

Life's Instruction Book

The Bible is a most unusual book. It is the best selling volume of literature in all of history. It has been translated into more languages, studied by more people and has transformed more lives than anything else ever written. When the President of the United States takes the oath of office he places his hand on the Bible. When the most ancient scrolls are studied in universities and museums, they are from the Bible. It is the foundation and authority of the world's three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The Bible is famous and fabulous, but it is also personal and powerful. Anyone who desires to be fully committed to Jesus Christ must have the Bible as life's instruction book.

Please understand that the Bible is not, nor was it ever intended to be, an object of worship. The Bible is not our God. The Bible is the record of God's words and deeds from the past in order to impact and shape our lives in the present and the future.

My father grew up in a working class home in Camden, New Jersey. He suffered from an embarrassing speech impediment. At the age of 16 he dropped out of high school and went to work. But an amazing change came to his life. He heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and became a Christian at 18. The day he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord my father's lifelong speech impediment disappeared. He began to take college-level night classes to learn the Bible. In his twenties he returned to high school to earn his diploma. Eventually he attended and graduated from seminary and college. He studied at New York University and Princeton. He became a pastor and a college president.

Several years ago my father died. While I can no longer see or touch him, I have letters he wrote to me, photographs, videotapes of him with our children, audiotapes of his sermons and much more. I think of him often. I would recognize his handwriting anywhere. I know his voice. I

love to look at his pictures. He continues to shape and impact my life after all these years.

I have another Father. He is God my Father. He created the heavens and earth. He gave life to Adam and Eve. He set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt. He sent Jesus to earth. He raised Jesus from the dead. He did this and so much more. I have the record, the memories - - they are all in a book called the Bible. The Father God who did these things years ago continues to shape and impact my life today. The Bible is the record book. The Bible is my memory book. It is the scrapbook of God.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ therefore requires that I read the Bible, that I study the Bible, that I obey the Bible. Not so much to master the words but to experience God himself.

There are many different ways to read a book. In college I was editor of the campus newspaper, which turned me into a lifelong proofreader. It is possible to read page after page looking for misspelled words, incorrect grammar and typographical errors without paying much attention to what the words are communicating.

In seminary I was trained in Hebrew and Greek and Middle Eastern geography and culture. I learned how to study ancient manuscripts and the families of manuscripts and how to compare one to another. I learned to analyze and critique.

Some read the Bible as unbelieving skeptics. Some read it to find mistakes. Some read it as analysts and scholars. While there are values to all these kinds of readings, the greatest value is to read the Bible as God's Word.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ I must read the Bible to experience God. That is not to minimize any question, challenge or scholarship, just as long as the disciple comes to the Bible seeking to experience, learn and obey.

When you open the Bible, seek the Author more than the words. Look for God. Listen for God. Expect to experience God. Read the Bible to learn who God is and what God has done. The

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word “disciple” means “learner”. Every chapter should be approached with an open and seeking mind.

Among his final words, Jesus said in Matthew 28:19 and 20 that a disciple is someone who obeys all that Jesus commands. The Bible is the basis for that and that is why the Bible is life’s instruction book for a Christian. While the disciple reads the Bible looking for information, comfort and hope, it is also necessary to read the Bible expecting to be told what God wants us to do and promising to obey whatever he says.

Since the disciple reads the Bible experientially, prayer is a vital part of Bible reading. Every time we open the Bible it is helpful to pray and ask God to teach us. We might pray a prayer like this: *Lord, let me meet you in these words. Show me what you are like. Teach me what you want. Shape my whole life through your Bible. Make this a supernatural experience.*

One of the first things I do when I get up in the morning is put on my glasses. I need them to walk around the house, watch television and read just about anything. To read without glasses is difficult if not a waste of time. So it is with prayer and the Bible. Every time a disciple opens the Bible there should be a prayer asking for the eyesight of God.

If the Bible is to have God’s intended effect, we must read it by the rules. Different books are read in different ways. You probably shouldn’t try to read the phone book from cover to cover starting at page 1 and ending on the last page. It wouldn’t make sense.

Some people use the rules of roulette to read the Bible. They just open it at random and hope to hit a winner, but it was never intended that it be used that way. Imagine opening a medical book and concluding that you have whatever disease is described on the first page you read. That would be malpractice. So follow some simple logical rules when reading the Bible.

Remember when and where the Bible was written. About 39 authors wrote the 66 books of the Bible over more than a thousand years. None of them wrote in English. Our English Bibles are all translations of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The authors all lived and wrote in the Middle East,

so expect the stories, analogies and references to include deserts, camels and historical events from when and where the Bible originated. Don’t expect Super Bowl games or fast cars or speedboats. We often must make a mental transition that sets the principle in the historical context. Then we bring the principle into our time and place and apply the principle.

A second rule to recognize is that the Bible was written in a number of literary styles. In some ways it is a library of 66 books bound together into a single volume. The Bible includes history, poetry, figures of speech, economics and all the types of literature we have today.

Sometimes I am asked, “Do you believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible?” I usually answer “yes”, but I immediately recognize that “literal” is a frequently misused word. By “literal” I mean that we should read and interpret the Bible as was intended by the original author. For example, Psalm 91:4 says that God “will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” Does this mean that God has wings and feathers? Of course not! The Psalms are all poetry and this is a poetic expression or metaphor.

