

GETTING AN OVERVIEW

Many people will read the Bible for several hours daily, when they first become a Christian (or when they first obtain a Bible at a later date). They are eager to read it—after all, it is *God's* Word, and they want to know what God has to say! Later, when they have a greater emphasis on the study of smaller Scripture portions (see below), they may still want to maintain a daily “reading schedule.” In this way, they can continue to gain a better understanding of the basic truths of the Bible and how these truths relate to each other and to life. Continued “overview reading” can help a person better understand the relationship between the individual passages he may study. It can influence his general perspective toward all things.

The following are some suggested “Bible-reading Schedules.” You may wish to follow one, or you may wish to make your own schedule. The important thing, however, is to read it!

SIMPLIFIED READING SCHEDULES:

- *FOR A NEW TESTAMENT:* Reading one chapter each day will take 9 months. Two chapters a day will take 4½ months.
- *FOR A NEW TESTAMENT WITH PSALMS AND PROVERBS:* Reading one chapter each day (two Psalms if they are short, and Psalm 119 in 2 days) will take one year. Two chapters a day will allow you to read it twice in a year.
- *FOR BOTH OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT:* Read three chapters each day and five chapters on Sundays. You will complete the entire Bible in about one year.

A FOCUS ON SPECIFIC VERSES

In the Psalms, the Bible mentions “meditating” on the Word of God. (See Psalms 1 and 119.) This refers to carefully thinking about a Scripture passage, with the goal of better understanding what it says and how it applies to one's life. A person who wants to understand God's Word will often set aside a special time each day, to study and meditate on the Word of God. Though overview reading is also important, it seems that the study of small passages normally has the greatest life-changing effect. It is probably more often used by God to accomplish his purpose of “*teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” (2 Timothy 3:16b–17)

Memorizing the Word of God is closely tied to meditating on it. After all, the more a person thinks about a verse—meditating—the easier it will be to remember what it says—memorization. If you memorize a scripture passage, it will be with you wherever you go. Throughout the day, you will be able to think about the Word of God, and about how it should influence the way you live.

More will be mentioned about “how” to study the Bible. But first there is one more important thing to remember...

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Though the emphasis of this tract is on the Bible, don't forget about prayer. Both are necessary. The Bible is God's Word to us. Prayer is our words to God! If you are a Christian, it is important for you to talk to God, your Father. Worship and praise him. Give thanks to him for his power and love, his forgiveness, and all that he does in your life. Confess to him your weaknesses, needs and fears, your sins and failures. Share with him your wishes and desires. Ask him to make you more like the person you should be; and know that he will do what is *best* for you (even if, for a while, you experience trials of many kinds—see 1 Peter 1:6–7 and Psalm 73).

UNDERSTAND IT!

Some parts of the Bible will be easy to understand; other parts may be more difficult. But what is necessary for salvation and life *can* be understood by anyone willing to accept what is written. If, while you are reading the Bible, you find something that you cannot understand, be careful! If necessary, leave it for later, and study something else. (In 2 Peter 3:16, the apostle warns about the dangers of distorting the Word of God. Those who distort it do so “*to their own destruction.*”) Remember: The Bible is *God's* Word. Do not add to it or subtract from it! Do not change what it says. Accept it as it is! (See Proverbs 30:5–6; Matthew 5:19; Mark 7:5–13; Revelation 22:18–19.)

A good guideline for understanding the Bible was given by John Wyclif, the first person to translate the Bible into the English language. His advice, given over 600 years ago, is as important today as it was when he first wrote it. Re-written in modern English, it is as follows:

*It Will Greatly Help You, For Understanding Scripture:
If you pay attention not only to what is spoken or written,
But also of whom it was spoken or written,
With what choice of words,
At what time (in history),
Where (what country or town),
For what purpose,
In what circumstances;
Considering also what is said before (previous verses)
And what is said after (the following verses).*

Some people find it easy to do these things; others may find it more difficult. Do what you can, but try to avoid adding to, or subtracting from, what the Bible says. Do your best to pay attention to what is said in the verses before and after those you are studying. If you are not sure about something, try to find other verses that say the same thing. Try also to find verses that might *seem* to say the opposite. (Such truths complement each other. Knowledge of them helps a person to better understand the Bible and to avoid distorted “half-truths.”) Another suggestion is this: Many people find it helpful to write down what they study, either to help them learn it, or so that they can look at it later.

