

THE
BIBLE READING
TOOL



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Perhaps one of the most common questions Christians ask is, “How do I read the Bible and understand it?”

It's one of the most important questions you can ask as a Christian. Why? Well in the book of Luke 4, Jesus says, *“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* The Psalmist says that the one who delights in it, *“is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.”*

The Bible or the Word of God, nourishes us, feeds us, and keeps us vital and alive because it is the primary way God speaks to us. We like to say at Salem Chapel, *“When God's Word is open, His mouth is open.”*

The Apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* Everything that we need for salvation, life and godliness is found within its pages.

A.W. Tozer put it like this: *“The Bible is the written word of God, and because it is written, it is confined and limited by the necessities of ink and paper and leather. The Voice of God, however, is alive and free as the sovereign God is free. ‘The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.’ The life is in the speaking words. God's word in the Bible can have power only because it corresponds to God's Word in the universe. It is the present Voice which makes the written word powerful. Otherwise it would lie locked in slumber within the covers of a book.”*

The power of the Bible lies not in it being a book with a moral code, though it has guidelines for living under the rule and reign of God. It is not primarily a history book, though it has astonishingly detailed and poignant stories from the annals of history. No. As Tozer once again remarked, *“The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.”*

Now I know what some of you are thinking. “Ok. Great. Well this is all well and good...but how do you read the Bible so that what Tozer is describing actually happens in my life?” And I want to set your heart at ease. You don't need to feel guilty or shameful in asking that question. After all the Bible is a thick book with some strange things to say and can feel daunting when you first start reading it, right? The average American household owns 4.4 Bibles, but only 19% of adults engage with the Bible on a regular basis outside of Sunday mornings (April, 2014 Barna study). I can't help but wonder if the primary reason Christians don't read the Bible is because they don't feel equipped to read it well. So let's see if we can break it down and simplify the process.

WHEN GOD'S WORD IS OPEN HIS MOUTH IS OPEN.

I mentioned earlier that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 describes the Bible as being “breathed out by God.”. In other words the Bible in a sense is God’s words written through men to you and me.(2 Peter 1:20-21) It is His primary form of communication to you. And in any relationship, communication is important. Think about your healthiest relationships. There is a desire and a practice to hear from the other person, to communicate your love for one another, your support for one another, your sympathy and empathy for one another just to mention a few examples. No healthy relationship is void of intimate, substantive communication.

This is also true of your relationship with the Lord. The Bible is the means by which God tells us who He is, why He can be trusted and the power He possesses to right all wrongs. His Word is also the primary way we hear, learn and grow in our relationship with Him. - God uses the Bible to communicate His love for us, His comfort for us, His sympathy and empathy for us in our pain, His will and direction for our lives, and His correction and forgiveness for when we go astray.

I wonder how many of us view the Bible this way? And what would happen if we view the Bible as essential to hear, experience and grow in our relationship with Him? King David says of the Word of God in Psalm 19:10 - *“More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.”*

When we view God’s Word as precious, something to be desired, and as the primary means by which we hear from Him and grow in our relationship with Him, it changes the way we view the Bible.

Therefore the main question we need to ask is, “How do I read the Bible?” So let me give you these four simple questions to answer when reading God’s Word that will work for someone who is brand new in their relationship with Jesus and someone who has been following Him for many years.

WHAT PASSAGE AM I GOING TO READ?

The easy answer is that there isn’t an easy answer. Every person is slightly different and as such, their pattern for digging into the Word will be different. That being said, the following are some different approaches that could prove useful:

- Pick a reading plan that you do along with people in your small group or church. There can be power in everyone reading the same text each day.
- Ask the Lord to show you which book of the Bible he wants you to focus on and dive into it until you finish it and then ask him for the next.
- Pick a reading plan that’s tailored to the way you think and process while reading. The Bible reading app YouVersion has an excellent assortment of options.
- Read through the whole Bible, start to finish, reading a chapter a day.

The other piece of practical advice we might give concerns the length of text that you read. Some people are able to read a chapter or more each day, while some people read only a few verses. The amount isn’t as important as is your ability to hear what God is saying to you through the Holy Spirit and His Word. Remember, this isn’t about checking off a spiritual box, but connecting to the heart of the Father that very day.

Charles Spurgeon, The Prince of Preachers, once said: *“Some people like to read so many [Bible] chapters every day. I would not dissuade them from the practice, but I would rather let my soul soak in half a dozen verses all day than rinse my hand in several chapters. Oh, to be bathed in a text of Scripture, and to let it be sucked up in your very soul, till it saturates your heart!”*

Intimacy with God is the end result we are pursuing. Sometimes you might be able to read large chunks of a passage. Sometimes you might read two verses and not be able to move an inch further as the Father invites you deeper, right then and there. Whatever the amount is, live in the grace of it, knowing that the real gift is being with the Lord.



