

The Mystery and Importance of Reading the Bible

The Analogy of the Car

I don't know anything about cars. Basically nothing. I know how to drive them, wash them, and that it's necessary to take them in for service. But beyond that, not a lot. Oh...I can check the oil and fluids. I can change a tire. I understand *broadly* how the engine works, but I couldn't name many of its parts. I couldn't take it apart and work on it. I certainly couldn't build one! For sure, some people are "car people". They have a great interest in cars, both from a performance and an operational standpoint. I'm just not one of them. When I look at a car engine, I am baffled.

What I do know is the Bible. That's something I can tell you about. But the car analogy helps to get at the issue that many of you may have with the Holy Scriptures. You may look at the Bible, and just feel fogged. Stumped. Bewildered. And I get it! It is a hard book to handle. To be sure however, the Bible is *very clear in its core message*. The basic truth of the Bible can be discerned by nearly anyone who can read. You might even know a little about it. And even though I am an "expert", there is much I am still learning! But the fact is, most people relate to the Bible the way I do to the automobile—**they know it's there, they know it has value, but they don't know where to start.**

This issue is a paradox in the Church and in the life of faith with believers. The more technology has given people personal access to the Scriptures (something that was never possible during the first 1960+ years of the Church), even though we have a plethora of resources available to read the Bible, across multiple platforms and devices in any situation or setting...even though this is the case, *practically no one reads the Bible*. Because they don't know how. Or they are intimidated. Or haven't been taught how. And when they do wade in and give it a try, they find themselves in some deep waters and immediately swim for shore. So, people now know *very little about what the Bible actually says and what Jesus (and His apostles and prophets) actually teaches*.

The resulting dilemma is two-fold. First, as a pastor and preacher, when I appeal to the authority of Scripture, I often get puzzled looks or even resistance. *People frequently don't trust in what they don't understand*. Second, people will look for any short-cut to help them, sometimes parroting pithy insights they glean from Facebook, claiming to be "biblical"...but are probably wrong. So, we have God's Word questioned or incorrectly applied. Let me put it this way. For those of you who are a little insecure about your biblical knowledge (or maybe you don't really care!), what is your reaction when someone "quotes" the Bible *at you*? Are you intrigued or are you put off? What is your reaction when someone has the "nerve" to cite the Bible as a response to a societal question, like abortion or gay marriage? Do you recognize that citation as holding some "authority" or do you feel a little hostility...in part because you are not clear what the Bible says?

So, my goal in this article is to assure you **that you are not alone**. I simply ask you to hear me out. Like the analogy of the car, I relate to the feeling. I relate to the indifference, or the bewilderment, or even the hostility. But unlike the car, which is a mere object, *the Holy Scriptures are the infallible repository of God's revelation, relevant to every time and place*. They are written by God using humans, in order that we might know Him more, but most importantly, that we might know His Son. The Bible is God's gift to the world, and to us, that we might be taught, comforted, encouraged, chastened, convicted and have certainty of His love for us. My goal in this article is to help you begin to love the Bible by offering a way to read it...and even begin to understand it.

The Basic Beginning Truths

But we have to start with some basic, fundamental truths. We are, as said above, not dealing with a car but with the written, fixed **Word of God**. And so, before the Bible can make any human sense, *before you can love it*, you must accept some basic presuppositions¹ about the Scriptures. First of all, **you must believe in Jesus**. "Wait," you say, "How can you believe in Jesus if you don't know the Bible?" It's called faith—trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation. Faith is God's gift. For if you don't believe in Jesus, then the Bible will be largely incomprehensible. Oh, you can get some stuff out of it. But without faith in Christ, the Bible is a "closed book". The good news is that you believe in Jesus! Likely, if you are reading this article, you are a baptized child of God. You have been given *eyes to see* His Word.

There are some other things too. The Bible, as God's Word, is without error. Critics of Scripture sneer at such an assertion. They point out apparent "contradictions". Those are people who don't have faith (see above) and are blinded to the Word of Truth. There are defenses to their critiques, but the point is this: **if the Bible is God's Word *in toto*, then it can't be in error, any more than we may doubt a single promise that He makes**. So, we approach the Bible, whatever our "comprehension" level, by accepting that *what It says is the truth*. For God does not lie.

But the Bible is also (miraculously) **a product of human hands**. It was written down not by holy angels but by ordinary men. The Bible is a product of more than 50 human authors, over a span of 1600 years. Therefore, one can speak of the Bible in literary terms. It has narratives, and poetry, and cosmic prophecy, and drama and tension and plot lines. God used human agents to pen His literary masterpiece. But God also is the author of the Scriptures. He breathed into these men to write what they wrote in the way that they wrote it. This makes the Bible **both completely Divine and completely human**. Sounds like someone I know...

Which leads me to the final thing you need to know before reading the Bible. **The Bible is all about Jesus**. *He is the center of the Scriptures*. He is the goal and the point. Even in arcane passages, or books that seem devoid of anything like Gospel, Jesus is there, lurking behind the

¹ A presupposition is something assumed beforehand at the beginning of a line of argument or inquiry.

shadows. To be sure, there are books that sing Christ with every word. But to see Jesus at the center of your reading project, helps one to read the Bible in the way It was meant to be read.