LIVE IT!

Through careful study, a person can understand the Word of God. Yet, the Bible warns us that this is not enough. There are many people who know what the Bible says, but are not genuine Christians, for the Bible has not changed the way they think and live. The Bible is not like books made by humans. The Bible cannot be read and ignored, without serious end results. When people continually refuse to accept (and to do) what God says, they bring judgment upon themselves. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit will harden their hearts. (2 Thessalonians 2:10–12; 1 Peter 2:7–8; 2 Peter 2:21; Romans 2:8) They will slowly lose their ability to accept what God says. In contrast, when a person begins to accept (and to obey) what God says, the Holy Spirit changes his heart. He becomes more able to accept (and to obey) the Word of God. As Scripture says: “*Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*” (Matthew 13:12)

Remember: A person who is not a Christian may know what the Bible says. But only a genuine Christian has a *life-changing understanding* that leads to eternal life—and this comes from the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:12–14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Ephesians 1:17) The Holy Spirit changes lives, but he uses the Bible to do so. He takes a person who is spiritually dead and uses the Bible to make him alive. (Ephesians 2:1, 4–5; Colossians 2:13) Once the person is alive, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to make that person become more obedient to Christ.

Study the Bible. Accept it and obey it; let it change your life. If you become discouraged (because you seem to have failed), do not give up. The devil is trying to defeat you. Keep returning to God, and in the end, you will be victorious. (1 John 5:4–5)

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER—A BIBLE STUDY

BEFORE YOU START—

Read this verse carefully: “*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, 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) I recommend that you learn this verse. Make it a goal in your life to always do as the Bereans did. When people teach you something about the Bible, examine the Bible to make sure that what they say agrees with it. (Examine the verses that the person may use. Also look for verses that might say something different than what he is saying.)

Remember that no teacher is perfect. Neither are you. All who are genuine Christians desire to be perfect—to be like their heavenly Father, who is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Yet none of us has completely reached our goal. (1 John 1:8–10; James 3:1; James 3:2 expresses our goal.) As a result, teachers—even good teachers—can

make mistakes or forget something. So we need to examine God’s Word—which is totally without error—to make sure that what the teacher says is correct. The more that we know (and accept) God’s words, the less we will believe (and accept) mistakes. (We also need to be on guard for totally false teachers—Acts 20:29–32.) Be careful, however, that your desire for truth (which all Christians must have) is not accompanied by a critical, harsh, unloving and unforgiving spirit toward other people. In Christ, truth and love go together (1 Corinthians 13:6; Ephesians 4:15); but people who are controlled by their sinful natures have a tendency to emphasize one and neglect the other. Pray that God will teach you to desire *both*. (If you speak the truth, people who are opposed to truth will oppose you, no matter how you speak it. But make sure that it is the Word of God, not a lack of love on your part, which causes their opposition.)

Below is an explanation of the parable of the Sower. As you study it, you should remember Acts 17:11. Though I have attempted to be completely accurate in what I say, you should make sure that what I have said is correct. If you are able, look for other verses that might provide more insight into what is being said. And pray that the Holy Spirit will teach you his ways.

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus often used parables (life-like stories) to teach spiritual truths. Once he told a story about a farmer who was scattering seed on the ground, to teach about the different ways people respond to the Word of God. This parable (and its explanation) is found in three books in the New Testament: Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–25 and Luke 8:4–18. Read it, and pay attention to Jesus’ explanations of the parable, as well as to the warnings he gives. Notice that the parable describes the responses of people who *hear* the words (or message) of the Bible. A person who does not hear cannot respond. This is why it is so important to share God’s Word with others. (See Romans 10:14. See also Mark 4:21–23; Luke 8:16–17—God expects truth to be told to others.) It is the Word of God which brings salvation. (James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:23)

THE FOUR TYPES OF HEARERS ARE:

1. *Those who do not understand.* When they hear the Word, they seem to hear the wrong message, for their understanding has been darkened by Satan. (Matthew 13:4, 19–20; Mark 4:4, 15; Luke 8:5, 12; see also Ephesians 2:3; 4:17–19; 2 Corinthians 4:4. Romans 1:18–23 describes their attitude toward truth.) This group would include people who have been led astray by false teaching.
2. *Those who understand the message, but who are mainly interested in their own comfort.* They like what the Bible says as long as it makes them feel comfortable. But they have no interest in the changes that occur in a genuine Christian’s life, nor in the trials and testing he may experience. (Acts 14:22) Sooner or later they turn away from the Bible, for true life is not in their hearts. (Matthew 13:5–6, 20–21; Mark 4:5–6, 16–17; Luke 8:6, 13; see also James 1:12; 1 Peter 4:12–19;

Romans 5:1–5; 8:18–39; Matthew 10:28, 32–33; Galatians 6:12—an example; Hebrews 6:4–9; 10:39.)

