

Good Habits for Christians Search the Scriptures daily

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Habits are hard to develop, and easy to lose, aren't they? Twice over the past two years I've had a go at the NHS "Couch to 5k" running scheme to try and get a bit fitter. I've found it quite hard work, but have kept going, and managed to complete the 9 weeks. In fact, I recently finished it and felt pretty pleased with myself. I was starting to feel a bit healthier and pleased with my new level of fitness. But then I had a couple of really busy weeks at work, and a week on holiday, and all of a sudden, I'd gone three weeks without running. And now it's hard to get back into it again! My motivation has gone. The TV suddenly seems so much more appealing. And I can feel that I've lost a bit of the fitness I gained. Like I say, habits are hard to build, and easy to lose.

Today, we're going to start a series on Truth for Today about good habits for Christians, by thinking about reading the Bible each day. I think most of us probably find developing regular Christian habits pretty similar to any other lifestyle habits hard to build and easy to lose. But I want to say to you today that regular reading of the Scriptures is well worth the effort. Couch to 5k might do me a little bit of physical good. But reading the Scriptures will do far more lasting good for me. And it's the same for you.

Since we're starting a series on habits for Christians, I think it's perhaps worth making a few comments now that will apply across all of the talks over the next few weeks.

The first is that these good habits are just that. Habits. They won't automatically make us better Christians. All of the habits we'll talk about, regular Bible reading, prayer, meeting with other Christians and many more, are good for us. They are ways God uses to help us and teach us more about Him. But in themselves they are no magic formula to faithful Christian living. It's possible to read the Bible for hours each day and live a faithless life, just as it's possible to read much less and live in faithful dependence on God. So, although I'm going to encourage you today to commit to reading your Bible more, be careful not to let any success in this goal become a source of pride!

The other point that's worth making before we get started is that occasional failure in these Christian habits of life shouldn't be a cause for too much discouragement. Perhaps, if you read the Bible each day as a habit of life, you'll understand what I mean when I say that I notice a difference on days when I haven't managed to read the Bible. I can't put my finger on exactly what it is, but something just feels different. But my lack of reading of the Bible on a particular morning doesn't make God more or less gracious towards me. Our faith has to be stronger than to think that if we fail to read or pray one day, God will be angry with us and everything will go badly. We all have days when things don't go to plan. Sometimes that's unavoidable – young children keep you up all night, and you just can't get up any earlier than you need to to get out for work. A family member is particularly sick and taking up all your time and energy. You're going through a particularly busy patch at work. Or sometimes we might not read the Bible for reasons that

ultimately boil down to our own bad choices – we filled our time on Netflix, or with sports, or we spent too much time on our work, or whatever we like to spend our time doing. Whether our failure to read is understandable or our own fault, we must avoid an attitude that writes that day off as a failure from the start. If we find ourselves on our way out to work and we haven't read the Bible, let's determine that we will still live faithfully for the Lord in whatever He brings across our paths that day.

So, that's enough of an introduction; let's start to think about reading the Bible. I want us to spend most of our time today trying to be really practical, and thinking about good tips to help us read the Bible. But I think it's worth first just considering a few things the Bible says about reading the Scriptures to remind us of why it's so important.

Let's first go to the book of Acts and think about the people in Berea. In Acts 17, verses 10-12, Luke records how Paul and Silas had been preaching in Thessalonica but found a hostile reception. They move on to Berea, where Luke records:

“Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore, many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.”

The people of Berea provide a great example to us! They searched the Scriptures to see whether what Paul and Silas were telling them was true. This probably happened mainly when they were met together rather than in personal Bible reading as we are used to it, but I think the principle is great – read the Bible to see whether the things people tell you are true. That's good advice whether it's to check on the truth of a sermon you hear, or whether it's something you hear on the news from a political leader. Does what they say stack up against the Bible's teaching? Is it true? These are good questions to ask ourselves. Let's be like the Bereans and search the Scriptures each day to discover what is true about God. And let's respond like the Bereans too, and believe the true things we learn about God.

