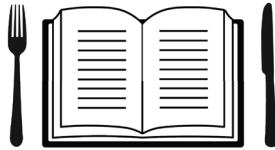


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## CHAPTER ONE



# STARVING FOR THE WORD

If you were to open your Bible to the exact middle point, you would land in Psalm 119. Written by King David a thousand years before the time of Jesus, Psalm 119 is the longest single passage in Scripture, glorying in the wonder and splendor of the Word of God. When you read the psalm, you cannot escape the conclusion that David *loves* the Word of God. He speaks of it with such tender affection and deep longing. He pens lines like, “Your word I have treasured in my heart” (v. 11), “I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies” (v. 14), “Your testimonies . . . are my delight” (v. 24), “I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love” (v. 47), “O how I love Your law!” (v. 97), “How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (v. 103), “Your testimonies are wonderful” (v. 129), “I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil” (v. 162), “Your law is my delight” (v. 174). Verse after

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verse, David continues to praise the Lord and declares his love for God's Word.

It could easily be a struggle to identify with David's sentiments. Even if we are able to read the Bible, we may not be as eager to confess such affection for it. *Don't you think you're taking this a little too far, David? I mean, after all, it's just a book, right?* But when you read all 176 verses of Psalm 119, one thing becomes very clear: God desires believers to know and love His Word.

But this has been a constant human struggle for ages.

### FAMINE IN THE LAND

The people of God were prospering under King Jeroboam II during the eighth century BC, but not all was well in Israel. Despite the fact that God had blessed the nation with wealth and political dominance, the Israelites were living in open rebellion to the Lord and violating His commands. After many warnings, God sent the prophet Amos to rebuke them and deliver a message of coming judgment. Unbeknownst to Israel, their destruction was not far away. The Assyrians invaded in the year 722 BC, and carried off the bulk of Israel into captivity. However, prior to their fall, Amos prophesied a far worse judgment than captivity:

*"Behold, days are coming," declares the  
Lord GOD,  
"When I will send a famine on the land,  
Not a famine for bread or a thirst for  
water,*

*Starving for the Word*

*But rather for hearing the words of the  
LORD.*

*“People will stagger from sea to sea  
And from the north even to the east;  
They will go to and fro to seek the word  
of the LORD,  
But they will not find it.” (Amos 8:11-12)*

What Amos describes is a horrible time when the people of God, longing to hear a word from the Lord, will be unable to do so due to His prescribed spiritual famine. In the earlier years, when they had easy access to the Scriptures, they were sluggish and indifferent to the things of God. It would be another two hundred years before they would be restored to where they were before the judgment.

When we examine this point in Israel’s history, it’s not difficult to see parallels that can be made of our modern age. For example, America is a financially prosperous, politically powerful nation that is feared and respected worldwide. However, we are arguably one of the most morally loose and spiritually bankrupt nations as well. And while there may be several key factors that contribute to it, our modern biblical illiteracy epidemic no doubt has a part to play. And while it’s possible to know the Word of God and be morally bankrupt, the problem of biblical illiteracy feels very much like a judgment of God because of our national sinfulness.

### The Bible Illiteracy Epidemic

In the years following the Protestant Reformation in Europe, for the first time in a millennium, the Bible had become accessible to a large number of Christians. With the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, Bibles were being mass-produced in numerous languages and being sent around the world. This amazing advancement created opportunities for even the youngest and poorest believers to have access to the Scriptures. A popular English translation was made in Geneva in 1560, which was readily used by the Puritans and even the Pilgrims that sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. Later, in the next century, King James I commissioned the translation of the Bible, called the *Authorized Version*, which has been used by scores of believers all throughout the English-speaking world over the last four hundred years.

The twentieth century alone produced more Bible translations than perhaps any other time in human history, which included the American Standard Version (ASV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), and the English Standard Version (ESV, released just after the turn of the century)—to name just a few. We have more access to Scripture than at any other point in human history. A 2014 study found that 88 percent of Americans own a Bible.<sup>1</sup> More than this, it's estimated that the average family has 4.7 Bibles in their home.<sup>2</sup> And with the invention of the iPhone, virtually every person on the planet has access to the

Bible electronically. In fact, even if every physical Bible was destroyed, it would be nearly impossible to erase the digital witness of Scripture on the internet.

