

Reading the Bible for All of Life:

The Important Work of Biblical Literacy

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Abstract: God's grand story of redemption, revealed in the pages of Scripture, is an essential story to frame every individual believer's story. To access the story and discover the self-revelation of God's character, a believer will need to be biblically literate. Knowing *how* to read and study Scripture will aid believers in their growth. The Word of God examines the heart and mind of the reader, convicting, compelling, exhorting, and commanding. In this paper I will define Bible literacy, present the skills involved in accessing the truths of Scripture, and inspire you as to the great feast in store when we read the Bible well.

Keywords: Bible literacy, reading, proficiency, studying, transformation

What is Bible Literacy?

The Bible tells one big story through a multitude of little stories. God's Word has been given to us in the form of one book which contains 66 smaller books written by about 40 authors over approximately 1400 years. Most of us have countless Bibles in different translations sitting on our shelves. But when we open up one of those Bibles, do we know where to start? Do we know how to read and study it?

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Literacy is defined as the ability to read or write, comprehending what one is reading at a basic level. Literacy can also refer to a breadth of knowledge in a particular area. It would be fair, then, to say that Bible literacy includes having access to the Scriptures in one's own language and the skills needed to read the Bible well. Reading God's Word thoroughly and thoughtfully are necessities in the journey of Bible literacy. We must read, engage with, and meditate on the whole of Scripture over time. The Bible was never intended to be read in fits and starts. Reading the book of Psalms countless times throughout our life is not Bible literacy; while we may gain a deep love of and comfort from the Psalms, we are missing the full picture of who God is. The Bible is God's self-revelation and, consequently, reading it is the primary means by which we, as believers, come to know Him.

Back to Basics

Where does one begin on the journey of Bible literacy? A necessary starting point is to believe that Scripture *can* be understood and that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).² God will tell us, through His Word, what we need to know. By His Spirit, He will help us comprehend what is necessary to live for Him.

Attaining a level of Bible literacy is all about how to read well. We should approach the Bible as a book, as literature—one big story told in a combination of historical narratives, poems, prophecies, and biographies. Since it is inspired through various authors, we can see their voice and personality coming through the text. Each book of the Bible is written with an intended purpose, meaning, and literary style (called genre), which means that to read the Bible well, we need to honour the style a particular book is written

² Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

in. Historical narrative accounts, like Exodus and Acts, give facts and details. The Gospels share the life story and mission of Jesus; they are biographical records written by four distinct authors each introducing Him to a particular audience. The New Testament letters provide imperatives and instructions as well as the underlying indicative truths and power for living the Christian life. The genres come together to tell one grand story: the story of a God who created, who planned for the redemption of fallen humanity from before the foundation of the world.

From Mere Ability to Proficiency

Studying God's Word is an integral part of the Christian faith. Yet, many believers are unsure how to begin the process of reading the Bible well. A helpful starting point is to ask *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* of every section you read, and record what you learn about God. Remember that the skill of studying Scripture can be developed and strengthened in due course through experience and repetition. Basic literacy over time ought to develop into proficiency in handling the Word. As believers, we can resolve to read the Bible for all it is worth.

As we explore the full breadth of Scripture over our lifetimes, the little stories will start to thread together in a meaningful and, hopefully, transformative way. For example, six "boring and monotonous" chapters that describe the tabernacle's construction in the book of Exodus will soon become a stunning revelation about the God of beauty and detail and holiness. The charge that Paul gives to Timothy in his final letter is the same charge for us today: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

A Feast is Waiting

The truth is, reading and studying take time. Yet something interesting happens as we engage in and devote ourselves to the study of His Word. As we grow in our comprehension of Scripture, we

begin to delight in it more and more. We will see that, as we grow from milk to meat, there is a feast waiting for us every time we sit down to meditate on and digest the passages before us. Moses ends the 40 years in the wilderness by teaching the children of Israel how precious the Word is: “For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life” (Deut. 32:47).

The Word is not to simply be endured, checked off, or studied out of obligation; it is intended to be delightful and life-giving. It does not mean that there will not be times when we will sit down and open it out of habit or discipline. Whether we “feel” like it or not, the habitual practice of reading and studying will still be of benefit even if there is not a mountaintop moment every time we engage. Because it is a supernatural book, God works in and through it even when we do not necessarily enjoy it.

Ultimately, our spiritual life and nourishment find their roots in His Word. Moses relays the essential nature of it to the children of Israel: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

A Transformation is Coming

Scripture is God’s primary means of helping believers grow in Christlikeness. Literacy does not necessarily equal maturity, but Christian maturity does not happen without feeding on the Scriptures. A key repeated theme in the writings of John is the idea of abiding. Disciples abide in the vine, dwell in His presence, and spend time in His Word. As believers abide, they are confronted with the commands and instructions in Scripture. *Abiders obey*; they *do* the Word. James says this: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves, do what it says” (James 1:22). There is this miraculous outcome of *doing* His Word: those who abide and live and obey His Word grow more in Christlikeness by the mysterious work of His Spirit. Fruit grows off of our branches; we get saltier and brighter as

we conform more to His likeness. In reading Scripture, we are compelled to believe what God is saying and we are prompted to obey what He is commanding. This results in a life of being sanctified. Jesus prays for His disciples just before His death, seeking that they grow in holiness through the truth of His Word: “Sanctify them in your truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Isaiah 55 presents a stunning picture of the work that God’s Word is doing:

- ¹⁰ “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Isaiah compares the Word of God to rain and snow that comes from heaven to water the earth, causing fruit and plants to be born. The rain had a purpose and that purpose was accomplished. So it is with the Word of God. God describes His Word going forth with the aim of *doing* something. He promises that it will “accomplish and succeed” in what He’s sent it to do. In the context of Isaiah, the illustration is of thorns and weeds being transformed into strong and beautiful trees and shrubs. What comfort and hope.

