

PREPARING FOR 2019

INTRODUCTION

We start a new year on Tuesday. I don't know what the year is going to bring to any of us. God does, but we don't. For some of us, it is going to bring an exciting year. Students graduating from high school and going to college. Students graduating from college and starting into a job. Maybe getting married and having your first child.

For some, it is going to be a difficult year. You may face an illness; you may suffer the loss of a loved one. You may lose your job.

For some, it is going to be a year of transition into an unknown future. That is certainly my situation.

Sometimes I wish I could know the future so I could prepare for it. But whether that would be good or not, it's not going to happen. Only God knows the future. But I can prepare for the future, no matter what it is.

Since this is a new year, many people like to set goals for this year. For others, who like to set goals in September like I do, this is a chance to reaffirm your goals, or to get back on track.

Since my surgery in September, I have struggled with adjusting to having a cochlear implant. Things have gone well with my hearing, but the adjustment period has been emotionally and mentally tiring, something I had not anticipated. The result has been that my nice, normal routines of life, including how and when I read the Bible, have not been as consistent as I want.

There are many spiritual habits that we could talk about that will benefit us in our walk with God, but I want to zero in this morning and challenge each of us to maintain or to develop the habit of reading and reflecting on the Bible every day. About 10 years ago, a massive study was done to find what spiritual habits were most effective in helping us to grow spiritually. Over 200,000 Christians in 1000 churches of all types were polled, and the results tabulated. They found that one of the best and most transformative of the habits to cultivate and maintain was the habit of reading and reflecting on the Bible. And it is easy to see why.

The greatest commandment God gives us is to love him with all our heart. As I think about loving God, three related actions of loving God come to mind: to love God is to know God; to love God is to trust God; and to love God is to obey God. I think each of those parts leads naturally to the next one. The more I get to know God, the more I see how phenomenal, wonderful, perfect, stupendous, glorious, marvelous—you can go on filling in with adjectives that describe how incredible God is, and he is! And when I see how great God is, it is easier to trust him. And when I trust him, it is easier to obey him. And when I know him, trust him and obey him, I am expressing in the greatest way, my love for God.

One of the best ways that can help me with knowing, trusting and obeying God is to

spend time reading the Bible. That is not only going to help me to love God more, but it is also going to help me prepare for the future.

I want us to have the attitude of the Psalmist:

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long. Psalms 119:97 NIV

And Ps 1 begins this way:

Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

or sit in the company of mockers,

² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,

and who meditates on his law day and night. Psalms 1:1 NIV

Do you love the Word? Do you delight in reading the Word?

One of the reasons we can love the Word and delight in it is because it points us to Jesus. Jesus made this evident when he said to some Jewish leaders:

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” John 5:39 NLT

We read the Bible to know God and Jesus better. It is Jesus who gives us life, so as we read the Bible, it leads us to Jesus, and as that happens, we experience a deeper quality of spiritual life.

I want to highlight 5 benefits of reading the Bible.

First, reading and reflecting on the Bible:

I. HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAVED

This first purpose for the word applies to every person who has not yet made the decision to become a follower of Jesus. As Paul seeks to encourage Timothy’s spiritual growth, he makes the comment:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:14-15 NIV

Timothy’s mother and grandmother were instrumental in helping Timothy learn the Bible, and the result was that Timothy learned about Jesus and his need to receive Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins.

The Bible can make you wise for salvation, i.e. give you the understanding of why you need to be saved and how Jesus can save you.

But I also want to make the application to all of you who are parents. I hope and assume that every parent wants their child to become a follower of Jesus. There is no greater decision that any person can make in this life.

Timothy learned the Scriptures from infancy as a very young child. Timothy's mother read the Bible to him from earliest time on.

Parents, are you reading the Bible to your children? Are you talking to your children about Jesus? Part of our goal as a church is to assist you parents in this, but, you, as parents are most instrumental in helping your child receive Jesus.

After making a decision to be saved, the next goal that God has for every Christian is to become like Jesus. That brings us, again, to the Bible, because it:

II. HELPS US BECOME MORE LIKE JESUS

Once a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit begins to help us become transformed into the image of Jesus. And one of the ways he does that is to work through the Word.

Part of this process is to help us see the difference between the values of God and the values of the world. Paul tells us:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:2^{NLT}

This transformation process focuses on the way we think. From the moment of our birth, we are being brainwashed, so to speak, by the values of the world, and we need these worldly values changed into godly values, and that is done by learning God's truth and values, that come through the Bible.

Paul also tells us how the Bible can help us:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. 2 Timothy 3:16^{NLT}

Besides teaching us, it shows us when we are going in the wrong direction and helps correct us.

A third benefit of the reading and reflecting on the Bible is to:

III. HELPS US BECOME WISE AND MAKE WISE DECISIONS

This year, every one of us is going to make hundreds, even thousands, of decisions. A few of these decisions are going to be significant and impacting in our lives. Most of them, though, are going to be small and seemingly insignificant. But don't let the small decisions fool you. Small decisions add up. They add up to determining a direction for our lives.