However, despite having unfettered access to the Bible in our modern age, it seems as though our appetite for the Word of God is greatly diminished. In fact, a more recent survey revealed that 48 percent of American adults are completely disengaged from Bible reading, with another 9 percent reporting that they interact with Scripture sporadically.<sup>3</sup> This shows us that the Bible has little to no impact on the lives of nearly 6 out of 10 people. Seizing on this problem, there have been countless books, articles, and blog posts about the problems of biblical illiteracy over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> In fact, one researcher has confessed his belief that biblical literacy has reached “a crisis point,” even describing the problem as a *famine*. New Testament scholar Kenneth Berding writes, “Christians used to be known as ‘people of one book,’” adding that “They memorized it, meditated on it, talked about it and taught it to others.” He continues, “We don’t do that anymore, and in a very real sense we’re starving ourselves to death.”<sup>5</sup>

But why is this happening? There may be several key reasons, such as postmodernism’s distrust of religion, self-reliance, social media distractions, entertainment, and addiction to busyness. Whatever the reason, it’s hard not to think that we’re living in a time similar to a biblically prosperous Israel just prior to the judgments of Amos.

Our problem is not that we do not have access to the Bible, or that God is deliberately withholding His special

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revelation from us. More than any other time in human history, His Word is sitting at our fingertips. All we have to do is pick it up. Learning to love God's Word is not just possible, it's doable. And history is full of believers whose love for God manifested itself in their love for His Word.

### LEARNING TO LOVE THE WORD OF GOD

The life of an Old Testament prophet was pretty miserable. Prophesying during the time of spiritual famine, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were marked by hardship and sadness. In the face of turmoil, however, the revelation of God became their sole source of comfort, strength, and joy.

The prophet Jeremiah spent his entire life battling with stiff-necked and hardened people. In fact, his ministry became so disheartening that he mourned the fact that he had even been born. However, in the midst of his sadness, Jeremiah took comfort in the Lord's ministry *to him*—the ministry of the Word of God:

*Your words were found and I ate them,  
And Your words became for me a joy  
and the delight of my heart;  
For I have been called by Your name,  
O LORD God of hosts. (Jer. 15:16)*

Despite his despair and utter depression over the state of his own country, he had learned to love the Word of God and take great comfort in it, confessing that Scripture had become “a joy” and a “delight” to him. Regardless of what

was happening around him, his spiritual appetite was satiated by devouring God's Word.

Ezekiel had a companion ministry to that of Jeremiah: Jeremiah was prophesying in the spiritual wasteland in Jerusalem while Ezekiel ministered to the exiles in Babylon. The primary job of a prophet was to speak God's word to God's people. In order to accomplish this calling, the prophet needed to know the word so intimately that it was seeping through his pores. Ezekiel reflects upon the time the Lord called him:

*Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you." Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.*

*. . . Moreover, He said to me, "Son of man, take into your heart all My words which I will speak to you and listen closely." (Ezek. 3:1-3, 10)*

While we know that God doesn't literally shove pieces of parchment into Ezekiel's mouth, Ezekiel describes vividly the act of receiving the Scriptures from the Lord and ingesting their content so intimately that he can describe the act only as *eating*. What was his response to such an intense experience with the Word of God? He describes their effect



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as being “sweet as honey in my mouth” (v. 3). This is not unlike David’s experience with Scripture, declaring, “How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103).

I find it hard to read verses like these and not stand amazed at the testimonies of people like David, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah—those who devour Scripture and delight so richly in it. It makes me wonder whether our current approaches to the Word of God are geared toward helping us learn to love it so. Are we truly being trained and encouraged to love God’s Word, or are we falling into the trap of becoming, as David Nienhuis warns, “merely informed quoters of the Word”—those who are prone “to memorize a select set of Bible verses” over helping believers become truly transformed by the Word?<sup>6</sup> While memorizing Bible verses should no doubt become part of our study (as we’ll see later), our real focus should be on developing a long-term understanding and love for the Bible.

### **Keeping the Long View**

For years, one of the more popular approaches to daily devotions has been built on reading through the whole Bible once a year. To be clear, there’s nothing wrong with reading through the Bible once a year consistently, but we’re living in unprecedented times. We simply do not have the luxury of assuming that most modern-day believers have the baseline of Bible knowledge that their parents or grandparents had. Generally speaking, churches are doing less and less Bible

teaching, few parents catechize their children, and culture is overwhelmingly Scripture averse. I recently heard the story of a Sunday school teacher who asked her class if anyone knew what Palm Sunday was. To her dismay, after a few awkward moments, one child raised his hand, spread his fingers and pointed to his palm. He wasn't joking.

And so, we're simply not exposed to the Bible. More than this, as Christians, we generally feel ashamed about it. So what do we do?

