

# 8 Mistakes We Make When Reading the Bible

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Reading Time: 7 minutes

Christians must read the Bible. It lights our pathway (Psa. 119:105). When the Word of God is ingested and applied to our lives, it keeps us from sin (Psa. 119:11). If we are going to live as God wants us to, we need to remember that we do not “live by bread alone” (Matt. 4:4). However, we should be mindful of the fact that God wants His word not only to be read but to be handled properly (2 Tim. 2:15). Not only does this involve deep reverence and respect for God’s Word, but also the proper interpretation and application of it (Prov. 30:5-6; Mark 7:9; Rev. 22:18-19). With more translations and formats (electronic and paper) for reading the Bible than ever before, we need to be cautious that these conveniences do not incline us to mishandle God’s Word. I do not claim to be an expert on how to approach the Bible (and I confess that I too make these mistakes), but I want to be better about it. Observe these eight mistakes we make when we read the Bible and try to avoid making them as you read and study scripture.

# Mistake #1: Ignoring the Context

We often do not appreciate the context of the book or the verse we are reading. The *context* refers to the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea. When we are reading a chapter of the Bible, we should ask ourselves questions like:

- What book am I reading?
- What covenant was in effect when the events of this book took place?
- What has been said previously in this book?
- What will follow?
- How does it fit into the overall context of the Bible?
- Also, what role does this book play in the entirety of scripture?

Taking verses like Philippians 4:13 as ammunition for passing a math test or climbing Mount Everest may be inspiring, but Paul didn't have these things in mind. Using Colossians 2:20-23 as a passage to suggest we should abstain from certain things is in direct opposition to what is being discussed in that chapter. Furthermore, when James speaks of being quick to listen in James 1:19, he is not referring to taking good advice, as important as this is (check out Proverbs 12:15; 19:20). More precisely, he is in context speaking of being quick to listen to the word of God (Jas. 1:18-25). Ignoring the context makes our agenda more important than the Holy Spirit's agenda as He inspired men to write the messages they wrote. Get God's point out of the text because **His position is the most important.**

# Mistake #2: Not Reading the Text Through Enough

Sometimes we read the Bible and claim we did not get anything out of it. The problem, however, is not with the Bible but with us. God never promised anyone that they would learn *all* that they need to know just by a cursory reading of a few verses or a book. The scriptures call for us to meditate and rehearse the truths contained in God's Word continually (Josh. 1:8; Psa. 1:2, 119:97). **While reading through an entire book in one sitting is a good and helpful practice, we should add to this that reading through in one sitting several times is better.** What we think is correct the first time we read a passage may be cleaned up as we go back through several times (cf. Prov. 18:17). Kings in Israel had to copy the word of God and then study it repeatedly (Deut. 17:18-20).

Instead of quickly rushing from one book to the next, try to saturate yourself with one book

of the Bible—learning it in and out—then move on. Read the same chapter several times for a few weeks and do so in various reliable translations as you allow the text to grip your thoughts. Then the central theme becomes apparent (Psa. 119:15-16), and **the excitement happens when you start noticing things you never saw in the text before**. The Bible was not written so we can hurriedly accomplish our daily devotional goal; it was written to be *digested* and *internalized* as we allow the Spirit to transform us.

## Mistake #3: Failing to Pray Before and After

Recently there has been a lot more talk about praying the Bible (especially the Psalms), and this is a good idea. Sometimes in our haste to read and dig out the truths from God's Word, we fail to pray to Him before and after we have read. Bible study is not merely an academic exercise where we are trying to cram and learn mere facts. Bible study, when done correctly, is *worship* as we encounter God through His word (Psa. 119:161). We should pray that the posture of our heart be humble and ready to receive the Word so that we can comply with its teachings (Jas. 1:21). We should pray that our prejudices and preconceived ideas be laid aside as best we can so we can see things through God's lens (Psa. 119:18). Before and after we read we should thank God that we can understand His word, that He has preserved it for us, that we have it in our language and can read it freely (Psa. 119:164). Not everyone has been as blessed as we are today (1 Pet. 1:10-12). We must not take the Word of God (nor our access to it) for granted. We need to take the words of Scripture and pray them back to God as we learn to pray for things in accordance with His will (1 John 5:14-15). Going into Bible study without prayer is like exercising without stretching: the intentions are good but you might get hurt in the process.

