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## Reading God's Word



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# Reading God's Word

Every endeavor has basic skills that support the success of the effort. For example, tying rope-climbing knots is a basic skill for rock climbing. Study skills are rudimentary for a student. These basic skills are sometimes called disciplines. They are practices from which success springs. The Christian life has disciplines which must be learned. The more we practice these disciplines, the more we grow and mature in them.

As followers of Jesus, we are to become more like Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are meant to help us grow in this godliness. We know this, yet often struggle to engage disciplines that position us to grow in godliness. Even when we engage these disciplines, we often feel frustrated with how difficult they are and how little they seem to change us. Take heart, if this is where you are. The fact you desire for greater fruit in your life is evidence of the Holy Spirit working in you. Sanctification is both a wonderful and challenging journey. We will have seasons of great joy and triumph and seasons of great discouragement and struggle. It is our hope these lessons on Spiritual Disciplines give you greater understanding, hope and most of all, a more fervent pursuit of God. This document gives some brief thoughts on:

1. The Big Picture of the Bible
2. Why Read the Bible?
3. How to Read the Bible?

## THE BIG PICTURE OF THE BIBLE

Coming to the scriptures without background knowledge has some advantages because you might be better able to read the scriptures for what they say without preconceived ideas. However, without understanding the larger storyline of the passage/s you are reading, the Bible can quickly become confusing. In some ways it is like looking at one piece of a 1000-piece puzzle and trying to make specific claims about the puzzle from that one piece.

When it comes to better understanding the Bible, it is helpful to have a good understanding of *Genesis 1-3* as you read the rest of the Bible. Not so much the ins-and-outs of what was created or the timeline of these events, but rather seeing God as the Creator of a good world and mankind being created in His image. This is followed by the consequences of man rebelling against God's instruction. Man's rebellion leads to death, pain, and suffering. Keeping an eye on these overarching realities in *Genesis 1-3* can help us see God's desire for close relationship with man and man's desire to rule independent of God rather than live under God's authority.

The dynamic of God pursuing a rebellious people is present through the entire scriptures. The imagery and sacrificial system in the Old Testament points to man's need for cleansing from sin and needing rescued from evil. Both the evil within, "the flesh", and the evil from outside, "the tempter" and those under his reign. Amid this bleak picture, there is anticipation for a Rescuer who fulfills the promise first mentioned in *Genesis 3:15* and runs through the entire Bible. Then Jesus enters the scene in the New Testament as the promised Messiah. Jesus offers life and freedom through recognizing Him as the promised Messiah and following Him.

It is helpful to shift our view of the Bible as a collection of stories to one connected story starting in *Genesis* and running through *Revelations* all pointing to Jesus. Seeing the Bible as one continuous story leads to asking different questions as you read a passage. Questions shift from "how does this apply to me" or "what do I do with this" to first trying to understand the passage. Seeking to first understand the passage allows for considering how to live out its teachings. Trying to understand the passage shifts questions to "how does this fit into the storyline of the Bible" or "is the author drawing from other passages and if so why". For example, in *Matthew* we are told Jesus went into the desert to be tested for 40 days. This account has more

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layers to consider when thought of as more than an isolated event. When thought of as part of an ongoing story it echoes the Israelites wandering the desert for 40 years and how they walked through testing compared to how Jesus walks through His testing. This is just one example of how seeing the Bible as one continuous story brings the wonder and beauty of the scriptures to life. The Old Testament points to the promised Messiah and the New Testament demonstrates how Jesus was the promised Messiah and what it means to live as His disciple.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does thinking of the Bible as one connected story affect the way you approach the scriptures?
2. What are the benefits/dangers of trying to keep the overarching themes of scripture in mind as you read a specific passage of scripture?
3. What are major themes or ideas that run throughout the Bible?
4. What parts of the Bible or Bible storyline are difficult for you to understand?
5. What could you do to grow in your understanding of these items?
6. Scriptures to Consider: *Genesis 1:26-31, Genesis 3:6, Genesis 3:21, Luke 24:27, Isaiah 61:1-3 and Luke 4:16-21, Genesis 3:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-19, Romans 5:14-21*