The Mystery in Reading

Being armed with these basic truths, one can “read the Bible”. But where to start? The beginning? The Gospels? The books we know? The hardest books to read? There truly is no right way (though I will suggest an approach below), but the **power is in daily, intentional engagement**. Because coming into contact with God’s Word (even on a smart phone) changes you. It works on you. It reveals to you *great mysteries*.

When we think of the word **mystery**, we think of Agatha Christie, or a “who-dun-it” on TV, or a puzzle we piece together. But a mystery in the realm of the Transcendent is **that which is revealed to you from above**. A mystery is a cosmic gift of God given that people might be illumined. Considering the Bible as a mystery allows one to enter into the heavenly throne room brought down to earth. To overhear things *almost* too deep for words. But that’s just it—*God has revealed these things to you that you may better know Him*. Thinking of the Bible then as a mystery acknowledges that It is from God and that we are dealing with something that might leave us with questions. But too often people approach the Bible as something to be solved, instead of something revealed by God to us.

The Importance of Reading

Maybe I’m starting to lose you. “There he goes again...” Fair enough. Let me talk in a clear language that everybody can easily understand. It is important that Christians not only read the Bible, but that **they know what the Bible says**. We must mine the Bible for Its precious content. It’s how we know about Jesus, about God’s will for His creation, about God Himself. About the activity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. **It is the Triune God revealing to you the lengths He went to redeem you and this world from sin in Christ and grant you life eternal**. It is also His way of telling you about Himself in a way that we can process. “But why does it have to be so hard?” you might ask. Well, does everything of value have to be spoon fed? Is a book about God required to be trite? Or cartoonish? Perhaps we might expect a book about God to be a bit “elevated”. Instead, we might start with approaching God’s Word with a bit more reverence and awe. We might approach it as a treasure to be mined, not cotton candy to be gobbled up. So, reading the Bible is something that takes effort, learning, repetition...and patience.

Reading the Bible is also important for your spiritual growth and maturity. Not just to vaguely know some information, but to know what God says in **specific, historical situations but also every time and place**, and then how you are to respond. The Scriptures are the primary way we have to measure and test the lies of world. To know the truth. To speak a word about Jesus. The Bible gives us a way to be more and more the people God wants us to be.

The Basic Strategy of Organization and Reading

So, now we get to it—a basic strategy for reading. First thing, however, is to make some sense of the whole by knowing its parts. So, go and grab a Bible. An *actual bound book*. Apps won't work for this. Turn to the "Table of Contents". It's in the front. Ready?

The Bible is not one book but 66 books—39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament. The trick to start is to "get organized". Old Testament first. Take a sharpie or pen. From *Genesis* to *Deuteronomy* draw a bracket. From *Joshua* to *Nehemiah* draw another bracket. From *Esther* to *Song of Solomon* draw a third bracket. From *Isaiah* to *Malachi* draw a final bracket. Here's what the brackets show:

Bracket One: The Books of Moses—These five books are the story of the creation, the primeval history through the Flood, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, etc.) and the Exodus, leading to the entry into the Promised Land. These books also make many promises about Jesus...and have many "types and shadows" that pre-figure Jesus.

Bracket Two: The Historical Books (ca.1500-450BC)—These books tell the history of the people of Israel from the entry into the land of inheritance all the way through the return to Judah after the Babylonian Captivity. Included in this are the reigns of King David and Solomon, the kingly line of descent which leads to Jesus.

Bracket Three: The Wisdom Books—These largely are books of poetry and wisdom. Included is the Psalms. These are the "songs in the key of life". They are worship, praise, laments and rules for living. They teach and give us language that we speak back to God and use to describe our life on earth as His people. These are books that teach us the fear of the Lord. The Wisdom books are also replete with imagery centered on Jesus.

Bracket Four: The Prophets (ca.900-400BC)—These are the *writing* prophets. They are both the big prophets (Isaiah-Daniel) and the so called "minor" ones. The prophets speak to God's people in different historical situations and apply God's Word in their own time. We might think of them as speaking in "BC language". But they also in many and various ways point to the coming of Jesus. They describe God's plan of salvation in both near ways and far off ways. But there is some strange, foreign stuff in here!

Next for the New Testament.

Make a bracket from *Matthew* to *John*. Put a dot next to Acts. Make a bracket from *Romans* to *Philemon*. Make a final bracket from *Hebrews* to *Revelation*.

Bracket One: The Gospels—These books talk about Jesus (duh!).

Dot One: Acts—This book continues the story of Christ by focusing on the *acts of His apostles* and the Christian Church. St. Peter and St. Paul are the two major figures spreading the good news of Jesus to Jews and Non-Jews alike. The Holy Spirit is in charge!

Bracket Two: The Pauline Epistles—These are Paul’s 13 letters, nine to churches/congregations and four to individuals. They are ordered by size (more or less). Paul’s letters give us the best, clearest proclamation of the significance of Jesus Christ in the Bible.