Without kicking anyone's reading plans to the curb, I'm suggesting that we alter our focus a bit. Because here's how it generally goes: Like other New Year's resolutions, you start your reading plan in January with the best of intentions, and as you work through Genesis and Exodus, you're sailing! Then you hit Leviticus and start to lose some steam, but you press on. A few jaunts in the genealogies of Chronicles and you're starting to question yourself: *Why isn't this interesting to me? Did I miss something?* Whereas many people seem to fall off around the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel), you grit your teeth and power through, eyes skimming over whole paragraphs of content. A late summer cold and a throbbing sinus headache make it impossible to read, so you lose half the Minor Prophets. By the time you get to Jesus in the Gospels, you've forgotten nearly everything from the Old Testament, but you're relieved to finally be in the New Testament. The stories and parables are sweetly familiar, and the missionary journeys of Acts are exciting. But then you hit nineteen letters of doctrine, followed by the

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head-scratching symbolism of Revelation. And while all your church friends fell off their reading plans months ago,<sup>7</sup> at least you finished—but you retained so little that you secretly wonder why you even attempted it in the first place.

This may not resemble your experience, but I've talked to countless Christians who have made such confessions to me. Now, if "Bible-in-a-Year" is working for you, no one is telling you to stop. But I'm guessing that you didn't pick up this book because you feel like you're knocking it out of the park.

So let me encourage you.

Instead of plowing through a few verses and then speeding off to work, slow it down. Instead of laboring through the whole Bible in a year, go a little deeper. Instead of reading your Bible simply to check it off the chore list, change your mental approach—change your philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Instead, take a longer view of learning your Bible—two, three, five, or even seven years. Make your end goal not merely to read the Bible but to know and understand it—to *love* and *treasure* it as God's holy, sufficient, transforming Word.

I distinctly remember being in a place of utter desperation and needing some fresh air. It was at that place that I discovered this paradigm shift.

## REDISCOVERING THE BIBLE

As I sat there with my head in my hands, the workday was half gone, but I couldn't even think about my job. I felt lost and alone, depressed and dejected. Like watching a car

wreck in slow motion, I knew my life had been veering off course into spiritual ruin. Why did I still feel distant from God? I was desperate for a sign, for an affirmation, for a word from heaven. What did God want from me? What did He want me to do? I had no idea. But deep down, I knew there was one thing wrong—something I was still neglecting. I reasoned, “I do everything else I’m supposed to do. He can’t really be *that* upset that I don’t read my Bible, can He?” I tried every excuse I could think of, but in the end, I knew that I was being disobedient.

A few years earlier, my father had given me a study Bible, which sat on the shelf in my office. While there wasn’t a sign above it that read, “Break Glass and Use in the Event of an Emergency,” I had treated the Bible that way. But that day felt like an emergency. So I grabbed it and thumped it onto my desk. When I *did* read my Bible, my method usually consisted of skimming through the pages until a verse jumped out at me. That, after all, is surely a sign that God wants to you read it, right? So I began to thumb through. Nothing. In a last-ditch effort, I turned to the front of the Bible and read the introduction. It would change my life forever.

## **The Seven Year Bible Plan**

In God’s providence, the Bible my dad had given me was *The MacArthur Study Bible*, and in the introduction, there is a section titled, “How to Study the Bible.” I thought, *Well, if anybody knows how to study the Bible, it must be this MacArthur guy.* So I read.

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*Read through the Old Testament at least once a year. As you read, note in the margins any truths you particularly want to remember, and write down separately anything you do not immediately understand. Often as you read you will find that many questions are answered by the text itself. The questions to which you cannot find answers become the starting points for more in-depth study using commentaries or other reference tools.*

*Follow a different plan for reading the New Testament. Read one book at a time repetitiously for a month or more. This will help to retain what is in the New Testament and not always have to depend on a concordance to find things.*

*If you want to try this, begin with a short book, such as 1 John, and read it through in one sitting every day for 30 days. At the end of that time, you will know what is in the book. Write on index cards the major theme of each chapter. By referring to the cards as you do your daily reading, you will begin to remember the content of each chapter. In fact, you will develop a visual perception of the book in your mind.*

*Divide longer books into short sections and reach each section daily for 30 days. For example, the gospel of*

## *Starving for the Word*

*John contains 21 chapters. Divide it into 3 sections of 7 chapters. At the end of 90 days, you will finish John. For variety, alternate short and long books, and in less than 3 years you will have finished the entire New Testament—and you will really know it!*<sup>9</sup>

Suddenly, my whole world opened up. Up to that point, the thought of reading and understanding the Bible had seemed daunting. But now, for the first time, I had hope! After all, I had tried reading the whole Bible in a year and failed many times, but studying the Bible book by book seemed possible.

Days stretched into weeks, which stretched into months. Chapter after chapter, book after book—I was actually reading and studying the Bible! With each new section, my understanding continued to grow. Before I knew it, I had finished the whole New Testament, having read it thirty times. And while I didn't feel like I had any sort of mastery of the text, I identified with the sentiment uttered by Martin Luther: "If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant."<sup>10</sup>

As I continued on to the Old Testament, I began to share my findings with others. As I began to talk with friends and church people about Bible reading, they began to convey their struggles. Very quickly, it became apparent that help was needed, and I wanted to create a duplicable plan that I could share with others. While I very openly shared that my

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inspiration came from *The MacArthur Study Bible*, I had made some drastic modifications to the plan, including a more comprehensive approach to studying the Old Testament. Within a few years, I had developed “The Seven Year Bible Plan.” This plan will be discussed at the end of the book.

