



Reading the Bible—For a Change

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The Bible is the most influential book in world history. The five books of Moses became the standard of life and faith for the Jewish people from the very first day they were written. The Gospels formed the world's opinions of the events and meaning of Jesus' ministry since they were penned, and continue to do so. The letters of Paul, Peter, and John were copied and shared widely among the churches of the first century, mainly because they believed those letters were important and needed to be preserved. Fourteen-hundred years later Gutenberg's printing press made it easier to copy entire books, and the first book to ink its template was the Bible. It is, without a doubt, the most influential book that's ever been written. There's even a copy of the Bible on the moon. It's everywhere, on every device. It's available (in almost every case, for free) on our phones, on our computers, on our digital e-readers, on our "verse-a-day" calendars, in every major language, in an ever-growing variety of translations.

And yet, the Bible may be the least-read best-seller ever printed. Every year scores and scores of Bibles are printed

and sold. But every year the biblical literacy of the church seems to get worse and worse. Perhaps it's because we don't know how to study the Bible. In some faith traditions the Bible is viewed as a mystical book that can't be understood without a "spiritual" mind. (Since most people, by their fallen nature, don't feel spiritual, they don't feel qualified or competent to understand the Bible.) Perhaps we've been taught that the Bible can't be understood without professional help. Some Christian traditions subtly convince their people that the Bible can't be truly understood unless you have a degree in theology and biblical interpretation. Whatever the reason, the Bible still continues to be printed, purchased, and then shoved on the shelf.

The Bible—for all of its interpretive demands, translation complexities, and spiritual power—was written in the common language, for everyday people. It's not a complicated book. Sure, it is handed down to us in foreign languages (primarily Greek and Hebrew), but we have smart, competent, well-trained translators who sincerely desire to help us understand, in plain English, what the original authors of Scripture were trying to say. They understand that the Bible wasn't written to be purchased, or even translated. It was written to be read, and lived.

In the previous chapter, Jim Chesser gave us a bird's-eye view of how to think about the Bible. If this book really is the Word of God to humanity, then we must read it, understand it, and live out its principles. Now it's time for us to help you do just that, through some common and basic strategies. But first, a bit about how we tend to read things is in order.

GOD'S CAPACITY TO FILL US

We are hungry for input. We fill our minds every day with information from our computers, television, conversations, reading, and relationships. But be careful what you see, what you hear, what you touch, and what you read. Our culture is obsessed with all things technological, electronic, and socially-driven. It may appear that we know it all and that we have it all. But do we really? All this fast-paced

living tends to shift our focus from what really matters in life to what is self-gratifying, efficient, trendy, and shallow. God is nowhere to be seen, heard, or touched. We fill our lives with people and things other than God. If we replace God with people and things, and focus only on what we consume by sight, by hearing, or by touch, ultimately we will be left empty and broken. What we fail to grasp along the way is that God alone has the enormous capacity to fill us. Psalm 145:16 declares, "You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing." Psalm 81:10 reminds us, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it."

We have this huge need to be satisfied. And no matter how much we expect other people or things to satisfy us, whether it is our friends or family or life's conveniences, no one and nothing can truly provide that ultimate satisfaction except God. This is the source of our discontent: that we put all our bets on everyone and everything else, and they will surely fail us. But God can fill us. Only He can bring contentment to our discontent.

But you have to know in your heart, mind, and entire being that He is the only one who can satisfy you. Not your parents. Not your boyfriend or girlfriend. Not your best friends. Not your stuff. Only God. Then you have to go to Him and ask Him to satisfy you. Ask and you will receive. Or do we not receive, because we do not ask? First John 5:14-15 reminds us that "this is the confidence we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." God will give. But will you take from Him? Will you gladly receive His goodness?

The Bible not only points us to God but also draws us near to Him so that we may be satisfied. Psalm 73:28 affirms that, "the nearness of God is my good" (NASB). God's word details to us in stories, in songs and poetry, in letters, in history how God is able to give—His love, His mercy, His provision, His wisdom, His goodness, His compassion, His assurance, His favor, and His forgiveness.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

We are hungry for input, and we long to be filled. In order to maximize the input that we receive from reading the Bible, and in order to create within our hearts a ready vessel for the Lord to fill, start with these very basic, fundamental steps.

