

Session 2

Starting to read

In this chapter, we introduce the Bible Reading Planner to help you read systematically through the Bible and provide some tips to successful Bible reading. We also look at two common problems new Bible readers have: strange words and strange customs. Finally we consider the use of cross references and footnotes to help you understand the Bible better.

Bible Reading Planner

We recommend regular intake of God's Word. Just as we have regular meals of physical food, we need regular meals of spiritual food to be in good health. A fundamental principle of Bible reading is to have a *steady, consistent diet of the Word of God*.

Because your Bible is a big book, and because it is so important, it pays to be systematic in reading it. After all, it is a textbook, your textbook for life, and if it is worth reading at all, it is worth reading well. In other words, don't just open your Bible at random each day and read a little; you wouldn't do that to a textbook on an unfamiliar topic.

However, you are not advised to open the Bible to page one, start, and keep reading day by day till it's finished. Some people have read the Bible that way, with success. But some of the difficulties experienced by first readers lead us to recommend a step by step approach which gives important and useful ideas quite early in your reading, then progressively consolidates them.

There are several ways of achieving this, but we have chosen a reading course that has been widely used and well tested.

The reading planner we are using gives daily readings for one year, each day's readings consist of one chapter. Through the year, you will read from many different parts of the Bible. The booklet will help fill you in on some of that Bible background you may need. You will cover many different parts of the Bible and have a good grasp of the overall plan of God.

Preparing to read the Bible

There are a number of things which need to be considered when reading the Bible.

1. *Pray*

It is important to ask God's blessing on your reading. It is his book and he can help us understand it.

2. *Be comfortable*

To properly concentrate on the Bible, you will need to find a comfortable, quiet place in which to read. Try to avoid places where there is a lot of background noise from the television or other people talking. In the Bible, God speaks to us. It is worth listening carefully.

3. *Allow time*

Bible reading is most effective if you are not rushed. Set aside 20–30 minutes each day to read the chapter and think about what it means. It also takes time to become familiar with the Bible message and the background in which it is set. Be patient and over time it will all start to fit together like a beautiful jigsaw.

4. *Be open to new ideas*

The people from Berea (in Greece) are described as being of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

If we are to gain as much as we can from Bible reading and study, we need to approach it with the right attitudes. We need an openness to new ideas. If we approach all ideas with a “fortress mentality”—thinking that our main job is to defend the walls that make up the fortress of Christianity—we have very little space for growth.

The Bible is a book of strength that has withstood all

kinds of attacks during its history. As in all other areas of study, scholars build upon and re-evaluate the work of earlier scholars. We need not fear examining new ideas and evaluating them carefully in the light of all the teachings of the Bible.

5. *Think about it*

God told Joshua

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Joshua 1:8)

To successfully understand the message of the Bible, we must spend time thinking about it carefully. So important is this that God said to the nation of Israel:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:18–21)

6. *Ask questions*

You will inevitably have questions about what you read. Write them down. You might discover the answers through further reading. Or you can take your questions to a more experienced Bible reader to see if he or she can help.

7. *Share your ideas*

We need an attitude of willingness to meditate on what we are learning and to think through for ourselves how our learning can and should be applied in our own lives. To do this, it is usually helpful to share our ideas and interpretations with other Bible students for discussion and evaluation. We can learn from each other.

Bible study is trying work. It is also exciting and life changing. Study of the Bible can enrich us as no other study can. You will experience a new energy as you learn to make your own judgments based on firm principles, and the Bible will become more alive and powerful in your life. Remember, you are intended to understand this remarkable book and to meet God in its pages.

Strange language

The King James Version was produced in 1611 and is famous for its majestic language and is the most quoted version of the Bible.

Consider the following passage (Psalm 23:1–3).

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Compare the NIV translation:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Note the archaic form of verbs used in the KJV. Notice, also, that punctuation has changed—the colon (:) is used differently today. However, in this passage, none of the words in the KJV are particularly difficult to understand and the meaning of the passage is clear.

This is not true everywhere. The KJV can sometimes be difficult to understand because of the archaic language. Consider the two examples below.

Psalm 119:147–148	
KJV	NIV
¹⁴⁷ I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word. ¹⁴⁸ Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.	¹⁴⁷ I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. ¹⁴⁸ My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.
What does the word “prevent” mean in the KJV?	

“Conversation”

Read the KJV of Philippians 1:27. Turn to a more recent version for comparison. What does the word “conversation” mean in the KJV?

As these two examples show, some words have a different meaning now from the meaning they had in 1611 when the KJV first appeared. In fact, it contains over 500 words which have changed their meaning or become obsolete. Some are shown in the table below.

