

MARTIN ARCHIBALD

Daily Bible Reading

A Short Guide



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Why read the Bible?

“To the Bible men will return, and why? Because they cannot do without it,” wrote Matthew Arnold, the Oxford Professor of Poetry. How much more true this is of the believer, re-born with a spiritual life from above, which needs spiritual food!

But if we are still asking, “How important is reading the Bible?” hear the Lord Jesus answer, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut.8:3). Moses wrote this after nearly forty years in a wilderness, where he knew the value of bread and water. The Lord quoted it when He had been forty days in the wilderness without food. Peter advised, “Crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Pet.2:2 NIV). Where could we look for ‘spiritual milk’ purer than the Word of God?

Then if we wish to grow, and keep in good health as Christians, we must read daily. The Psalmist knew the blessing of this, even though his Bible was only the Old Testament:

“Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night” (Ps.1:1-2 NIV).

How often, and how much, should I read in a day?

Many have found that the most practical habit to keep up is to read twice a day; and for most, this means early in the morning, and either early evening or before bed. These are probably the

times when most can count on being undisturbed. Whether evening or later can be decided according to when we feel most awake! If you're involved in shift-working, best ask advice of a brother or sister with experience of those demands.

Many have also been refreshed by spending some of their lunch break on spiritual food, even at the cost (small, they would say!) of embarrassment from the world. If we followed the example of Daniel, taking time to pray at midday, we might wish to include a short reading, so as to allow God to speak to us more immediately.

How much?

This will depend on three factors: the simplicity or richness of the passage we read; whether we like reading by nature; and how eager we are to be nourished or grow. But a chapter per sitting makes a good rule, since the chapter-divisions were devised for human convenience. If we read too little, we are liable to lose in understanding. Many a question a particular verse may raise is answered later in the chapter, or in the next. Further, a whole chapter will often provide more variety than a shorter passage and allow us to find a key message for the circumstances of the day. We may note here that some have found the New Testament prepared them more for the demands of the day, whereas the Old was more rewarding in the evening.

As for **how many minutes**, this will matter less if we invest free time in Scripture study and prayer as a pursuit, thus making up the balance. A great leader in the Fellowship said he would read

for twenty minutes in the morning and twenty in the evening. Twenty minutes for a great man, however, in the disciplined years of maturity, may have to be 30 minutes for me!

Then, if we take longer, we might find the family and other duties crying out for attention. It certainly is wise not to be hindered by puzzling over a difficult verse; best leave this till study-time—preferably the same day; or when you can ask for help.

Prayer and ‘The Quiet Time’

Now to consider how reading and prayer might fit together. It seems clear that the power of prayer to cleanse our thoughts and prepare us to listen to God calls for some minutes at least before reading. Men of God have also commended reading as a prelude to the daily prayer time. Again, quietness before God is commended (Ps.119:48) so that we may commune with Him and He with us—to capture the experience that Adam and Eve had sadly lost in Genesis 3:8: “... the sound of the LORD God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.”

How else may we still the fret of Martha’s anxiety over many things, so as to sit at the feet of our Lord with Mary, and choose “the good part” (Lk.10:38-42)? In the working life this will call for special arrangement and some sacrifice. This ‘oasis’ must surely be helped by beginning with reading and prayer beforehand.

So the pattern emerging is:

a.m. and p.m.: Brief prayer to ‘tune in’, and ask the Spirit to

teach us, then reading and a fuller prayer-time. Thereafter, or by arrangement: 'Quiet Time.'

The final rules as to time spent are: **disciplined regularity; and quality before quantity**. Then we may find in our reading the thrill of the poet of Psalm 119:

"I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil" (v.162).

Where to begin

One of the special pleasures a mature Christian can have is to be asked by someone young in faith, "Where would I best begin in the Bible?" A sensible question, in view of the 66 books! The usual suggestion is one of the Gospels, and the favourite is Mark, as the shortest. Here the young disciple may most easily find his Saviour and Lord, and hear wise ministry clearly relevant to the needs of everyday. He also can enjoy the clarity and attractiveness of a story, which ends with the vision of the resurrected Christ. Then what more natural sequel than the Acts?

Meanwhile the Old Testament can lay a foundation in appreciating the majesty of God, His holiness and His love; the obvious starting point being Genesis, again with the natural hand-holds of a story-line. As time goes on, however, and the spiritual concepts of Scripture provoke many questions, a guide of some sort is very helpful, such as the introductions and outlines for individual books given in such classics as the *Scofield Bible* (available now with the NIV) or the *NIV Study Bible*.

It may be wise to leave schemes with daily commentaries till teaching classes and the study of Fellowship general literature have given a steady framework of guidance. Evangelical daily commentaries are of course invaluable as a tonic, and might well be an encouragement, while a properly functioning church of God should be at hand to give advice where questions arise.

