

A UNIQUE BOOK

- A. Introduction: We have begun a new series in which I am exhorting you to become a regular, systematic reader of the Bible, especially the New Testament. You need to know for yourself what the Bible says.
1. The Bible is a collection of 66 books and letters (epistles) which are meant to be read from start to finish—just like other books and letters. Here’s a simple way to read effectively.
 - a. Begin with the New Testament. Set aside 15-20 minutes every day (or as close to that as possible).
 1. Start at the first book and read as far as you can in your allotted time. Don’t skip around or stop to look up the meaning of words or read the study notes at the bottom of the page. Just read.
 2. Put a marker where you stop and pick up there the next day. Repeat this procedure until you finish the book. Then read the next book, and the next, until you’ve read through the New Testament. Then, read through the New Testament again.
 - b. Don’t worry about what you don’t understand—just keep reading. You’re reading to become familiar with the text. Understanding comes with familiarity which comes with repeated readings.
 1. I’ve had several people ask me if they can just listen to the Bible being read instead of reading it. Yes and no. I listen to the Bible almost daily and find it to be a great blessing.
 2. The problem is that it is harder to stay focused and the words become background noise. It’s easier to stay focused on the audio once you are somewhat familiar with the written text.
 2. Bible reading is a struggle for many Christians because they have inaccurate ideas about its purpose and what it will do for them. We go to it looking for immediate help with our most pressing problems. How do I improve my marriage? Find my destiny? Deal with a difficult boss or unruly children?
 - a. The Bible can help you with those issues, but not necessarily by giving you step by step instructions and immediate solutions. Instead it changes you and how you deal with life (upcoming lessons).
 - b. The Bible wasn’t written to give advice on how to live a happy life. The Bible is a revelation of God’s plan of salvation, His plan to deliver humanity from sin, corruption, and death through Jesus Christ. II Tim 3:15
 1. The 66 books and letters that make up the Bible tell the story of God’s desire for a family with whom He can live forever and the lengths to which He has gone to obtain His family through Jesus. Every document in the Bible adds to or advances this story in some way.
 2. Almighty God reveals Himself through His written Word. He reveals His plans, His will, His character. We get to know God through the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God.
 - c. The Bible is a supernatural book because the inspiration for its writings came from a realm beyond this physical world. The Scriptures are God breathed or inspired by the Spirit of God. II Tim 3:16
 1. Because the Bible is supernatural, it works in and changes those who hear, read, and believe it (I Thess 2:13). Jesus compared the Word of God to bread or food (Matt 4:4): You eat food (or take it in) and it produces growth and change in you. You can’t live without it.
 2. Eating God’s word was not a new concept for the first Christians. When God commissioned the prophet Ezekiel to deliver His Word to Israel, the Lord told him to eat the Word. Ezek 3:1-3
 - A. Ezekiel ate the scroll (God’s Word). The prophet received it, digested it, let it become part of him and nourish him. When he ate God’s Word, it tasted like honey. In the Old Testament, when the term honey is used figuratively, it means something delectable or highly pleasing and delightful (*Webster’s Dictionary*). God’s Word is delectable.
 - B. Jeremiah, another great prophet of Israel wrote: Your words I found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart for I am called by your name (Jer 15:16, ESV). God’s Word had a tangible impact on Jeremiah.
 3. Just as food produces growth and change in those who eat it and imparts strength, so the Word of God produces transformation in those who eat or read it.

