



Ask Pastor John

750 Bible Answers to Life's
Most Important Questions

TONY REINKE

Foreword by John Piper

“My first thought on seeing these pages was that perhaps not since Richard Baxter penned his massive *Christian Directory* has a book like *Ask Pastor John* been offered to Christians. From the vast number of questions to which John Piper has responded over a decade of podcasting, these pages contain 750 of the most listened-to answers. And while Piper’s ministry is separated from Baxter’s by more than three centuries, a common thread binds them together—the deep-seated conviction that the God-breathed Scriptures make us ‘wise for salvation’ in the fullest sense because, in providing teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, they are sufficient to equip us ‘for every good work’ (2 Tim. 3:15–17). The value of these pages is as evident as it is manifold. At one level, theological, pastoral, and ethical questions are assessed, analyzed, and consistently answered by bringing them to the touchstone of Scripture. But in addition, this is done with a rigorous and determined attention to both the wording and the interior logic of God’s word with a desire to help us to think God’s thoughts after him. And this in turn serves all of us as a pattern to learn and apply in our own Bible reading, and as a model that encourages us to live according to Scripture. In addition, the step-by-step care with which John Piper seeks to handle Scripture helps us—as he would wish—to discern how what he says applies in our own lives, and, indeed, where it might not. And so as a theologian he guides our understanding, and as a pastor he encourages us to grow in discernment so that we are not simply becoming automatons but are learning to think through and apply God’s word by ourselves, for ourselves, and to ourselves. We owe a debt of grateful thanks to John Piper for the labor of love and devotion of time and pastoral care this book reflects, and to his long-time colleague Tony Reinke, who—from an archive of over two million words!—has expertly selected and edited these pages. Here is one of those rare contemporary books that can be described as ‘should be in every Christian home,’ and to which we can turn again and again for guidance from God’s word, encouragement in Christ, and challenge to walk according to the Spirit.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *The Whole Christ* and *Worthy*

“I don’t know what is more remarkable, that the *Ask Pastor John* podcast has nearly two thousand episodes and over 230 million listens or that Tony Reinke has distilled all that content in order to give us a guided tour of 220 hours of audio recordings. Have you ever wished you could sit down with John Piper (or any wise, seasoned pastor) and ask him all your practical, nitty-gritty questions about life, ministry, parenting, sex, Bible reading, divorce, abuse, dating, gambling, eating, drinking, movies, demons, depression, poetry, and selfie sticks? Then this is the book for you. Even if you don’t agree with Piper on every jot and tittle of application, you will find that he is always thoughtful, always careful, always pastoral, and always tied to the Bible. Read the book straight through, a little each day, or use these five hundred pages as an encyclopedia on situational ethics and practical theology. Either way, I can’t imagine any Christian who wouldn’t be helped (and fascinated) by the hundreds of topics covered in this amazing resource.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina; Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“Throw a hard question at John Piper and he will isolate the main challenge and address it with a sage answer, drawn from the Bible, delivered in a kind tone that lacks even a hint of hubris. He willingly answers all sorts of dilemmas, from hard Bible verses to the daily struggles of the Christian life to culturally charged questions that border on the embarrassing to the bizarre. For years I have been an avid listener because each episode draws me deeper into God’s word. Pastor John has spoken so wisely on such a wide array of topics that I am always ferreting through past episodes to learn more. But that vast archive can be daunting. With many years of experience as the host, Tony Reinke has pulled together the 750 most popular episodes from their first decade together into a single guide touching on dozens of themes. This book is an index to the podcast archive, drawing together multiple episodes on single topics, making it easy for me to find the audio I need, when I need it. As a podcast listener, I couldn’t be more pleased. I’m thankful to Reinke for compiling this encyclopedia and—now for over a decade—drawing out, documenting, and helping us all more richly benefit from America’s most beloved theologian!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International
Disability Center

“This book is a remarkable achievement, cataloging John Piper’s answers to hundreds of challenges and dilemmas in the Christian life. A modern-day *Table Talk*, reminiscent of Martin Luther, this book is like sitting across a table from a Bible-saturated pastor addressing issues that are timely and issues that are timeless. You likely won’t agree with every answer. I didn’t. But what I appreciate about this book is how, even when I disagreed, Pastor John pointed me back to the Scriptures and pressed my nose deeper into those pages where, through studying and savoring, I find the unerring words of life. I am thankful for this encyclopedia of wisdom and insight. It increases my love for God and his word.”

Trevin Wax, Vice President of Research and Resources, The North American Mission Board; Visiting Professor, Cedarville University; author, *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*; *Rethink Your Self*; and *This Is Our Time*

“For years, the *Ask Pastor John* podcast has served me as a go-to reservoir for pastoral encouragement and practical help. There is nothing else like it. If you’re serious about your joy in Jesus, turn these pages and find accessible, God-centered answers to life’s biggest questions. The book is brilliantly organized; few will sufficiently appreciate what Reinke has pulled off here.”

Matt Smethurst, Lead Pastor, River City Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia;
author, *Before You Open Your Bible* and *Before You Share Your Faith*

Ask Pastor John

Other Books by Tony Reinke

Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age (2019)

God, Technology, and the Christian Life (2022)

Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books (2011)

Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ (2015)

12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You (2017)

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Most Important Questions

TONY REINKE

Foreword by John Piper

 **CROSSWAY®**
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To each of Desiring God's precious ministry partners who carried this podcast through its first decade. This book testifies to your faithful response to the call of our Savior through your faithful prayers, personal encouragements, and monetary investments over these ten years. Together we are extending God's grace around the world and adding new voices to the global chorus of souls thankful to God, all to the praise of his majesty (2 Cor. 4:15).

“All learning is the fruit of question-asking and answer-seeking.”

JOHN PIPER (1975)

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Foreword by John Piper

AFTER SPENDING EIGHT HOURS PREPARING to record answers to five *Ask Pastor John* questions, I come downstairs at six o'clock and say to my wife, "What would we do if we did not have the Bible?"

The answer is, we would presume that our own wisdom could penetrate the mysteries of life and point people to their eternal good. That is not what we presume. Our assumption is that God alone has the wisdom we need to honor him, love people, and be eternally happy in his presence. That wisdom is recorded infallibly in one place, the Bible. God's word is the foundation and motivation of *Ask Pastor John* (APJ).

Christ has given to his church "shepherds and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). I believe he called me to be one in 1966. Tony tells the story in his introduction. It is a dangerous calling. The very Bible that warrants the call, warns the called: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).

A podcast that presumes to answer some of the hardest questions of life would be utter folly without the word of God. And even with the word, and the help of the Holy Spirit, it is a trembling work: "This is the one to whom I will look," declares the Lord, "he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2).

For all the danger and all the trembling, it is a joyful work. The teacher always learns more than the student. This is God's way: it is always more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). But the joy is not just in learning; it is even more in tasting its fruit in the lives of those who listen. For example, one young woman said to me, "My parents are not believers. I am a new Christian. I do not know how to do life. But when I hear your voice on APJ, it sounds like a soothing grandfather helping me know how to live."

There are advantages to being old. Sounding like a trusty grandfather is one. Another is recognizing rare gifts when you see them. The gift of synthesis

manifested in this book is astonishing. For ten years I have watched Tony Reinke evaluate questions, record answers, edit recordings, host the podcast, and schedule the episodes. It is a precious partnership. But the skill you see in this book is of another order. Weaving hundreds of thousand-word answers into topical, coherent, readable chapters inspires my seasoned admiration.

One of our hopes for this book is that you will be drawn into the audio podcast. Not because spoken words are truer than written words. But because the living voice carries the affections of the heart more effectively. Why does that matter?

It matters because love is the goal of knowledge, not the other way around (1 Tim. 1:5). Christ-exalting behavior flows from Christ-cherishing hearts, not just Christ-knowing minds. Tony and I are Christian Hedonists.¹ Therefore, this podcast flows from the conviction that God is most glorified in our listeners when they are most satisfied in him. So, we can't settle for imparting new ideas. We aim to impart new affections. A miracle. Such affections can be heard more readily than read. We hope you can hear our hearts. There is a melody there. We call it the glory of God in the gladness of God-centered souls.

1 See APJ 1913: "Christian Hedonism in Two Minutes" (March 15, 2023).

INTRODUCTION

A Little History of APJ (and Why I Wrote This Book)

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF ONE PODCAST—*Ask Pastor John* (APJ). Every day our audience sends us hard questions about life. I read the questions, select a few, and ask them to longtime author and pastor John Piper. We call him Pastor John. And we ask him about everything—smartphones, shopping, sex, self-pity, swearing, Satan, and salvation. Nothing is off-limits. He takes his answers from the Bible.

I submitted this book to the publisher in the first week of 2023, just a few days after we broadcasted our final episode of 2022—the bookend to our first decade. We have released 1,881 episodes, which have now been played over 230 million times, or about 125,000 times each. In the story of the universe these numbers are trivial, but in the story of this podcast they are remarkable reminders of God’s kindness to us.

