

MY PREFERRED WAY TO READ THE BIBLE

by Jim Eliff

It's presumptuous for a man to suggest that he knows the best method for *everyone* to read the Bible. But I'm going to tell you the way that *I* best read the Bible . . . and why it works so well for me.

I've been a Bible reader for many years and the plans I've followed are certainly varied. At times I've read the Bible through every seven weeks. I believe I even read it in a month a time or two. Such "marathon" plans are a little much for most people, but can be helpful in some special situations. I've read in various sections each day. I've read books at random, making sure all the books are eventually covered before my allotted time is finished. I've used plans that matched certain books together to give more of a chronological feel to the reading. Most of my believing life, I've tried to read the Bible once a year at least, with some portions read multiple times. Some years I failed to do anything very consistent, but usually only because I did not determine a plan of action beforehand.

No plan for Bible reading is a complete waste of time, obviously, but I've now come to believe there is a better way of thinking about Bible reading. I'm recommending immersion or saturation in one or two books of the Bible over several months as my preferred method. Frankly, I have never known Bible reading to be so transformative and interesting as with this method, both for me and for many friends who have tried it at my suggestion.

Three Tempting Replacements for Meaningful Bible Reading:

Devotionalism

Regardless of whether you prefer my new plan or not, I want you to consider three distractions always luring the serious Christian away from his Bible. The first is devotionalism. I mean by this the view that we read the Bible mainly in order to get a spiritual boost for the day. We *do* want to be devoted. I don't mean to disparage that aim. But devotionalism is a way of reading Scripture for a lift rather than for truth. It's reading the Bible as a self-help book designed to give you nuggets to get you through the day. Most of the believers I know have been devotionalists. I was for many years. You can often tell them by the fact that they can converse about almost nothing significant biblically, even after years of reading, except how good they feel when they have devotions.

I don't mean to say that a devotional reader never cares about truth at all, but that he will not make exceptional efforts to find it out. Not really. He would rather take whatever apparent meaning floats to the top or whatever someone has said that lingers in his mind to be the text's meaning than to do any work at understanding himself. He will skip over the difficult and seemingly unrelated sections lying between these potent verses he thinks

are most helpful to him. Sometimes the devotional reader is correct in his view of the text, but often he will be wrong, or biased in his understanding of the text. And, for all his reading over years, his understanding of Scripture never really changes that much.

Good Books

Good books are a second diversion from serious Bible reading. I've had a large library for many years, and have spent lots of my time reading books. I'm also an author of several books. But I can tell you without question that many people are not serious Bible readers *because* of the best of these books.

We should read some books, but very selectively. Recently, in another country, I stacked up a set of five large books next to the Bible. The men listening to me were receiving these books as part of a book reading seminar for the next year. The books were about five times higher than the Bible. It will take them just seven to eight pages of reading each day over the semesters to make it through those fine books. But I asked: "How many of you will read that much Bible every day?" They sighed, because they knew I was making my point. Who can spend serious time reading the Bible when there is so much else that is good to read staring at them? I said, "You can read at least three times through the Bible this year in the same amount of time it will take to read these books."

Many people buy books incessantly and build large libraries. When I see the rows and rows of books, I think, "Can they reject these noble authors staring down at them from these shelves?" Those books say, "Read me, read me," every time they walk through the room.

I have such a library. It's impressive. But some years ago something died in me concerning those books. The desire mechanism inside me wilted and gave in to something more appealing. I read some still, but I don't have the relish for those books I used to have. They seem so much less important now than the Bible that I can't bring myself to invest in them as I used to. I'm not trying to act pious about this. It's happened, and I can't seem to revive the old lust for them I used to have. As a result, I've divested myself of a couple thousand of them, and will do more of that when I have time. I believe the death to those books came from reading a set of 66 books I own that do much more for me. I must admit, I don't have even much relish to get people to read the books I've authored either, though I believe God has used them in the lives of many. It's strange, but true.

I've often encountered Bible students in seminaries and Bible schools who say, "I don't have time for the Bible in school since I've got so much reading to do." It's an interesting thing, isn't it, that some students read far less Bible in seminary than they did before they went. They will come out weaker Christians if they don't do something about this. Some men start their ministries having never read through the Bible! Some have read it only once. Reading *about* the Bible has replaced reading and discussing the Bible itself in many scholastic settings. Is God pleased with this?

