

The Christian and the Word

M. W. Bassford, 12-15-13

Now that the old year is winding up and the new year is soon to begin, it's time once again to ponder our New Year's resolutions. As you've probably noticed, one of my quirks as a preacher is that even though I invariably forget to mention holidays like Thanksgiving and Mother's Day, I always remember to talk about New Year's and its accompanying resolutions. Perhaps it's because Christianity is about renewal, and there is no more renewal-centered holiday than that.

Regardless, I'd like us to focus this morning on one of the classic spiritually focused New Year's resolutions—the resolution to read our Bibles more. For most Christians, a daily Bible reading is like checking the seals on our gas grills every time before we use them—we know we should, but we can never quite make it happen. I have to acknowledge that I'm in the same boat. I read the Bible all the time, but I have never completed a daily Bible reading plan. This morning, then, let's consider why it should happen and how to make it happen. Let's look at the Christian and the word.

Why Read?

Let's begin by considering why we should read the Bible regularly. The Bible provides many answers to this question, but we're going to zero in on four of them. The first is that we should read **FOR OUR OWN SAKES**. Consider the sobering statement of Romans 14:12. Sure, there are lots of things that we do together as Christians, but there is one thing that every one of us is going to do on our own. We are going to stand before the throne of God and give an individual account of what we did with our lives and why. That time when we are judged is the most significant moment of our existence. It determines whether we will save our souls, or whether we will lose them.

The only way we have to prepare for that solemn hour is live in a way that pleases God, and the only way we can learn how to do that is to study His word for ourselves. Sure, you can come here and listen to me, or go to another church in Joliet, but how do you know whether I'm telling you the truth? How do you know whether those other guys are? If an audience is Scripturally ignorant, a preacher can prove just about any point he wants to by twisting and distorting the text, and he'll get away with it because nobody knows enough to call him on it. I could be doing that this morning, and the only way you can know is if you spend enough time with the Bible to know the truth for yourselves. If you don't study and find it out, I could lie us all straight to hell together, and then what a fine pickle we'd be in! Let's prevent even the possibility of that happening. Let's each of us study to the salvation of our own souls.

Second, let's study **TO GAIN WISDOM**. Look at how the psalmist describes himself in Psalm 119:98-99. There are a lot of different ways to gain wisdom. We can watch the failures and successes of others. We can learn in the sometimes brutal school of hard knocks ourselves. We can even learn too late, and spend eternity considering all the things we should have done to save our souls from eternal torment. Of them all, the best is to learn from the word.

The Bible is many things, but among them, it is God's guide to a life well lived. In the Bible, we have all the information we need to gracefully navigate the choices and challenges of life. The thing is, though, we have to have internalized that information before those choices arise. When we're tempted, nobody ever says, "Hold on now, devil. Let me spend the next hour doing a word study on that topic so I can figure out the right thing to do." Either we know what the Bible says, and we make a wise decision, or we don't know what it says, and we make a foolish one. We don't know what challenges are going to come up. We must prepare for all of them through diligent study.

Third, study is important if we want **TO HELP OTHERS**. We see part of this responsibility outlined in 1 Peter 3:15. God expects us to be ready to tell others about Jesus at the drop of a hat. He expects us to be able to edify and encourage one another immediately. The only way we can be either one of those things if we have studied the word enough to use it effectively. Trying to teach the lost the gospel without knowing the word is like trying to fire a gun without bullets. Trying to build up and encourage our brother without knowing what the Bible says about his situation is like trying to build a brick wall without mortar. We can try, but we can be certain that our work won't have lasting value.

Let me emphasize, brethren: this isn't an optional commandment. This isn't a way for extra-good Christians to get bonus points. This is God's expectation for all of us, and the only way we can meet it is through study of the word. It's true, if we've failed at that in the past, if we haven't equipped ourselves through study, we can seek God's forgiveness for our failure, and He will extend it. But what then? If we've failed in the past, how are we going to do better in the future? If we know that our Biblical ignorance misses the mark, but we never work on educating it, that stops looking like sin and starts looking like willful sin, in which we are choosing a course of disobedience. If we aren't effective now, we've got to study until we become effective. Our souls may well depend on it.

Finally, we must study if we want **TO KNOW GOD**. Let's look at what Paul says about the gospel in Romans 1:16-17. It's true that the Bible is not the only source of information about our Creator. We learn about Him every time we stop to consider a beautiful flower or look up at the stars at night. However, the Bible is the most important source, for without it, what we learn about God from the creation would be disastrously incomplete. We all know that it's our

responsibility to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus said that's the greatest commandment. Well, if we're expected to love God above all else, doesn't that mean that we'd better get to know Him?

