

# How To Get More From Your Bible Reading

by L. G. Butler

Years ago an elderly lady stood in line to enroll in an adult reading course. When asked, "At your age, why?" she replied: "I want to read the Bible before I die." Today, for everyone who wants to read the Bible ... for the first time, or again, but with greater ease, understanding, and retention ... there are *many* good reasons to abound in hope!

Consider trying some of the following ideas for making Bible reading more efficient, effective, and rewarding. In the long run, it is probably much better to read only a small amount with good understanding, than to try reading so fast (or so much) that understanding and retention suffer. Better to focus on "uncovering the material" than trying to "cover" too much. Several things you can do, (1) *before reading*, (2) *during reading*, and (3) *after reading*, will increase the potential for greater benefits for the time spent. In turn, the additional sense of accomplishment can enhance motivation to continue.

Once you allocate a block of time (say thirty minutes<sup>1</sup>) for reading the Scriptures, consider using the following plan:

- (1) *Before reading procedures* (e.g., three to eight minutes)
- (2) *During reading activities* (twelve to twenty-two minutes)
- (3) *After reading activities* (at least, five to ten minutes)

Although this plan will leave less time for actual reading during the half hour, in the long run your growth in knowledge and understanding will be much greater than if you had spent all of the time reading. This article is based on the idea that reading is a *means to an end*, not an end in itself.

## (1) Before Reading Procedures

Take a few minutes to *prepare your heart* (Ezra 7:10<sup>2</sup>)<sup>3</sup> and *ready your mind* (Acts 17:11<sup>4</sup>). During this time, focus on one or more of the following:

- *Pray for an open heart and increased understanding*. God has promised to give us wisdom, if we will ask (James 1:5<sup>5</sup>). This need not be a long prayer—only earnest and focused.

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- *Get in tune with your “hunger and thirst for righteousness.”* Nothing can substitute for desire, whether it is in sports, academics, or understanding the word of God. Consider our potential for spiritual growth if we were to crave righteousness as much as we crave pizza, ice cream, or a juicy hamburger! Jesus assures that when people seek with this intensity of noble purpose, “they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). And, I might add, not with cholesterol and saturated fats—but with knowledge, righteousness, and hope!
- *Approach God’s word with reverence.* The Scriptures are not only an ancient, valuable document, but are, indeed, the very *word of God*<sup>6</sup>, having “the power of God to salvation” (Romans 1:16). When Nehemiah and his colleagues “opened the book” to read from it, the people “stood up,” implying great reverence and respect (Nehemiah 8:5).
- *Focus your attention.* Lots of things compete for our attention. Find (or create) a quiet reading place away from the chaos that is so pervasive in our culture. Turn off the radio, television, and cell phone (or, put on airplane mode); even consciously nurture a quiet heart. Public speakers know this: “May I have your attention, please.” Mothers know this: “You pay attention when I am speaking to you!” The apostle Paul knew this: “Give attention to reading ...” (1 Timothy 4:13). Solomon, respected for his wisdom, knew this: “Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say” (Proverbs 7:24, NIV). The reason? Solomon explains: “Pay attention and gain understanding” (Proverbs 4:1, NIV).
- *Quickly survey the passage.* Look for key terms or phrases that give clues to (1) what the passage is about, including the general context, and (2) what type of writing it is (e.g., poetry, narrative, or informative; historical or prophetic; literal or figurative—such as a parable or metaphor). Use this survey procedure to help nurture curiosity and mental engagement.
- *Reflect briefly on what you already know about what you are about to read.* This step can help improve initial comprehension and increase long-term retention. Making connections between new and old learning can also enhance recall, thus reducing forgetfulness.
- *Establish your purposes.* Think about what you would like to learn as you read the passage. Focus more on understanding than just finishing the task. Consider some challenges you are facing in your walk with God, or topics/questions about which you want to know more.

## (2) During Reading Activities

While reading, engage your brain/mind in a variety of comprehension-enhancing processes:

- *Stay focused on learning and understanding.* It is important to keep attention and purpose focused. By doing so, you can help prevent getting to the end of a passage and pausing in wonderment ... “I have read every word and phrase, but I don’t have a clue regarding anything the author said!” (Who has not experienced this!)
- *Practice active reading.* Interact with the text. Raise questions: “I wonder if ...?” “What is meant by ...?” “How might I use this in my life?” “Who is....?” “Why might this be important?” Try to connect what the author is saying with your own experience and knowledge; even judge what is being said (1 Corinthians 10:15; Acts 17:11). “During family Bible reading time,” as Brett Hickey shared, “each family member can look for the most meaningful verse as a chapter is read out loud. This makes for good discussion afterwards.”
- *Monitor your comprehension.* As you read, constantly ask: “How well do I understand what I am reading?” “Does my current understanding of the passage match what I already know about this incident, topic, or person?” If needed, use one or more of the following techniques: (1) slow down, (2) reread, (3) tentatively hold the thought in suspension while you read on to see if it is clarified later in the passage, or (4) hold questions (or write them down) to ask or to discuss with others later.
- *Stay attuned for God’s message(s) in the passage.* If we are not careful, our biases, prejudices, beliefs, personal desires, or lack of love for truth will cause us to misunderstand God’s true meaning, or even be deceived.<sup>7</sup>
- *Do not get discouraged if you find words you cannot pronounce or passages hard to understand.* Using a *read along strategy*<sup>8</sup> while listening to an audio recording of the Bible<sup>9</sup> can help both with pronunciation of unknown words, and reading in “thought units.” Reference works such as Bible dictionaries and maps can also help.

