

DAY 1

THE BIBLE IS BORING AND HARD TO UNDERSTAND

As a young man growing up in a Christian home, I knew all too well that reading the Bible was a good thing to do. The problem was that I really struggled to read it!

So I would make a promise to God and myself (usually after church on a Sunday or Wednesday) that I was going to start being good. I was going to read my Bible every day. But you probably know the story. After a few days I'd get bored, busy, or distracted and give up. That, of course, would lead to feeling guilty all over again, and the cycle would repeat itself. Can you relate?

The truth is, developing a good habit of Bible reading is a hard thing for many modern Christians. We have our reasons: "It's hard to read." "I'm really busy." "I get bored easily." But I think it has more to do with our approach.

Sometimes we read the Bible like a self-help book. We're hoping to get something out of it. We want to learn something. We want to find a nugget that will be meaningful to our lives. And we want all of this fast. We Americans like our information short and to the point because we're busy! We've got jobs to do and goals to achieve! So our culture has conditioned us to look for wisdom and knowledge in little, bite-sized nuggets, and I think we bring this same approach to scripture.

Other times, if we're being honest, we read the Bible out of a sense of obligation. We feel like we should. We think God won't be happy with us if we don't read it, so out of guilt we go to God's Word hoping to salve our conscience.

But here's the problem. Both of these approaches put us at the center. The Bible becomes a means to our end. The Bible, then, is only as valuable as it is useful. In other words, if I don't get something out of it, why would I read it? Exactly.

So what if we changed our approach? What if instead of approaching the Bible to get something out of it, we approached it like a relationship? What if we read it simply to know more of who our God is?

Here are a few helpful tips for developing a different approach to reading scripture:

- 1.** Use a good Bible-reading plan and stick with it. Don't always rely on your own judgement of what you should read because you'll just gravitate to the verses you like best! You want to get a BIG perspective of God.
- 2.** Be okay with not getting anything out of it that day. Do a husband and wife have breakthrough relational moments every day? Of course not! A healthy marriage is built on years of consistent face time.

3. Seek a relationship over an application. Application isn't a bad thing, but if you seek to turn the Bible into an instruction manual for your life, you'll greatly minimize its value and purpose.

VERSES TO READ:

John 17:1-26

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Have I been approaching the Bible for quick fixes to my problems or to develop a better relationship with God?
- Do I read the Bible out of obligation? What can I change about my posture to help me have a meaningful relationship with God's word?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Lord, today, I purpose to seek You and You alone. I pray as Paul prayed, that You would give me a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that I would know You more. Lord, You are my very source of life; apart from You, I can do nothing. So as I seek You, I ask You to reveal Yourself to me, so I may become more like Jesus. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 2

PUTTING GOD FIRST

lordship over our lives.

We've all heard it said: "Put God first!" It sounds good, and we hear it talked about in churches all the time. But I wonder, what does it truly mean to put God first? Well, it's more than checking a box in our daily routine, and it's more than 15 minutes in the morning so we can move on with our business. Putting God first is a daily realignment of our hearts and minds to give Jesus

What is lordship, you ask? Well, consider Jesus when the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. In Matthew 6:9–10, He responded with the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done." First, notice how He's honoring His Father above all else. That's what it means to "hallow" God's name. It means that nothing else in your life will be above God's name and desires.

Naturally, then, this led Jesus (and it leads us as well) to surrender His will and desires to His Father's. Consider how He surrendered His throne and His glory when He came to the earth. And again, on the cross, He surrendered everything when He gave His body, His blood, and, ultimately, His life. Lordship is nothing less than a daily, continual surrender of your heart, mind, body, and will.

So now comes the real heart work; is that kind of surrender representative of your relationship with God? Or do you find yourself continually pleading with Him to "fix" something in your life? Ask yourself, "What am I seeking first—God's desires for my life or my own?" The answer to those questions will tell you a lot about who the real "Lord" of your life is. And if you're anything like me, you'll probably find that you have some work to do in this area! But here's the great news: Jesus is loving and patient with us. Even though we try to occupy the seat that rightfully belongs to Him as our Creator, He lovingly waits for us to recognize our pride and allow Him to take His rightful place on the throne of our hearts.

John 14:10-14; Psalm 25; Luke 9:23

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Is that kind of surrender representative of my relationship with God?
- What am I seeking first – God's desires for my life or my own?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Lord, today, I put You first. I surrender my life to You and give You lordship of my day. In every task, in every errand, in every meeting, in every encounter with another person, have Your way in me. Be my wisdom, righteousness, strength, and peace so that my life glorifies You. Lord, today, Your kingdom come, Your will be done. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 3

WHY AM I HERE?

