Devotion to the Word

SPEAKER	Chanaka Dooldeniya
DATE	Sunday, September 21, 2025
PASSAGES	Joshua 1; Isaiah 55; Hebrews 4; Psalm 119; Romans 13; Psalm 23; 2 Timothy 3; Colossians 3
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:22:11 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Bible is not a collection of books but God's living voice, telling one unified story we are part of. Being in it daily cultivates the soul, aims us away from sin, and comforts us in the valley. And it is worth doing even when you do it badly.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Dan Davis' line — "if something is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly" — is the frame for the whole message. Some things are worthwhile enough that a bad attempt beats no attempt.
- Chanaka spoke from struggle, not mastery. Prayer and worship come to him like breathing; being in the word never has.
- Scripture is one meta story across both testaments — creation loved, humanity fallen, God glorified in redeeming it through the death and resurrection of Jesus. A day's reading is a chapter of that, not a fragment.
- Reason one: the word transforms us into Christlikeness. Souls are gardens, and gardens need daily tending.
- Reason two: the word is our targeting scope. Sin means missing the mark, and stored-up scripture aims us.
- Reason three: the word comforts. Psalm 23 is where Chanaka goes in despair and loneliness.

- Build the habit on grace, not guilt, and sequence it onto something you already do. Start absurdly small — one verse, the way BJ Fogg says to floss one tooth.
- Discipline is a team sport. Do it with a friend, and if you miss a day, don't cancel the subscription.

▶ 1:22:11

Chanaka opened with something Dan Davis, Hope's founding pastor, used to say over breakfast: "Chanaka, if something is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly." He admits he cringed at it — he leans perfectionist — and thought, *surely if it's worth doing, it's worth doing really well.* Older now, he has come to think there is a great deal of wisdom in doing genuinely worthwhile things even when you do them badly. That is the permission slip he handed the room before asking anyone to take up a daily practice of being in Scripture.

Speaking from struggle, not mastery

▶ 1:23:54

He was direct about where he stands. "I'm not talking to you today from a place of mastery. Really, it's actually from a place of actual struggle and weakness." Prayer and worship come to him like breathing. The word has been a long series of starts and stops. What he offered were the lessons that came out of the failing.

He read a poem from Justin Martyr, the second-century church father, on what Scripture does to a person: the word driving out lust "like a serpent charmer luring the reptile from its den," dispelling hatred, strife, envy and anger, so that "the soul grows calm where serenity dwells." Our king, in Justin's telling, is not after strength of body but a pure heart.

One story, told across many nights

▶ 1:26:29

When his daughters Ariel and Rowan were three and four, bedtime always began the same way: *a long, long time ago in a land far, far away, there lived two beautiful princesses.* He or Wendy — Wendy was the creative genius, and he suspects the girls circulated a mom-only-story-night petition — would spin a Narnia-shaped adventure with talking animals, fantastical creatures, obstacles to overcome, and a dragon librarian named Draconus. Each night's story built on the one before and picked up threads introduced weeks earlier. A fly on the wall for one night would never have seen the meta story running through all of it.

God narrates that way across the Old and New Testaments: his love for his creation, the fall and brokenness of humanity, and God bringing glory to himself by redeeming creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Chanaka cited Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* on meditating within that story, picturing yourself in its scenes. A primary reason to cultivate daily devotion is simply to learn the story and where you fit inside it.

1. Scripture transforms us

▶ 1:29:55

Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae*, treats Scripture as the supreme source of revealed truth and urges reading the whole Bible to see its unified story of salvation. The command itself is older:

> "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success."
>
> JOSHUA 1:8 ↗

▶ 1:31:17

Last May, he and Wendy visited Japan, and their favorite stop was Yoyogi Park — cherry trees, Japanese black pines twisted into strange shapes, and, in the mornings, teams of gardeners everywhere, weeding and cultivating and planting, visibly loving the work. Our souls are that garden. They need daily care to flourish.

> "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."
>
> ISAIAH 55:10–11 ↗

And Hebrews 4:12 — the word living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. "The Bible isn't just a collection of books," Chanaka said. "It is God's living voice reshaping us to become more like Christ."

▶ 1:33:08

He had been praying over Psalm 119:130 — "the unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" — and that morning Jolene came to him unprompted, saying God had put

light on her heart for the service, not knowing what he planned to preach. He took it as confirmation: knowing the word is how you walk in the light.

2. Scripture aims us

▶ 1:34:26

"It is our targeting scope." Psalm 119:11 — "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" — reads differently once you know that *sin* can be rendered as missing the mark.

Augustine of Hippo, wild and hedonistic in his youth, tells in the *Confessions* of sitting in despair and hearing a child's voice say *pick it up and read*. He opened to this:

> "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."
>
> ROMANS 13:13–14 ↗

The scripture pierced him and he surrendered. Chanaka's image for it: sunflowers turning to track the sun. The word orients us that way toward God.

3. Scripture comforts us

▶ 1:36:21

In despair and loneliness he turns, like Augustine, to a psalm — and he had the congregation read it with him.

> "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."
>
> PSALM 23:1–4 ↗

Then the confession: his early attempts at daily devotion were "less vibrant garden and much more spiritual tumbleweed." He has committed to reading the Bible in a year many times and failed many times — by Leviticus he was dreaming of going for a run instead. As his daughter Aurelia puts it, Leviticus comes for us all. That is the point about Scripture, though: it meets us in the mess and keeps

working. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 — all of it breathed out by God and profitable, so that we are complete and equipped. Psalm 119:105: without the lamp we stumble; with it we walk.

