

Bible Reading
A Note from Pastor Spencer
December 2022

At the start of the New Year, many Christians will make resolutions to read the whole Bible in one year. As Christians, we know that we should read the Bible. And with the coming of the New Year, now is a great time to start reading the Bible, maybe for the first time. But why should we read the Bible? And how do we do it?

Why should we read the Bible?

Well, the Bible is God's revelation of Himself to humanity. It not only reveals who God is and what he requires of us, but it also shows us his plan to redeem a people for himself through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. What is more, the word of God, along with the sacraments and prayer, is an ordinary means of grace. One of the ways that God communicates his grace to his children is through his word, the Bible (WSC Q. 88). In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed for his disciples: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). One of the means, then, by which we grow in grace is by reading God's word. A wonderful chapter to discover the importance of the Bible is Psalm 119. The entire Psalm is a celebration of the Psalmist's love for and obedience to the law of God. The law of God – which is simply another name for the Bible – is said to be better than gold and silver (119:72), a lamp to the feet (119:105), the longing of the heart (119:174), comfort in affliction (119:50), the love of life (119:97), and sweeter than honey (119:103). In fact, the Psalmist's entire day is organized around praise and worship according to Scripture.

"At midnight, I raise to praise you, because of your righteous rules" (119:62).

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (119: 97).

"I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words" (119:147).

"Seven times a day I praise for your righteous rules" (119:164).

"My eyes awake before the watches of the night that I may meditate on your promise" (119:148).

What a beautiful reminder that we should develop regular habits of reading Scripture and that our lives should be structured around praise and worship according to the Word!

How to read the Bible?

1. **Pray.** Begin by asking the Holy Spirit for guidance. Without the help of God's Spirit, our reading of Scripture will be merely academic. One Puritan writer, Edmund Calamy wrote, "I would have you pray unto God to enlighten your understanding, to quicken your devotion, to warm your affections, and so to bless that hour unto you."

2. **Read the text.** Whether you are reading one chapter for ten minutes or four chapters for thirty minutes, you must read the text. If your mind wanders, I have found it helpful to read out loud. This forces you to slow down and pronounce every word, which reinforces learning because you both see and hear the text. As you read the passage, I recommend asking yourself: What does this passage teach about God, Christ, salvation, sin, humanity, and sanctification? Not every chapter will cover every theme, but these are some basic ones that are helpful to consider.

3. **Meditate.** After reading, go back and reflect on what you have read. In other words, you want to avoid quickly reading a chapter, and then moving on to the next one. Instead, pause for a few minutes, review the text, identify key words, doctrines, characters, events, and themes. The idea is to meditate on the text, consider it carefully, reflect on what it teaches, and how it applies to your life.

4. **Pray.** It is very important to end your time in God's word with prayer. Thomas Watson said, "Pray over your meditations. Prayer sanctifies everything; without prayer they are but unhallowed meditations; prayer fastens meditation upon the soul; prayer is a tying a knot at the end of the mediation that it does not slip; pray that God will keep those holy meditations in your mind forever, that the savor of them may abide upon your hearts."

5. **Bible Reading Plans.** One of my old coaches used to say, "It is not the quantity of practice that counts, but the quality of practice." In other words, it is not the number of hours that one practices that results in improvement, but the quality of those hours. You can spend hours flipping through the Bible, reading a little here, a little there, but never make significant progress in your understanding of Scripture. For that reason, I recommend using a Bible reading plan. A Bible reading plan functions like a personal trainer. While they don't yell at you to get off the couch, they do provide structure, a plan of action, short and long-term goals, and a realistic framework to work through the Bible in a systematic way. Reading plans also prompt us to read all of God's Word, "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), which keeps us from our inclination to only read the books and portions of Scripture that we may prefer or are more familiar with.

Practical Tips

1. Find the plan that works best for you.

As with any new routine, you will want to know your level of expertise, the amount of time you have per day, and your goals. Have you read through the Bible many times? Do you have a strong theological or biblical background? If so, then consider a more advanced Bible reading plan. Are you someone just starting out in the Christian life, with little exposure to the Bible? Do you only have a few extra minutes per day to read? If so, then a beginner's plan might be best. Maybe you are somewhere in the middle. If so, then you might consider an intermediate plan. The important point is not where you start or what Bible reading plan you use; the important point is that you are spending quality time in the Word of God each day, allowing your heart, soul, and mind to be shaped and informed by Scripture.

