

How to Read the Bible

(And Actually Understand It)

Introduction

The Bible is a comprehensive story of God constructed in 66 books that the church has historically agreed on as Scripture.

Bill Sunday, a famous evangelist in the early 1900's provided a beautiful description of what understanding the whole narrative of Scripture can be like.

"Twenty-nine years ago, with the Holy Spirit as my Guide, I entered at the portico of Genesis, walked down the corridor of the Old Testament art-galleries, where pictures of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Isaac, Jacob and Daniel hang on the wall. I passed into the music room of the Psalms where the spirit sweeps the keyboard of nature until it seems that every reed and pipe in God's great organ responds to the harp of David the sweet singer of Israel.

"I entered the chamber of Ecclesiastes, where the voice of the preacher is heard, and into the conservatory of Sharon and the lily of the valley where sweet spices filled and perfumed my life.

"I entered the business office of Proverbs and on into the observatory of the Prophets where I saw telescopes of various sizes pointing to far off events, concentrating on the bright and morning Star which was to rise above the moonlit hills of Judea for our salvation and redemption.

"I entered the audience room of the King of kings, catching a vision written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Thence into the correspondence room with Paul, Peter, James and John writing their Epistles. (*Billy Sunday Speaks* [New York: Chelsea House, 1970], p. 23).

The goal of this class is to learn how to read the whole of scripture in a way that is faithful to the text and, more importantly, to God. Each week we will have a "case study" from scripture and will spend time discussing what each passage means.

Foundations

There are four fundamental things that provide a foundation for the work we are going to do. We might call them the four cornerstones of Bible interpretation.

Incarnation

In the incarnation God demonstrates in fullness what he has always done for mankind. He enters into our situation, contextual and societally aware, in order that we may grow in relationship with Him.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1:14

Though scripture should never be held in the same regard as our Lord and Savior, Jesus, Scripture carries a similar nature in that it is both divinely inspired and humanly constructed.

How do you see this in the Bible? (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

What it meant -> What it Means

A second foundational element is the difference between "exegesis" and "hermeneutics." These terms are technical jargon for Bible scholars and while you don't need to know these specific terms it is important to understand their concept.

- ❖ Exegesis – The process of discovering *what the text meant* to the original audience.
- ❖ Hermeneutics – The process of discovering based upon exegesis *what the text means* to us today.

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

2 Timothy 2:15

Why is it important for us to understand first what the text originally meant? (Romans 1:16-17.)

Reading Scripture Is Communal

The third foundational element that is often overlooked but that is Biblically accurate and vital for reading and understanding scripture is that Bible reading is a communal event. Now, by that we don't mean that a person can only read the Bible when they are with other Christians. It is important that every one of us read scripture daily. Instead, we mean that we should be a part of a community of people who are working to read, understand, and be transformed by the Holy Spirit as we engage with scripture.

My voice should not be the only one I hear when I read and interpret the Bible.

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." 2 Timothy 3:14-15.

Philip and the Eunuch – Acts 8

Why is it important that scripture reading is a community event?

Anagnosis (Read and Know)

Paul writes to his "son" in the faith, "Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching."

The word that is translated here, "public reading" is one word in the original language: Anagnosis. This word literally means, "a knowing accurately, knowing by reading; then simply, reading."

This word is usually used to describe the public reading of scripture, but within the word is the idea of comprehension. The text is to be read and understood. Scripture carries at a minimum this idea. Whereas with many books they are for entertainment or fleeting interest, but the Bible is different in that we are called to not only understand but to be transformed.

How can reading the Bible transform your life?

According to the Bible who is the one at work in the transformation?

Translations

The Bible is written in two primary languages: Hebrew for the Old Testament and Koine Greek for the New Testament. A third language, Aramaic, occurs in a few, scattered occurrences. Likewise, there is no original manuscript of the Bible. Instead we have scattering of different ancient manuscripts written in languages foreign to us. So how can we trust what we are reading?