The stats give a sense of the number of lives impacted over the years. Five years into the podcast, Pastor John began to notice that “of a constellation of influences people receive from Desiring God, APJ is one that people mention to me as much as any other—from moms shuttling their kids to school and playing the podcast on the way, to lawyers building it into their early morning exercise routines, to high school students taking a break from homework, to eighty-somethings whose eyes won’t read anymore.”¹ The podcast’s rise has drawn other notice. As I was wrapping up this book, I heard Kevin DeYoung publicly celebrate Desiring God’s many valuable labors. Then he singled out

1 John Piper, email to author, July 11, 2018.

the podcast as “chief among their media content.”² So it’s no surprise that when he now travels, Pastor John is thanked for the podcast more than anything else he does. In conference venues, the most common badge of affiliation and appreciation he hears is from people who approach him simply to say, “I listen to APJ every week!”³

The podcast serves a steady diet of content to a growing audience that’s becoming increasingly diverse and international. It gathers older listeners, church leaders, and young adults, many of whom were raised in nominal or non-Christian homes and are now trying to navigate life as new believers. Across the generations, Pastor John’s voice is that of a (nearly eighty-year-old) mentor. One regular listener, a wife and mother, called APJ an “audible daily moment of gospel-centered encouragement, like a quick coffee with a dear friend who stirs my affections for Christ.”⁴ It is the unique power of persistent, steady, audio podcasting over the years to forge deep connections with listeners.⁵ So it’s also not a surprise when listeners tell us that Pastor John’s voice is like heeding the voice of a father, grandfather, mentor, or friend.

An Origin Story

To understand APJ’s success you need to understand one part of John Piper’s life. The part about why he thinks *asking good questions* is essential to succeeding in life. And that story begins with an awkward teenager—insecure, pimple-faced, and nervous—by the name of Johnny Piper, as he was first known to the world.⁶ The son of a respected preacher and traveling evangelist, Johnny was unable to talk in front of groups and deathly afraid of public speaking from grade five to his sophomore year in college.⁷ In front of others, he froze. An “intense nervousness” haunted him as his chief boyhood burden. But despite the debilitating limitation, his local church became for him “an oasis” where he gained respect for a growing knowledge of Scripture. While he couldn’t

- 2 Kevin DeYoung, “Positive World, Negative World, and Christian Nationalism with Justin Taylor and Collin Hansen,” *Life and Books and Everything*, podcast, November 8, 2022, episode 87.
- 3 Point made in his debrief after T4G’s final conference in the spring of 2022, where he intentionally invested extra time meeting attendees (John Piper, private meeting [April 28, 2022]).
- 4 APJ 1558: “How Do I Battle Imposter Syndrome?” (December 7, 2020).
- 5 True for me as the host too. When I first meet listeners face-to-face, I’m often met with a contorted look, the outward expression of an internal calculation processing how a total stranger could speak with the voice of an old friend.
- 6 APJ 1: “Reflections from John Piper on His Birthday” (January 11, 2013).
- 7 APJ 228: “How Did You Learn to Preach?” (December 3, 2013) and APJ 1730: “Should I Become a Preacher?” (January 12, 2022).

stand up and speak in front of a group—any group—he *could* answer Bible questions in his youth group.⁸

Johnny became John around the time he entered Wheaton College (1964–1968; BA), the scene of a tumultuous 1966 that would change his course forever. As the year began, John was completing his second year of a lit major. But by May he took a sharp turn toward medicine and jumped into a premed track. On June 6, 1966, the aspiring doctor met his future wife, Noël, on campus.⁹ Just weeks later John was asked to pray in chapel, a request he surprisingly agreed to do with a vow to God: “If you will just get me through it so that I don’t freeze and my voice doesn’t stop, I will never turn down a speaking opportunity for you again out of fear.” It worked. He prayed in chapel (and has kept his vow ever since).¹⁰ That fall he was hospitalized for three weeks with mononucleosis. Lying in bed with “big yellow tonsils and palpitating spleen,” he heard compelling preaching on the radio that ignited a new fire within him.¹¹ A passion to preach “that has never died.”¹² In that hospital bed his calling moved from medicine to ministry,¹³ an inadvertent “bait and switch” on his new girlfriend, who “thought she was falling in love with a medical doctor.” She was understanding. John’s new calling was undeniable and clear: “You’re not going to be a medical doctor; you’re going to be a Bible guy. And your job for the rest of your life is going to be to *look at it*, see what’s there, try to *savor it* according to its value, and then *say it* for other people to enjoy.”¹⁴ Tongue loosed, he aspired to Bible scholarship, a decision driven by many factors including “an unceasing desire to have some questions answered” for himself and an urge to “help others answer them” too.¹⁵ In these formative years, Wheaton’s English department had awakened his heart’s affection for God and sharpened his mind to read texts more carefully.¹⁶

John graduated with a literature degree and enrolled at Fuller Seminary (1968–1971; BD). There he was first exposed to a quote attributed to John Dewey: “We never think until we have been confronted with a problem.”¹⁷ And there he first read Mortimer J. Adler’s book *How to Read a Book* in its original

8 John Piper, personal journal, November 27, 1990.

9 APJ 1382: “When to Stop Listening to This Podcast” (October 16, 2019).

10 APJ 1730: “Should I Become a Preacher?” (January 12, 2022).

11 APJ 1373: “Who Is John Piper?” (September 25, 2019).

12 APJ 1382: “When to Stop Listening to This Podcast” (October 16, 2019).

13 APJ 1405: “I’m Not Good at My Job—Is the Lord Telling Me to Quit?” (December 9, 2019).

14 APJ 1382: “When to Stop Listening to This Podcast” (October 16, 2019).

15 John Piper, personal journal, August 16, 1970.

16 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

17 As cited in Daniel P. Fuller, *Thinking God’s Thoughts: The Hermeneutics of Humility* (np; 2020), 66.

1940 edition. “Wonder is the beginning of wisdom in learning from books as well as from nature,” Adler wrote. “If you never ask yourself any questions about the meaning of a passage, you cannot expect the book to give you any insight you do not already possess.”¹⁸

Dewey and Adler entered John’s life through a seminary professor who would permanently alter Piper’s entire approach to Bible study—Daniel Fuller, who quickly became the most influential character in Piper’s formation, second only to his parents (Bill and Ruth).¹⁹ Fuller modeled a “rigorous attention to the text.”²⁰ He called it arcing, the act of writing out every proposition of a Bible text on a different line to figure out how those propositions relate to each other.²¹ The approach demands attention to detail as it “takes every word, every phrase, every sentence in the Bible with blood-earnest seriousness, and wrings it until every drop of life-giving blood falls out of it on the page,” Piper said. “And I’ve never been the same since.” His own transformation was rapid. By Dr. Fuller’s influence, between the age of twenty-two and twenty-three, Piper became, in his own words, “a different human being.”²² The rapid metamorphosis was driven by laborious practice. Proposition by proposition, Piper plodded through courses on Romans 9, Romans 1–8, Galatians, the Sermon on the Mount, and 1 Corinthians—the whole time “Dan Fuller pushing my nose down in the nitty-gritty of the conjunctions and the connectors.”²³

Arcing is a surgical skill that asks and answers questions within the ligaments of the Bible’s connective tissue. But it’s more than a sophisticated academic tool. It sustains faith. Over time, John came to discover that Christian learning is the process of heart convictions gained by asking great questions and finding convincing answers in the Bible. Whether a scholar investing in Christian minds, a preacher seeking to mature a congregation, or a parent seeking to raise his child in the Lord, all three must labor to avoid the deadly trap of authoritarianism. Answers must be rooted in the Bible’s authority, not the expertise of the scholar

18 Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 219–20. Read for the first time in his early twenties (APJ 1244: “How Do I Choose Good Books and Grow My Library?” [August 31, 2018]).

19 APJ 107: “Who Has Been Most Influential in Your Life?” (June 7, 2013).

20 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

21 APJ 107: “Who Has Been Most Influential in Your Life?” (June 7, 2013) and APJ 127: “Advice for Better Bible Reading” (July 8, 2013). On arcing, see APJ 395: “What Tools Do I Need to Study the Bible?” (July 29, 2014), APJ 1056: “How Can I Better Study a Bible Passage?” (June 19, 2017), APJ 1141: “Deep Bible Reading Strategies for the Tired and Busy” (January 3, 2018), and John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 395–411.

22 APJ 1373: “Who Is John Piper?” (September 25, 2019).

23 APJ 311: “How Piper Learned Reformed Theology” (April 2, 2014).

or preacher or parent. Failure here will “sow the seeds of apostasy,” because the student, the congregant, and the child must find their own way to their own convictions. To this end, question-asking is essential for an enduring faith.²⁴

John found himself developing into “two kinds of person in one: a highly analytical question asker and a romantic pursuer of deep and authentic, satisfying emotional responses to what I see and experience.” Rightly stewarded, curiosity must lead to worship. At Wheaton College, Piper found “the deepening and intensifying of my affections—my emotions, my heart response—to the good, the true, and the beautiful, and ultimately, of course, the highest good and the highest affections for God himself and his word.” Likewise, he found an intensifying “analytical bent toward probing, questioning, scrutinizing, and dissecting” texts. By Dr. Fuller’s influence, “I had formed habits of observation and analysis and text querying that were very fixed in my methodology.” From here on, “everything I have done, written, or spoken has been shaped by the double grasp of God’s word in these two ways”—in the “double response” of Psalm 119:97. Rigorous *meditation* in search of truths to *love*.²⁵

John took his question-centric probing of Scripture and his love for the resulting answers into three years of graduate school at the University of Munich (1971–1974; DTheol). But following his deeply transformative years at Fuller Seminary, the move to Germany was an exegetical disappointment. German academia was stuck on “textual gamesmanship” that never “pushed through the words to *the reality* that was driving and animating everything in the Bible.” Arcing had given Piper a method of discovery that kept him from being intimidated by his learned professors (Ps. 119:99). In Germany, he couldn’t outread his liberal professors by volume of reading, but he could outmeditate them with an open Bible. With this conviction from the psalmist, Piper knew that “one true citation from God’s word may silence a whole semester of human speculation.”²⁶

