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On Reading the Bible

God has communicated with mankind in a quite remarkable way. His Book is a unique revelation - unlike anything else that has ever been written. It lays bare the lives of many of its writers, showing us just what they were like, including their faults. It presents a portrait of the greatest man who ever lived - the Lord Jesus Christ - and it thus portrays life at its very best. Yet, in describing what happened to him, it also shows us human nature at its very worst.

❖ A Book to Read

Such a book has to be read. It cannot be neglected or overlooked yet, more often than not, that is what happens. Many people have Bibles; only a few read any of it and very few people read the entire Bible on a regular basis. Some people may have favourite parts of the Bible that they read quite often, but if we want to know God's message for mankind, the entire Bible must be read. And, because it is a long and sometimes complicated book, we need to read it and keep on reading it. This is a book that can give us a new life, but it is going to take a while to understand it entirely.

Everybody wants to know about the mysteries of life, which is why, in some countries, there is such interest in fortune telling or witchcraft. Is there any life after death? Is the world going to end sometime? Why do people suffer? Questions like that are not easily answered, but the Bible has the answers - because it contains God's message and God's answers. So how do we get to know what those answers are?

This book will work through those questions and seek the answers to them as we follow the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. But it has already become clear that, to understand the Bible for ourselves, we need to do some more Bible reading of our own. At the end of each chapter in this book you will find some suggestions about further

Bible reading. If you follow these they will help to increase your understanding of Bible teaching and will help you check up on what we will look at in Romans.

It is a good Bible-based practice to check things out, not just to take them for granted. When the apostle Paul made his first visit to Europe, he met some fierce opposition in different places. He came across a group of people in a place called Berea, of whom it was said:

*"These Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.** Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" (Acts 17:11,12).*

You might want to work out a pattern of daily Bible reading that suits your own needs. Different readers of this book will be at quite different stages of understanding. Some will be quite familiar with the Bible already; others might never have looked seriously at it. So a variety of ideas are suggested here and you can pick something that seems appropriate. But first, here are some general observations.

❖ Bible Versions

This book uses the English Standard Version of the Bible, which is a quite recent translation into English.¹ The ESV updates the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which itself was a revision of earlier versions going back to the 1611 King James Version. The reason for using it is that the ESV combines a fairly literal approach to Bible translation with a pleasant and readable style. Other versions will be referred to from time to time, where that translation is a little clearer, and it does not matter too much which version you have available or choose to use.

The Old Testament of the Bible was mainly written in Hebrew (with just a small part in Aramaic) and the New Testament was written in Greek. All translations do the best they can to render the original languages into English,

¹ It is customary for Bible Versions to be abbreviated to just their initials, so the English Standard Version is known as the ESV, the King James Version as the KJV (or sometimes as the AV, as it is also known as the 'Authorised Version'), the New International Version as the NIV and the Good News Bible as the GNB.

and some are bound to do it better than others. Be sure you are using a translation and not a paraphrase, as some versions - like *"The Living Bible"* or *"The Message"* - set out to be a very free rendering, more chatty and conversational than accurate.

A Bible with Cross References can be a great help. These are references that appear in the margin, or at the bottom of the page. They point you to other passages of Scripture which are similar, or which deal with similar subject-matter. As you become more familiar with the message of the Bible you will want to make use of those extra helps. But, for the moment, what matters is how to start.

Read through the Gospel of Mark if you want a gentle introduction to the Life of Jesus. You will quickly realise how different things were two thousand years ago. The events that are described in the Bible happened in the Middle East, in an agricultural society where Roman law controlled the life of the citizens and Jewish law regulated the way people worshipped. The more you read the easier it becomes, but it is always worth remembering that life was somewhat different in Bible times. These are writings that belong to ancient history. The marvellous thing is that they are still relevant and meaningful today. The Bible is an old book with a really up-to-date message.

❖ Two Different Parts

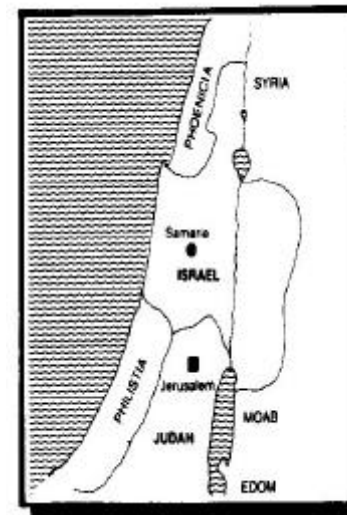
The structure of the **New Testament** is quite easy to follow. The life of Jesus is told four times, in the gospel accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Then comes the story of the early church - mainly centred on the preaching of the apostles Peter and Paul. That is contained in the Acts of the Apostles, which was written by the gospel writer Luke. The Acts account refers to many places that the apostles visited and the various letters, which make up the rest of the New Testament, were written during or after their journeys.