3. We have more to say about why we can trust the Bible to be what it claims to be (the Word of God) and to do what it claims to do (reveal God and His plan to us as it works in us to change us). II Tim 3:14
- B. Before we talk more about why the Bible is reliable, we first need to address a concern that comes to many people when they hear that the Bible is written to tell us about salvation and that you have to read the entire New Testament a number of times to become familiar with it.
1. None of this means that you can't get "everyday" help from reading the Bible. Nor does it mean that you can't get help until you are familiar with the New Testament because you have read it multiple times.
 - a. God is a good God who is better than the best earthly father (Matt 7:9-11) and He will help you right where you are as you grow in Him. Consider an example from my own life.
 - b. When I was a brand new Christian reading through the New Testament for the very first time, God touched me in a powerful way through His written Word.
 1. Before I became a Christian (at age twenty-four), it bothered me greatly that women are most often assessed by their physical attributes. Even though I was funny, smart, and fairly easy to get along with, I was often overlooked because of my average physical appearance. I wanted desperately for someone to look past my appearance and see me, the person on the inside.
 2. The first time I read through the New Testament I came to Galatians 3:28 which says there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. There are no words to express what an impact that verse had on me—to know that God saw me, the person on the inside.
 3. That's not actually the author's point. Paul was referring to the equality of our standing before God. Through Jesus we all (Jew Gentile, male, female, slave, free) are children of God. But the Holy Spirit used this verse to minister confidence to me that God loved me!
 2. When people first begin to read the Bible it seems unrelated to the problems we all face in life. I've heard people respond to the fact that the Bible reveals God's plan of salvation with: That's all well and good, but I've got real problems and I need real help.
 - a. You need to understand that your greatest problem is the fact that you are guilty of sin before a holy God and face a future of eternal separation from Him in a place called Hell.
 1. Every problem you face is a lesser expression of your greatest problem. I'm not saying that you're facing trouble now because you committed a sin. I'm saying that all of life's hardships are here because Adam's sin and the effects of his disobedience on humankind and the earth. We live in a fallen, sin damaged world and life is hard. Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12; John 16:33; etc.
 2. Every issue you're struggling with now is temporary and will end when you leave this world. But the big issue (a future in Hell because you're guilty of sin) begins when you draw your last breath and last forever—unless Jesus is your Lord and Savior and your guilt has been removed.
 - b. The fact that the Bible is about God's plan of salvation from sin which delivers us from eternal separation from Him in the life to come doesn't mean it has no help for us in this life
 1. Just as salvation from sin comes through Jesus, so does help and provision for this life. It comes through knowing Him. We get to know Jesus through the written Word (the Bible).
 2. II Pet 1:2-3—Peter, one of Jesus' first followers prayed this for Christians: May God bless you with his special favor and wonderful peace as you come to know Jesus, our God and Lord, better and better. As we know Jesus better, his divine power gives us everything we need for living a godly life (NLT); everything we need for our physical and spiritual life (Norlie).
 3. Jesus' first followers were Jewish and grew up with the portion of Scripture that had already been written when Jesus came into this world—the Law and the prophets (or the Old Testament).
 - a. The Old Testament instructed Israel's mothers and fathers to bring their children up with the Law or the written Word of God. For this reason the Book of Proverbs refers to God's Word as the law and commands of fathers and mothers. The point relevant to our discussion is that knowing God's

Word would help them navigate through this life.

- b. Proverbs 6:20-23—My son, obey your father’s commands, and don’t neglect your mother’s teachings. Keep their words always in your heart. Tie them around your neck. Wherever you walk, their counsel can lead you. When you sleep, they will protect you. When you wake up in the morning, they will advise you. For these commands and this teaching are a lamp to light the way ahead of you (NLT).
 - 1. How does God’s Word speak to or advise us? The Bible reveals the general will of God and gives general wisdom that helps us make decisions in situations not specifically addressed.
 - 2. The Holy Spirit guides us in line with the written Word. Many struggle with discerning His leading because they aren’t familiar with His voice. We get familiar with His voice by reading the words that He inspired—the Scriptures, the written Word of God.

C. We made the point last week that Bible reading can be a struggle because we don’t see it as a worthwhile use of our time. And, we’ve all heard statements like these: Men wrote the Bible; it’s filled with contractions; we don’t have the right books. All of this undermines our confidence in Scripture and makes it harder to put forth the effort to read it until we become familiar with it. How do we get beyond these issues?

