

SAMPLE CHAPTER
NOT FOR RESALE



Ask Pastor John

750 Bible Answers to Life's
Most Important Questions

TONY REINKE

Foreword by John Piper

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Ask Pastor John: 750 Bible Answers to Life's Most Important Questions

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To each of Desiring God's precious ministry partners who carried this podcast through its first decade. This book testifies to your faithful response to the call of our Savior through your faithful prayers, personal encouragements, and monetary investments over these ten years. Together we are extending God's grace around the world and adding new voices to the global chorus of souls thankful to God, all to the praise of his majesty (2 Cor. 4:15).

“All learning is the fruit of question-asking and answer-seeking.”

JOHN PIPER (1975)

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Foreword by John Piper

AFTER SPENDING EIGHT HOURS PREPARING to record answers to five *Ask Pastor John* questions, I come downstairs at six o'clock and say to my wife, "What would we do if we did not have the Bible?"

The answer is, we would presume that our own wisdom could penetrate the mysteries of life and point people to their eternal good. That is not what we presume. Our assumption is that God alone has the wisdom we need to honor him, love people, and be eternally happy in his presence. That wisdom is recorded infallibly in one place, the Bible. God's word is the foundation and motivation of *Ask Pastor John* (APJ).

Christ has given to his church "pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). I believe he called me to be one in 1966. Tony tells the story in his introduction. It is a dangerous calling. The very Bible that warrants the call, warns the called: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).

A podcast that presumes to answer some of the hardest questions of life would be utter folly without the word of God. And even with the word, and the help of the Holy Spirit, it is a trembling work: "This is the one to whom I will look," declares the Lord, "he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2).

For all the danger and all the trembling, it is a joyful work. The teacher always learns more than the student. This is God's way: it is always more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). But the joy is not just in learning; it is even more in tasting its fruit in the lives of those who listen. For example, one young woman said to me, "My parents are not believers. I am a new Christian. I do not know how to do life. But when I hear your voice on APJ, it sounds like a soothing grandfather helping me know how to live."

There are advantages to being old. Sounding like a trusty grandfather is one. Another is recognizing rare gifts when you see them. The gift of synthesis

manifest in this book is astonishing. For ten years I have watched Tony Reinke evaluate questions, record answers, edit recordings, host the podcast, and schedule the episodes. It is a precious partnership. But the skill you see in this book is of another order. Weaving hundreds of thousand-word answers into topical, coherent, readable chapters inspires my seasoned admiration.

One of our hopes for this book is that you will be drawn into the audio podcast. Not because spoken words are truer than written words. But because the living voice carries the affections of the heart more effectively. Why does that matter?

It matters because love is the goal of knowledge, not the other way around (1 Tim. 1:5). Christ-exalting behavior flows from Christ-cherishing hearts, not just Christ-knowing minds. Tony and I are Christian Hedonists.¹ Therefore, this podcast flows from the conviction that God is most glorified in our listeners when they are most satisfied in him. So, we can't settle for imparting new ideas. We aim to impart new affections. A miracle. Such affections can be heard more readily than read. We hope you can hear our hearts. There is a melody there. We call it the glory of God in the gladness of God-centered souls.

1 See APJ 1913: "Christian Hedonism in Two Minutes" (March 15, 2023).

A Word before We Begin

1. Don't stop listening to the podcast! What you hold is a companion guide, a thematic synthesis, an easy-to-browse encyclopedia, to make the audio archive more valuable and useful. My book is intentionally brief, blunt, and to the point. The audio recordings are fuller, warmer, and more pastoral. Use them in tandem.
2. You probably won't agree with everything in this book or on the podcast. That's okay. Read and listen as a good Berean with an open Bible and active discernment.
3. You won't need everything in this book. Not immediately. It covers a broad swath of situational ethics on our most popular themes.
4. If you are a Christian leader and pastor, however, you should read every word of this book. These topics will introduce you to the mind of John Piper as he addresses situational, ethical dilemmas from the Bible. By them I hope you will more clearly see how he processes challenging questions. It's formative. While I am forever grateful to God that Piper writes books and preaches sermons, I have learned the most from Pastor John in his answers to great questions. Those answers help me contextualize his complete works.
5. Study Pastor John's text-first approach to ethics. With a question on the table, Pastor John begins with the clearest biblical texts on the topic first, then reasons out to proper application. The church can sometimes rush too quickly to discuss and debate very specific ethical *applications*, too often running past the first step of getting clear on the *baseline relevant texts*, which are the ground of all else. For the sake of the church,

this text-first approach will remain an essential discipline for Christian authors, professors, journalists, counselors, pastors, preachers, parents, and anyone who describes or prescribes Christian ethics. The goal of the podcast is the aim of this book—to help you form your own ethical synapses, new junctions where Scripture connects to daily life in the twenty-first-century world.

6. Most importantly, desire God. God *is*—“absolute, self-existent, and independent of all other reality” (Exod. 3:14). He has no beginning and no end. He experiences no need, no change, no improvements.¹ Behind, under, over, and around the entire APJ podcast looms this self-sufficient Creator of the universe, infinitely happy in himself. Every other topic—from salvation to smartphones to sulking to sex—can only be handled Christianly in the presence of our triune Creator’s bliss. “From all eternity, before all time, God was alive with volcanic joy. Joy is essential to the very nature of God in the fellowship of the infinitely happy and holy Trinity. The Father loves the Son and finds him supremely well pleasing. The Son loves the Father and delights in all that he is. The Holy Spirit streams omnipotently with his joy between the Father and the Son. So God needs nothing. He has no deficiencies. He is free from all evil and full of all good.”²

All of God’s subsequent sovereign actions display his all-powerful independence. God is “completely happy” within himself, “happy at the core of his being in his all-sufficiency.” From his self-sufficiency he creates the world, in love, a place “to share with creatures in his own image the very joy that he has in himself.” God doesn’t need creation. Or you. Or me. And yet he is so “perfectly happy” in himself that he chooses to create us and to redeem us from our sin through Christ’s blood so that we can experience the eternal bliss of delighting in him. And so arises “this great circle of *enjoying* God and *glorifying* God.”³ The two aims become one. Thus, second only to the happiness he enjoys in himself, “there is no higher or greater happiness that God is looking forward to” than “the delight that he takes in the echoes of his excellence in the supremely happy praises of the saints.”⁴ Only to this

1 APJ 1600: “Who Is God?” (March 15, 2021).

2 APJ SE09: “The Joy Project” (September 21, 2015).

3 APJ 116: “God’s Joy and the Joy of the Calvinist” (June 20, 2013).

4 APJ 958: “The Heart of Christian Hedonism—and the Bible and Creation and Everything” (November 2, 2016).

ultimate and eternal end—God glorified by our satisfaction in him—should each of our life decisions be considered and each of the following episodes be consumed.⁵

5 To flesh out John Piper’s “favorite slogan” (“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him”), see APJ 30: “Three Levels of God-Glorifying Emotion” (February 19, 2013), APJ 194: “Is God an Egomaniac?” (October 15, 2013), APJ 482: “Are We Satisfied ‘in God’ or ‘by God?’” (December 1, 2014), APJ 497: “Is God Less Glorified in the Judgment of Sinners?” (December 22, 2014), APJ 702: “Is God Only Glorified by People Who Love Him?” (October 8, 2015), APJ 1096: “What’s the Origin of Desiring God’s Slogan?” (September 20, 2017), APJ 1201: “Is My Joy Essential in Glorifying God?” (May 23, 2018), and APJ 1215: “Is God Glorified in Those Who Reject Him?” (June 25, 2018).

On Bible Reading, Bible Neglect, and Bible Memory

Why do we read the Bible?

We prioritize daily Bible reading because without it we fail to achieve life's great purpose: "to make God in Christ look magnificent—to make him look precious and valuable, to look like the supreme treasure that he is" (Phil. 1:20). And yet, "there's so much in us that is inclined to think or feel or act in ways that *don't* make Christ look great." To accomplish our great purpose, we must see glory. "If we don't desire and cherish and enjoy and savor and treasure Christ, we will not commend him as magnificent in what we feel and say and do. Christ is most magnified in us when we are most satisfied in him, and we cannot be daily satisfied in the depths of our soul in Christ if we don't *see* him and *savor* him." And that will "only happen" by a "steady meditation on the word of God in the Bible." In Scripture we behold Christ's glory, and this glory transforms us from the inside out (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4).

Proper Bible reading is motivated by a desperation to see God. "The reason I read the Bible is because I am stone-cold dead without Christ and his word. But I want all my life—every part of it—to be glorious. I want life to be beautiful. I want life to be vastly more than it is if I'm left to myself. I want to see how astonishing reality is at every turn—every person, every rock, every tree, every animal, every work of salvation. I know that, left to myself, I am an absolute dud. I am blank, nothing deep, nothing moving, nothing intense, nothing beautiful, nothing precious, nothing sweet or wonderful—just empty, blank, unmoved, coasting along from one worldly preoccupation to another." There's "one hope for John Piper: that I would have eyes to see the God-entranced magnificence of everything—namely, that God would be pleased in my Bible reading to cause me to see the glory that is really there." We must see and savor the glory that shapes us into redeemed sinners who

magnify God by being satisfied in him. Set in this context, Bible reading is truly an “awesome quest.”¹

Why read the Bible daily?

To a new believer who asked why daily Bible reading is so essential to a fruitful life: “I have never met a mature, fruitful, strong, spiritually discerning Christian who is not full of Scripture, devoted to regular meditation on Scripture, and given to storing it in the heart through Bible memorization—and that’s not a coincidence.” Indeed, “it is absolutely essential, after coming to faith in Christ, to be radically, deeply, experientially devoted—unshakably, unwaveringly persuaded—that reading and meditating on and understanding and memorizing and enjoying the Scriptures is absolutely essential for the Christian life.” It calls for daily practice.

Here are ten reasons we need the word daily. (1) Scripture is a means of preserving our salvation. Salvation is a dynamic reality that functions in three tenses: past, present, and future. And in the present reality, “God saves us daily by Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:16). (2) Scripture meets Satan’s temptations (John 8:32, 44; 1 John 2:14). “Every time Jesus was tempted by the devil, he struck back with ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’” (Eph. 6:17). And he had it memorized “so he didn’t have to carry a book in the wilderness.” (3) Scripture is a means of grace and peace to us (2 Pet. 1:2). (4) Scripture is meant to sanctify our lives, to make us more and more holy (John 17:17). “We don’t become perfect in this life, but we do become holy” through the Spirit’s work in our lives via the word. (5) Scripture gives us joy (Ps. 1:21; 1 Thess. 1:6). “Life without joy is unbearable. The Christian life is filled with afflictions. But in them all, God sustains joy, and he does it by the Scriptures.” (6) Scripture protects from error (Eph. 4:13–14). How do Christians avoid becoming leaves blown around by all the cultural winds of opinions? The answer: “The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God—knowledge that they experience not as the opinion of man, but as the word of God. That’s found in one place: the scriptures.” (7) Scripture gives us hope for eternity. Scripture promises us that the frustrations that limit our joy in this life will be removed in the age to come. (8) Scripture keeps us from being startled by false teachers and apostates (2 Tim. 4:3). (9) The Bible calls for careful handling, which we can only learn through day-by-day familiarity with the word (2 Tim. 2:15). (10) The Bible sustains our lives (Matt. 4:4). “Spiritual life—eternal life—just like physical life, must be fed, not by bread, but by the word of God. If you think

1 APJ 1140: “A New Year, A New Bible Reading Plan” (January 1, 2018).

that you have eternal life as a kind of vaccination against hell, which needs no nourishment, you don't know what spiritual life is." Spiritual life is sustained by the daily bread of God's word.²

How do I get the most from my Bible reading?

With all these convictions in place, how do we maximize the impact of our daily Bible reading?

People are very different, and Bible reading will be a different experience for everyone, including the man who initially asked the question. "How disciplined is he? How much time does he have available? What skill does he have in reading—what speed and comprehension? How familiar is he with all the parts of the Bible, even those maybe he hasn't read at all? What level of curiosity does he have that might drive him to slow down and figure things out that are puzzling to him?" Our Bible reading experiences differ because "our capacities for reading and comprehending, our speed, and our life situations are different."

Despite the variables, here are common helps.

1. Belong to a great church that models careful Bible reading by preaching verse by verse. "Few things are more helpful in grasping the totality of Scripture than a steady, week-in and week-out, month-in and month-out, year-in and year-out, decade-in and decade-out feeding on the preached word of God. Oh, this is so important. If your pastor doesn't preach Bible texts and explain to you what they mean, please try to find another church. Because the decades of your life will be gloriously transformed if you sit under the preaching of the word like that for a long, long time." What you hear preached on Sunday morning should illuminate what you read on Monday morning.

2. Find friends who offer accountability and ask you how your reading is going.

3. Set your routine. "Set aside a place and a time where you're going to read your Bible every day. If you don't have a set place and a set time, Satan—along with your own flesh—will almost certainly push your Bible reading right out of your schedule and out of your space."

4. Pray. "Pray earnestly over your Bible reading before you read, while you're reading, and after you read. Pray that God would show you what's really there and make it real for you."

5. Appreciate the deep change that comes from persistence. The Bible is huge. In a given day you'll read four chapters, most of which you will forget in

2 APJ 1512: "Ten Reasons to Read the Bible Every Day" (August 14, 2020).

an hour. In this sense, daily reading will soon feel “absolutely overwhelming and pointless.” But in the discipline, Scripture is “lodging itself in your mind and in your heart in ways you cannot comprehend. The so-called forgotten *language*, the forgotten *paragraphs*, the forgotten *words*, the forgotten *stories*, the forgotten *points* are becoming a repository from which the Holy Spirit can draw out things you do not even know are there.”

6. Take something specific from your reading. More practically, aim to “take one crisp, clear sentence with you—something encouraging, something motivating, something strengthening, something guiding. Write it down on a little piece of paper, stick it in your pocket, stick it in your purse, whatever. Say it to yourself over and over again during the day. Those sentences accumulated—365 of them—are an amazing power and stockpile of truth over time.”