Academic games were powerless to forge convictions. Instead, as a twenty-six-year-old Sunday school teacher, John was convinced that the deepest questions of the human soul were often the simplest in form. The *why* questions. So he prodded his class to ask them, the *why* questions, until one man finally mustered the courage to raise his hand and ask, “*Why* do we go to church anyway?” It was a great question, a dangerous question, the kind of question that makes the asker vulnerable. But the honest question set Piper’s mind to work. Such basic inquiries must be asked (and never assumed) because “the person who does

24 John Piper, personal journal, April 7, 1972.

25 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

26 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

not know *why* he believes something or does something is like a robot: he does not know from whence his thought or action springs nor where it is headed.”²⁷

In response, Piper turned the attention of his class to the brimming affection of the psalmist (in Ps. 116:12–14). Like this psalmist, Christians gather with God’s people because our hearts are filled with a gratitude bursting to expression. To this question (why do we go to church?), and to every other question, mere intellectual answers are insufficient. “The psalmist was not solving a riddle or a mind teaser. He was giving expression to a heart delighted with real bounty, not mere thoughts about bounty: he *felt* the goodness and beauty of God in his own life.”²⁸ So he had to express it. Hence, he had to be with the people of God. That’s why we go to church. This Sunday-school-class moment illustrates an essential conviction in Piper. Whether standing behind a music stand in a Sunday school class, teaching behind an academic lectern, laboring over the exegetical point of a biblical text at a desk, or standing in the pulpit preaching—true Christian communication aims to persuade by satisfying the *regenerate heart* with divine glory, not simply by addressing the *curious mind* with articulate reasoning. The *why* question may simply be the product of a curious brain, but its *answer* should appeal to the capacities of the thirsting heart. True in the early 1970s. True today.

John Piper graduated from the University of Munich and became Dr. Piper, a Bible and Greek professor in Minnesota. And to prep for his inaugural semester as a professor he returned to Adler’s book on reading, newly minted in a revised version. Added to the new edition of the book (likely by its new coauthor, Charles Van Doren) was one sharp prescription for active reading: “*Ask questions while you read—questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading.*”²⁹ To this newly added line, printed on the page in italics, Piper eagerly underlined it with a pencil and added five emphatic symbols in the outside margin, two stars and three vertical lines (★ ★ |||). The hand-drawn ciphers codify a multilayered ah-ha moment—a “revelation.”³⁰ The line struck him (and still does), because “no one *thinks* (which is the key to understanding) until they have a problem; and the best way to have problems for the mind is to ask questions. Questions are the best steady-state way of creating problems for the mind” because “a question-free mind is a thinking-free mind and a discovery-free mind.” Without this engagement, “reading becomes passive

27 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

28 John Piper, personal journal, July 29, 1972.

29 Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1972), 46; emphasis original.

30 John Piper, personal journal, January 27, 1975.

entertainment, rather than growth in understanding reality.” It’s great advice from Adler to every reader, but “when the book is *the Bible*—O my, the implications for soaring in conversation with the inspired writers and God!”³¹

Adler simply confirmed what had already been operating in Dr. Piper’s mind for many years: “all learning is the fruit of question-asking and answer-seeking.” But like his Sunday school class, he would soon find that his college students asked too few of them. “It is astonishing how many only make assertions of what they presently think rather than posing questions in order to make their thinking better.” Why didn’t they? Two reasons. One, asking questions creates problems and adds to the workload. It’s academically easier to make assertions based on present knowledge. And, two, questions expose ignorance and require humility. The greater temptation is to make quick assertions on the fly, to avoid the embarrassment of “not knowing,” and to appear sharp and intelligent before others. The “questioning mind” must cut against these twin-sin tendencies: laziness and pride. Asking honest questions, in other words, requires childlikeness. “That a child asks so many questions shows his boundless energy and his unawareness of the adult shame of ignorance. Hence *childlikeness* in this sense is a prerequisite of a lifetime of learning.” To *not* ask questions is to stagnate, to never have the mind and heart refreshed as if by a mountain stream, a refreshment reserved only for those willing to ask “eager questions.” Such an unquestioning mind can only grow “more and more bigoted” as it becomes more sold out to the “correctness” of its past assumptions. To such a mind comes a damning end: “Hearing they do not hear and seeing they do not see” (Matt. 13:13).³²

Dr. Piper came to understand that one of his main tasks as professor was to impart a “dramatic reorientation” to the lives of even his most pious students, “who have imbibed from childhood an ‘unquestioning’ approach to the New Testament.” His challenge: convince students that question-asking was not to cast doubt on God and his revelation but to honor him and his word. By his own example, Piper would prove that “posing questions is not inimical to an open, docile, childlike spirit toward the Scripture.” So while many Christians associate these interrogations “with unbelief and doubt,” in reality “without questions, *earnestly asked*, there is rarely any true conviction of truth. There may be much espousing of ideas inherited or picked up along life’s way; but that does not make for deep hearty union with the God of truth and whole-souled *amen* to his counsels.”³³ The sturdiest faith-convictions, the ones that cut deep

31 John Piper, email to author, May 5, 2022.

32 John Piper, personal journal, January 27, 1975.

33 John Piper, personal journal, November 27, 1976.

and hold fast in the hungry heart like a fishhook, are convictions that start as childlike questions, earnestly asked in faith and resolved by Scripture. These answers convince the mind and feed the heart. For short, I'll call this four-step approach "question-resolution-conviction-worship" (or QRCW).

It's not irreverent to question the Bible's claims, if we are eager to receive the Bible's answers. In fact, "reverence for God's word *demand*s that we ask questions and pose problems *and* that we believe there are answers and solutions which will reward our labor with treasures new and old (Matt. 13:52)."³⁴ Reverent questions can only come from minds and hearts seeking answers. Irreverent "questions" come from a skeptical and antagonistic heart that has already closed itself to answers. God is most attentive to questions that are personal, honest, earnest, and urgent.³⁵

When done humbly and expectantly, this reverent and childlike approach (QRCW) proved superior to and more fruitful than all other forms of teaching—a result confirmed to Dr. Piper one evening in 1976, in a formal debate with another professor before students. This strict and proper debate structure was never his style, as he later reflected. He preferred more open and free-flowing dialogue. "What I really enjoy is question-and-answer sessions. There is where I am at my best, I think, and there is where *understanding* really happens."³⁶ To teach and persuade is to answer questions with the aim of worship. And Dr. Piper's aptitude for answering such difficulties—questions on texts, theology, and ethics—was confirmed over time. Three years after his formal debate, God called him out of academia and into the pulpit.³⁷ The teaching assistants in his department sent him off with a custom T-shirt that read: "Asking questions is the key to understanding."³⁸ It wasn't a reminder. It was his brand.

Dr. Piper became Pastor John in 1980. His eight-mile move to become the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church caught the attention of one local reporter who predicted that his methodology wouldn't change much. "Piper's preaching style will be similar to his classroom teaching style. In the classroom, Piper asks questions and makes his students do part of the answering. Behind the pulpit, he will ask questions and do the answering himself. 'The way I study the Bible,' said Piper, 'is to ask questions of the text to try to get out its meaning.

34 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2002), 91; emphasis added.

35 APJ 1707: "Is Violent Crime under God's Providence?" (November 19, 2021).

36 John Piper, personal journal, August 30, 1976; emphasis added.

37 Justin Taylor, "'This Word Must Be Preached': John Piper's Call to the Pastorate," *Desiring God*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

38 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 74–75.

It is natural that my sermons will be a systematic exposition of the meaning of biblical texts. That is what I think good preaching is.”³⁹

But good preaching must be more than resolving mental curiosities. Good preaching isn’t Socratic dialogue reduced to monologue, nor is good preaching like a classroom lecture. The preacher may raise and answer questions to help explain the text, but all with an eye to “the first aim of preaching”—not education, but a “supernatural encounter with the living God.” Asking the right questions is essential for arcing, exegesis, and sermon prep, and those questions may sometimes emerge in the sermon itself. But the *final task* of the preacher is to herald the glorious news that the living God of the universe is “calling his people to the fullest enjoyment of his kingdom.” That’s the sermon’s main goal. “I call it *expository exultation*.”⁴⁰ In the sermon, questions are answered, the congregation is shown truth from Scripture, and then they are invited to be “caught up with the preacher in his love affair with God and his salvation.”⁴¹ Affectionate worship is the final aim of QRCW, whether in preaching a sermon or answering pastoral questions. The regenerate heart’s search for satisfying divine answers was—and remains—the pedagogical foundation from which Piper’s entire ministry is built.

As predicted, in the transition from academic lectern to church pulpit, Pastor John never stopped asking and answering questions. The discipline shaped how he prepared his sermons and pastored his flock. Live and in-person Q&A sessions became a staple for Piper, both at home and on the road, as his preaching ministry rose to national and international notoriety in the early 2000s.

In 1998, a new website launched to host Piper’s popular sermons (desiringGod.org). And as the volume of online listeners increased, so too rose the volume of theological inquiries. Email questions arrived about everything—Calvinism, eschatology, infant salvation, marriage and divorce, “just war” (in light of 9/11), and Bible reading tips. In the early days, these inquiries were answered by his assistants. With the website in place, it made sense to publish written responses to the most common questions as a digital FAQ. The site became an online hub of answers.

