

READ

THE

BIBLE

SESSION 1

When I was a beginning Christian, the dear, loving people I looked up to in the church told me, “Read the Bible and pray every day.”

Great advice. Still, even though I was brought up in the church—with Sunday School classes and Vacation Bible Schools—I really didn’t know how or where to begin. Looking back, I wish someone could have helped me get started. It would have saved me a lot of time if I had known why I needed to read the Bible daily.

Over the years, I have found the following concepts informative and helpful. Perhaps these ideas will serve as a good guide for you too.

The Primary Focus

Many good things will come from daily Bible-reading. However, one basic reason for daily reading blesses and fulfills all the other benefits: *We read to come to know God.*

The Scriptures have been given to us so we may come to know God the Father; to help us become more and more like His Son, Jesus; and to help us live out God’s love in the power of the Holy Spirit. If John 3:16 is the “Golden Text” of the Bible, perhaps John 20:31 is the “Golden Key.” “These [miraculous signs recorded in John’s Gospel] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

We believe that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writing breathes life into the reading. It isn’t the beautiful old words or the modern translations that bring the Bible to life; it is the Holy Spirit! He is the vital connection. We will not be saved simply by repeating words, as true as they may be. We are saved by the Truth, who is a Person. Through the written Word, we may come to know the Living Word, Jesus. We discover that as we come daily with obedient spirits, the written Word nourishes our faith and brings us into line with the mind of Christ.

We read to come to know God.

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION:

WRITE IN YOUR BIBLE.

Date your entries.

Claim promises.

Underline passages

that speak to you. Write answers to prayer in the margins.

Look up cross-references. Make your Bible personal to you.



An Overview of the Bible

For someone unfamiliar with Scripture, the Bible can be a daunting book. Some of the words are hard to understand. Parts of the Bible seem to have different styles than other parts. How can a new Bible reader make sense of all this?

The Bible is actually a whole library of books. In the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments are stories, songs, lists of genealogy, histories, allegories, different kinds of prophecy, and more. The Bible was written over a period of more than 1,500 years, and by perhaps 40 different writers. We believe it is like no other book, in that it is God-breathed, divinely inspired so that the human authors were enabled to convey divine truth.

“A covenant is an agreement between persons. God also makes covenants with people. He promises to help and be a friend to all those who obey Him” (Albert Truesdale, et al., *A Dictionary of the Bible and Christian Doctrine in Everyday English* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1986), 67).



Also called “Torah” and “Pentateuch.”



Also known as “Hebrews” and “Israelites.”

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION: PRAY THE PSALMS.

Some people think the only prayers they can pray are words they themselves put together. If a prayer in the Bible says what you wish you could say, make it your own! Pray with David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24). In other words, if it is saying what you need, don’t just read it, pray it!

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION: MEMORIZE FAVORITE VERSES.

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). Write out a verse to memorize on a card and carry it with you until you have it by heart. The Holy Spirit has a wonderful way of bringing just the word you need when you need it, and not surprisingly, He uses the words we have hidden away in our reading and memorization.

TWO MAIN SECTIONS

The Christian Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New.

The name “Old Testament” refers to the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants. It was the promise that they would share His blessing with the entire world.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The portion of the Bible called the Old Testament consists of three main divisions.

It begins with the *Law* (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and *history* (Joshua through Esther). The stories of Creation and the Flood—mysterious and wonderful—lead to the story of one man, Abraham. He is so important that a large section of Genesis is devoted to him, his son Isaac, and grandson Jacob. The last two-thirds of Genesis is about the beginnings of a new nation, the Jews. The rest of the Law and history tell of how God loved these special people, and intended for them to carry out Abraham’s covenant.

The second section of the Old Testament is the *wisdom* literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon). It is a treasure of poetry, prayers, songs, drama, and much more than can be described here. From the simple, profound beauty of Psalm 23 to the sophisticated philosophical arguments in the Book of Job, blessings for every mood and every situation are found. The readers who are willing to make the time to let the message come through will find great reward in these books in the middle of the Old Testament.

Finally, the last section is called the *prophets* (Isaiah to Malachi).

As a young Christian, I liked Isaiah the best because I took the promises God was making to the chosen people of Israel as promises for me as well. I confess I still do. I never will forget the night I discovered Isaiah 41:10. It was my first night away from home.

It was September, 1949, and I was on my way to college. Six grown people packed into a sedan for a two-day journey from Ohio to Boston. We stopped near Syracuse, New York, for the night. In the tiny tourist cabin where two of us slept, I opened my little Bible. I was not using any “plan” for reading beyond the sketchy advice I had received to read the Bible every day, so I skipped here and there from day to day.