GOD SAID



GOD SAID

WHAT IS GOD SAYING IN THE PASSAGE I READ?

Having prayed for the Holy Spirit to be present, to speak and having opened the Word to the passage you are reading for the day, we now read the passage itself. The first question we are asking is a simple one: “What is God saying to me in the passage I read?” This may seem like an obvious question, but it is an important one nonetheless. Why? Because it can be easy to make the passage say what we want it to say. What we are seeking is for the text to say what God wants it to say.

The tendency for some may be to go straight to a biblical commentary, which is a resource written by biblical theologians that help you understand the passage if you are struggling with what you are reading. These are great to use and we will include some recommendations at the end of this chapter, but I want to encourage you do the following things first as you ask yourself what God is saying in the passage you are reading.

First, look at words and phrases of the passage that repeat or are jumping out to you. You can underline them or box them in your Bible. It is always good to read your Bible with a pen in hand. I always say a good Bible is a Bible that has writing and underlining in it. This also can serve as “memorials” for what God has said to you in a passage that you have read in the past that has been influential in your life.

So let’s give this a try together.

We will use Romans 8:1-11 as an example.

Life in the Spirit

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh. 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

GOD SAID

So in this text, in addition to what the text is plainly saying about Life in the Spirit, you'll notice two words in particular that are repeated over and over again: Flesh and Spirit. So those have been boxed.

I also underlined verses that stood out to me on that particular day. So vs 1, vs 4 and vs 9-10 particularly were standing out.

Maybe there are words, phrases or ideas that you don't understand on the first read. Pause and take time to reflect on them.

If it's a story, what's the story about? Asking questions about the passage can also reveal what the text is saying.

- Where do I see God's presence in what I read? Where Do I see God's promises in what I read? Where do I see God's power in what I read?
- What does it say about me, about humanity or my identity in Christ?
- Is there a Truth to embrace? Something to respond to? Something to confess or repent of? Something to be encouraged by?

There might be ideas, concepts or truths that are being shared from the Word that you're having a hard time grasping. That's ok. That's normal! We suggest having one or two simple study books on hand that can help you dig in and uncover what that text is getting at. (We've included some recommendations at the end of this chapter.)

In thinking about the importance of studying the text, knowing the text, understanding the text, John Wesley said this: "God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book."

If you're going to read and study only one book...this is that book!

As you're reading or studying, if anything jumps out at you, make sure to write it down in the margins.

Flesh = sin that dwells within

"Set their minds"

What is my mind set on?

Flesh Spirit

Death vs life/peace

Hostile to God

= Enmity, antagonism

BIG IDEA

Those who have been raised

to life in Jesus now live in

the power of the Holy Spirit

and live at peace with him.

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GOD SAID

Notice what is written in the margins in our Romans 8:1-11 example:

- I defined what I think “flesh” means (the sin that dwells within).
- The phrase “set their minds” was standing out to me on that day and a question came to mind that seemed important: “What is my mind set on?”
- We are told that the two words that are repeated over and over (Flesh and Spirit), lead somewhere: Death and Life/peace.
- I wrote down what “Hostile to God” means according to one of the study books I referenced: enmity or antagonism.

Once completed, look at the words, phrases and at your notes in the margin. Spend some time in prayerful reflection. What do you think is the BIG IDEA of the passage? Go ahead and write it down.

You’ll notice written in the margins, the BIG IDEA of Romans 8:1-11: Those who have been raised to life in Jesus now live in the power of the Holy Spirit and live at peace with him.

Finally, whether you’ve read an entire chapter or are simply coming to the conclusion of a chapter, look at the various things you’ve written for this chapter. Maybe there have been 3-4 big ideas throughout the chapter. Ok, great. Well, what’s been the BIG IDEA of the entire chapter? Write that down too.

This can be a really helpful pattern to use. From time to time, you may be reading a passage that seems dry, or it’s not connecting with you. Take the time to write down the big idea, in spite of how you “feel” about the passage connecting to you that day. It may be dry on that day, but because the Spirit is at work, it will come back with a return.

So that’s the first step: *What is God saying in the passage I read?*



I HEARD



I HEARD

HOW IS THE HOLY SPIRIT MAKING WHAT I READ PERSONAL IN MY LIFE TODAY?

The fact of the matter is that we could just walk away at this point. We've put in some time. We've done some studying and reflecting. We could check off the spiritual box for the day. If that is all we do, we approach the Word like any atheist could, simply trying to understand what an ancient text says. But that's not what we are after.

