

Theology of Reading

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[0 : 00] Jesus himself pointed to the importance of reading over and over again. How often do we see him ask, have you not read?

! He said it when challenging the Pharisees about the Sabbath.! He said it again when challenging them about marriage and many other moments. And the implication was clear.

If you had read and if you had understood what God has already said, you wouldn't be so confused about this. This isn't just about consuming information.

This is ultimately about transforming ourselves. From the very beginning, God's people have been a people of the book, if you will.

You've heard that phrase before? Moses wrote down the law. He didn't just preach it. And what did he do with it from there? He read it publicly to Israel. It wasn't enough for him to receive God's word.

[1 : 00] The people needed to hear them too. Later in Deuteronomy, God commanded his people to take his word very seriously. He said in Deuteronomy 6, This is all encompassing.

Do you hear the emphasis?

Read them. Teach them. Write them. Keep them visible wherever you look. Why? Because God's people can't follow what they don't know.

One of the most powerful moments in Israel's history came during the time of Ezra. The people had been in exile for many years, and when they finally returned to Jerusalem, they're spiritually dry, if you will.

So what did they do? They gathered in the square, and Ezra stood up and read the book of the law. Out loud. For hours.

[2 : 27] And the people listened. And they wept. And they repented. It wasn't exactly a sermon. It wasn't a conference.

It was the reading of Scripture. That was it. And it changed them. Fast forward to the New Testament, and we see the same pattern.

Jesus himself, he modeled the practice of public reading. When he began his ministry, he went into the synagogue there in Nazareth. He picked up the scroll of Isaiah, and he read it aloud.

Then he sat down, and he said, Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus didn't paraphrase the passage.

He read it. And I believe there's power in that simple act of reading the Word of God. Paul understood this too.

[3 : 27] That's why he instructed the churches to read his letters publicly. Colossians 4.16, When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans.

1 Thessalonians 5.27, I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. And of course, 1 Timothy 4.13, Paul told Timothy, Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture.

Not just preaching, not just teaching, but reading. Just read it. Why?

Because faith comes by hearing, right? And hearing through the Word of Christ. The early church took this very seriously. They recognized that Scripture was inspired by God, breathed out by God, was profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.

So even though literacy rates were low in the first century, they made sure everyone possible had access to God's Word by reading it aloud in their gatherings, word for word.

[4 : 45] And this is important. Even when people couldn't read for themselves, they didn't use that as an excuse to neglect Scripture. They made sure it was heard.

They developed a hunger for it. And those who could read, they were expected to engage deeply with the text. So the point is relatively established in Scripture, from the Old Testament to the New

Testament to the early church, reading Scripture has always, always been central to the life of God's people.

So what about us? If reading and meditating on God's Word was essential for Israel, for Jesus, for the apostles, for the early church, what would ever make us think it is less important today?

Yet, as we've been talking about, in our digital age, we've become distracted. We skim, we scroll, and then we move on. But Scripture isn't meant to be skimmed.

It's meant to be absorbed and digested. It's meant to be wrestled with, and of course, lived out. That's why we need to reclaim, if that's the appropriate word for us personally, the practice of intentional reading.

[6 : 14] not just for knowledge, but because the Word of God changes us. Because when we immerse ourselves in God's written Word, we are essentially immersing ourselves in His voice, and that's what shapes us as His disciples.

If you've ever held a Bible in your hands, which I know you have, in your own language, and read it for yourself, you are part of a rich tradition that spans thousands of years.

The ability to read Scripture is something that we often take for granted today, but for most of history, literacy wasn't a given. It was something people fought for, sacrificed for, and even died for. Christianity has always been deeply connected to the written Word. From the earliest days of God's people, reading and writing were central, not just as academic skills, but as spiritual disciplines.

So let's back up and start with ancient Israel. In a world where most cultures pass down knowledge through oral tradition, and there was some of that within Israel, Israel was very different.

[7 : 39] They were a people of the book, quite literally. The law wasn't just spoken, it was written down. And it was meticulously preserved by scribes over the centuries.

And these guys weren't just record keepers, they were guardians of God's truth in a sense.