7. Very practically, use the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan to read from four places in the Bible, with the benefit of catch-up days built into the monthly rhythms. But read it. Read all of it. Because “if we leave out big parts of the Bible, we probably won’t know God the way we should.”³

What should we expect on our first read through the Bible?

The Bible daunts any first-time reader, so it’s natural to feel intimidated from the start. Here are three negatives to “scare you off,” and then nine positives to “suck you back in.”

Expect three challenges that will dampen your desire to read the Bible cover to cover.

1. You will be opposed. “Satan hates the word of God and will disincite you, blind you, distract you, bore you.” He will do anything to keep you from the word. Pray for his subversive aims to backfire. “Ask God to keep your heart inclined, remove your blindness, grant you focus instead of distraction, and give you excitement instead of boredom.”
2. You will be shocked. The Bible is raw and honest about life and eternal matters. It’s “stunningly graphic in its description, both of our outrageous sin and God’s breathtaking judgment on sin. If you have any kind of sympathetic engagement with the Bible, you will want to throw up at times when you see what God ordains against sin in this world.” Brace yourself.
3. You will be confused. Expect to come away from Bible reading with unanswered questions, because God does not reveal to us everything

3 APJ 1296: “How Do I Make the Most of Daily Bible Reading?” (December 31, 2018).

we want to know (Deut. 29:29). And what he does reveal is sometimes hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). You will need preachers and teachers in your life to make progress in the challenging parts of Scripture. Press through the confusion. “Put things together that you can put together. And what you can’t figure out, put on the shelf for later attention, and keep on moving.” Don’t let any question stop your progress.

If you press on, expect nine experiences to bless your efforts. (1) Your faith will be deepened. Faith comes from hearing the word, because the Bible was written to give us hope (Rom. 10:17; 15:4). (2) You will experience new liberation from lies and sins that have plagued you (John 8:32). (3) You will be outfitted with new weapons to withstand Satan (Matt. 4:1–11). (4) You will be made more holy (John 17:17). (5) You will become more loving (Phil. 1:9). (6) You will be sustained. “The Bible is the means of God by which he goes on saving us” (1 Tim. 4:16). (7) You will be given an indestructible joy (John 15:11). (8) You will meet God directly, because he meets us in his word (1 Sam. 3:21). (9) And you will behold more and more of Christ’s radiant glory (2 Cor. 3:18). These nine blessed experiences make the challenges of daily Bible reading worthwhile.⁴

How do we stay passionate about Bible reading for a full year?

We don’t follow Bible reading plans to tick off a daily checklist or to meet an external law. We do it to meet an internal necessity, because “feeding upon the word of God day-by-day is built into God’s way of saving you.” We are born again by the word that awakens our spiritual appetite (1 Pet. 1:23–2:3). In this new condition, Peter tells us to *keep on desiring* this word. This is no auto-appetite. We “stoke this desire for spiritual food in the word of God by which you were born again.” The pure word saved us (1 Pet. 1:23–25). And because of it, we can long for the pure milk of the word, “that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:1–3). James makes the same point. The word made you alive (James 1:18). Therefore, go on receiving the word with meekness (James 1:21). “The evidence of your new birth will be shown by your ongoing feeding on the word of God, which works in you all the kinds of things that keep you on the narrow road that leads to life and final salvation.” If you neglect the word, “what’s your alternative strategy for making it home?”

Peter and James remind us that the Christian life starts with a new birth brought about by the word, and it is sustained by receiving the word humbly and regularly. Our spiritual lives are not preserved automatically; they are

⁴ APJ 1416: “What Should I Expect My First Time through the Bible?” (January 3, 2020).

preserved by the means of God’s word. “I love to get up early in the morning, grab my cup of hot tea in the wintertime, sit in my chair for an hour, and enjoy fellowship with Jesus, the living King of the universe, in four different places of the Bible. It is my life. May I say it again? It is my life. Oh, may God cause you to experience his word as life!”⁵

Where should I help a new believer begin his journey into the Bible?

The Gospel of John is celebrated as a good place to start, given that its purpose is clearly to introduce the life and work of Christ (John 20:30–31). But you can go broader and begin with some sense of familiarity with the New Testament. The Bible is meant for a lifetime of exploration and daily discipline. John Piper’s sixty years as a believer have been sustained by this discipline of daily Bible reading. “Wherever you start, you are going *forever* in the Bible. This is not about merely starting.”

Another place to start is with an overview of the New Testament’s structure. It begins with four Gospels, “the books about the historical foundations of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” And then comes the book of Acts, “the story of how the early church got started and launched by the power of the Holy Spirit after Jesus went back to heaven, and how the church took root because of what Jesus had done.” Next comes a bunch of letters written by “the authoritative apostles—the spokesmen for the risen Christ—teaching the church how to live in the church and in society.” Finally, the “strange book” of Revelation finishes the New Testament with “the victory of God at the end of the age.”

Or you can start with Luke and Acts, one book in two volumes. See the opening of the book and their united purposes as “one man writing a double volume about the foundations and then about the expansion of the church” (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3). Then move to Paul’s letters.

Every reader brings different intellectual capacities and reading abilities. Some will struggle to read, and that’s okay. Essential to Bible reading is also finding a church “with solid preaching, vital corporate worship, and a small group of relationships where you can ask lots of questions” and “get all the help in the world” as you make your way through the canon “little by little.”⁶

Another consideration. If you’ve never read the Bible, start with Jesus. Begin with two books about his life and work. Start with the Gospel of Mark and then read the Gospel of John. Then read an epistle that puts all the implications of

5 APJ 1569: “How Do I Become Passionate about Bible Reading?” (January 1, 2021).

6 APJ 284: “Where Should a New Believer Start in the Bible?” (February 24, 2014).

Christ's life and work together, particularly Romans. Then consider a historical book about the early church, called Acts. And then read from the middle of the Bible, the Psalms, ancient songs that "capture all the moods and the ups and downs and the struggles of God's people."⁷

Three essential components to daily Bible reading

We need three essential components "to ongoing fruitful encounters with God and his intended truth through the Bible." (1) *Motivation*, (2) *skill*, and (3) *illumination*. Or (1) the "want to," (2) the "able to," and (3) the "see through." Or the (1) *desire*, (2) *act*, and (3) *reward* of Bible reading.

Essential Bible reading component 1 is the motivation—the "want to," the desire for Bible reading. "If we lose motivation, we will not read the Bible. And if we don't read the Bible, we miss everything God has for us through the word." We *must* be motivated for the task, with motivation like Jesus offers in John 17. "There is a fullness of joy that we will miss if we don't continually listen to what Jesus speaks—that is, listen to the Bible" (John 17:13). And there's a life transformation we will miss if we don't read the Bible (John 17:17). And there's a strengthening of our faith that comes through the testimony of Christ and his apostle via Scripture (John 17:20). "If you want faith, if you want holiness, if you want joy—they all come through encountering God in his word, Jesus says. That's how we get motivated."

Essential Bible reading component 2 is the skill—the "able to," the act of Bible reading. "Something mysterious happens when we pick up a pen or a pencil—not a keyboard, but a pen or a pencil—and we either write out the text, or if it's too long, write down questions you have or observations you make about the things that you're reading in the text." The act of writing out the text will cause you to have new thoughts about the text you would not have had otherwise. Write out your thoughts and questions. Note-taking cultivates careful Bible reading.

Essential Bible reading component 3 is illumination—the "see through," the reward of Bible reading. The payoff. The *realities* of God—his character, will, and ways—"shine through the Scriptures." We see these divine glories by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:18).⁸

Component 3 is subtle, profound, and expounded elsewhere more fully. It means we don't grow content with checking off daily readings, or marking up our Bible for Instagram, or even arcing or diagraming texts. Press "through

7 APJ 464: "I've Never Read the Bible. Where Should I Start?" (November 3, 2014).

8 APJ 1297: "Three Reasons to Read the Bible Every Day in 2019" (January 2, 2019).

the words” to get into “the *reality*” that was “driving and animating” the Bible’s words.⁹ “Massive realities are *behind* these words.” So push yourself “*through* words into reality.”¹⁰ “Push through” the Bible’s words and grammar and logic until you see “the *reality* behind all the words and grammar and logic.” And then dwell on that illuminated divine *reality* until it becomes “an *emotionally experienced reality*.”¹¹

How many Bible versions should I read?

Settle on one main translation. The English Standard Version is Piper’s choice. The ESV is not perfect (no translation is), but it “strikes such a good balance between formal equivalence to the original language as far as possible and readability and appropriate dignity, while being accessible, for the most part, to ordinary folks,” a rare translation broadly useful for personal study, the church’s gathered life, and for memorization by both children and adults. That’s “asking a lot of a translation, to cover all of those bases.”

Good Bible translations don’t overinterpret or oversimplify challenging texts. And yet, with all the varying philosophies behind each work, no contemporary English translation will “lead people into serious doctrinal error.” So it’s a great question: Read one or multiple? “The rule of thumb that I would suggest is this: use multiple translations for the purpose of *increased understanding*—for instance, use them as commentaries—and use one main translation for the purpose of *memorization* and *the saturation of your mind*.”¹²

Ink or pixels?

Is a Bible on-screen or a Bible on paper best for personal devotions?

“I have done all my reading—Bible reading, devotional reading—on an iPad for several years now” and it’s a “wonderful” reading experience, having original-language resources and commentaries available with a screen tap. “So the digital word has made the Bible more accessible, and it has made helps easier to use. Those are some of the upsides.” Apps provide immediate access to tools to enhance our Bible reading experience.

But the digital convenience has two drawbacks.

1. The downside of transience. “I want to see the highlighting and underlining and note-taking with a digital Bible as more secure and more permanent. When I have a paper Bible in front of me, I can be underlining it, taking notes

9 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

10 APJ 1268: “How to Read the Bible for Teenagers” (October 26, 2018).

11 APJ 1197: “How to Read the Bible—and Preach It” (May 14, 2018).

12 APJ 1003: “How Many Bible Versions Should I Read?” (February 15, 2017).

in the margin, and that Bible can go on a shelf, and forty years later—which is what I do with my King James Bible from when I was fifteen years old—fifty years later I can take that down and look at what God was doing, at what he was showing me.” Instead, there’s a lingering suspicion that digital notes are doomed to be deleted over time. A “lack of permanence.” We need software that “takes this seriously” by allowing users to export all personal notes and highlights into a file you can save, archive, and return to years later.

2. The downside of immediate distractions. Digital Bible reading requires special focus because we’re just a click away from social media or texts or emails, or a pop-up notification away from having our screen intruded upon. Bible reading easily gets co-opted as we jump back and forth from app to app, a communion-killing compulsion. “Real change happens in the human soul when God shows up in his almighty, authoritative word and works on you. And that is just diminished when we are jumping around looking at other things.” It’s a serious downside. If you cannot overcome this app-jumping impulse, “I would say that it might be better not to even put yourself at risk.”¹³

Yet again, digital Bible programs on a tablet add expediency at several levels. Daily readings are made convenient by an app like Logos where the Bible plan readings are hyperlinked to make it easy to flip to and read. You can copy, paste, highlight, and save verses for meditation later in the day. You can share Bible verses and brief meditations to Twitter and social media. You can click on English words to see their Greek or Hebrew origin. You can earmark texts for future writing projects. And you can reference Bible commentaries with a tap.¹⁴

How do I find the meaning of a Bible text?

Seven stages of discovery will unlock a text. (1) Define key words. Every word has a meaning, often derived from the context—from the immediate context, the paragraph, and the book overall. Find these keywords with Bible software or a concordance, “my most commonly used tool in Bible study.” Rather than turning to commentaries or Bible dictionaries, gather up texts to get you into the author’s head. “What issues all the insight, almost 90 percent of the time, is looking up words that put me onto the trains of thought in an author’s mind.” (2) Find the propositions. Propositions, “the basic building blocks of meaning,” tie those words together, usually with a subject, a verb, and some modifiers. (3) Relate the propositions. Look for these connections in words like *because, therefore, in order that, although, or when*. “This is the way an author

13 APJ 275: “Digital or Paper Bible for Devotions?” (February 11, 2014).

14 APJ 828: “How Do You Use Your iPhone and iPad in Christian Growth?” (April 1, 2016).

communicates his meaning. He puts words together in propositions, then he puts propositions together in certain logical relationships.” (4) Determine the main point of the text flow. The propositions will link together into a logical flow, revealing the author’s point. (5) Compare different texts with similar themes. Find other texts that carry similar terms or similar logical flows, and compare and contrast how they convey the same meaning. (6) Stop to appreciate the reality behind the text. This is a serious step, too often neglected by even the most serious students. “Lots of young people, and older people, when they’re getting excited about seeing the meaning of words, seeing how propositions work, seeing how logical flows of thought develop, get all excited about words and logic. Suddenly they’re playing a game, and they’re forgetting about heaven and hell, life and death, God and Satan—the massive realities behind these words. So I want to push myself through words into reality.” (7) Make life application. Apply your discoveries to your own life. So run a Bible app search for keywords or get a good concordance—the “most helpful” and “most commonly used tool in my Bible study. Commentaries don’t even come close.”¹⁵

Often the meaning of a complicated verse will come only by studying the larger context. When you’re stumped by a text, “step back and look at the larger flow” of the author’s thinking. This will often help resolve the meaning and purpose of a verse or phrase.¹⁶

Too many Christians assume that others must tell them what a text means before they can start thinking about it. That’s false. God gave us “a huge, untapped resource for Bible study: our minds.” So think over texts as you write verses out by hand into a personal notebook. In seminary, Pastor John began writing the text out, and in “writing every proposition of every paragraph on a different line and figuring out how those propositions relate to each other—the very writing caused me to see things.” Writing slows us down, enhances learning, and improves retention. It allows you to write and retain your response. On the same page as the Bible text you copied out, write out implications you see or questions the text raises in your mind. The goal is communion. “We want to meet God in the Bible. And in my experience, slow, meditative, commenting, question-asking reading is where I meet God. I don’t meet God when I am rushing through a text. So get a pen and paper. Open your Bible and copy out a paragraph.”¹⁷

15 APJ 1268: “How to Read the Bible for Teenagers” (October 26, 2018). On studying isolated texts, see APJ 1056: “How Can I Better Study a Bible Passage?” (June 19, 2017).