- 1. We’ve made the point that, not only is the Bible a supernatural book, it is a record of verifiable events.
 - a. Christianity is based on a historical reality—the resurrection of Jesus. When the same criteria is used to assess other historical events is applied to the resurrection there is evidence to substantiate it.
 - b. Consider another example. Jesus was crucified during the Passover celebration, one of three annual feasts in which thousands of pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem from all over the Middle East. As many as 50,000 people packed the city at the time the crucifixion and resurrection.
 - 1. Jerusalem covered about 425 acres, approximately 4300 ft by 4300 ft. There were plenty of potential witnesses in a small area and the supposed empty tomb was only fifteen minutes away from the Temple where the Passover lambs were sacrificed every year.
 - 2. When we consider the response of people in Jerusalem that year, it indicates that something very significant happened. Within a few of months of the resurrection, over 7,000 people in and around Jerusalem acknowledged Jesus as Messiah (Savior), even though doing so meant excommunication from the Jewish worship system. Acts 2:41; Acts 4:4; Acts 2:47; John 9:22
- 2. All the men who wrote the New Testament were eyewitnesses of the resurrection or close associates of eyewitnesses. They saw Jesus die and then saw Him alive again. Following His resurrection Jesus commissioned them to go out and tell the world what they saw. Luke 24:46-48
 - a. These were real people with a vitally important message. They belonged to a nation (Israel) that had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, the Redeemer, who would cleanse men of sin.
 - 1. These men did not set out to write a religious book. The apostles proclaimed their message orally at first because they lived in an oral culture. The first New Testament documents were actually epistles that were written to communities of new believers to help them grow in Christ: James (AD 46-49), Galatians (AD 48-49); and 1&2 Thessalonians (AD 50-52).
 - 2. Since these first apostles could only be in one place at a time, written words greatly expanded their reach. And the new Christians wanted more than one oral teaching given when an apostle visited their city. They wanted a written record of what was given orally.
 - b. Accurate communication and transmission of their message was critical (James 3:1). It was a vital message and Jesus Himself tasked them with sharing it. They were aware that they were writing documents inspired by God (II Pet 3:15-16; II Pet 3:1-2; I Tim 5:18; Luke 10:7; Matt 10:10)
 - 1. Thousands of people in Israel saw or heard about Jesus at same point in His three and a half year ministry as He traveled from Galilee in the north, south to Jerusalem over 90 miles away.
 - 2. If the apostles told the story incorrectly or added made-up details, there were plenty of people

who could correct them because multitudes of people witnessed various events in Jesus' life.

3. It has become increasingly common to hear people say that the books in the New Testament were chosen centuries after Jesus lived by church councils (the Nicene Council) to advance political agendas and mislead and control people. But that's contrary to what we know about the spread of the early writings.
 - a. As these writing (documents) circulated, they were accepted by new believers because it was well known that they came from the original eyewitnesses of Jesus—His first apostles.
 1. A new type of manuscript began to be used in the 1st century, the codex, the ancestor of modern books. Sheets of papyrus were stacked, folded, and bound. Churches kept libraries of their codexes or codices. These documents were highly prized and carefully stored.
 2. As these believers gathered materials for the libraries, their criteria was—can these writing be traced to an apostolic eyewitness? In others words, no one “picked” the books for what would become the New Testament. From the beginning the first Christians recognized certain documents as authoritative or directly traceable to an original apostle.
 - b. We know this from the early church fathers or church leaders who followed the apostles. For example, John the apostle taught Ignatius (AD 35-117) and Polycarp (AD 69-155). Ignatius became a bishop at Antioch, Turkey and Polycarp became a bishop in Smyrna, Turkey. These two taught another man named Irenaeus (AD 120-202). These three men are early church fathers.
 1. They and many other such men wrote extensively about the early church, its practices and doctrine. They also wrote to combat false teaching that arose in the 2nd century.
 2. All the existing works of these ancient and influential Christians down to the AD 325 Council at Nice (Nicene Council) have survived. They have been translated into English and they give us much information about the early church and the New Testament—including what books were universally recognized as authoritative from the very beginning.
4. Let's talk for a moment about the copies of the New Testament that have come down to us today. There are no original copies of the Old or New Testament still in existence (as far as we know). There are no original copies of other books from ancient times.
 - a. Ancient books were written on highly perishable materials such as animal skins called vellum and papyrus made from reeds. What we have are copies. The issue is: How reliable are the copies?
 1. There are more than 24,000 manuscript copies of all or portions of the New Testament. These copies can be compared to each other for accuracy. Do they all say the same thing? No other other document from antiquity comes even close to such numbers. The next closest one is the *Illiad* by Homer. Only 643 manuscripts still survive.
 2. Not only is the number of surviving manuscripts important, it matters how close to the time of the originals that the copies were made. Once again, the Bible is superior to every other ancient writing. Homer's *Illiad* was written about 900 BC. The earliest copies date from 400 BC—a 500 year time span. The New Testament was written between AD 40 and AD 100. The earliest copies date from AD 125. That's only a 25 year time span.
 - b. The New Testament texts we have are in better shape than the 37 plays of Shakespeare, written in the 1600s, after the printing press was invented. In every play there are gaps in the printed text.
 1. We have no idea what the original said. Scholars have had to make guesses to fill in the gaps. Nothing is missing from the New Testament. The abundance of manuscripts shows us that.
 2. In addition, the early church fathers quoted the New Testament so frequently, that in their writings, we find almost every single verse in the New Testament.

D. Conclusion: The Bible is a unique book. We can trust the Bible to be and to do what it claims. It is the Word of God and it works in those who believe (I Thess 2:13). Lots more next week!