Beginning in 2007, these questions were posed to Pastor John by radio host Bob Allen, who edited Piper sermons into radio broadcasts. In a ten-month span between June 2007 and April 2008, he produced 132 episodes.⁴² Several of these broadcasts included bonus in-studio audio, with Allen posing questions to Piper. Those responses were later excerpted from the radio programs

39 Ken Wanovich, “Piper Accepts Senior Pastorate,” *Clarion* 55 (March 21, 1980): 4.

40 APJ 118: “Is the 40-Minute Sermon Passé?” (June 24, 2013).

41 APJ 1877: “What Makes for a Good Musical Worship Experience?” (December 21, 2022).

42 Bob Allen, email to author, July 19, 2018.

and indexed as audio files at desiringGod.org under a new banner: “Ask Pastor John”—a heading first coined and added to the website in August 2007.

After the radio program ended, Desiring God launched a livestream video format called *Ask Pastor John Live*.⁴³ On a makeshift set, Piper answered real-time questions from viewers through a novel social-media platform called Twitter. Sometimes the live video format used a host to read questions,⁴⁴ and other times the questions were printed on cards or flashed on a screen to Pastor John, who read the questions and answered them all on the fly, consecutively, one after another, without advance preparation. The videos ended abruptly a few years later, canceled in the spring of 2010 to make room for Pastor John’s eight-month ministry leave to focus on his heart, his marriage, and his family.⁴⁵

Podcasting

The leave ended at the conclusion of 2010, and Pastor John returned to ministry rejuvenated and renewed. But no radio or video manifestation of APJ resumed.

In January of 2012, I joined the team at Desiring God and launched my first longform podcast, *Authors on the Line* (AOTL). I interviewed authors over the telephone and handled the planning, hosting, writing, producing, recording, postproduction, sound engineering, and marketing. By the end of that first year, I completed eleven longform episodes and had settled on a process for efficiently getting conversations recorded, transcribed, edited, and published through a syndicated audio channel. I called John Piper’s home landline phone for the very first time at the end of November 2012 to record a special holiday episode of AOTL.⁴⁶ Technologically, everything worked.

Entering 2013, Desiring God faced a new challenge. In the spring, Piper’s pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church would end. And to allow the new church leadership to gel, he planned a year away in Knoxville, Tennessee, with wife, Noël, and daughter, Talitha, from June 2013 to August 2014.⁴⁷ He would use the time to work on various book projects and to dream about the next decade of ministry ahead, a rural “retooling” for his next season of urban ministry.⁴⁸ But the temporary move left Desiring God in a bind because we had never experienced ministry

43 First envisioned by Lukas Naugle.

44 Often moderated by David Mathis.

45 May to December 2010. For details, see his bookended updates: John Piper, “John Piper’s Upcoming Leave,” *Desiring God*, March 28, 2010, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>; John Piper, “John Piper’s Report on His Leave of Absence,” *Desiring God*, January 1, 2011, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

46 John Piper and Paul Maier, “Christmas and the Sting of Personal Loss,” podcast interview, *Authors on the Line*, December 4, 2012.

47 APJ 111: “Our Move to Tennessee and New Projects” (June 13, 2013).

48 APJ 112: “Adjusting to Life in the Country” (June 14, 2013).

with Pastor John so long absent from Minneapolis. How could we keep his voice close to our audience while he lived and worked eight hundred miles away?

With my little podcast experience, at a ministry team lunch on January 7, 2013, I proposed a new podcast with an old title: *Ask Pastor John*. Podcast delivery would follow the popular Q&A format, reminiscent of the old radio program and the livestream video, but could now geographically detach Pastor John from the host. It would replace eye contact and attentiveness to a video camera with the freedom to work remotely and to work from detailed notes. It eliminated the uncertainties of live and impromptu sessions. Now every episode could be preplanned and every question more carefully selected and studied. Pastor John would now have between forty-five and sixty minutes of prep time for each reply. No cold questions; no cold answers. A time investment made possible when Pastor John became a full-time employee at Desiring God a few months later.⁴⁹ Providentially, at the same time, audio-only podcasting was becoming popular among Christian listeners.

In the podcast proposal, I suggested that topics “could include leadership coaching, pastoral and exegetical and theological questions, responses to contemporary events, autobiographical details of public value, updates on current reading and thinking, responses to listener questions, as well as travel plans and personal and writing updates.” Pastor John *could* cover all those topics. That was clear. And I had a goal in mind: to “connect Pastor John to the Desiring God audience each week from now until the conclusion of his leave.” The podcast would then terminate after eighteen months, giving us about 390 episodes. Surely by then, I thought, every question would be answered.

That evening I sent a formal proposal to Pastor John, and two hours later he eagerly replied: “This sounds excellent. Let’s pray that it will not just be interesting or informative, but spiritually awakening and Christ-exalting, and soul-sanctifying, and mission advancing, and that it would spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things through Jesus Christ, and abundantly more.” Because the goal of human curiosity is not just right answers in the brain, but joy in the satisfied heart (QRCW). Then he asked: “Any suggested regular hour of the week. Like this week, starting Friday?????”⁵⁰ John Piper doesn’t use emojis and rarely repeats punctuation. Four repeated question marks translated into an eagerness to launch this podcast. Just four days after I sent my proposal, we launched episode 1 on January 11, 2013: “Reflections from John Piper on His [Sixty-Seventh] Birthday.”

⁴⁹ Which began April 1, 2013.

⁵⁰ John Piper, email to author, January 7, 2013.

Our initial pace was brisk. Episode 100 released *before* the Pipers left for Knoxville. In our eager jump, we released 245 episodes in 2013 alone, one new episode from Pastor John every weekday. In due time we slowed the pace, but Pastor John’s voice remained very close to Desiring God’s audience. As the Pipers packed up to leave Knoxville and return to Minneapolis, we published episode 400 (on, of all things, a very sensitive marital intimacy question). No topic was taboo, and this episode proved it. The more willingly we embraced awkward situational topics, the quicker our audience grew.

But episode 400 did not become our finish line; it became our tipping point (now the most played episode in the history of the podcast, with around 2.5 million plays and growing). By the time the Pipers returned home to Minneapolis, the podcast had registered nine million episode plays, and—thanks to episode 400—that number quickly rocketed past ten million.⁵¹ New daily emails from listeners increased from ten to twenty to thirty.⁵² We decided to ride out the growth momentum, and we never stopped. Here we are, ten years later.

In the inaugural episode I called APJ a “relaunch” of the previous radio and video formats, but in fact the podcast version developed into a unique product within John Piper’s ministry legacy. The prep time allotted to Pastor John was a big reason why. After a decade, and nearing two thousand episodes, our basic premise remains unchanged, though we’ve modified various aspects of the podcast over the years. Early on we moved our landline phone calls to Skype and then to Zoom. Since Knoxville, Piper has always recorded in his upstairs office in Minneapolis in an urban home on a busy street, and not far from a hospital. Plenty of road noises and sirens have interrupted recordings. To combat the commotion, we experimented with various studio mics that helped but never totally silenced the clamor (most obvious the morning when city workers arrived unannounced to chainsaw down his beloved front-yard tree⁵³).

I also record in my home office, first in Minneapolis and then in Phoenix, always remotely. The exception being August 21, 2019, when Pastor John and I appeared on stage to record our first-ever APJ live in Nashville in front of

51 A few milestones to note, based on the total times our episodes were played. Even before the Pipers moved out of Minneapolis, APJ crested one million total episode plays all-time (July 2013). Shortly after they returned from Knoxville, we hit ten million (October 2014). We hit fifty million in July 2016, one hundred million in July 2018, and two hundred million in July 2021.

52 An email load that soon exceeded our capacity to answer. In total, in our first decade, we averaged thirty emails per day, 216 per week, 936 per month, 11,237 per year—or sixty-three questions *in per Piper episode out*.

53 APJ 1615: “Did Abraham Laugh at God’s Promise?” (April 19, 2021).

about two thousand podcast listeners at the Getty Sing! conference. It resulted in five episodes.⁵⁴ And it worked so well, we repeated it three years later.⁵⁵

To make our publishing pace sustainable over the years, we introduced seasons of guests and sermon extracts, and later scaled to a format of three episodes per week—two new studio episodes from Piper (on Mondays and Fridays), and one curated sermon-clip episode (on Wednesdays). When we launched a new sermon-clip podcast in 2023, we dropped the clips and settled on two episodes per week (on Mondays and Thursdays).

Over time, the podcast proved useful for field recordings of Piper audio that wouldn't fit other content channels. This included his prayer at a local pro-life rally outside a Planned Parenthood facility, simply recorded on an iPhone.⁵⁶ Also on an iPhone, at a Desiring God staff meeting, we captured his prayer for the president, minutes after the staff watched Donald Trump's inauguration together.⁵⁷ And a local church captured an unforgettable prayer at the funeral for a family of five who had been in training to become missionaries to Japan when they were all killed in a single car accident.⁵⁸ Each of these historic audio moments in Pastor John's ministry found a ready home in APJ.