The letters were the way the various apostles kept in touch with new congregations that had been established. Sometimes they were letters of general encouragement; sometimes they dealt with specific problems or issues that had arisen. As we have already seen, Romans was written to set out Paul's understanding of the gospel of salvation prior to his intended visit, as well as dealing with some local problems the church in Rome had.

The **Old Testament** Scriptures are longer. They make up about two thirds of the Bible and include history, poetry and prophecy. The historical or narrative accounts start in the first Book - Genesis - and go right up to the Book of Esther - 17 books in all, out of 39. The first 11 chapters of Genesis describes the creation of the world, then tells how things went wrong, the coming of a worldwide flood and the building of the Tower of Babel. After that the record follows the story of one family - that of Abraham, and his descendants.

Those descendants eventually became a nation (Israel), and were rescued from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. After a period of wandering in the desert they entered the Promised Land and began to live as God's chosen nation, learning to obey and follow His Law. First they had a God-given leader Joshua, after that they were given judges to save them from particular situations, and then they were given kings, somewhat like the other nations.

The Kingdom established in Israel did not, however, run very smoothly. After initial success, under King David and his son Solomon, the kingdom split into two - North and South. The Northern kings abandoned the true worship of



Map of Israel and Judah in the time of the Kings

God and devised a completely man-made system of calf-worship. They had false priests and made up their own rules and regulations. That arrangement lasted for about 200 years before the Northern Kingdom was taken captive to Assyria and all the people were deported. The Southern Kingdom of Judah fared a little better. Altogether it lasted for about 350 years before it too abandoned the worship of God and paid the price. By then, about 600 B.C., Babylon was the ruling power in the Middle East, having conquered the Assyrians, and the people of the Southern Kingdom were deported there, to the country we now know as Iraq.

Seventy years later a group of Jewish² exiles returned from Babylon - which had, in the meantime, been conquered by the Persians. They started to rebuild their nation and the city Jerusalem. This part of their history is covered in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Four hundred years after that - by which time the Romans were the ruling power - the New Testament begins, with the birth of Jesus.

❖ Wonderful Variety

Now you have some idea of the variety and fascination of the library of books which make up the Bible. There are books full of **poetry** and proverbial **wisdom**. The Book of Psalms is the hymn book that was used in temple worship. There are the wise sayings of King Solomon and of others; love poetry; and a reasoned treatise about the best way to live before God. There is also the Book of Job which explains how someone can become right in the sight of God, an insight that came about when Job was severely tested.

Then there is **prophecy**, which makes up a large proportion of the Bible. Someone has worked out that over one quarter of the Old Testament predicts the future in one way or another (and over one fifth of the New Testament too). There are large prophecies - like those of Isaiah and Jeremiah - and twelve shorter ones, bringing us right up to the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. As the Book of Acts gives us a guide in New Testament times about when and to whom the various letters were written, so the historical parts of the Bible help us work out the meaning of the message that God's prophets brought. For often their message had an immediate as well as a longer-term significance.

If you would like to sample a little of the Old Testament after reading the Gospel of Mark, you might like to read the Book of Ruth to give you an insight into what life was like in those times. That book was written in the days when the Judges ruled (about 1250 years before the birth of Jesus).

It's a marvellous feature of the Bible that such an ancient book - written down over 1900 years ago - can still be so interesting and relevant. It should be no surprise

² Because the people who returned were mainly from the tribe of Judah - the small tribe that had been living in and around Jerusalem - from now on the people in the land are known as Jews (a word which originally referred to members of the tribe of Judah).

since, as we have seen, this is a book from God. Its various writers wrote as they were inspired by God. They did not make things up. They could never have achieved such a superb result without the help of God. As the apostle Peter once said:

*"We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that **no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**" (2 Peter 1:19-21).*

Daily Bible Reading

If you decide you would like to read a part of the Bible every day, to work your way through everything that God has included in His message, you will find a daily Bible Reading planner helpful. It is designed to give you an introduction to different parts of the Bible and it will take you a year to work through, reading one chapter each day.

If you think that is a bit too much for you at this early stage of your understanding, you can think about starting it later on, as your knowledge grows about the Bible's overall message. If you want something more detailed, which will take you through the whole Bible in the course of a year, there is another Bible Reading plan towards the end of this book. But you need to pace yourself so that you can read more as your level of understanding increases.