A word of caution about **Internet sites** that offer commentary on the Bible. Some are sound in their way, but check how old they are; it's easier and cheaper for sites to use a Bible version or commentary that is free of the 50-year copyright law. At times they might be explaining difficulties that only arise from centuries-old versions that have been overtaken by more recent textual discoveries and advancing scholarship.

Others are the work of enthusiastic individuals who are not working with an editing team. All commentaries also begin from a point of view and church association, so it's wise to find out what this is, and avoid its dangers: e.g. one from a Unitarian outlook that rejects the deity of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit.

What to look for

In Luke 24:27 and 44 the Lord Himself showed, or spoke of, how something of Himself was to be found spread through the Old Testament Scriptures—"the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms," which last included the historical and poetic writings. (This does *not* mean that you find Christ in every verse of every book: the last chapters of Judges, for instance, settle that idea.)

Would any disciple, then, be content to read his portion and miss its relevance to Christ? Granted, this is not always easy to detect; but here the Spirit within us will help us sooner or later to find that revelation. Perhaps at some later reading we will see Him, and will be all the more captivated by having had to wait.

But the Word often has a **cleansing** work to do first: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your word” (Ps.119:9). Ephesians 5:26 speaks of how Christ gave Himself up for the Church the Body, “cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” While this was the believer’s cleansing once for all, the same Word clearly helps to purify our thoughts and hearts from the dust and soiling of our path through this world. Further, by storing up verses in our memories we can quickly be warned in a spiritually dangerous situation by the Spirit’s recall of a verse that sheds divine light on our way (Ps.119.11).

Again, the living Word teaches us by **example**. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom.15:4). Here and in 1 Corinthians 10:11 the Old Testament is commended as a source of instructive example, and that part of our Bible should never be neglected.

The day’s reading can also be used by the Spirit to give us **guidance** about the events of the coming hours, though we may often find we are in fact drawing on the stored-up wisdom of

previous days. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps.119:105); so that we can the more readily ask as in Psalm 143:8, “Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul” (Psalm 119:98). Verse 100 also promises wisdom from our reading, if we behave accordingly.

Difficult chapters

Do you remember (or still dread!) the dismay with which you worked through a chapter of names, and tried to find some spiritual food in it? Or the gloom of lamentation, or dire judgement? Or an obscure prophecy? But perhaps you also remember the times when praying for help with this problem brought a rewarding answer. Let us look more closely at the **chapters of names**.

In Genesis 5, after wondering at the length of the lives of those days, and the generations that would be able to talk together, we may find that the verses that stay with us are 22-24, where we may reflect with much profit on a man who “walked with God,” and did not die in the usual way, but “God took him.” The evening’s study might take us to what Jude says about Enoch, using the marginal references of a good bible. In Numbers 33, recording the stages of Israel’s journey to Canaan, it might become rewarding to think about those places that attract comment, e.g. Elim, “Where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees.”

A quick reference back to Exodus 15 could remind us of the impatience of Israel over the bitter water, how it was made

drinkable by the addition of the tree God pointed out, and then the blessing of the oasis that lay next stage ahead. Complaining; the ministry of Calvary; and the refreshing of the Spirit—these might become just the message we need, let alone the similar contemplation of other nuggets of comment awaiting us through the chapter.

By the time we reach the extended **genealogies** of 1 Chronicles, we may have learned to look out for the gems that sparkle with light if we pray over them in our quiet time with God. Apart from the clear message that God prizes the individual, there is the character of Jabez, the leaders who searched out rich pasture for their flocks, the lesson of Reuben's rights as firstborn, the men *trained* for battle, the gatekeepers of the Temple, the bakers of the "presence bread" (look at the margin note), the musicians "responsible for the work day and night" (1 Chr. 9:33) — and much more.

We are reminded of the little girl who asked, "Why do you tell me all these Bible stories, Dad? You'll spoil the book for me when I read it myself!" But do read the poem Amy Carmichael wrote out of her thoughts about 1 Chronicles 4:23 and "the potters who ... stayed there and worked for the king", 'In Any Office' from *Toward Jerusalem*.

Meanwhile any lingering question about the importance of the Bible's lists of names is answered when we note the number of times their **meaning in the original languages is used by the Spirit for instruction**. The names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as

expounded in Genesis 17:5, 15, 21:6, 25:26, and 32:28, leave us in no doubt about the value of their meanings. They are a first sign that large tracts of Scripture will unfold further riches if we study the meaning, and placing, of names. Of course, it will be a considerable study, since we will find at once that authorities like Dr Strong and Dr Young often give differing meanings.

This brings us to a great principle in all Scripture-reading: that much of the deepest of all books will only become available to *the student prepared for careful labour*. The Lord commended some for searching the Scriptures (Jn 5:39); while the wise king said, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings" (Prov.25:2).

