

Have you ever found your mind wandering as you read your Bible? Do you ever finish reading and find yourself unable to remember what you read? I don't know about you, but I find this very frustrating. After all, this is *God's Word*! Shouldn't it be the most exciting thing we read?

The issue that keeps most of us from really engaging with and learning to love the Bible is that most of us don't read it *correctly*. Here's what I mean. Think of your favorite author – maybe a mystery or biography writer, or an expert on your favorite subject. Once you have read and enjoyed several books by that author, you start to eagerly anticipate the next book. You expect it to be great.

Did you catch that? You *expect* the next book to be great. Many of us *want* the Bible to be exciting, but we don't really *expect* it to be. We all know the power of expectation. If you go to a party expecting to have a good time, you will be more likely to actually have a good time than if you go thinking the party will be dull. If you go into a test expecting to miss every question, the probability of passing the test with flying colors is quite slim. The next time you sit down to read your Bible, try to read with an expectation that the God of the Universe wants your time in His Word to be exciting – because He does!

Never forget that your time reading your Bible is time with Him. The primary objective of this book is *not* to give you a method

to follow or an academic exercise to employ. Bible study is primarily *relationship* time. The technique must always be secondary to the relationship. You and I have the chance to get to know the Author. He wants to spend time with us. Reading the Word must always be about relationship with God, not just information about God.

The five elements of Foundational Reading¹ are:

1. *Prayerful Reading*
2. *Continuous Reading*
3. *Repetitious Reading*
4. *Independent Reading*
5. *Thoughtful Reading*

Rather than being progressive steps, these elements are principles we can practice simultaneously to transform our time in the Word.

Prayerful Reading

Imagine for a minute that you are a running back for a football team. (For some of us that's a big stretch, but bear with me.) Your team is starting on the 20-yard line. Eighty yards to go. Your goal is to get to the end zone. You've prepared. You know the play. You are completely committed to getting to the end zone. The ball is snapped and placed right in your hands. Off you go. Five yards down the field – boom! – you're knocked right on your backside. As you lay there on the ground you think to yourself, "Hmmm. Why am I not in the end zone? Why did I only get five yards down

the field? I was totally ready. I don't understand." Finally, a little voice in your head says, "Because there's someone playing defense!"

Do you realize that there is someone playing "defense" while you are trying to read the Bible? There is someone who wants you not to have quality time with God as much as (or more than) you want to have it. In his first letter, Peter warns, "*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*" (1 Peter 5:8) The Enemy is doing everything he can to distract you – or better yet – convince you that you are too busy to spend time with God at all! We need to be ready for the distractions. We need to prepare in advance to deal with any excuse for not spending time in the Word. We all need an "offensive" attack to deal with the devil's defense.

That is why Prayerful Reading is vitally important. We simply don't have the strength to fight a spiritual battle without the help of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 6, right after Paul has finished listing all the pieces of the "full armor of God," he makes this statement: "*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*" (Eph. 6:18)

Whenever you set out to spend time in the Word, take some time to ask God to help keep your mind focused, to reveal His Word to you, and to help you fall more deeply in love with Him and His Word. Then, as you read, if you find your mind wandering, stop and spend some time in prayer again. It may be that a short, one-sentence prayer is all you need to refocus, or it could be that God is urging you to simply stop reading and focus on Him for a while. Either way, the goal is to build your relationship with God,

not simply to get through your reading for the day. As you come to the end of your time in the Word, pray again, asking the Holy Spirit to keep your mind focused on Him – and the passages you have read – as you go through your day.

The Enemy wants to keep you from spending time with God in His Word. And if you do set aside time for Bible study, he most certainly does not want it to be fruitful. However, your Heavenly Father wants nothing more than to build a vibrant, meaningful relationship with you. He wants you to love spending time in His Word and He is able to make that a reality in your life.

As I mentioned earlier, Bible study is primarily relationship time. Approaching God's Word with a prayerful attitude is the first step toward entering His presence. Our desire must be to not only learn about God, but also to hear from Him, talk to Him, know Him more intimately. Simply put – we need to be with Him. Prayerful Reading is the key ingredient in fostering that relationship. It is also essential if you want to develop a love for His Word.