Synagogues, even in small villages, they functioned as schools where children were taught the Torah.

Now imagine being a Jewish child and learning your letters, but not through random academic exercises, but by tracing the words of Genesis and Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Reading wasn't just about literacy. The whole point of literacy was so that you could know God through His Word. And by the way, that's how Sunday school started.

When children didn't have an opportunity to learn their letters and learn how to read because they're working with their parents on the farm or whatever throughout the week, Sunday was a perfect opportunity to teach them these things for the purpose of being able to read God's Word.

[8 : 54] Well, this respect for the written law, it carried right into Christianity. The first believers certainly did not reject Scripture.

They cherished it. They copied it. They studied it. They gathered to read it aloud. Now, here's something interesting. Early Christians, it is believed, were the first to embrace and really utilize the codex, which is that book format that we're so accustomed to now, instead of scrolls, which had been common for many, many years.

Why does this matter? Well, scrolls were long. They were bulky. They were difficult to use, while codices were compact. They were easier to flip through.

They were better for studying, you know, let's say, multiple passages at the same time. So, the early church was already prioritizing access to Scripture in the most practical way possible.

This was really important for the church. But there was a problem. Just like ancient Israel, most people in the Roman world couldn't read.

[10 : 06] So, what did the church do? They made sure Scripture was read out loud in worship, commonly, regularly. Letters from Paul and other apostles were copied and passed from church to church, ensuring that those who maybe couldn't read for themselves could still hear and still understand God's Word.

Christians became known as a people who valued reading and writing, not for pure intellectual pride or something like that, but because knowing God's Word was essential for life and faith.

They cherished this. Now, fast forward a few centuries, and Europe is in what we often call the Dark Ages. Literacy rates, again, plummet.

The vast majority of people can't read. And books, especially the Bible, are incredibly rare for people. If you wanted a copy of Scripture, it had to be handwritten, and that's a process that can take months, if not years.

So, who preserved the Bible during these years? Well, you had various kinds of scribes and monks. Monasteries became centers of learning where scribes very carefully copied Scripture in a room called the Scriptorium.

[11 : 28] Some of them were very dedicated to this, devoting their entire lives to the work, and it's because they saw the written Word of God as sacred, worth every painstaking effort.

And they didn't just copy the text. You'll notice in some of these ancient copies of Scripture, they illuminated it. If you've ever seen, say, a medieval Bible with this gold leafing and this elaborate artwork on every single page, that's the result of monks or someone who really just wanted to make the Word of God beautiful and revered to illustrate the fact this is not a typical book.

This is something more. So, think about that. At a time when the vast majority of people couldn't read, the church is still working tirelessly to preserve and transmit Scripture.

Then, in the 1400s, everything changed. Enter Johannes Gutenberg with his printing press.

And with this invention, books could be mass-produced for the first time in history. And what was the very first major book ever printed?

[12 : 51] The Bible, of course. Suddenly, Scripture wasn't just for monks and scholars. It could be placed in the hands of ordinary people with relative ease.

And this explosion of printed Bibles came just in time for what great event in church history? The Protestant Reformation. Something tells me this isn't an accident.

Reformers like Martin Luther and William Tyndale, they were passionate about getting Scripture into the hands and into the languages of everyone.

Luther translated the Bible into German. Tyndale, of course, risked his life to put the Bible in the hands of every English speaker so much so that he was executed for it.

You remember his last line before his execution was, Lord, open the king of England's eyes. And within a decade, the English Bible was widely available in every church.

[13 : 57] The Reformers believed that every single Christian should be able to read the Word of God. And again, this isn't just about literacy.

Literacy was the means for reading the Word of God, which is the means for spiritual survival in a sense. In fact, literacy became so tied to the Christian faith that in 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the Old Deluder Satan Act.

The idea was that if children couldn't read the Bible, they would be vulnerable to the devil's lies and deceptions. So towns were then required to establish schools.

Why? Christian, this education wasn't just about teaching the ABCs so that kids could be smarter and, you know, produce more and be a better contribution to society.