*"These Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so**" (Acts 17:11)*

Bible Reading Planner

Read a chapter a day for 12 Months



| Step | Week | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|------|------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1 | 1 | Psalm 18 | Genesis 1 | Luke 2 | 1 Cor 13 | Mark 4 | Ecclesiastes 3 | 2 Tim 3 |
| 2 | 2 | Genesis 2 | Genesis 3 | Genesis 4 | Genesis 5 | Genesis 6 | Genesis 7 | Genesis 8 |
| | 3 | Matthew 1 | Matthew 2 | Matthew 3 | Matthew 4 | Matthew 5 | Matthew 6 | Matthew 7 |
| 3 | 4 | Genesis 11 | Genesis 12 | Genesis 13 | Genesis 14 | Genesis 15 | Genesis 17 | Genesis 19 |
| | 5 | Matthew 8 | Matthew 9 | Matthew 10 | Matthew 11 | Matthew 12 | Matthew 13 | Matthew 14 |
| | 6 | Genesis 22 | Genesis 26 | Genesis 27 | Genesis 28 | Genesis 29 | Genesis 30 | Genesis 31 |
| 4 | 7 | Matthew 15 | Matthew 16 | Matthew 17 | Matthew 18 | Matthew 19 | Matthew 20 | Matthew 21 |
| | 8 | Genesis 32 | Genesis 33 | Genesis 37 | Genesis 39 | Genesis 40 | Genesis 41 | Genesis 42 |
| | 9 | Matthew 22 | Matthew 23 | Matthew 24 | Matthew 25 | Matthew 26 | Matthew 27 | Matthew 28 |
| | 10 | Genesis 43 | Genesis 44 | Genesis 45 | Genesis 46 | Genesis 47 | Genesis 49 | Genesis 50 |
| 5 | 11 | Mark 1 | Mark 2 | Mark 3 | Mark 6 | Mark 7 | Mark 8 | Mark 9 |
| | 12 | Exodus 1 | Exodus 2 | Exodus 3 | Exodus 4 | Exodus 5 | Exodus 6 | Exodus 7 |
| | 13 | Mark 10 | Mark 11 | Mark 12 | Mark 13 | Mark 14 | Mark 15 | Mark 16 |
| | 14 | Exodus 8 | Exodus 9 | Exodus 10 | Exodus 11 | Exodus 12 | Exodus 13 | Exodus 14 |
| | 15 | Luke 1 | Luke 2 | Luke 4 | Luke 5 | Luke 7 | Luke 9 | Luke 10 |
| | 16 | Exodus 16 | Exodus 17 | Exodus 19 | Exodus 20 | Exodus 24 | Exodus 25 | Exodus 32 |
| | 17 | Luke 11 | Luke 12 | Luke 13 | Luke 14 | Luke 15 | Luke 16 | Luke 17 |
| | 18 | Leviticus 8 | Leviticus 10 | Leviticus 16 | Leviticus 17 | Leviticus 23 | Leviticus 25 | Leviticus 27 |
| | 19 | Luke 18 | Luke 19 | Luke 20 | Luke 21 | Luke 22 | Luke 23 | Luke 24 |
| | 20 | Numbers 14 | Numbers 17 | Numbers 20 | Numbers 21 | Numbers 22 | Numbers 23 | Numbers 24 |
| | 21 | John 1 | John 3 | John 4 | John 10 | John 11 | John 15 | John 17 |
| | 22 | Deut 1 | Deut 2 | Deut 3 | Deut 6 | Deut 8 | Deut 18 | Deut 28 |
| | 23 | Acts 1 | Acts 2 | Acts 3 | Acts 4 | Acts 5 | Acts 6 | Acts 7 |
| | 24 | Joshua 1 | Joshua 2 | Joshua 3 | Joshua 4 | Joshua 6 | Joshua 20 | Joshua 24 |
| | 25 | Acts 8 | Acts 9 | Acts 10 | Acts 11 | Acts 12 | Acts 13 | Acts 14 |
| | 26 | Judges 4 | Judges 7 | Judges 14 | Ruth 1 | Ruth 2 | Ruth 3 | Ruth 4 |