I hope I can read more of the right books in my life, for there are some worthwhile ones, but I would far rather read and become a master of the Bible. And if there is a choice between the two, as often seems the case, I know which I'm choosing.

Commentaries and Study Bibles

A third lure away from the Bible are the commentaries and study Bibles we own. I might make some enemies here, especially those who made big investments in these sorts of books. For sure, we need such tools. We can't say anything negative about them *per se*. It's obviously a little hypocritical if I, as a teacher, refuse to use commentaries and then become a commentary for someone else on a certain text by my teaching it. I get that fully. Yet, I'm going to suggest that spreading out a set of commentaries in front of you is not meditating on the text, but meditating on what people *say* about the text. For this reason, people dependent on commentaries bypass the very means God has ordained to bring blessing into their lives—meditation on Scripture. And when any believer's eyes constantly drop down to the study notes in the study Bible, rather than focus on the text itself, he is missing the one thing designed to make him "like a tree planted by rives of water" (Psalm 1:3).

Again, there is good in these tools, but I'm simply saying that the Bible itself can do so *much* for you, *much* more than what somebody writes about it. It's the combination of the Bible and the process itself that God blesses and uses when our eyes are on His word. And it is only logical to deduce that the commentaries are often wrong in their interpretation, for if you read through many of them, you will see that they disagree with each other. How much Bible then will you have to comprehend to know which commentary or study Bible note is correct? I'm overstating here a bit, I realize. We have all been helped by the excellent work of others—but I think you understand me. At least consider the *sparing* use of such tools while you discipline yourself to be a true meditator on Scripture.

When George Muller, a man who knew seven languages, decided to set aside commentaries and to go to the Bible alone, he stated that the very first night he did so he received much more benefit than he had in weeks of commentary use before, "but with this difference: it fed my soul." This will be the experience of a person who trains himself well by Bible reading.

Ten Simple Suggestions for Meaningful Bible Reading:

Saturation as a Means to Meditation

So what do I mean by saturation or immersion in the Bible? Simply this: Choose a book (or two) of the Bible and soak yourself in it by reading and re-reading it numerous times.

As an illustration, you may wish to begin with a small book of the Bible like Philippians, First Timothy, First Peter or others. You can read this book daily for five days each week (two days are left for catch-up). It will not take you long. You may do this for several

months reading it through as many as 50 times. Do you think you will know something about the book by then?

Or, you may read a longer book completely through in one five-day week. For instance, Luke is 24 chapters long, so each day you will read about five chapters. Do this weekly read-through for several months.

So, you see, the smaller books may be read completely through each day, but longer books can be read in a week. But the key is reading in as many times as possible, saturating yourself in it.

The book of Genesis is so foundational to the rest of the Bible, you may choose to start with that book (50 chapters). You may wish to add a New Testament book like Matthew (28 chapters) if you are ambitious. You could read these every week or every two weeks. So, on a five-day plan, reading Genesis and Mathew every week would be a little less than 16 chapters a day, taking an hour and a half to two hours depending on how you read and meditate. If you read these every two weeks, you would read less than 8 chapters a day and would spend around an hour or possibly less. This can also be done for several months. I suggest at least four to six.

I'm sure you see what I'm after by making the suggestions above. You may work out your own plan as well. The important thing is to immerse yourself in Scripture by repeated readings.

But there are some other important suggestions to enhance the reading of the Bible.

Read to understand

Rather than the devotionalism approach I mentioned earlier, make understanding and applying the passage your goal. Each time you read through the whole book, you will feel that you are increasing in your understanding. Try to figure out why the author has written that book. Agonize over the meaning of difficult passages. Attempt to figure out how the book is laid out. Don't be satisfied with a surface understanding, but press on in your thinking for much more.

Read aloud some of the time

You will be amazed what reading the Bible aloud will do for your understanding. Sometimes the passage only opens up this way. A chapter of Scripture read aloud usually takes about five minutes of time.