It was specifically, explicitly about equipping them to know and obey God's Word. And this emphasis on literacy, of course, didn't stop with the Reformation, but Christian missionaries throughout history, when they went into unreached areas, one of the first things they would always do is create writing systems for languages that had never been written down before.

[15 : 28] Why does this matter? It's so the people can have a Bible in their own language so they can read God's Word for themselves. Missionaries didn't just go into a place and start preaching the Gospel.

They built schools and they taught reading and they translated Scripture. It was about making sure that everyone had direct access to the Bible.

Even today, some of the world's most widespread literacy programs are fueled by Christians, fueled by the church who want to ensure that people can read the Bible for themselves.

So the takeaway is that from ancient Israel to the early church from medieval monasteries to the Reformation from missionary efforts to modern education.

Christianity has always championed literacy, not for the sake of knowledge alone, but so that every believer can know God's Word personally.

[16 : 32] and yet, we live in a time when literacy has never been higher, but deep reading is declining.

We have more access than ever to the Bible, and yet we struggle to engage with it meaningfully. the question is, will we continue the legacy of the church, or will we fall into complete complacency regarding this matter?

Will we be a people who take God's Word seriously? Because history shows us that when God's people are committed to reading Scripture, the church is strong, important reformations happen,

and so on, and when the church neglects it, the church drifts.

So, as we move forward in this, let's remember that reading is not just for the purpose of academics, it's a way of saying, God, I want to know you, I want to know your will, and I think that's something worth reclaiming if we need to.

Let's talk about the power of reading. Not just for learning facts, but for shaping our minds, for shaping our hearts, for shaping even our spiritual lives. So, we live in a world, as you know, that bombards us with quick, bite-sized information.

[18:04] We scroll, we skim, we consume, but how often do we truly engage with something? Well, reading, real reading, is very different.

It requires focus, it forces us to slow down, it forces us to process and think deeply, and when we apply that discipline to Scripture and to other meaningful books, it transforms us spiritually, it's important.

So, let's talk about Scripture. The Bible, obviously, isn't just a collection of stories or moral lessons, this is God's breathed-out word, and reading it does something very powerful within us.

Romans 12, 2, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. How does that renewal happen?

Through engagement with God's truth. When we read Scripture, not just casually, but intentionally, it changes the way we think, which in turn changes the way we live.

[19:16] Psalm 1, 2 describes the godly person as one who meditates on God's law day and night. But meditation doesn't mean emptying your mind as it means in some Eastern traditions, it means filling it with truth, chewing on it, letting it sink in, and that doesn't happen in a hurried, distracted state.

It happens when we slow down and really engage with what we're reading. Psalm 119, verse 11 says, I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

The process of storing up God's word begins with reading. not just hearing it, not just glancing at it casually, not just seeing a verse on social media, but really dwelling in it and letting that word take root in our hearts.

And it's not just the Bible. Thoughtful, theologically rich books, they can also help shape our spiritual growth.

Christian classics, biographies of faithful believers in the past, even well-written fiction that stirs our affections toward God, all of these cannot replace but maybe supplement our study of Scripture and deepen our understanding of God's truth.

[20:51] Another key benefit of reading is that it sharpens our discernment. We live in a world full of competing ideas, every time we look at our phones, we're hit with opinions and arguments and possibly persuasive messages and how do we filter what's true from what's false?

Well, Acts 17, verse 11, describes the Bereans as people who receive the word with all eagerness examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

And by the way, they're fact-checking the Apostle Paul and they're commended for that. In other words, they didn't just accept information at face value, they compared it to God's Word.

That's critical thinking. Reading well helps us develop that same kind of habit. Instead of passively absorbing idea after idea, we learn to test everything.

We learn to analyze the arguments, we ask questions, we weigh ideas against Scripture, and that's how we grow in wisdom. Not just knowledge, but in wisdom.

[22:09] And here's something interesting. Studies show that deep reading, the kind that requires concentration and reflection, actually strengthens the neural pathways involved in critical thinking.

So it's sort of like weightlifting for your brain. The more we engage with books, the more equipped we become to think biblically in every area of life.