Manuscripts

The study of manuscripts is referred to as “textual criticism.” This is the effort of Biblical scholars to find the most authentic (original) form of the Bible. To keep things simple we will focus on the NT exclusively in this section. There are three basic types of New Testament manuscripts:

- ❖ Greek manuscripts – these are manuscripts as early as the 2nd century AD. They preserve the order of wording and layout. Between the 2nd and 13th century we have nearly 3000 full Greek manuscripts and nearly 2300 lectionary manuscripts.
- ❖ Ancient Translations – We also have a variety of helpful translations of the NT. The Latin, Syriac, and Coptic version date from the 2nd-5th centuries. These are useful as for supporting dating and history of different readings.
- ❖ Quotations in ancient authors – Though these are not often exact, word-for-word quotations, they are still useful in how early they exist. The early “church fathers” often paraphrased portions of the NT in their sermons.

None of us here are qualified, nor do we have the time to take on the task of “textuall criticism.” That is why it is so important that we are part of a community of believers who have helped us come to a strong reading of the Bible.

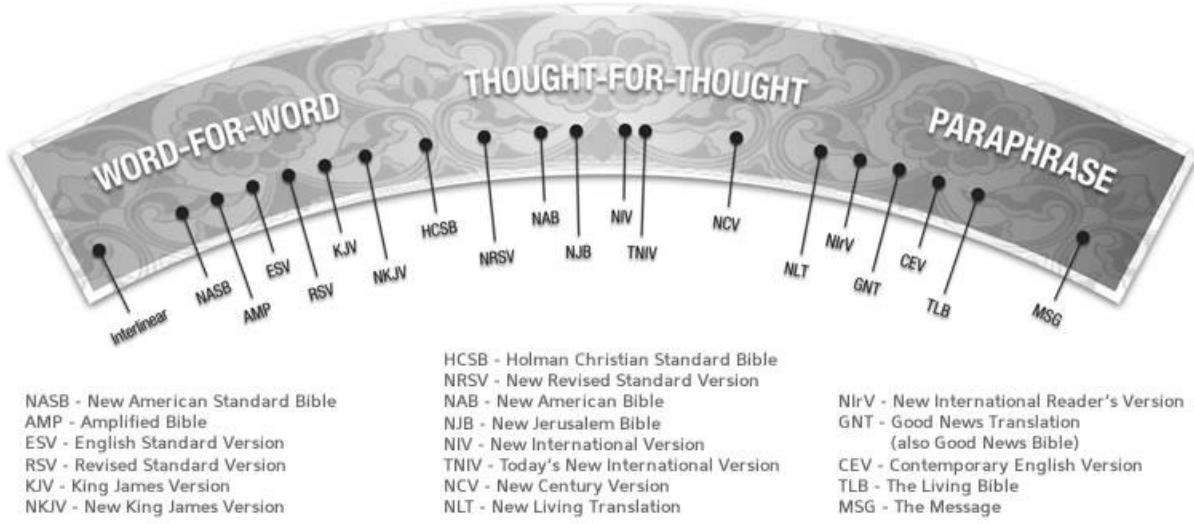
What does this teach us about the nature of the Bible?

Translations

Read Nehemiah 8:1-8. How do you see translation at play in this text?

There are a variety of different translations, and each take a slightly different approach to translating the Bible. We talk about the type of translation on a sliding scale from Word for Word (literal) through Thought for Thought (dynamic-equivalent) to Paraphrase (free). See the scale below.

Types of Bible Translations



Case Study: Galatians 2:16.

Look at different translations and see if there is any major difference between them.

Case Study: 1 Corinthians 7:26.

Look at different translations and see if there is any major difference between them.

What are the pros and cons of each type of translation?

What is the best way to approach differences in translations?

Context

To understand scripture you must understand the context of the scripture that you are reading. This doesn't mean that you have to be a world class archeologist or biblical scholar, but it does mean that from time to time it takes a little more work and conversation to better understand a passage. Context is a very big issue and we will take a few weeks to explore. There are a variety of layers of context, but for simplicity we will spend the next three weeks talking about literary context, historical context and theological context. First, we need a word about the problems associated with not properly regarding context.

Context Problems

One of the greatest issues in Bible reading is not properly regarding the context of a text. This can happen in variety of ways, but the two most common are:

- ❖ Proof texting – This is the problem of taking a verse of scripture to support the theology you are promoting instead of listening to scripture to develop your theology. For example I believe that God is much like a chicken and in support I quote Matthew 23:37 and Psalm 91:4.
 - What is the problem with proof texting?
 - Where do you see proof texting most often at play?