That night my eyes fell on Isaiah 41:10, and I read these words: “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (KJV).

That night in that tiny cabin, I did not know where I was; I was homesick and frightened. Yet, those words became a personal message to me. God knew where I was. I knew He would be with me. Nearly 60 years later as I write these words, they are still “my” promise.

**A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION:
LET THE WORD SHAPE YOU.**

Daily reading, combined with prayer, will help you become a man or woman of God. There is no higher ambition. Make this your personal goal. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the [person] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).



“‘Pentecost’ is the name of a Jewish festival day also celebrated by Christians. The word ‘Pentecost’ means 50. The Jewish festival was celebrated on the day following seven weeks after Passover.” Now Christians celebrate it seven weeks after Easter (Albert Truesdale, et al., *A Dictionary of the Bible and Christian*

Doctrine in Everyday English (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1986, 215).

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The “New Testament” refers to the fact that the “old” covenant made to Abraham and his descendents has been fulfilled by a “new” promise. Many prophecies of the Old Testament clearly foretold the coming of a messiah who would bless all humanity. Through Jesus Christ, the new covenant is revealed. Abraham’s promise has been expanded. Now Jews and Gentiles alike can be full members of God’s family and inherit all the promises of grace.

The New Testament also has different sections or divisions.

The *Gospels* are the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Gospels each tell the story of Jesus’ coming to earth, and His ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Invest a lot of your reading in the Gospels, for they are the stories of Jesus.

Mark’s Gospel, the shortest of the four, was probably written first. Matthew and Luke both seem to augment and amplify the rapid action of Mark’s account. They are called the *Synoptic Gospels* because they share the same stories from slightly different viewpoints, and thus give depth to our understanding of Jesus. John’s Gospel highlights miracles and personal conversations of Jesus, especially His challenges to the disciples that uniquely call for confession of faith.

Remember, we read the Bible to know God. Remember the “Golden Key” to the scriptures: “These [miraculous signs recorded in John’s Gospel] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

During my first pastorate, a man named Walter came to Christ and was genuinely transformed. Walter knew absolutely nothing about church or the Bible or how a Christian would want to live. He came to Christ in response to such a simple invitation and prayer that I honestly wondered if he had understood, if his faith could be real. I need not have wondered because he asked for a Bible of his own. A healthy hunger is always a good sign in newborns.

I gave Walter a Bible and told him to begin reading John’s Gospel.

“I don’t want to learn about John,” he said. “I want to learn about Jesus!”

I explained that the first books in the New Testament were about Jesus, so Walter began his Bible-reading there. Within six months, he was asking me questions that were keen and relevant to spiritual growth. Walter grew to be a true man of God, a valued member of his congregation for many years, and a blessing to all he met.

The one book of *history* in the New Testament is Acts. Beginning with the birth of the Church at Pentecost in the first 2 chapters, Acts tells the story of how the Church reached out in all directions from Jerusalem in the first half of that century. Broadly speaking, the first 12 chapters reflect the leadership of Peter, and the last 16 the influence of Paul on his three missionary journeys, reaching Rome—the nerve center of the civilized world. The Church across the centuries has liked to think this is an “unfinished history” and that the Holy Spirit is writing “new chapters” as succeeding generations obey the Great Commission and live in the Spirit of the first Pentecost. You’ll learn more about that as you read daily.

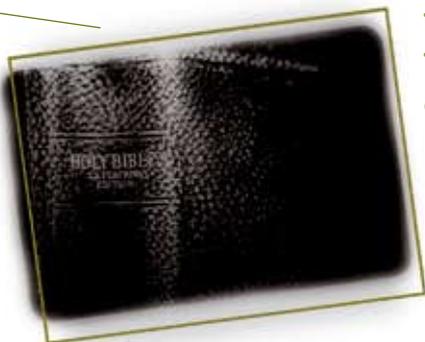
The *Epistles* are letters written to churches or individuals, 21 books in all, Romans through Jude. Some of these letters have passages that are easily understood. Some have difficult lessons. God is not interested in confusing sincere seekers. The most important task is



looking for Jesus in all those words. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. Make sure your spirit is right.