16 APJ 1863: “Do Unbelievers Get a Second Chance after Death?” (November 18, 2022).

17 APJ 127: “Advice for Better Bible Reading” (July 8, 2013). Piper alludes here to the discipline of arcing. On arcing see APJ 395: “What Tools Do I Need to Study the Bible?” (July 29, 2014),

Should we read the Bible for breadth or depth?

The Bible is a huge book. So how do we enjoy it: *verse by verse* to uncover important details or *chapter by chapter* to understand the sweeping storyline?

We need skills to do both. Some days you will not finish your entire reading, and that's okay. Imagine you wake up one morning, get to your Bible reading, and read Romans 12:9–13, a text with thirteen exhortations in it! What do you do? Breeze past them to finish your daily reading? Or stop and focus on one command to take into your day? “And the answer is *both*. And I don't know how. I just know I've got to read the Bible fast and I've got to read the Bible slow, because if you don't read the Bible fast to get through it in a year or two, you can't get the big picture.” Imagine a jumbo jet flying 560 miles per hour at 38,000 feet over Florida. “You look down and say, ‘Wow, that's an amazing orange grove. Very nourishing. Really tastes good. Really gives me energy.’ Wrong! It doesn't. You're just flying tens of thousands of feet overhead. And that's the way we read the Bible: flying overhead.” Eventually you must land, go to the orange grove, and pick one orange. So “let love be genuine” (Rom. 12:9). Pick one command from the cluster of thirteen and take it into your day. Be willing to stop and ask, What does this mean? Then pray. “I want to be like that. Holy Spirit, please kill the disease of hypocrisy in my life.” In Bible reading, know when to stop and meditate.¹⁸

A decade later, Piper worked out a clearer process for doing both.

To read for *depth* means stopping to reflect deeply on the words and phrases and propositions in a particular text. You can read through a few verses per day, but at that pace “it will take you eighty years or more to read your Bible. I am a great believer in slowing down and thinking, thinking, thinking.”

But given the length of the Bible we must also read for *breadth*. “By *breadth* I mean reading broadly enough so that you take in the entire five-hundred-year period, say, of the divided kingdom in Israel, from Rehoboam right down to the end of the exile. In 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles we have king after king after king rising, falling, succeeding, and failing. Good and evil. Evil then good. A rotten father followed by a good son. A good father followed by a rotten son and on and on.” In this case, “I don't know of any other way but reading through those books broadly to get the profound sense of both the repeated failure and rebellion of God's people over centuries and the extraordinary mercy and patience of God.” There's no replacement for taking a month to consume

APJ 1056: “How Can I Better Study a Bible Passage?” (June 19, 2017), APJ 1141: “Deep Bible Reading Strategies for the Tired and Busy” (January 3, 2018); and John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 395–411.

18 APJ 1670: “How Can I Make Daily Bible Reading Authentic?” (August 25, 2021).

the breadth of these four historic books to fully appreciate God's patience with them—and by implication his patience with us.

Practically, three considerations. (1) Alternate mornings and evenings. Go for *depth* in the mornings and for *breadth* in the evenings. (2) Alternate by month. One month read for *depth*, the next read for *breadth*. (3) Alternate by year. One year read the whole Bible and the next year study only Romans. But whatever path you choose, “never stop reading. This is God's very word. Broad or deep, it is his transforming voice.”¹⁹

Reading broadly *and* deeply is part of the natural rhythm of reading the whole Bible in a year in the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan, a favorite of Pastor John's. Every day you read in four areas: two long Old Testament readings for broader study and two shorter readings in the New Testament for deeper reflection. “This has the great advantage of combining both a broad scope of reading and a narrow, intensified reading.” As an added help, catch-up days are scheduled into the monthly plan.²⁰

Balance deep reading with devotional reading

How do we accomplish *deep reading* with pens and paper and marked-up texts, but also simply read the Bible *devotionally*?

Bible reading is about life stability. “My goal in everything I've ever done with regard to the Bible is not to produce a lot of Bible nerds, but the kind of Christians who are so deep and unshakable in their convictions about eternal reality that they are not blown over by the winds of trouble and don't simply float mindlessly along, conforming to the currents of contemporary culture.” The aim is to be an oak tree, “withstanding the winds of adversity” (Ps. 1:3). Or a dolphin, “cutting through the currents of culture.” To these ends, the Bible calls us to first become gold diggers, seeking after buried treasure (Pss. 19:10; 119:72, 127; Prov. 2:1–5). Imagine a treasure was hidden long ago in your backyard. Would you dig out this wealth? Yes, of course. That's what Scripture is: a treasure of spiritual wealth beyond imagination, worthy of the grime, sweat, and excavation. So it's “a matter of how desperate we are to get rich with true riches—the riches of Christ and the wealth of his glory, and his wisdom and his power for living the kind of radical Christian life this world so desperately needs.”

Practically speaking, do both kinds of study: deep *and* devotional. Set aside one day to excavate deep into the word. And then read more devotionally throughout the week. “Find a slot in your week, early, before you have to do

19 APJ 606: “How Do I Study Bible Verses and the Bible Storyline Together?” (May 28, 2015).

20 APJ 1140: “A New Year, A New Bible Reading Plan” (January 1, 2018).

lots of stuff with the kids or work in the yard. Find a slot—maybe Saturday morning early or Sunday afternoon or Sunday evening—where you do some serious digging in God’s backyard once a week. But on most mornings, give yourself to a more devotional kind of meditation on the word. It’s never one or the other. It’s always both-and.”²¹

How do we piece together chapters of Scripture?

Reading whole chapters is hard work, especially when connecting propositions and finding the logical flow of arguments. Think of a whole chapter, or a whole psalm, like a jigsaw puzzle. “There are five hundred pieces laid in front of you, and as you look at them, they do not look at all like the painting on the front of the box. They are just one big jumble. That’s how the words and phrases and clauses might look to you in a chapter in the Bible when you try to think of the chapter as a whole.” So how do we start, when the Bible offers no overall picture on the cover to make sense of the pile of pieces?

You examine one piece. “You notice that half of this piece is solid red and the other half is solid gold. You notice that the little protrusion at the top is split in half, and half of it is gold and half of it is red. From this, you infer with careful thinking that there is another piece somewhere that will be half red and half gold.” Of the five hundred pieces, maybe six meet this design. You isolate them, fit them together, and make one “mid-size unit.” Then you look for another unit. And build another. And another. Later you begin to fit the units together.

Such work is tactile, too demanding for most of us to do in our heads. So print the text on paper, draw circles and lines on it, and make summaries of the mid-sized pieces. And then fit those larger units together to see their logical coherence. So “look at the pieces very carefully. Fit them together in mid-size units. Jot down the main points of the mid-size units until you have them all on a half-sheet of paper, and then think and think, and pray and pray, and think and pray and think and pray, and organize and draw lines, and try to fit them all together until they fall into place and you see how these five, six, seven, eight, nine points of the mid-size units are in a flow that make one big overarching point. You will be surprised, if you take a pencil and paper and do this, what you will see.”²²

21 APJ 1141: “Deep Bible Reading Strategies for the Tired and Busy” (January 3, 2018). For more on the dolphin/jellyfish contrast between those who “cut a path against the current” versus those who “float in the current of culture,” see APJ 683: “How to Engage Culture and Swim against It” (September 11, 2015) and APJ 1141: “Deep Bible Reading Strategies for the Tired and Busy” (January 3, 2018).

22 APJ 1049: “How Do I Follow Big Sections of Scripture?” (June 2, 2017).

How do I read the Bible topically?

“I love this question because I think many people sell themselves short when it comes to what they can glean from the Scriptures—for their own spiritual enrichment in depth and for their life in a morally complex world. I think most of us doubt our capacities to find answers for ourselves. Others of us are lazy—let’s be honest—and we want somebody else to do the work for us. So we try to get a quick answer from somebody else rather than do it ourselves with rigorous study.” But the Bible will not give its riches to people who refuse to dig (Prov. 2:3–6). Over all of our Bible study waves the flag of Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”

From this motivation, get to work and isolate your topic by a keyword, like *money* or *marriage*. Use a concordance or a Bible program. You could limit your study to one book, one author, or just the New Testament. But keep it manageable and don’t get overwhelmed. Once you have a list of verses, jot them all down and read each one. Write out the connections you see in the word as it appears in the same author or across Scripture. “Many people have the notion that simply reading and observing the Bible causes insight and wisdom. It doesn’t. It doesn’t. You’ve got to think.” You must *think over* (νόει) what you read (2 Tim. 2:7). To do this, you must keep your eye on the context and logic of each text. And follow the footnoted related texts to the one you’re studying.

Keep paper and pens handy. “Be writing, writing, writing, either in a file on your computer or, like I do often, with a folded half-sheet of paper. I’m doodling and I’m constantly writing because when I write, I’m able to hold more things in my head. Without writing, everything tends to be a muddle. It’s just so complex. People that aren’t writing aren’t going to go very far in bringing a coherent picture of some reality.” Then, later in the process, consult commentaries, books, or web resources on your theme. But in everything, preserve what you have seen so that you can easily return to your discoveries later.²³

What happens when you pray over Scripture?

Prayer is an essential component of Bible reading, but often ignored. “It is amazing, after all these years, how many times I simply start reading without praying. And I can tell the difference, profoundly.”²⁴ Maybe this is one reason why our delight in God from our Bible reading is so short-lived.

We read with the foundational conviction that we are called to focus our lives—our attention and our delight—on heavenly things (Col. 3:1–2). And we

23 APJ 1058: “How Do I Study a Specific Topic in the Bible?” (June 23, 2017).

24 APJ 903: “Why Is My Delight in God So Short-Lived?” (July 22, 2016).

are to avoid setting our attention and delight on the things of man (Matt. 16:23). So what's the solution to an enduring encounter with the word? "I think maybe the most helpful thing I could do is to bring you into a lesson God is teaching me afresh at age seventy that I should not have to be taught again after sixty years as a Christian. I have one tip for you that is just so front-burner for me right now." The tip: pray, before you read your Bible, that God "would come and meet you in the reading of Scripture and open the eyes of your heart and show you what is really there, and make himself real, and bring about amazing changes in your life" (Eph. 1:18). It makes a real difference.

If we pause and pray before we read, God will answer us in six ways. (1) We will hear. By our pre-Bible reading prayer, "God creates a supernatural atmosphere" to remind us "this moment is not just about you and a book. It is about you and the living God." (2) We will see. God will answer and show us new things in Scripture. "Most of us are blind to the glories embedded by God in the very words that he has given us. We read them so casually. Reading the word *Spirit*, the word *glory*, the word *cross*, the word *sin* without praying is one experience. Reading those words after praying may be cataclysmically different, a different kind of *seeing* in those same words." Divine weightiness attends to God's word as it is prayed over. (3) We will feel. We want the right affections to attend our reading. "If you pray, God will open your heart to feel the preciousness of glorious things and the horror of evil things that you would not otherwise feel," because "most of us do not feel emotions that accord with the realities we are thinking about. This is a work of the Spirit, and he does it in answer to prayer." (4) We will be changed. By praying before reading, "God will work changes in you that you would not otherwise experience," changes in your war against sin, desires for holiness, conquering of bad habits, recharging new resources for your relationships, and increased experience of the fruits of the Spirit. (5) We will be guided. "If you pray this prayer at the beginning of your Bible reading, God will from time to time provide the very guidance and leading that you have been longing for in regard to big decisions in your life. God delights to bring fresh vision and guidance into the life of his children while they are spending time with him in his word." (6) We will recalibrate to true reality. Reading the Bible will give us new eyes to see spiritual realities, the lostness of the world, and the eternal future we each have.

So each day, "pause before you read, and earnestly—with as much heartfelt longing as you can muster—pray to God that he would come and meet you in the reading of Scripture and open the eyes of your heart and show you what is really there and make himself real and bring about amazing changes in your life."²⁵

25 APJ 903: "Why Is My Delight in God So Short-Lived?" (July 22, 2016).

A one-minute prayer before you read your Bible

So what does this prayer look like? Before opening your Bible, pray a one-minute prayer of desperation, organized by the acronym I.O.U.S.: *Incline* my heart (Ps. 119:36). *Open* my eyes (Ps. 119:18). *Unite* my heart (Ps. 86:11). *Satisfy* my soul (Ps. 90:14).

Find comfort that such an acrostic of desperation was pulled directly from the Bible. “I take unbelievably strong encouragement from the fact that the psalmists had to pray this way.” *Incline my heart*. “It is amazing that the psalmist would ask God to incline his heart to the word. What? You are not inclined to the Bible sometimes, Mr. Psalmist?!” *Open my eyes*. The psalmist opens the word but looks at basically a blank page and feels horrible about his spiritual insensitivity. We do too. *Unite my heart*. “My heart is all fragmented; it is going every direction. I am looking at a fly on the wall or hearing something on my driveway, and I get distracted in a hundred ways. And the psalmist does too.” *Satisfy my soul*. This final plea is “maybe the most important one of all,” as we join the psalmist in praying: “O God, don’t leave me in this season of boredom or blankness or deadness.”²⁶

Step 3 (*U*) applies especially to those with a divided heart, a normal experience of the Christian life. We want God to draw near to us, but we also have a heart that pulls back from him when he does.²⁷

In sum, I.O.U.S. (“my favorite acrostic”) is “my prayer virtually every day over the word of God,” says Pastor John.²⁸ Without this little prayer, “I might blunder into God’s word in a spiritually self-sufficient frame of mind, in which I am not at all listening to God or hearing God.” And it’s a short prayer. “I’m talking about one minute. You say to God, ‘I am about to read your word, and I need your help.’” Bible reading is not for satisfying curious minds but for feeding hungry souls. “I am here to eat. I am not here to stockpile arguments. I am not here to get a lesson. I am hungry for *you*, God. I need to eat truth here!” This is the desperation behind the little one-minute prayer.²⁹

The acrostic is not only built from the psalmist’s spiritual vulnerability, but also from his darkest struggles. Together they make a prayer of desperation for the believer. “I have gone through very dark and cold seasons, and I want to make sure that when I say that, people realize that we are not talking about a simple, two-phased Christianity, as if there is really red-hot, devoted, vital Christianity, and then there is cold, dead, dark Christianity. The fact is, there

26 APJ 166: “When I’m Bored of the Bible—What Can I Do?” (September 5, 2013).

27 APJ 1719: “Is It Normal to Have a Divided Heart?” (December 17, 2021).

28 APJ 27: “Fighting for Joy in Pastoral Ministry” (February 14, 2013).

29 APJ 496: “How Does Scripture Serve Our Prayers?” (December 19, 2014).

are infinite gradations in between those two extremes.” And those gradations change all day long. “I wake up needing to become alive. And my strategy has been the same pretty much all the way along in trying to fight this fight for joy, and that is to pray earnestly while I look at the Bible.” This struggle is the heart of the acrostic prayer. “I want to see Jesus. I need Jesus. I don’t need mere propositions. I need an encounter with the living Christ, and I believe it comes through the word.”³⁰

A similar strategy works well when the Bible feels boring. When it does, simply recount its own testimony about itself. “I look at things that the Bible says about the Bible to rekindle my love for the Bible” (especially Ps. 119:25, 98; John 5:24; 6:68; 8:32; 17:17; Rom. 10:17; and 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But the bottom line is that for those who find the Bible boring, “you are not alone. We all are up and down in the degree to which we love to read the Bible.” But “even when you don’t feel like it, keep tending the garden like a farmer who has to get out there every day and pull the weeds and till the soil—not because that day the fruit is going to grow up, but because sooner or later, in God’s sovereign timing, if you tend your garden, it will grow.”³¹

I read the Bible but I don’t feel anything—what do I do?