The author of Hebrews describes it this way: “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” (Heb. 4:12). As we read, the Bible itself uncovers our habitual sin and patterns of thinking or doing that put us at risk of drifting. But as this

supernatural book works in us, we can experience the sweet relief of confession and repentance available to us as we encounter Him and His tender mercy and everlasting kindness through His Word. We come face to face with the goodness of God as He reveals our wayward hearts and draws us back to Himself. Ultimately, we grow in holiness by submitting our thinking and ways to the plumbline of His precepts; we are conformed to His image as our Spirit-empowered efforts are confirmed.

Let Us Resolve

We need to do the honest work of first assessing where God's Word is in our homes, lives, and churches. Is it gathering dust? Are the pages of the Psalms worn and threadbare while the book of Amos has never seen the light of day? We need the whole counsel of the Word to receive the complete revelation of God.

Yes, some books are challenging. A while back, a group of women and myself spent an entire year studying the Minor Prophets—a section of Scripture made up of books with strange names like Obadiah and Habakkuk. A primary theme in these books is the judgment and wrath of God. But something miraculous happened: we ended up loving Him more deeply by the end. We met a merciful God full of lovingkindness, who does and will judge righteously. In turn, these short, difficult books helped bring hindsight clarity to the book of Revelation which we had studied several years before. We better understood the necessity of a Saviour, as these books gave us a burden for those who have not received the healing forgiveness of Christ in their lives. We are missing out on the riches before us if we confine our Bible intake to a quick daily devotional that gives us morsels of the sustaining Word out of context and without the whole of Scripture bearing on itself.

So, what next? As professing believers, we ought to be reading and studying the Word of God regularly. Before you get started, acknowledge to the Lord that you desire to experience hunger, discipline, delight, and devotion as you encounter Scripture. Ask Him to search your heart and reveal the reasons you might lack desire and

intention. Ask for His power and illumination to help you regard the text as essential and necessary for life.

Can we resolve to clear the path to make way for a lifelong journey of Bible literacy? Join a Bible study, express your desire to a few people around you, take a course on the basics of studying Scripture. Start going to the Bible instead of reading books about the Bible. Feed on His Word. Study the Word *for* yourself but not *by* yourself.

As you begin or continue your journey of Bible Literacy, here are a few bits of help:

- Be prayerful. Ask God to help you understand what He needs you to know from His Word.
- Be intentional. Set a plan for the week ahead. If you're looking to crack open the Bible and start fresh, what about starting in the beginning? Pick a time and a place each day where you can commit to 10–20 minutes of reading (or more!).
- Be common-sensical. We don't need to drum up a new way of reading. Read the text before you for basic understanding. Ask questions about the text. What's happening? Who is this about? Where is this taking place? Why is this happening or being described or being commanded?
- Be contextual. Determine who the author is of the book you are reading. Who is the intended audience, and what is the author's intended meaning for that particular group of people?
- Be inquisitive. Start exploring the cross-references you find as you read or study a given passage. See what else God says on this particular matter or facet of His character.
- Be resolved. After you have determined what God meant for the people the author was writing to at that time, try to build the contextual bridge to today. Read the Scriptures through the lens of the finished work

of Christ. This will help us apply it to our time and our particular circumstances. Application can look like a change in thinking, a prompting to act, a command to obey, an offering of worship, a deep encouragement, a call to repent. We will not arrive at a different meaning from the original intended audience, but carrying that meaning through the cross and resurrection will help us to apply it faithfully to our own particular circumstances today.

Let's learn the Word through utilizing basic study skills both individually and with others. Let's love the Word as He gives us an understanding of the life available and the revelation of Himself. And let's live the Word, endeavouring to give a hearty "yes" to all that it asks of us, knowing that His commands have been given in light of the knowledge of our human frailty and failure. His power indwells us to help us want to obey and be able to obey.

Reading the Bible for life will nourish our minds and souls, and help us grow in Christian maturity and Christlikeness. We will gain satisfaction and delight as we meditate on truth in a world of ambiguity and lies. And we have clear instructions for the way; Scripture is sufficient to help us live all of the Christian life.

So in 2022, where is the Word of the Lord in your life? Let's dust off the cover and get started.

Resources for Getting the Big Picture of the Bible:

- *Woven: Understanding the Bible as One Seamless Story* Angie Smith
- *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* D.A. Carson

Resources for How to Study the Bible:

- *Read This First: A Simple Guide to Getting the Most from the Bible* Gary Millar
- *Women of the Word How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds* Jen Wilkin (Although the title would suggest otherwise, this book is not for

women only! It is a helpful resource for both men and women.)

- *How to Study Your Bible* Kay Arthur, David Arthur, and Pete De Lacy
- *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays