



DAILY BIBLE READING: *WHY & HOW*

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WHY & HOW

What God said to them...

What God is saying to us...

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A lakeside stand of trees, filtering the rising sun, conjures the sort of idyll conducive to relaxed reflection on the Word of God. In reality, life is generally more frenetic and harried than that. Yet even as life swirls, God meets us in his Word.

DAILY BIBLE READING

This article explains the why and the how of Bible reading. It proceeds by answering questions that Christians often have when encouraged to read the Bible daily. First ...

Why read the Bible every day?

One could argue, I suppose, that so long as we read the Bible every day, why we do so is of lesser consequence. On the other hand, personal and pastoral experience suggest that some motives tend to contain within them the seeds of failure. Two counterproductive motives are common.

Especially at New Year, the convention of making resolutions prompts many Christians to recommit to daily Bible reading. Like dieting and exercise, resolutions are commonly driven by a sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, and a desire for self-improvement. All require a high level of self-discipline. All are in equal parts healthy and hard work. And all tend to last about the same length of time.

Another common motive for undertaking daily Bible reading is a desire to revitalize spiritual life. What could be wrong with that? Often it derives from a combination of misdiagnosis and unrealistic expectations. It may spring from a longing to return to the enthusiasm that attended the early days of faith. For many, an initial awakening or

owning of personal faith occurs during adolescence or college. While some of the associated enthusiasm derives from coming into a personal relationship with God, some of it derives from the circumstances of life at that stage, from the heady days of self-discovery, of romance, and of spending all day with hordes of contemporaries sharing similar age and common interests. Eventually, that gives way to the routines of family, career, mortgage, and suburban life. Daily Bible reading is no elixir for midlife doldrums.

What daily Bible reading can do, however, is to provide a modest encounter with God, leading to a process of incremental growth. While it may not be earth-shaking, it is the same sort of development that occurs in family life and career. The idealistic quest to love more deeply than anyone ever, and to change the world, appropriately give way to faithful living and gradual progress. With modest expectations and consistent practice, spiritual growth occurs bit by bit, by the grace, and to the glory, of God.

Indeed, incremental progress in the fulfillment of God's promises is a main part of the theme that runs from Genesis through Deuteronomy (and beyond). If God moves at deliberate pace when fulfilling his purposes in the world, it is no surprise that he works at similar pace in our lives.

Daily Bible reading contributes toward that incremental progress, along with prayer, public worship, ethical living, and caring for the oppressed. What Scripture uniquely brings us is the very Word of God, the primary, and only

authoritative, entirely reliable, revelation of God. In Scripture, God discloses himself to us. This is sufficient motivation for daily Bible reading.

Why use a Bible-reading guide?

In one sense, this question is entirely justified. Jesus himself rebuked the professional classes of scribes and rabbis who adjudicated the meaning of the Law of God, lording over the non-professionals (e.g., Matthew 5:20; 7:28-29; 12:38-42). Adding weight to the claim, it is often argued that we all have the Spirit whose role is to guide us into all truth (John 16:12-15).

Reading guides properly have a modest goal. This guide does not claim to speak for God; it intends to help the reader perceive how God speaks, and what he says, in his Word. Few would oppose the use of reading guides, for instance, to understand the plays of Shakespeare, written in a language and culture much closer to ours. Yet the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek (with a little Aramaic), two thousand years ago, or more. Even in modern English translation, it was written to cultures different from our own, and in literary genre less familiar today. A reading guide can help with this.

Nor does a reading guide intrinsically impinge on the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's role is preeminently to open our mind and heart, and to bend our will, to embrace and obey what God says in Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 2). The Spirit is transformative; a reading guide is merely informative.

Still, this concern makes a crucial point. This guide serves a useful purpose only as it helps you understand the text, not if it replaces the text. Each reading begins with a link to the Bible passage under consideration (courtesy of BibleGateway.com). Read the passage first, to get a general sense of its content. Only then turn to the reading guide. Finally, armed with a map of the theme and its development, reread the passage. As you do so, note that in the nature of the case, the interpretation sections hew more closely to the text than the application sections. So assess the latter with special care.

What are the key features of this guide?

First, the guide seeks to be manageable. It recognizes that Bible reading competes for attention in our crowded and frenzied lives. So most readings cover a single chapter of Scripture per day. For the same reason, each reading is limited to 800 words. The Microsoft readability tool consistently rates the guides to be at a tenth-grade level. This is higher than television requires, but surely God deserves as much effort from us as our sophomore schoolteachers.

Secondly, each reading pursues 'authorial intent'. What 2 Peter 1:19-21 says of the prophets is true of all Scripture. The message originates from God, articulated through those inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was not invented by the human spokespeople. If the ancient prophets dare not put words into God's mouth, we dare not. The Bible is no 'Rorschach test' onto which we can freely impose our own

meanings. Scripture warns against spiritual ventriloquism; God is no one's dummy (Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19).

The original meaning of the text controls both interpretation and application. A passage means now what it meant then. It applies now in a way consistent with its application then. Due to changing cultures and eras, the parallels are not always exact, but they must be substantial.

Thirdly, readings focus on the central point of a passage, and its development. The Bible - like most communication, whether ancient or modern - typically works in larger thought units, so Individual verses and single details receive little attention. The readings explore the overall point of a passage, as it unfolds from beginning to end.

Fourthly, each chapter contributes to a larger story, the narrative of 'salvation history' (aka, 'the history of redemption'). The entirety of Scripture tells a single, overarching story, from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. Taken altogether, the story explains the dual nature of our world: its compelling beauty and its painful brokenness.

Its blessings are explicable only in terms of a powerful and benevolent creator and ruler. Its evils cannot possibly derive from such a source, so where do they originate? Genesis 1-3 begins here.