APJ's Goal

The growth of the podcast was great, but it also led to occasional friendly emails from church leaders who feared that APJ's widespread use was subverting the wisdom of local churches, pastors, and Christian friends in our lives who are better suited to help us in our struggles. So at the end of our first year, I asked Pastor John how he wanted listeners to engage with APJ. How should listeners balance the podcast with the voices immediately around us? "In the spirit of 1 Thessalonians 5," he said. "Test everything; hold fast what is good"

54 Sing 2019 episodes were released as APJ 1379: "How Do We Respond When a Pastor Leaves the Faith?" (October 9, 2019), APJ 1382: "When to Stop Listening to This Podcast" (October 16, 2019), APJ 1386: "Should Anyone Say, 'I Am of Calvin?'" (October 25, 2019), APJ 1418: "What Every Marriage Needs Most" (January 8, 2020), and APJ 1421: "How Should I Parent My Non-Christian Teen?" (January 15, 2020).

55 Sing 2022 episodes were released as APJ 1861: "Let the Nations Be Glad!—Thirty Years Later" (November 14, 2022), APJ 1877: "What Makes for a Good Musical Worship Experience?" (December 21, 2022), APJ 1882: "John Piper's Favorite Things" (January 2, 2023), APJ 1885: "Getting the Tone Right on Sunday Morning" (January 9, 2023), and APJ 1887: "When Does Despondency Become Sin?" (January 13, 2023).

56 APJ SE06: "John Piper's Prayer at Planned Parenthood" (August 22, 2015).

57 APJ SE11: "John Piper's Prayer for President Trump" (January 20, 2017).

58 APJ SE10: "John Piper's Funeral Prayer for a Family of Five" (August 6, 2016), a risky episode we debriefed a few weeks later (APJ 931: "How Do You Pray in Public, without Performing?" [August 31, 2016]).

(1 Thess. 5:21). Test everything by the Bible. “That’s where I try to find all my responses to people’s questions.” Second, “I hope they esteem the spiritual leaders of their own churches highly and talk to them about the issues they face—which is also in 1 Thessalonians 5 (1 Thess. 5:13)! There is one final authority and it’s God’s word, not mine. I want to exalt God’s word over and over as true and wise and sweet.”⁵⁹

A few years later, Pastor John mentioned his hope that the podcast was equipping listeners to think for themselves. “My prayer is that, besides the immediate guidance and encouragement it may give, over time, people will absorb a way of thinking and a way of using the Bible so that in the decades to come they will become the sages in their churches where younger people come for wise, Bible-saturated, gospel-rich counsel.”⁶⁰ The purpose of APJ is to disciple Christians into mentors who can better serve the people around them. The podcast doesn’t subvert local churches; it fortifies them. We pray the Christians who listen will be equipped to better serve the many nonlisteners in their lives. Based on our emails, this is happening. (And equipping pastors to be better pastors too.)

The podcast doesn’t replace pastors or friends, because our episodes are not infallible. APJ is one source of wisdom, not a single decoder ring to solve all of life’s riddles. We don’t make decisions for listeners. Our aim is to equip and empower Christians to answer their own questions with an open Bible.

To avoid religious authoritarianism (mentioned above), listeners must be equipped to find answers from Scripture on their own. Pastor John has explained how. Begin with a question and find the corresponding Bible terms. Run a digital concordance word study of those terms. Isolate five (or so) key texts, print them, study their context, and then circle and underline words that seem especially relevant for answering the question. With these texts in place, build your biblical convictions. Knowing most listeners could do this on their own, Piper seeks to “empower” listeners to engage the word for themselves. “You could make your own podcast,” he said with a smile.⁶¹

Why This Book?

John Piper is a pastor-theologian. Decades of pastoral ministry trained him for this podcast. I’m a journalist-teacher. Several years in the print-news industry trained me how to report events and conduct interviews, skills I now use to capture and curate pastoral wisdom to serve APJ’s audience. Reading audience emails, choosing the best questions, scheduling the episodes—my podcast

⁵⁹ John Piper, email to author, March 10, 2014.

⁶⁰ John Piper, email to author, July 11, 2018.

⁶¹ APJ 1084: “If Someone Doesn’t Like Me, Have I Ruined My Christian Witness?” (August 23, 2017).

labors are just an excuse to pull off a 220-hour interview with a pastor-theologian (and friend) who endlessly fascinates me. After a full decade, we have accumulated a huge archive of over 2.3 million published words.

My book is a guided tour, a narrated synthesis of our 750 most popular episodes, mostly on situational ethics, published in the *Ask Pastor John* audio podcast over the course of its first decade (from January 11, 2013 to December 30, 2022). This book is a core sample of John Piper’s mind and theology. I pray it serves four purposes.

1. I want to map the ground we have covered so I don’t repeat questions. With such a vast archive, about a third of new listener emails have been sufficiently covered in the past, either directly or indirectly. This suggests to me that even though we maintain a huge digital archive—fully transcribed and searchable—many people cannot easily find those episodes when they need them. Even I sometimes forget which questions have already been covered. So I pray this book matches our archive to new and future questions you will face. And helps me avoid repetition.

2. I want to topically curate our episodes. As the podcast archive grew, I also noticed a sharp uptick in requests from friends and ministry partners asking me to point them to past APJ answers to specific questions they are facing. I did. And as I did, I discovered how each question is best answered from various angles in multiple episodes. The overlapping value of multiple episodes proved daunting at first. But to each request I responded with an abstract, a summary and synthesis of multiple episodes that I thought could help. In return, I was told these summaries did help. So I kept a running document to collect them over the years. That document became the genesis of this book. And when our international partners heard about these abstracts, they requested them for another reason. Translators interested in bringing the podcast archive to a new language (and APJ now exists in ten languages!) told me that they would benefit from a topical guide to help them triage episodes on given topics and subtopics to guide their work and cluster their focus.

3. I want to celebrate Pastor John’s investment in this podcast. APJ is a one-of-a-kind pastoral resource. As inspiring as he is in explaining his do-it-yourself method, he does so by leaving out his own resume. His answers are not simply the product of a concordance. John Piper is a renowned New Testament scholar, world-class preacher, and veteran pastor with over three decades of church leadership practice added to his personal experience in marriage, parenting, and grandparenting. He watches his life and doctrine more closely than anyone else I’ve known (1 Tim. 4:16). And he was born to answer Bible questions.⁶²

⁶² In keeping, you’ll find references to Scripture and Scripture quotations throughout. Many of these cited scriptures are not direct quotes but paraphrases or original translations. The

He has a keen eye for the crux, skilled in rapidly pinpointing the core problem in a given dilemma—a gift I’ve seen operate in tense meetings, complex email chains, and now in hundreds of APJ responses. While there’s always much more to say on a topic, he can isolate the main thing that needs to be said in a ten-minute episode. His willingness to invest hundreds of hours of preparation into his responses, personal piety, earnestness, devotion to Scripture, skill in pinpointing core issues, and deep experience are the ingredients to the secret sauce of the podcast’s popularity now, and of its potential to endure for decades ahead.

4. I want to acquaint you with the scope and depth of the podcast archive. My fifteen years in curating pastoral wisdom is now employed in the goal of adding value to APJ. This book doesn’t replace the podcast; it complements it as an easily browsable companion guide, a summary of our most popular episodes, particularly focused on the situational dilemmas we will face. It’s a CliffsNotes version of our most popular episodes to aid meditation, retainment, and recall. Books can be easily stacked on shelves. Even magazines can be kept in a box or basket. But podcasts are strictly digital things—ephemeral audio files meant to stream, play, and then disappear like a soundwave in the air. But APJ was designed, from the start, to endure as a permanent audio archive. What you hold in your hands is a guided tour—a topically arranged encyclopedia to a podcast archive. I don’t intend for that to make immediate sense, because I think this book inaugurates a new genre. Basically, my prayer is that by making dozens of the major podcast themes browsable in print, this book will make the archive more useful to you at the very moment you need it. This book doesn’t *have* an index; *it is* the index, an index to serve you as you serve others. So for example, if you’re counseling someone (or a couple), don’t simply copy and assign pages from this book. Instead, assign specific podcast episodes. Use this book to find your assignments.

As we build this podcast into a single content library, our first decade lays the groundwork for everything else to come. For current listeners, the book rehearses key highlights from the past. For future listeners, the book is an on-ramp to summarize the ground we’ve already covered. This book will immediately serve thousands of current listeners who found their way *from* the podcast *to* this book. But perhaps, if the Lord is gracious, the current will reverse in due time, and thousands of readers will find their way *from* this book *to* the podcast.

quotation marks surrounding Scripture verses frequently indicate Pastor John’s speaking from the Scripture rather than the actual Scripture text.

That's my prayer. As you gift this book to not-yet-listeners, you're helping me fulfill this dream. Think of this book as a podcast promo made of paper and ink that you can physically hand to others.

Getting to the Audio

I want to show you around these 220 hours of audio recordings. I'll again be your host, not from behind a mic but from behind a keyboard.

The audio recording and transcript for each episode is housed at the Desiring God website (desiringGod.org). To move from the book to the episode, follow my footnotes. A footnote for "APJ 1173" means everything paraphrased or quoted *before that footnote* is from episode 1173. To find the full episode, go to the APJ homepage—AskPastorJohn.com—and simply type "1173" in the search bar. To find episodes in Google or YouTube, use the full episode titles in your search.

Find the episode number in the footnote, flip to the episode index in the back of this book, and find the episode's full title to use in your search.

Speaking of that index in the back, over the years several APJ listeners have emailed to let us know they have listened to *every episode* of the podcast. You can, too, with that full title index as a guide to every episode featuring Pastor John over the course of our first decade, 2013–2022. It can be used to tick off episodes as you listen through the entire archive. And just browsing the title list is a great way to discover episodes too.

