

— MY —
PREFERRED
WAY to
READ
the
BIBLE

JIM
ELLIFF

MY PREFERRED WAY TO READ THE BIBLE
Jim Elliff

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My Preferred Way to Read the Bible

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 seasons. 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 consistently, but usually only because I did not determine a plan of action beforehand.

Any plan for Bible reading is valuable, obviously, but I've now come to believe there is another, perhaps better, way of thinking about Bible reading. I'm recommending immersion or saturation in one or two books of the Bible over several months. It's 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 plan or not, I want you to consider three distractions luring the serious Christian away from his Bible, or at least a right use of the Bible. The first is devotionalism. I mean by this word with its added “ism” to be the view that a person should read the Bible mainly to get a spiritual boost for the day. We *do* want to be devoted to Christ, and we *do* need to be inspired. We *do* approach the Scriptures with open hearts wanting to be led by God. I don’t mean to disparage that aim. But devotionalism is a way of reading Scripture mainly for a lift rather than for truth. The Spirit authored the Bible for us to know the truth which will “set us free,” not just for an emotional perk. Devotionalism is reading the Bible as a self-help book designed to give us nuggets of inspiration to get us through the day. Most of the believers I know have been devotionalists. I was for many years.

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 it for 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 devotionalist is correct in his view of the text, but often he will be wrong, or biased in his understanding. And, for all his reading over the years, his understanding of Scripture may not really develop 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. Once, I stacked up a set of five large books next to the Bible. As I recall, I knew each of the authors, and trusted them. 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 myself 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 selectively 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 about three thousand of them so far, 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 motivation 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 actually 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 very 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 hope I will always choose the right one.

Commentaries and Study Bibles

A third lure away from the Bible is 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 rivers 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 of meditative reading 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:

1. Saturate your mind with the text as a means of 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 or meditation on other passages). It will not take you long. You may do this for several months reading it through as many as 50 times or more. 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, the Gospel of 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 or, if desired, two weeks. But the key is reading it as many times as possible, saturating yourself in it.

The book of Genesis is so foundational to the rest of the Bible that 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 Matthew 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 months or more.

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. It is the little known yet most significant key to knowing and living out Bible truths.

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

2. Read to understand

Rather than the devotionalism approach I mentioned earlier, make understanding and applying the passage your goal. Be passionate about this pursuit. Each time you read through the whole book, you will feel that you are increasing in your understanding on its main themes. Try to

figure out why the author has written that book. Agonize over the meaning of difficult passages after the initial few reads. 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. You do not have to be a Bible scholar to gain understanding that will be transformative.

3. 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. Read with passion as if you were the author attempting to reach the hearts of listeners.

4. Mark your Bible

It was the renowned pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Charles Haddon

Spurgeon, who said, “A well-marked Bible is the sign of a well-fed soul.” We prefer to buy special pens for marking that are acid free, small tipped, archival level pens that do not bleed through the page. These pens are not too costly, and can be found online or in some stores. Christian bookstores often carry them. Get an assortment of colors. Add to this a set of colored pencils for the best array of options.

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 your special pens made for marking on thinner Bible paper to judiciously circle repeated or important words or phrases instead of underlining whole verses. If you wish to remember a whole verse, just circle the number. Color that in with a pencil if you prefer. Draw lines to other words or concepts.

Use symbols or shapes around words if you want for repeated significant words or phrases. Write notes in the margin. My suggestion is that you feel free to switch color codes and shapes at will for each new book of the Bible as you mark repeated words. Just be consistent in marking those repeated words with the same color and shapes throughout that book. If you eventually find that a few colors or shapes are what you wish to use in all the books you study for some words, that's your call. But I wouldn't be a slave to doing that. Again, just be consistent in how you mark the book you are presently reading. Pick a color or symbol that makes the word or concept stand out. I suggest holding back a bit as you first read through the book because you will see it so differently later.

5. 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 personally, 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 single column with left justification. This provides for the most space to write notes. 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 and other covers are not usable for long.

6. 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 in your reading together each night. Just pick up

the next time where you left off. Put the marker in when the snoring begins! What good thoughts to go to sleep by. Re-read the book again and again night by night, with no pressure about how much you read at any one time.

Or, you may wish to read once a week or even daily with a friend via your computer or 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 discussion about meaning in a natural way. 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 talked over.

7. 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. I've downloaded my favorite audio Bible, *Word of Promise*, on my audio player for use when I'm

walking or at night before sleeping, and when I wake up in the middle of the night. For instance, in the last few nights, in the middle of the night, I've listened several times through 1 John. This has proven very useful.

My wife sometimes carries her audio player around while she works, and as she goes to sleep, allowing her to listen over and over to certain books she is attempting to understand. When I asked her once about what she was listening to, she said, "Romans." I didn't know she was doing this. I asked her how many times she had listened through the book. "Fifty times or so," she said. She doesn't always listen perfectly while she works, but then, many times she pays very close attention. I've found that I only have to begin a verse out of Romans, and she can finish it. She has done this through several books of the Bible.

8. 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 often make the interpretation of a text far more meaningful and memorable. They help you picture the experience which often imprints it on your mind. 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. You may also look up the site to see photos that can enliven your reading. Again, this is most helpful later, after you have read through the first few times.

9. 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. It seems to me that the practice of sharing insights and special connections in the Bible should be normal for Christians. Think how this can open up doors of ministry to each other!

10. Host a Bible Immersion Retreat

This retreat can be a half day, a day, or even overnight. Just pick a book of the Bible that is the right length and read it through meaningfully together with friends as many times as you can.

Let's say that you prepare for such a day in your home and the book you will read is Ephesians. Your friends can each bring their own lunch if you wish, or bring dishes to share. Have coffee and tea and snacks ready. Explain how you

will mix prayer and Bible reading together. Encourage good listening. And help the group to use lots of animation in their reading, as if they were intent on getting the truth over to the other listeners like the author himself might do.

Then begin to read aloud a chapter at a time, passing the reading around, with as much meaning and pathos as possible, until the book is finished. Usually it takes about five minutes for each chapter. You may wish to get on your knees to pray for insight and application of the book at times. Treat it seriously; you are listening to God.

After a break, read through it again, and again. You may wish to set aside a specific shorter amount of time for conversation about the most meaningful passages, or how some truth is coming to light, along with testimony about how these passages are impacting each of you as you read. Do this after you have had a few readthroughs. Then do it again as long as you have time, with appropriate breaks, short discussion times, and silent meditation periods, letting the Lord speak to you through what is written. Such

reading retreats can change lives and refresh believers. And leading them is something most people can feel comfortable doing.

At the end of the retreat, introduce the group to the value of the saturation method for daily Bible reading.

Finally

We have such a short life, don't we? 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 to take a more serious approach to meditative Scripture reading through saturation, I doubt that you will be able to turn back. You will mark that day as a major turning point of your personal history with God. Who knows what God will do through a person like you if you will just fill your mind with Scripture?