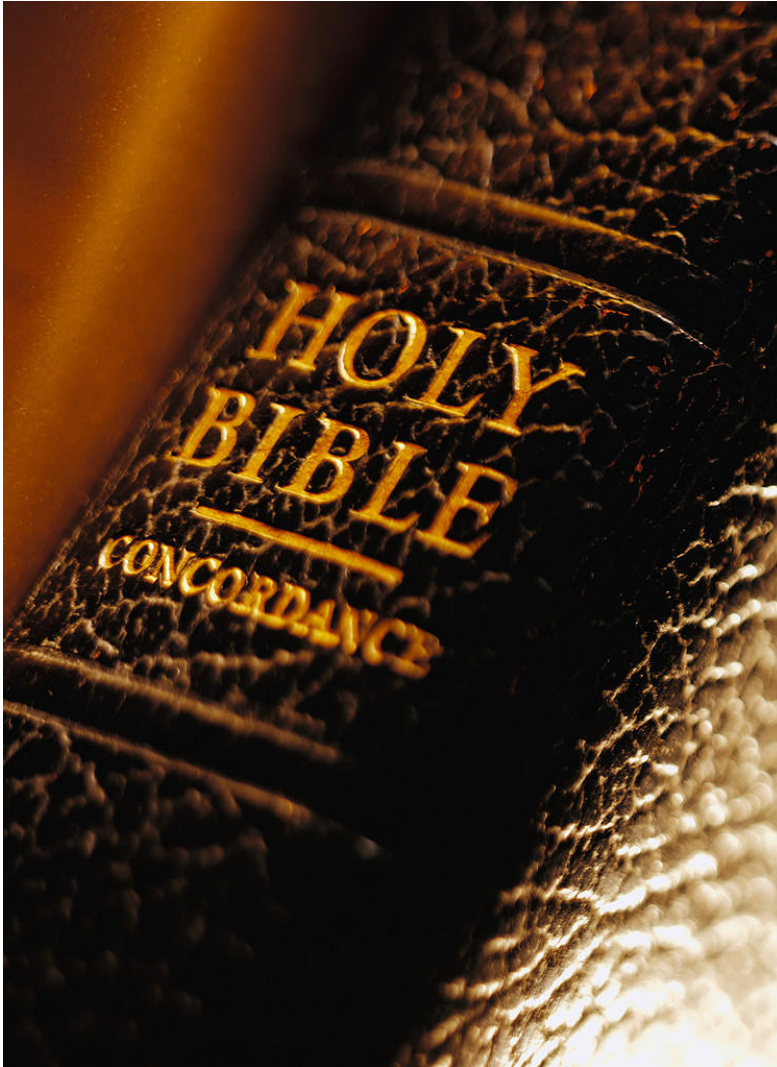




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*Your Bible Study  
& Prayer Time  
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Wise Christians turn to the Bible to discover how God wants His Creation tended. But not everybody finds it easy to read Scripture; and many people simply don't know where to start in trying to understand the Bible's teaching. Here then are five ideas for developing a love for Bible study; ideas that

just might help you cultivate a habit of studying God's Word.

- **Biography--Learning from real people in the Bible**
- **Detective--Sorting out why minor characters made the cut to be in the Canon.**
- **Jesus' One on One People Skills--Studying Him to help ourselves**
- **Walk before we run--Finding a language you can understand**
- **Triage--Finding the part of the Bible you need right now**

### *Biography, or Learning from the Major Characters of Scripture*

Do you love stories? Are you the kind of person who is attracted to books, movies or television shows where character development is strong? Do you learn best from examples? Then this approach should offer promise in helping you stay interested in the Bible.

In early America, both urban and rural Christians knew their Bible. Schools used the Bible as literature, history and reading texts. Today, though, even people who have been Christians for years know very little about the *people* in the Bible. This is a shame, because the stories of each of these men and women are included for specific reasons. Each person's story teaches us valuable lessons; stories **about** real people *for* real people.