We want to draw close to the heart of the Father and to hear what He is saying. As John Stott says, *"We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior."*

I think one of the things we lose sight of is that we are not just reading a passage in the Bible, the passage is also reading us. Hebrews 4:12 says, *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

The Holy Spirit is working. He leads and guides us as our Helper in order for us to hear and discern what God wants to say to us from His Word to our situations in life. He is the one making the words come alive personally in our hearts. So the next question is this: *"How is the Holy Spirit making what I read personal in my life today?"*

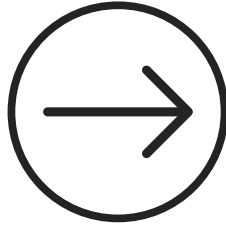
As I've read the passage and written down various things in the margins to prayerfully reflect on, "How is the Holy Spirit making what I read personal in my life today?" From what I have heard God say in today's reading, what's hitting me in a very personal way today? David, in Psalm 139, said, *"Search me and know me. Test me and know my anxious heart!"*

This is why I said that the passage of God's Word is reading us. Something is standing out to us. What's going on in my life that this passage is speaking to? Is there a lie I'm believing? Am I living into a narrative that ultimately leads to "bad news" when I could be living into the good news of the Gospel? Is there something God wants me to do that the Word is revealing to me? Is He inviting me to understand my identity in Christ at a deeper level? We spend some time in prayerful reflection with the Lord, attending to whatever He is stirring in our hearts, as the TEXT of scripture is speaking into the CONTEXT of my life.

What is God saying to me, right here, right now, today? As you have a sense of what that is, write it down in the margin as well and even date it.



I WILL



I WILL

WHERE DO I NEED TO BE OBEDIENT TODAY FROM WHAT I READ?

Believing something doesn't mean we just acknowledge a collection of facts some-where out there in the wild blue yonder. No. If you want to know what someone really, truly, honestly believes, you look at his or her pattern of life.

Leonard Ravenhill, one of the great saints of the 20th century, once said, *"One of these days some simple soul will pick up the Book of God, read it, and believe it. Then the rest of us will be embarrassed."*

We are not meant just to understand the Word. We are not meant only to hear the Word. No. We are meant to believe it and thus live by that Word in obedience. According to Paul in Romans 10, that word births faith in our hearts and faith always leads to action.

Psalm 1 says, *"Blessed is that man who meditates on the word day and night."* So we take the word with us.

So how is the Lord calling you to obey today from what you read?

The Holy Spirit always gives us the opportunity to obey or disobey. But be careful not to make what you believe to be the act of obedience for your life today from God's Word to be too general. Therefore think of it this way:

Make it personal - what does obedience from what I read look like for me? Maybe there's a question He's asking you, and you pray through that with Him for the rest of the day? Maybe it's something specific He wants you to do?

Make it practical - How can I practically apply this to my life today?

Make it urgent - When am I going to be obedient and act on what the Spirit has said to me?

So, we think about it, chew on it and meditate on it throughout the day. Maybe you also write it down on a notecard to carry in your pocket. Maybe you jot it down as a note in your phone.

Think back to our Romans 8 example from earlier. On that particular day, the thing I walked away with was a simple question: “What is my mind set on?”

For the rest of the day, I meditated on that with the Lord and over the course of the day, He revealed to me the things my mind was set on...both the good things and the darker things. The word didn't end there; it stayed with me and kept shaping me and illuminating truth to me as the Holy Spirit led the process.

So as we go through the day, we meditate. We continue to ask the Lord the same questions we constantly ask as disciples of Jesus:

What is God saying to me?

What am I going to do about it?

Sometimes we leave our time in the Bible knowing the answer to those two questions and what it means to walk faithfully and obediently that day. But many times, that is clarified throughout the day as we meditate and pray and reflect with God as we walk with Him.

What is the end result?

It is summed up in Jeremiah 15:16: *“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts.”*

Like anything else that you're learning to do, it takes time and practice. So rest in that. Trust the fact that if you are a son or daughter of God, He wants nothing more than to speak to you each day through the Word that He's given us. So see His Word as the primary way to communicate with God and enjoy the relationship you have with Him through Jesus Christ.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart
- Reading and Understanding the Bible by Ben Witherington III
- The Reformation Study Bible edited by R.C. Sproul
- Preaching the Word Commentary Set
- Tony Evans Bible Commentary
- Gospel Transformation Bible
- John MacArthur Commentaries
- The Olive Tree Bible app is a great resource that allows you to have multiple study resources open in the app and different translations at the same time