Did your parents ever tell you that you were an accident? Even though they were thrilled that you were born, it makes you think, “Would things have been better had I been carefully planned?”

God saw you coming even if your parents were caught off guard. He participated in your creation by forming you while you were yet in your mother’s womb! He knew you and He chose you to be His own before you took your first breath (Zechariah 12:1).

You may not have been properly introduced earlier in your life, but God wanted a relationship with you from the very beginning. In fact, it is the number one reason you were born. You’ll never find “home” until you find your Heavenly Father.

How, then, do we connect with this great, unseen God?

How do we cultivate the awareness of His presence within us?

In Revelation 4, we read about 24 spiritual elders who are seated before God’s throne. Think of them as the wisest, purest people who ever walked on earth. In this chapter, we watch them connecting with God. What do they do?

They simply begin to worship God and give Him thanks! It is obvious that they take tremendous pleasure in this exercise, and God, likewise, takes great pleasure in their worship. If you want to understand the deepest and most meaningful reasons for your creation, worship God. Give thanks to Him for every good thing you can think of. Spend a few minutes doing this early in your day and see if you don’t find yourself with new purpose and meaning for life.

Isaiah 44:2; Zechariah 12:1; Revelation 4:1-11

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Can I worship God even when I don’t feel His presence?
- Do I lose sight of His goodness by worrying about things I don’t have?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Heavenly Father, I worship You because You loved me, and You chose me to be Your very own child. My greatest purpose in life is to give glory to Your name. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 4

FONDNESS OR SURRENDER?

Millions of people in the Christian world hold a very favorable view of Jesus Christ. In fact, many would call themselves Christians. Most would affirm a strong belief in God even though their behaviors might not represent Jesus at all. Can a person have genuine faith in God simply by holding a favorable view of Jesus Christ?

During the first 300 years of Christianity, true believers paid a steep price for their faith, and it is still going on today. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been martyred for refusing to deny the Lord. They have been slaughtered in the most horrible ways. I think they held something much deeper than a mere fondness for Jesus' teachings and humble lifestyle.

Romans 10:9 teaches us that salvation comes to those who surrender to the lordship of Christ: "If you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Calling Jesus your Lord is a statement of surrender—total surrender. This is but the beginning of a life journey of learning to surrender to the will of the Father. Why is surrender to God so difficult for us? It comes down to one word: trust. In the secret places of our hearts, we do not really trust that God wants and knows what is best for our lives. We are afraid to put our dreams, relationships, interests, and desires into His hands. We have more confidence in our own ability to direct our lives even though we have ample evidence to the contrary! We want to be our own god.

God asks us to trust Him, but not blindly. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He has proven His love for us. He has proven that we can trust Him. He comes to us with His hands open and outstretched. And if we will daily trust Him, He will lead us on a life journey of freedom and fulfillment that does not exist in this world. He asks us to live for Him, but this joyous life cannot be found by fond admiration. It comes only through total surrender.

Romans 10:9; Romans 5:8; Matthew 16:24-26; James 1:17

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Have I unreservedly surrendered my life to Christ?
- Do I daily deny my natural inclinations and impulses that come into conflict with His claim on my life?
- Do I fully trust Him and believe that His will is the best for me?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Heavenly Father, I confess anew the lordship of Jesus Christ. I believe You want good and perfect gifts for me. You see where my heart struggles to surrender. Help me to trust You more. I give up myself—my will, my thoughts, and my body to You. Thank You for making Your lordship a reality in my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 5

WHAT IS MY FOCUS?

At some time or another, you've probably experienced the pain of a splinter in your hand. Most of us know the feeling of having an unpleasant distraction and a constant annoyance like that. It's hard to ignore a splinter. It's the kind of distraction that we have to be intentional about removing, just like so many other distractions. Often, the best way to remedy a splinter is to ask for help from someone with the skill to safely remove it without causing more damage. The best thing we can do is take our eyes off of the splinter (or distraction) and shift our focus to the calm, steady presence that's helping to remove it.

How do we keep our focus on Jesus in the midst of a distracted world that's constantly grabbing for our attention? In John 15, Jesus tells us that He is the vine, and we are the branches. He tells us to "remain" in Him numerous times. In John 15:4, Jesus specifically says, "Remain in Me, and I in you." This direction from Jesus is the key to overcoming distractions in our lives.

To remain in Jesus isn't just a desire; it's a choice that demands focus. To focus on something is simply the ability to pay attention to what is important in the midst of distractions. The world wants our focus and is full of endless opportunities for us to lose sight of what's important, but Jesus wants our focus to be on Him first and foremost. In order to remain in Jesus, we must make daily decisions to do the things that keep us in close contact with Him.

