

Barry C. Black: Chaplain of the U.S. Senate

Impossible Goals are Possible with Bible Study

By Karen Jones

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Far from the desperate poverty of the Baltimore ghetto he was born into, Chaplain Barry C. Black has amassed an extraordinary list of achievements in his sixty-one years. Currently the 62nd Chaplain of the United States Senate, Black is also a retired Rear Admiral in the United States Navy, where he served with distinction for nearly 30 years, eventually rising to Chief of Navy Chaplains. A dedicated trailblazer, he was the first African-American to be named Chief of Navy Chaplains and the first to preside over the spiritual welfare of the lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Convinced from an early age that God wanted him to excel, Black earned a Doctorate of Ministry from the Eastern Baptist Seminary in Pennsylvania and a Ph.D. from the United States International University in California. His long list of prestigious awards includes the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit Award, two Defense Meritorious Service Medals, and the NAACP Roy Wilkins Renowned Service Award for contributing to equal opportunity and civil rights.

His 2006 autobiography, [*From the Hood to the Hill: A Story of Overcoming*](#) (Thomas Nelson) chronicles his inspirational journey. It is the first of seven books he would like to write, says Black, when he spoke with *Bible Study Magazine* about a variety of topics.

The Bible Challenges Street Gangs and Siren Calls

Chaplain Black grew up in a bleak Baltimore public housing project called Cherry Hill. He rarely saw his father, but his mother, the daughter of sharecroppers, was a profound force in his life right from the start. She was pregnant with Chaplain Black at the time she was baptized and always felt he was “set apart by God.” He would later agree with her.

In a neighborhood filled with the “siren call” of street gangs, Chaplain Black’s mother battled against tough circumstances with daily Bible study. “My mother had morning and evening worship and she gave my siblings and me an allowance based on scriptural memorization. She had a flat rate—we got 5 cents a verse. It motivated me to memorize Scripture. She knew if she could get God’s Word in us, the Word would do the rest, and she was right.”

As a teenager, he did not suffer a true crisis of [faith](#), but he says he did briefly flirt with the dark side. “At around fourteen or fifteen, I started hanging out with some of the gangs and getting involved in activities that I shouldn’t. I think it was a matter of trying to test the validity of faith and experiment with the other side. So I think it was more curiosity than a real break with faith. I always knew I was going to come back, so I thought ‘let me get a quick education in evil.’ ”

It did not take Chaplain Black long to come “running back” and embrace his faith whole-heartedly. He completed his education and received a BA of Theology at Oakwood College in Alabama (1970) and a Masters of Divinity at Andrews Theological Seminary in Michigan (1973). He began pastoral duties in North and South Carolina. It was during his tenure in the Raleigh-Durham area that he noticed certain sailors making a five-hour one-way commute to worship. “I knew that I was not that good of a preacher so I said, ‘Why do you guys make this drive?’ They said

they had never seen an African-American Navy Chaplain. So that triggered my interest in the military and the Navy as a career option.”

In the Navy, “Power-Hour” Bible Study Works

He became a Navy Chaplain in 1976, serving as a pastor for military personal and their families. Whether on ship or at shore he would organize a daily lunchtime Bible study dubbed the “Power Hour” so sailors and marines “could be invigorated by the inspiration of Scripture.” In the evenings he would conduct another Bible study often associated with a religious movie. “I did that because usually in the evenings sailors and marines would be looking at movies. I wanted a spiritual spin on what they would be doing anyway, so the announcement would go over the public address system about my Bible study. And then we would see different movies and seminars and discuss them.”

Because of his childhood memorization of Scripture and extensive theological education, Chaplain Black says he can “pretty much put together a Bible study series without opening the Bible.” In the Navy, he would plan out special series to meet specific needs he knew about from his pastoral interactions. “If someone had a problem with their superiors, I would do a Bible study series on successful interpersonal relationships.”

“If deployed sailors and marines were dealing with loneliness, I might think of David, who was a fugitive for 20 years because he had to run from Saul. He often described his loneliness and depression.” To put together a Bible series on loneliness, he would begin with a list of questions: Why are we sometimes lonely? What decisions should we *not* make while lonely? What should we do when God seems far away even though we are crying out to Him? He would then add the appropriate Scripture verse as a response to each. “I would read the question and one of the sailors or marines would read the verse. I used a blend of induction and deduction, but I wanted to draw them out to talk about it (and think about it) before I made my comments.”

As to his success in helping sailors and marines in his care, he is proud that 90% of those who regularly attended his Bible studies were eventually baptized. “These are pretty young folks away from home for the first time and haven’t made a former commitment to Jesus. In fact many joined the military as a way of running away from accountability or the strictures of religion. So they discover what sin offers is at best seasonal, and instead become interested in faith.”

Impossible Goals Accomplished with a Barely Legible Bible

When asked about his personal daily Bible study habits, Chaplain Black says he takes advantage of his commute by car to Capitol Hill. He has just finished listening to the entire Bible on CD. “This gives me an airplane view of Scripture.” To this overview, he then combines personal Bible study with personal [prayer](#). “I pray the Scriptures. I will read through the Bible in a different translation each year. I read until something stops me, which doesn’t take very long, and then I will talk to God about it. I am using Bible study as a time of communion, reflection and interaction with God. I call that ‘Giving Him the courtesy of starting the conversation’—and it basically reenergizes my prayer life. I don’t have to go with my little list of things. I open the Bible and wait in His presence. And it doesn’t take long before He speaks; and then we talk about it. I move on and He speaks again. It is a wonderful way to get through Scripture.”