## Mistake #4: Rushing to Application

How many times have we heard or even said "What is the Bible saying to me?" Or "I want God's will for my life." While the Bible does have something to say to us we need to be sure that we first find out what the text *is saying* before we worry about what it is saying *to us specifically*. Consider this principle as it relates to the daily news cycle. A newspaper has some useful information, and many of the articles within its pages can be applied to our lives. However, few people pick up a newspaper thinking that every section directly applies to them. The first goal is to determine what the story is *about*, then to make personal application if possible. I know the Bible is not a newspaper (and God *does* have something to say to us on every page), but personal application is not the first order of business in Bible study. Our rush for present-day application has caused many to make Jeremiah 29:11 about

God's plans for high school and college graduates; many read the Book of Revelation as if it's about current political figures. Yes, application must be made eventually, but *first* we need to see the text as it was originally intended.

## Mistake #5: We are reading someone else's mail as *our* mail

We are reading letters and documents that were written to other people in a different time. We should remember that books like 1 & 2 Timothy were written to an individual named Timothy. Luke was writing to a man named Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). The more we can learn about the culture, times, and customs of those originally receiving these documents, the better our understanding of the text will be. **We should see how things would have been received by those who were the original target audience *before* we read it through our 21<sup>st</sup>-century lenses.**

Still, we do make a mistake when we do not see that these messages are for us as well. The inspired apostles and prophets knew that they were writing scripture (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Pet. 3:15-16). They wanted their letters circulated and passed along to various congregations (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). We read the Bible improperly when we think the message is locked in the first century and has nothing to say to us today (Matt. 28:20). We are jeopardizing our souls when we write off the Bible's condemnation of specific sins as being relevant only to that particular cultural context. The scriptures must be taught, explained, and obeyed by every generation as we faithfully pass on its message (2 Tim. 2:2).

## Mistake #6: Reading for Mere Information

The Bible is a 66-book volume library. There is historical, scientific, and cultural information in the Bible that interest all who open its pages. The Bible is deep enough to confound scholars and simple enough to be taught to infants. However, the purpose of reading the Bible is not to pass some heavenly trivia test. We are not to simply be able to recall where passages are and exactly what they say so that we can impress people or seem intelligent. Memorizing scripture suggests one has spent much time with God's Word (cf. 1 Cor. 15:2). Still, knowledge puffs up and love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). If we know a lot of Bible but are not more kind, loving, and compassionate, we are doing it wrong (Gal. 5:22-23). If we do not hate sin *more* (especially our own) as a result of our study, then we are not reading the

Bible carefully enough (Jas. 1:15).

**Bible reading should make our love for God soar, our love for humanity increase, and our desire to serve God abound.** The authors of scripture, especially in the New Testament, give a lot of information and then they challenge those who receive it to live changed lives as a result (cf. Rom. 12:1-2). If our Bible reading does not improve our family life, work ethic, and treatment of God and others, then we are merely reading for information alone and this is unprofitable (Jas. 1:22-25).

## Mistake #7: Read Our “Position” into the Text

As much as we would all like to be unbiased about our reading of the Bible, the truth is we all have biases. We need to be aware of this when we study the Bible. We don't have it all figured out. (For if we did, why bother reading the Bible anymore?) We must not turn the Bible into an echo chamber, telling us that every idea we have is right. We must not bring our preconceived convictions into the text and then manipulate passages so that they agree with us (Mark 7:9-13). If we believe the Bible teaches something, we should evaluate all the relevant passages in their proper context and allow the Bible to speak for itself.

## Mistake #8: Forgetting the Main Point

**The main point of the entire Bible is Jesus.** Jesus said the whole Old Testament pointed to Him (Luke 24:44). This does not mean we should allegorize the text to death and make every single verse somehow about Jesus. Still, it does mean that in the end, the Bible's main message is pointing to the Christ. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their search of the scriptures, which involved a lot of things but left Him out (John 5:39-40). When we read the Bible, we should be saying, “What is this teaching me about Jesus?” How does this passage help me be more like Jesus? If we are in the Old Testament, we should be looking for ways that the book we are reading prepares the way for Jesus to come or foreshadows His coming. The star of the Bible is Jesus, and when we read the Bible and fail to see this, we are making a huge mistake. The Bible is the book that teaches us about God, and if we read it and do not come away with more knowledge of Him and more love for Him, then we are missing the point. May we come away from our Bible reading exalting Christ and praising Him for His amazing grace.

Bible reading is a great thing. I am glad we can read the Bible and study it as often as we

would like. Let's honestly search our hearts and realize we all sometimes make mistakes as we read God's Word. Let's be better students so that we can come to know God better.