

The Seven Habits of Effective Bible Readers

I'm sure you'd agree with me that establishing and maintaining a regular time of Bible reading and prayer can be a real challenge. We've already talked about some of the obstacles. We may well be hungry to know God better but with all the pressures and distractions of modern life, sometimes it's just easier to live on spiritual snack food rather than a healthy diet of God's Word.

How can we satisfy that deep hunger for real spiritual nourishment?

How can we overcome the challenges and enjoy the many benefits of daily Bible reading and prayer?

Let me offer seven simple suggestions to help you develop a more effective and meaningful time with God in his Word.

1. Begin with the Basics

Your most basic "tool," of course, is the Bible. There are many different—and very good—translations of the Bible available today. For years, my favorite has been the New International Version (NIV). But depending on your church tradition, you might enjoy the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) or the New American Bible (NAB). It's also helpful to visit a Christian bookstore to browse through the Bible section. But no matter which translation you choose, the key is to select one that's easy for you to read and understand. In addition, you might want a notebook and pen to write down insights you gain from the Bible, or answers to prayer.

2. Pick a Spot

Then, choose a convenient time and place for your meeting with God. It doesn't have to be lengthy, perhaps just 15 minutes. Find a quiet place where there are minimal distractions so you can concentrate. This could be a quiet corner of your house while you have your morning cup of coffee (that's my preference!), in your office before the workday begins, or during your lunch break. Give some thought to the time and place that works best for you.

It's true that maintaining a regular Bible reading habit will take some discipline. But remember that a habit is only a means to an end. Your higher goal is to transform your Bible reading and prayer habit into a meeting with God. Think of it as an appointment with God. If you do, Bible reading and prayer will become less of a discipline and more of a dialog with God.

3. Don't Feel Guilty

Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm having trouble keeping a regular quiet time with God? I know I ought to but ..."? Maybe you've felt that way. As we've already acknowledged, maintaining a "spiritual discipline" like Bible reading can be a challenge. Even so, we should be careful not to think of it as "paying our dues to God" or assume that God is waiting to "zap" us if we fail to read the Bible for a period of time.

The important thing to remember is God loves you and he wants to meet with you (John 4:23-24)! Don't let guilt over what you haven't done in the past rob you of the joy of meeting with God in the present. With whatever time you do have, focus on enjoying God's Word today. If you do that, you'll soon find yourself feeling less guilty and more excited about meeting God every day.



4. Find a Plan that Works for You

I've heard people say, "I love to cook but I hate to decide what's for dinner every night." The same is often true when it comes to daily Bible reading. That's why I've found it helpful to use a daily Bible reading plan or guide. Scripture Union has two guides for adults: Discovery and Encounter with God. (For more information on these see pages 31-32 in this booklet, or go to www.ScriptureUnion.org.) There are many other good Bible reading plans available from Christian publishers. Perhaps your church denomination offers one too. Different plans will appeal to different people. The key is to find one that gets you into the Bible and stick with it. Then, you won't have to spend your quiet time in "menu planning" and can focus more on "the joy of cooking."

5. Be Creative, Add Variety!

Even good things can become routine. We all go through times when our walk with God feels dry and lifeless. When that happens, it helps to remember that those feelings are normal; you won't see spiritual fireworks every time you open your Bible. But the way to overcome them is to try something new. Here're some ideas that have worked for me.

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It's a simple change, but I've found it helps to read the day's passage in a different Bible translation than usual. Perhaps you could try the New Living Translation (NLT), the Contemporary English Version (CEV), or even a paraphrase like The Message (MSG). Another helpful technique is to keep a journal of my reflections; I don't write in it every day, only when something especially stands out. Every so often I'll try a through-the-Bible-in-a-year reading schedule; it's good to read "the whole thing" at least once. Sometimes I'll read through one book of the Bible and try to study it in depth using a commentary. Other times, after I've read a Bible passage, I'll also read a few pages from a classic Christian book. A little variety can make a big difference.

6. Give the Distractions to God

It's a noisy world out there! Even the most disciplined Bible reader faces plenty of distractions: unexpected phone calls, family interruptions and pet emergencies. I've also learned that the biggest distractions come from within: my fears, frustrations, temptations and worries.

Unfortunately we can't always control or avoid these distractions. So when they come, use them for good! Incorporate them into your time with God. If young children interrupt, invite them up on your lap and read the Bible together. If the phone rings, pray for the caller after you hang up. If your thoughts wander to worries and concerns, give those thoughts to the Lord in prayer. Don't get too frustrated by the distractions. They may be the very things God wants you to pray about.

7. Learn to Listen

My wife Carol and I have been married for more than 30 years. Over the years we've learned that listening to each other is essential to a healthy relationship. The same is true in developing a relationship with God. Prayer isn't just reciting a laundry list of requests. Prayer also involves listening to God. The question is, how can we do that?

Begin by taking time to quiet yourself in God's presence. You might imagine that your cares and burdens are packages and you are handing them to God. Then think back on the prior day. Recall the ways you saw God at work in and around you. When you feel that your heart is still, some call it "centered," then slowly read a passage of the Bible. After you read, wait in silence, reflecting on the verse or phrase that jumps out at you. What do you sense God is saying to you from this Word? How does it apply to the specific issues you face now? When you love someone, you listen to them. Practice the art of listening to God.

The Best Time to Start...is Now!

There's no better time to begin reading the Bible than today. Decide on a time, a place and a Bible reading plan. Ask God to give you a hunger for him and his Word. Use these seven steps and the other ideas and resources in this Bible Reading Start-Up Guide to begin. Soon, you'll discover that those few quiet minutes with God will become the most meaningful part of your day!