Chaplain Black laughs when asked if he scribbles notes in the margins of his Bible, admitting that his bibles are “barely legible.” He says he also keeps a master list of goals tucked in the back of his Bible. A steadfast believer in [James 4:2](#) “you do not have because you do not ask” (NKJV)—he regularly asks God to help him achieve his goals, many of which have already been met. “One goal was to be an Admiral in the Navy Chaplain Core. The primary motivation was to help very junior enlisted people because there was so much bureaucratic red tape. I wanted to get to the most powerful man in the military unannounced, and I knew I had to be chief of chaplains to do that.”

Another goal was to provide pastoral support to the Senate, which was reached in 2003 with his election as its Chaplain. “The focus in my selecting goals was that they were objectives I knew I could not accomplish without supernatural help. There is no way you can control whether you will be an Admiral in the Navy, and there had not been an African-American Chief of Navy Chaplains in over 220 years. You need supernatural help to make that

happen. The same is true with Chaplain of the Senate. There are some things you will never receive from God without making the request. I asked for things I thought were impossible and it's been amazing how He has honored His promise."

Today, Chaplain Black opens the Senate each day in prayer, officiates at weddings, memorial services, state funerals (he offered the invocations for former presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford), and has an inroad to movers and shakers whose decisions affect our lives. "Anyone can pick up a history book but to be there and, under the radar, influence the making of history and the decisions in the chamber is an amazing privilege." By providing counseling and spiritual care for over 7,000 people on the Hill, Chaplain Black says he has a "front row seat to human history," and there is no closer inroad to history than the Oval Office. He considers President Obama a personal friend who he got to know quite well when the President was a Senator, and with whom he has enjoyed a number of theological discussions.

However, great privilege has its challenges, admits Chaplain Black, who feels the biggest one is to be certain he is ethically congruent. "I have to make sure my actions match my rhetoric. I call it 'passing the private eye test' and 'being who you say you are.' Capitol Hill is a very seductive environment with money, power and beautiful people. There are those that want to get to you because they feel you can help them get to others, so being the 'real deal' is critical."

Bible Study on the Hill about WMDS

Chaplain Black offers that instead of the 'Babylon' many envision, Capitol Hill has a sound spiritual base. "I have the opportunity to minister to people who are very spiritually fit, routinely read through the Bible every year, and are very knowledgeable in Scripture." He has adapted his Naval Bible study series to this constituency. Studying the lessons of David, Joseph and other great heroes and heroines of the Bible, for example, can easily be applied to life on the Hill today.

Still he has to be prepared for the really tough questions. "I once had a Senator ask me, 'Do you think God would permit human beings to destroy the planet?'" That sparked a whole Bible study series on Daniel and his interpretation, in [Daniel 2:1-49](#) of a dream Nebuchadnezzar had. Chaplain Black followed Daniel's dream interpretation in six Bible study sessions tracing world history through Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and its fragmentation into Europe, as well as the current effort to reunite Europe. He ended with [Daniel 2:44](#) "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed." In response to the original question, he was able to say, "Before God will permit that to happen, Senator, he will put up the sign 'Closing Time.' He is the one who will create the new heaven and the new earth. It will not be weapons of mass destruction eviscerating the planet. God is in charge of human history."

Bible Study: The One-a-Day Vitamin

To help new Christians and those who are not familiar with the Bible learn to read and study the Word, he advises they visit the Bible section in a bookstore and browse the many different translations. "Pick up different bibles and find a passage you might know like the [23rd Psalm](#) Read it in the different translations until you reach one that really sings for you. That translation should probably become your devotional Bible. Then start with a book like Mark, which is only 16 chapters, but captures the life of Christ. Also, read the letters of Paul."

"As a basic minimum, read a chapter from Proverbs each day. I am convinced that Proverbs is the greatest success manual ever written and it has conveniently thirty-one chapters. Zero in on one a day. Eventually two or three verses will grab you and you can reflect on them throughout the day. Proverbs can be used for inspiration or reflection. Example, [Proverbs 14:23](#) 'In all labor there is profit.' It is an awesome verse. If I want to profit all I have to do is throw some work at it. Or there is [Proverbs 22:29](#) 'Show me a man diligent in his business and he will stand before kings and not ordinary people.' You have these wonderful Proverbs and it's like a one-a-day vitamin—a daily dose of faith. If you have Proverbs and the Gospels, you'll be getting to know Jesus. If you get the Epistles of Paul, you will get practical advice on how to live your life. Then I would recommend starting to pray the Scriptures, beginning with the Psalms. I think that will energize your prayer life."

Bible Study Helps Us Weather Storms in Life

Near the end of *Bible Study Magazine*'s time with Chaplain Black, he was asked how dedicated Bible study can help people weather the tough storms in life. He offers this, "I think the Bible is God's chosen vehicle for enabling us to deal with the pilgrimage called life. [Second Timothy 3:16-17](#) says that it 'is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that we may be complete and equipped for good works.' So the completeness that the Scriptures are designed to help us reach is a spiritual maturity that enables you to weather the storms of life with equanimity."

Chaplain Black concluded with the story of Elisha and a young prophet ([2 Kgs 6:8-23](#)). "Elisha's house is surrounded by soldiers who have come to get him. And the young man sees it and cries out 'Alas my master what should we do?' and Elisha prays 'LORD open the young man's eyes.' And when his eyes are open, he sees that the mountains are filled with an angelic army greater than the number come against them. That's what the Bible does. It takes us away from the things that are seen, or temporary, in order that we can see the unseen, which is permanent. It enables us with equanimity and calm to go through the worst that life can give because as [Romans 8:28](#) says 'In everything God is working for the good of those who love him, according to his purposes.' "

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