Continuous Reading

When was the last time you sat down and read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting? For the first twenty years I was a Christian, I never had. I never even considered it. I had been told somewhere along the line that I should read a chapter a day. Where did that idea ever come from? Not that reading a chapter a day is bad, but it certainly won't make the Bible come alive. Could you imagine picking up a novel by your favorite author and only reading one or two pages a day? It wouldn't matter how talented the author was; that would be one boring novel!

Reading a chapter of the Bible typically takes between two and five minutes. If that is all the time we spend reading the Bible, it is no wonder that three hours later we can't remember what we read. We need to read the Bible in such a way that the entire message sticks in our head once the Bible is closed and we are going about our daily business.

Continuous Reading means reading a complete book of the Bible in one sitting. You may be thinking, "That would take hours!" Actually, there are more books of the Bible that can be read – in their entirety – in less than thirty minutes than there are books that take more than thirty minutes. Obviously, there are some books that would take much more time, such as the Gospels, Genesis, and several others. With these books, I suggest breaking them down into larger chunks, so that you end up reading the whole book over the course of a week or a few days.

The purpose of Continuous Reading is to get a feel for the book as a whole. It provides you with a good understanding of the general message. You are not examining every detail – yet. The Finish Work Phase is the time for that. Remember: for now, you are looking at the Big Picture.

Repetitious Reading

Once you have read through a book of the Bible, try this the next day: read it again! And again the next day. And again the next day. If our goal is to hide God's Word in our hearts, we are going to have to soak in it. This principal is not unique to Bible study. It is simply the way our brains work; we need repetition. This is why pianists practice the same song over and over until it is second

nature. And why golfers hit buckets and buckets of balls on the driving range. Repetition makes things stick.

Whenever you set out to study a new book of the Bible, a good goal is to start by reading that book thirty times in thirty days. That may sound like a lot, but one month from now you could know a book of the Bible better than you have ever known one before. That is the power of Repetitious Reading! It plants the stories and concepts firmly in your mind, so that when you begin to study verse by verse, you already have the context of those verses planted in your memory.

Obviously, with the longer books of the Bible, you will not be able to read them thirty times in thirty days. However, most of these are books that tell a story and do not take quite the amount of repetition to gain a good understanding of the plotline, characters, and events. For these books, I would still recommend reading them through a few times over the course of a month before you dive into any verse-by-verse study.

Though you may initially think that Repetitious Reading must get boring, you will actually find that when you start to understand the verses and the way they fit together, the Bible will hold more meaning and excitement for you than ever before. I have found that the last fifteen days of reading are actually more exciting than the first fifteen days.

In order to more firmly cement the Scripture into your mind, make sure that during Repetitious Reading you read the same Bible every day. Not just the same Bible translation, but the same physical Bible. That may sound strange, but using the same Bible will actually help you to internalize Scripture without even trying. You

will start to notice that you automatically remember where certain verses are located on a page.

At a few specific times during the Foundation Phase – about every five to seven days – purposefully read a different translation of the Bible. This will give you a fresh look at the book. Sometimes a different wording will shed some light on a passage that did not make sense to you before. After reading the new translation, return to your primary Study Bible the next day. You will add this new insight into the passages that are now becoming familiar to you.

Before we move on, allow me to encourage you not to underestimate the importance of Repetitious Reading. After ten or eleven days, you may be tempted to say, “Okay, I know this. I can move on.” If you really want God’s Word to stay with you for the long haul, make sure you stick with it for the whole thirty days.

Independent Reading

When you read your Bible, are you constantly glancing at the notes at the bottom of the page or looking in a commentary to find out what a passage means? Let me start out by saying that commentaries, Study Bible notes, and other reference materials are invaluable tools. However, many of us rely on this information before we even try to understand a passage by ourselves. It is as if we subtly tell ourselves, “I can’t understand the Bible on my own. I need a Bible scholar to explain it all to me.” This is completely false. Let this sink in: God wants you to know Him. When you go to His Word, He wants you to understand it. He wants to personally reveal Himself to you. Take a look at these two verses from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...”