Now, let's talk about something we don't commonly associate with reading, and that is empathy. Some other research I've recently come across shows that reading, especially some sort of narrative, think of a biography perhaps, actually increases our ability to understand and relate to others.

When we read a story, we're stepping into someone else's shoes, right? We see the world through their eyes, we experience their struggles, their joys, their fears.

And as Christians, this matters. Jesus commanded us, just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. John 13, 34.

[23 : 30] Love requires a certain degree of understanding. It requires seeing beyond ourselves. And when we read Scripture, we gain insights into the experiences of people across history, suffering saints, flawed but faithful leaders, even Christ himself in his humanity.

And when we read other books that reflect truth and beauty and someone else's experiences, we cultivate a heart that is more compassionate, more patient, and I would argue more Christ-like. But the benefits of reading don't stop even there at the spiritual and emotional level. There are all kinds of scientific advantages.

Studies have shown that reading improves memory. It strengthens focus. It even helps prevent cognitive decline as we get older.

In other words, reading keeps your mind sharp no matter your age. It also reduces stress. I thought this was interesting.

[24 : 41] Researchers have found that just six minutes of reading can lower your heart rate and tension level. It's more effective than almost anything else.

Watching TV, certainly, scrolling your phone, even listening to music. And the reason is reading fully engages the mind in a way that actually calms it.

Here's something fascinating. There's a difference between active and passive engagement. Not surprising. Watching a video or scrolling through social media is very passive.

You're just absorbing whatever's in front of you. But reading requires active participation. We've talked about this. Your brain has to work to interpret the words, to visualize the scene, to connect the ideas that are presented.

And this kind of mental exercise is essential, especially in an age where attention spans are shrinking. So, how do we take all of this and apply it?

[25 : 50] Well, one way is making reading a spiritual discipline. Journaling what you read in Scripture, praying through passages, even writing reflections on books that challenge and inspire you.

These practices, they help deepen your engagement with what you're reading. And reading doesn't have to be a solitary activity.

Book discussions, Bible studies, small groups, these are powerful ways to sharpen one another and grow together in wisdom. But the point is, reading is not just an intellectual exercise.

It's more to it than that. It's a tool for spiritual growth. And I think God's people have recognized this for a long time. It shapes how we think, how we love, how we discern truth, even how we engage with God.

God. So in a culture that encourages the skimming and the scrolling and the distractions, reclaiming this habit of deep, meaningful reading, it's certainly counter-cultural.

[27 : 02] But it's an act of faith in many respects. It's a way of saying, Lord, I want to know you more. I want to grow in wisdom. I want to be changed for the better.

So I guess my challenge for you is make time for real reading. Not just for entertainment, not just for information, but for the sake of knowing God, for the sake of sharpening your mind, for the sake of shaping your heart.

Because when we commit to that, we don't just become better readers. God willing, we become better disciples. So again, we live in a world dominated by screens.

From the moment we wake up, we are bombarded with digital notifications. And we check emails, we scroll through news feeds, we watch endless videos, sometimes all before breakfast.

And it's not just a habit anymore. It's become the default way we engage with the world. But we need to stop and consider what this is doing to us.

[28 : 19] Mentally, emotionally, most importantly, spiritually. What is this doing to us? Ever find yourself struggling to read Scripture or sitting for a few moments in prayer without getting distracted?

Well, you're not alone and there's a reason for this. We've talked about this some already, but our brains are being trained by digital media. Every notification, every short video, every rapid fire news update is slowly but surely rewiring our brains to crave quick hits of information.

So, we become expectant of all content being in these bite-sized pieces, you know, fast, engaging, easy to skim.

But the problem is the deep things of God don't work like that. Spiritual growth, it takes time. Wisdom takes meditation, as the Bible says over and over again.

The Bible is not a social media post you can skim in 10 seconds. It requires reflection. But if we've trained our minds intentionally or unintentionally, in most cases, to jump from one thing to the next in a matter of seconds, well, obviously, we are going to struggle to slow down long enough to engage with Scripture in a meaningful way when we attempt to do so.