Bible Reading Planner

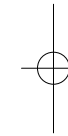
Read a chapter a day for 12 Months



| Step | Week | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|------|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 7 | 27 | Acts 15 | Acts 16 | Acts 17 | Acts 18 | Acts 19 | Acts 20 | Acts 21 |
| | 28 | 1 Samuel 1 | 1 Samuel 2 | 1 Samuel 3 | 1 Samuel 8 | 1 Samuel 9 | 1 Samuel 10 | 1 Samuel 15 |
| | 29 | Acts 22 | Acts 23 | Acts 24 | Acts 25 | Acts 26 | Acts 27 | Acts 28 |
| | 30 | 1 Samuel 16 | 1 Samuel 17 | 2 Samuel 1 | 2 Samuel 2 | 2 Samuel 5 | 2 Samuel 7 | 2 Samuel 24 |
| | 31 | Romans 5 | Romans 6 | Romans 8 | Romans 9 | Romans 10 | Romans 12 | Romans 13 |
| | 32 | 1 Kings 3 | 1 Kings 5 | 1 Kings 12 | 1 Kings 17 | 1 Kings 18 | 2 Kings 5 | 2 Chron 36 |
| | 33 | 1 Corinth 1 | 1 Corinth 2 | 1 Corinth 3 | 1 Corinth 10 | 1 Corinth 11 | 1 Corinth 13 | 1 Corinth 15 |
| | 34 | Psalm 1 | Psalm 2 | Psalm 6 | Psalm 16 | Psalm 19 | Psalm 22 | Psalm 23 |
| | 35 | 2 Corith 11 | Galatians 1 | Galatians 2 | Galatians 3 | Galatians 4 | Galatians 5 | Galatians 6 |
| | 36 | Psalm 32 | Psalm 37 | Psalm 45 | Psalm 46 | Psalm 48 | Psalm 49 | Psalm 51 |
| | 37 | Ephesians 4 | Ephesians 5 | Ephesians 6 | Philippians 1 | Philippians 2 | Philippians 3 | Philippians 4 |
| | 38 | Psalm 67 | Psalm 72 | Psalm 88 | Psalm 90 | Psalm 91 | Psalm 95 | Psalm 96 |
| | 39 | 1 Thess 1 | 1 Thess 2 | 1 Thess 3 | 1 Thess 4 | 1 Thess 5 | 2 Thess 1 | 2 Thess 2 |
| | 40 | Psalm 103 | Psalm 104 | Psalm 110 | Psalm 122 | Psalm 146 | Psalm 149 | Psalm 150 |
| | 41 | 1 Timothy 1 | 1 Timothy 2 | 1 Timothy 6 | 2 Timothy 1 | 2 Timothy 2 | 2 Timothy 3 | 2 Timothy 4 |
| | 42 | Isaiah 1 | Isaiah 2 | Isaiah 9 | Isaiah 11 | Isaiah 25 | Isaiah 26 | Isaiah 32 |
| | 43 | Hebrews 1 | Hebrews 2 | Hebrews 3 | Hebrews 4 | Hebrews 5 | Hebrews 10 | Hebrews 11 |
| | 44 | Isaiah 40 | Isaiah 42 | Isaiah 52 | Isaiah 53 | Isaiah 55 | Isaiah 60 | Isaiah 61 |
| | 45 | Hebrews 12 | Hebrews 13 | James 1 | James 2 | James 3 | James 4 | James 5 |
| | 46 | Jeremiah 1 | Jeremiah 17 | Jeremiah 30 | Jeremiah 31 | Jeremiah 33 | Jeremiah 36 | Jeremiah 38 |
| | 47 | 1 Peter 1 | 1 Peter 2 | 1 Peter 3 | 1 Peter 5 | 2 Peter 1 | 2 Peter 2 | 2 Peter 3 |
| | 48 | Ezekiel 2 | Ezekiel 3 | Ezekiel 18 | Ezekiel 36 | Ezekiel 37 | Ezekiel 38 | Ezekiel 39 |
| | 49 | 1 John 1 | 1 John 2 | 1 John 3 | 1 John 4 | 2 John | 3 John | Jude |
| | 50 | Daniel 2 | Daniel 3 | Daniel 5 | Daniel 6 | Daniel 7 | Daniel 9 | Daniel 12 |
| | 51 | Hosea 13 | Joel 3 | Micah 5 | Zechariah 8 | Zechariah 12 | Malachi 3 | Malachi 4 |
| | 52 | Revelation 1 | Revelation 2 | Revelation 3 | Revelation 5 | Revelation 19 | Revelation 21 | Revelation 22 |

Things to Read

-  This chapter has suggested that you sample the New Testament by reading the whole of the Gospel of Mark (all 16 chapters) and the Old Testament by reading the Book of Ruth (just 4 chapters). Don't rush them; take your time and work carefully through the passages.
-  You may, however, prefer to start with the Bible Reading Planner which includes both Mark and Ruth within its suggested readings, as part of Step 5.
-  There are also suggested readings with each chapter of this book, so you can decide what is best for you. Perhaps you will prefer to start regular Bible reading after you have finished this book, for there are suggestions about helpful passages at the end of each chapter.
-  If you note anything especially interesting or difficult, make a note of it, or scribble down a question or two, and that will help you develop a logical and thoughtful approach to the Scriptures.



Questions to Think About

- 3.1 Even the Kings of Israel were commanded to read the Bible and to make their own copy of part of it, so that it was available for their ready reference. Every family in Israel was to talk about and teach the Scriptures in their homes, so that these things would be their daily delight. What does that indicate to us about daily Bible reading? (Deuteronomy 17:18-20; 6:6-12)
- 3.2 How did the Scriptures help Jesus to learn about the will of God and what does his experience teach us about the progress we are likely to make? (Luke 2:40-47, 51-52; 4:3-12; 16-21)