

10 TIPS FOR CONSISTENT BIBLE READING

If you are a follower of Jesus, somewhere inside your heart is a desire to find joy in reading God's word, and seeing this practice be a regular part of your life. But the key word is, "somewhere," because most of us don't always feel that. There are times when you struggle to read God's word. In fact, sometimes you may not even sense a desire to desire it – that's scary, is it not? You want to consistently be in God's word throughout your week, but you struggle to do so.

But take heart, you're not alone. And this leads us right into the first of ten tips to help establish and sustain a practice of regular Bible intake.

1. Realize the struggle for joyful, meaningful, and consistent Bible reading is a common experience for God's people. Listen to the singer of Psalm 119: ¹⁸*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.* ²⁷*Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.* ³⁶*Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!* ¹²⁵*I am your servant; give me understanding, that I may know your testimonies!* ¹³⁵*Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes.* ¹⁷⁵*Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me.* (select verses from Psalm 119). These pleadings should be encouraging for God's people. Here is an inspired psalmist saying he struggles to understand God's word, and he sees himself inclined towards other things. Therefore, he turns to the Lord and asks Him to overcome his wayward heart.

2. Learn how to motivate your heart by grace rather than legalism. Did you know that God doesn't have an acceptability, or likability, meter in heaven that fluctuates based on how much you read and enjoy reading the Bible? No really – it doesn't exist. If you have been reconciled to God by the shed blood of His Son, and you don't read your Bible today, or tomorrow, or next week, it cannot change the way God loves and watches over you. Or, if you do read it, it doesn't cause Him to like you more. He accepts us today and tomorrow and forever only because we are in Christ, not because we read our Bibles.

However, all that said, there is still a way to motivate our hearts rightly – and it's motivating it by grace. Instead of telling yourself to read the Bible because you have to, it's reminding yourself of the promises of Scripture itself: that it goes to work in God's people (2 Thess. 2:13), that it's effective to teach us and correct us and train us (2 Tim. 3:14-17), that it grows us in our salvation (1 Pet. 2:1-3), can make our hearts rejoice (Ps. 19:7-8), and many other such promises. To move forward by grace through faith says, "I may not feel it now, and I may not feel it by the time I'm done, but God, You have said Your word has that kind of power and effect, so I will trust it."

3. Have realistic expectations and beware of letting an experience determine value. We live in a fast-paced, have-everything-instantaneously, culture, and this can fuel the misconception that unless my Bible reading is having tangible, rapid results, then it's not going well.

Therefore, it is important to remind each other that growth is a process, and just because we can't see anything happening doesn't mean that this is truly the case. An image I like is from Psalm 1,

where the author says God's people will become like fruitful and strong trees, overtime, as they immerse themselves in God's word. Sometimes you may have an incredible time in Scripture, while at other times it doesn't seem like much happened. But the drip, drip effect might be doing more than you'll ever know.

4. Realize there is goodness in wrestling with difficult texts. A large portion of the Bible is clear and understandable. And yes, we all come to portions that are hard to understand. But do you really want a God you can totally figure out, or to shrink down to the size of your brain? I believe there is goodness in simply wrestling with a passage, realizing you don't get it, and then pressing on. First of all, it is always good to meditate on God's word. Second, it is a good lesson in humility – you don't get everything. Third, more is probably going on than you can see (remember the last tip). And fourth, it requires trusting God rather than yourself. If you are to press on your only hope is to look outside yourself and remember that God has promised His word to be for your good, and you will move forward on *that* rather than your ability to figure it all out.

5. Read in community. Years ago I had an interesting conversation with a woman from China who had grown up with a strong community focus as opposed to the individualistic mindset that we have in the western world. While I think she stated it too strongly, I was intrigued and challenged when she told me about how much we need to have more group Bible studies in our church culture here. Her plain reasoning was this: "You can't understand the Bible on your own, you need other people." Naturally that didn't sit well with my individualistic pride, and I believe it is also theologically off, but it sure made me think. And it has caused me to include much more community Bible reading into my life. Other people bring a different reading style, different perspective, different hurts, different victories, and different baggage to the text than I do. And listening to them think through the text has brought much richness to my reading, and it has also helped me think through some difficult texts. There are times when I wrestle and wrestle, but then someone mentions a simple solution and all becomes clear. I trust that if you read in community you will find it to be a great blessing.

6. Make a practice of telling others. I have found that telling other people can help clarify things in my own mind. This is one of the personal benefits of telling others. But more than that, God commands us to build one another up. We are told to stir one another up toward love and good deeds, and to encourage one another day after day, as long as it is called today. In saying this, I don't believe our attempts of encouraging are to focus on telling someone how much we like them. Rather, we are to be pointing them to the words that were written for their encouragement and hope – to what the Scriptures say about God and the redemption He won for us in Christ.

Therefore, I think it is safe to say that a helpful motivator for spending regular time in God's word is so that you can build up others faith by passing along what you learn, and being able to offer a word from the Lord in a moment of counsel. When we think of our reading being for the purpose of others it just might press us deeper into it.

7. Plan to read at your best time. Personally I'm not convinced that Scripture teaches there is a "best" time for God's people to read His word, meaning that it is universal across cultures, genders, generations, etc. But, I do think a clear case can be made about the importance of God's people learning God's word. I would therefore argue, rather than for a set time for everyone, that each individual should not only find a time that works for them, but find their "best" time of day. By this I mean the hours that they function most clearly. For some that may be first thing in the morning. For others it might be mid-day or at night time. The point is that if you try to establish reading during the time of day when you are tired and nearing your "worst," you can pretty well be sure it is going to be an ongoing struggle. So, when are you at your best? When are you energized and ready to go? When do your statements become nonsensical? It may take time to figure this out, but pay attention to yourself, and it may pay off if you can be reading during your "best."

8. Plan for routine rather than spontaneity. Planning does not always equal legalism. It may be wisdom. We are creatures of habit, and we should use the good part of that for our benefit. A routine can include such things as reading at the same place, at the same time, with the same snack, with the same blanket, with the same beverage, etc. I've also found that it helps me to anticipate what I'm going to read ahead of time (like the night before if you read in the morning). It can even build anticipation. You could also consider how many days a week a good routine would be for you. Nowhere are we commanded that we must read every day, but I would argue it is still wise to plan rather than just assume you'll do it.

9. Vary your translations through the years. Reading different translations can keep reading fresh and keep me on my toes. I've read the same verse many times, but sometimes the way a translation says a single line helps me to hear it anew. Many times it can help bring more clarity and see things we wouldn't otherwise catch. At other times it can assist in the reader seeing where important or difficult to translate thoughts occur.

10. Realize it takes significant repetition to form a habit. Have you ever established a habit? If so, then you know that they rarely immerse overnight, or even in a matter of weeks. More realistically it can take months if you can go without default. But unfortunately it seems to only take a couple days for the whole routine to go out the window. At that moment you may feel like you're at square one, and that may be. But one of the fortunate things is that as the years go on and you grow in grace, the window of time it takes to re-establish the routine will shrink.