Mark your Bible

It was the renowned pastor, Charles Spurgeon, who said, "A well-marked Bible is the sign of a well-fed soul." We prefer to buy special pens for marking since they are acid free, small tipped, and do not bleed through the page. [1](#)

It is usually not best to highlight a Bible with a felt-tip marker. Once that is done, your ability to do more is limited. Plus, as you read a few times through the passage, you will keep on highlighting by underlining and may find so many meaningful verses that you underline them all! This isn't a good plan. Instead, use the special markers to carefully circle repeated or important words or phrases instead of whole verses. If you wish to remember a verse, just circle the number. Draw lines to other words or concepts. Use other symbols if you wish. Write notes in the margin. My suggestion is that you feel free to switch colors at will. When you read a lot you simple cannot keep up with a different color for every similar concept or word over the life of your use of that Bible. That being said, some of the time you will read through with something in mind and can mark it each place you find it, but most of the time, pick a color that makes the word or concept stand out. I suggest holding back a bit as you first read because you will see it so differently later.

Purchase a good Bible

The Bible is your main tool in life. It is worth spending some money on it. Get a reliable translation. I prefer either the NASB or the ESV, but you may receive recommendations for another version. If possible, obtain a Bible with space for marking. I have a wide-margin Bible, for instance. And make sure your Bible has a good cover. As you invest your time in the word, marking it in special ways, you will be glad the Bible is usable for a long time. A full leather Bible is needed, in my view. Bonded leather often cracks, and, of course, paperbacks are not usable for long.

Read with others when you can

Reading with others when possible is so encouraging. Some people add this to their regular reading. For instance, you might pick a book to read over and over for a couple of months with your spouse before dropping off to sleep. It doesn't make any difference how far you make it. Just pick up the next night where you left off. You may read until one of you falls asleep. Re-read the book again and again with no pressure about how much you read.

Or, you may wish to read once a week or even daily with a friend via Skype or by phone. Some people do this with a relative or friend long distance as a way to engage in good spiritual activity together. Your reading often promotes some discussion about meaning that is natural. At first, you are just reading. But, as you go along, reading even a time or two more, you will start to see things that beg to be discussed.

Listen to Scripture

I make a lot of use of audio Bible tools. You may find the Bible read in various translations online on several sites such as YouVersion.com or BibleGateway.com. I've downloaded my favorite audio Bible, Word of Promise, on my mp3 player for use when I'm walking or at night before sleeping and when I wake up in the middle of the night. I set the timer on my mp3 under "Settings" so that my player will not continue after I've fallen asleep again. For instance, in the last few nights, in the middle of the night, I've listened several times

through 1 John. I tend to prefer to listen to one book over and over again. This has proven very useful.

My wife sometimes carries her mp3 player around while she works, allowing her to listen over and over to certain books she is attempting to understand.

Pay attention to geography

Although everyone will not think this is helpful, remember that God put place names, mountains, roads and waterways in the Bible for a purpose. I find that sometimes they actually make the interpretation of a text far more meaningful and memorable. For instance, to know that the Gadarenes, where the demon possessed man lived, is on the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee helps you understand why people were herding pigs, which were forbidden for Jews to eat. You may wish to use the maps in the back of your Bible. Better yet, obtaining a nice atlas is very helpful. Or you may visit a site like BibleAtlas.org where you can type in the name of the place and a map will appear.

Share what you find

It's so exciting to read the Bible and to discover new insights or to finally understand why a book was written or how it is put together. You need to share your insights. Make this a habit and you will be able to encourage many other people while you also are growing.

Read the same book(s) with friends for maximum insights

If a friend or several friends all tackle the same book or set of books, the door is open for lots of great sharing when you see each other or when you email each other. This is a huge help for growth as a believer.

Finally

We have such a short life after all. If you do what I'm suggesting, think how you can begin to grow like you never have before. Being a believer is serious business; you need a guide like the Bible. The Spirit of God intends to use it in your life. There is no reason to think you cannot do this. Once you begin on a more serious approach to Scripture, I doubt that you will be able to turn back. You will mark that day as a major turning point of your personal history. Who knows what God will do through a person like you if you will just fill your mind with the word of God?

1 Millennium pens come in various colors and are our choice. The 01 gauge is best. They will not bleed and are acid free.

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