## Further Resources

- *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* by: Vaughan Roberts
- *30 Days to Understanding the Bible* by: Max Anders
- *The Jesus Story Book Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* by: Sally Lloyd-Jones

## WHY INTERACT WITH THE BIBLE?

What we do is certainly important but why we do it is even more important. It can be helpful to step back and ask yourself, “why do I read the Bible?” Doing the right behavior is important but the “why” we engage specific actions is what gives sustaining life and energy to those behaviors. For example, the task of studying for your final exam takes on a new perspective when you focus on why you are studying. Motivation for studying might come from wanting to get a good grade, simply enjoying learning, not having to take the class again, or getting your degree for a future career. The “why” is likely what motivates the behavior of studying. When we lose focus on the purpose for our behavior, the behavior is likely to stop over time.

Time in the scriptures is much the same. It becomes dry, boring and confusing when it is merely a behavior to engage without any purpose or goal. For Bible reading to become purposeful, you will need to identify a “why” that brings life and purpose to your time in the scriptures. For example, one of the main purposes of spending time in the Bible is to better know the God of the Bible. Time in the scriptures is to change who we are as we encounter the reality of our Creator. This in turn changes our view of self, others, and the world around us, ultimately affecting how we live. The Word is to affect our hearts and minds, exposing our brokenness so we turn to Christ and follow Him. Ultimately, we are to pursue time in the Bible out of a desire to know God and be transformed into His likeness.

This transformation changes the way we live by following the scriptures practical instruction. We are given instruction on the things to do as well as things to abstain from. The converted heart must take these instructions seriously. Yet, the Bible is not primarily a book about how to live. Rather it is a book meant to point us to God rather than to offer specific “how-to’s” for daily life. The scriptures expose the desperate reality of the human heart and the wonder of a God who has created and relentlessly pursues His people. We, like the Galatians, can quickly lose sight of our hope being in Christ and be drawn back into the law. As we read the scriptures we are to consider how it should affect our lives and we should remember God’s promise (*Genesis 12*) came prior to the Law (*Exodus 20*). Thus, the promise is not annulled by the Law, but the Law is provided as a “*schoolmaster*” to bring us to the Promise (*Gal. 3:24*). Getting to know God through His Word will bring us to a place of fearing a holy God who at the same time is a compassionate friend. The scriptures offer an endless journey of knowing God more deeply who is both a consuming fire and a kind father. Knowing God then brings us to a place of offering our lives as a living sacrifice. (*Romans 12:1-2*)

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do you read the Bible?
2. What do you hope is accomplished through time spent in the Bible?
3. Do you believe your view of God, Man, Satan, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus will change as you read the Bible? Why or why not?

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4. What does it mean to read the Bible for the purpose of growing in godliness?
5. What are your thoughts about seeing the Bible as a book about God and getting to know God rather than a book of "how-to"?
6. How would you describe God to someone who asks, "What is God like?"
7. Describe how you can get to know God more deeply.
8. What will knowing God more intimately lead to for an individual?
9. List some ideas that could enhance your Bible reading?
10. Scripture to Consider: *Romans 12:1-2, Psalm 119:105, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 2 Timothy 3:16, Psalm 5:7, 1 John 5:1-4, Isaiah 43:5-15, Ecclesiastes 12:13, Deut 6:1-9; Josh 1:5-9; Psalm 12:6-8, 19:7-14; Psalm 119; 2 Tim 3:10-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21*

## Further Resources

- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney
- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life: Workbook* by Donald Whitney

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## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

There are many “how-to’s” when it comes to reading the Bible including things like: word studies, memorization, reading large chunks of scripture to get the overarching flow of a passage, diving deep into specific verses, structured Bible studies and so on. No matter which specific “how-to” you engage, there are two things that will need to be the foundational in your Bible reading. First, the Holy Spirit illuminating your heart and mind to the scriptures. Second, you will need to grow as an active rather than merely a passive reader of scripture.