1. *Clear your schedule.* There is much that is ready to distract us: work, school, the internet, Facebook, Twitter, our phones, television, movies, video games, and friends. The old saying is true, “Nature abhors a vacuum.” And if we aren’t intentional about setting aside time to read the Bible, then other things will rush in and fill that space. So create a space on your schedule (a regular, optimal time during the day) when your distractions will be minimal. Devote that time to the Lord, sit down, open up the Bible, and start reading.
2. *Pick a clear and consistent translation.* One of the most common questions we are asked is, “Which translation of the Bible should I read?” When the King James Version was the only translation available, it was an easy question to answer. But with so many translations available to us today, we have at our fingertips a multitude of translations. Some are more concerned with what the words say (e.g., KJV, NASB, ESV), others with what the words mean (NLT, *The Message*, TEV), and some with a healthy blend of both extremes (NIV). There is a plethora of translations out there available to you. To note the differences among them and recommend one would take an entire chapter. And then there is the question of whether to read a paper Bible or a digital version. To all of these questions, we say it doesn’t much matter. For now, just pick one that you like and stick with it.
3. *Focus.* Make a concerted effort to get your mind off of everything else during this time and give God your full attention. By nature of our technology, ours is a multi-tasking world. But in this area, less is more. Remove all

distractions and focus on God, His Word, and nothing else. If that means leaving your phone in the other room, make it so. If that means reading the Bible underneath a tree where people in your apartment won't bother you, then make it so. Do whatever it takes to remove the distractions and focus.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF READING

Once you've cleared a space on your schedule, sat down with a clear translation, and are ready to focus on the Word, what should you do? How do you read this book? We noted above that, because we are hungry for input, we tend to read differently. Living in the Information Age certainly has its advantages. But one of the downsides to all this input is that we tend to read for information, not for transformation. Robert Mulholland says that "informational" reading tries to cover as much ground as possible, as quickly as possible, and fosters within us a desire to master or control the text—through analysis, criticism, and problem solving—rather than to be controlled by the Spirit through the text.¹ Eugene Peterson takes it a step further when he says that we read the Bible to satisfy the Unholy Trinity: my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.² We tend to read the Bible to "get something out of it," and we often try to control it toward that end.

What we need is a way of reading the Bible that blends information with transformation.³ We need to read the Bible in a way that lets it change us—to understand what it says, to take that to heart, and to allow the Spirit of God to work through us so that we obey its teachings. Below we have proposed a simple guide for reading the Bible. Once you've

¹ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1985), 49-50.

² Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 31.

³ For a fuller discussion of this kind of transformative way of reading the Bible, see Leslie T. Hardin, "Searching for a Transformative Hermeneutic," in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 5, no. 1 (2012): 144-157.

sat down with your translation of choice, pick one passage of Scripture (we'll suggest a starting place later, if you need one) and focus on it, following these four simple steps.

1. *Pray.* Start your Bible reading time with prayer. Pray that God will “open the eyes of your heart,” so that as you read you may know the greatness and goodness that we have in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:18-19). Ask God to help you understand what you read, and to help your mind make connections between the Bible’s world, your world, and your life.
2. *Study.* As you read, don’t be afraid to ask questions about the passage you’re reading. Don’t just read it; study it. Who is writing this passage? Why is he writing it? When did he write it? What is the author trying to communicate to me? Be curious about the Bible. Ask it questions. Write your questions down in a journal, and then (after your study and prayer time) go find out the answers. While there is a difference between academic study of the Bible and devotional reading, it’s not as much as you might think. So read and study. After all, you can’t put into practice what you don’t know or understand.
3. *Listen.* The Holy Spirit works in the mind and heart of all believers to help them understand the Scriptures. Greg Hartley helped us in Chapter Three to understand some of the roles that the Spirit plays for us. But one of His greatest roles is helping us to understand the truth. Jesus called him the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17, 15:26) and said that He would guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Paul said that the Spirit reveals wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6-10) and helps us to understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:12). Isaiah described Him as the “Spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge” (Isaiah 11:2-5). So as you read, ask the Spirit to help you understand what you are reading. He won’t mind. It’s what He does best.

4. *Obey.* The last step is very simple. Once you've read the text, asked questions of it, and understood what God is saying to you through it, all that's left is to do what it says. If you hear Moses tell you, "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15), then you must obey. If Jesus says, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39), then you must obey. If you hear Paul whisper, "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor," (Eph. 4:25), then you must obey. There is no pleasing God without doing what the Scriptures say. Reading that leads to spiritual transformation will always end with obedience to what Scripture says—no matter what that obedience costs.

BIBLE READING PLAN

Some of you will know where to start with your Bible reading. To you, we say, "Read, and read well." Some of you, though, don't know where to turn. Should you start at the beginning and work your way through the entire Bible? Should you try to read the Bible in a year's time? There are many plans that can help you do that, if you want.

Start with a short-term plan to begin this journey of reading the Bible and taking in His wonderful "words of life." The goal is to successfully follow a simple schedule instead of aiming to read the Bible in its entirety in one year. (We've tried these plans, but end up failing because of time constraints, the daunting chapters of Leviticus, Numbers, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, the stress of completing the reading of the Bible in one year, sheer laziness, or a disobedient heart.) I heard a wise preacher challenge the congregation to commit to reading one chapter each day. After reading one chapter, look for something new that you glean from reading the passage that day. It could be a verse or two. Meditate on those words. Underline or highlight that verse, write down your thoughts, and write down the date when you read that passage. Sometime in the future, when you re-read that same chapter, you may be able to recall the thoughts, feelings, and

circumstances surrounding that first reading. You may then recognize how God has been at work in your life.

