Some Tips for Reading the Bible

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Following is a list, in no particular order, of ideas and suggestions to help us in our quest to read the whole Bible in 2015. Understand that these are just suggestions: they don't have to be followed slavishly, and you should feel free to amend them, rework them, or throw them out altogether in favor of better ideas… whatever it takes to make it easier and more likely for you to open up your Bible and read it!

1. **Choose a translation that works for you.** There are many very good, and very readable, biblical translations to choose from today… so you should find a translation that appeals to you and start with that. There are still many people who like the King James Version, and there's nothing wrong with using it. But my opinion on KJV is that the archaic English, grammar, syntax, etc. makes it a more difficult translation to use. Plus some of the more modern translations are based on older and more reliable manuscripts than KJV, so I would recommend sticking with one of the more recent, more "modern" translations.

   As far as specific recommendations, I would suggest: the **New Revised Standard Version** (NRSV.) The **Revised Standard Version** (RSV) is also very good, but it lacks some of the "inclusive language" updates of the NRSV (my duct-tape Bible is regular RSV.) The **New International Version** (NIV) is another excellent modern translation. The NIV is the translation of our pew Bibles, and the version that I usually read in church each week. **Today's English Version** (TEV) is also very readable. It's written for "young people," but don't let that fool you. It's an excellent translation for adults, too, and you should have no second thoughts about using it. There are some other quite modern translations and "paraphrases" which are popular today, such as the Jerusalem Bible and The Message… but for my money I would encourage the use of any of the four translations that I have highlighted above.

   I would be wary, however, about using the **Living Bible**. The Living Bible is written in more up-to-date English, but it's not a strict translation of the Greek and Hebrew texts… it's a paraphrase, and in many places the very conservative theological bent of the "translator," Ken Taylor, creeps into the text. The TEV is an actual translation, and is a much better choice than the Living Bible.

2. **Break the task down into smaller, more manageable, units. Or, think of the Bible as a whole library of books, instead of one single volume.** Sometimes the sheer size of the Bible causes people to throw up their hands in defeat before they ever really get started. Taken as a whole, it is very long… there aren't any pictures (unless you're using an illustrated children's Bible!)… and it can take

many months to plow your way through it. This can lead to despair, and, eventually, defeat. But if you break the effort down into smaller, more manageable chunks, it helps on the psychological level, and keeps hope alive that you really can make it to the end.

Keep in mind that the Bible is *not* just one extended narrative, but a whole *library* of 66 sacred books which were written at different times, in different places, by different people, for different reasons, over many hundreds of years. When we think about it in this way, we realize that it's not necessary to start with Genesis 1 and then plow straight through to Revelation 22. Instead, it's possible and allowable to pick and choose various books from either Testament, and read each one as a complete, self-contained text or book or unit. Taken together, *all* of the biblical books add up to an overall consistent witness to the Lord and His presence with His people… but that doesn't mean that they can't be read individually, and in more or less any order that you like.

As an aside, it should be noted that there are some sections of the Bible, some series of books, which it might be helpful to read together, or in order. For example, the first five books of the Old Testament… or the gospels… or some of the prophets. This isn't mandatory, but it may help to provide a more full and holistic picture of the biblical period under study.

So, to sum up: break it up… read it in sections… take it one piece at a time!

3. **Don't worry about understanding everything! Just read it!** No matter how much, or how little, we might know about the Bible, Christianity, church history, and so on, there will always be parts of the Bible that will be difficult for us to understand. Therefore, we should not be surprised or dismayed when we come upon a biblical text that seems to be beyond our understanding. I highlight this point because I think that we sometimes shy away from Bible reading because we're convinced that the Bible is "beyond my understanding" or "too difficult for me" or "something that I'm completely unfamiliar with." And if that's the case, why bother to take the time to read it?

Well, we should read the Bible, even if we don't understand every last part of it, because simply reading through it has great value. First of all, much of the Bible you *will* understand… even if you've never read a word of it before. And even the parts that you don't get now, you may get later. In addition, just reading over the text will put us in touch with our faith story… it will re-introduce us to the "world of the Bible…" it will re-familiarize us with the places, people, and events of biblical history which are so important to our daily practice of our faith. Finally, reading over the Bible will remind us of that "transcendent worldview" which, again, is so crucial to our daily faith life and the values and priorities which we adopt for our lives. This is the worldview which is almost completely ignored in our culture today… but it's the worldview that is the heart and soul of

our faith and our discipleship. Being even superficially acquainted with the Bible will help us in our efforts organize our lives around that worldview.

4. **If you get off the track, just get back on it and pick up where you left off!** The older I get, the more important that I think this perspective is in many areas of life, and especially when it comes to reading the Bible. It doesn't matter what strategy, approach, or plan you adopt for reading Scripture… sooner or later the circumstances of life will intrude on your schedule and you'll wind up missing a day, or a week, or a month, or whatever. When that happens, as it surely will, don't despair and don't give up! Just get back on your "biblical horse" and start riding forward again!

5. **Attend a Bible study… ask the pastor for help… read a commentary or other book on biblical matters… seek God's guidance before, during, and after your biblical reading.** Between the library, book store, internet, TV, and your friends at church, there's an inexhaustible array of resources out there which can help you with your reading… and which can make your reading more interesting, understandable, and helpful. My advice? Take advantage of as many of them as you can!

6. **Some tips on how to approach biblical reading:**
    1. The "plow right through it" method. Start with Genesis, and read right through to Revelation. Not impossible, by any means… but quite daunting for many people.
    2. The "take it in small sections" method. Read Genesis – Deuteronomy, and then jump to another section. Read the gospels and Acts. Read the letters of Paul. Alternate a gospel with an OT book. Read through the Psalms and Proverbs, etc. Is there a biblical book that's always intrigued, confused, interested, or challenged you? Start with that one!
    3. The "Genesis… Psalms… Gospels… Romans" method. Four separate tracks, one chapter of each track every day. I use this method and it works for me… keeps things varied, interesting, and you're getting good exposure to the whole Bible without feeling bogged down in one section.
    4. The reading schedule included in assorted lectionaries and devotional guides.

I hope this helps you! Please let me know what does, or doesn't work for you!