

Taking Captive Every Thought

Number 1. On reading the whole Bible

Taking Captive Every Thought is a series of papers published by Three Rivers Grace Community Church to encourage believers to pursue the goal stated in the Scriptures (II Cor. 10:5) and reiterated by the leaders of the Reformation: to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life. The papers therefore deal with a variety of aspects of life and how to bring them into submission to Christ.

Do you believe the Bible is the infallible, authoritative word of God? If so, let me ask you another question: Have you ever read it? That is, have you read the whole thing, cover to cover? If not, then consider: How can we claim that we believe the whole Bible, when we have not read all of it—when we are not even sure what certain parts of it say?

I was asked these questions as a sophomore in college, by a graduating senior who was part of my Christian student fellowship. Chagrined, I had to admit to myself that though I had been a believer for many years, and pretended to considerable knowledge of Scripture, there was still much of the Bible I had not read, including the majority of the Old Testament. Still more regrettable, though this episode firmly imprinted itself on my memory, several more years passed before I finally motivated myself to accomplish the task.

Why was my indolence a problem? Why is it important for me to read the whole Bible? Why is it important for you?

We Christians often content ourselves with repeated readings of a set of favorite books or passages (e.g., the Gospels, Epistles, and Psalms), beyond which we seldom venture. We restrict our readings to these favored few, possibly memorizing certain popular verses from John and Romans, with little understanding of why these books were written, by whom, to whom, when, what the overall thrust of each is, and what part each plays in God's overall revelation. All Scripture, as we know, is inspired by God, and is profitable for instruction, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16). What good reason—rather, what possible excuse—could there be for

avoiding the instruction, reproof, correction, and training we stand to gain by reading it? While I would not suggest that one should read once through Ezekiel for each time through Romans, it must certainly be that if God inspired all of Scripture, and all is profitable, then He desires us to read it all.

Let me not be mistaken as advocating the dry exercise of reading the whole Bible for the sake of checking off a task, as a point of pride. I am, in fact, advocating considerably more than that. One should read the entire Bible in order to learn about the coherence of God's revelation to us. A knowledge of Scripture in its entirety is requisite to an appreciation of God's redemptive plan as a unified whole, unveiled through history. Was God's way of salvation different for those who lived before Christ than for us today, and if so, how? What is noteworthy about Jesus being referred to as both king and priest, and what do these offices historically signify? Why was it important that Jesus was a descendant of David—or even a Jew, for that matter? The believer will obtain the answers to questions like these, not through piecemeal reading of Scripture, but through systematic study of the Bible as a coherent work.

It is common to read scattered individual verses, with little context. This is fine for devotional purposes and the like, as long as it is not our sole practice. If it is, then we miss much of what is to be learned from a passage, as well as the knowledge of how to interpret it. We should learn to read the Gospels as books of history, the Epistles as letters, the Psalms as poetry, and the Proverbs as wisdom literature. We need to read the

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Prophets in historical context; having first read the books of Samuel and the Kings, and noting the events and persons involved. (Indeed, reading the Prophets in isolation, with insufficient knowledge of the persons and events mentioned, deprives the exercise of most of its profit, and many who begin the task leave it unfinished.)¹

Perhaps the most dangerous effect of not having read the Bible is that false confidence leads to poor doctrine—being drawn into error, or failing to see error in what one already believes. Sadly, too many Christians are characterized, not only by an unfamiliarity with Scripture, but also by the self-assurance that they already know what it has to say, so there is no need to read it more thoroughly. Many thereby leave themselves defenseless against eloquent persons spreading empty but fine-sounding doctrines—and our nation is full of them. We are told to test everything (I Thess. 5:21), to see whether it is in accordance with the ways of God. How will we test a thing without comparing it to His revealed word? How will we compare it to His word if we do not know His word? How will we know His word if we have not read it?

I thank God for calling us to be His church, and I thank Him that we value His word. But I wish to call us to make our reading of it much broader and deeper; to see to it that we love His law (Ps. 119:97). Let us read the Gospels and Epistles, let us put to memory the verses that tell the wonderful message of salvation, but by all means, let us not stop there. Let us be people who have read all the Bible, who are familiar with its content, who know the history that forms the backdrop for the story of redemption, and who know the doctrine for which we stand, and how it is derived from the Scriptures. Let us be lifelong

students of the word of God, ready to confront the culture with the claims of Christ.

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1. At this point, some might say, “This is the problem. I don’t know how to study the Bible,” or, “I don’t get anything out of studying it.” If this is the case for you, I urge you to try some of the numerous resources available to help you in this, e.g., *30 Days to Understanding the Bible*, by Max Anders, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee, and *What the Bible is All About*, by Henrietta C. Mears, as well as the large variety of study Bibles, Bible handbooks, and commentaries available today.