

Ten Steps to Biblical Literacy

by Michael D. Marlowe

"I know I should read the Bible more often, but I just don't enjoy doing it: I get frustrated when I don't understand a verse, and I get bored reading verses I've already read and understand. It's such a chore." Few people would put it so bluntly as this. But if we were honest with ourselves, most of us would have to admit that such discouraging thoughts are frequent enough, and practically prevent us from reading the Bible at home. After all, who wants to do irksome chores in his free time? In this pamphlet we will take this problem by the horns in a very practical manner, so as to really help those who wish to improve their Bible-reading ways.

1 You must first of all choose a version to stick with. This is very important. Skipping around from version to version will continually distract and worry you, and you will never get anywhere. I recommend that you use a Bible version that is an essentially literal one, such as the English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New King James Version, or (if you can understand the old English in it) the good old King James Version. Whatever version you use should be one for which you can get audio tapes. Get an edition of the version that has the translators' notes and plenty of cross-references. This is important. Do not use a cheap edition that omits these notes and cross-references. Also get a set of tapes of the version for the whole Bible. The book and tapes will cost you about \$150, but it will certainly be one of the best investments of your life.

2 Listen to the entire Bible on tape. Listen to an entire book at one sitting. Pay attention, but do not worry about understanding difficult parts, backing up the tape, and so forth: just let the tape play. If you do this every day you will have heard the entire Bible after just two months. When you are finished, do it again, and again. Three times in all. After six months you should be pretty well familiar with the contents of the whole Bible.

3 Now listen to the tape of Paul's epistle to the Romans while following along in your Bible. Do the entire epistle in one sitting. This will get you used to reading. Romans is the book to read at this point because it is the most important book of the Bible, and explains almost everything.

4 Now read the epistle to the Romans again without

the tape. As you read, never skip a lexical note. Always read the notes. Do the whole book at one sitting.

5 Now read the epistle to the Romans again while looking up the first cross-reference in every chapter. Look up no more than one, or you will not be able to read the book in one sitting; and resist the temptation to go browsing as you look up the passages. Lightly cross out the references with a pencil as you look them up. The reason for this will be explained below. As you read, you will occasionally come across verses and phrases that you do not understand. Do not worry about it: just put a question mark next to the verse and continue reading.

6 Read the epistle again (including notes), this time looking up any cross-references given in the places where you put a question mark before. You will find that the passages referred to usually clear up your problem. Circle any references that prove helpful, and cross out the others. (If problems remain, don't trouble yourself about them: everyone has problems. If you continue to read other books of the Bible in this attentive manner you will find that most of the problems will just go away as you learn more. You will waste a tremendous amount of time if you try to figure them out now or if you go searching in commentaries.) Look up at least one reference for every chapter, whether you have a problem in it or not, and cross them out. This is a sort of game, which you may find silly at first, but it will greatly help you to maintain a high level of interest. It will keep the epistle interesting to you as often as you read it, because you will derive a slightly different or fuller meaning as you compare different passages every time you read it. By this time you have not only learned Romans well, but you have also learned and become accustomed to the method of profitable and interesting Bible reading which you should follow at all times.

7 Now begin to follow this daily routine: Begin by reading one of the Psalms, taking them in order. Then pray to God for understanding of his Word. Then read at least three chapters of the New Testament, from the beginning. While you are reading:

Look up at least one cross-reference for each chapter. In this you should always prefer the references to Romans, because by looking them up you will be building on a good foundation which is already familiar to you. Cross out references as you go.

Put a question mark next to verses you have problems with, and look up any cross-references for the verses. Circle references that prove helpful, and continue reading.

Read every marginal note.

When you are done reading, go back and find a pithy sentence which seems to sum up a good portion of the things you have just read. This will cause you to reflect briefly on the reading. Underline the sentence, and commit it to memory.

Bring your memorized portion to mind several times until the next day. When you take up where you left off you will be ready to read, having kept the substance of the previous day's portion in your mind by means of the sentence you have memorized.

If you do these things you will find that you are not bored, and that, with the help of the cross-references, you are usually quite capable of understanding everything tolerably well. All will fall safely in place "theologically" if you keep referring to and remembering Romans as you go. You will also find that, by means of the memory work, what you have read will begin to fall into place in your life, because you will get in the habit of reflecting upon God's Word during the day, and you will be able to bring appropriate words of Scripture to mind at the time when they will be of real service to you and others.

8 When you are done with the New Testament, start on the Old Testament, from the beginning, proceeding in the same manner as outlined above. Pay special attention to cross-references to the New Testament. (It is a bad idea to spend months in the Old Testament without staying in touch with the New Testament.)

9 When you are finished with the Old Testament, read the New Testament again. You will be amazed at how much more you get out of the New Testament the second time, after having read the Old Testament.

10 When you have done all this, which should take at least three years, you will probably be among the more biblically literate in your congregation, and you When you have obtained one of these commentaries, go through your Bible and find all those question marks you have made in the margins, and see what the learned commentator has to say about the passages. The next time you read a book of Scripture,

will feel confident in offering comments at Bible study meetings. This is good, but take heed: You should regard comments upon Scripture as a form of teaching ministry, to be regulated by such chapters of Scripture as First Timothy 1 and 2, Second Timothy 2, and James 3. You will avoid the worst errors of interpretation by the method prescribed above, being anchored on Romans, and habitually comparing Scripture with Scripture by means of the cross-references. But if you aspire to become a truly reliable help to others, begin now to acquaint yourself with some standard commentaries. You should avoid the use of commentaries up to this point, because people too often get bogged down in them, and end up learning less that way than if they were to simply read the Scripture without comment. Good commentaries often give so much interesting and unexpected help in matters of detail that the reader will begin to feel that he should always read the commentary along with the Scripture, in order to avoid missing anything or getting things wrong; but the duty of reading the lengthy commentary soon becomes irksome, and the student leaves off reading his Bible because he has made it into such an intolerable burden. The truth is, a better grasp of the Scripture is to be had by the mere reading and re-reading of it than by the disciplined use of commentaries. But by now you should be familiar enough with Scripture that it would not be inappropriate to spend some time with commentaries which would otherwise be spent in simply reading the Scripture. I recommend that you begin with the classic and very edifying commentary of Matthew Henry. This commentary not only explains many things, but it will also serve you well as a model of godly practical teaching. Afterwards, for explanations in a more technical or exegetical vein, consult Notes on the Old and New Testaments by Rev. Albert Barnes, or the Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown. All of these are available in inexpensive reprints. Any one of them will give you more commentary than you will ever have the time to read; you should use them as reference books, like encyclopedias of biblical interpretation and application.

refer to the commentary occasionally just to be sure that you are on the right track when you are unsure of your own understanding of a passage. Study the commentary thoroughly when you prepare a Scripture lesson for Sunday school, or if you are

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expected to take a leading part in Bible study meetings. If someone asks you a question about some passage, and you are not sure of the answer, refer to the commentary.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that the program of

“biblical literacy” described in this pamphlet will be of some good use to you. May the Lord Jesus Christ himself cause you to abound in all wisdom and understanding of his holy words, and help you to walk in them. To him be the glory!