Necessity of the Holy Spirit: As believers, we can be assured the Holy Spirit is at work within us. This should give us great confidence as we approach the Holy Scriptures. Not that the Spirit will show us all things or make all things clear. 1 *Corinthians 13:12* tells us “*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*” The Spirit does not give full insight into all things, but He does illuminate truth to God’s children. The Spirit is faithful to work with us in our current state as we pursue growth. In part, this means the Spirit will be revealing different truths at differing levels at different times as we mature in Christ. Just as a math teacher does not start by teaching calculus but builds upon fundamental concept, the Spirit reveals truth, and, as we mature, deeper layers of this truth or nuances we had not yet seen become apparent. The “*thoughts and intents of the heart*” are revealed by the Spirit as we approach the Word with a humble, teachable heart and mind. (*Hebrews 4:12*) We are to be sensitive to what the Spirit is revealing to us as we read the Word, both trusting He is shaping us and striving for continual growth. (*Philippians 2:12-13*) As we spend time in The Word we desire the Holy Spirit to shape our view of life and how we interact with others to be more consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures.

### Discussion Questions

1. What does being dependent on the Holy Spirit provoke in you?
2. The Holy Spirit desires to lead and instruct us in truth. How might we stifle the Spirit as we read the Word?
3. Describe the balance of being dependent on the Holy Spirit yet working hard to pursue growth.
4. How might you distinguish between being led by the Spirit vs. led by your own pre-conceived ideas as you read the Word?
5. List practical ways you can seek to be led by the Spirit throughout your day.
6. Scriptures to Consider: *Colossians 1:29, 1 Corinthians 2:9-14, John 16:13-14*

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Becoming an Active Reader: One of the biggest hindrances to Bible reading for many of us today is being passive rather than active readers. Becoming an active reader of the Bible requires us to stay focused on our reason for reading. If our “why” for reading is to check off the box of having read the Bible that day, it will have little effect on our hearts or lives. We can be thankful we serve a merciful God who pursues us and is faithful to finish the work He has begun in us. Yet, when we continually see Bible reading as a task to complete rather than an opportunity to interact with the God of the universe, listen to His Words and be changed by them, we become passive readers. In contrast, the active reader engages the scripture with expectation, hope and wonder. Practically this means things like: paying attention to the literary style of the passage and how this impacts how we read it, stopping and looking up words we don't understand, looking up connected passages, listening to and seeking to pursue answers to the questions that bubble up as we read, and slowing down to ponder what we are reading. To read without meditating on the Word will lead to completing the task but not being affected by it.

## Discussion Questions

1. Share methods you have found to be helpful as you strive to keep your mind actively engaged while interacting with the scriptures.
2. The Bible has different literary styles such as poetry, narrative, law, prophecy, and epistles. What expectations would be similar/different when reading poetry compared to reading an epistle?
3. Curiosity is defined as a strong desire to know or learn something. Curiosity is often driven by an interest or questions to explore. What questions might be helpful to keep in mind as you read the Scriptures?
4. What do you think is a healthy balance between reading and thinking as you spend time in the Bible? (Examples: 90% reading, 10% thinking, 50% reading and thinking, 25% reading 75% thinking)
5. Scripture to Consider: *2 Corinthians 3:18, Mark 4:1-20, Psalm 1*

## Further Resources:

- Spiritual Disciplines: Study <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Lt-PYo7ldM>
- How to Study the Bible <https://www.accounseling.org/how-to-study-the-bible/>
- Literary Styles in the Bible: <https://thebibleproject.com/videos/literary-styles-bible/>

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