The next Scripture I want to take us to is 1 Corinthians chapter 2. The whole chapter is worth thinking about if you have some time this week, but let's read verses 9-12 for now.

“But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”

In this chapter, Paul tells us that God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us understand things about God. Without God's help, we wouldn't be able to understand what God wants us to know. But God wants to teach us about the things that God has freely given to us. God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us understand what we read in the Bible. So if you find yourself reading this week, and are struggling to understand what you are reading, or getting a bit lost in it all, try to remember the great truth Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 2 – God has given us the resources we need to be able to understand the Scriptures. So we can pray and ask God to help us understand. We can ask Him to open the eyes of our understanding to see what the Holy Spirit is teaching us.

Then one more Scripture for us to think about. It's some more of the things that Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth, this time from 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 12-18. Listen to what Paul writes:

“Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Again, Paul is reminding us here that God has given us the ability to understand the Bible. Now he puts it like this. When the Jewish people of the day read the Old Testament they read it as if they had veiled eyes. They couldn't see what it had to say about Christ. But when Jesus saves someone, it's like God takes the veil away. So now we can read the same verses and see the glory of the Lord in them. Isn't that amazing!

So it's not that I'm encouraging you to read the Bible today, just because I want you to tick some sort of religious duty box. No! I want you to read the Bible because I want you to see Jesus! I want you to see something of the glory of the Lord! I want you to see some of the things that God has freely given to us, to borrow Paul's words we read in 1 Corinthians 2. But there's more than that. Did you notice what Paul said at the end of the verses we read in 2 Corinthians 3? “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image.” Paul says that it's as we see something of the Lord's glory as we read the Bible that God is doing His work of transforming us to be more like Christ! Just stop a minute to grasp that! Can you see that reading the Bible is not just a nice habit to have? It's the way God changes us and makes us more like Christ. It's how God will make us more ready to serve Him in the world around us!

I hope these short parts of the New Testament that we've considered so far have given you a renewed enthusiasm for reading the Scriptures, and to make it a crucial part of your life. So, let's spend the rest of our time today thinking about how we read the Bible. I'm going to try and share with you four pieces of advice about reading the Bible that I've found helpful over the years. Just remember, these are just things I've found helpful. They're not rules you have to follow, they are just things you might find helpful to think about. What's important is that you read the Bible, not that you follow my methods or techniques. So here are my tips for Bible reading.

1. Don't be too concerned about methods.

I'm sure you'll find loads of advice about how to read the Bible if you looked online or spoke to some of your Christian friends. I suggest you settle on something that works for you. There is not “the best method”. That's not to say that every approach is equally useful. Dropping your Bible and just seeing where it opens is probably not going to be a serious way to hear from God each day! But you'll find lots of people who advocate for getting up early and reading in the morning. Others advocate reading in the evening. Still others who suggest reading at various points through the day. Each of these suggestions has good points about them. Just find something that works for you. And if a season of life means you have to change your pattern, just do it, and make sure you keep reading even if it's at a different time of day. When I was a student, I used to get up early every morning to spend a while reading the Bible. That worked well, and I enjoyed those times. But when my children were born and they didn't sleep well, getting up early, having only just got

back to sleep, suddenly became much harder! I had to find a bit of time later in the day to read, and inevitably, they weren't the long, quiet, uninterrupted times I had before the children. The Lord understands that, and is just as capable of blessing a few minutes in between nappy changes, as He was when I spent much longer in the Scriptures.

2. Try to allow for both breath and depth.

I've found reading through the Bible in a year a good habit to try and adopt. I don't manage it every year, but I have for the past few years. Like I said at the beginning, there's nothing particularly holy about this, but I have found that it helps keep a good overview of the Bible in my mind. By reading through the whole Bible in a year, it helps me to see how the different books fit together. There are lots of good schemes for getting through the whole Bible in a year that you could find on the internet. Why not pick one and give it a try. Don't beat yourself up if you miss a few days here or there. I don't usually try and catch up – it becomes too daunting once I miss more than a couple of days. Just keep reading and ask the Lord to bless the days you do manage to read.