The archive is overwhelming. I want it to feel more manageable through my book, first inspired by Richard Baxter's classic *A Christian Directory* (1673), which weighs in at 1.3 million words (six times longer than this book). Forced in his introduction to address the elephant in the room—its enormous size!—Baxter lamented that it was to his "own great trouble" that "the world cannot be sufficiently instructed and edified in fewer words."⁶³ Ha! Yes. Now zooming past 2.3 million published words, the APJ archive dwarfs Baxter's book. As it does, I'll echo his sentiment. Instructing and edifying the world is wordy work.

Thank-You

But the labor involved in publishing APJ is no trouble or burden. It's a joyful labor, largely because our listeners eagerly listen and enthusiastically participate. But it *is* work. *Hard* work. Firsthand, I've watched John Piper pour himself into every APJ recording session. In the summer of 2018, he bought a Fitbit heart

⁶³ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 1:546.

monitor. A couple of weeks later, as we ended our recording of one particularly grueling series of questions, I said: “Wow, that was a lot!” He agreed. “Whew—I feel like I just ran a marathon!” he replied, with a joy-filled laugh as he looked down at the Fitbit on his wrist. “I have been stunned—stunned—when I look at the graph of my day. I have a lot of 60 bpm. And then spikes go up to 100 or 125 bpm. Of course, the spikes are there when I jog and when I lift. But they’re also there when I preach and record APJs. But I don’t feel out of breath like when I jog. It’s adrenaline—an adrenaline high, I guess.”⁶⁴

That summer we reached 100 million episodes played, and at this benchmark I discovered another side to his exertion. I asked Pastor John to reflect on what it had been like for him working on the podcast. “There are times I put my face in my hands and shake my head when I read the questions you send me from our listeners,” he said of his prep days. “So much suffering. So much sorrow. So many imponderable relational tangles with seemingly no human solution. So the effect of *Ask Pastor John* on my life is first to soften me for people’s suffering, and then anger me at sin and Satan. It drives me not only to the word of God, my only hope of helping anybody, but also to prayer and to the Holy Spirit. In other words, the podcast makes me feel helpless.”⁶⁵

Pouring our lives into the work, in a spirit of desperation, we depend wholly on God for this podcast to continue. Ten years old, nearing two thousand episodes, passing 230 million episode plays—all of it is grace. We charge no fees. We use no sidebar ads or paid sponsors. We depend wholly on God, putting it on listeners’ hearts to pray for us and to financially support us, so that we can—together—make the podcast free and accessible to millions of listeners around the world. APJ has the potential to serve the church for decades ahead, and it has been the honor of a lifetime to play my part in it. For all of it, I’d like to personally say thank you! To *you*—Desiring God’s precious ministry partners—I dedicate this book.

64 John Piper, raw recording session outro, June 6, 2018.

65 John Piper, email to author, July 11, 2018.

A Word before We Begin

DON'T STOP LISTENING TO THE PODCAST! What you hold is a companion guide, a thematic synthesis, an easy-to-browse encyclopedia, to make the audio archive more valuable and useful. My book is intentionally brief, blunt, and to the point. The audio recordings are fuller, warmer, and more pastoral. Use them in tandem.

You probably won't agree with everything in this book or on the podcast. That's okay. Read and listen as a good Berean with an open Bible and active discernment.

You won't need everything in this book. Not immediately. It covers a broad swath of situational ethics on our most popular themes.

If you are a Christian leader and pastor, however, you should consider every word of this book. These topics will introduce you to the mind of John Piper as he addresses situational, ethical dilemmas from the Bible. By them I hope you will more clearly see how he processes challenging questions. It's formative. While I am forever grateful to God that Piper writes books and preaches sermons, I have learned the most from Pastor John in his answers to great questions. Those answers help me contextualize his complete works.

Study Pastor John's text-first approach to ethics. With a question on the table, Pastor John begins with the clearest biblical texts on the topic first, then reasons out to proper application. The church can sometimes rush too quickly to discuss and debate very specific ethical *applications*, too often running past the first step of getting clear on the *baseline relevant texts*, which are the ground of all else. For the sake of the church, this text-first approach will remain an essential discipline for Christian authors, professors, journalists, counselors, pastors, preachers, parents, and anyone who describes or prescribes Christian ethics. The goal of the podcast is the aim of this book—to help you form your own ethical synapses, new junctions where Scripture connects to daily life in the twenty-first-century world.

Most importantly, desire God. God *is*—“absolute, self-existent, and independent of all other reality” (Exod. 3:14). He has no beginning and no end. He experiences no need, no change, no improvements.¹ Behind, under, over, and around the entire APJ podcast looms this self-sufficient Creator of the universe, infinitely happy in himself. Every other topic—from salvation to smartphones to sulking to sex—can only be handled Christianly in the presence of our triune Creator’s bliss. “From all eternity, before all time, God was alive with volcanic joy. Joy is essential to the very nature of God in the fellowship of the infinitely happy and holy Trinity. The Father loves the Son and finds him supremely well pleasing. The Son loves the Father and delights in all that he is. The Holy Spirit streams omnipotently with his joy between the Father and the Son. So God needs nothing. He has no deficiencies. He is free from all evil and full of all good.”²

All of God’s subsequent sovereign actions display his all-powerful independence. God is “completely happy” within himself, “happy at the core of his being in his all-sufficiency.” From his self-sufficiency he creates the world, in love, a place “to share with creatures in his own image the very joy that he has in himself.” God doesn’t need creation. Or you. Or me. And yet he is so “perfectly happy” in himself that he chooses to create us and to redeem us from our sin through Christ’s blood so that we can experience the eternal bliss of delighting in him. And so arises “this great circle of *enjoying* God and *glorifying* God.”³ The two aims become one. Thus, second only to the happiness he enjoys in himself, “there is no higher or greater happiness that God is looking forward to” than “the delight that he takes in the echoes of his excellence in the supremely happy praises of the saints.”⁴ Only to this ultimate and eternal end—God glorified by our satisfaction in him—should each of our life decisions be considered and each of the following episodes be consumed.⁵

1 APJ 1600: “Who Is God?” (March 15, 2021).

2 APJ SE09: “The Joy Project” (September 21, 2015).

3 APJ 116: “God’s Joy and the Joy of the Calvinist” (June 20, 2013).

4 APJ 958: “The Heart of Christian Hedonism—and the Bible and Creation and Everything” (November 2, 2016).

5 To flesh out John Piper’s “favorite slogan” (“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him”), see APJ 30: “Three Levels of God-Glorifying Emotion” (February 19, 2013), APJ 194: “Is God an Egomaniac?” (October 15, 2013), APJ 482: “Are We Satisfied ‘in God’ or ‘by God?’” (December 1, 2014), APJ 497: “Is God Less Glorified in the Judgment of Sinners?” (December 22, 2014), APJ 702: “Is God Only Glorified by People Who Love Him?” (October 8, 2015), APJ 1096: “What’s the Origin of Desiring God’s Slogan?” (September 20, 2017), APJ 1201: “Is My Joy Essential in Glorifying God?” (May 23, 2018), and APJ 1215: “Is God Glorified in Those Who Reject Him?” (June 25, 2018).

On Bible Reading, Bible Neglect, and Bible Memory

Why do we read the Bible?

We prioritize daily Bible reading because without it we fail to achieve life's great purpose: "to make God in Christ look magnificent—to make him look precious and valuable, to look like the supreme treasure that he is" (Phil. 1:20). And yet, "there's so much in us that is inclined to think or feel or act in ways that *don't* make Christ look great." To accomplish our great purpose, we must see glory. "If we don't desire and cherish and enjoy and savor and treasure Christ, we will not commend him as magnificent in what we feel and say and do. Christ is most magnified in us when we are most satisfied in him, and we cannot be daily satisfied in the depths of our soul in Christ if we don't *see* him and *savor* him." And that will "only happen" by a "steady meditation on the word of God in the Bible." In Scripture we behold Christ's glory, and this glory transforms us from the inside out (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4).

Proper Bible reading is motivated by a desperation to see God. "The reason I read the Bible is because I am stone-cold dead without Christ and his word. But I want all my life—every part of it—to be glorious. I want life to be beautiful. I want life to be vastly more than it is if I'm left to myself. I want to see how astonishing reality is at every turn—every person, every rock, every tree, every animal, every work of salvation. I know that, left to myself, I am an absolute dud. I am blank, nothing deep, nothing moving, nothing intense, nothing beautiful, nothing precious, nothing sweet or wonderful—just empty, blank, unmoved, coasting along from one worldly preoccupation to another." There's "one hope for John Piper: that I would have eyes to see the God-entranced magnificence of everything—namely, that God would be pleased in my Bible reading to cause me to see the glory that is really there." We must see and savor the glory that shapes us into redeemed sinners who

magnify God by being satisfied in him. Set in this context, Bible reading is truly an “awesome quest.”¹

Why read the Bible daily?

To a new believer who asked why daily Bible reading is so essential to a fruitful life: “I have never met a mature, fruitful, strong, spiritually discerning Christian who is not full of Scripture, devoted to regular meditation on Scripture, and given to storing it in the heart through Bible memorization—and that’s not a coincidence.” Indeed, “it is absolutely essential, after coming to faith in Christ, to be radically, deeply, experientially devoted—unshakably, unwaveringly persuaded—that reading and meditating on and understanding and memorizing and enjoying the Scriptures is absolutely essential for the Christian life.” It calls for daily practice.