Strategy 1: build on grace, and start small

▶ 1:39:51

Pick one of three strategies and commit to it for thirty days, which the research says is roughly the floor for forming a habit. If it doesn't fit, try another — including one he never mentioned.

The first is a matter of the heart: grace, not guilt. This is not earning God's love but responding to it. Chanaka quoted Henri Nouwen from *The Return of the Prodigal Son* — God's love "does not depend on our goodness or our response. It is a gift freely given, and our task is simply to receive it."

Then, practically: five to ten minutes, sequenced onto something already in your routine. In his kitchen that means hitting start on the espresso machine and dropping down for push-ups — weird enough that Wendy asks what he is doing, automatic enough that he no longer thinks about it. Attach the word to your coffee, your tea, your morning walk. He recommends a one-year chronological plan, naming the Bible Project's *The One Story that Leads to Jesus*, Nicky and Pippa Gumbel's *Bible in One Year*, and Tara-Leigh Cobble's *The Bible Recap*; the first is strongest on the unified message and the cultural context, the other two on daily application.

Strategy 2: engage actively, not passively

▶ 1:45:23

Don't just read — study, apply, and best of all teach it to someone, since teaching is how information gets internalized. Ask what a passage reveals about God, about you, and how it points to Jesus. Journal with SOAP: scripture, observation, application, prayer. He walked John 3:16 through all four, ending in a prayer to believe more fully and live that love out in action — and pointed people to the prayers David has put up on the wall as models of simple praying.

Memorize, too. He is terrible at it and commends it anyway, because God brings verses back at the moment you need them. Tim Keller once described studying C. S. Lewis so deeply that he could anticipate what Lewis would say to a given question. "That's exactly what we want with scripture," Chanaka said — the word so rooted in us that whatever life throws at us, we can see how God would respond. And discuss it with others: a Hope Group, a friend, or the Wednesday night *Echoes Between Testaments* group led by Bob and John.

Strategy 3: persist through the obstacles

▶ 1:49:41

Distraction, busyness, dryness and doubt are coming. Chanaka borrowed from Jocko Willink, who refuses to schedule days off from training on the logic that life hands them to you anyway — sick days, sick kids, days where getting everyone fed is the whole victory. So commit to daily, expect the misses, and if you can, put it at the front of the day: "if I do that in the morning, it doesn't matter what comes at the rest of the day. It's already done. I've won the day."

Then the tactics. Optimize the environment: a quiet space, phone on do not disturb — he reads on his phone, and one incoming text sends him down a ten-minute detour. Vary it with audio Bibles on a commute or a walk, a study Bible for depth. Track the habit. And make the entry absurdly easy: BJ Fogg, in *Tiny Habits*, tells people who want to floss to commit to flossing one tooth, because once you have done one you tend to go get the rest. Commit to one verse. Learn to show up before you add complexity.

▶ 1:52:50

> *"Committing to daily devotion is like signing up for a spiritual gym membership. Don't worry if you miss a day. Just don't cancel the subscription."*

Better still, get a friend to sign on with you. A friend of his calls discipline a team sport, and Chanaka can attest to it — every time he has done this alongside someone, it has gone better than going it alone. All of it under Colossians 3:16: let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

"Son of David, have mercy on me"

▶ 1:54:50

Chanaka closed by inviting the Holy Spirit to plant a love of God's word in the room, and asked Bob to pray the blessing. Bob took the congregation into the blind man outside Jericho, having the room say his cry aloud three times — "Son of David, have mercy on me" — over the objections of everyone telling him he was disturbing the proceedings. Then the question Jesus asked him: *what is it that you want me to do for you?* Bob offered several answers people might bring — to read the books they have never read, to be led to the passages that confront a particular sin, to finally memorize the verses they love, or, for some, guidance about whether to stay in the position they are in. He gave the room a few seconds of silence, then had everyone stand and whisper their request.

And the last word was Dan's, again: if something is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Joshua 1:8
- Isaiah 55:10–11
- Hebrews 4:12
- Psalm 119:130
- Psalm 119:11
- Romans 13:13–14
- Psalm 23:1–4
- 2 Timothy 3:16–17
- Psalm 119:105
- John 3:16
- Colossians 3:16
- Mark 10:46–52

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where in your life have you refused to do something worthwhile because you couldn't do it well? What would it look like to do it poorly this month?
2. Chanaka said prayer and worship come to him like breathing, but the word never has. Which spiritual practice comes easily to you, and which one has always been the struggle?
3. Of the three reasons — transforming, aiming, comforting — which one do you most need Scripture to do in you right now?
4. What existing habit in your day could you sequence ten minutes in the word onto, and what would you have to move or silence to make room for it?
5. Discipline is a team sport. Who are you going to ask to take the thirty days with you, and when will you ask them?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Chanaka Dooldeniya is a member of Hope Chapel who knew the church's founding pastor, Dan Davis, well enough to share regular breakfasts with him. He is married to Wendy and has daughters, among them Ariel, Rowan and Aurelia. He describes himself as a perfectionist who finds prayer and worship natural and daily Bible reading a long struggle, and he reads widely in the early church fathers — Justin Martyr and Augustine especially — as well as Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen and Tim Keller. He gardens.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqAsiCnSKpE&t=4931s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.