This kind of reading works best when done outside of (but in conjunction with) church, Sunday School, small group study, or Bible classes. If you read a chapter a day, this reading plan will take you about 274 days or nine months to complete. If you are a student, you can begin when school convenes, then finish right about the time the academic year ends before summer. But you can begin this plan at any time of the year. It is a good way to jumpstart reading the Bible.

Start with the book of Psalms. The Psalms are a collection of Hebrew poetry, many written by King David, some by the master musicians in the Temple, by Moses, and by King Solomon. The Psalms teach us how to worship, how to delight in God's Word, how to live our lives, how to view God, how to pray, how to cry to God in times of failure or distress, how to be still, and how to rejoice in His presence. The Book of Psalms will take you through at least 150 days. Don't be intimidated by the one long chapter: chapter 119. It is a beautiful devotional on the Word of God. Breaking the chapter down into twenty-two sections or stanzas, each stanza representing a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, will allow you to meditate more deeply on God's ways and commandments. It is like getting a bigger dosage of all the promises of God and benefits from feeding on His Word. Immerse yourself in the Psalms.

Next, read the Book of Proverbs. This book provides guidelines for godly living: what to stay away from, what to avoid, what to strive for, what is common sense living. You will find good advice for handling your tongue, your hands, your feet, your ears, and your money. These wise words from King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived on earth, contain the wisdom of God. Reading this book will take you to the 203rd day of straight Bible intake.

After Proverbs, go to the Gospel of John. The book affirms the deity of Jesus Christ and also chronicles His life, ministry, death, and resurrection. The main purpose of this book is that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son

of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Get to know Jesus, the Son of God, by reading the twenty-one chapters of this book.

Then go back to Genesis. Go all the way back to the beginning, and see how our relationship with God began. Be encouraged that God had you in mind from the very beginning of time. Learn stories of faith from Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Learn about relationships (both good and bad) between God and His creation, between God and man, and between one man and another. Grab hold of God’s sovereignty, love, providence, and faithfulness. Discover God’s heart, one that loves and gives, and one that ultimately sent an Only Son to rescue all of mankind from the sin that so quickly entered into Paradise.

LET’S GET STARTED

There’s no reason you can’t begin this kind of spiritual reading right now. Carve out the time and space you need to spend with God. Make a decision to do this tangible thing. Plan when and where you will meet Him. Make that decision to invest in your relationship with Him. It cannot be just whenever or wherever; it will not happen. Make it a priority, for there will be activities and priorities that will worm their way into your life for your attention. By reading a chapter a day, you will have learned a bit more about God on a deeper level.

I (Ruth) have been intrigued by the saguaro cactus ever since my family visited Arizona. This beautiful plant magnificently graces the Southern Arizona landscape in the thousands. The saguaro has become the symbol of the Sonoran desert. The saguaro usually has four to five arms and grows up to fifty feet tall. Their arms appear to lift towards the sky in praise of the Sovereign Creator. The saguaro can stand up against the strong winds and the heavy rains that pass through the mountains during the hot summer months because their roots run all around the plant to a distance equal to its height. The roots wrap around its entire area and hold

on to rocks for survival and for nourishment in this sun-scorched environment.

The saguaro teaches us that only God's deep well of sustaining living water can hydrate us towards a godly life. His abundance, His reserve, and His Spirit can provide us with the power to face the headaches, the pain, the suffering and the consequences of our sins. We go through life unaware that our sins bind and choke us, and worse, deplete us of spiritual nutrients needed to carry us through this sun-scorched journey of life. God's refreshing living water is always a welcome relief. And we need to take that daily relief from God.

Take from God. Receive His Word and meditate on it. Take also His sustenance through prayer and fasting. Hang out with God. Take from Him. If you open wide your mouth, your heart, your entire being, God will fill it to a capacity level beyond what you can imagine. Your hunger and thirst for input will be deeply satisfied.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. What kind of input do you seek? How often do you seek it?
2. How much time do you spend reading the Bible during the day? During an average week?
3. Why do you think it is so difficult to systematically read the Bible and meditate on it?
4. What are your favorite passages of the Bible? Why are they so meaningful to you?
5. Were you taught to read the Bible informationally or transformationally? Do you tend to read one verse at a time, or one chapter at a time? What are the advantages and disadvantages to each approach?
6. The authors lay out a four-step approach to reading the Bible (pray, listen, read, obey). What do you think

about this approach? Is there anything that you feel should be added, or removed? What? And why?

7. What are the things that distract you most from reading and studying the Bible? What do you think you need to do in order to remove those distractions? Tell of one step you plan to take today to deal with that distraction.
8. Tell (or write down) what time of day is best for you to study the Bible.
9. What do you think the authors (quoting Eugene Peterson) mean by reading the Bible just to attend to “my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings”? What do you think those mean? And what kind of Bible reading focuses on them?
10. How can we begin to move away from an informational kind of reading to a more transformative kind of devotion? What will it require? What obstacles stand in our way?

