

The Neglected Exercise

What will you miss if you don't read your Bible every day?

By Robert Boardman

In the early 1970s, I accompanied a small tour group into a country that was difficult to enter. In one city of about 500,000, we found only one church left open by the authorities. All over the city we could distinguish former church buildings turned into museums, warehouses, offices, or military barracks.

In that solitary open church we joined about fifteen bystanders, including several youth, watching a stand-up worship service. The worshipers numbered ten elderly women, one elderly blind man, and a handful of children. A priest wafted incense and recited some incantations. Then he brought out a huge, bejeweled Bible, carefully unlocked it, and read a portion from the Old Testament and another from the New. He then locked the Bible and, to our astonishment, one by one the eleven elderly worshipers came by and reverently kissed the ancient Holy Book.

As we came out of that forlorn but open church building, many thoughts raced through our minds. One thing we were sure of was that the onlooking young people were thinking, *If this is Christianity, it deserves to stay in the Middle Ages*. What we saw was ritualistic, clergy-dominated religion where the people had no access to a Bible of their own. It was literally locked away from them.

How many versions of the Bible do we have in the free world? Hundreds I'm sure. I have an invaluable study book called *The New Testament from 26 Translations*. Do you and I take advantage of the unlocked, abundant versions of the Bible in our homes and libraries? Or do our negligence and apathy make the Bible a locked book?

THE UNREAD BESTSELLER

Consistent daily Bible reading is a rapidly fading religious relic. I have taken surveys on the place and importance of the Bible in Christians' daily lives in many seminars I have given. In fifteen groups of American Christians, 607 out of a total of 1,089 people, or 55 percent, replied that they were not sure they had ever read the entire Bible.

Among thirteen groups of Christians in Australia and Asia, 588 out of 941 people, or 62 percent, had never read the entire Bible. Several groups in Canada yielded approximately the same percentage. In one Latin American country, among three groups of Christians, the average was 71 percent. In all of the above groups, an amazing number could not say that they were sure they had ever read the entire New Testament.

Many of these people had been Christians for five, seven, ten, twelve, even fifteen years or more and had never read the entire Bible. I have even met quite a few full-time Christian workers who have never read the whole Bible. I taught a series of lectures to a class in a Bible college several years ago in the United States in which eleven of fifteen students had never read the entire Bible. They were learning the fine shades of meaning, but had never completed the basic course on the primary colors.

Recently I met an evangelical assistant pastor who was honest enough to confess that he had never read the entire Bible. A pastor's wife, whose husband has been in the ministry for sixteen years, wasn't sure she had ever read the entire New Testament. These same surveys revealed that

very, very few people read the Bible through once a year.

IS THE WORD OUR DELIGHT?

How lightly we esteem the Word of the living God! We cannot stand with Jeremiah and say, “When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight” (Jeremiah 15:16). We cannot stand with Job, who said in his suffering, “I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread” (Job 23:12). We cannot stand with Jesus, who overcame Satan by quoting Scripture: “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

Why are people reading the Bible less and less even though church attendance remains high in the United States? Here are some reasons:

- Television consumes our minds and our time. The excuse, “I don’t have time to read the Bible, I’m too busy,” doesn’t hold up very well when the average American spends forty-four hours per week—over six hours per day—watching the boob tube. High school graduates today have spent more time watching TV than sleeping.

- Emotionalism among Christians substitutes for disciplined searching of the Scriptures. Doing what feels good, we shun the hard work of digging for wisdom in the Bible. Read Proverbs 2:1–9. Emotion has its place in the Christian life, but it cannot be the foundation of faith. When the hurricanes and typhoons of trials and temptations come howling in, only those grounded in God’s Word can stand.

- We have a “shortcut” mentality. The microwave method has permeated our churches, youth groups, and Christian organizations. Pop it in, set the timer, and out it comes in a few seconds. If Bible reading can be tedious and time consuming, our culture tells us it must not be right.

Centuries ago the Apostle Paul put his finger on our raw nerve, a tendency toward laziness: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, emphasis added). The verb translated “do your best” (or “study” in the King James Version) means “be zealous or eager, take pains, make every effort.” It’s hard work to be a consistent student of the Scriptures.

- The proliferation of Christian books, tapes, seminars, and meetings devours the time we set aside for spiritual matters. Today, especially in the Western world, you can find a seminar on almost any topic you can think of—even on Bible reading! It’s easy to dabble (the word means “to dip lightly in and out”), to become lightweights in the Christian life.

My wife and I read lots of other books, but only after our daily quiet time and Bible reading. The danger is in reading books about the Bible but not reading the Bible itself. Let’s ask God to help us to be like the ancient Bereans, who found the secret of knowing Christ through “examin[ing] the Scriptures *every day*” (Acts 17:11, emphasis added).

BECOME AN ARMS EXPERT

The world, confused by conflicting voices, desperately needs people whose daily lives blaze with the reality of God through His Word. But in our churches, Sunday schools, and Christian organizations we can become so skilled at speaking Christian language and doing religious activities that no one notices our spiritual staleness and disobedience.

In the battle of Peleliu in World War II, my company commander was known throughout the First Marine Division as an arms expert. When Division Headquarters had a problem with a complex captured enemy weapon, Captain Heath could be counted on to solve it. His expertise

was the fruit of years of painstaking study.

In the same way, we should become experts on the complexities of the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. But doing so takes lots of time and hard work that only self-discipline will drive us to invest.

