

How To Read the Bible

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“**H**ow do I read the Bible?” If you are asking this question, you are already on the right track. The question shows you care about the Bible and think it is worth reading. Perhaps you’ve already begun. Good for you. Biblical illiteracy has led to an undeniable dumbing-down of our culture. And the Bible is undeniably great literature as well as foundational for Western society.

Still, there has to be more. The Bible is more than a cultural deposit, a work of literature to be analyzed and dissected. While the Bible may be the object of our attention, we, in fact, are its target audience because through it, God speaks to us (2 Timothy 3:16). In an age of relativism, the Bible’s claim is decidedly universal and objective. Israel’s Messiah has come to be the world’s Savior. The Bible also speaks on a personal level to each and every one of us. Its message matters, not simply on a literary or philosophical level. It’s a matter of life and life’s meaning.

Having said that, you may still feel like the Ethiopian eunuch who, having been asked whether he understood the Scriptures, famously replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” That, I suppose, is where pastors come into the picture. Even as our Lord Himself was the best Teacher, so also He trained men to be teachers of His Word (Matthew 28:20). Faithful pastors, following in the footsteps of the great teacher, are entrusted with the great and noble task of teaching God’s Word to the people, even as Philip taught the Ethiopian eunuch and led him to the knowledge of salvation.

Still, the question arises, “When I am reading the Bible at home, what should I expect to find?”

Check out a typical Christian bookstore, and you’ll find scores of self-improvement books telling you how you can become healthier, wealthier, thinner, and happier by applying various biblical principles. Similarly, I have friends who are constantly reading the Scriptures as if they were tea leaves predicting the future rising and falling of earthly empires. Such biblical prophecy clubs turn the Bible into a parlor game and miss the point entirely.

Perhaps the better question is “Who should I expect to find?” The answer, of course, is Christ Jesus. Christ is not simply the main topic of Scripture; He is its Alpha and Omega. In fact, Scripture’s every letter testifies to our Lord and the redemption that He has won for us on the cross. As Paul said, “I am determined to preach nothing among you but Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). All the prophets and apostles shared Paul’s determination and conviction.

The Gospels form the center and heart of Scripture, for within them we hear of our Lord’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. In the Gospels, God most fully reveals Himself in Christ, who makes Himself known in word and deed. For this reason, we stand when the Gospel is read in church. Everything in the Old Testament anticipates the coming of Jesus. When our Lord was explaining the Old Testament to the Emmaus disciples, we are told, “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Likewise, in the New Testament epistles, the apostles reflect upon the life and ministry of our Lord and apply it to particular circumstances within the Church.

Now, you might ask yourself, are there any tools that would help me become a better reader of Scripture? Well, there is no microwave that can speed up the process. As in any other discipline, it takes time and practice. If you want to swim, I would encourage you to jump in the pool. And, generally speaking, the more you read, the better reader you will become. You may read the Bible alone at home, but this reading is not done in isolation. We read within the context and community of the Church. It is good for pastor and people to read the Scriptures together.

If you are interested in a particular book of the Bible, you may want to go ahead and buy a commentary, perhaps one from the Concordia Commentary series. Or, you may consider reading Scripture along with the Early Church fathers. Then again, there is something to be said for simply reading Scripture for enjoyment. If Bible reading becomes a chore, you won’t do it. So, look at a few psalms and see how they strike your fancy. Find the story of David or Ruth, and dig in. Read a small epistle in one sitting. And ask yourself, in all cases, how the story, psalm, or epistle teaches you about Christ.

Now, it helps, I think, if you are grounded in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the faith of the Catechism. Doctrine has a certain shape or form, even as Scripture, too, has its own shape and form. You might also consider this: You already know a lot about God through His church. You know that He loves to baptize, to cleanse us, and raise us to new life. You know He loves to feed us in His Supper. Therefore, you should expect to find that throughout Scripture our Lord is cleansing and feeding His people. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, you should expect to find little reminders of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In that sense, the Bible is like a mystery novel that finds its climax in our Lord’s death and resurrection, even as it is actualized and effective in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

One trait that I think is underrated is that of curiosity. When you read Scripture, read as an explorer with a sense of adventure and discovery. Put yourself in the mindset of one who is prospecting for gold or an oilman looking for a gusher. If

something strikes you as odd, make a mental note. Don't be too quick to harmonize everything and make hasty judgments. Do not use Scripture only to confirm what you already know. Scripture is a lot more interesting than any system or preconceived notions you may have.

Certain skills will help you become a better reader. If you would be a teacher of others, it would help if you knew Greek and Hebrew. God's Word is like nutrition or an exercise program: the effects are not immediate, but they are long-lasting. God's Word is like a seed that once planted in the heart is able to take root, sprout, and result in the great fruit of faith. So, by all means, keep reading.

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