Some archaic words from the King James Version

Old word	Modern equivalent	Example
prevent	precede	1 Thessalonians 4:15
bowels	heart	Genesis 43:30
bewitch	amaze	Acts 8:9
allow	approve	Luke 11:48
conversation	way of life	Philippians 1:27
bruit	report	Jeremiah 10:22
maketh collops	gather fat	Job 15:27
throw	think	Luke 17:9

Language is dynamic—it is always changing. New words are created, old words die out, some words change their meaning. Therefore, to read older versions effectively, you need to learn the old words. Or use a modern version.

Even with a modern version, you will come across words that are not in common use. There are things mentioned in the Bible which are not part of everyday conversation and so the words used may not be familiar. To help you when you come across these words, we have listed some of them with a definition in Appendix B.

Strange customs

The people in the Bible lived thousands of years ago in a different culture and a different land. When reading the Bible, you will soon learn some of their ancient customs. For example:

When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. (2 Samuel 15:32)

Tearing your clothes and covering your head with dust seems strange behaviour to us, but in the context it is clear that this was a sign of mourning. The same custom is found many times throughout the Old Testament. It doesn't take long to recognize these ancient customs and learn what they meant.

Some ancient customs

- tearing clothes
- dust on head
- wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes
- professional wailing women at funerals
- arranged marriages
- multiple marriages
- walls around cities for defence
- some names mean something
- sitting in the gate of a city

Footnotes and cross references

Consider the following passage from Matthew 5:21–22 which is part of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the mount". This excerpt is from the RSV.

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brotherⁱ shall be liable to judgement; whoever insults^j his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell^k of fire.

The basic message of Jesus is quite clear: in the past you were told not to kill—I am telling you not even to be angry or abusive. He was taking the Old Testament commandment to a new level. However, we can understand the passage better using some simple Bible study tools.

Footnotes

The small letters *i*, *j* and *k* after the words “brother”, “insults” and “hell” indicate there is a footnote with more explanation. In this case, the footnotes given at the bottom of the page are as follows:

- i* Other ancient authorities insert *without cause*.
- j* Greek *says Raca to* (an obscure term of abuse)
- k* Greek *Gehenna*

The first one shows that some of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament give a slightly different form of words, which alters the meaning. Obviously the translators felt the form of words they used in the main text was the most likely but there was sufficient doubt to include the alternative as a footnote.

The second footnote explains that the original Greek actually refers to a particular abusive expression. Because this has little meaning for us, they have translated it as “insults”.

The third footnote shows that the word “hell” has been used for the Greek word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley south of Jerusalem; it is also known as the valley of Hinnom. It was used as a rubbish dump and always had a fire burning to destroy the rubbish. Previously it had been the site of child sacrifice to an Ammonite god called Molech (2 Chronicles 33:6). Jesus seems to have used it as a symbol of complete destruction.

In general, footnotes are provided by the translators to explain some words, give alternative translations, or explain some aspect of the text. They are often helpful in understanding a passage.

Cross-references

There is no better commentary on the Bible than the Bible itself. No source is more appropriate for interpreting God’s Word than God himself. It is in this area that the use of cross-references can be so valuable. They are verse ‘references’ supplied by the publishers which direct the reader to other locations in the Bible where the same word or the same or similar event or phrase may be found.

Bibles which have cross-references will usually place them in a centre column, after the footnotes, or at the end of each verse.

Most cross-references take one of the following forms:

1. Quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament;
2. Parallel passage of the same or similar events;
3. More detail about a person, place or subject.

Example: Matthew 5:21–22

Some cross-references for Matthew 5:21–22 are given below.

Exo 20:13; Deut 5:17; 1 John 3:15; Eph 4:26; Jms 1:19–20.

Look them up. Do they help us better understand what Jesus said?

Exercise: Genesis 1

The second reading in the Bible Reading Planner is Genesis 1. Read the chapter and discuss the following questions.

1. Were the sun, moon and stars created after the earth? If so, how was there “evening and morning” for the first three days?
2. Human beings are described as being created “in God’s image”. Look at the following cross-references: Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; James 3:9. How do these help us understand what Genesis means?
3. What food was assigned to man? There is a cross-reference to Genesis 9:3. What does this tell us?
4. Over what part of creation did man have dominion? Does this give us the responsibility to care for the environment?
5. How are Adam and Eve mentioned?

Homework

1. Read the book of Ruth and find a few customs very strange to us. What do you think they mean?

2. Here are some examples of cross references. Use them to answer the questions.
 - (a) Luke 9:7–9
Why was John the Baptist beheaded?
CR to Matthew 14:1–3; Mark 6:14–16

 - (b) Matthew 12:38–42
Who was the “Queen of the South”?
CR to 1 Kings 10:1