

BECOMING STRONGER BIBLE READERS

Written by Matt Gray



The Bible is an incredibly complex book, but by keeping a few simple things in mind, we can all be stronger readers of scripture! Good habits of scripture reading is a huge topic, and we could spend weeks studying and learning and honing our skill; the following is just a few considerations to get us started on the right track. I will also include some resources if you would like to keep learning.

As convenient as they are, we would all benefit from being careful about only using 'verse of the day' reading plans. The best way to read the Bible is always going through a whole book. This helps us read in context and means we are exposed to all of God's Word.

THE GOAL OF READING

What are you trying to do when you read scripture? I don't know how often you think about this.

James tells us the following "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22). From this we understand that our primary responsibility is to actually obey God's Word. This means that the goal of scripture reading is: (1) to understand what the author is saying; and (2) apply this into our lives.





WE ARE COMMITTED TO WHAT IT SAYS

Sometimes our 'interpretive' work is not because the Bible is confusing, but because it is confronting. When Jesus tells us to give away our wealth, Peter tells us to submit to all human authority or Paul tells us to forgive as Christ forgives us, these are easy to understand but hard to do.

Sometimes we try to twist verses to avoid having to obey them. We need to be committed to what scripture actually says regardless of how we feel about it!

CHAPTERS AND VERSES AND LINE-BREAKS - OH MY!

If you learn nothing else, let's remember that the chapter and verse numbers are a helpful way of finding a specific verse but they were not put there by the original authors. The problem with chapters and verses is that it stops us from reading the Bible like a normal book. You wouldn't open a novel to a random page and read one sentence in the middle of a paragraph, but the verses encourage us to read the Bible like this! As much as possible try to work out what a whole paragraph or group of paragraphs is saying, not just a single verse. When we just read single verses we can misconstrue the meaning of the verse. Some versions of the Bible print each verse on a new line. This is really unhelpful in reading the bible as it was intended – that is, in sections and paragraphs, like we read other texts.

This is an extreme example but shows what I'm trying to say: in Matthew 4:9 we read the following (which sounds like a great promise): "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will kneel down and worship me." (Matt. 4:9). It sounds like something God would say, it sounds holy because it asks us to worship, it is appealing because I want it all. There's just one problem. These are not God's words, they are Satan's! This is how dangerous it can be to ignore this principle.

CONTEXT

Following on from this, the Bible needs to be read in context. *This is the most important consideration.*

This means that the verse you're reading must be interpreted in accordance with the surrounding verses – it cannot be read 'against the grain' of that paragraph. This is just the way language works. The word 'trunk' can mean a suitcase, part of a tree, part of an elephant, swimwear, a torso, or a car part, depending on what context we use it. Firstly, context helps us understand scripture better: for example, Jesus' cursing of the fig tree only really makes sense in the context of his critique of the temple which wasn't bearing the correct fruit either. More importantly, it helps us avoid misusing scripture: for example, in context, the 'all things' in Philippians 4:13 is about being content in every situation.

THE BIBLE IS ABOUT GOD AND HIS CHURCH

The Bible is primarily about God, not about me. As much as I love to read scripture for what it says to me or about me, the reality is that most of it is telling us about God, about what He has done through Christ, and about how His people are to live. This means that not every passage has a direct application for me – but every passage does have

value for me as I want to expand my worldview, know more about God, and think like He thinks.

THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN FOR YOU BUT NOT TO YOU

Possibly the most important principle of interpreting scripture is to understand that you are not the original audience. Each book was written for the original audience and made sense to the original audience. This sounds obvious, but we often don't treat scripture this way. God has not hidden the meaning in His Word, like a treasure hunt, ready to be found by a spiritual person. Gordon Fee reminds us that if our interpretation of a passage is clever and unique then it's probably wrong. I have had to overcome a lot of pride in this area.



THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

Why was the Bible written? What is its purpose? Sometimes we read the Bible like an abstract theology textbook, but each book of the Bible was written for a reason. For example:

The Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy) *tells the story of Yahweh establishing Israel.* It recounts how God chose and saved Israel, outlining how He delivered them from Egypt to the Promised Land and explains the law – the way they were to maintain their covenant with God.

The history books (Joshua – 2 Chronicles) are written to *explain why Israel was sent into exile* and to *encourage repentance.* It shows how Israel were continually unfaithful to God, and why He was forced to bring judgement.

The prophetic books (Isaiah – Malachi) were written to *call God's people back to obedience* and warn them of the consequences of judgement. They are less concerned with predicting the future than with warning the nation that the curses of Deuteronomy 27-29 will come upon them if they are not faithful.

The gospels (Matthew – John) *tell Jesus' story to strengthen faith, elicit praise, and encourage obedience.* Each gospel gives its own nuance, showing how Jesus fulfilled God's promise to restore Israel as King and Messiah.