[29 : 56] So, we should ask ourselves and be very honest with ourselves, are we able to focus? Or, have we allowed screens to fragment our attention to the point that sitting with God's Word for more than a few minutes feels impossible?

We really struggle with it. Of course, the other danger of excessive screen time is it just encourages passive consumption. I mean, how often do we really process the information we take in?

Social media, YouTube, even Christian content online to some degree, it all feeds us, but do we ever slow down to digest what we're consuming?

Then there's the matter of misinformation and sensationalism. The Internet is full of voices claiming to speak truth, but not all of them are trustworthy.

And without discernment, as I've talked about, we can end up feeding on junk food, content that may entertain, it may even inspire us, but it doesn't really nourish our souls.

[31 : 12] Jesus didn't say, scroll through the latest opinions. He said, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

We need substance, not snippets. So, we ask ourselves, am I just absorbing what's right in front of me, or am I engaging with something true, something meaningful?

One of the most concerning effects of constant screen time is how it numbs our hunger for God.

Every spare moment of our day can be filled with entertainment if we want it to be.

Waiting in line, check your phone. Sitting at a red light, scroll through social media until the car behind you honks. Quiet evening, well, plenty of time to catch up on that show that you like so much.

We've lost something precious. We've lost the ability to even sit in silence for a few minutes. Again, Psalm 46:10, which is kind of where we began this talk about entertainment.

[32 : 27] Be still and know that I am God. But how can we be still if we fill every moment with noise?

And here's the scary part. Over time, if we drown out our spiritual hunger with this constant digital input, we may not even notice we're starving.

So are we truly seeking God? Are we just keeping ourselves entertained and distracted? And it's not just our spiritual lives that suffer.

I mean, studies show clear links between heavy digital consumption and increased anxiety and depression. Why? Because screens, they keep our brains in a constant state of stimulation.

Social media, it fuels comparison. News cycles fuel fear. And all of this endless content can leave us feeling drained, not refreshed.

[33 : 33] You may just be laying there doing nothing at all but holding a phone or whatever, but you're not going to feel refreshed. refreshed. And let's not forget sleep disruption.

Staring at a screen late at night, whether it's a phone or a TV or tablet, it actually messes with our brain's ability to wind down. The blue light from screens, they say, interferes with melatonin production, which means we stay awake longer and we get lower quality sleep.

And a lack of sleep affects everything. Our mood, our ability to focus, our spiritual discipline, when we're exhausted, we're less likely to wake up early for prayer, we're less likely to engage deeply in scripture because we simply can't concentrate, we're too tired, and we're more likely to seek out distractions at that point.

Start the whole worthless process all over again. So, that brings us to the bigger picture. If we're not actually careful, intentional, our screen habits will actually shape us more than scripture does.

Again, Paul, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed, be changed by the renewal of your mind. But if we're consuming hours of media every day and only minutes of scripture, which one is going to shape our minds?

[35 : 12] 1 Peter 5:8 calls us to be sober minded, to be watchful, because the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

And that's something we're not doing if we're constantly distracting ourselves. now, this doesn't mean we need to throw away our phones and move out into the woods, but it does mean we need discipline.

We need to be intentional about what shapes us. So, take a hard look at your screen habits. Ask yourself, do I struggle to focus when I read scripture? Do I reach for my phone first thing in the morning rather than reaching for the Bible or going to God in prayer? Do I fill every quiet moment with entertainment instead of making some space for meditation? Do I feel spiritually dry? Do I feel anxious? Do I feel distracted? And how could my media habits be a factor in all of that? We need discipline.

[36 : 18] We need to reclaim our focus, our hunger for God, our ability to be shaped by truth rather than distraction. distraction. So, the simple answer is we need to make a change if necessary.

Put God's word back at the center, break free from mindless consumption, and frankly, rediscover the joy of deep, meaningful engagement with truth, with wisdom, with God himself.

So, obviously, we've talked about the dangers of excessive screen use and the benefits of reading things. But, these things don't automatically change your habits.

Knowing something is not the same as doing something. So, if we want to reclaim reading, especially reading scripture, we need a plan. We need a strategy, something we can actually put into practice.