Here are ten reasons we need the word daily. (1) Scripture is a means of preserving our salvation. Salvation is a dynamic reality that functions in three tenses: past, present, and future. And in the present reality, “God saves us daily by Scripture” (1 Tim. 4:16). (2) Scripture meets Satan’s temptations (John 8:32, 44; 1 John 2:14). “Every time Jesus was tempted by the devil, he struck back with ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’” (Eph. 6:17). And he had it memorized “so he didn’t have to carry a book in the wilderness.” (3) Scripture is a means of grace and peace to us (2 Pet. 1:2). (4) Scripture is meant to sanctify our lives, to make us more and more holy (John 17:17). “We don’t become perfect in this life, but we do become holy” through the Spirit’s work in our lives via the word. (5) Scripture gives us joy (Ps. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:6). “Life without joy is unbearable. The Christian life is filled with afflictions. But in them all, God sustains joy, and he does it by the Scriptures.” (6) Scripture protects from error (Eph. 4:13–14). How do Christians avoid becoming leaves blown around by all the cultural winds of opinions? The answer: “The unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God—knowledge that they experience not as the opinion of man, but as the word of God. That’s found in one place: the scriptures.” (7) Scripture gives us hope for eternity. Scripture promises us that the frustrations that limit our joy in this life will be removed in the age to come. (8) Scripture keeps us from being startled by false teachers and apostates (2 Tim. 4:3). (9) The Bible calls for careful handling, which we can only learn through day-by-day familiarity with the word (2 Tim. 2:15). (10) The Bible sustains our lives (Matt. 4:4). “Spiritual life—eternal life—just like physical life, must be fed, not by bread, but by the word of God. If you think

1 APJ 1140: “A New Year, A New Bible Reading Plan” (January 1, 2018).

that you have eternal life as a kind of vaccination against hell, which needs no nourishment, you don't know what spiritual life is." Spiritual life is sustained by the daily bread of God's word.²

How do I get the most from my Bible reading?

With all these convictions in place, how do we maximize the impact of our daily Bible reading?

People are very different, and Bible reading will be a different experience for everyone, including the man who initially asked the question. "How disciplined is he? How much time does he have available? What skill does he have in reading—what speed and comprehension? How familiar is he with all the parts of the Bible, even those maybe he hasn't read at all? What level of curiosity does he have that might drive him to slow down and figure things out that are puzzling to him?" Our Bible reading experiences differ because "our capacities for reading and comprehending, our speed, and our life situations are different."

Despite the variables, here are common helps.

1. Belong to a great church that models careful Bible reading by preaching verse by verse. "Few things are more helpful in grasping the totality of Scripture than a steady, week in and week out, month in and month out, year in and year out, decade in and decade out feeding on the preached word of God. Oh, this is so important. If your pastor doesn't preach Bible texts and explain to you what they mean, please try to find another church. Because the decades of your life will be gloriously transformed if you sit under the preaching of the word like that for a long, long time." What you hear preached on Sunday morning should illuminate what you read on Monday morning.

2. Find friends who offer accountability and ask you how your reading is going.

3. Set your routine. "Set aside a place and a time where you're going to read your Bible every day. If you don't have a set place and a set time, Satan—along with your own flesh—will almost certainly push your Bible reading right out of your schedule and out of your space."

4. Pray. "Pray earnestly over your Bible reading before you read, while you're reading, and after you read. Pray that God would show you what's really there and make it real for you."

5. Appreciate the deep change that comes from persistence. The Bible is huge. In a given day you'll read four chapters, most of which you will forget in

2 APJ 1512: "Ten Reasons to Read the Bible Every Day" (August 14, 2020).

an hour. In this sense, daily reading will soon feel “absolutely overwhelming and pointless.” But in the discipline, Scripture is “lodging itself in your mind and in your heart in ways you cannot comprehend. The so-called forgotten *language*, the forgotten *paragraphs*, the forgotten *words*, the forgotten *stories*, the forgotten *points* are becoming a repository from which the Holy Spirit can draw out things you do not even know are there.”

6. Take something specific from your reading. More practically, aim to “take one crisp, clear sentence with you—something encouraging, something motivating, something strengthening, something guiding. Write it down on a little piece of paper, stick it in your pocket, stick it in your purse, whatever. Say it to yourself over and over again during the day. Those sentences accumulated—365 of them—are an amazing power and stockpile of truth over time.”

7. Very practically, use the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan to read from four places in the Bible, with the benefit of catch-up days built into the monthly rhythms. But read it. Read all of it. Because “if we leave out big parts of the Bible, we probably won’t know God the way we should.”³

What should we expect on our first read through the Bible?

The Bible daunts any first-time reader, so it’s natural to feel intimidated from the start. Here are three negatives to “scare you off,” and then nine positives to “suck you back in.”

Expect three challenges that will dampen your desire to read the Bible cover to cover.

1. You will be opposed. “Satan hates the word of God and will disincline you, blind you, distract you, bore you.” He will do anything to keep you from the word. Pray for his subversive aims to backfire. “Ask God to keep your heart inclined, remove your blindness, grant you focus instead of distraction, and give you excitement instead of boredom.”

2. You will be shocked. The Bible is raw and honest about life and eternal matters. It’s “stunningly graphic in its description, both of our outrageous sin and God’s breathtaking judgment on sin. If you have any kind of sympathetic engagement with the Bible, you will want to throw up at times when you see what God ordains against sin in this world.” Brace yourself.

3. You will be confused. Expect to come away from Bible reading with unanswered questions, because God does not reveal to us everything we want to know (Deut. 29:29). And what he does reveal is sometimes hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). You will need preachers and teachers in your life to make

3 APJ 1296: “How Do I Make the Most of Daily Bible Reading?” (December 31, 2018).

progress in the challenging parts of Scripture. Press through the confusion. “Put things together that you can put together. And what you can’t figure out, put on the shelf for later attention, and keep on moving.” Don’t let any question stop your progress.

If you press on, expect nine experiences to bless your efforts. (1) Your faith will be deepened. Faith comes from hearing the word, because the Bible was written to give us hope (Rom. 10:17; 15:4). (2) You will experience new liberation from lies and sins that have plagued you (John 8:32). (3) You will be outfitted with new weapons to withstand Satan (Matt. 4:1–11). (4) You will be made more holy (John 17:17). (5) You will become more loving (Phil. 1:9). (6) You will be sustained. “The Bible is the means of God by which he goes on saving us” (1 Tim. 4:16). (7) You will be given an indestructible joy (John 15:11). (8) You will meet God directly, because he meets us in his word (1 Sam. 3:21). (9) And you will behold more and more of Christ’s radiant glory (2 Cor. 3:18). These nine blessed experiences make the challenges of daily Bible reading worthwhile.⁴

How do we stay passionate about Bible reading for a full year?

We don’t follow Bible reading plans to tick off a daily checklist or to meet an external law. We do it to meet an internal necessity, because “feeding upon the word of God day-by-day is built into God’s way of saving you.” We are born again by the word that awakens our spiritual appetite (1 Pet. 1:23–2:3). In this new condition, Peter tells us to *keep on desiring* this word. This is no auto-appetite. We “stoke this desire for spiritual food in the word of God by which you were born again.” The pure word saved us (1 Pet. 1:23–25). And because of it, we can long for the pure milk of the word, “that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:1–3). James makes the same point. The word made you alive (James 1:18). Therefore, go on receiving the word with meekness (James 1:21). “The evidence of your new birth will be shown by your ongoing feeding on the word of God, which works in you all the kinds of things that keep you on the narrow road that leads to life and final salvation.” If you neglect the word, “what’s your alternative strategy for making it home?”

Peter and James remind us that the Christian life starts with a new birth brought about by the word, and it is sustained by receiving the word humbly and regularly. Our spiritual lives are not preserved automatically; they are preserved by the means of God’s word. “I love to get up early in the morning,

4 APJ 1416: “What Should I Expect My First Time through the Bible?” (January 3, 2020).

grab my cup of hot tea in the wintertime, sit in my chair for an hour, and enjoy fellowship with Jesus, the living King of the universe, in four different places of the Bible. It is my life. May I say it again? It is my life. Oh, may God cause you to experience his word as life!”⁵

Where should I help a new believer begin his journey into the Bible?

The Gospel of John is celebrated as a good place to start, given that its purpose is clearly to introduce the life and work of Christ (John 20:30–31). But you can go broader and begin with some sense of familiarity with the New Testament. The Bible is meant for a lifetime of exploration and daily discipline. John Piper’s sixty years as a believer have been sustained by this discipline of daily Bible reading. “Wherever you start, you are going *forever* in the Bible. This is not about merely starting.”

Another place to start is with an overview of the New Testament’s structure. It begins with four Gospels, “the books about the historical foundations of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” And then comes the book of Acts, “the story of how the early church got started and launched by the power of the Holy Spirit after Jesus went back to heaven, and how the church took root because of what Jesus had done.” Next comes a bunch of letters written by “the authoritative apostles—the spokesmen for the risen Christ—teaching the church how to live in the church and in society.” Finally, the “strange book” of Revelation finishes the New Testament with “the victory of God at the end of the age.”

Or you can start with Luke and Acts, one book in two volumes. See the opening of the book and their united purposes as “one man writing a double volume about the foundations and then about the expansion of the church” (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3). Then move to Paul’s letters.