- ❖ Personal Application Fallacy – This is where you take a verse from scripture and do not apply the principle of *what it meant -> what it means*. Thus, you take the scripture, regardless of its meaning, to be specifically and directly written to or about you. For example see Philippians 4:13.
 - What is the problem with personal application?
 - Where do you see personal application most often at play?

Case Study – Philippians 4:13

How do you most often see this verse interpreted?

What fallacy is at play most often in the interpretation of this verse?

Literary Context

Literary context is the first element of context that is important in Bible reading. Every verse of scripture is imbedding in a broader literary setting. A sentence belongs to an entire paragraph. A paragraph belongs to an entire story or thought. A story or thought belongs to an entire letter and etc.

It is important to understand scripture within its literary context. The best way to study literary thought is to think of scripture like a tree.

See Attachment A on the next page.

Genre is very important to understanding scripture. The genre of a passage teaches us how we are to read that passage. Genre includes but is not limited to Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts), Epistles (Romans – Jude), History (Joshua – Esther), Apocalyptic (Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation), Prophets (Isaiah – Malachi), Wisdom Literature (Job-Song of Songs), and Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy).

Also within a genre can be a subgenre's

Case Study – Luke 10

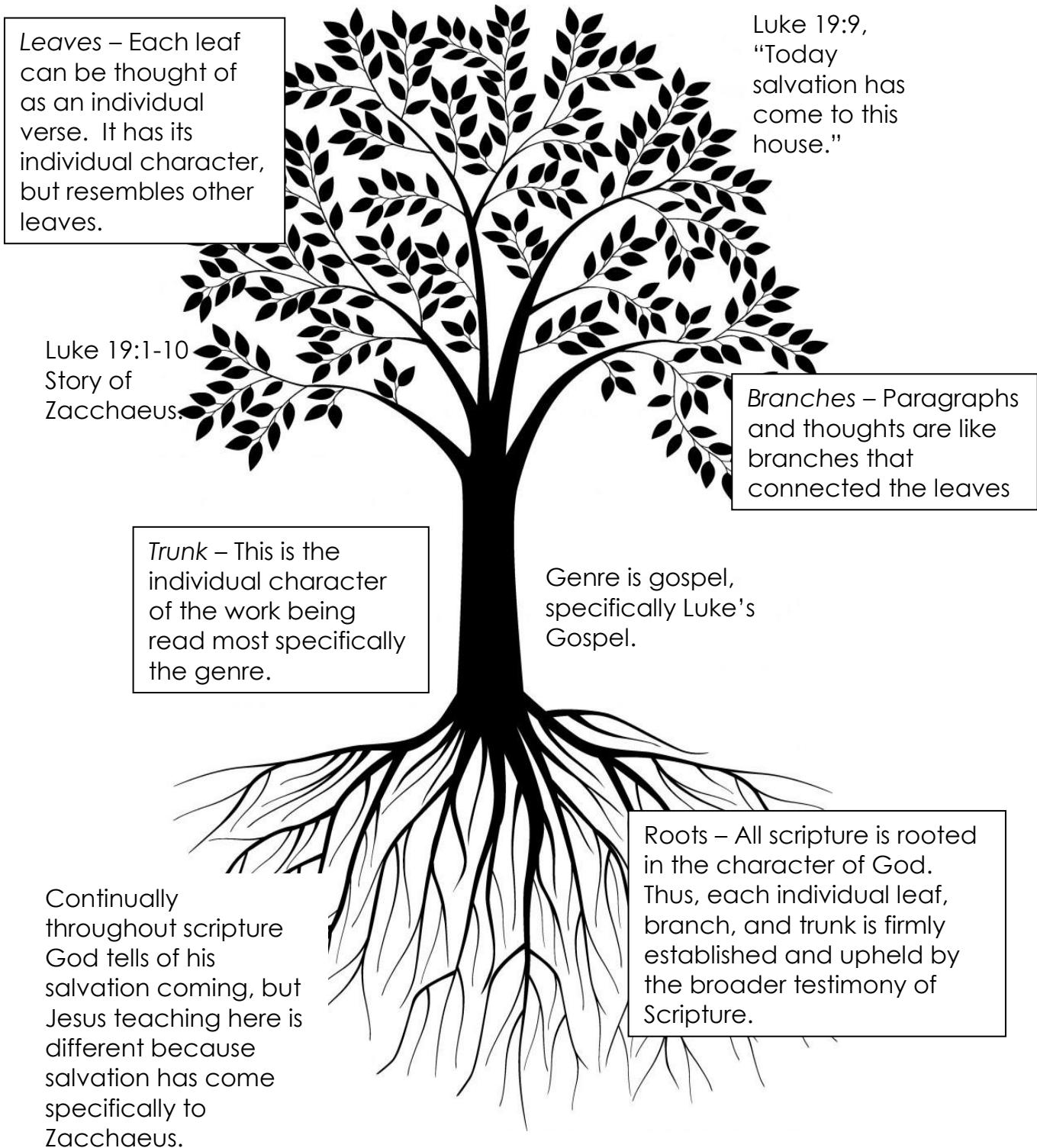
What different subgenres do you see in Luke 10?