2. When you fall behind or get discouraged...

Please note that I did not say "if" but "when" you fall behind or get discouraged. Inevitably, we will all fall behind in our reading plan. Even if you have the greatest of intentions and rigorous self-discipline, sometimes life gets in the way. You can't help it. When this happens, don't be discouraged or give-up. Simply try to persevere through it. If you can catch up, great! If not, that is okay. Again, the important point is not that you never miss a day, but that you are reading God's word on a consistent basis. Furthermore, remember that the Devil and real spiritual forces of evil do not want you to be in God's Word. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12). Doing a Bible reading plan isn't just a battle with ourselves, there is a spiritual struggle that takes place when we seek to spend time in God's Word each day. When discouragement comes or motivation wanes, pray for the Lord to give you the grace and strength to persevere. Pray for Him to speak through His Word, and then pick up the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17) which is the offensive instrument He has given us to fight the good fight. (2 Tim. 4:7).

3. My Bible reading plan doesn't work for me.

Many Christians will start the new year with an abundance of excitement to start reading the Bible, and then they will discover that the reading plan they have selected does not work for them. To be completely honest, I have tried many reading plans over the course of my Christian life, and most of them have not worked for me. Many Christians love the M'Cheyne plan. I have tried it many times but have never completed it. Although I agree that it is a good plan, it simply doesn't work for me. My brain struggles to read and process four books at the same time. So, knowing how my brain works, I have had to develop a plan that works for me. You might have to do the same. If you do find yourself struggling with a reading plan, I recommend trying to persevere and work

through it. You might just be having a difficult week or two. But if you find that you are not making any progress, I recommend trying another plan, even if it is during the middle of the year. Once again, what matters is not that you complete a Bible reading plan from start to finish, but that you are getting a regular in-take of God's word. Finally, if you need help in selecting a plan that might work well for you, feel free to reach out to one of the Pastors. We'd be glad to talk with you about this.

4. Find a good time and place.

As human beings, we are creatures of habit. Even the most spontaneous among us thrive when we follow orderly routines and cycles. Reading the Bible is no different. It is important that we devote a particular time of the day to spend in God's word. Mornings are a good time (Psalm 119:147), but so are evenings (Gen. 24:63; Psalm 4:4). Many have also found it helpful to have a particular place where they read. This could be in an office, bedroom, or living room. When and where you read the Bible is something you will have to figure out for yourself. I do my best work early in the mornings in my home office while sitting on the floor (don't ask me why). If you don't know what works for you, try experimenting with different times and locations.

5. Parents with young children...

Children are a wonderful gift and blessing from the Lord (Psalm 128). But they can make devotions very difficult. If you are in this stage of life, then take comfort that the Lord knows and has compassion. He sees your sleepless nights and knows what you are going through. Rest assured that your acceptance with him is not based on your performance but on the finished work of Christ. Even if you struggle or fail, you are completely righteous before him because of the imputed righteousness of Christ! However, there are some things that you can do during these demanding years of caring for and raising children. First, consider alternating devotions with your spouse. One watches the kids, while the other spends time in Scripture and prayer. Second, consider doing your devotions together as husband and wife. This is a great way to encourage and strengthen each other in the Lord. Third, if your children are old enough (and they likely are!), then consider combining your devotions as part of family worship. (On family worship: it is never too early to start reading a children's Bible or a children's catechism, and it is almost certain that you will benefit from going through the story and these truths with your children as well.) Fourth, don't focus on quantity, but quality. One chapter per day is better than no chapter per day. And there is nothing wrong with listening to the Bible!

6. The danger of Bible reading plans...

There is a danger when it comes to Bible reading plans, namely, that we come to think that our acceptance before the Lord is based upon our reading performance. However, such thinking confuses justification and sanctification. In justification, God declares the sinner righteous based upon the imputed righteousness of Christ. Sanctification, on the

other hand, is a life-long process, whereby we die to sin and are conformed to the image of Christ. If we believe that our standing before God depends upon our level of performance, then we are confusing the two. Bible reading plans are a wonderful tool to help us grow in sanctification. But please don't view them as a path to earn God's favor. Christ has already done that for you!

- Pastor Spencer, December 2022