Then will come the **baleful judgements** Jeremiah declaims against Israel, and against surrounding peoples—for much of 52 chapters plus 5 of Lamentations! Perhaps the greatest help in wrestling through such reading is to appreciate that the God of Heaven is sharing with us the aching hurt of the way His beloved, chosen people have treated Him, and the final appeal He is making by His messenger, "rising up early and speaking" (Jer.7:13 AV), before Jerusalem was laid waste. God means us to feel the burden! He also wishes us to realise the nature of sin, and of His utter holiness.

Yet by chapter 6 there come the first **notes of promise**: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls" (v.16). There does seem to be a deliberate design in the structure

of most of the prophets; books that demands self-examination before the promises of God's mercy and restoration. The disciple can but learn to wait for the passages that thrill with Israel's future glory and rest. In this way the Holy Spirit teaches us the unchanging character of God—both light and love, first pure and then peaceable, like His wisdom from above (Jas.3:17).

It can, however, be a lifesaver to the reader new in faith to have a **simple outline** of the prophetic books that explains their design, and the specific purpose of their messages. Some reading-schemes, such as Dr C.M. Luxmoore's (available from Hayes Press), provide an illuminating verse from elsewhere to accompany each chapter. But when all else fails, here is the value of **reading the Old and the New Testaments in parallel**, so that there is always a clear and digestible passage in the day—even if only a verse or two!

Another help is the carefully selected group of verses culled for each day in our 'Golden Bells' calendar which, we may add, is an excellent basis for the family reading that raises the tone of home-life for all who make room for it.

Using what we have gathered

Finally, a word about the application of all this reading. Satisfaction in keeping on track will grow if we use what we find by talking about it to friends, drawing on it in discussion while witnessing, and giving to God in worship and prayer. Conversation, whether with Christians or unbelievers, will be purified and adorned if we contribute what God has said about

the subject in hand; or if we simply pass on something fresh from such a living spring. “O man, I beseech you, do not treat God’s promises as if they were curiosities for a museum; but believe them and use them” (C.H. Spurgeon).

And for the writer, the pleasure of this study will be redoubled if you find it helpful to write to him via the publisher, sharing your successes or problems. May you daily meet God as you open His book.

Father of mercies, in Thy Word
What endless glories shine!
For ever be Thy name adored
For these celestial lines.

Here may
the sons of deepest want
Exhaustless riches find,
Riches above what earth can grant,
And lasting as the mind.

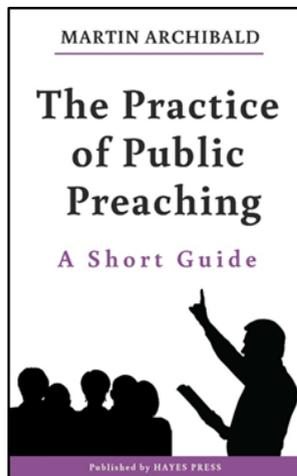
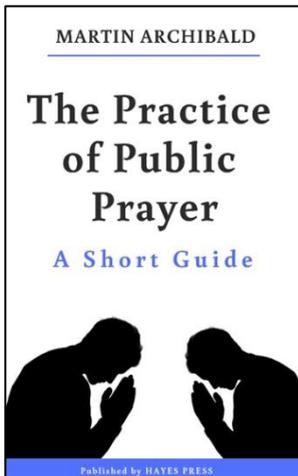
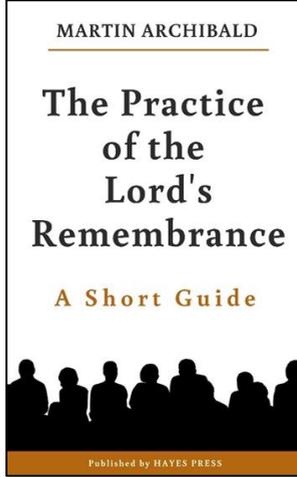
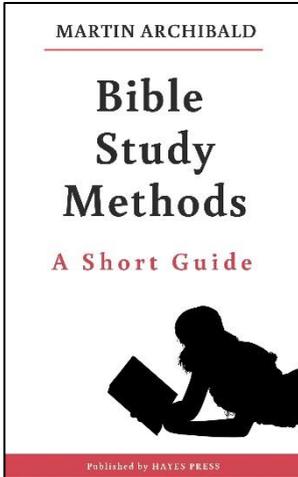
Here the Redeemer's welcome voice
Spreads heavenly peace around;
And life and everlasting joys
Attend the blissful sound.

Oh, may the heavenly pages be
Our ever true delight!
And still new beauties may we see,
And still increasing light.

Divine Instructor, Gracious Lord,
Thou art for ever near;
Teach us to love Thy sacred word,
And view the Saviour there.

(A. Steele)

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