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historical background. And of course, Study Bibles are just as good for longtime Bible readers (and even scholars). As you grow in your faith and understanding, the huge amount of information in them (and wide variety of types available) ensures you'll always have more to learn, and pray about. Think of it as a mini-seminary on your bookshelf. Do you need a Study Bible to appreciate Scripture? Absolutely not. Gods Word stands on its own. But a quality Study Bible can be immensely helpful as a guide throughout your Bible journey. They're popular for a reason! Here are a few Study Bible recommendations for beginning Bible readers. For more recommendations, including for more advanced Bible readers, see our full post on Study Bibles for every type of reader. It will probably come as no surprise that Im a Bible maximalist. Why have just one Bible when you could have many? In truth, with so many options between translations, types, and formats, its easy to get carried away. Owning lots of Bibles wont bring you deeper into Gods Word: only reading them will. That said, it can be helpful to have a few editions (ideally in different translations, in case you want to compare) for use in different settings or situations. Heres what I recommend to best equip yourself for the journey: Pick a Study Bible probably just one for now for the reasons outlined above. Get a non-Study Bible standard, thinline, compact, large print, journaling, whatever you like for a more portable option, or for when you want to read without distraction. Install a Bible app on your phone. Personally, I prefer to read the Bible in hard copy but ever since downloading Bible Gateway, Ive been able to replace social media or news doomsscrolling with a few minutes of Bible reading when Im waiting or need a break. Optional: If you like audiobooks, get an audio Bible instead of or in addition to the Bible app. So, youve got your Bible (or Bibles) in your favorite translations and youre ready to dive in. Great! Theres just one more step I strongly recommend first: establish a reading plan, and set reading goals. After all, just like any other habit prayer, contemplation, exercise starting out is easy. Sticking with it is harder. And just like any other habit, consistency is key. Having a preset roadmap for your reading is crucial for establishing that consistency. There are two parts to this step. The first is picking an approach; the second is determining a cadence. There are many different ways you can approach reading the entire Bible, the most common of which are: canonical order, chronological order, and OT/NT concurrent. Canonical Order: This is simply reading the Bible in the order established by the early church, starting with the historical books, then wisdom books, then prophets, and then into the New Testament. Chronological Order: Another option is reading the books chronologically, which is surprisingly complicated, because many books overlap (and sometimes we dont know when they were written or take place). But it can be done, and can be both a fascinating way to see the evolution of Israels history and relationship with God, as well as a fun way to break up long chunks of history/prophecy and help keep them both fresh. OT/NT Concurrent: Another popular way is to combine daily readings from the Old Testament with shorter readings from the New Testament so you can see how they relate and interact, and diversify your reading experience. Whichever option you go with, its common to read one Psalm per day (and sometimes a few verses of Proverbs), which has the double benefit of framing your daily reading with a Biblical prayer and breaking up the repetitiveness of reading all 150 Psalms at once if you are going straight through. Once youve decided on how you want to approach your reading, its time to set a reading schedule and goals. The most common approach is to read through the entire Bible in one year, but if that feels too daunting, there are two-year plans available as well. You can set your own reading schedule by taking the number of pages in your Bible and dividing by the number of days you want to read (e.g., 365 in a year, or about 260 if you want to skip weekends). But rather than reinventing the wheel, youd probably be better off using an already-existing reading plan. Many are widely available. Bible Gateway has over a dozen reading plans including chronological, OT/NT, 90-day, and more and well email you reminders, too (if you want). You can also sometimes find plans in the back of your Bible (especially in Study Bibles). Or for a fully guided experience you can opt for a daily-reading Bible, such as the Daily Scripture Bible (available in NIV and NASB) or Max Lucados Grace for the Moment Bible (NKJV). Similar options are available in a few other versions, but not all, so youll have to check for one in your chosen translation. As you embark on your Bible reading journey, there are a few things you should keep in mind. These will help to guide and inform your reading, especially when youre struggling with a complex, confusing, troubling, or just plain boring passage. The Bible was written roughly between 4,000 and 2,000 years ago in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. No part of it was written in English. In fact, English as a language didnt even exist back then! Whenever you crack open your Bible, you should always keep in mind that, no matter what youre reading, it is a translation. Its not the original. Now, that doesnt mean your translation isnt accurate. In most cases, Bible versions are produced by dozens of scholars working for years and building upon the previous work of hundreds of other scholars going back hundreds of more years. Any choice they make, they make it carefully, thoughtfully, and intentionally. You can trust your Bible. That said, any translator will tell you that most languages dont map perfectly on to one another. And thats all the more true when comparing ancient and modern languages. Most words and phrases can be translated multiple ways and still be accurate. Thats why we have so many Bible translations in the first place! Any time you encounter a sentence or passage that you find confusing or uncomfortable, try checking it out in another translation (or several). It might help shed light on the different possible meanings of the text. Watch Out for Paratext Paratext is every part of the Bible (or any other book) that isnt the content itself. In the Bible, thats quite a lot! Some of it is obvious like version or book introductions, notes and articles in your Study Bible, or translators footnotes. But some of it is much more subtle. Most readers dont realize, for instance, that chapter and verse numbers are not part of the original Bible. They were added about 500 years ago by Bible translators and publishers after the invention of the printing press, to make cross-referencing easier. And they certainly do! But they also introduce artificial breaks and interruptions that arent there in the original texts. In fact, in ancient times, they didnt use paragraphs they barely used