak.

✦ ✦ ✦

Lectio Divina: Praying the Word is part of The Daily Bread Library.