Another thing you might try is to read through parts of the Bible in one go. Perhaps try reading through the whole of one of Paul's letters over breakfast on a Saturday morning, or through a minor prophet on a Sunday afternoon. The process of reading through a whole book in one sitting can be really helpful for noticing themes and patterns through the book.

I once tried reading through the Gospels 4 chapters a day. This meant I could read all the Gospels within a month, and I repeated this for a few months. I have a friend who tried to read through the Old Testament 10 chapters a day, so he got through it in about 3 months. I've never managed this, but I suspect it would give a good overview of the key themes of the Old Testament. Equally, there's no special attachment to fast reading. If you want to read the whole Bible but want to try it over two years, reading about 2 chapters a day, that's just as good an aim as reading through the Bible in a year. Why not give some of these ideas a try?

One of the downsides to reading more quickly to get through the Bible in a year, or to get through the Gospels in a month, is that you inevitably miss things. I don't think this matters since the whole aim of these kind of schemes is to give us a good grounding in the overall picture of each book. So even if you couldn't explain all the details of Matthew's Gospel, or Isaiah's prophecy, at least you could say what the book was roughly about.

But it's good to try and supplement this reading for breadth, with some more detailed reading of parts of the Bible. You might like to take one of Paul's letters and read through it multiple times over a month or so. And read it more slowly and carefully, asking questions of the verses. What do they tell you about God? What do they tell you about yourself? What challenges do they give you? What sins do they reveal in your life? How do the verses fit together with other parts of the Bible? This kind of reading takes time, and requires thinking about what you read, a bit like the Berean Christians we were thinking about earlier.

The way I've tried to fit in both reading for overview and reading for detail, over the past few years, is to try and read the chapters for my read through in a year scheme in the morning before I go out to work. And then, in the evening, once the children are in bed, some evenings of the week I try and think in more detail about some part of the Bible. I might use some books to help me, or listen to some sermons as well. You might find a different system suits you better. But try and think about how you can make sure you both regularly and repeatedly read through the whole Bible, and also read in more depth particular parts of the Bible.

3. Redeem the time

My third challenge is to ask you to think about your use of time. When I was talking before about both reading through the Bible and reading some parts more thoughtfully, perhaps you respond like I often do, “I don’t have time.” Well, I certainly sympathise with this. Life is certainly busy for most of us. But I want to suggest that most of us could make more time than we do to spend with God each day. Most of us could find 15 minutes in a morning and 15 minutes in an evening. Perhaps it’s one less episode of something on the TV, or 15 minutes less time on Facebook, or whatever your favourite apps are. Perhaps if you travel to work on public transport, you might consider either reading a Bible app on your phone on the journey or listening to recordings of the Bible? Perhaps a lunch break might allow a few minutes to read here or there? Perhaps for some of you, you already read the Bible and love reading it, and you feel the pressures of so many demands on life. Perhaps today the challenge for you is not so much to find more time to read the Bible, but to encourage you to keep going as you are reading the Bible. Don’t let Bible study be the thing that drops to allow for the crazy busyness of life.

4. Try to make use of good resources.

The Bible is the only thing that is God’s inspired word to us. But God has been kind to us in giving lots of capable Bible teachers who can help us understand what we read. You might like to look for some daily Bible reading notes like the “Our Daily bread” notes. Or you might like to try something that gives a bit more detail like an Emmaus Bible course. If you’re studying a particular book, why not look for a good commentary on it. Have a look on the Truth for Today website to see if there are messages on the book you’re reading and have a listen.

So our times gone for today. I’ve tried to give a few tips that I hope will be helpful to you and encourage you to read the Bible. But above all, I want to finish by saying this. **THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU READ.** The point of Bible reading is not to tick off a religious duty for the day. It’s to encounter the living God and be changed by Him. That comes by thoughtful, careful reading of the Scriptures, and allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to you. So pick a method and a schedule that works for you. And then read and keep on reading. Look for what is revealed to you about Jesus, and may the Lord direct all of our hearts to love God more and be transformed to be more like Christ!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on “Good habits for Christians: Search the Scriptures daily”, talk T1172.

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