

The Mystery and Importance of Reading the Bible

The Analogy of a Car Engine

I know nothing about cars. I know how to drive and wash them, that it's necessary to take them in for service. But beyond that, not a lot. Oh...I can check the oil and fluids. I can change a tire. I broadly understand how the engine works, but couldn't name many of its parts. I couldn't take it apart and work on it. I certainly couldn't build one! For sure, some people are "car people." They have a great interest in cars. I'm just not one of them.

What I do know is the Bible. That's something I can tell you about. But the car analogy helps to get at the issue many of you may have with reading God's Word. You may look at the Bible, and just feel fogged. Stumped. Bewildered. And I get it! It's a hard book to handle. However, the Bible is *very clear in its core message*. The basic truth of the Bible can be discerned by nearly anyone who can read. You might even know a little about it. And even though I am an "expert," there is much I'm still learning! The fact is, most people relate to the Bible the way I do to the automobile—they know it's there, they know it has value, they just don't know how it works.

There is a paradox in our times with God's Word—the more technology has given people personal access to the Scriptures (something impossible during the first 1960+ years of the Church), even though we have a plethora of resources available, across multiple platforms and devices in any setting...*practically no one reads the Bible*. Because they don't know how. Or are intimidated by the prospect. And when they do wade in and give it a try, they find themselves in some deep waters and immediately swim for shore. As a result, people now know very little about what the Bible actually says and what Jesus (and His apostles and prophets) teaches.

The resulting dilemma is two-fold. First, as a pastor, when appealing to Scripture's authority, I sometimes get puzzled looks or even resistance. *People frequently don't trust in what they don't know*. Second, people will employ Bible short-cuts to help them, sometimes parroting pithy insights gleaned from Facebook, claiming to be "biblical"...but are probably wrong. So, we have God's Word questioned or incorrectly applied. Let me put it this way. For those of you a little insecure about your biblical knowledge, what's your reaction when someone "quotes" the Bible *at you*? Are you intrigued or put off? What's your reaction when someone has the "nerve" to cite the Bible as a response to a societal question, like abortion or "gay marriage"? Do you recognize that citation as holding some "authority" or do you feel a little hostility...in part because you are not clear what the Bible truly says, properly interpreted and applied?

My goal in this article is to assure you that you are not alone. I simply ask you to hear me out. Like in the analogy of the car, I relate to the feeling, to the bewilderment. But unlike the car, which is a mere object, *the Holy Scripture is the infallible repository of God's revelation, relevant for every time and place*, written by God using humans, in order that we might know Him more, but most importantly, that we might know His Son. The Bible is God's gift to the

world, that we might be taught, comforted, encouraged, chastened, convicted and have certainty of His love for us and all humanity. My goal is to help you begin to love the Bible by offering a way to read it...even a way to better understand it.

Basic Beginning Truths

So, we start with some basic, fundamental truths. For we are not dealing with a car but with the written, fixed Word of God. So, before the Bible can make any human sense, *before you can love it*, you must accept some basic presuppositions.¹ First, one must believe in Jesus. For if you don't believe in Jesus, then the Bible will be largely incomprehensible. Oh, you can get some stuff out of it. But without faith in Christ, the Bible is a "closed book." The good news is you believe in Jesus! If you are reading this article, you're likely a baptized child of God. You have been given *eyes to see* His Word.

There are some other things too. The Bible, as God's Word, is *without error*. Critics of Scripture sneer at such an assertion. They point out apparent "contradictions." These faithless critics are blinded to God's truth. To be sure, there are defenses against their critiques, but the point: if the Bible is God's Word *in toto*, then it cannot be in error (contradiction), any more than we may doubt a single promise God makes. So, we approach the Bible, whatever our "comprehension" level, by accepting that *what it says is the truth*. For God does not lie.

But the Bible is also a (miraculously inspired) *product of human hands*. It was written down not by holy angels but by inspired, ordinary men. The Bible is a product of more than fifty human authors, written over a span of 1600 years. Therefore, one may speak of the Bible in literary terms. It has narratives, poetry, and different genres, also drama, tension and plot lines. God used human agents to pen His literary masterpiece. For God is the author of the Scriptures, breathing into these men to write what they wrote in the way that they wrote it. This makes the Bible both completely Divine and completely human. Sounds like someone I know...

Which leads to the final thing you need before reading. The Bible is all about Jesus. *He is the center of the Scriptures*. He is the goal and point. Even in arcane passages or books that seem devoid of anything like Gospel, Jesus is there, lurking. To be sure, there are books that sing Christ with every word. But to see Jesus at the center of your reading project, helps one to read the Bible in the way it was meant to be read.