How does that influence meaning?

Case Study Romans 8:28.

Trace the literary context of this passage to discover what it means.

Attachment A –Tree of Literary Context



Historical Context

Of the different layers of context the most difficult one was previously historical context, but with the increase in technology, study guide Bibles and other resources this layer has become increasingly accessible. So, what is historical context?

Historical context contains all of the contextual elements that deal with the life and times of the author or audience of text. This includes questions like:

- ❖ Sociological Setting -
 - What was family life like at the time?
 - What were the norms for hospitality and community?
 - What were the major social classes and how did they interact?
- ❖ Economic Setting –
 - What form of economic structure was in place at the time?
 - Was this a time of wealth or poverty?
 - What was the basic cost of living?
 - What did a person do for work?
- ❖ Political/Government Setting –
 - What was the basic political style?
 - What major wars or events were taking place?
- ❖ Religious Setting –
 - What were the major religions of the time?
 - What did deity look like in their minds?
 - How was God or were the God's involved in the world?
 - What were the customary religious practices at the time?
- ❖ Language –
 - What were the main languages of the time?
 - Were the written languages the same as those spoken?
- ❖ Philosophy –
 - Who were the major philosophers?
 - What did they teach about morality and truth?
- ❖ Education –
 - How educated was the average person of the day?
 - What did a person study in their education of the time?

This element may seem overwhelming, but the historical setting of a text gives insight into how the text was understood by the original audience.

Case Study: Luke 9:58

One of the areas in which this is most clearly seen is in Jesus' teaching of the parables. Underlying each of these stories is a deeply imbedded historical setting. For example in Luke 9:58 Jesus says, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” We most often interpret this to mean that though all the animals have a home, Jesus will not. Yet, we often miss in this text the political undertones that Jesus is using. Throughout their cultural history foxes were used to refer to the Ammonites and more directly in Luke to Herod (Luke 13:32). Likewise, birds of the air were a common symbol for the gentile nations in apocalyptic literature at the time. Thus, on a deeper level Jesus is responding to a possible Jewish disciple, “Everyone will find a home in Israel except for Israel.”

Resources

There are a variety of resources available at this time and I would encourage anyone to utilize them.

- ❖ Study Bibles – These are Bibles with notes already provided. Be careful as different versions can be very bias based on the author of the notes.
 - *NIV Study Bible* – Neutral and often provides two or three views.
 - *NIV Archeological Study Bible* – Provides articles and photographs.
- ❖ Reference Works
 - Bible Dictionary – Every Christian should have in their library at least one good Bible Dictionary.
 - *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman.
 - *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Draper & Brand
 - Surveys – A survey is a brief overview of the books of the Bible that provide basic historical context.
 - *A Survey of the New Testament*, Robert H. Gundry
 - *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew E. Hill & John Walton
 - *Exploring the New Testament*, A. Anderson & B. Moore

❖ Apps

- *Glo Bible* – Has built-in videos, images, maps plus a large set of study tools to help you better understand Biblical times and history.
- *Olive Tree Bible Study* - Learn from great scholars through thousands of resources, including commentaries, maps, and dictionaries.

❖ Websites –

- www.bible.org – This useful website provides abundant bible commentary and insight. Once again be critical in using these resources.
- <https://bible.org/netbible/> - This is a wonderful, online Bible Translation with nearly 61,000 footnotes!

❖ Digging Deeper – Without overreaching the scope of this class, here are a variety of deeper level works to help as you advance in Bible reading.

