

WAYS OF READING THE BIBLE

The key thing to do when reading the Bible is to ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand it and obey it. We read it to meet with God, to understand God's purposes and to learn how to live to please God. There is no set way to read the Bible, the most important thing is that we do actually read it and allow it to change us but the following methods are ones I have found helpful

Investigative Approach

This is a logical approach to reading the Bible and has three key stages:

- reading the passage (what does it actually say?);
- interpreting the passage (what does it mean?)
[In particular what might it have meant to the people who originally wrote it and heard it];
- applying the interpretation for us. (what does this understanding mean for us?).

The aim is to discover the original meaning of the text so that by using our logic, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can apply that meaning to us today. In general when we read the Bible we should be looking for a meaning that is:

1. natural - that is obvious to us.
2. original - fits with how its original readers would have understood it.
3. general - fits with our overall understanding of what the Bible says.

The following questions are always useful to ask when reading a bit of the Bible:

- *Is there some encouragement I can take to heart?*

- *Is there some new lesson about God I can thank him for?*
- *Are there words of praise I can echo?*
- *Is there an experience described that is true for me?*
- *Is there a warning for me here?*
- *Is there a promise I can claim?*
- *Is there an example for me to follow?*
- *Are there commands I must obey?*
- *Is there a sin I must avoid or confess?*

Step by step for Investigative Approach:

1. Read the passage more than once and think about what it is actually saying (you could even re-write it in your own words).
2. Then write down what you think it might mean and what its key messages are.
3. Then read how one or more commentator explains the passage.
4. What are the main lessons you can learn from this passage and what action do you need to take in response to it?

Imaginative Approach

This is a more intuitive approach to the Bible. It involves imagining oneself in the scene or situation described in the Bible and asking the Holy Spirit to bring it to life for us and speak to us through it.

It is possible to imagine the scene in its original context or to use your imagination to see a similar scene in the present day. For stories you can choose to be a character in the story or choose to add yourself as an additional character in the story. For letters, poems or prophecy you may choose to imagine yourself as writing the letter etc. or being a recipient or hearer of it.

Step by step for Imaginative Approach

1. Read the Bible passage through at least once.
2. Imagine the scene described in the passage and imagine yourself in the scene or observing the scene.
3. Now using your imagination go through the Bible passage a line or so at a time, imagining the action taking place and the words being said. As you do this think about what the different people in the story might be thinking or feeling at each stage. Think about what you are thinking and feeling at each stage. You may find it helpful to write down the story and the different thoughts and feelings as you go along.
4. If you have written down the story read it through again. Think about the main things that have stood out to you as you have imagined the story. Does it make you realise something about God, yourself or the people in the story?
5. What are the main lessons you can learn from this passage and what action do you need to take in response to it?

Story Approach

The first two approaches tend to involve a fairly intensive look at a particular passage from the Bible. However it is also important to read the Bible in bigger chunks – a book or a section of a book at a time – and think about the big picture.

So, for example it is quite possible to read through the whole of one of the New Testament letters or books like Ruth or Jonah in the Old Testament at one sitting. And rather than focus on every detail or the bits you don't understand to ask yourself what are the main messages

in the book. The notes in some Bibles or commentaries may suggest helpful ways to break into sections some of the bigger books in the Bible.

The aim of this approach is to read a larger section of the Bible in one go and allow the Holy Spirit to give you an overall impression and highlight one or two lessons. It can be helpful to read a more contemporary translation or paraphrase of the Bible for this approach, such as the Message. This can make it easier to read as a story.

Step by Step for Story Approach

1. Select a book or a section of a book that you want to read in one sitting.
2. Now slowly read the book or section through, allowing yourself to follow the story or argument – perhaps note down bits that strike you or you don't understand but don't let them distract you from the overall sense.
3. When you have read the whole book or section note down what you think the overall message, purpose and feel of it is.
4. What are the main lessons you can learn from this passage and what action do you need to take in response to it?