Fundamentally, the plan is built on the MacArthur reading plan. The basic idea is: *read each book of the New Testament thirty times over three years*. However, I soon found myself desiring to alter my approach. At the beginning, I stayed pretty close to the MacArthur plan, but I began tweaking it slightly. Instead of logging the number of *days* in a book, I started tracking the number of “reads” through the book. By doing multiple daily readings, I was able to cover more ground in a shorter time, yet hopefully without sacrificing the needed time to study and meditate on the text. After completing the New Testament in three years, I altered the reading method and applied it to the Old Testament, shortening the number of “reads” down to fifteen. This allowed me to complete the Old Testament in just over four years.

*New Testament: 30x through each book  
= approximately 3 years*

*Old Testament: 15x through each book  
= approximately 4 years*

My aim for this book is far more than simply giving you this reading plan; my aim is ultimately to help you develop a long-term approach to lasting Bible study. As we proceed in our discussion, I’m going to offer study helps and exhorta-

tions designed to encourage you wherever you are, and using whatever plan with which you are most comfortable. For me, the Seven Year Bible Plan was transformational, but it is by no means the only way to learn and love the Scriptures. I'm convinced that our focus needs to be building lasting, sustainable habits and disciplines. Every newborn must learn how to eat in order to stay alive for a lifetime. As spiritually reborn people, we must also learn how to eat spiritual food (1 Peter 2:1–3) in order to endure until we are called home to be with the Lord. Therefore, we must learn to eat our Bibles.

## **ERRORS TO AVOID**

As we're learning how to "eat our Bibles," we want to be careful not to get indigestion! Therefore, I want to offer a word of caution. In learning to love God's Word, there are two errors we ought to avoid:

First, *don't become prideful*. If you were to take every sin listed in the Bible and rank them according to God's hatred of it, pride would be at the very top (see Prov. 6:16–17). God opposes pride at every twist and turn. He can't stand it. So if you find yourself growing in your Bible knowledge and love for the Scriptures, guard yourself against pride. I always cringe a little when I see Christians posting pictures of their marked-up, highlighted, dilapidated Bibles on social media. Now, to be clear, there's something beautiful about seeing the fruit of years of intimate Bible study. Charles Spurgeon famously said, "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs



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to someone who isn't." There's some wisdom to that. Read your Bible, study it, learn it, know it. Just don't brag about it to everyone around you. Don't go out of your way to show others how much you read, or how full the margins are with illegible chicken-scratch, or how many times you've had your Bible rebound. To put some mild spin on Jesus' maxim in Matthew 6:3, when you read your Bible, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Avoid pride at all costs.

Second, *don't be ashamed*. There are many reasons why Christians don't read their Bibles, but guilt and shame usually play a huge part in keeping them from growing in this area. Most Christians know they *should* be reading the Bible but struggle to have the desire or the practical know-how to do so effectively. As they grow more and more frustrated over this, their guilty conscience begins to weigh them down, and they become depressed. And the longer it persists, even the sight of the two-inch thick study Bible sitting on their nightstand causes the pit in their stomach to sink even deeper until they finally retire the book to the shelf, convinced that "maybe I'm just not a reader."

Let me encourage you: *God desires for you to know and love His Word*. Of all the possible things you would chase in this life that God could be against, Bible study isn't one of them. In fact, He's prepared to strive *with* you to help you. Prepare your heart, stay humble, and be encouraged! Cast off all your guilt and shame, and lift your eyes up to Christ. And as we work our way through this book, my prayer for

you is that your heart would ignite for the Lord, that your desire for His Word would consume your waking thoughts, and that your love for Christ would abound in all joy and thanksgiving.

But before we dive into the Bible, we need to ask for help.

**Summary:** Despite having easy access to the Bible, our current American culture suffers from severe biblical illiteracy. In seeking to delve into the Bible, however, Christians would do well to alter their approach. Instead of plowing through Bible-in-a-year reading plans, students should embrace a long-term approach and focus on delving deeper into individual book studies. One such approach is the Seven-Year Bible Reading Plan.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What is your present relationship to God's Word?
  - a. What is your regular reading and study plan?
  - b. What are some of the challenges that you have faced in approaching the Bible?
2. What have you observed about our current spiritual climate in America? Why do you think fewer people are reading their Bibles?
3. How did David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel describe their relationship to God's Word?

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4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of Bible-in-a-Year reading plans? What are the potential benefits of taking a longer, slower approach?
5. What are the two ditches we ought to avoid in studying our Bibles?

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