Given the high calling of our emotional engagement with the word, what if I read my Bible, but I don’t feel anything in my affections that resonates with the worth, the value, the preciousness, the beauty, the pleasures of what those words are supposed to communicate? Is there anything I can do next?

Yes, there is, because Scripture calls us to *incline* our ears and apply our hearts to knowledge so that it will be pleasant to the taste and fixed in the memory (Prov. 22:17–18). From this text we see that Scripture is meant to move from the head to the heart in three stages. (1) We *incline* our ear. When we struggle to hear someone, we lean in and listen more attentively. Same with the Bible. (2) We *incline* so that we can *hear* wisdom. (3) After *inclining* and *hearing* we then *apply* our heart to what’s been heard. This means, literally, “you take your heart and you *push* it—you *push* the nose of your heart into the beauty of the knowledge. If the heart is not feeling anything, you say to your heart, ‘Heart, wake up!’ And you take hold of the heart and you apply. You push it. You place it in the knowledge. You *push* on it.”

The word of God is a precious diamond. It’s a gift. And if your heart doesn’t feel the preciousness of this, *push* it into the diamond to look at it from every

30 APJ 27: “Fighting for Joy in Pastoral Ministry” (February 14, 2013).

31 APJ 166: “When I’m Bored of the Bible—What Can I Do?” (September 5, 2013).

direction, “and say to your heart: ‘Heart, move around this diamond. Look at the diamond from that side and look at the diamond from that side.’” Preach to your heart: “Come on, heart, wake up. Come on, heart, *look* at this. Come on heart, *feel* this. This is beautiful. Wake up, heart!” Make this the instinctive cry of your heart when spiritual affections wane over God’s word.³²

Prep your soul to encounter Christ

Bible reading is for encountering Christ. So how do we know that we are not just connecting prepositions but beholding glory? Some thoughts on *seeking* out this encounter with God.

1. Sync your soul. It can take a long time to sync our souls with divine glory. “One of the reasons we don’t meet God profoundly in his word as often as we would like is because our hearts are so unprepared and out of sync with the spiritual reality when we come.” It may take reading fifty chapters of the Bible before the sync happens! “I say it to point out the fact that we may be that out of sync spiritually and emotionally and psychologically with the Bible so that when we read, our frame of mind and the disposition of our heart and the spiritual receptivity of our heart are so out of step with the Spirit of the passage that nothing happens.” To sync, consider personal retreats, rare times set aside to read fifty chapters of the Bible and go hard after God.

2. Draw from writers who have beheld Christ’s glory. Give them the first fifteen or twenty minutes of your time before you open the Bible. This will help sync your soul (1).

3. Taste joy in the longing. We have no greater desire than to see our Savior. But this “perfect fullness of the enjoyment of Christ” is reserved for when we see him face-to-face (1 John 3:2). And yet this joy of Christ’s presence is something we taste now—“really, substantively, authentically, spiritually in the very longings for it.” Meaning it’s “artificial” to separate “our deepest yearnings and achings and longings and cryings for Christ from his presence, his sweetness, the tastes of his visits, and his love. That’s an artificial distinction. The *longings* are themselves a sweet taste of the bread of heaven. The *yearnings* are themselves a sweet detection of the aroma of paradise. The *inconsolable desires* of your soul for Christ are themselves a divine work of the Holy Spirit communicating to you in advance some measure of the sweetness of Christ himself in heaven.”

4. Open your Bible and read. Use a plan to read the whole Bible in a year, something like the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan. And anticipate that God will meet you—maybe in just one of the four readings in any given day. And

32 APJ 748: “I Read the Bible and Feel Nothing—What Should I Do?” (December 11, 2015).

that's okay. Don't expect God to make every Bible reading time unforgettable. But expect a few of them to be especially sweet. Read with this anticipation. And "even if God only shows up once a year, it's worth a year's reading. I mean, if he showed up once a year, it would be worth reading every day, wouldn't it?"³³

Isn't the Bible old and irrelevant?

The Bible is old, but motivation for Bible reading is built on the conviction that its ancient pages are ongoingly relevant to our lives today. So how do we respond when it doesn't *feel* relevant? Listeners ask this question about (1) the Old Testament, (2) the New Testament, and (3) the whole Bible.

1. Is the Old Testament relevant to our lives? What do we gain by reading difficult Old Testament books like Leviticus, where the glory of Christ is not obvious and personal application for our postmodern lives seems unclear? The Bible is always relevant, but we should never imagine that the Bible was entirely written only for us today. The Bible, "with all of its many wonderful and strange parts, is designed by God, inspired by God, put together by God, not just for twenty-first-century, Western, middle-class culture but for thousands of cultures around the world, spread over thousands of years, with all of those centuries and all of those cultures being dramatically different." Only God could pull off a task this huge. So the Bible is relevant for every culture, but it will not apply the same to each generation. For us, "there are going to be parts of the Bible that I as a twenty-first-century, middle-class, White guy find difficult to find relevance in or any kind of echo of my own present concerns. When that happens, I don't think I should neglect any part of the Bible. I think I should be patient and pursue it all."³⁴

2. Are Paul's epistles from the first century applicable to twenty-first-century life? Yes, they remain relevant for several reasons. Some of Paul's letters were intentionally circular, so their contents were not limited to a single church. This is also true of letters from James and Peter. Paul knew that his letters were from God, "words valid and relevant for his people of all time" (1 Cor. 2:12–13). As an apostle, Paul often spoke about the church universal because he knew that his teaching was "foundational and useful for the church's whole existence" (see Eph. 2:19–20). And several New Testament texts deal with transcendent themes that will never change: the nature of God, the nature of man, and the truths of the gospel. Nothing about the gospel that we read is "time-bound or situation-bound," but is equally true and valid and important for us today (see 1 Cor. 15:3). And many points of application for our lives are built on eternal truths that remain "valid

33 APJ 1216: "What Does It Feel Like to See the Beauty of Christ?" (June 27, 2018).

34 APJ 864: "How Do I Feed My Soul in the Hard Books of the Old Testament?" (May 23, 2016).

across time.” So Christians still shouldn’t lie to one another, because we belong to one another (Eph. 4:25). We don’t avenge ourselves, because God is still our avenger (Rom. 12:19). Women don’t preach, because the creation order holds firm today (1 Tim. 2:12–14). And we still love through appeals rather than by commands (Philem. 8–9). Our situational ethics today are held firm by ancient truths.³⁵

3. How do we overcome the perpetual, low-grade feeling that the whole Bible is too long and old and irrelevant for us today? “What I would like to do is help this person get over the hump of feeling like the Bible is over their head or from another planet or just totally irrelevant. The real answer to the question of ‘Why press on?’ is this. It is worth it. The Bible has so much to give, and what it has to give can be found *only* in the Bible. If you turn away from it, it can’t be found anywhere else. Nothing can compare to it.” The Bible is “better than gold, better than silver, better than honey” (Pss. 19:10; 119:72). Only in the Bible do we find the truth that will save us eternally (1 Tim. 4:16). Only in the Bible do we find the truth that “liberates us from sin and Satan,” gives peace with God, empowers holiness, motivates love, and sustains our souls in life’s hardest trials. “It really is the greatest book in the world because it is the only book inspired by God Almighty, the Creator of the universe, and the only one that can make us wise unto everlasting life” (2 Tim. 3:15–16).

With those convictions in place, here are six simple steps for overwhelmed Bible readers. (1) Find a modern translation like the ESV. (2) Get a good study Bible, like the ESV Study Bible with notes that will help answer the perplexing questions you meet along the way. (3) Write out the most perplexing passages you stumble over and work through them with a pen in hand. (4) Watch *Look at the Book* episodes, video tutorials “for me to help guide you through texts that I hope will instill habits of reading in you that will make the Bible live and will make it understandable for you.” (5) Find your way to an expositional church that preaches through the Bible text slowly. (6) “Pray for God to give you light. God loves to make his Son known. He sent him into the world at the cost of his life so that he could be known and loved. He is not interested in holding back from you the light that he gave with his Son and gave with his word.”³⁶

Battling doubt and cynicism in Bible reading

A woman wrote in to admit that her Bible reading is often “hijacked” by a sense of doubt and cynicism about Scripture, a spiritual battle more than an intellectual one.

35 APJ 904: “How Do I Know Paul’s Epistles Are Relevant for My Life?” (July 25, 2016).

36 APJ 438: “6 Tips If You Find the Bible Hard to Read” (September 26, 2014).

It's never automatic that we believe the Bible to be true. All our Bible reading is spiritual warfare. "The devil really hates the Bible. He hates truth. He is a deceiver from the beginning, and he can make things look merely intellectual when, in fact, some pretty heavy spiritual stuff is going on." But we can respond with prayer, asking that God "would fight your doubts and cynicism" as you also fight. In battling our inner cynic, we pray for God to "help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). "Help your unbelief do what? Die. That's what." Unbelief must die for us to see divine beauty, the beauty that validates itself. "Seek in all your reading and praying in the Bible not just to know truth but to see the glory of Christ. There is a spiritual light shining from Christ that is self-authenticating if you see it."

In the believer's battle with doubt and cynicism with the Bible, we must remember that Christ is kind and patient with us. Think and pray on this as you look to authors, teachers, local church leaders, and Christians around you who have a robust spiritual life.

But never stop reading the Bible in the fight of faith, because the fight of faith is fought *in the reading*. "This is one of Satan's main aims in your doubt and your cynicism. He wants to get you to stop reading when, in fact, the Bible says faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Read on despite the inevitable dry seasons. "The dry desert winds blow. And those whose roots are not planted by the streams wither by cynicism and doubt. But those whose roots have gone down meditating day and night on the word of God are like trees that have roots way down by the water so that they are not killed by the droughts of doubt" (Ps. 1:1–3).³⁷

Why is the Bible so violent?

The Bible features some shockingly violent texts, like Judges 19:22–30. Few Christians would approve of watching such violence on a movie screen. So why is it in our Bibles?

We know that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16). "All of it is profitable and God-inspired—and that includes the most violent parts." Yet the violence on a page is different from the violence on a screen. Gratuitous onscreen violence is "not profitable and should be avoided." But on the page, "God's presentation of these things in writing in the inspired Scripture is no mistake. He presents the world in divine, context-laden, interpretive words—not lurid videos of blood and gore that preempt and replace the God-intended movement from reading written words to having word-built images in the mind. Verbal descriptions with divine explanations are not the

³⁷ APJ 651: "Battling Doubt and Cynicism in Our Bible Reading" (July 30, 2015).

same as worldly depictions for entertainment or education with no ultimate divine meaning.”

The shocking violence of Scripture awakens us from dreamlike fiction. “We live in a very soft, easily offended, emotionally fragile culture that unfits us to grasp what most of history has been like, and what most of the world is still like. I think God gave us the Bible the way it is, with all the horrors, partly because he knew the day would come when we would be so spoiled, so cocooned, so overprotected, so coddled that we would not have the emotional and mental capacities to grasp utterly crucial realities in the Bible and in the world.”

So what’s the meaning of biblical violence?

1. Violence exposes the ugliness of unrestrained rebellion. Particularly in the book of Judges, we witness broken civil authority (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). “Violence signifies what happens to a society when the river of evil flowing from the human heart runs wild without a dam of civil authority to keep it from spilling out over the whole earth and corrupting with violent effects. That’s the point: There was no king. ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes’” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Thus, “the book of Judges is written to demonstrate what happens when human beings, in all our sinful rebellion against God, have no restraints.” The human heart is so evil that civil authority is essential.

2. Violence exposes sin’s wickedness. The world is violent because of human rebellion and the fall (Gen. 3:1–24). After the fall, “when God-opposing, God-rejecting, God-disparaging, God-demeaning treason against God entered the world—God responded not simply by judging man’s *emotions* and *thinking* and *willing* and *relationships*, but he also responded by subjecting the human body and the entire material and physical creation to his judgment” (Gen. 3:14–19; Rom. 8:20).

So why did God curse the whole creation? “Why did he ordain that the effect of moral evil would be displayed in the horrors of physical evil—earthquakes, floods, famines, pandemics, wars, and every manner of horrible mistreatment of man on man? Oh, my. He did it because he knew that people who are dead in their trespasses and sins would never comprehend the moral outrage of treason against God unless they saw it reflected in the physical outrage of violence against men.” No sinner “loses sleep” over his cosmic treason against God. “But let their physical body be touched with cancer or their house be touched with rioting, and then their emotions rise up with moral indignation. Violence and suffering exist in this world as a divine witness to the meaning and the seriousness and the outrage of sin against God.”