Matthew 19:24 quotes Jesus as saying that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Obviously no normal camel will fit through the eye of any normal needle. Does this mean that rich people are all excluded from heaven? No, Jesus is using a figure of speech. He is using hyperbole or exaggeration.

The Book of Revelation is full of strange language that is used to communicate great truths, but much of the book is symbolic and must be read in the style in which it was written.

Sometimes all of this is hard to figure out, but usually it’s not. When you read the newspaper or your favorite magazine you know the difference between a news story, an editorial, a cartoon and an advertisement. You read each and interpret each according to its own style.

Rule number three is to keep the context. Be careful not to lift single words, lines or verses totally away from their surroundings. This can inappropriately change the meaning. Psalm 53:1

says, “There is no God.” Someone says, “Whoa! The Bible says there is no God?!” Yes, the Bible clearly says that there is no God. However that line appears in a context that says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Whenever we as disciples read and study the Bible, we must give the Bible the same fair treatment we would give any other book and that includes full respect for the context in which statements are made.

Rule number four is to beware of reading-in meaning. We should approach the Bible to learn, not to teach. It is the Bible that gives meaning to us and not the other way around.

Several years ago I knew a man who read the Bible a lot. He and his wife were thinking about building a new house. She wanted a home in town. He wanted a house out in the country. So he searched the Bible until he came up with Isaiah 5:8 which says, “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.” This husband took the words out of context and misused the Bible to control his wife and get what he wanted. That’s not what a disciple is supposed to do. A disciple lets the Bible do the teaching.

Rule number five is to get help when reading the Bible. There are some things in the Bible that, quite frankly, could be easily misunderstood. For example, the Bible is not assembled in chronological order.

Instead, different types of literature are put together. If you look at the table of contents in a Bible you will see that it is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament happened first and the New Testament happened next. Within both Testaments the history books are first and the literature books are last. That’s like putting together a family scrapbook with the family tree and history in the front and sample letters from relatives in the back. If you don’t know this, it’s a good idea to get help to find out.

There are some statements in the Bible that need some explaining. Take, for example, the story of the Good Samaritan. By just reading

Luke 10 you probably wouldn’t know that the Samaritans were a people of mixed ethnicity that were deeply disliked by the mainstream Jewish community. A brief explanation can enormously enhance your understanding of Jesus’ story.

Where is help available? Fortunately we live at a time and place where wonderful resources are readily available. One of the cheapest and easiest resources is a Study Bible. Study Bibles add introductions, footnotes and other helps for the Bible reader. One of the most interesting is the *Quest Study Bible*. It started out with different people reading through the Bible and writing down every question that came to their minds about the text. Those questions were then distributed among a group of Bible teachers and scholars who gave short answers that were added to the margins of the Bible.

The more you study, the more questions you may have. You may then want another study Bible, helpful books on different Bible subjects or classes that focus on certain parts of the Bible.

Reading and studying the Bible is not unlike hunting, fishing, camping, computers and other special interests. You may need help getting started learning terms and figuring out how everything works. Then you can go ahead on your own. Or you may want help to go

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deeper.

Let me give one quick warning. The help you get should never be elevated to the authority of the Bible. Only the Bible is guaranteed by God, not the books and lessons others provide about the Bible.

If, as disciples of Jesus Christ, the Bible is going to have the impact that God intends for it to have we need to have a plan to actually read it and learn from it. There are people who have been Christians for years who have never really read and studied and understood the Bible. They may have tried, but they have never gotten very far. It’s kind of like dieting and exercise – they just never passed the first few days.

Social scientists tell us that if you want to break a bad habit stop it for 60 days. If you want to start a good habit do it every day for 60 days. So study the Bible regularly for 60 days. Pick a time. For me it's early in the morning; for you it may be another time. Pick a place. It may be your living room or the car or Starbucks parking lot, but make it the same place. And set goals. When you're getting started, don't try to read the Bible from cover to cover. Instead, start with the book of Proverbs and read one chapter each day for a month. Or, in the New Testament start with the Gospel of Mark and read a paragraph or two a day or maybe a chapter a day. The point is to establish clear goals because if you don't have a plan you'll never do it.

For disciples who seek to read and obey the Bible here are some practical suggestions. One is to write in your Bible. Write in the margins. Put down the date when some declaration from God has special impact in your life. Underline so that you can find those things again. When you figure out what something means write the explanation in the margin.

A second practical suggestion is to bring your Bible to church. Church is the classroom of the Bible. Even if there are pew Bibles or verses are put on a screen, these are intended for those who are new or who forgot their Bibles. When you have your own Bible in church you can take notes in the margins when God makes a truth clear to you. Make that a habit.

A third practical suggestion is to use a Bible that you like. Find a translation that you're comfortable reading. If you like a big Bible with large print, get one so that you can read it easily. If you like a pocket-size Bible with tiny print, then get what works best for you. Bibles are available in different translations, with and without study helps and in different bindings, colors, languages and sizes. Get the Bible you are most likely to

use and wear out!

Let's conclude with a look at 2 Timothy 3:16 which tells us, "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible we read comes from God himself. When we read and learn from the Bible we will be taught what we need to know, rebuked for what we are doing wrong and corrected so we'll get life right. The bottom line is that this book is supernatural. It is a supernatural instruction book for the disciple's life.

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