

Some (Slightly Contrary) Bible-Reading Tips

#1 Read a literal translation

Not a jot or tittle of the Scriptures will be forgotten by God until it is all completely fulfilled (Matt. 5:18). But when Jesus said that, he wasn't talking about the jots and tittles of *The Message:Remix*. He was talking about the original text as originally given by "holy men of God moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21).

It follows that if you're reading the Bible you want to get as close as possible to the original text, not just be relying on the translator's interpretation. And the closest that can be got, without learning Greek and Hebrew, is to read a literal translation such as the NKJV, the ESV, or the NASB (although I'm obviously not saying that it's the jots and tittles of these translations which will not pass away).

But on the other hand it might be more helpful to

#1½ Read a dynamic translation

In spite of what has been said above, going this second route is easily justified on two grounds, pragmatic and theological.

As [Philip points out to the Ethiopian eunuch](#), reading the Bible is only useful if you understand what you're reading. And the 'dynamic' translations (such as the NLT or the Message — the NIV is [somewhere in the middle](#)) are generally more readable. And then there's the fact that the freshness of a more contemporary translation can cut through the sense of over-familiarity which can sometimes plague your Bible-reading.

For the theological defense of using various translations, one can point out that the NT quotes the OT in various ways: sometimes with what seems to be a literal translation of the Hebrew, sometimes by just using the Greek (Septuagint) translation, and sometimes in ways which don't conform precisely to either.

#2 Underline words, highlight verses, mark the pages of your Bible

I am blessed: I grew up in a home where I was encouraged to read the Bible from an early age. (Yes, I have a [goodly inheritance!](#)) But I am also blessed because I grew up in a home where I was encouraged to *read*. And to this day I love reading, and continue to venerate books with a degree of awe.

One consequence of this is that I have grown up with the sense that to deface the page of a printed book was a sin of unspeakable degree.

So when someone first suggested that I mark the pages of my Bible, I took a little while to be persuaded that such a thing was not synonymous with blasphemy. But once persuaded, it was a revelation: having the freedom to scribble on the Bible's pages helped me to engage with the text and the Bible began to come alive like never before.

But on the other hand it might be more helpful to

#2½ Read a Bible that is totally clean of markings

If you have been in the habit of underlining, highlighting and annotating the pages of your Bible, and have had the same Bible for some time, then there comes a point at which a page can become somewhat cluttered with markings. Getting hold of a fresh Bible, devoid of such annotations, can make it easier for the text to impact you afresh, for new and different things to strike you.

And while you're at it, try to get hold of a Bible without passage headings, and (if you can) even chapter/verse numbering. After all, the chapter/verse divisions were only added by a medieval monk — they're not inspired!

#3 Make that extra effort to read the bits of the Bible you've never read

Jesus' comment about "every jot and tittle..." is again relevant here. Or one could point to 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed".

The argument for reading the whole Bible seems sufficiently obvious that there really doesn't seem much to add.

But on the other hand,

#3½ Don't be ashamed of returning repeatedly to favourite passages of Scripture

Dare I say it, but I don't believe that all Scripture is equal! Or let me put it this way — I think there is a reason why the Scriptures make much more frequent reference to God's revelation of himself to Moses in [Exodus 34:6-7](#) than, say, to the genealogy of the sons of Noah in Genesis 10.

So, it's okay if you sometimes skip over the prophecies of judgement in Jeremiah and head straight for the marvelous promise of [Jeremiah 29:11](#). But do remind yourself occasionally that wrestling with the admittedly bleak context of that verse will help you to understand even better the indestructible hope that is offered for those who seek God with all their heart.

#4 Question the text

Lest this seem impious, let it be pointed out that Jesus was not afraid to asking questions about the Scriptures, from his childhood (Luke 2:46) all the way through to the end of his ministry (Mark 12:35). And if Christianity is true truth (in Schaeffer's phrase) then it does not need to be afraid of even the most difficult of questions.

On the contrary, questions are an invaluable tool in reading the Bible: they help ensure that we have understood what we have read, and they help root out the various errors that so easily creep in to our theology. What's more, if you don't ask the question when you come to something that seems not to make perfect sense, then eventually you are likely to meet someone who is asking that question—and you will have nothing to say to them.

So ask about the historical plausibility of the biblical stories, ask about the compatibility of the gospel narratives, ask about whether and how the Bible applies to life today.

Ask! And you shall receive!

But on the other hand, there are times when you need to

#4½ Accept the text of Scripture on faith

In the words of the great theologian, Anselm, theology is ‘faith seeking understanding’. And while questions are a valid and vital way of engaging with the biblical text, we need to remember that we come to the Bible not like a lawyer for the prosecution cross-examining a witness, but like a child coming to a Father. And as children who as yet know only in part, we should not expect to have all our questions answered immediately.

But as well as being willing to trust that the Bible is the Word of God even when you don’t understand how it fits with the rest of what you know to be true, faith is also necessary in a more active way. For it is faith that is the activating key to making the Biblical promises reality (cf. Mark 9:23). So, for example, when you come to a verse like that in John 14:14, promising that everything we ask for in the name of Jesus will be granted to us, the thing to do is not just to trust that this must somehow be true even though once you prayed and got no answer, but rather to be encouraged by this to pray again, to believe that if this verse is true then an answer must come eventually even if it didn’t come immediately, and to keep crying out in the name of Jesus for whatever it is you need until either it is granted or God specifically speaks to you to say otherwise.

#5 Remember, the Bible is the Word of God

This has been assumed and stated in various ways throughout this discussion, but it’s worth repeating. Let’s be like the Thessalonians, who Paul commended for receiving the apostolic teaching “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13).

But on the other hand,

#5½ Remember, it is *Jesus* who is the Word of God

In John 5:39, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for searching the Scriptures while all the while failing to pay attention to the One of whom the Scriptures testify — Jesus!

And — I know this from experience — it’s all too easy for us to do the same: to fill our heads with Bible-knowledge without letting our hearts be filled with love for Jesus. So in all of your Bible-reading, remember — it’s all about Jesus.

Do you have any other helpful tips for those wanting but struggling to read the Bible?