

Let Bible Reading Get Back to Basics

The best tools and strategies are deceptively simple.

JEN WILKIN / POSTED MARCH 16, 2020

I learned to cook with the most basic tools under the tutelage of my stepmother, the inheritor of kitchen magic from generations before her. Bacon was fried in a cast-iron skillet, turned with a fork. Pie crust was formed with a wire pastry cutter in a mixing bowl. Biscuits were cut using an empty can. Simple tools, employed faithfully, yielding all manner of goodness.

But as my interest in cooking grew, I moved on to more complicated tools that promised less work or mess. My kitchen brimmed with single-use utensils and fancy appliances, but the crispy bacon, flaky pie crusts, and warm biscuits of my early years did not improve. In many cases, they degraded, or the task of locating and employing the right implement dulled my interest.

It is possible to overcomplicate simple practices that yield good things. Just as with cooking, so with reading our Bibles. The availability of online commentaries, lexicons, interlinear Bibles, and searchable databases can make us forget basic, tried-and-true tools that serve us well. Consider recovering these five simple “utensils” that may have gotten lost in the drawer amid so many ways to access and parse the Scriptures:

Reading Repetitively

We underestimate the effectiveness of repetitive reading in training us to follow the meaning of a text. It helps us identify ideas, names, locations, images, rhythms, or phrases, and we begin to see structures and patterns emerge. We never reach the end of its usefulness, for on each reading, new treasures are yielded from the text. One of the best—and most neglected—approaches to Bible study would be to read a book of the Bible from start to finish, without attempting to analyze or apply it. And then read it again. And again.

Consulting a Map

When J. R. R. Tolkien published his now-famous *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, he placed in the opening pages an ingeniously simple tool that enabled his readers to enter into the story: a map of Middle-earth. It is likely that a fair number of modern-day Christians know more about the geography of Middle-earth than the geography of the Middle East. The appendices of our Bibles also contain maps to draw us into the setting and provide context. Knowing that the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 made a pilgrimage of 1,500 miles enhances our understanding of his deep desire to know Yahweh. Mapping Paul’s missionary journeys or Abram’s travels adds to our understanding and reinforces our retention of these stories.

Keeping a Bible Timeline

When did the Divided Kingdom begin? When did Isaiah prophesy? When was the intertestamental period? When was the temple destroyed? Keeping handy a Bible timeline can help us place what we are reading in the proper historical context. It can also help us develop a sense of what themes are commonly addressed in particular eras or why a particular theme does not appear in a particular portion of the Bible. Consider making a bookmark to keep in your Bible that helps you learn and apply the timeline of biblical history to your reading.

Comparing Translations

If a phrase or sentence is hard to understand, compare it with several other translations. Online access to multiple translations makes comparison easy and accessible. Add a layer to your repetitive reading by changing translations for your later passes through a book.

Checking a Dictionary

A Hebrew or Greek lexicon is not always a helpful tool in the hands of those unfamiliar with the original language, but a simple English dictionary can be of good service. When Paul encounters the proconsul in Acts 13, a glance at the thesaurus tells us that a proconsul is a Roman governor. When we read in 1 John 2:2 that Christ is our propitiation (in the ESV), a dictionary clarifies that this is an atoning sacrifice. Even looking up common words like *steadfast* or *righteous* can help expand or challenge our understanding.

When it comes to Bible reading, avoid overcomplicating the recipe. Rediscover basic literacy skills and read with renewed attention. Simple tools, employed faithfully, yield all manner of goodness.

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