In this approach, we suggest you buy (or find online) a Bible with a ***cyclopedic index***, or one with a ***reasonably exhaustive concordance***. The cyclopedic index is usually preferable because it lists all the key passages pertaining to the people of Scripture, but many concordances do an adequate job of as well.

Armed with this tool, select a person you want to know more about in Scripture. (*Take David, for example. If you look up David's name in the cyclopedic index or concordance, you'll find listed there all or most of the passages referring to David. By reading these passages, you'll discover a built-in biography of this "man after God's own heart".*) You will watch David grow from a shepherd boy strumming music to sooth King Saul, and see him conquer Goliath, following him through many important Scripture passages as he comes King. You'll even follow him through his failed moments. As you learn about David you also learn about God, and much about yourself. You'll also find one character will introduce you to another you will want to follow, and then another and another...like Samuel, Solomon, and Jonathan from David's story.

Don't know where to start?

Try these names:

Peter	David
John (Jesus' disciple)	
James (Jesus' brother and an early leader in the church)	
King Saul	Hannah (don't miss this one!)
Esther	Ruth
Noah	Cornelius
and my personal favorites, Andrew, Barnabas, Bezalel, & Oholiab.	

### *Detectives, or Why Did This Person Make the Cut?*

Hundreds of minor characters form the backdrop that is the drama of Scripture. This magnificent meta-narrative of Creation, Fall, and Redemption is rife with real-world characters like us. Meet Rahab, Jabez, Ethan and more. Lydia, the woman from Tekoah; all these have much to teach us, and each person is included in the canon with a purpose. Your job? Find that purpose, for in doing so, you're likely to see yourself while also learning God's Word.

Pick a more obscure person in the Old Testament. As you read the passages related to this person, ask yourself some questions:

- Why do you think that person's story is included in the Bible?
- What lesson(s) does it offer for you in your life?
- If the person you selected fails to bring anything to mind immediately, try reading about that passage, and that person, in a Bible dictionary, or a commentary

There are plenty of great characters in the New Testament, too. However, Christians too often have an aversion to the Old Testament, so we want to encourage you to jump in there first. Old Testament characters are generally more fleshed out than those found in the New Testament, meaning you'll be able to identify with their strengths and weaknesses more easily and more fully.

*A word of warning here.* It's a real temptation to read a passage, then immediately jump to a commentary and let a theologian tell you what they think that passage means. While commentaries are an important, valuable, and often delightful addition to personal Bible study, we encourage you to read and understand what it means on your own first, then look to see what others have written about it to see how your own understanding compares with theirs.

Always remember this rule in studying Scripture: Measure the part by the whole. If one Scripture passage seems to mean something that is inconsistent with the whole of Scripture, then you've understood that passage wrong. For example, if you read James and believe there are verses there that suggest that salvation comes through works, then you know you're wrong because the whole of Scripture teaches us that salvation is through grace alone.

### *Jesus One on One People Skills--Studying Him to Help Ourselves*

Jesus' mission on Earth was to remove the barriers between us and God, making it possible for us to be restored to a relationship with Him. Remember, we weren't made *to do*, we were made *to be*--in relationship with God.

With this idea in mind, select a Gospel and read it with pencil and paper handy, because you will want to make notes you can refer back to later. As you read through this Gospel, each time you see Jesus in a one-on-one encounter, write down your answers to the following questions:

- What is the barrier Jesus is trying to eliminate between this person and God?
- Why is this person's story described here?
- How is the barrier Jesus is confronting in this person's life similar to one in my own life?

Keep in mind you're not focusing on what Jesus' is doing in that person's life (*healing, rescuing, forgiving, etc.--another great study idea*); stay focused on trying to identify what it is that is preventing this person from being in fellowship with God.

Don't miss the fact Jesus uses a different approach in nearly every encounter.

### *Evangelism Templates? You bet!*

Are you a mature Christian? Then instead of just studying the barriers, also study the ways Jesus overcame these barriers. Consider the people in your circle who may be similar. Try to incorporate Jesus' approach to these people into your own approach to their counterparts in your life.