punctuation at all so each book of the Bible was simply one long scroll of unbroken text. There are Bibles you can purchase (such as the new NIV Lectio Bible) that attempt to recreate this experience by stripping out chapters, verses, and section headings. It can be a deeply immersive and powerful reading experience. But I wouldnt recommend it for your first or only Bible. Theres a good reason those paratexts were introduced, after all. They make the Bible immensely easier to read, reference, study, and share. But even so, its worth remembering as you go that they are additions not part of Gods Word as it was first written. Hermeneutics is a technical term for the theories and methods of Biblical interpretation. Throughout history, readers of the Bible Jews, Christians, and others have approached the text in many different ways. The Bible even interprets itself in different ways! Ancient and medieval readers, for instance, often looked for typology or anagogy hidden ways the Bible predicts future events, such as the coming of Jesus or the end times. Post-Reformation, modern readers have become increasingly interested in the historical situation and origins of the Bible. As youre just setting out on your reading journey, you dont need to know the intricacies of this history. (Like reading in the original languages, this is not beginner-level: its a thing people get PhDs in.) But you should be aware that it is an ongoing conversation even among traditional, orthodox Christians and the plainest meaning of a passage isnt always the only way it should be understood. Jesus himself, of course, famously preferred teaching in parables. Once again, if youre perplexed by a passage youre reading (or even if youre not!), thats a great opportunity to do some deeper digging, such as in your Study Bible, and see what different scholars and theologians have said about it. At this point, you should be well on your way to becoming a regular Bible reader! Before you get too far, though, I have just a few more pieces of advice for you to consider. Above all, dont get discouraged! If youve noticed one theme of this article, its probably that. I started out by saying that the Bible is intimidating. But even those who go in energized and excited often run aground somewhere around Leviticus, or maybe Numbers in fact, its become something of a clich among pastors and Bible teachers. There are different ways of dealing with those long-slog passages. One of them, as I suggested above, is to use it as an opportunity to do some research read your Study Bible, explore resources in Bible Gateway Plus, and maybe find some amazing insights you had no idea about. (Hint: theres more to the endless genealogies than you might think.) But ultimately, if youve run into a place where your only options are to stop reading or skip ahead by all means, skip ahead. Maybe skim a section. The entire Bible is holy every word. But that doesnt mean every word will speak to every reader every time they read it. Far from it! Over the course of your lifetime, different parts will mean different things to you at different stages and thats OK. Thats one of the things that sets it apart (set apart is the original meaning of the Hebrew word for holy, by the way) as Scripture: its depth is literally infinite. So if something isnt working for you right now, no matter which way you turn it, dont be ashamed to set it aside. Move on to the next section. You can always return to it later. If you do set something aside, be sure to note it down maybe just draw a big question mark in the margin. Better yet, write down whats bothering you about it. Sometimes the simple act of taking a note can help you understand something better. But dont stop there! Take notes on your favorite passages, too. Highlight them, underline them, or if (like me) you cant bear the thought of marking up your precious books use a separate journal. Or a journaling Bible. Or just use Bible Gateway. We are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), and wrestling with Scripture is one of the ways we do that. Writing down thoughts and reactions positive or negative or mystified is a great way to engage with the Bible. It helps you have an ongoing conversation with the Lord through his Word, as you return to it again and again over the years. And, as a bonus, it will be doubly meaningful if you someday choose to pass it on to your children or another loved one. Another possibly even better way to wrestle with Scripture is together. While reading a Study Bible is a great way to go deeper into the text on your own, doing a Bible Study with a group can help surface ideas and perspectives you never would have encountered by yourself. Indeed, the Bible was meant to be read in community. Jesus preached to crowds; Paul addressed most of his letters to the assembly in various regions. At a time when written works were exceedingly expensive and few people were literate, the primary way people received the Word was orally, either read aloud or told from memory. Today, thanks to vernacular translations, the printing press (not to mention Internet), and much better education systems, most of us can read the Bible for ourselves and thats a huge blessing. But the advantages of doing so in Christian community are manifold. If there isnt a Bible Study group already meeting at your church, its always a great idea to consult with your pastor about difficult passages, or even just general themes and ideas. God has called them explicitly for the purpose of tending to his flock and that means you! Besides, they generally have a lot of additional training and education on the Scriptures, and can point you in the right direction. If you dont have a church or pastor you trust on these issues nows a great time to go and get one. How to choose a church is whole other topic, but just like with Bible versions, the best advice I can give is to try some out. Go to local congregations, get a feel for them, see what theyre doing in your community, how they approach the Gospel, and how welcoming they are. Chances are, youll know it when you find it. When all else fails and you just cant bring yourself to sit down and read the Bible but still want to build a relationship with God maybe its time to try something different. Personally, Im a theology nerd, so I like to start with reading a church theologian, who tend to reference the Bible a lot, so then I go and read the referenced Bible passages. Or you can simply pray about it: talk to God, tell him where youre stuck, and ask him to open the way. You can also try commentaries, devotionals, discussion groups, even board games! To those who knock, the door will be opened (Matt. 7:7). We at Bible Gateway truly believe the Bible is for everyone. Even so, we understand it can be intimidating to approach for the first (or even hundredth) time. But it doesnt have to be. I hope this guide has given you the resources you need to get started or restarted, or just reenergized on your Bible reading journey. Stay tuned to this space for lots more content to guide you on your way!

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