

TTB7 / Through the Bible in 7 Weeks: Introduction

Ready for a fantastic journey through the Bible?

Over the next seven weeks, you will be reading through the entire Bible. This booklet will help you to prepare for and walk through this journey. The Bible is actually a collection of books written by more than 40 authors over a span of several hundred years with 66 individual installments. The Bible was given to us by God to be engaged with it, and here are a few steps to help you to do just that.

STEP ONE: READ IT

Step one is to *read* it. Jesus was once asked a number of questions by a group of people who were seeking answers to the spiritual questions they were wrestling with. He patiently answered each one of them, but eventually He turned around and asked a question of them: “*You do not know the Scriptures... have you not read what God said to you?*” (Matthew 22:29, 31, NIV) Jesus was surprised that people who claimed to be interested in spiritual things had never even bothered to read the main source. So read it! Here are some suggestions regarding reading the Bible.

Use a modern Bible translation: Firstly, I suggest that you use a modern translation of the Bible. Many people who have tried to read the Bible have found it difficult to read, and there is a reason—it was! But only because they tried to read it in a translation that almost doomed them to failure. The Bible was written primarily in two languages: Hebrew and Greek. The Old Testament was written in the language of its day, Hebrew, and the New Testament was written in the language of its writers, Greek. So that means all of our Bibles today are translations of those original languages. When the Bible was translated in the 1600’s, the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were translated into the language of that day which was King James English.

The Bible was commissioned by King James (hence the name King James Bible) and this is why you find all the “thees” and “thous.” But there’s nothing magical or holy about King James English, and clearly we don’t use King James English today.

So get yourself a modern translation that takes the manuscripts of the Bible and translates them into the language of our day. This will make it much easier for you to read and understand what it says. There are some Bible translation recommendations on page 13 of this booklet.

Don’t be intimidated. If you begin the journey to read the Bible convinced that you probably won’t understand it, then you’ll be a lot more likely to put it down at the first rough patch you come to. The truth is that the Bible was written by ordinary people to other ordinary people. In fact, one of the primary writers of the New Testament, the apostle Paul, once said, “*We do not write you anything you cannot read or understand*” (2 Corinthians 1:13, NIV). So take heart! If you get a good, up-to-date translation and start in the right place, you will find the Bible to be much easier to read.

Read the Bible with an eye toward discovery. While you read, keep in mind the types of questions an investigative reporter would ask when arriving on the scene of a breaking story; ask questions like...Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? So while you are reading ask yourself...Who is speaking? Who was this written to? What are the main ideas?

And then, once you’ve answered those surface-level questions, dig in deeper, asking things like...What was the background of the writer? What was going on during that time of history? What seems to be the key section or verse? Suggested questions for you are given on page 13 of this booklet. After you’ve processed all of this, you can move on to interpreting it for your life by analyzing what it means. This really isn’t as tough as it sounds.

There are three simple rules for interpreting the Bible:

1. Find out what it originally meant, and then move on to the principle behind that meaning.
2. Always try to interpret the verse in light of its context. Taking a verse out of context is one of the most common mistakes people make with the Bible. Remember that a verse is part of a chapter, and a chapter is part of a book, and a book is a part of a library of books. Don't isolate a verse from its wider context.
3. Always let Scripture interpret Scripture. If you want to know what a particular verse or chapter might be trying to say about marriage or parenting, money or sex, the best way to be sure you're interpreting it correctly is to make sure it lines up with everything else the Bible says about that subject.

Read with a heart of reflection. My final suggestion for reading the Bible is to try to read with a heart of reflection. In other words, take some time to really think about it. Meditate on it. Turn the words and meanings over and over in your mind so they begin to penetrate the depths of your heart. Because that's what you're after; that's where the Bible begins to come alive.

I once read about a highly-educated, highly-successful man who went to visit a pastor. He was in his 30s, but he had never visited anyone for spiritual direction before. So the pastor started off by asking him, "What have you done to maintain a relationship with Christ all throughout your life?"