So, one of the biggest reasons people say they don't read is, I don't have time. Is that true?

[37 : 25] We've got time. We just fill it with something else. We spend hours on the phone, we watch the TV, we find something to fill our time with.

So, what if we started scheduling time for reading in the same way that maybe we schedule time for meetings or workouts or meals or whatever else?

So, here's just a few simple suggestions. I'll just throw these out there and you can add to this list, but maybe set a daily or weekly reading block.

I mean, even 15, 20 minutes a day. That can add up fast. How about limit phone usage? Turn off non-essential notifications.

Set app limits if you don't delete many of those apps. just get rid of them. Get them out of your way. Maybe try a digital fast. Set aside a few hours, maybe a whole day, maybe a month where you take extreme measures to cut down on media use and use that time instead for reading, for prayer, for reflection.

[38 : 37] I mean, you don't have to go extreme overnight. I've talked about this. Small, intentional steps can make a huge difference as they start to add up. If you're not used to reading regularly, don't start with a two-hour block each day.

You know, that's like deciding to run a marathon when you haven't gotten off the couch in years.

That's crazy. Just start small. You know, read 10, 15 minutes a day.

Build the consistency first. Keep a reading list. Kind of gamify your reading, if you will. Write down the books you want to read.

Mark them off as you do read them. See how far you get. I don't do this so much anymore, but I used to track my reading. I would journal a few thoughts as I would read and kind of keep that as a diary, if you will, of what I've read.

And then, you know, celebrate the small wins. You finish a book, well, congratulations, you know. Reading is an investment. And every book you finish, every good book you finish, anyway, it adds to your growth.

[39 : 56] And of course, when it comes to Scripture, it's always helped to have a reading plan of some kind to keep you on track, to keep you motivated. it. But in our day, how do we choose a book outside of the Bible that's worth reading?

I think for believers, the answer always starts with Scripture comes first. That should be our priority. There's no more important book than the Word of God itself.

So if we're reading everything except the Bible, well, our priorities are terribly off. But beyond Scripture, there are many other books that can really build us up in our faith that I have found immensely helpful.

Devotionals for daily encouragement. Theology books that deepen our understanding of what we read in Scripture. Biographies of faithful believers who have gone before that really inspire us. even some well-curated fiction. As I said before, that can really stir our imaginations and help us to see truth in fresh ways.

[41 : 08] I've even enjoyed several books that sort of novelize stories from the Bible. Again, the key is going to be discernment when you read these books.

Discernment. Philippians 4.8, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure. Think about these things. That applies to our reading.

So, we could talk about how we read, whether we use digital devices or whether we use physical books. We could give suggestions for and against each, but let's just say, use what works.

Use what works. reading is just a powerful thing. Now, when you're getting started out, if you're not a big reader, you might consider joining or starting a Bible study group where you read Scripture together.

A book club, maybe, that focuses on reading sound, faith-building books. Do this within your family. Read books together with your spouse or with your children.

[42 : 22] I have found that reading in community certainly keeps us accountable, but it also keeps us motivated, helps us process what we're learning. Hebrews 10.24.25 reminds us to spur on one another in faith, and reading together can be a great way to do that.

But none of this is really easy if you're not a reader. Becoming a reader is not easy because, especially now, we've conditioned ourselves to crave that constant stimulation.

The pull of screens is always strong. The idea of slowing down to read might feel like torture at first, but it's worth it. And ultimately, we do not have to do this alone.

And I don't just mean with one another. I don't just mean with our families. James 1.5. If we lack wisdom, we're told to ask God for wisdom.

God will give it generously. So, if we're struggling with anything, time management, distraction, the desire to read, go straight to the Lord.

[43 : 33] Ask God to renew your hunger for His Word. Pray for wisdom in managing your time. Seek the Spirit's guidance in what to read and how to grow.

Jesus promised that the Spirit of Truth would guide us in John 16, 13. And I believe that can include our guiding our habits and our focus and our discipline.

So, I'll give you a really, really simple challenge. We need to quit. Just take one step today or one step this week that will transition you from screen to deep reading.

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