Let's put it like this: Most people obey the gospel out of fear. They realize that they will go to hell if they continue on their current path, so they repent and are baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. It makes perfect sense that fear is their motivation. They can't very well obey out of love for God because they haven't had the opportunity to get to know Him yet. Sadly, many Christians never grow past that point. They know they don't want to go to hell, but they don't really see the point of going to heaven either. The only thing that can help us grow past that is study. The more time we spend with the Bible, the better we will know God, and inevitably, the more we will love Him.

How to Read

Now that we've considered why we need to read the Bible, let's ponder how we should read it. First, let's consider the importance of reading it **IN CHUNKS**. For an illustration of why this is significant, let's think about Paul's instruction in Colossians 4:16. All of the books in our Bible are broken up into chapters and verses, particularly the verses. Those verses really grab our attention. Even now, what I'm projecting on the screen is just a single verse.

However, the original unit of understanding the Bible was not the verse. 90 percent of the time, it wasn't the chapter either. It was the book. When Tychicus came to Colossae, he didn't just read a couple of verses out of Colossians. He read the whole thing. The book of Colossians has some overall points and overall themes. If we spend our lives picking a verse here and a verse there out of Colossians, we will never understand why Paul by the Holy Spirit wrote Colossians in the first place. We will spend our lives missing the spiritual forest for the verse-by-verse trees.

The only way to offset this verse-by-verse focus is to read, chapters at least, books if possible. That way, we can come to appreciate not just Paul's thoughts on baptism in Romans 6. We can grasp the thread of the whole main argument of Romans, which stretches for the first eleven chapters. So many false doctrines have arisen from Romans because people zoomed in too far and never thought about why Paul was making a particular argument in its context. Let's be wiser than that. Let's read in chunks, so we can understand the original intent of the authors of God's word.

Second, we should read **HONESTLY**. Here, we can have no better example than the Bereans in Acts 17:10-11. It's easy for us to read into the text what we think ought to be there. It's a lot harder for us to listen to what the text is actually saying. However, if we are more interested in our own opinions than what the Bible actually says, we cannot please God. If that's our attitude, how are we different than the member of a denomination who explains away a dozen different passages and continues to insist that baptism isn't necessary for forgiveness of sins? How are we different than the worldly man who only knows enough to quote "Judge not lest ye be judged"? It's one thing to be weak and wishy-washy in our convictions. It's another thing to be so firm in those convictions that we cannot be persuaded by the word.

Next, we should read **MEDITATIVELY**. Let's ponder the attitude expressed by the psalmist in Psalm 119:148. For us, reading the Bible shouldn't be the end of the spiritual process. It should be the beginning. We shouldn't flush what we've read from our brains as soon as we're done like a student who has just finished taking an exam. Instead, we should dwell on it, carry it around with us all day, and think about it when we aren't thinking about something else. If we never do this, the word will always remain apart from us. We will never take it into ourselves and make it part of the way we think. The Bible won't make us more like Jesus. To put things another way, meditating on the word is like kneading yeast into bread dough. If you don't, you will never see the effect that you want to.

Finally, we should read **CONSISTENTLY**. Look at the psalmist's self-description in Psalm 119:20. He didn't want God's word to be a part of his life part of the time. He wanted it with him all of the time. This takes us full circle to where we began, to the idea of a daily Bible-reading program. As I suspect is true of many here, I've tried them before and failed at them before. What I think will make the difference for me, and hopefully for many of us, is automating the reading process so that we have a daily reminder to read.

For instance, the next time you're at a computer, go to <http://www.esv.org/resources/reading-plans-devotions/>. Scroll down to "Through the Bible in a Year", which is a basic yearly reading program. If you click on the link and give them your e-mail address, they will send a daily reading in the ESV, which is a good translation for reading, to your e-mail account, or even to your iCal application or RSS reader. I don't do those other two things, but I do use e-mail, and even though I might forget my Bible reading, I check my e-mail every day, several times a day. If I find my reading waiting in my inbox, then I'm going to read it. It will help me to remember to do what I truly want to do. If you like reading from a screen, you can click on the link every morning. If you're like me and prefer to read out of a paper Bible, you can use it as a reminder to crack open the book. Most readings won't take very long. We can finish them during a fifteen-minute break at work, but their impact is immeasurable.