Note: At an even larger level it is good to try and read and think about the overall story of the Bible from beginning to end. There are books available that can help you read the Bible to get this insight.

Topical Approach

Another useful way of approaching the Bible is to focus on a topic or theme and think about what different parts of the Bible say about it. It is good in particular to look at the different stages of the Bible story: creation; Abraham to Moses, the law; the history of Israel; the psalms and prophecy; then Jesus; the early church, the teaching in

the letters and finally what the Bible says will happen at the end and in the new heaven and earth.

It is important when looking at a topic to not just look at proof texts and forget important overall themes such as God's character and purpose. For example when looking at a topic such as homosexuality, it is as important to think about what the Bible says positively about sexual relationships in general as anything it specifically says about homosexuality.

The Bible Speaks Today Series have done a number of useful topical commentaries which highlight different passages you can look at. Otherwise you can use your own knowledge of the Bible, advice from other people and a concordance and perhaps books on the topic to create your own list of useful passages to consider.

Step by Step for Topical Approach

1. Select a theme or topic you wish to think about.
2. Think about and note down different passages in the Bible that you think are relevant to it and use other people and books to identify others.
3. Now read through the passages you have identified this can be at one sitting or over a period of time. Reflect on and note down what each passage says in relation to your topic.
4. Once you have read all the passages look at your notes and consider the main ideas that you have highlighted and any other important biblical themes you need to remember.
5. What are the main lessons you can learn from this study and what action do you need to take in response to it?

Devotional Approach

The fifth approach is a more meditative approach to the Bible. It involves focusing on a small piece of the Bible – a verse, or phrase or paragraph – and repeating it and chewing it over in our mind. You may find it helpful to memorise it and then spend a bit of time repeating it and pondering exactly what it is saying. You may also find it helpful to personalise it – either allowing the words to be ones you say to God or words that God is saying to you. The aim is to allow the words, and the truth and challenge in them, to permeate our minds and seep into our hearts. It is a bit like trying to plant the verse or phrase as a seed in our lives.

It is good to allow verses or phrases to catch our attention when reading a Bible passage. So read through a passage slowly a couple of times and then focus on a verse or phrase that has caught your attention while reading it. By catch your attention I don't mean a bit you do not understand rather I mean a bit where an image or truth strikes you.

Step by Step for Devotional Approach

1. Read a Bible passage through a couple of times and see if a verse or phrase catches your attention.
2. Now repeat the words to yourself, perhaps memorise them. If appropriate you could make them words you say to God or that God says to you.
3. Take your time doing this, allow the truth and challenge of the words to seep into your mind and heart.
4. What are the main lessons you can learn from these words and what action do you need to take in response to them?

It is good at different times and for different Bible passages to use all of these different ways of reading the Bible. Each of the methods has strengths and weaknesses. You may find that your learning style or personality prefers one of the methods. That is fine but do try at times to use the other ways of reading the Bible as well to help you have a balanced approach to the Bible. However the main aim of these methods is try and help you find a way of enjoying and making the most of reading the Bible. I hope they help!

Exercise

For 10 minutes try one of these ways of reading the Bible. The first Bible passage that I read imaginatively was John 20:19-23 where Jesus appears for the first time to his disciples after the resurrection. So why not use one of the step by step approaches and do one of the following:

1. **Investigative Approach** - Read John 20:19-23 and think about the importance of what happened and the meaning of the words Jesus said for the disciples. Then read the section from the commentary that is available.
2. **Imaginative Approach** - Read the passage and imagine yourself in the scene what are you and the other disciples thinking and feeling.
3. **Story Approach** - Read the whole of John ch. 20 & 21. Think about the overall message and feel of it.
4. **Topical Approach** - Think about the resurrection. Read some of these passages and see what you can learn: Mark 16, Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20 & 21, 1 Corinthians 15, Acts 2:14-41, 1 Peter 1:3-9.
5. **Devotional Approach** - Read John 20:19-23 and see which words catch your attention. Repeat them, memorise them and if appropriate personalise them.