And the man proudly said, "I have gone through the whole Bible three times."

And then the minister said, "That's good. But here's the real question: How much of the Bible has gone through you?"

STEP TWO: BELIEVE IT

Reading is only the first step. The second step is to believe what you've read. When it says that a certain action is best, a particular idea is true, or a specific event took place, you have to make the choice to believe it. Because if you don't, its power and significance will be lost on your life. While the decision to believe in the Bible is a personal one, remember that it's a decision that determines everything.

Early in his life, the great evangelist Billy Graham wrestled with whether he was going to embrace the Bible as the inspired, revealed Word of God and, therefore, the ultimate truth-source for his life. Alternatively, he could have chosen to view it through eyes that dismissed it as a fallible, unreliable book of merely human insight. He knew that everything in his life was on the line with that decision. The resolution came while he was at a student conference at Forest Home, a retreat center in the San Bernadino Mountains near Los Angeles. Billy went for a walk in the surrounding pine forest. About 50 yards off the main trail, he sat for a long time on a large rock with his Bible spread open on a tree stump. Then he made his choice. Ultimately and finally. And he prayed: "Oh God, I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions some people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God."

I've been to Forest Home, and on a similar walk I accidentally stumbled on the very rock upon which Graham made this life-long choice. I knew it was the same rock because there is now a bronze tablet on the stone commemorating his decision. Why such recognition? Because it was through this decision that Graham was able to be used by God to change the world. Here's how Graham himself reflects on it:

"That single resolution gave power and authority to my preaching that has never left me. The gospel in my hands became a hammer and a flame. I felt as though I had a rapier in my hands and through the power of the Bible was slashing deeply into men's consciousness, leading them to surrender to God."

When you read the Bible...*believing* what you read...matters.

STEP THREE: FOLLOW IT

After you read the Bible and make the faith-choice to believe it, then comes the third and final step, and a very important one: follow it. In the Old Testament Book of Proverbs the Bible says: *“Despise God’s Word and find yourself in trouble. Obey it and succeed”* (Proverbs 13:13, TLB). Reading and believing should lead to doing! If you don’t take that final step, then you’ve missed one of the primary roles the Bible should play in your life. This is so important that I want to give you some pastoral advice so you don’t miss out on all that the Bible can do to impact your life. Namely, there are three pitfalls I hope you will avoid.

Cosmic Exception Clause: First, I’ll start with something I like to call the “cosmic exception clause.” Most of us are familiar with exception clauses—the idea being that something applies to most people and most situations, EXCEPT when... and then you can fill in the blank with the exception of your choice. Sometimes this exercise can be valid. After all, one size doesn’t always fit all.

But sometimes exceptions can become dangerous. When a sign says: “Warning: Electrified Fence--Do Not Touch,” the idea of an exception clause does not apply. And if you choose to make an exception for yourself, it can cost you your life. The Bible is like that. It is a comprehensive manual for doing life and relating to God. You cannot read the Bible with the goal of trying to grasp what it is teaching you about your life, but respond by saying, “Well, in my case, and in my situation, that doesn’t count.”

That’s trying to use the cosmic exception clause.

Whenever you come across something in the Bible you dislike or disagree with, you decide that somehow, somehow, it doesn’t apply to you. You’re the exception. The only thing an attitude like that accomplishes is to make the Bible meaningless and impotent. You will never grow spiritually with that kind of approach.

Listen to these words from the New Testament:

“The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:4-6, NIV).

Food Bar Approach: A second pitfall to avoid when it comes to applying the Bible to your life is the “food bar” approach. Think how a food bar works: You grab your tray and start down the line. Some things you like and some things you don’t. So what ends up on your plate? The things you hate? Of course not. Your natural instinct will be to pile it up with stuff that catches your eye and that you think will taste good.