More to the point, what is God doing to fix the flaws? Genesis 4-11 report his first attempt. When that only repeats

the cycle of failure, God sets out in a new direction. He makes three promises to Abraham: innumerable descendants, a homeland of their own, and international influence (Genesis 12,15,17). The remainder of Scripture traces progress in the fulfillment of those promises, in the face of many obstacles.

Eventually those promises reach an apex in the coming of Christ. He launches a new era in salvation history, marked by the inclusion of all nations among the people of God, in fulfillment of the third Abrahamic promise. Yet this is only the beginning of the end. The end of the end - and the beginning of a new beginning - are the focus of Revelation, particularly its closing chapters.

Every chapter of Scripture contributes to a greater or lesser extent to the narrative of world redemption. Conversely, the arc of salvation history impacts both the interpretation of a passage, and its application. Readings will regularly track the progress of this all-encompassing storyline.

How do we read the Bible accurately?

Bible reading consists of two interrelated steps. First, interpretation asks, "What did God say to them (i.e., the original audience)?" In other words, what does this passage mean? Then, application asks, "What is God saying to us?" In other words, what does this passage mean for us? Every reading asks these two questions of the passage under consideration.

The questions are phrased in parallel to underscore the central tenet of accurate Bible reading: the meaning of the text for us today is controlled by the meaning the original author intended for the original audience. Stated negatively, a biblical text cannot mean for us something it could not have meant for its original audience.

(This tenet requires one qualification: Old Testament prophets only partially understood the ultimate fulfillment of what God said to, and through, them about the coming of the Messiah; cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12.)

What did God say to them? All writing - in fact, all communication - seeks to send a message, communicate a perspective, develop a thesis.

The first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy, all either consist predominately of narrative (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers), or are set within a narrative framework (Leviticus, Deuteronomy). Narrative, like every other genre, conveys a message. The author is making a point, not assembling an abstract report of 'what really happened' (as though such is ever possible).

The Gospel of John, for instance, is explicit about both his selectivity in recording the story of Jesus, and his purpose in telling the story this way: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

While every genre has a point to make, genre vary in the way they make the point. The process of interpretation differs correspondingly. So the operative question, in understanding Genesis through Deuteronomy is, How does biblical narrative communicate its message? How should we read narrative in order to grasp its point?

Narrative is an indirect genre. In contrast to the explicit teaching of the prophets, narrative develops its thesis implicitly. In Hebrew narrative, among the key literary tools are word play and thought play. Word play includes verbal repetition, multiple meanings, and puns. Thought play includes recurring references to the theme, often in parallel. Readings will note such structures when they shed light on the theme and development of a passage.

What is God saying to us? Interpretation sets the parameters for application. Application mirrors interpretation, with necessary adjustment for shifts in culture, and developments in the history of redemption.

Given contemporary tendencies, it is particularly important to note that if a passage originally referenced the corporate life of the people of God, or geopolitical issues, then contemporary application will do likewise. We must be vigilant to avoid the risk that our cultural predisposition toward therapeutic individualism, narcissism, and emotivism will turn every passage into an exploration of my personal, emotional, inner experience of God.

Another common mistake is exclusively moralistic

application. As part of the application process, behavioral change has an important place. It accepts the admonition in the epistle of James: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

While behavioral change is a necessary aspect of application, it is not sufficient. In addition to what God wants us to do, we consider also what he wants us to know, to feel, and to be. Application considers the range of cognitive, behavioral, existential, and emotional responses that God sought to evoke in the original audience, and derivatively, the responses that he seeks to evoke in us.

A Closing Thought

So far, this explanation has focused on the process for reading and understanding Scripture. This runs the risk of confusing means with end, of supposing that the goal is more to complete a reading than to interact with God as he speaks to us through Scripture. Reading with understanding is the beginning, not the end.

The historic Christian practice known as 'contemplative Bible reading' adds other essential dimensions: reflection, prayer, contemplation, and imitation. Toward this end, each reading concludes with a verse from the passage that encapsulates its central point. Take that verse with you, as you go on about the business of the day, and keep returning to it in reflection and prayer.

More could be said. But this plenty to start. This appendix explains the process. The daily readings that follow implement the process. Through consistent use, it gradually becomes reflexive. So, with the illumination of the Spirit, let us seek God as he reveals himself in his Word.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For those interested to explore further, I found the following resources useful for research (not for daily reading).

Methodology

The method employed here combines two approaches, one from each of these resources.

Fee, Gordon and Douglas Stuart
2014 *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.
Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Robinson, Haddon
2014 *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Commentaries

Commentaries are typically stronger on details, than on the central theme and its development, or its contemporary relevance. Items marked * are evangelical in perspective.

Genesis

Wenham, Gordon*
2017 *Genesis*. 2 vol
Grand Rapids: Zondervan
Note: requires knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet.

Matthews, Kenneth*
1996 *Genesis*, vol 1
2005 *Genesis*, vol 2
Nashville, B&H Publishers

Sarna, Nahum
2001 *Genesis*
Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society

Exodus

Stuart, Douglas*
2006 *Exodus*
Nashville: B&H

Fretheim, Terence
2010 *Exodus*
Louisville: Westminster John Knox

Sarna, Nahum
1991 *Exodus*
Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society

Leviticus

Wenham, Gordon*
1989 *Leviticus*
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans

Milgrom, Jacob

2004 *Leviticus*

Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress

Numbers

Wenham, Gordon*

1981 *Numbers*

Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity

Olson, Dennis

1996 *Numbers*

Louisville: John Knox

Deuteronomy

Wright, Christopher*

1996 *Deuteronomy*

Grand Rapids: Baker

Craigie, Peter*

1976 *Deuteronomy*

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans

