



READING THE BIBLE DEEPLY AND WIDELY

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” - 2 Timothy 2:14-17 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

We believe the whole Bible is breathed out by God. We also believe it is our best, authoritative witness to Jesus and what it means to follow Him. Therefore, coming to know the Bible is essential for us as disciples of Jesus and disciplers of others. Here we will discuss some strategies for both studying the Bible deeply *and* reading it widely, individually and with others.

WHY DEEPLY AND WIDELY?

Though the Bible is a collection of many books written over many years by many human authors, it is unified by its divine authorship—the fact that God Himself inspired the biblical texts. It tells a coherent, unified story that finds its center point in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For this reason, we can be confident that each individual verse, section, or book of the Bible contributes real insight into the meaning of the whole Bible. At the same time, the Biblical story as a whole informs how we are to understand each individual book, section, or verse. We have to work hard to understand the parts to understand the whole, and vice versa. For this reason, Christians do well to build ongoing habits of thorough, deep Bible study of individual books as well as broad, sweeping reading of the Bible as a whole. Doing each will make the other far more effective.

STRATEGY FOR DEEP STUDY

There is no shortage of Bible study books that provide the reader with insights and questions to spur deeper understanding. There are also plenty of books detailing helpful interpretive methods for studying the Bible (including a couple listed below). These are all well worth pursuing. But one particularly simple, effective method for deeply studying the Bible inductively is the OIA method: observation, interpretation, and application. Whether you have fifteen minutes or three hours, understanding this approach can transform the way you study (and even think about) the Bible. Once you’ve selected a Biblical book to study, read through the whole book a couple of times, and broken it up into manageable/coherent units of thought, the following three steps can be applied to a short unit of text. Ideally each step would be written out in a page or two of a journal:

Observation – Pray, then read the paragraph several times. Write out simple declarative statements of what you see in the text. This is not a time to interpret (that comes next), but rather to notice what is there on the page. Ask who, what, when, where, why, and how questions to fuel your observations. Note any repeated or emphasized words. Note comparisons or contrasts. Note any commands. Aim to be thorough, shoot for at least three observations per verse as a baseline.

Interpretation – After thoroughly observing the text, now comes the time to interpret. We are looking for the original author’s intended meaning to his original hearers. This is the time to do simple word studies on key words, identify any cross references that might shed light on the meaning, see how themes explored here have developed across the canon, consult relevant cultural background information, etc. Write out interpretive questions—anything that was unclear in the observations. A good study Bible (the NET bible, Blue Letter Bible, ESV Study Bible, etc.), Bible commentaries (ask around or consult BestCommentaries.com), Bible dictionaries, etc. can be consulted at this point to find answers to the questions you’ve written. Make note of how this particular paragraph functions in its immediate context and the context of the whole book.

Application – Once we, hopefully, have a good understanding of the meaning of the text, it’s time to figure out how to live it out. Any commands in the passage that have been identified will be especially important here. Write out a statements of how you intend to apply the passage. Good application will be practical (can actually be done), measurable (finite, it is clear whether or not it has been done), and attainable (not too lofty or unrealistic).

This may seem like a lot to work through, but it is scalable depending on how much time you have available to study. And using this method over time will train you to think in similar terms whenever you read any Biblical text. We should always be asking ourselves: what does this say, what does it mean, and what am I going to do with it in order to better honor God?

STRATEGIES FOR WIDE READING

If we only ever engage in deep study of individual books or texts, we will probably miss out on the big picture story of what God has been (and will be) doing throughout history. We will fail to understand how the individual books and texts contribute to the larger story or how they're impacted by it. For this reason, we need to develop rhythms of reading widely, as well.

A good, general practice that many Christians have undertaken is to read the Bible in a year. There is nothing magical about reading the Bible in a year, though it can be done in around 20 minutes per day for most readers. Some try to read at a faster pace, others shoot to read the whole Bible over two years (or more!). Here are a couple of plans that can help readers through reading the whole Bible:

Divide your own Bible – Take the total page number of your Bible and divided it by 365. This will tell you how many pages you need to read daily to finish the whole thing in a year. In the ESV Journaling Bible there are 1042 pages. Divided by 365 days, this comes out to just under 3 pages per day, which is very attainable for most people. You could also divide it according to two years, a year-and-a-half, a year with five readings per week, etc.

The Bible Project Read Scripture Plan – The Bible Project has created a one-year Bible reading plan that includes a reading in the Psalms each day, plus indications when to watch explanatory book-overview videos and theme videos that can help the reader understand what they're reading and how it fits into the overall story of Scripture. Print out the plan and tape it into your Bible or keep track via the Read Scripture app.

There is no silver bullet for reading the whole Bible. It is difficult and takes enormous discipline to finish, even at a slower pace. It takes both serious discipline *and* grace for oneself. Commit to not missing any days and stick to it, but also don't let yourself get derailed by missing a day (or a week, for that matter). If you've never committed to reading the whole Bible, don't wait for an arbitrary starting point (January, etc.). Start now, and whenever you finish, start again!

FOLDING OTHERS IN

Every Christian shares the commission to go and make disciples—leading others to Jesus and helping them grow in obedience to Him (Matthew 28:18-20). Reading and studying the Bible with others should be a key part of this process. Fold others into this process—your spouse, friends, co-workers, community group members, etc. Invite others to do a reading plan and meet weekly to discuss. Maybe select a biblical book and invite people to study it one-paragraph-per-week using the method above. Doing these spiritual disciplines with others will keep you accountable, will spur others on in their walks with Jesus, and will help you both grow as you both have questions and Spirit-guided insights. Get creative in how you do this, but seriously consider it.

Today, it may seem extremely daunting. There is so much to read and so much depth to explore. But imagine fifteen years from now—fifteen years of daily embracing these disciplines in some form. You won't have mastered the Bible (no one ever does), but you'll almost certainly have begun to be mastered by the God of the Bible in a beautiful way.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Online study Bibles – Check out BlueLetterBible.org or Net.Bible.org. They both take some time to get used to, but they have incredible free tools for your studies.

The Bible Project's Read Scripture Bible Reading Plan – Download the app (called Read Scripture, developed by Crazy Love Ministries) or a printable PDF (<https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/tbpweb/media/Study%20Notes/rsreadingplan2017.pdf>).

Best Commentaries – This site rounds up trustworthy reviews of Bible commentaries and other helpful study books. If you're interested in doing an in-depth study of a particular book, consult this site to find the most helpful commentaries for your purposes. It also designates if a commentary is more technical (requiring knowledge of the original languages), pastoral, or devotional. Depending on your background and goals, this is extremely helpful information. (<http://bestcommentaries.com>)

How to Read the Bible and Do Theology Well article by D.A. Carson. Very helpful article talking about the interrelationship between reading the Bible and doing theology (Biblical, Historical, Systematic, and Pastoral). (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-theology-don-carson-nivzsb>)

Read the Bible for a Change book by Ray Lubeck – If you want to go a bit deeper in your own ability to study the Bible, Lubeck's book is an excellent intermediate resource. Fee & Stewart's **How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth** is another excellent book on the subject.