3. The Bible’s violence showcases the bloodiness of our faith. Our gospel is the message of “the Lamb who was slain” (Rev. 13:8). We’re saved through

violence. This text reminds us that “God’s plan before the foundation of the world” was that the center of our salvation would be “one of the grossest, most violent and gory events in the history of the world—namely, the crucifixion of the Son of God.” For us there’s “no salvation without this violence.” And in a gloriously subversive way, we will celebrate this violence forever (Rev. 5:9–10) because in this “gruesome death of his infinitely precious Son,” we come to appreciate the greatness of God’s love to us (Rom. 5:8).³⁸

So pastors should read the Bible cover to cover to be reminded of the violent sinfulness of the world and of God’s global sovereignty over it all. “How easy it is to put the sovereignty of God to the side while lamenting the miseries and wickedness of this world. God is in charge of the world. This is one of the great benefits of reading the whole Bible cover to cover every year,” something Piper has done for decades. “You watch the terrible sweep of evil in the world, and the Bible portrays it better than anybody—the sweep of evil from century to century in the world. And you have this rugged, unwavering, biblical perspective that God is on his throne and is in charge over the world, and evil does not, will not, triumph. So that note must be struck. The sovereignty of God must be struck by a pastor over and over again because his people are going to start losing it as things get bad.”³⁹

Indeed, “the murder of the Son of God” was “the worst act in human history.” And God planned it (Acts 4:27–28).⁴⁰ He remains “sovereign over all sin,” and in that governance “he never sins.”⁴¹ That’s because there are two wills in God. The sin of murder can, at the same time, (1) contradict God’s moral will (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17) and (2) fulfill God’s sovereign purposes (Acts 4:27–28). In God, there are two wills: (1) A will of command—a moral, revealed will. And (2) a will of decree—a sovereign, ultimate will (Eph. 1:11).⁴²

Let the Bible demolish your theology

Reckoning honestly with the Bible forces us to purge old errors we cherished. In his twenties, Pastor John’s theology was tormented by new biblical realities in Scripture that contradicted his understanding of God’s goodness, especially over questions like whether God predestines some for eternal wrath. “I know what it is like to see these things at first and not see how they fit with his justice and goodness. And I have wept. My early twenties was a season of great tor-

38 APJ 1530: “Why Is the Bible So Violent?” (September 24, 2020).

39 APJ 817: “Gospel Hope for Cultural Pessimists” (March 17, 2016).

40 APJ 85: “How Do You Process Public Tragedy?” (May 7, 2013).

41 APJ 749: “Where Did Satan’s First Desire for Evil Come From?” (December 14, 2015).

42 APJ 1122: “Does God Decree Events He Doesn’t Want to Happen?” (November 20, 2017).

ment mentally and emotionally over theological issues like this. I have tasted what it means to put my hands on my desk, face in my hands, and cry out to God, ‘I don’t get this!’⁴³

This testimony prompted an email from a listener whose theology was likewise being deconstructed.

Getting theology right is something like a dynamic puzzle, where one key piece that seems to hold together a whole theology in our mind can be dislodged and everything else moves. Perhaps you learned something as a child and believed it. “And now you are reading your Bible and you say, ‘That is not a Bible piece.’ And it comes out. Then what happens?” The other pieces shift, “because you might have to jostle fifteen pieces to put the new Bible piece back in. And here is what I think makes us frightened to the point of weeping: it feels as though all of those fifteen pieces might be wrong. They moved. They shifted out of the position that they had. The thing that was giving them coherence just suddenly was gone.” But in the shift, the Holy Spirit brings a new coherence built on biblical truth that brings freedom and peace.

To this aim of theological coherence, the Bible calls for us to add theological knowledge (Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:10; 2 Pet. 3:18). But it also demands that our theological knowledge be refined and any false notions we have about God be *destroyed* (καθαροῦντες; 2 Cor. 10:5). And that’s why the growing pains hurt. “I assume that not every opinion in my brain is a perfect opinion, and there may be some lofty opinions that get in there from time to time or left over from when I was a kid that need to be torn down.” As these errors are purged from us, it stings, “especially if they are old or cherished or from mom and dad.” As you construct a better and more cohesive biblical vision of God, pray that he would give understanding and lead you to an eternally beautiful and biblically accurate picture of God—beautiful in its biblical accuracy (Ps. 118:5–6; 2 Tim. 2:7).⁴⁴

Is Bible reading only profitable if we come away with application?

No. “And here is why I feel strongly about it. I would say that probably 99 percent of our lives is lived without immediate reflection upon a life principle. Rather, we just act. If you think about your day, there are maybe a hundred big decisions you make in a day. And by *big*, I just mean *conscious*.” We don’t have time to weigh every decision. And in this light, Jesus made it clear that *what we do* is an expression of *who we are*. “The good person out of the good

43 APJ 450: “Does God Predestine People to Hell?” (October 14, 2014).

44 APJ 609: “When Scripture Demolishes Your Theology” (June 2, 2015).

treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). Out of the heart’s abundance we speak, either from an abundance of evil or of good (Matt. 12:33–37; 15:18–20).

“Well, that is scary, right?” Yes, a scary heart-abundance paradigm with two big implications for our lives. It means that “most of our lives are lived spontaneously. Most of our lives are *not* lived after ten seconds of reflection on a biblical principle. So where do they come from? They come from being a *kind* of person.” So “how do you become a *kind* of person so that you are a good tree that bears spontaneous good fruit instead of a bad tree that bears spontaneously bad fruit? You soak in the Scriptures, and you let your sight of Jesus and your taste of Jesus and his ways in the Bible affect and shape your soul. Your soul marinates in the sauces of grace until the soul is made soft and tender and supple and sensitive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit so that in a kind of spontaneous way, it responds.” Basically, we aim to live out the Christian life, in most of life, from the heart, through an informed, Spirit-filled subconscious.⁴⁵

“I’m a Christian Hedonist for theological reasons. I’m after people’s affections—their hearts, their emotions, their feelings.” Maybe a few things we say or do “by dint of willpower against our passions,” but “very few.” Ninety-nine percent of what we do and say comes from the abundance of what’s inside our hearts (Matt. 12:34). Therefore, “the number-one issue in life is having new passions.” Or to say it another way, God coaxes our daily holiness by feeding our passions with the lavish, eternal promises we discover in his word. A dynamic on full display in 1 Peter 1:1–25.⁴⁶

How do we avoid intellectualism with the Bible?

The Bible calls for hard thinking *and* deep feeling. But each of us tends to fall on one side or the other, either toward an anti-intellectual feeling, or an antifeling intellectualism. So how do we avoid a cold, academic study of our Bible? Five strategies.

1. Read as a life-and-death battle. There are many people in the church who, for “personality reasons” or “theological reasons,” think emotions are unimportant—just “the caboose at the end of the train.” Not so. Love is essential. Loving God with all your heart is essential (Matt. 22:36–37; 1 Cor. 16:22). Love for Christ above all others is essential (Matt. 10:37). Love for God is a matter of life and death. The “deepest, heartfelt, affectionate, relative kind of love” that

45 APJ 26: “Must Bible Reading Always End with Application?” (February 13, 2013).

46 APJ SE07: “The Passions That Prevent Adultery” (September 4, 2015).

we can imagine for a mother or father or son or daughter is the love we are to have for Christ—but intensified. If Christ is not our supreme love, “we are not worthy of Jesus.” So we must become “totally persuaded” that knowledge of God without love for God is “eternally deadly. Deadly! So, I am trembling at the thought that I could go about my academic work or my scholarly work or writing work or preaching work or study work in some kind of cold frame with no awakened love for God, affection for God.” Making the quest to overcome intellectualism is “a life-and-death battle.”

2. Read for more than truth. We are looking for *value* to adore and love. The devil “probably knows more true things about God than we do,” but he will never worship God as “supremely valuable and supremely satisfying.” If Satan refuses to treasure what he knows about God, then “our aim in reading the Bible should not be demonic.” Instead, we read “with a view to *feeling* what is valuable about God, *treasuring* the treasure that God is. The aim is to see the millions of reasons why God is a treasure, not just the millions of evidences that God exists or has certain attributes. All of our theological refinement should be for the sake of doxological embrace and enjoyment.” We don’t just drink in the word; we drink to *taste* God’s goodness for ourselves because “*the tasting is the nutritional encounter* with the living God that grows us up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

3. Read in desperation. Pray before reading. “You can make yourself read. You can make a list of God’s attributes. You can make lists of ways that God behaves. But you can’t make yourself *feel* how wonderful they are.” So we must pray that God would satisfy us (Ps. 90:14). Why? Because “the human heart doesn’t naturally feel it when it hears and sees the beauties of God.” Prayer “is absolutely essential, not only that my eyes would be open, but that my affections would be awakened.” To that end we pray. “We ask God to make us satisfied in God.”

4. Read others. Read authors who express beautifully the spiritual realities they see and feel deeply, voices like John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, John Newton, and C. S. Lewis.

5. Share your joy. “Open your mouth and bear witness to family and friends and neighbors and colleagues to the beauty of God and your joy in him. It is precisely in giving expression to our joy that intensifies the joy itself. A shared joy is a doubled joy. God loves mission. God loves witness. God loves sharing. God loves loving people. And he does not love hoarding.” We glorify God and intensify our own joy as we share the joy he gives us in our Bible reading.⁴⁷

47 APJ 939: “Five Strategies for Avoiding Intellectualism” (September 19, 2016).

Does John Piper overthink the Christian life?

No, and the nature of Bible reading explains one reason why not. Much life application flows from the careful reading of the Bible, in tracing lengthy arguments and logical connections. If God didn't want our serious thinking, he would not have given us such a long book. Based purely on the nature of Scripture, serious thinking is essential. "It was a huge moment in my life when I woke up to the fact that the Bible is not just a string of pearls to be admired one at a time, or a package of Life Savers to be dissolved on the tongue of my soul one at a time. Rather, the Bible, in most of its writings, forges a chain of arguments connected by words like *because* and *therefore* and *although* and *in order that*." By this design, God expects us to work hard to follow the "argument chains" in the text.

As one example, Paul chains together five arguments against sexual sin in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20. (1) Such sin violates your own body; (2) your body is a temple of the Spirit; (3) you were redeemed at a cost; and (4) you are not your own. Therefore (5) glorify God with your body. Our sex ethics require us to trace these progressive connections in the text.⁴⁸

Paul chains together another argument in Romans 1:15–17. He makes four statements that build through three "because" statements, or "for" statements ("*For* I am . . . *for* it is . . . *For* in it . . ."). "I read my Bible for two decades before I discovered that's the way Paul wrote. You can't understand Paul's intention, what he's trying to communicate, unless you understand the logical relationships between those four statements." And he "signals those relationships, loud and clear, by using the word *because* [γὰρ] three times" as he builds "from foundations to conclusions."⁴⁹

Do I love Bible insights more than I love God?

A young woman who highlights and writes notes and draws multicolored diagrams on her Bible has been warned by older Christian women that her study of Scripture is too academic. It lacks devotional warmth. Too much *head* and not enough *heart*, they say.

The core question for all serious Bible students is whether we have committed "a slight misplacement of affections onto what is discovered more than the one who revealed it." Or, do we have "an excitement more with intellectual insights than with God himself?" This danger is not often obvious to us at first.

Or to ask the question another way: Can we honor God through a detailed study of Scripture? Absolutely. For example, watch how Paul employs typology,

48 APJ 900: "Can We Overthink the Christian Life?" (July 19, 2016).

49 APJ 1696: "How Do You Find Meaning in the Bible's Narratives?" (October 25, 2021).

drawing from the Old Testament to shape Christian desires and affections (evidenced in 1 Cor. 10:1–5). In Paul’s words, Old Testament events are recorded as “examples” (τυπος) for us so that “we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). In other words, “typology is about emotions.” To cultivate healthy loves within us, we study Old Testament and New Testament connections.

The rigorous study of Scripture honors Christ when done authentically. “I want to glorify God by serious, rigorous, detailed study of the Bible that owns up to all that God put there. But here is something we need to remember: some people are wired by God in their genetic makeup that if they themselves make that effort at detailed study, their heads shut down their hearts. It does. As soon as they try their best to think hard, they start feeling cold.” To such a person, the detailed study of Scripture by others would trigger a false alarm.

So for those who love deep Bible study, what can be done? The one who studies most rigorously should *love* most rigorously too. “In other words, if others think that our study will damage us, we must prove to them that it does the opposite.” Among the older Christian women concerned for a too-academic approach to the Bible, this young woman’s call is to “out-love them, out-rejoice them, out-repent them, and out-serve them. And how will they then be able to say that study is hurting her if all the evidence is in the other direction?”⁵⁰

Later in the year came a more specific question. In Bible reading, how do I fight the temptation to glory in the novelty of personal discovery? How do I kill the impulse to study only to impress others on social media?

It’s a two-part danger—one part *cerebral* and one part *vainglory*.

1. The cerebral trap. As we’re reading our Bible, “we see something new and fresh and amazing” and taste “a flash of genuine enjoyment of what it shows us about God. And then there is an almost immediate impulse to begin shaping it for a conversation or an email or a devotional thought or a sermon or a lecture or a blog post or a poem or a tweet. This is real dangerous stuff. And it can feel in that moment as though we have lost the authenticity of our enjoyment of communion with God in the truth we have seen.” The danger here is that “the impulse to plan to teach or restate in some way what I have seen may reveal that my enjoyment is not really in the Lord himself at that moment, but rather in the intellectual process of making the discovery and in the impulse.” In this case, pray: “Lord, deliver me from the bondage to that kind of intellectualism that finds more pleasure in the processes of intellectual discovery in the Bible than the glorious one we have discovered!”

50 APJ 634: “Is My Bible Reading Too Academic?” (July 7, 2015).

2. The vainglory trap. The second danger is that “the impulse to turn my insights into, say, a teaching plan or a blog or something may signal that I crave recognition from an audience for what I have seen. So my pleasure is not so much in what I have seen as in the approval others are going to give me for seeing it. Oh, how horribly insidious and dangerous this is! If my impulse to teach reveals that to me, I am on my face pleading, ‘O God, deliver me from that kind of vainglory!’”