We don't know what the future holds in this coming year, but through the Bible, we can gain wisdom. And with wisdom, when we make a decision, whether it is a big decision, or a small one, we can make a wise decision.

One familiar verse to us is:

*Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path. Psalms 119:105^{NIV}*

The Bible is a lamp that shows us where to walk. It lights the path we are walking on to keep us from stumbling and it keeps our footing firm.

Another verse points out:

Your statutes are my delight;

they are my counselors. Psalms 119:24 NIV

Think about how beneficial it would be to have a few trusted, wise friends that could help you always make the best decisions. That's what the Bible can do. The principles and commandments of the Bible are truth that can help us walk in the light.

A fourth benefit of reading the Bible is that it:

IV. PRODUCES FRUIT IN OUR LIFE

The outward fruit of a tree reflects its inner nature. An apple tree produces apples because its inner nature is that of an apple tree. A Christian produces spiritual fruit because we have the inner nature of the Spirit of God.

The Bible says:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 NIV

This is the kind of life God wants to produce in us. Look at these qualities. Wouldn't you like to have them flourishing in your life? Think about how your marriage and your family would be if you constantly expressed these qualities to your spouse and your kids. Think about how things would go at work or school if you always responded to people in these ways.

The Holy Spirit wants to produce these fruits in us and will, but here's a secret: we must be living in constant union with Christ. Using the metaphor of a grapevine, Jesus said:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ... ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. John 15:5,7,8 NIV

The secret is to abide in Christ and let his words abide in us. That means to remain in him, to constantly be thinking about Jesus and our relationship with him, to be continually dependent on him. And reading the Bible is one of the best ways to let his words abide in us.

One final benefit of reading the Bible is that it:

V. THE WORD GIVES US HOPE

Paul writes to Christians about how the Old Testament helps us in living for God. He said:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4 ESV

The Old Testament reveals many, many things about God and living for God. It tells about how the Jews lived for God and experienced God's blessings. It tells about how the Jews failed to live the way God has called us to live and they experienced God's discipline. The Old Testament is full of teaching moments. And throughout their history, there was always hope—hope for God's blessings, hope for God's help, hope for God's forgiveness.

I think hope is one of the most important traits we can have. Hope gives us optimism for the future, that the future is going to be better than the past. Hope motivates us to keep going and not give up.

Sometimes in life, we go through hard times. Sometimes, it seems like God has failed to live up to a promise. Other times we have really messed up in life and think God will never forgive us or give us a second chance. In times like these, we may be tempted to give up on God because we think God has given up on us. We may think it is useless to keep living for God. We conclude that coming to church is a waste of time. That may be how this coming year will be for some of us. But that's where reading the Bible will help sustain us in these times. Paul says:

...through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4^{ESV}

The Bible will give us hope because God speaks through his Word. Continuing to read the Bible will give us the encouragement we need to continue to have hope.

There are many other great benefits to reading the Bible. Jesus said what I think sums us the importance of God's word when he said to Satan during his temptations:

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:4^{NIV}

We will not live by physical food alone, but by the spiritual food that comes from God.

So as we begin this year, I encourage you to maintain or start up your Bible reading for 2019.

Next Steps:

Approach your Bible reading with a plan that reflects four things:

1. Have a goal

Be clear on what you want to get out of reading the Bible. There are many ways to approach the Bible.

You can read it from Genesis to Revelation. This would be good to get an overview of the Bible.

You can read it chronologically. This would be good to help you place the books of the Bible in chronological sequence—both the O.T. and the N.T.

And that leads us to the second point:

2. Have a plan

I hope I have motivated you to read the Bible. But when you leave here this morning,

it's going to be very easy to simply fall back into your old way of life. That's why you need a plan. How are you going to read the Bible? When are you going to read it? Odds are you are already using your time to do something. So you are going to have to cut out something, or modify something in order to have the time to read the Bible.

God's Story in 66 Verses, Stan Guthrie

https://www.amazon.com/Gods-Story-66-Verses-Understand-ebook/dp/B00KQ2G4SO/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1545927963&sr=1-1&keywords=God%27s+story+in+66

Many Bible reading plans:

<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/bible-reading-plans/>

3. Be realistic

What is realistic? The goal is to be consistent. What is realistic for you? If you are a mom with kids, it probably isn't going to work to get up at 4 am and read the Bible and pray for 2 hours before your kids get up. Your season in life

If you have a commute to work that gets you up at 5 am, to have a Bible reading program that takes you an hour may not be realistic. You may need to read through the Bible in two years instead of one.

It helps to take a long view of growing spiritually. You want to be a continually growing Christian, throughout your life.

4. Be committed

If you are developing this habit for the first time, or picking it back up, know that it is going to take you 3-4 weeks to establish the habit. During this time, it is going to be very tempting to give up. But don't. One of the best ways to help you is to find a friend or two to share with them your goal and get them to pray for you and to hold you accountable.