## (3) After Reading Activities

Once you have finished reading the selection, allow some time to reflect on, respond to, and apply what you have just read:

- *Consider (observe and think about) what God has said.* God has promised that if we do, He will give understanding (2 Timothy 2:7). Like Mary, ponder the thoughts in your heart (Luke 2:19). “Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all” (1 Timothy 4:15).

- *Take notes.* Notes can include: questions you want to reflect on or discuss with others, items to study in more depth, ideas you want to remember, an outline or summary of the passage, quotes you plan to memorize, a personal response, or principles you intend to implement in your life.
- *Discuss with others what you are reading.* Jesus' disciples asked each other about things they did not understand (Mark 9:10; John 16:19); the Ethiopian official asked Philip for help in understanding a passage (Acts 8:30-38). Should you happen to misunderstand something, hopefully, others can explain "the way of God more accurately," as Priscilla and Aquila did for Apollos (Acts 18:26).
- *Allow yourself to respond emotionally to what you have read (e.g., rejoice, weep, fear, or be comforted).* After Nehemiah read the Scriptures one day, "All the people went their way to ... rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them" (Nehemiah 8:12). Awesome!
- *Reread the passage in the same or another translation.* The Bible is so rich with meaning we can never grasp everything in a lifetime of study, much less from a single reading. Read again (and, again) to recheck an interpretation or to accomplish a different purpose (e.g., more details, main ideas, themes, or look for ideas missed in previous readings). The more we learn, the more we will be able to learn—even from material we have already "read" a number of times. Amazing how this works! For all of you who are just beginning to read the Bible and find it "difficult," I encourage you to not get discouraged nor give up too quickly. In many ways reading the Bible is like harvesting strawberries—not all of the fruit is ready to harvest the "first picking!" Some of the sweetest fruit comes later!
- *Hide God's word in your heart.* Why read if we do not intend to remember? David provides a wonderful positive example: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You" (Psalms 119:11). To increase retention, review a number of times what you have read—by yourself or with others. Review: (1st) shortly after reading, (2nd) later the same day, (3rd) the next day, and (4th) a week or so later. Reviewing in this way will take additional time and effort, but can greatly increase the potential for remembering more, longer.
- *Identify changes you intend to make in your life as a result of your learning.* Be not a forgetful hearer but a doer, the Scriptures charge (James 1:25). It is not enough just to read or even to add knowledge. Instead, the goal is for us to "be transformed by the renewing of your [our]<sup>10</sup> mind, that you [we] may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2).

## Summary and conclusions

For many people, reading the Bible can be very challenging. If it is for you also, hopefully, the above suggestions will help you benefit more from the time and effort you spend in God's word. God assures: "If you seek her [i.e., knowledge] as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:4-5).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> If you can find more than a half-hour each day, that would be great! In that case, use similar time *proportions* for the three segments.

<sup>2</sup> "For Ezra had *prepared his heart* to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10, italics added).

<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup> "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they *received the word with all readiness* [*"with all readiness of mind," KJV*], and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11, italics added).

<sup>5</sup> "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

<sup>6</sup> "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God*, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, italics added).

<sup>7</sup> "...with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, *because they did not receive the love of the truth*, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, italics added).

<sup>8</sup> A *read-along strategy* is a supportive learning procedure. In it you would have a copy of a Bible and follow along in it while listening to an audio recording of a narrator reading aloud the same passage in the same translation. As you listen, read along with the narrator (silently or "out loud"). Pay particular attention to pronunciation and reading in "thought units." Listening, reading, and thinking at the same time (when focused on the same passage) can be a powerful learning tool. Although this procedure can be used by anyone, it can be especially helpful for persons just beginning to read the Bible. Following are some sources of audio recordings of the Bible available online at no cost to users. Recordings of the Bible (in various translations) are also available for purchase online and from many bookstores.

<sup>9</sup> Audio recordings of the Bible (various translations) can be found at these sites:  
<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/> (ESV, HCSB, KJV, LEB, NASB, and NIV versions, accessed December 27, 2013).

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/audio-bible/> (KJV, NLT, and WEB versions, accessed December 27, 2013).

Note: In digital copies of this article (e.g., website, e-book, or PDF) and while connected to the internet, click on *underlined* text to take you directly to the online reference cited.

<sup>10</sup> A bracket within quotes indicates the words enclosed were not in the original quote.

### **For more information:**

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Second ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993. 1981.

Fox, Michael. *Feeding on the Word: Establishing the Basic Skills of Interpretation*. Auburn, CA: BoldPrint, 1999.

Hickey, Brett. "How to Study the Bible (#789)." <http://letthebiblespeak.com/library.cfm> (Transcript, audio & video recordings, 28 minutes. Accessed December 27, 2013).

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Hickey, Brett. "Obstacles to Bible Reading—Part 2 (#936)." Let the Bible Speak. <http://letthebiblespeak.com/library.cfm>. (Accessed December 27, 2013).

<http://www.studythebibleyourself.com> (Guides, tutorials, and other study resources, accessed December, 27, 2013).

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