Despite the dangers, these impulses to see, discover, and share truth, bring four benefits too. (1) Healthy discovery should lead to an impulse to put words to it, to “turn *seeing* into *saying*.” (2) Healthy discovery should lead to *sharing*. This is how divine beauty works. “As our minds circle and orbit around some glorious sight, some discovery about God and his word, viewing it with joy from all the angles as we orbit the thing we have seen, the very circling of the mind to see the beauty of the truth tends to fling the mind outward where people are, so that they can be drawn into this orbit of seeing.” To *see* beauty is to be compelled to *share* beauty. To *share* beauty is to *see more* beauty. “I think that belongs to the very nature of the truth of God, the very nature of God. He is not a privatistic God. He is a very public God. He is a displaying God, a communicating God, an expansive God. So it is not surprising to me that not only would our seeing become centrifugal almost immediately, but that he would design for that centrifugal impulse to become a way of seeing more.” (3) Taught truth is enjoyed truth because “teaching is not strictly a mere second step after enjoyment but is an extension of the enjoyment itself. Otherwise, I think teaching becomes inauthentic.” Failing to enjoy a truth *in the act of teaching* is nearly as bad as the original inauthenticity of merely enjoying the discovery. “So it cuts both ways. For teaching to be authentic, it must be an extension of that joy, I think. Otherwise, it is just not Christian teaching of glorious truth.” (4) For all Christian communicators, our calling is to see and enjoy divine glory as we seek to shape others by what we have seen.

So self-test to ensure you’re not “enjoying the process of discovering things about God” more than you are “enjoying God authentically and supremely.” If you sense this to be a problem, “the most practical thing” you can do is stop. “Pause repeatedly” to tell God how much you enjoy what you see. “Tell him. Talk to him about how *good* he is, and *beautiful* he is, and *wise* he is, and *just* he is.” Halt the impulsive desire to share or write a new point into a sermon. This worship-pause is “a great test of my soul.” Build into your Bible discipline time to sing to him. And when it comes to sharing with others, see it (1) “not merely as a way of *saying*, but as a way of *seeing* more of God by saying.” And

(2) see the joy-filled act of teaching as the “authentic overflow” of enjoyment in God that began in private.⁵¹

Bible reading in dark seasons

Don't neglect the Bible during spells of discouragement and depression. Bible reading is *for* seasons of testing, and particularly *for* seasons when we feel dejected. As Paul says, “For 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). “This is amazing; this is sweeping!” The keyword is *endurance* for getting through tough seasons. For the suffering, Bible reading is not irrelevant and optional but appropriate and essential. “If you can, inasmuch as you can just make it a few verses, be in the word every day. Even though you don't feel like fighting, give yourself that medicine every day.”⁵²

Bible reading, meditating in the mind, and stirring your affections by biblical truth—as a daily discipline—is “the central biblical strategy” for escaping discouragements, disappointments, and the dark seasons of life—a point made and embodied by Asaph in Psalm 77.⁵³ It is also a point embodied by a friend of Pastor John's, a “seriously depressed” man who endured an eight-year darkness—“almost to the point of immobilization”—who never stopped reading and memorizing Scripture until one day God “broke in” and delivered him. The friend “always chalked up” his escape “to the fact that he continued in the word, even when he didn't feel much and could barely function.”⁵⁴

I'm too busy and exhausted—when should I read the Bible?

This question came from three listeners: a pastor, a single woman, and a mom.

First, a tired pastor wrote in asking how he could recharge his body and soul after being depleted by the demands of ministry.

Pastor John applied thirty years of pastoral experience and told him to plan his devotional Bible reading when he has the most energy and focused attention. Likely, first thing in the morning. “Take your best times of the day with your best energy and feed your soul. Worship the Lord over his word with

51 APJ 727: “Do I Delight in God or in Others Being Impressed by My Discovery about God?” (November 12, 2015).

52 APJ 1046: “God's Work in Your Depression” (May 26, 2017).

53 APJ 1883: “The Bible's Main Road Out of Discouragement” (January 4, 2023). On Psalm 77, see also APJ 1880: “Beat a Path to the Word in 2023” (December 28, 2022), APJ 1886: “How Do I Push Truth from My Head to My Heart?” (January 11, 2023), APJ 1887: “When Does Despondency Become Sin?” (January 13, 2023), and APJ 1889: “Fight for Delight by Planning Your Devotions” (January 18, 2023).

54 APJ 542: “What to Do When God Feels Distant” (February 27, 2015).

your best energy, not the dregs at the end of the day. Any pastor who says, ‘I work so hard at the demands of the church ministry that I don’t have energy for feeding my own soul through Scripture and Scripture-saturated books,’ has got his day backward. If there are parts of the day with *much energy* and parts with *little energy*, then let one of the parts with *much energy* be given to what is absolutely indispensable: communion with God in his word for the sake of seeing and savoring the King of heaven. If this personal joy, personal fellowship, and personal hope languish, everything languishes—and worse than languishes usually. It’s *deadly*. What our people need from us more than anything is the aroma of Christ.”

The tired pastor must steward his affections carefully, ensuring that he does not allow his affections for Christ to be deadened by a steady diet of popular media. “I believe we live in a day where immersion in popular culture—with all of its God-ignoring, sin-enjoying, pride-exalting assumptions—is not only assumed to be harmless but assumed to be necessary. Both of those assumptions are wrong—deadly wrong.” Pop media is an affection killer.⁵⁵

Second, a female listener wrote in to say that she feels spiritually stuck and too tired for edifying Bible reading. God’s word has been pushed to the margins of a life filled with cooking, cleaning, exercising, running errands, getting food, and shopping—all “classic, good, valuable things.”

Jesus understood these realities when he entered the house of Martha and Mary. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. And while she was “anxious and troubled,” frantically trying to pull off the impromptu hospitality and “distracted with much serving,” her sister Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” Martha complained that she was left “to serve alone.” To which Jesus replied: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but *one thing is necessary*. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38–42). There are many things, but only one thing is necessary. “*More needful* than your pattern of cooking, *more needful* than your pattern of cleaning, *more needful* than your pattern of exercising, *more needful* than your pattern of errand-running and shopping—it’s just plain *more needful*.” You need to hear the voice of God. And yet, since the time of Christ, the word is often choked out by the busyness and cares of life (Luke 8:14).

So, very practically, go to bed earlier, wake up forty-five minutes earlier, shower earlier, and then hit the coffee to “let caffeine do its magic.” But if this doesn’t solve the drowsiness problem, “get up out of your comfortable chair and walk around

55 APJ 988: “I’m Exhausted—How Do I Recharge My Body without Neglecting My Soul?” (January 11, 2017).

the room in circles, reading your Bible. There's nothing sacred about sitting, and it's much harder to fall asleep while you're walking. I did it just the other day."

But "more important than these nitty-gritty, practical suggestions is the foundational experience that the word of God is more precious than anything" (Ps. 19:9–10). "Don't let gold and don't let food feel more valuable or sweeter than the word of God. They're not."⁵⁶

Third, the question from a mom who struggles to get time in the word. Her husband must step in. Single moms will face particular challenges here, but "God's idea for marriage and parenting is two parents. That is his ideal. And one of the reasons for this is so that one can cover for the other and make sure that both are connecting with God through Jesus in the word every day."

For the sake of mom's soul, dad should work especially hard to establish parental order. "My impression is that way too many parents today think their children should be allowed to control the atmosphere of the house. That is a big mistake on a lot of levels. So, dad, step up. Partner with your wife in establishing routines, and expect obedience—expect submission to her and to your authority." Bring "the whole atmosphere of the house" under "parental order." Next, set a playtime. In the Piper home, Pastor John took the kids for an hour after dinner. "Noël had done it all day. I can do it for an hour, and she can do whatever she wants. And if it is time to read the Bible, there she has it." Also, build in short retreats for mom (and for dad). Lead your wife in the word. Give her adult conversation in the word. Pray for her regularly.

In the end, consider the discipline of Susannah Wesley, the busy mother of Charles and John Wesley and seventeen other children. "Nine of them died in infancy. That left ten. She promised the Lord that she would spend time in prayer and the word every day, and at one point, her strategy was this: she taught the older children and the younger children that the younger ones were responsible to the older. And when you see mom with an apron over her head at the table, don't bother her. Keep the kids quiet. "That is my time with God," she said. So train your children with that kind of rigor. Expect obedience. Find your apron or your closet. But, dad, I am looking to you for the major support."⁵⁷

When reading disabilities intrude on Bible reading

Dyslexia and other mental and physical challenges make reading painfully hard. So how can a reader who is plagued by limits of concentration work through the Bible in short spurts?

56 APJ 1299: "I'm Tired and Busy—How Do I Make Time for the Bible?" (January 7, 2019).

57 APJ 437: "Bible Time for Busy Moms" (September 25, 2014).

The first step is convictional. “We live by faith or we don’t live at all. And faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (see Rom. 10:17). As Jesus said, we don’t live only by physical food, but from every word spoken to us by God in his word (Matt. 4:4). “Faith cannot be sustained without the word of God.” If faith dies, holiness dies, and holiness is essential to our final salvation (Heb. 12:14). So Bible reading “goes right to the heart of what it means to be a Christian and how to sustain faith.”

Whatever physical challenges some readers face, every Bible reader can expect massive spiritual resistance. “The big ones are sin, indifference, love for the world, and spiritual blindness to the glory of Christ.”

But then come challenges that are physiological (like dyslexia) or due to age (like senility). For those challenges, Pastor John offered five pieces of advice.

1. Read to savor. “The goal is not just to put in a certain amount of time or to cover a certain amount of material. The goal is to see and savor God, his ways, and his promises. The goal is to fight for faith and to walk in obedience by faith. Be sure to keep that mindset. Go to the Bible to get food for your faith.”

2. Plead for healing. Ask God for supernatural help. “I’m dismayed how many Christians are fatalistic, materialistic, and humanistic when it comes to their disability.” Don’t just think of your disability in terms of medicines or therapies (which are important). Pray for full healing.

3. Work harder. “There are some strengths we’ll never have and some things we’ll never accomplish. But, oh, what amazing things people with disabilities have accomplished by refusing to be dominated by the negative implications of their weaknesses.” Instead of reading for an unbroken ideal of thirty minutes, you may need alarms throughout the day to read the Bible ten times for three minutes. Think about strategies to read small portions more frequently.

4. Lean on audio Bibles. You may comprehend better by following the text with your eyes as you listen to an audio Bible with your ears. “I do that. When I’m especially tired, I let the audio read for me while I read with my eyes.”

5. Lean on others. “Cultivate deep friendships in the body of Christ and in your family. Do this so that when you’re old and can’t do hardly anything for yourself, others will be there for you to read to you, and to perhaps, in that last comatose hour, say glorious words really loud into your seemingly deaf ear: ‘Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save’ (Isa. 46:4).”⁵⁸

58 APJ 1099: “Reading Is Agonizing for Me—How Can I Study the Bible in Small Bits?” (September 27, 2017).

Should we use audio Bibles for daily devotions?

Speaking of audio Bibles, a long-haul trucker asked if simply listening to the Bible is sufficient for his daily Bible intake. Obviously, it suits his lifestyle well.

Such a desire shows a wonderful hunger for the word in his life. But the practice comes with many pros and cons, raising six questions. (1) Can you recall what you hear? We process audio inputs differently. “Some people can remember almost everything that they hear.” Is this you? Or do you forget everything you hear? Know how well audio mediums stick. (2) Is the audio Bible reader accurate? How the text is read is a form of interpretation. Pace, cadence, emphasis, pauses, emotional tone, soft voice, loud voice, pronunciation—all of it is an interpretation of the text. “If the interpretation is perceptive and penetrating and true and powerful, that’s a benefit to the hearing listener. If the interpretation is contrary to the author’s intention in meaning or tone, it can be a great hindrance from profiting the way God intended us to profit when we read or hear the word.” (3) Can you stop? God will meet you and move you in his word. In that moment, what will you do? Will you let the audio run and the moment pass? Or will you be in a position to pull over, stop, and embrace the moment? (4) How much focus can you give the Bible? As you work, can you give the text your full attention? The Bible will compete for the attention you need to safely drive. This is not evil; “it’s just a limitation of all that the word might accomplish if it had our full and complete attention.” (5) Can you look up cross-references to other related texts in the Bible as you go? No. (6) Can you take notes as you go? No, not easily.

“Because of everything I’ve said, I would suggest that listening to the Bible not be the *only* way we fellowship with God in the word. Listening is a great way to meet God. It has its own advantages and benefits, but it also has limitations. So why not both?” Listen to the Bible and find time to read the text itself. Benefit from the strengths of both mediums. And in whatever way you do it, keep pressing into the word to be filled with glorious truths from its pages (Ps. 119:18; Eph. 1:17).⁵⁹

I have one hour to read. How much Bible? How much other books?

It’s dangerous to get too specific to any one person’s life and needs in answering this question. But there are broad applications.

First, the Bible calls us to learn outside the Bible. “I can imagine a person saying, ‘Well, if the Bible is the very word of the Creator of the universe, why would you not just stay with your Bible all day and listen to God? For goodness’ sake—he’s God!’ The answer to that question is that the Bible tells you not to:

⁵⁹ APJ 1575: “Is an Audio Bible Sufficient for Devotions?” (January 15, 2021).

‘Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise’ (Prov. 6:6). In other words, close your Bible and go out and look at anything and learn something from the world.” Close your Bible and look at the lilies (Matt. 6:28). Close your Bible and study the birds (Matt. 6:26). “Don’t just read the Bible. Read God’s *world* as well as God’s *word*.”

This holds true in our vocations. The Bible calls us to work diligently (1 Thess. 4:10–12). “But you learn how to be a tentmaker like Paul, or a doctor like Luke, or a carpenter like Jesus’s father, or a professional fisherman like Peter *not* by reading your Bible. The Bible doesn’t tell you which stitches hold tents together when the leather gets wet. It doesn’t do that. It’s not designed for that.” Listen to the wise, study nature, “and figure things out.” So the very Bible itself tells us to pay attention to other sources of knowledge as it “instructs us to learn about the world, learn about people, learn about vocations, and learn about society and social processes that God made.”