- www.ntgateway.com – This website has hundreds of articles on every book of the NT at a scholastic level.
- *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Everett Ferguson – The single best work on the historical setting of the NT.
- *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament* – Exhaustive Background Commentary on OT.
- *IVP New Testament Commentary Series* – Great work that covers every verse of the NT. Available for free online at <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/toc/>
- *An Introduction to the Old Testament, Second Edition: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Walter Breuggeman
- *An Introduction to the New Testament*, D.A. Carson & Douglas Moo

Case Study – Jeremiah 29:11

Which fallacy is this most often associated with?

Use literary context and, then, historical context tools to help discover what this passage means.

JEREMIAH 29:11
“For I know the plans
I have for you,”
declares the LORD,
“PLANS TO PROSPER YOU
and not to harm you,
plans to give you
HOPE *and a* FUTURE.”

Theological Context

Theology means “the study of God.” In the broadest sense theology refers to any form of deity, but for this class we are speaking of specifically Christian theology. There are a variety of types of “theology.” It is good to know these types of theology, though for everyday Bible study they aren’t necessary.

- ❖ Natural Theology – this is the knowledge of God formed from creation.
- ❖ Biblical Theology – this is the knowledge of God primarily formed from scripture, but limited to specific sections of scripture. Such as the “theology of Genesis” or “Paul’s understanding of grace.”
- ❖ Historical Theology – This is the development of the knowledge of God over the space of history. This can be both biblical history and post-biblical history such as the “Early Church Father’s understanding of atonement.”
- ❖ Systematic Theology – this is the attempt to form a system of thinking about God derived from natural, biblical, and historical theology such as “justification” or “covenant.”
- ❖ Practical Theology – this is how theology relates to the present circumstances of a person such as “the resurrection and spiritual formation” or “relationships like Christ.”

Some people say that they have no theology, but the truth is that anytime we study scripture or talk about our faith we are doing theology. Each of us have a “theology.” One of the goals, then, of reading scripture and understanding it is to allow the Holy Spirit to form in each of us a theology that honor’s God.

There are three important considerations concerning theological context when reading scripture.

1. **Theology is Cohesive** – When reading scripture we can form a coherent and consistent theology, not because scripture is innately this way (although it is), but because God is this way. The story of scripture is the revealed narrative of God. Thus, regardless of the portion of scripture a person is reading, there will be a cohesive view of God.

Case Study – Exodus 34:6.

Where do you see these traits of God displayed throughout scripture and in our world today?

2. **Theology is Dynamic** – We are taught from all elements of theology that God is alive. Thus, his nature is revealed as a living God. Because God is alive, theology is living and dynamic. Thus, you see theology develop throughout scripture as God is further revealed. This development culminates in the incarnation of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Case Study – Exodus 20:24

How do you see the dynamic nature of sacrifice throughout scripture?

3. **Theology is Paradoxical** – An often overlooked but common construct of theology is the paradoxical nature of God. Because, our God is a living God and his knowledge is beyond the comprehension of any man, he often reveals himself in ways that seem paradoxical. He is both loving and just. He is both immanent (intimate) and transcendent (holy). To live as a Christian is to live in the tension of God's revealed paradoxical nature.

Case Study – John 1:14

How is the paradoxical nature of God as both full of grace and truth revealed in scripture?

Thus, the final stage of context in reading a scripture is the theological stage.

After looking at the literary and historical context a person should ask the following three questions:

1. Is my understanding of this text cohesive with what I know about God?
2. How do I better understand the nature of God through this text?
3. What relationship does this text have to other revealed qualities of God?

Case Study – Matthew 7:1

How is this text customarily used in our culture?

Trace this text through its literary, historical, and theological context to discover what it means.

Daily Bible Reading

One of the central spiritual disciplines of a Christian life is the need for daily Bible study. There are a variety of approaches to daily Bible study including different plans, methods, and techniques. It is good to not get “stuck” with only doing one way of daily Bible reading. This guide will help provide some different approaches. We will divide the approaches into three categories: Plan, Thematic, and Devotional.