The *Mystery* in Reading

Being armed with these basic truths, one can begin reading. But where to start? The beginning? The Gospels? The books we know? The hardest books? There truly is no correct way (though I suggest an approach below), but the power is in *daily, intentional engagement*. Because coming

¹ A presupposition is something assumed beforehand at the beginning of a line of argument or inquiry.

into contact with God's Word (even on a smart phone) changes you. It works on you. It reveals to you *great mysteries*.

When we think of the word *mystery*, we think of Agatha Christie, a “who-dun-it,” a puzzle we piece together. But mystery in God's realm is *that which is revealed from above*. A mystery is a cosmic gift of God given that people might be illumined. Considering the Bible as a mystery allows one to enter into the heavenly throne room brought down to earth. To overhear things *almost* too deep for words. But that's just it—*God has revealed these things to you that you may better know Him*. Thinking of the Bible as a mystery acknowledges that it's from God to be received as a gift. To be sure, we are dealing with something that might leave us with questions. But too often people approach the Bible as something to be solved, instead of something revealed by God to us to be received, cherished, and studied.

The Importance of Reading

*I*t is important that Christians mine the Scriptures for its precious content, that we may know about Jesus, about God's will for His creation, about the Triune God, revealing the lengths God went to redeem you and this world from sin and grant life eternal to all who believe in Christ. “But why does it have to be so hard?” Well, does everything of value have to be easy? Should a book about God be trite? Perhaps it's sensible that a book from God and about God might be a bit “elevated.” So, we might start by approaching God's Word with a bit more reverence and awe, as a treasure to be mined, not cotton candy to be gobbled up. Reading the Bible is something that takes effort, learning, repetition...and patience.

Reading is also important for your spiritual growth and maturity. Not just to vaguely know some information, but to know what God says in *specific, historical situations that applies to every time and place*. The Scriptures are the primary way we measure and test the lies of world. To know the truth. To speak a word about Jesus. To live lives of holiness. The Bible gives us a way to be more and more the people God wants us to be.

The Basic Strategy of Organization and Reading

*N*ow we get to it—a basic strategy for reading. First, however, is to make some sense of the whole by knowing the parts. So, go and grab a Bible. An *actual bound book*. Apps won't work for this. Turn to the “Table of Contents” in the front. Ready?

The Bible is not one book but 66—39 in the Old and 27 in the New. The trick to making a start is to “get organized.” Old Testament first. Take a sharpie or pen. From *Genesis* to *Deuteronomy* draw a bracket. From *Joshua* to *Nehemiah* draw another bracket. From *Esther* to *Song of Solomon* draw a third. From *Isaiah* to *Malachi* draw a final bracket. Here's what this shows:

Bracket One: The Books of Moses—These five books are the story of the creation, the primeval history through the Flood, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, etc.) and the

Exodus, leading to the entry into the Promised Land. These books also make many promises about Jesus...and have many “types and shadows” that pre-figure Jesus.

Bracket Two: The Historical Books (ca.1500-450BC)—These books tell the history of the people of Israel from the entry into the land of inheritance all the way through the return to Judah after the Babylonian Captivity. Included are the reigns of King David and Solomon, the kingly line of descent leading to the Christ.

Bracket Three: The Wisdom Books—These are books of poetry and wisdom, including the Psalter, or “songs in the key of life.” They are psalms of worship, praise, laments and rules for living. They teach and give us language that we speak back to God and describe our life on earth as His people. The Psalms teach us the fear of the Lord. The Wisdom books are also replete with imagery pointing to and evoking Jesus.

Bracket Four: The Prophets (ca.900-400BC)—These are the *writing* prophets, both the big ones (Isaiah-Daniel) and the so called “minor” ones. The prophets speak to God’s people in different historical situations and apply God’s Word in their own time. We might think of them as speaking in “BC language.” They also in many and various ways point to the coming of Jesus, describing God’s plan of salvation in both near and far off ways. But they contain some strange-sounding and difficult material!

Next for the New Testament. Make a bracket from *Matthew* to *John*. Put a dot next to *Acts*. Make a bracket from *Romans* to *Philemon*. Make a final one from *Hebrews* to *Revelation*.

Bracket One: The Gospels—These books talk about Jesus (duh!).

Dot One: Acts—This book continues the story of Christ by focusing on the acts of His apostles and the early Church. St. Peter and Paul are the two major figures spreading the good news of Jesus to Jews and non-Jews alike. The Holy Spirit is in charge!

Bracket Two: The Pauline Epistles—These are Paul’s thirteen letters, nine to congregations and four to individuals, ordered by size (more or less). Paul’s letters give us the best, clearest proclamation of the significance of Jesus Christ in the Bible.

Bracket Three: The General Epistles—These are the rest of the books of the New Testament, some by Peter, some by John, some by a few others. They read more like sermons...centered on Christ. Revelation is its own “animal” and should be read only when one has a firm grasp on the OT, especially the Prophets.