With this principle in place, learn from edifying books. If you have a copy of John Calvin’s *Institutes* or J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*, and you also want to read your Bible, how do you divvy up the hour? It’s practical math. A slow reader reading at two hundred words a minute for fifteen minutes a day can cover over one million words per year. A serious book with 360 words per page translates into 3,041 pages read per year at this pace. Averaging books to 250 pages each, “that’s twelve very substantial books, all in fifteen minutes a day for the average slow reader.” This leaves forty-five minutes per day to read Scripture slowly, thoughtfully, meditatively, prayerfully—and at a pace to get through the entire Bible in one year.

So make both readings work in tandem. “My experience, and the Bible itself, tells me that other people’s vision of what they have seen in the Bible can be a great means of seeing more in the Bible. I know this is true. If I take ten minutes in the morning to read John Owen or Jonathan Edwards, I see more in my Bible.”⁶⁰

If I listen carefully to sermons, why do I need to read my Bible?

Eager listeners on Sunday encourage pastors. But pastors are not encouraged if their sermons fail to breed eager Bible readers the other six days of the week. Faithful preaching “doesn’t just *satisfy* hunger—it *creates* hunger. I would have felt like a total failure if my people said, ‘Because of your preaching, we don’t read our Bibles!’” Faithful preaching creates new longings for the word.

Evaluate your Bible appetite with two questions.

60 APJ 1298: “I Have an Hour a Day to Read—How Much Should Be Bible?” (January 4, 2019).

1. How much of the Bible do you *want*? Imagine being in love. “My girlfriend writes me every day. But I would rather just read her letters once a week. And I think I would like somebody else to read them for me and give me a digest of what she said.’ Are you kidding me? I was in love in the summer of 1967 while working as a water safety instructor. I was eager to go off every day with these lavender envelopes to smell them for five minutes before I opened them. I am not going to give those letters to anybody else.” In the same way, Scripture is “an unparalleled love letter to the people of God.” Its words are sweet every day, not just on Sundays (Ps. 119:103). Scripture is our daily delight and daily meditation (Ps. 1:2), more desirable than the gold that greedy treasure hunters seek daily (Ps. 19:10; Prov. 2:4). “So why would you only want one glimpse a week of this beauty, one taste a week of this honey, one deposit a week of this silver in your bank, one letter from your lover?”

2. How much Bible do you *need*? Scripture is our *daily* sustenance, more necessary than bread (Matt. 4:4). “Temptations are too relentless. Doubt is too frequent. Satan is too active. Tribulations are too heavy. Conflicts are too many. Emotions are too volatile. Perplexities are too difficult. Faith, hope, and love are too threatened to think I can deal with these all week long, simply from one word I got on Sunday. I can’t do it. And I don’t think anybody can.”⁶¹

If I read my Bible, why do I need preachers?

On the flip side, if we’re faithful Bible readers, why do we need preachers?

God designed it like this. The church is given the “infallible word of God in the Bible” and then later, and underneath its authority, God gives the church “fallible elders” who are gifted to lead and teach the flock. Even Paul, the “in-fallible’ apostle,” entrusted the ministry of the word to fallible pastors (1 Thess. 5:12–14). In this text, Paul is “telling the teachers how to *minister* the word, and he’s telling the members how to *receive* the word and how to *respect* the teachers.” In another place, Paul commands one pastor, Timothy, to herald that infallible word (2 Tim. 4:1–5). Whether or not the believers in Ephesus each had a copy of the epistle written to the church (which we now call Ephesians), they’re called to attend to Timothy in Ephesus as he heralds that epistle and equips his church for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–12). This was God’s design.

So why did God design for his infallible word to be handed off to fallible teachers? Five answers.

61 APJ 435: “If I Listen to Sermons, Why Do I Need to Read My Bible?” (September 23, 2014).

1. Preachers make new discoveries. God gifts preachers and teachers and makes them “apt to teach” (διδασκτικόν) the Bible, “which means that they should have the time, the inclination, the skill, and the spiritual discernment to see things in God’s infallible word that many ordinary folks just don’t see” (1 Tim. 3:2).

2. Preachers train new discoverers. Preachers who are disciplined to discover truth for their congregation train that congregation to see more truth on their own, in their private reading.

3. Preachers stoke new affections. Good preaching (that is, expository exaltation) means that “the preacher himself *feels* and *communicates* the *worth* of what he’s seeing.” It’s a preaching that both *sees* and *savors* the realities of the text. “This means that those who listen to such preaching, over time, will not only have their *heads* stocked with new thoughts, but will have their *hearts* awakened to new affections for God and his word and his ways and his people.” For example, the preached word is meant to encourage the fainthearted (1 Thess. 5:14). “Affections are changed—not just minds—through God-ordained preaching.”

4. Preaching saves (1 Cor. 1:21). “We might imagine that all the world needs are Bibles dropped from airplanes into people’s lives,” but God’s plan is to save people through the word preached.

5. Preachers are indispensable. God designed that we be mutually encouraged by the expressions of others’ gifts (1 Cor. 12:21), including preachers. “God has determined that Jesus Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, will get *more glory* through the Christ-exalting, Spirit-dependent, word-saturated, mutual ministry in the church than he would if people only read their Bibles, rather than hearing other believers speak the word into their lives. That’s the bottom line: Christ is *more glorified* through doing it God’s way than by forsaking God’s way while presuming to love the Bible.”⁶²

John Piper’s whole ministry methodology in one text

In exploring the role of Bible teachers in our personal reading of the text, we meet one of the most influential paradigms for understanding John Piper’s Bible-centered ministry methodology—Psalm 119:97–100.

“When I was in graduate school in Germany, forty-five years ago or so, I was in my twenties. I was surrounded by world-class, high-powered scholarship in people who did not believe the scriptures as God’s word or share my love for the gospel.” He knew that his limited reading capacity could be overcome by careful attention to the word, and he drew tremendous comfort from Psalm 119:99.

62 APJ 1659: “If We Read Our Bibles, Why Do We Need Sermons?” (July 30, 2021).

There David makes the claim: “I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation” (Ps. 119:99). His teachers had God’s word. But David believed that “direct, sustained, personal, love-filled meditation on the word of God itself would produce, in his mind and in his heart, a kind of discernment and a kind of insight that would protect him from errors in his teachers, and would give him an authentic, personal, true understanding of God and his ways that would go beyond what he got from his teachers, or what they got from their way of study.” Freed from being “at the mercy of scholarship,” he experienced “personal, prayerful, sustained, thoughtful, rigorous, love-soaked meditation.” By it, he could outsee his teachers. “And, frankly, looking back fifty years now, I believe it’s true. I believe God granted me to see beautiful things that many of my more sophisticated, even more intelligent, teachers did not see.”

We listen to teachers, but we test everything according to the word (1 Cor. 14:37–38; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). But we must also find delight in reading the word itself, without aid. “Something’s wrong with the taste-palate of the tongue of your soul if you need to have the food of God’s word always spiced with the words of a fallible human being.” True Bible scholarship is driven by an affectional dynamic. “If every time a lover gets a letter from his beloved, instead of reading it—reading it slowly as if to savor every word, revealing the heart and the mind of the beloved—he goes searching for somebody else to read the letter to him and then talk to him about the letter, that’s a defective relationship. I mean, this is serious.” Careful Scripture reading is about feeding delight, not simply accumulating knowledge.⁶³

To further understand John Piper’s entire ministry approach, consider these two provocative tweets. “In my twenties, I knew I could not outread my liberal professors. But I took heart from this verse that I could outmeditate them. So can you.”⁶⁴ Two years earlier he tweeted: “One true citation from God’s word may silence [a] whole semester of human speculation.”⁶⁵

I asked Piper to expand on these tweets and the key texts that inspired them both (Ps. 119:97–100). These verses “are very, very precious to me,” he said. Psalm 119:97 defines the *practices*. It sets the stage as David celebrates God’s *law*—or more literally God’s *torah* (תּוֹרָה), all of his *teachings* (Ps. 119:18). David is celebrating all of God’s revelation, not simply his rules. He’s saying: “Oh, how I love everything you say!” So David *loves* God’s teaching as he *meditates* on it

63 APJ 1533: “Why Do I Need to Read the Bible When We Have Bible Teachers Online?” (October 2, 2020).

64 John Piper (@JohnPiper), Twitter, June 15, 2020.

65 John Piper (@JohnPiper), Twitter, June 16, 2018.

all day long. During his college years, Piper experienced this double focus. He meditated deeply on texts. And what he saw, he loved. A “double response” that “set the course of my life.” It set it to the point that “everything I have done, written, or spoken has been shaped by the double grasp of God’s word in these two ways.” This dual discipline paid off in his next six years of higher education. He became more confident in dealing with the biblical text directly, finding that “spending long hours staring at the texts—wrestling, digging, querying, praying—paid more dividends for me than if I had spent all of that time reading secondary sources.”

So when future professors put more emphasis on secondary resources, he wasn’t impressed. He knew that direct engagement with Scripture (with head and heart) makes one wiser than (1) enemies, (2) teachers, and (3) the aged. Those *practices* of Psalm 119:97 bear their *fruit* in Psalm 119:98–99. Hence, “the more seriously and diligently and lovingly you dig into God’s word, and let it dig into you, the more likely it is that you will be wiser and more insightful than those who get their learning another way—no matter how much older than you they are.” So read the Bible for yourself. And to any aspiring pastor: “If they will *love* God and *love* his word, and if they will give themselves untiringly to careful handling, *meditation*, on God’s text, they will never have to be cowed by their enemies, their teachers, or the aged—even the aged John Piper. They will be able, on their own, to get what they need and preach the word.”⁶⁶

When does my Bible neglect become sin?

Here are five symptoms, determined by key internal spiritual shifts, we should be aware of.

1. When you lose your desperation. Only the Bible can give us a glimpse of God himself, feed our faith, give us joy, and sanctify us (1 Sam. 3:21; John 17:13, 17, 20; Rom. 10:17). “Wherever diminishing Bible reading is owing to a loss of desperation for seeing God, trusting God, rejoicing in God, and holiness—as if those things don’t matter or can be found without the word—sin is taking hold.”

2. When you read without faith. “Diminishing Bible reading and meditation is becoming sinful when it is owing to disillusionment with the Bible, because it has not been pursued by faith but rather as a performance to win God’s favor.” Self-righteous Bible reading is destined to fail. In contrast, consistent discipline of Bible reading can only flourish in our Bible reading if we know “the great reality that in Christ God is 100 percent for us.” When faith wanes,

⁶⁶ APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021). A related point from Ps. 119:100—age doesn’t equate to wisdom (APJ 1867: “Give Young Christians a Chance to Lead” (November 28, 2022)).

and we stop reading the Bible from our full justification by the blood of Christ, our reading will diminish.

3. When you stop living from the fruit of your reading. When our morning reading is done, we close our Bibles and go off to work or school to live out the fruit of what we have seen and savored. “God did not design the Bible to be read eighteen hours a day so that we do nothing else. He designed the Bible as a tree that produces delicious fruit of living for the glory of God and the good of others.” Failing to live fruitfully from our reading will undermine our reading over time.

4. When you lose a taste for the preciousness of God’s revealed words. Bible reading will not endure if we cease to experience the preciousness of divine things in the Bible. We will drift away from Scripture when it’s no longer “something more precious than gold and sweeter than honey” (Ps. 19:10). “This preciousness and this sweetness are meant to entice us back, freely and joyfully, to the word.” But when we “no longer embrace this preciousness, or taste this sweetness, the diminishing is sin.”

5. When you tie daily reading to failed examples. You might know a man who prided himself on daily Bible reading but was a jerk. His sin shouldn’t cause you to neglect the Bible. “That’s idiotic. That’s immature. Don’t be like that. This includes refusing to read your Bible daily because your dad did, and he beat your mom. He was abusive, and he read his Bible. That kind of immaturity is a tactical triumph of Satan. You don’t want to be Satan’s lackey, an immature, adolescent follower of the evil one.”⁶⁷

The final goal of Bible reading

When the story of the world is complete, what’s the point of all the hours invested in our Bible reading? That end is being unveiled now as God acts in and through his word. It’s not a dead book. “God doesn’t set out his word in the world and then walk away and watch from a distance to see what is going to come of it.” No. “He watches over his word to perform it” (Jer. 1:12). He’s performing his word right now, in us. As we read our Bibles we are being permanently changed. And this transformation culminates into an ultimate purpose—which is that God be “worshiped with white-hot affection as the supreme excellence and value of the universe, by a people gathered from all the nations and tribes of the world. The Bible is the place where people see God clearly enough, that the Holy Spirit might be moving them to savor him supremely enough, that they will be changed enough

67 APJ 1300: “When Does Bible Neglect Become Sinful?” (January 9, 2019).

into his likeness so that he will get the white-hot worship that he deserves.” Thus, in bringing about this ultimate end, “Bible reading is a necessary, indispensable instrument in the hand of God.”⁶⁸ So God doesn’t merely *predict* the future, he *knows* the future. And he *knows* the future “because he *plans* it and *performs* it.” And he *plans* and *performs* it through his word” (Jer. 1:12; Ezek. 12:25).⁶⁹ In Bible reading, we participate in God’s unfolding of his final design for the cosmos.

Moving from Bible reading to Bible memory

After completing your daily Bible reading in the morning, go back, isolate one verse or phrase, memorize it, and take it into your day. Make this phrase “the main message you will preach to yourself during the day. Set yourself a reminder on your phone to go ding every hour or buzz on your wrist to tell you to pull out that sword from your morning reading, say it to yourself, preach it to yourself, and tell Jesus ‘thank you’ for it and that you really believe it.”⁷⁰

The power of Bible memory

“I have never met a mature, fruitful, strong, spiritually discerning Christian who is not full of Scripture, devoted to regular meditation on Scripture, and given to storing it in the heart through Bible memorization. And that’s not a coincidence.”⁷¹ Bible memorization is a “signature of sanctified people.” On the flip side, “low-level interest in the Bible and Bible memory almost always goes hand in hand with high-level interest in superficial things.”⁷² Bible memory is a pivotal priority in the authentic Christian life. It serves the soul. But the discipline is uniquely positioned to serve the souls of others.