Plan

This is the traditional approach to daily Bible reading, which lays out a schedule for a specific period of time. Common approaches include:

- ❖ Yearly Plans – These plans can be to read through the whole Bible, NT, OT, Paul’s epistles, etc. over the course of an entire year. It is probably the most common approach. Each day is broken into a specific “chunk” of scripture that must be read.
 - Resources: www.biblegateway.com (and the available app) provides a multitude of reading plans. Bible app by Lifechurch.tv also has a variety of reading plans.
- ❖ Chronological Bibles – These are actual Bibles that are sectioned out according to a yearly reading schedule and they follow the chronological order of scripture rather than scriptures traditional order.
 - Resources: *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible*, ed. George H. Guthrie; *The Daily Bible: In Chronological Order 365 Daily Readings*, ed. F. LaGard Smith.
- ❖ Variety Plans – There are a multitude of different reading plans available online. Just a quick google search will provide more than a lifetime could work through.
 - Resources: For new daily Bible readers try the 5*5*5 plan available online at <http://l2l.org/assets/rsrcc/reading/dj-plan-555.pdf>. For more advanced daily Bible readers it is common to do a four prong approach including the Psalms, OT, Gospel, and Epistle. See Professor Grant Horners Bible Reading Plan available online.

Thematic

These plans center on a common concept or theme. Instead of having assigned daily reading you dwell in scripture for lengthened amounts of time.

- ❖ Single books or chapters – A common approach is to have only one piece of scripture that you are reading repeatedly and thoughtfully. For example you may read the first chapter of John, Ephesians, etc.
- ❖ Word – This approach searches for a specific word throughout the whole of scripture such as grace, covenant, love, etc. This is often overlooked as a daily resources but can be substantial if used well. Make sure to pay attention to context. A few tools are necessary:
 - Bible Concordance – Each translation of the Bible has an available concordance. A concordance is a tool that allows you to look up a word and see all of the time it is used in scripture.
 - Digital Search – These are becoming ever more popular and are available on nearly every Bible app. www.biblegateway.com is the best available. Simply search a word and find all of its use throughout scripture.
 - Various Translations – Because all of scripture is translated into English various words are translated different in different contexts. So use a variety of translations for word searches. For more advanced study check out greattreasure.org.
- ❖ Theme – This systematic approach is a bit broader than a formal Word study and focuses on a concept throughout the Biblical paradigm and involves using a concordance or digital search system. Such examples include Kingdom of God, the Son of Man, or Fathers and Sons.
 - One incredibly useful tool is the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible*, which does an outstanding job of tracing themes.

Case Study: "Word of God."

Most often when we hear the phrase "word of God" we think of the Bible, but is that how the Bible uses this phrase. Do a word or theme study to explore this concept.

- ❖ Chapter/Verses - This is a neat approach that is rarely used. Take a chapter and verse and read it in every book of the Bible as is available. For example 3:16 is an interesting one as is 4:12.

Devotional

This approach involves a variety of methods, but the daily reading is accompanied by prayer, meditation, writing, and supported reading.

- ❖ Daily Devotionals – This is a good introductory approach to this form of daily Bible reading that involves other voices. Yet, you should also be wary of reading the devotional thoughts with more attentiveness than the actual Bible reading. There are a mass quantity of devotionals available, but a few of my favorites include:
 - *My Utmost for His Highest* – Oswald Chambers. A classic work.
 - *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, Shane Clairborne. This wonderful work is an advanced reading.
- ❖ Journaling – This advanced approach has become one of my personal favorites. You take a passage of scripture, dwell on it, and then journal. I usually spend a week on one section such as Galatians 5. The loose method is as follows:
 - Day 1-4 – Simply read and pray over the text. Ask God for guidance and understanding. Take notes that come to mind.
 - Day 5 – “Translate” the text into your own words and write it in your journal. Highlight key phrases and thoughts.
 - Day 6-7 – Journal your understanding of the text and how it relates to your life.
- ❖ Lectio Divina – This ancient Christian practice (Latin for Divine Reading) has been used for hundreds of years, and was developed in Benedictine Monasteries. It is a rich practice that focuses on entering into a text for communion with God rather than simply studying a text. It contains four practice that should be done in order:
 - Read (*Lectio*) – Read slowly through the text at hand.
 - Meditate (*Meditatio*) – Slowly “ruminate” on a word or thought.
 - Pray (*Oratio*) – Bring the word or thought honestly and openly before God.
 - Contemplate (*Contemplatio*) – Rest in the presence of God with the word or thought. No agenda, just stillness and intimacy.

Case Study: Jonah 2:2-9

Use the method of *Lectio Divina* to spend time in this text look for a word.