Now think of applying that food bar approach to the Bible: You grab your tray and start down the line of what the Bible has to say about your life. Because of your natural instinct, your plate will be piled high only with what you like. If you see something you don’t like, you won’t put it on your plate. So you’ll end up with some comfortable insights and principles on things like marriage or parenting, but you’ll pass up on the uncomfortable, lifestyle-changing applications on things like money or sex.

Hey, why go for spinach when there’s cheesecake?

At the end, you walk away with only the areas of God’s leadership in your life that you like. The ones that you’re comfortable with. The ones that go down easy. The ones that taste good. The ones that don’t challenge how you’re living. But because you do have some food on your plate you say to yourself, “See, I’m letting God lead my life.”

But you’re not.

When you approach the Bible like a food bar, you’re the one in charge. All you’ve done is assign God a place in your back pocket where you can whip Him out whenever it’s comfortable, and put Him away whenever He’s not.

A willingness to follow whatever the Bible says is such a litmus test of authentic spirituality and the way the Bible was intended to operate that Jesus made the following declaration:

“Not all who sound religious are really godly people. They may refer to me as ‘Lord,’ but still won’t get to heaven. For the decisive question is whether they obey my Father in heaven. At the Judgment many will tell me, ‘Lord, Lord...’ but I will reply ‘You have never been mine.” (Matthew 7:21-23, TLB).

No Compromise: The final way to make the Bible lose its power in your life is to compromise it. Compromise happens when you water down the Bible’s clear teaching (trying to deny it says what it says) or its authority (that what it says is off-base or even wrong). I’ve always loved how my friend, Lee Strobel, describes this.

He says to pretend that you’re a father and that your daughter and her boyfriend are going out for a date one night.

You say to your daughter, “You must be home before 11.”

Now suppose it gets to be 10:45 p.m. and the two of them are still having a great time. They don’t want the evening to end, so suddenly they begin to have difficulty interpreting your instructions.

They say, “What did he really mean when he said, ‘You must be home before 11?’”

“Did he literally mean us, or was he talking about you in a general sense, like people in general? Was he saying, in effect, ‘As a general rule, people must be home before 11?’ Or was he just making the observation that generally people are in their homes before 11? I mean, he wasn’t very clear, was he?”

“Would a loving father be so adamant and inflexible? He probably meant it as a suggestion. I know he loves me, so isn’t it implicit that he wants me to have a good time? And if I am having fun, then he wouldn’t want me to end the evening so soon.”

“He didn’t specify whose home. It could be anybody’s home. Maybe he meant it figuratively. Remember the old saying, ‘Home is where the heart is?’ Well my heart is right here, out having a Coke, so doesn’t that mean I’m already home?”

“Did he mean that in an exact, literal sense? Besides, he never specified 11 p.m. or 11 a.m. And he wasn’t really clear on whether he was talking about Central Standard Time or Eastern Standard Time. I mean, it’s still only quarter to seven in Honolulu. And as a matter of fact, when you think about it, it’s always before 11. Whatever time it is, it’s always before the next 11.”

“So with all of these ambiguities, we can’t really be sure what he meant at all. If he can’t make himself more clear, we certainly can’t be held responsible.”

Now, you know and I know that some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. The Scriptures reflect the histories, cultures and languages of places long ago and far away. And there are some passages that people might disagree about. On the essential teachings and issues, however, the Bible leaves little room for confusion. As Mark Twain was known to say, “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that disturb me. It’s the parts of the Bible that I do understand that disturb me.” Why? Because they challenge our lives on the deepest of levels. Look at what the Bible itself says about this:

“For whatever God says to us is full of living power; it is sharper than the sharpest dagger, cutting swift and deep into our innermost thoughts and desires with all their parts, exposing us for what we really are” (Hebrews 4:12, TLB).

Now it’s time to take the three steps that have been outlined for you here regarding the Bible—read it, believe it, follow it—and put them into action!