Knowing Scripture by heart leads to “immeasurable moments” when you draw a key text “from your heart, eyeball to eyeball, without having to open a book and read it, coming from your soul,” an impromptu moment that “explodes with significance.” Key texts include Psalms 16, 46, 121, and 130. “How many times have I knelt down, put my arm on somebody who has just been broken for some sin that they have committed, and I have been able to just pray, ‘Lord, if you would mark iniquities, who could stand?’” (Ps. 130:3).⁷³

68 APJ 837: “Sneak Peek of Pastor John’s Next Book” (April 14, 2016).

69 APJ 1010: “Is God Ever Surprised?” (March 3, 2017).

70 APJ 1245: “How Do I Feed My Joy in Jesus Every Morning?” (September 3, 2018).

71 APJ 1512: “Ten Reasons to Read the Bible Every Day” (August 14, 2020).

72 APJ 257: “Bible Memory: Essential or Optional?” (January 16, 2014).

73 APJ 131: “Bible Memory as Ministry to Others” (July 15, 2013).

We minister grace to our friends through the memorized word. In 2013, in a small prayer gathering, Pastor John prayed over his friend Dave, an older man, nervous about his upcoming flight to India to serve pastors. “We got around Dave, people prayed, and I closed it by saying, ‘Dave, fear not for I am with you. Be not dismayed. I am your God. I will help you. I will strengthen you. I will hold you up with my righteous right hand. Amen.’ I spoke God’s promise from Isaiah 41:10. I spoke it to him. And I hope ringing in his mind at that moment was: ‘God is going to help me. God is strong for me. God doesn’t want me to be dismayed.’”⁷⁴

Piper discovered the power of recited texts firsthand as a twenty-eight-year-old, when he first heard someone recite a large section of Scripture from memory. A Bible professor recited Jesus’s words against anxiety (Matt. 6:25–34). “Oh, the effect it had on me!” It was “paradigm-changing.”⁷⁵ It became a commitment he deployed as a pastor years later when he recited Isaiah 53 during a communion service. A woman in the congregation broke down in tears over the power of the moment.⁷⁶ She later said it was the power of pastor-to-congregation eye contact in hearing Scripture, made possible by memorization. The practice is potent in public and in private. If you’re standing beside the bed of a dying man and a passage comes to mind, “you could look a dying man right in the face and recite to him the last five verses of Romans 8. It is so much more powerful than if you say, ‘Well, let me reach in here and get my phone—*click, click, click, click, click*. At that moment, that just feels so distant and so artificial.”⁷⁷

Bible apps don’t replace memorization, because memorization is more than simple recall. Memorization restructures our brains through “immersion in the mind of God.” By it, our minds are renewed (Rom. 12:2).⁷⁸ Indeed, “nothing can replace Bible memory in doing what it was designed to do—forge a connection between the Bible, our minds, and our hearts.”⁷⁹ These connections are essential because daily we’re forced to make decisions under pressure. Too much of our life is spontaneous. Most of what we decide is not premeditated. Our lives are 95 percent “spillover.” If what’s in our hearts is good, goodness spills out of our life. If what’s in our hearts is evil, evil will spill out. The same is true of the connection between what’s in our hearts and what comes out of our mouths (Luke 6:45). Deep change must happen within us if holiness is to

74 APJ 39: “How Can I Help My Friends Stay Satisfied in God?” (March 4, 2013).

75 APJ 690: “Seven Tips for College Students” (September 22, 2015).

76 APJ 257: “Bible Memory: Essential or Optional?” (January 16, 2014).

77 APJ 276: “Do Digital Bible Searches Relativize Memorization?” (February 12, 2014).

78 APJ 276: “Do Digital Bible Searches Relativize Memorization?” (February 12, 2014).

79 APJ 1727: “Let God’s Word Dwell in You Richly This Year” (January 5, 2022).

spill out of us in our decisions, actions, and speech. To state the urgency brazenly: we don't have "the chance of a snowball in hell to be holy" if we're not memorizing and meditating deeply on God's word.⁸⁰

Bible memory accomplishes many things. It makes Scripture accessible when we are away from our Bible, sweetens our communion with God, and conforms our minds to God's mind. It gives us truth to heal the hurting, ammunition to conquer temptations, a shield to deflect lies, and power to resist the devil. "Memorizing Scripture enables me to hit the devil in the face with a force he cannot resist, to protect myself and my family from his assaults. What are you hitting him with? He is a million times stronger than you. And he hates you and your family and your marriage and your church and your God. How anybody walks through this devil-ruled world without a sword in hand is beyond me."⁸¹

College students should be memorizing Scripture, because ten minutes of morning devotions is woefully inadequate to confront the temptations they face daily. Spiritual warfare calls for serious Bible memory. "Memorize chapters. Memorize whole books. Memorize the Sermon on the Mount. Memorize particular psalms. I doubt that anyone will be an effective Christian in our day standing *against* the culture—and *for* the culture—without much Bible memory."⁸²

Memorization suggestions

Bible memory is "a signature of sanctified people." So where do we begin? Start with a whole chapter, and make it Romans 8, "probably the greatest chapter in the Bible" and one that's "always relevant." Romans 8 covers everything from our justification, the peace it brings, the end of fearing condemnation, the weakness of the flesh, and our hope of the resurrection and glorification—all within the present reality of our suffering and groaning as we await Christ's return.⁸³ At the outset of the coronavirus lockdown (2020), Pastor John suggested that we all use the extra time at home to memorize Romans 8, a bedrock passage for fighting off the fears and unknowns of the looming pandemic.⁸⁴

Love is also relevant, an ingredient so essential to the successful Christian life that "most of us should memorize all of 1 Corinthians 13," the Bible's "most important chapter on love." The text is especially important for anyone struggling with a critical spirit. Memorize the chapter and watch it change your

80 APJ 411: "The Key to Christian Obedience" (August 20, 2014).

81 APJ 476: "Good Motives for Bible Memory" (November 19, 2014).

82 APJ 690: "Seven Tips for College Students" (September 22, 2015).

83 APJ 257: "Bible Memory: Essential or Optional?" (January 16, 2014).

84 APJ SE18: "How to Talk to Children about the Coronavirus" (March 31, 2020).

entire life. “Good night! Say it and say it, pray it and pray it, until it’s *you*. And God will heal you of much of your hypercritical spirit.”⁸⁵

Beyond key Psalms, Isaiah 53, Romans 8, and 1 Corinthians 13, memorize smaller and more specific promises. Isaiah 41:10 has proven to be Pastor John’s “most commonly used” promise “over the last fifty years.”⁸⁶ Facing the pains and struggles of life, he’s wielded the text “a thousand times.”⁸⁷ A text with historical significance traced back to a critical transition in his life at the age of twenty-five.⁸⁸ Ever since the weapon of choice against anxiety. Whenever he feels nervous before preaching, he turns his mind to Isaiah 41:10 to hear God’s voice. “I did that many times as I stood up to preach. It was as though the Lord just looked me right in the face and said, ‘I will help you.’ I didn’t make that up. He said that to me. That’s what I mean by *meeting* the Lord in his word.”⁸⁹ This text’s relevance for life is proven by its three verbs corresponding to “every challenge” we will face. You can use it in weakness (“I will strengthen you”), in need (“I will help you”), or when life beats you up (“I will uphold you”). Three “awesome verbs” God uses to speak his comforting presence directly to your soul.⁹⁰ Speak the text verbally, as an act of faith, and you will hear God audibly speaking to you.⁹¹

Be sure to memorize Romans 8:32—“the most prominent promise in my heart,”⁹² and “perhaps my favorite verse in all the Bible.”⁹³ Additionally, consider memorizing Matthew 28:20, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 1:20, 9:8, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 4:19, and Hebrews 13:5–6. “I think it is good to memorize a handful of promises so that you can always call them to mind, no matter what your situation, for encouragement and protection and strength.”⁹⁴

Essential Bible texts for life’s hardest battles

Speaking of key texts to memorize, these sixteen have proven most useful to Pastor John over the decades, each “tailor-made for living the Christian life through all of its ups and downs.”

85 APJ 1714: “How Can I Resist a Critical Spirit?” (December 6, 2021).

86 APJ 1858: “What Makes My Life Christian?” (November 7, 2022).

87 APJ 799: “How Do I Live the Authentic Christian Life?” (February 22, 2016).

88 APJ 1232: “John Piper’s Most-Used Promises” (August 3, 2018).

89 APJ 589: “Have I Cast My Anxieties or Hoarded Them?” (May 5, 2015).

90 APJ 1232: “John Piper’s Most-Used Promises” (August 3, 2018).

91 APJ 1232: “John Piper’s Most-Used Promises” (August 3, 2018) and APJ 1798: “Crucial Texts for Our Hardest Battles” (June 20, 2022).

92 APJ 1232: “John Piper’s Most-Used Promises” (August 3, 2018).

93 APJ 536: “The Dangers of Nostalgia” (February 19, 2015).

94 APJ 1232: “John Piper’s Most-Used Promises” (August 3, 2018).

1. Texts for battling lust. First, a warning text, a “very powerful disincentive” to seeking online porn (Matt. 5:29). Then a promise text, that not lingering over sexual stimulation will preserve my vision of God (Matt. 5:8). Then a provision text (1 Pet. 2:24). The power of sin over me has been broken. Why would I grieve Christ with this sin?

2. A text for affliction (Ps. 34:19). We don’t necessarily suffer because we’ve sinned. The righteous suffer too. And their suffering will end in God’s timing.

3. A text for when you’re mistreated (Rom. 12:19–20). When false things are said about us, how do we find peace? We leave the retribution with God. “Oh, how many times I have been set free from bitterness” by this text.

4. Texts for when you feel weak. God works for us (Isa. 64:4). This is “the glorious uniqueness of our God” compared to the ancient gods. Our God does not recruit slave labor to work *for him*, he’s eager to work *for us*! Indeed, God’s eyes scan the globe for his righteous children, “looking for people for whom—with omnipotence—he can work for today” (2 Chron. 16:9).

5. Texts for when you feel inadequate. When you feel short on money, time, or help, there are “two go-to verses I have used hundreds of times.” God promises that *every need we have will be met* (Phil. 4:19). Bank on it. So don’t love money. Don’t fear man. Be content. Why? Because God is with you (Heb. 13:5–6). And to *have* God “is as sweet as it gets.”

6. A text for when you feel alone (1 Pet. 5:6–7). God has a mighty, omnipotent hand. And he cares for *you—little you*. “So don’t shrink back from humility, thinking that you’re going to be too vulnerable if you’re humble.” No. Your “every single anxiety goes onto his broad shoulders.” Because he cares for *you!*

7. Texts for when you think God is begrudging toward you. In truth, God is *eager* to bless you from his “good pleasure” (Luke 12:32). “He *loves* to care for you.” He *rejoices* in doing us good (Jer. 32:41). “What more can God say than that *he rejoices to do good to us*, with *all his heart* and *all his soul*? There isn’t anything conceivably bigger than *all* of God’s heart and *all* of God’s soul. And that’s what he says is behind his doing good for us!”

8. A text for fear (Isa. 41:10). This is the verse “I’ve gone to more than any other in all my seventy-six years of life.” It’s verse “number one for the struggle with fear.” It is the voice of God directed right at you with “I will . . . I will . . . I will . . .” Recite the text verbally to hear God speak directly to you.

9. A text for depression (Ps. 42:11). Yet another text that speaks directly. An interrogation. Why, soul, are you cast down? Hope in God! “Oh, my goodness. I have preached that to myself in low times, hundreds and hundreds of times.”

10. A text for facing death (1 Thess. 5:9–10). At the age of seventy-six, “I recite this to myself before I go to sleep every night,” akin to a “Now I Lay Me

Down to Sleep” bedtime prayer. The text tells us we are free from wrath and safe forever in Christ, whether alive or dead. So powerful is this text, he says, unless he changes his mind in the meantime, “it’s going onto my gravestone.”

11. The promise of all promises (Rom. 8:32). This is the “all-encompassing” promise, the fountain, “the Vesuvius” of all the other promises on this list. Because Christ shed his blood for us, “God will give his children everything—absolutely everything—we need to be supremely holy and happy forever.”⁹⁵

Scripture memory how-to

So how does one memorize the whole chapter of Romans 8? Start by breaking it down into thirty-nine verses over thirty-nine days. On day one, read verse 1 ten times. Study each different word. Each time, read the verse with an emphasis on a different word in the sentence. Squeeze as much possible meaning from each text. Then close your eyes and recite the verse ten times. The next day, recite verse 1 from memory ten times. Make sure you got it. Then work on verse 2. The next day recite verses 1 and 2 ten times from memory. And so on.⁹⁶

What translation should we use for Bible memory? Pastor John vividly remembers his two translation moves—first from KJV to RSV; then from RSV to ESV. Contrary to using multiple translations in Bible reading, in memorization you should settle on one translation: “if you are going to do significant long-term memory, it will be very difficult to jump around in translations because the mind gets locked in—and it *needs* to get locked in—to certain wording, so that it doesn’t have to be self-conscious as it is reciting the Bible and can focus on the meaning.” Consistency is important. Ask your church leaders which translation is going to be used over the long haul. Avoid using “idiosyncratic translations” and keep to those proven over the years: NIV, NKJV, NASB, and ESV. “My own vote is for the ESV, but, boy, it is far better to be memorizing *any* version than to be memorizing *none*.”⁹⁷ Best of all, memorize for a long time from *one* proven translation because “I just don’t know any who have done serious, long-term, extensive Bible memory by using several translations.”⁹⁸

95 APJ 1798: “Crucial Texts for Our Hardest Battles” (June 20, 2022).

96 APJ 258: “Practical Tips for Bible Memory” (January 17, 2014).

97 APJ 259: “What Translation for Bible Memory?” (January 20, 2014).

98 APJ 1003: “How Many Bible Versions Should I Read?” (February 15, 2017).



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TONY REINKE is a journalist and serves as senior teacher and host of the *Ask Pastor John* podcast for desiringGod.org. He is the author of *Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books*; *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*; and *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*.

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