One other presupposition. There are basic events one needs to know before reading. I give approximate dates for simplicity. For the OT: the Flood (???), the Exodus (ca.1500BC), the Reign of King David (ca.1000), the Babylonian Exile (ca. 600BC). For the NT, the birth of Jesus (4BC), His ministry (ca.27AD), His death and resurrection (ca.30AD), the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70AD). These markers help keep the reader on a kind of historical footing.

Now you have a basic organizational grasp of the entire Bible. By knowing how things are laid out should give you a better handle. So, what to read? A basic guiding principle to follow—read those books more often that most directly talk about Jesus or His promises. As Luther put it, “[Read] what *thumps/urges* Christ.” It’s *those books we read first and most*. Below, I suggest a reading plan based on that principle (from top to bottom by column):

*Throughout, read a psalm a day, followed by Proverbs, then the Psalms again, etc.

1. Starting from Scratch

Genesis 1-3

Matthew

Luke

Romans

1 John

John

Mark

Ephesians

Acts

Galatians

2. Building Up

Genesis

Exodus

Deuteronomy

Matthew

Philippians

1 Peter

Mark

1 Thessalonians

Luke

Ruth

3. Gaining Momentum

Acts

Joshua (skim parts)

1 Samuel

John

2 Samuel

Romans

Luke

1 Corinthians

Mark

4. Staying Strong

Matthew

Genesis

John

1 John

2 Corinthians

2 Thessalonians

1 Kings

2 Kings

Romans

Ephesians

James

5. Forming a Habit

Malachi

Isaiah

Mark

Luke

John

Jeremiah

Matthew

Titus

Hebrews

Exodus

Acts

I know you think this is “too much.” You’ll say, “I’m not a reader” or “I don’t have time.” Truth is, there are a billion bible reading plans out there, and a number of ways to read the Bible. But to actually know God’s Word, you have to...well...start reading the Bible. *There’s no real shortcut.* What I propose is a strategy that focuses primarily on repeatedly the Gospels and several of Paul’s letters and the general epistles, with key books of the Old Testament interspersed. The repetition is on the books that most clearly and profoundly tell the story of Jesus and unpacking the enduring significance of Jesus.

The Joy and Blessing of Reading God’s Written Word

Here’s the thing—however you go about it, *just read.* I present a plan that won’t get you stuck in strange places. There’s time later for strange...better to not start there! That’s why reading the Bible chronologically is problematic—you get to *Leviticus* and wham! “What is going on here?” And then people quit and go back to Candy Crush.

I also don’t assign books to dates or time periods. Often people will start a reading plan and do fine for a while...until they get sick or go on vacation. The point is to get “back on the horse” amidst the disruptions of life. You can read as fast or slow as you want. If you want to go back and start over, you can do that too. This gives you books in an order to build up your knowledge of Christ and complement toward the goal of a better overall understanding of the whole. But if you read consistently you will find that you want to explore. You’ll get pulled in. Because God’s Word, when daily engaged, *does things to you.* It opens up the mysteries of the universe. It tells you the greatest love story of all time. *It blesses you.* Before you know it, you will be going to (gasp!) a “bible study.” You’ll start watching online resources or listening to podcasts. You will begin to be formed and shaped by God’s treasury of wisdom and mercy. And it will start to make some sense.

Very last thing. To read the Bible alone, without a church home and faithful Christians (namely a pastor) to guide you is difficult. Frankly, the Bible was *written to be read in a community of*

faith. While clear in its core message, reading alone can lead to forming some very wrong conclusions! The three historic Creeds of the Church (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian) are a sort of roadmap to reading. For instance, if at some point you come to the conclusion that Jesus isn't God, then, you've gotten off the road! Or if you come away feeling like God doesn't love His world, a wrong turn was made. So, it's important to have trustworthy Christians to nearby that you may have instruction, guidance, encouragement. As well, it's so important to be regular in worship. For the Divine Service is explicitly drawn from Scriptures, as are the hymns.

Give it a try. Something might happen. You might grow in your faith and more certain in God's love for you. You might even get better in your Christian witness and apology of the faith.

Two Quick Postscripts

Obviously, reading an entire book of the Bible is a big commitment of time and attention. I have not done "partials" because I think it is important to read the "whole." This means, you will encounter some things that might confound and confuse you. Or things you've never heard before. You might have a bunch of questions. My advice is to press on. *Keep going.* If the things you're reading aren't made clear in the following context, or you're bothered by a question, there are many of resources that provide help (including your pastor). As well, "reading" the Bible can also be listening to it. There are a variety of good performative, faithful presentations of the Holy Scriptures out there. Some are even free! So, you can "read" the Bible while you drive or work out. Having another member of your household read aloud is another great way to engage with God's Word. Listening to the Bible might help if you are not "a reader."