3. *Those who believe the message, but who still love the things of the world.* Although they claim to accept the truth, it has not changed the way they live or the things they value. Their “faith” is worthless. It is not genuine, for the “fruit” (result) of salvation is not in them. (Matthew 13:7, 22; Mark 4:7, 18–19; Luke 8:7, 14; see also James 2:14–26; 1 Peter 1:17; Hebrews 11:13, 24–26; 1 John 2:15–17; Matthew 10:37–39; John 15.)
4. *The genuine Christians* are different from the other types of hearers. Unlike the first type, they understand and accept the Word. Unlike the second type, they persevere when trials come; they do not permanently fall away. And unlike the third type, they have a good and noble heart. God’s laws are now in their hearts, and they love him (and they love other people) more than they love themselves and the things of this world. When they heard God’s Word, it was a life-changing hearing. (Matthew 13:8–9; 23; Mark 4:8–9; 20; Luke 8:8, 15; see also Hebrews 10:16; Matthew 7:13–27; 13:16–17; Mark 12:28–34; Revelation 12:11; 1 John 3:1–3; Titus 2:11–14; 3:3–8; Psalm 1; 2 Peter 1:3–4.)

THINGS TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT:

It is important to remember that genuine Christians do not all grow the same way. Some will be more fruitful than others. Some may even “backslide” for a while. (The Lord will discipline such a person, to turn him around. See Hebrews 12:5–13 and Psalm 119:67, 71, 75.) In contrast, some of the other types of hearers may for a while look like children of God, and we might not realize what they truly are, until they fall away and do not return. (1 John 2:19) But even though we may sometimes be mistaken about someone else, we can be confident that, “*The Lord knows those who are his.*” (2 Timothy 2:19) It is far more important for us to make certain that we are the right kind of hearer. We cannot control someone else’s heart.

When Jesus told this parable, he gave a warning: Be careful how you hear. If you fail to pay attention and to become like the fourth type of hearer, you will lose your ability to hear. You will bring judgment upon yourself. (Matthew 13:12, 15–16; Mark 4:24–25; Luke 8:18; see also 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12; 1 Corinthians 1:18–19.) If you continually ignore God’s Word, you will become like many of Jesus’ hearers—who heard his words, but who were no longer able to receive them with an understanding that results in life. (John 3:16–18, 36)

Please do not let this happen to you.

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THE BIBLE

GOD’S WORD TO ALL PEOPLE

Because of his kindness and love, God has given us his Word, the Bible. In it, he tells us who he is, who we are, why we are alive, and how we should live. He tells us about our sin, why sin has turned us into his enemies, and how (through Jesus Christ) he has restored friendship to all who accept his forgiveness. Furthermore, by using the teachings and commands of the Bible, God works in the hearts of those who belong to him, to change the way they think and live.

Here are some of the verses in which the Bible describes itself:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

(See also: 1 Peter 1:23–25; 2 Peter 1:19–21; Psalm 19:7–11; Psalm 119:1–176.)

READ IT!

The Bible has been translated into many languages. Today, God’s Word can be read by more people than ever before; and although the *words* in these various translations are different, the *message* remains the same. God did not limit his Word to only one group of people, or for only one language group; rather, the Bible is for everyone! If God has given you the opportunity to have a Bible (or a New Testament), share its message with others!

Some people have an entire Bible (Old and New Testament). Many others have only a New Testament or an even smaller portion of the Bible. Yet regardless of what one may have, it is important to read and study it. It is important for each “child of God” to know what God says—to fill his mind (his thoughts) with the words of his “Heavenly Father.” (1 John 3:1–3) The Bible is the word (or message) of life.

There are different ways to read and study the Bible. A person may focus on a small portion of the Word, and study it very intensely. He may also focus on the entire book—reading it through in much less time—in order to get an overview of what it says. Each of these methods is important.