### *Walk Before You Run. Finding a Language You Understand*

Choose an easy-to-read paraphrase Bible. Here's an important caution, though: There are a lot of frivolous, even dangerous, versions of the Bible out there. *Consider asking a mature believer or a pastor for guidance.*

When I give a Bible to a seeker, I'll often use a ***Life Application***© ***Bible***. Many pastors use a version called ***The Message***. While these paraphrase Bibles are not as precise as the NIV, NASV and other literal translations, they can make the Scripture accessible to Biblical novices.

Even if you're a longtime believer, you may discover you fit the category of Biblical novice. If you have the time, the best way to learn is to read the paraphrase side by side with an NIV, NASV or more literal translation. Using both Bibles together will acclimate you to the more literal translations' style, and will help you to develop an ability to understand the passages as they were meant to be read. While I personally love the King James' Bible because its poetic renderings of truth are how I memorized Scripture when I was young--and therefore how I hear it in my head, most people today find the wording inaccessible. After the King James', I prefer the NIV, but you'll discover pastors and mature Christians have strong connections to other translations, also. Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to be tempted to read *only* paraphrase versions of the Bible like ***The Message***. These paraphrase Bibles can sometimes miss the nuance of Scripture, and are really mostly the best-attempt by one person or group to tell us what the Scriptures mean to say.

It's always best to read a literal version and allow the Holy Spirit to speak through those words directly, so this strategy for jump-starting your quiet time should only be used until you're more comfortable with the real translations .. It's best to think of paraphrase versions as the training wheels of Scripture reading; get off of them as soon as you're able.

### *Triage--Finding the Part of the Bible You Need Right Now*

Choose an area of Scripture to read based on the season of your life right now.

For example, (a) *if you're in the middle of great struggles, read the Psalms*. Because they've become one-liners in so many sermons and books, many people dismiss them as mere poetry. But step back, and you'll see how the Psalmist cries out to God in extremely honest fashion. We Christians like to play head games with ourselves, thinking one thing about the difficulties we face, but "cleaning up our act" when we sit down to pray to God; as if He couldn't see our earlier thoughts. Psalms is rich with passages that will calm the storms of your life simply because you'll find yourself saying "That's *exactly* how I feel!!" Notice how often David says the Lord is His strength; over and over and over again. That's likely because he was reminding himself over and over and over again in the face of struggle, something we often need to do ourselves.

If, like me, (b) *you enjoy history, then start in Chronicles or Kings*. You'll be surprised how much new information you discover about God and His people simply by reading these books.

Want some ideas on (c) *how to reach out to cultures that rebel against God? Then, start reading through the Minor Prophets*.

Or try this, (keeping in mind each of the Gospels offers much more than just the focuses suggested here)

- (d) *read the books of Luke and Acts* to see Jesus as a professional saw him;
- (e) *read the book of John*, the disciple "whom Jesus loved" and notice how much more vividly he seems to communicate the love of Christ, likely because of that love of Jesus for Him;
- (f) *read the book of Mark* for an understanding of how to communicate the Gospel message in a succinct yet vivid fashion.
- (g) *Read the book of Matthew* when you find yourself tempted to be judgmental and legalistic.

Many people use devotional books as a part of their daily Bible study. What a joy it is to read what Oswald Chambers and others have to say about a Scripture passage. But don't make the mistake of considering this as adequate for your spiritual journey. Never rely merely on someone else's opinion of what the Bible says; study and discover it for yourself.

Remember, God promises his Word will never return void (*Isaiah 55:11*); meaning

every time you read the Bible, its truths are stored there for the Holy Spirit to use, if not now, then at some point in your lives.

While the Holy Spirit will not “Google” what isn’t there, once you’ve read a passage, its truths are now stored in you, available from that point forward to be drawn out by the Holy Spirit for use when you need it most.

One last word: While a solid knowledge of Scripture isn't essential for salvation, it IS essential for producing fruit and serving God as He wants us to serve Him. When we make our way through life without knowing His word, we're doing what seems right in our own eyes, and that always leads to sin and chaos.

Make the effort and you'll discover what the Bible means when it refers to itself as a living instrument. It will breathe life in you as nothing else can.