- (Eph. 1:17-18a, *emphasis mine*)

When we rely too heavily on study tools, we miss the opportunity for a personal revelation from our Almighty God.

Throughout the first two or three weeks of Foundation, avoid using extra Bible study tools except when doing a Background Study. (We will talk in detail about Background Studies in the next chapter.) These tools will play an important role a little further into the Bible study process, but if we want to truly fall in love with God’s Word, we need to start off by simply soaking in the story. When we go straight to studying the details and relying on others’ insights, we run the danger of falling into two traps. First, we can start to see the Bible as simply a textbook we read to get information. Bible reading becomes time spent getting information about God, rather than time spent with God.

A second trap to this approach is that we can give the study tools the same authority we give to Scripture. I once heard someone say, “One thing we must always remember about commentaries: they are simply another Christian’s comments on Scripture. They are not Scripture themselves.” I have a friend who has made a little rule for himself to specifically avoid this second trap. Whenever he is about to grab a commentary, he rereads the passage

of Scripture ten times first! This places the Bible verses fresh in his mind before he reads someone else's comments.

Avoiding these traps are not the only reasons to read independently. There are also several blessings when we embrace Independent Reading. First of all, few experiences can compare to the realization that God has just personally revealed a piece of Himself to you. When you are reading along and suddenly find that a passage comes together and makes sense, there can be a tremendous sense of nearness to God. There is also great joy in going to a commentary or hearing a sermon and realizing that God showed you the exact same thing He showed that author or pastor.

You will undoubtedly find that as you read there will be some passages that are difficult to understand. Commentaries can help bring light to some of those passages. Also, there will be times when you will turn to a study tool to find out more information about a person, place, time period etc. (We will talk about that in the section on Background Studies.) But when it comes to Independent Reading, the bottom line is that God wants to spend some time with you. Just the two of you. Take Him up on it. You won't regret it.

Thoughtful Reading

Whenever I discuss Bible reading with people, there is one question that is always met with groans of painful agreement: Do you ever struggle with your mind wandering when you read the Bible? (Maybe you just groaned when you read that question.) The more I talk to people, the more I find this is the most common problem in Bible study.

As we spoke about in the section on Prayerful Reading, the Enemy is specifically working to keep us from focusing on Scripture. In addition to preparatory time spent in prayer, there are some specific steps that we can take as we read to keep this from happening.

First, it takes work to keep our minds from wandering. As we put effort into Thoughtful Reading however, it becomes "built in" to the way we read the Bible. One practice that has helped me focus more than anything else is to read out loud. Have you ever tried reading the Bible out loud? I never did until I had been a Christian for 15 years!

Reading silently, the verses all tend to sound the same – monotone. Reading out loud allows us to hear the emotion in the passage. We can sense the author's compassion, or frustration, or sadness, or joy. We can actually picture the author speaking the passage directly to us. Reading out loud also gives our brains one more way of taking Scripture in, making it that much easier to remember. Study after study shows that – no matter what the information – we remember far more of what we read *and* hear than what we only read.

Another element of Thoughtful Reading is reading from different perspectives. This is most easily done when we keep an underlying question running through our minds as we read. Take Philipians for example. One day you might read Philipians asking: "What would it feel like to be Paul writing this letter?" The next day you could ask: "What would it have been like to sit in the church in Philippi the day this letter was read for the first time?" The third day: "What would my family (or communi-

ty/country/world) look like if the messages of this letter were lived out in my life and the lives of those around me?"

Develop additional questions that help you focus as you read. We tend to focus more easily and draw more from a passage when we approach it from many different angles, rather than reading it the same way, day in and day out. It is a deception of the Enemy to believe, however subconsciously, that the Bible is a monotone book with nothing new to say to us. Nothing could be further from the truth.



Prayerful Reading, Continuous Reading, Repetitious Reading, Independent Reading, and Thoughtful Reading. Utilizing these five techniques will greatly enhance your understanding of, love for, and internalization of God's Word. You will soon find yourself expecting the Bible to be the wonderful relationship builder God always intended it to be.

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE CONTEXT?

Background Studies