Here are some important reasons for reading the Bible daily—preferably at least once through each year:

- **It gives you a bird’s-eye view of Scripture.** Detailed Bible study is like mining for truth far beneath the earth’s surface. We need that, but we also need the counterbalance of the broad, overall sweep that we get only by daily reading. Studying one portion yields helpful details, but reading by volume with a daily goal in mind gives a better overall perspective on the whole of Scripture.

- Daily reading **helps prevent doctrinal tangents and sidetracks.** More than three thousand cults in North America represent many voices under the guise of true religion, all clamoring for allegiance. Some false teachings are difficult to discern. Almost all were formed when someone put all the emphasis on a few passages of Scripture taken out of context.

As the Second Coming of Christ draws near, many false Christs and false prophets will try to seduce the people of God (Mark 13:21–23). The Word of God can give us correct discernment: “If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (Isaiah 8:20).

- Daily reading under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit can **keep us from majoring on the minors.** Doctrinal issues that wrongly divide believers can be kept in perspective by reviewing the broad issues and events. Familiarity with the whole Word of God by constant and repeated reading helps us recognize when Scripture is being used out of context by the immature or by false teachers.

- Continual reading, **helps you refamiliarize yourself with God’s truth.** As you read daily, review your previous markings and notes in the margin of your Bible. Not to review every year means the possible loss of important truths, knowledge, and vital personal applications as well as specific direction for life and ministry.

I remember well trying to work out a mission strategy for the great megalopolis of Tokyo, then about nine million people. Having studied Neh. 2, which I titled “How to Start a Work,” and having written a broad outline in the margin of my Bible, I knew specific steps to take. Nehemiah circled the city secretly at night with a few select men before he went to work. Challenged, I boarded the Yamanote train line, which circles Tokyo, with a few men. Each of us had prayer cards, and we earnestly prayed and interceded as we rode and watched people come and go. Reviewing those notes in the margin of my Bible helped launch God’s strategy for the Navigator work in Tokyo.

- Daily, systematic Bible reading **makes difficult passages clear over time.** A well-worn foot path through such difficult books as Revelation, parts of Daniel, and Haggai will make those rugged mountains increasingly familiar and understandable. Eventually you will become a guide for others. All of this is part of the spiritual growth process toward maturity.

- Daily Bible reading **gives you a moral bath in spiritual truth.** It transports you from the secular, the physical, the cares of the day, to the heart of the living God, speaking to your inner being through His cleansing Word. How easy it is in the midst of daily routines and constant contact with people to develop I unclean thoughts, or to be offended by an unloving, harsh, thoughtless word in the marketplace! Only God’s Word, washing us daily, can restore peace of mind and take away the resentment that naturally builds up. “Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble” (Psalm 119:165).

- Daily Bible reading **teaches us the fear of God, obedience to His Word, and humility.**

That is why God insisted that anyone who became king of Israel should “write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law . . . It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left” (Deut. 17:18–20).

Any leader, spiritual or secular, is susceptible to pride, the most subtle of sins. A spiritual cancer, pride eats away at our fellowship with God. It is the fundamental vice. Only as we see ourselves clearly and daily in the mirror of God’s Work can we walk humbly before Him and with our neighbors, and remain steadfast in obedience.

Any leader, spiritual or secular, is susceptible to pride, the most subtle of sins. A spiritual cancer, pride eats away at our fellowship with God. It is the fundamental vice. Only as we see ourselves clearly and daily in the mirror of God’s Word can we walk humbly with our God. Let us determine that by daily, prayerful reading, we will fear God, walk humbly before Him and with our neighbors, and remain steadfast in obedience.

- Daily Bible reading lengthens physical life and improves health. Daily irritations, small and great, create stress. Without a spiritual refuge, accumulated tension can actually shorten physical life. People who neglect daily intake of the Scriptures open themselves to life-shortening tensions. Modern medicine verifies what the Bible has told us for thousands of years: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity” (Proverbs 3:1–2).

In our own family, when physical and moral tragedy has struck, the comfort and solace of God’s Word have kept my heart fixed, unafraid of evil things (Psalm 112:7). “Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace” (Psalm 37:37).

PRAY FOR GRACE AND DISCIPLINE

God calls negligence sin: “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (James 4:17). Consistent Bible reading flows out of deep personal conviction that it is not merely important but *vital* for the development of our spiritual life and ministry.

Pray for discipline and grace to fulfill the instructions given to the king in Deut. 17:19 (emphasis added): “[The law] is to be with him, and he is to read it *all the days of his life* so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law.”

» See Also: *On Your Own: Mining Pure Gold*

» See Also: *Sidebar: As You Read Through The Bible*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

ROBERT BOARDMAN has been on the staff at The Navigators for forty-two years, and served thirty-six years overseas. He and his wife pioneered the Navigator ministry in Japan. They are now based in Seattle, continuing an international ministry. He is the author of *A Higher Honor* (NavPress, 1986).

On Your Own

Mining Pure Gold

1. Slowly and reflectively, read Psalm 19:7–11. Then, take a blank piece of 8 1/2" x 11" paper and turn it sideways, with the long side on top. Write each verse number, 7 through 11, down the side of the page, then divide the remaining space into four columns. (Some spaces on the chart will not be filled.)

- a. In the first column, write any words the verse uses to describe God's law—e.g., *perfect* and *trust worthy*—across from the verse number.
- b. Reflect on what each of those words means in regards to the Bible, and write your thoughts across from the words in the second column.
- c. In the third column, record the effect each verse says God's Word has on the one who reads it; e.g., *revives the soul*.
- d. In the last column, write the phrase in column three in your own words, describing the impact of the Bible in a person's life.

2. Write out a prayer of thanks to God for His Word and its benefits in your life.