Every reader brings different intellectual capacities and reading abilities. Some will struggle to read, and that’s okay. Essential to Bible reading is also finding a church “with solid preaching, vital corporate worship, and a small group of relationships where you can ask lots of questions” and “get all the help in the world” as you make your way through the canon “little by little.”⁶

Another consideration. If you’ve never read the Bible, start with Jesus. Begin with two books about his life and work. Start with the Gospel of Mark and then read the Gospel of John. Then read an epistle that puts all the implications of

5 APJ 1569: “How Do I Become Passionate about Bible Reading?” (January 1, 2021).

6 APJ 284: “Where Should a New Believer Start in the Bible?” (February 24, 2014).

Christ's life and work together, particularly Romans. Then consider a historical book about the early church, called Acts. And then read from the middle of the Bible, the Psalms, ancient songs that "capture all the moods and the ups and downs and the struggles of God's people."⁷

Three essential components to daily Bible reading

We need three essential components "to ongoing fruitful encounters with God and his intended truth through the Bible." (1) *Motivation*, (2) *skill*, and (3) *illumination*. Or (1) the "want to," (2) the "able to," and (3) the "see through." Or the (1) *desire*, (2) *act*, and (3) *reward* of Bible reading.

Essential Bible reading component 1 is the motivation—the "want to," the desire for Bible reading. "If we lose motivation, we will not read the Bible. And if we don't read the Bible, we miss everything God has for us through the word." We *must* be motivated for the task, with motivation like Jesus offers in John 17. "There is a fullness of joy that we will miss if we don't continually listen to what Jesus speaks—that is, listen to the Bible" (John 17:13). And there's a life transformation we will miss if we don't read the Bible (John 17:17). And there's a strengthening of our faith that comes through the testimony of Christ and his apostles via Scripture (John 17:20). "If you want faith, if you want holiness, if you want joy—they all come through encountering God in his word, Jesus says. That's how we get motivated."

Essential Bible reading component 2 is the skill—the "able to," the act of Bible reading. "Something mysterious happens when we pick up a pen or a pencil—not a keyboard, but a pen or a pencil—and we either write out the text, or if it's too long, write down questions you have or observations you make about the things that you're reading in the text." The act of writing out the text will cause you to have new thoughts about the text you would not have had otherwise. Write out your thoughts and questions. Note-taking cultivates careful Bible reading.

Essential Bible reading component 3 is illumination—the "see through," the reward of Bible reading. The payoff. The *realities* of God—his character, will, and ways—"shine through the Scriptures." We see these divine glories by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:18).⁸

Component 3 is subtle, profound, and expounded elsewhere more fully. It means we don't grow content with checking off daily readings, or marking up our Bible for Instagram, or even arcing or diagramming texts. Press "through

7 APJ 464: "I've Never Read the Bible. Where Should I Start?" (November 3, 2014).

8 APJ 1297: "Three Reasons to Read the Bible Every Day in 2019" (January 2, 2019).

the words” to get into “the *reality*” that was “driving and animating” the Bible’s words.⁹ “Massive realities are *behind* these words.” So push yourself “*through* words into reality.”¹⁰ “Push through” the Bible’s words and grammar and logic until you see “the *reality* behind all the words and grammar and logic.” And then dwell on that illuminated divine *reality* until it becomes “an *emotionally experienced reality*.”¹¹

How many Bible versions should I read?

Settle on one main translation. The English Standard Version is Piper’s choice. The ESV is not perfect (no translation is), but it “strikes such a good balance between formal equivalence to the original language as far as possible and readability and appropriate dignity, while being accessible, for the most part, to ordinary folks,” a rare translation broadly useful for personal study, the church’s gathered life, and for memorization by both children and adults. That’s “asking a lot of a translation, to cover all of those bases.”

Good Bible translations don’t overinterpret or oversimplify challenging texts. And yet, with all the varying philosophies behind each work, no contemporary English translation will “lead people into serious doctrinal error.” So it’s a great question: Read one or multiple? “The rule of thumb that I would suggest is this: use multiple translations for the purpose of *increased understanding*—for instance, use them as commentaries—and use one main translation for the purpose of *memorization* and *the saturation of your mind*.”¹²

Ink or pixels?

Is a Bible on-screen or a Bible on paper best for personal devotions?

“I have done all my reading—Bible reading, devotional reading—on an iPad for several years now” and it’s a “wonderful” reading experience, having original-language resources and commentaries available with a screen tap. “So the digital word has made the Bible more accessible, and it has made helps easier to use. Those are some of the upsides.” Apps provide immediate access to tools to enhance our Bible reading experience.

But the digital convenience has two drawbacks.

1. The downside of transience. “I want to see the highlighting and underlining and note-taking with a digital Bible as more secure and more permanent. When I have a paper Bible in front of me, I can be underlining it, taking notes

9 APJ 1713: “John Piper’s Ministry in One Bible Text” (December 3, 2021).

10 APJ 1268: “How to Read the Bible for Teenagers” (October 26, 2018).

11 APJ 1197: “How to Read the Bible—and Preach It” (May 14, 2018).

12 APJ 1003: “How Many Bible Versions Should I Read?” (February 15, 2017).

in the margin, and that Bible can go on a shelf, and forty years later—which is what I do with my King James Bible from when I was fifteen years old—fifty years later I can take that down and look at what God was doing, at what he was showing me.” Instead, there’s a lingering suspicion that digital notes are doomed to be deleted over time. A “lack of permanence.” We need software that “takes this seriously” by allowing users to export all personal notes and highlights into a file you can save, archive, and return to years later.

2. The downside of immediate distractions. Digital Bible reading requires special focus because we’re just a click away from social media or texts or emails, or a pop-up notification away from having our screen intruded upon. Bible reading easily gets co-opted as we jump back and forth from app to app, a communion-killing compulsion. “Real change happens in the human soul when God shows up in his almighty, authoritative word and works on you. And that is just diminished when we are jumping around looking at other things.” It’s a serious downside. If you cannot overcome this app-jumping impulse, “I would say that it might be better not to even put yourself at risk.”¹³

Yet again, digital Bible programs on a tablet add expediency at several levels. Daily readings are made convenient by an app like Logos where the Bible plan readings are hyperlinked to make it easy to flip to and read. You can copy, paste, highlight, and save verses for meditation later in the day. You can share Bible verses and brief meditations to Twitter and social media. You can click on English words to see their Greek or Hebrew origin. You can earmark texts for future writing projects. And you can reference Bible commentaries with a tap.¹⁴

How do I find the meaning of a Bible text?

Seven stages of discovery will unlock a text. (1) Define key words. Every word has a meaning, often derived from the context—from the immediate context, the paragraph, and the book overall. Find these keywords with Bible software or a concordance, “my most commonly used tool in Bible study.” Rather than turning to commentaries or Bible dictionaries, gather up texts to get you into the author’s head. “What issues all the insight, almost 90 percent of the time, is looking up words that put me onto the trains of thought in an author’s mind.” (2) Find the propositions. Propositions, “the basic building blocks of meaning,” tie those words together, usually with a subject, a verb, and some modifiers. (3) Relate the propositions. Look for these connections in words like *because, therefore, in order that, although, or when*. “This is the way an author

13 APJ 275: “Digital or Paper Bible for Devotions?” (February 11, 2014).

14 APJ 828: “How Do You Use Your iPhone and iPad in Christian Growth?” (April 1, 2016).

communicates his meaning. He puts words together in propositions, then he puts propositions together in certain logical relationships.” (4) Determine the main point of the text flow. The propositions will link together into a logical flow, revealing the author’s point. (5) Compare different texts with similar themes. Find other texts that carry similar terms or similar logical flows, and compare and contrast how they convey the same meaning. (6) Stop to appreciate the reality behind the text. This is a serious step, too often neglected by even the most serious students. “Lots of young people, and older people, when they’re getting excited about seeing the meaning of words, seeing how propositions work, seeing how logical flows of thought develop, get all excited about words and logic. Suddenly they’re playing a game, and they’re forgetting about heaven and hell, life and death, God and Satan—the massive realities behind these words. So I want to push myself through words into reality.” (7) Make life application. Apply your discoveries to your own life. So run a Bible app search for keywords or get a good concordance—the “most helpful” and “most commonly used tool in my Bible study. Commentaries don’t even come close.”¹⁵

Often the meaning of a complicated verse will come only by studying the larger context. When you’re stumped by a text, “step back and look at the larger flow” of the author’s thinking. This will often help resolve the meaning and purpose of a verse or phrase.¹⁶

Too many Christians assume that others must tell them what a text means before they can start thinking about it. That’s false. God gave us “a huge, untapped resource for Bible study: our minds.” So think over texts as you write verses out by hand into a personal notebook. In seminary, Pastor John began writing the text out, and in “writing every proposition of every paragraph on a different line and figuring out how those propositions relate to each other—the very writing caused me to see things.” Writing slows us down, enhances learning, and improves retention. It allows you to write and retain your response. On the same page as the Bible text you copied out, write out implications you see or questions the text raises in your mind. The goal is communion. “We want to meet God in the Bible. And in my experience, slow, meditative, commenting, question-asking reading is where I meet God. I don’t meet God when I am rushing through a text. So get a pen and paper. Open your Bible and copy out a paragraph.”¹⁷

15 APJ 1268: “How to Read the Bible for Teenagers” (October 26, 2018). On studying isolated texts, see APJ 1056: “How Can I Better Study a Bible Passage?” (June 19, 2017).

16 APJ 1863: “Do Unbelievers Get a Second Chance after Death?” (November 18, 2022).

17 APJ 127: “Advice for Better Bible Reading” (July 8, 2013). Piper alludes here to the discipline of arcing. On arcing see APJ 395: “What Tools Do I Need to Study the Bible?” (July 29, 2014),