There is 1 book of *prophecy*, Revelation. A word about this last book in the Bible: it carries a unique promise of blessing to those who read it, but don’t get hung up in Revelation! Stick with what is crystal clear. The first 3 chapters are pretty plain, although even here “experts” love to date and label the various church “ages.” We can be sure that spiritual struggle and conflict exist, and we can be certain that God and holiness will prevail; but run from those who get out charts to explain exactly what is going to happen, blow by blow, as the world comes to an end. They don’t know! Read Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.” Make sure your door is always open to Jesus.

The Great Commission is the mission that the risen Christ gave to His disciples, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20.



THE CONNECTION

The Old Testament is the necessary foundation for the New Testament. The only Bible Jesus knew was our Old Testament. He quoted from it, and declared that it foretold His coming and His mission. It is not made obsolete by the New, but is tied to it in so many ways that the foundation for our faith rests in both Old and New. The New Testament does not contradict the Old; the Old Testament does not conflict with the New. The awesome Creator—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we see in the Old Testament is the same holy Father, the same mighty breath of the Holy Spirit, the very same Christ who has come, who has died, and who is coming again—calls to us from the pages of the New Testament. We need to read both testaments, to read them together, to study them and let their message shape our lives. An old couplet tells us, “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.”

In God’s great wisdom, the simple yet profound message of His love for each one of us can be understood by little children, and yet there is always a challenge to learn more, to come closer, to be made into men and women of God. We are saved in a moment of time, but we never stop growing in grace.

Welcome to the homework assignment of a lifetime! Welcome to the Bible!

Devising a Plan

There are many daily devotional plans available. Which plan you choose is not as important, perhaps, as simply sticking with it. The way you read and study will change and grow as you become more and more at home in the Word. Beginners might do something as simple as reading the words Jesus spoke, often printed in red, and by browsing daily through the Psalms.

READING SCHEDULES

If you simply want to read your Bible through from cover to cover, it will take you about 15 minutes a day. I would strongly suggest that you read from both the Old and New Testaments each day, perhaps three chapters from the Old and two from the New. Be prepared for some long genealogies, hard words, and difficult-to-understand passages. Don't get hung up on secondary matters.

One-year Bibles are available and can be both a working plan for reading as well as a personal journal. You can begin reading any day of the year and find selections from the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs. If you read the entire passage each day, you will complete the whole Bible in a year's time.

You may use just the New Testament portion, along with other readings from Sunday School lessons or the like. You may read the Psalms each day. I write in the margins of my one-year Bible. It is my second one, about 10 years old and close to being retired. When I review what I've written, I see burdens and victories that give me a sense of progress in my faith journey.

The *Revised Common Lectionary* is a three-year schedule for weekly Bible study. It is keyed to the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew one year, Mark the next, Luke the third, with John's gospel being integrated into every year's lessons as well. Selections from all parts of the rest of the Old and New Testaments, always including readings from the Psalms, complete what becomes a pretty comprehensive coverage of the entire Bible. The special times of the church year—such as Advent and Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost—get special attention. The *Revised Common Lectionary* is an excellent way to share in Bible study along with millions of other Christians from many denominations.

Remember plans and schedules are our servants, not our masters. If you miss a day, don't be discouraged and quit. If your plan is too ambitious, scale back. Take your time, but keep at it. You will find your way.

GROUP EFFORTS

One simple way to learn to study the Bible is a good Sunday School class. Lessons for adult Sunday School classes provide plans for systematic reading of the Bible. In addition, they can provide support and encouragement that is helpful in establishing daily devotional habits. Also, many churches have Bible study groups for growing Christians.

DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE

There are a number of devotional periodicals readily available which have scripture selections for each day with supplemental readings. People from all walks of life share their stories and insights as to how that day's scripture lesson touched them or met their need. These testimonies or brief devotions can serve as the basis for meditation on Scripture and prayer.

The *Revised Common Lectionary* may be easily accessed on the Internet at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/>.



Among these great little magazines are *Reflecting God* and others.

A FINAL WORD

Don't try to find God's "secret" messages; the Way is plain and simple and clear. Keeping covenant with God by obedience to the Holy Spirit is what really counts. The basic plan of salvation is simple. God will help you sort out what you need. Remember the "Golden Key!" Jesus told the people who boasted about knowing all about their Scriptures but missed the main point, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). It isn't

what you know when it comes to daily Bible reading, but whom you come to know, and love, and follow.

Trust the Holy Spirit, your Teacher. Bible-reading and prayer overlap in our spiritual formation. In one sense, our Bible-reading can be God's side of the conversation. Just as Jesus came alongside the discouraged duo on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27), He comes again and again to warm the hearts of those who persistently seek Him in the pages of Holy Scripture.



A Prayer

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(The Book of Common Prayer, 236)