The epistles (Romans – Jude) are written by pastors to churches to *address pastoral issues* through theology and instruction. They are often written to create unity, to encourage persecuted believers, or to ward off theological threats.

Revelation is designed to *strengthen believers* buckling under the persecution of the Roman Empire. It uses apocalyptic imagery to encourage Christians that God is stronger than the emperor and will prevail over the forces of evil. It is not primarily concerned with predicting the future.

Understanding why a book in the Bible was written helps us to comprehend what it says and to better apply it to our life.



APPENDIX A – TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Unfortunately, much of the free information on the Internet is not as trustworthy or high quality as the paid content. This is a real shame! Luckily, there are some ways to access quality information that won't break the budget.

The Bible Project is a free resource that is amazingly helpful. They have an overview video for each book of the Bible on YouTube. This is enormously helpful in getting the big picture of the book. It is a good idea to consult something like this before reading any book in the Bible.

Ebook library. One of your best friends is an eBook library. Websites such as 'Scribd' or 'Perlego' give you access to an enormous range of ebooks and audiobooks for a monthly fee. I rely heavily on these subscriptions almost daily. 'Perlego' costs \$12 a month if you subscribe for the whole year (otherwise it's \$18) – it may be a great gift!

Study Bibles. A good study Bible is a very valuable tool. There are many available for a range of prices.

Commentaries. Good commentaries are great tools but they can be expensive. I think the best commentary series is the 'NIV Application Series' which is committed to helping us understand scripture AND apply it to our life. These are all available on 'Perlego' if you get a subscription which saves about \$2000... I also think that the 'For Everyone' commentary series is affordable and accessible.

Textbooks. There are many textbooks on reading the Bible better. These are often designed for Bible college students – but I think they are helpful for anyone who is desiring to keep growing in reading the Bible. Some of the best include:

- *The Blue Parakeet* – Scot McKnight
- *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* – Fee and Stuart
- *Grasping God's Word* – Duvall and Hays
- *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* – Chris Wright (not just helpful for preachers...)
- *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* – Klein, Hubbard, and Blomberg

Shopping around for books. As much as I love Koorong, it is only one shop for buying books and Bibles. Remember to shop around if there's a book you want to buy: check betterworldbooks.com, bookdepository.com or eBay to compare prices with Koorong and you will often snare a bargain!

APPENDIX B – THE BIBLE: THE BIG PICTURE

Scripture tells one grand story, made up of hundreds of little stories. Understanding the big picture, and where any text exists within that big picture, makes comprehending passages of scripture much easier. If we ordered the books of the Old Testament chronologically, they would look something like this:

1. Torah – *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*

These books focus on the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. They outline how Israel came to be a nation, how they are to relate to God and to each other, and leads them to the edge of the promised land. Deuteronomy 27-30 prophesies the story that will unfold in the rest of the Old Testament: land, disobedience, exile, restoration. They ultimately warn that Israel will not be able to keep the covenant until God intervenes and gives them a new heart.

2. In the Promised Land – *Joshua; Judges; 1 and 2 Samuel; Ruth*

These books focus on the conquest and occupation of the promised land. It shows the increasing sinfulness of the nation and the inability to remain in covenant relationship with God. The kingdom is established in 1 and 2 Samuel.

3. The Kingdom(s) of Israel – *1 and 2 Kings; 1 and 2 Chronicles; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; Hosea; Joel; Amos; Obadiah; Jonah; Micah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah*

These books focus on the downfall of the kingdom. It is divided into two kingdoms: Israel (North) and Judah (South). God continually warns His people to obey Him through His prophets, but they are sinful and cannot keep the covenant.

4. Israel in Exile – *Daniel; Lamentations; Esther*

These books are written while Israel has been exiled. The northern kingdom is first exiled in Assyria; then Judah by Babylon.

5. Post-Exilic Israel – *Ezra & Nehemiah; Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi*

These books show Israel after they have returned to the promised land. The temple is rebuilt but the glory of Yahweh does not return (so the full promises of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are not yet fulfilled).

The Writings – *Job; Psalms; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs*

These books do not fit neatly into the above progression. They are largely poetic and do not contribute in a straight-forward sense to the story of Israel

Deuteronomy plays a central role in framing the remainder of the Old Testament. The book outlines the details of the covenant between Israel and God and stipulates the expectations of Israel's leadership. It states the curses that will befall the nation due to disobedience, culminating in the ultimate punishment – removal from the land. Rather than random or new warnings, most of the prophetic books point back to and expand on the warnings of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy also outlines the ultimate hope of Israel: after they return to the land, God will 'circumcise' their hearts to enable them to obey Him. This is the new covenant that is fulfilled in Christ.

