

How to Read The Bible For Transformation

Many people find the Bible stifling and boring. This happens because they read an occasional fragment for tradition's sake, though they prefer novels, newspapers, magazines, or television. At the other end of the spectrum, some insist they must have frequent contact with the Bible because for them, it is a fascinatingly helpful book that speaks to their emotional, intellectual, and spiritual concerns. Obedient yieldedness makes the difference even if the Bible's truth is uncomfortable.

Though other books can be read at whatever level of intensity the reader chooses for instruction, information, or pleasure, this Book pressures individuals to master its message. Precisely at this point, the Bible is significantly different from all other books because it renews and enriches only those who read with a yielded *yes*. Nothing is more vital to the ability to understand the Scripture than wholehearted devotion to Christ. When out of tune with God, the inner world is cluttered with self-centered sin, harbored resentments, and neglected spiritual opportunities. In contrast, a clean inner life sharpens one's ability to hear the message of Scripture so that one can escape the enslavement of "what is" to move on to the point of "what can be." Useful techniques allow the Bible to nourish the inner world.

Start simply. Beginners should think of the Bible as a library of books, so a reader need not commence at Genesis and read through to Revelation. At the outset of a spiritual quest, it is useful to browse through this sixty-six-book library until a section captures one's interest and speaks to one's need. A plan for those who are new to Scripture might be to begin with Matthew 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount); Psalms 23, 24, 100, 122, 139; Isaiah 35, 55; the Gospels of Mark and Luke; or Paul's letter to the Philippians. Next, begin cultivating a friendship with Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, or Micah. Then turn to the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament for exciting accounts of the early church. After completing these sections, the reader will be ready for almost any passage.

Take time. History records stalwart saints who arose as early as four o'clock in the morning to read Scripture. Others read all night. Though their examples do not offer precise patterns for today, they do demonstrate that spiritual development requires us to take quality time for Bible reading. It is time well spent because every relationship and responsibility goes better after we have saturated our minds and souls with God's point of view and expectations.

Read with anticipation. To counteract boredom, count on receiving a fresh word from God each time you read. Anticipation nourishes readiness to listen and learn. Persons who look for a fresh word from Scripture are seldom disappointed. Receptivity always expands as new truth is allowed into the shady nooks and obscure corners of life. Those who expect the Bible to speak to their situation usually discover a gold mine of resources.

Read in spite of feelings. Everyone has mood swings that fluctuate for no apparent reason. To keep from being victimized by moods, individuals should read the Bible when they feel like it, read when they don't feel like it, and read when they have no feelings at all. How encouraging during "down moods" to read the Psalm, "My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word" (119:28).

Read for meanings. The Bible is a letter from the Enlightener who knows everything. Thus, the God-seeker should read the Bible until it says something significant to him. While it may seem desirable to read ten verses, two chapters, or a whole book at one sitting, it is generally more rewarding to read until the Bible speaks to your current situation. Stop and listen to key words, phrases, verses, or paragraphs; a meeting of meanings is more important than any prescribed procedure or set strategy.

Keep reading in spite of difficult passages. Follow Spurgeon's advice when you come to a puzzling passage: "When I am eating fish and come upon a bone, I don't fling the whole fish away. I put the bone on the side of the plate so that I can go on enjoying the fish." Take time to seek clarification from commentaries, atlases, dictionaries, and other study aids. But keep reading. Think of Scripture as God's personal word to you for each new day.

Share it. One gifted Bible teacher said, "It was by teaching that I learned what I know about the Bible." Home Bible studies, family devotions, Bible classes, and even casual conversations offer opportunities to encourage others with Scripture. A shared word from the Bible frequently relieves personal perplexity. To offer a promise from Scripture provides a lift for the giver and keeps the receiver thinking about the passage for a long time, so both are energized by its message.

To encourage lifelong growth, remember two characteristics of Scripture that stand forever: the Bible is simple enough that anyone can find the way to God and challenging enough to stimulate the most brilliant mind.