Bracket Three: The General Epistles—These are the rest of the books of the New Testament, some by Peter, some by John, and a few others. These read more like sermons...also centered on Christ. Revelation is its own “animal” and should be read only when one has a firm grasp on the OT and especially the Prophets.

One other organizational tool. There are **four basic events** that one needs to know even before they read the Old Testament. I give very approximate dates for simplicity. The key events are: the Flood (???), the Exodus (ca.1500BC), the Reign of King David (ca.1000), the Babylonian Exile (ca. 600BC). For the NT, the birth of Jesus (4BC!), ministry of Jesus (ca.27AD), death and resurrection of Jesus (ca.30AD), the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70AD). These markers will help you keep some kind of historical perspective and grounding.

Now you have a basic organizational grasp of the entire Bible. By knowing how things are laid out, you should have a better handle on things. So, what to read?

There is a basic guiding principle that helps choose—**which books most directly talk about Jesus or the promises of Jesus**. As Martin Luther put it, “[Read] what *thumps/urges on* Christ.” It is *those books we read first and the most*. Below, I suggest five reading plans, going in order:

Sample Reading #1	<i>Galatians</i>	Sample Reading #3
<i>Genesis 1-3</i>	Sample Reading #2	<i>Luke</i>
<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Genesis</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>Luke</i>	<i>Exodus</i>	<i>Joshua (skim parts)</i>
<i>Romans</i>	<i>Deuteronomy</i>	<i>1 Samuel</i>
<i>1 John</i>	<i>Matthew</i>	<i>John</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>Philippians</i>	<i>2 Samuel</i>
<i>Mark</i>	<i>1 Peter</i>	<i>Romans</i>
<i>Ephesians</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>1 Corinthians</i>
<i>Acts</i>	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	<i>Mark</i>

Sample Reading #4	<i>1 Kings</i>	<i>Exodus</i>
<i>Matthew</i>	<i>2 Kings</i>	<i>Mark</i>
<i>Genesis</i>	Sample #5	<i>John</i>
<i>John</i>	<i>Isaiah</i>	<i>Daniel</i>
<i>1 John</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>Matthew</i>
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	<i>Jeremiah</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>

Throughout this, you could also read a psalm a day, followed by the Proverbs, then the Psalms, etc.

I know you think I'm crazy. I know you think this is "too much". You will tell me, "I'm not a reader" or "I don't have time!" Truth is, there are a billion bible reading plans out there. There are a number of ways to read the Bible. But to read the Bible, you have to...well...start reading the Bible. *There's no real shortcut.* What I am proposing is a strategy that focuses primarily on the Gospels, several of Paul's and the general epistles, with key books of the Old Testament. **The repetition is on the books that most clearly and profoundly tell the story of Jesus and unpacking the enduring significance of Jesus.**

The Joy and Blessing of Reading God's Written Word

But here's the thing—however you go about it, *just read*. I'm trying to give a plan that won't get you stuck in some strange places. There's time later for strange...but better to not start there! That's why reading the Bible chronologically is problematic—you get to *Leviticus* and wham! "What is going on here????!!!" And then people quit and go back to Candy Crush.

But if you read, focusing on the Gospels and Paul, adding in Genesis, Exodus and the Psalms, you will find that you will want to explore. You will be pulled in. Because God's Word, when daily engaged, *does things to you*. It works on you. It opens up the mysteries of the universe. It tells you the greatest love story of all time. *It blesses you*. Before you know it, you will be going to (gasp!) a "bible study". You will start watching online resources or listening to podcasts. You will begin to be formed and shaped by God's treasury of wisdom and mercy. It will start to make some sense.

Very last thing. To read the Bible alone, without a church home and faithful Christians (namely a pastor) to guide you is *difficult*. **Frankly, the Bible was written to be read in a community of faith.** While clear in Its core message, reading alone can also lead to forming some very wrong conclusions! The three historic Creeds of the Church (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian) are a sort of **roadmap and guide to reading**. For instance, if you at some point come to the

conclusion that Jesus was not God, then, you've gotten off the road! Or if you come away feeling like God doesn't love His world and the people in it, a wrong turn was made. So, it's important to have trustworthy, faithful Christians to "be around" that you may have instruction, guidance, and encouragement. But the journey is to read the Bible for all It's worth...not simply to stare at It as I would a car engine.

Give it a try. Something might happen. You might grow in your faith and more certain in the love God has for you. You might even tell other people about Jesus.

Two Quick Postscripts

Obviously, reading an entire book of the Bible is a big commitment of time and attention. I have not done "partials" because I think it is important to read the "whole". So this means, you will encounter some things right off the bat that might confound and confuse you. My advice is to **press on**. *Keep going*. If it isn't made clear, or you are bothered by a question, there are a multitude of resources to provide help (including your pastor!).

Also, "reading" the Bible can also be listening to it. There are a variety of good performative, faithful presentations of the Holy Scriptures out there. Some are even free! So, you can "read" the Bible while you drive or work out. Having another member of your household read aloud is another great way to engage with God's Word. Listening to the Bible might help if you are not really "a reader".