If we remain in Him, Jesus promises that He will remain in us. He is lovingly calling us into a close, mutual relationship. He is the focus that allows us to navigate through the pain and challenges of this world. We have the option to daily live in a close relationship with a God that is full of truth, grace, strength, mercy, and love. It won't happen overnight, but all it takes is the first step toward Him, followed by another—day by day, moment by moment, shifting our focus back to what's important.

Hebrews 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 4:18; John 15:1-8; Matthew 6:33

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What specific times throughout each day can I pause to acknowledge God?
- What practices can I implement throughout each day to keep me in contact with God?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Father, thank You for creating me to be in a close relationship with You. I acknowledge that You are the vine, and I am the branch. I choose to remain in You today. Help me to clearly see what choices I can make today that will draw me close to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 6

DEVELOP CONSTANT CONVERSATION WITH GOD

Have you ever been hungry, but after eating, you still aren't satisfied? Sometimes we eat, and our stomachs are full, but the hunger for something specific remains. Life can feel this way. We have busy schedules with very little time unaccounted for, but if we are really honest with ourselves, most of us aren't satisfied, and we don't know why.

God wants us to know Him, so He planted a longing in us that can only be satisfied in His presence. Thankfully, access to God isn't limited to church services. God wants to be a part of every moment of your life, even the busy ones. He desires to have an "all day, everyday" conversation with you.

You can begin this conversation now. Use plain language. Be yourself. Simply acknowledge God and invite Him in. Whether you're changing a diaper, mowing the lawn, or closing a deal at work, it doesn't matter. Be mindful that once invited in, He may have something to say. You may gain clarity where it was lacking or have an idea you recognize is not your own. The key is to turn all of life's activities into conversation with God. It's not difficult, but it does require being intentional.

A constant conversation with God starts by practicing it until it becomes a habit. There is nothing too big or too small to talk to Him about. He cares about it all. You will spend some time talking and some time listening. As you choose God over and over throughout your day, you will begin to know Him better. If at any time you become unaware of His presence, simply pause and realign your thoughts. Invite Him back in. You are as close to God as you choose to be. No place is any closer to Him than where you are right now.

Isaiah 55:6a; Psalm 16:11a; James 4:8

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Have I been putting conversation with God in the box of church or chair time only?
- What step can I take to increase the amount of conversation I have with God every day?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Dear Heavenly Father, I acknowledge that You desire an intimate, personal relationship with me. I am amazed and humbled that the Creator of the universe wants to be in constant conversation with me. Right now, I invite You in to every part of my life. From the spectacular to the mundane, nothing is off limits to You. I want to remain in Your presence. I choose to be intentional. I am determined to speak to You throughout the day, and I welcome You to speak to my heart. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 7

BETTER TOGETHER

Congratulations! You've already made it to Day 7 of the 21 Days of Prayer. Clearly, you have a desire to grow spiritually, and that's a good thing! The Bible has much to say about desiring spiritual growth, but perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of spiritual growth is the important role that other people play in it.

Let's talk about one impediment to spiritual growth that's hard to see sometimes— autonomy. This is an idea that stems from our culture which actively endorses, celebrates, and even prescribes self-expression above all else. Essentially, we are the answer to our problems, or, at best, we want to believe the answer to our problems lies within us.

Consequently, we may have a tendency to approach spiritual growth very much the same way we would approach growth in any other category. We take matters into our own hands. We go it alone.

Our “‘rise and grind’ to ‘work hard’ on our ‘side hustle’ in order to ‘get ’er done’” attitude toward life in general, and spiritual growth in specific, presupposes that growth depends on us and us alone. For some disciplines, that may be the case. But what if the path to spiritual growth is different? No doubt, individual effort is a part of spiritual growth. But what if God set it up so that spiritual growth actually happens best within the context of a broader group of people, like a church family?

Scripture is laced with verses and stories of people rallying around each other, to help, sharpen, encourage, support, challenge, love, and even correct one another. Why is that?

It is because God designed people to need people. And He designed spiritual growth to happen best with others! That is why we gather together corporately, and it's why we circle up in small groups, so that through relationships we might grow closer to Christ.

Proverbs 27:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Do I find myself trying to go it alone when it comes to growing spiritually?
- What person in my life has had the biggest impact on my spiritual growth?

PRAYER TO PRAY

Lord, help me in my pursuit of You to remember that there are people that You've placed in and around my life to help me grow closer to Jesus. I ask that You would use me to help my brothers and sisters grow closer to Christ as well. In Jesus' name, amen.