

“Why Read the Bible?”

Psalm 119:105-112

When I was in junior high, I wrote a lot of letters. I’m a little embarrassed to say this, but many of them were to girls that I met at summer camp. In today’s high-tech world, writing a good old-fashioned letter and actually licking the back of the envelope sound weird. I never liked the taste of the glue! But it was worth it. There was something about receiving a hand-written letter - and sending one in return - that just can’t compare to talking on the phone, or texting, or even video chatting.

My wife and I exchanged a fair amount of letters when we first were dating. It helped our relationship grow when there was a great distance between us. We could communicate our thoughts, hopes, and dreams to each other. Those letters and cards were precious, not because of the price of the paper and the stamp, but because of the value of the information inside of them.

Can you think of a personal letter or card that you have received? Have you stopped to think about the effort another person put into writing it? I hope that you, like me, have received letters that made you feel great.

Today I am going to be a little bit preacher and a little bit salesman. I want to tell you simply why I think we all should read the Bible. My pitch to you is this: The Bible is God’s love letter to us. Today is part of a tradition we call Rally Day, a day we dedicate to our Sunday School teachers and students. We are giving away free Bibles today – specifically to the third graders, but really to anyone who wants one. We have adult Bibles, family Bibles, read-aloud Bibles. You can even download the free Bible App on your phone or tablet. We want you all to have access to this amazing love letter from God.

Our scripture passage we read earlier comes from Psalm 119. This is the longest chapter in the entire Bible. Without looking, I wonder if anyone can tell me how many verses there are? I'll give you a hint. Twenty-two times eight. (Not much of a hint, is it?) The answer is 176.

Psalm 119 is a beautiful acrostic love poem about God's law. An acrostic, if you don't know, is based on the letters of the alphabet, in this case, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first stanza - eight verses - starts with the Hebrew letter Aleph (A). The next stanza starts with Beth (B), and so on and so forth. The 22nd stanza starts with Taw, the Hebrew equivalent of Z. That's a lot of words. Why would someone write a 176-verse poem?

Let me draw an example from Shakespeare.¹ William Shakespeare was in love with an unknown woman whom he calls his "dark lady." He wrote sonnets to her like this one:

*"My thoughts and my discourse as madman's are...
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night."*

Sonnets are a very disciplined form of poetry, with exactly 14 rhyming lines and a particular rhythm (iambic pentameter, for those literary diehards.) Who would take such "fevered emotion" and express them in such a strict way? Someone who was dedicated enough to finding the best way to express his love. Shakespeare was so in love with this woman, he realized, "Roses are red, violets are blue," was not deep enough.

¹ From the NIV Student Bible notes by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, Zondervan, 1996.

The author who wrote Psalm 119 used an acrostic to direct his love for God’s word. Psalm 119 is a long, passionate poem about God’s law.² It seems strange to us – after all, who writes love poetry to the IRS tax code?

But it is obvious how much this writer loves God’s law. As you read this long psalm, you begin to realize just how hungry the psalmist was for God’s word.

Take, for example, verse 112, also one of the lines from an Amy Grant song, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet.” Have you ever been in a blackout and needed to find a light? You know how valuable a flashlight is when you are lost. That is one example of how much the psalmist loves God’s word – it is as precious to him as light itself.

The psalmist knows that God’s word protects him. He admits he has suffered much – any love-sick fellow will attest that suffering is a part of love – but God’s word preserves and restores his life. Look at verses 109 and 110. God’s word protects the writer from himself and from his enemies. That reminds me of I Corinthians 13:7. “[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

At the conclusion of this section of Psalm 119, the psalmist focuses on his heart, the center of his being. He calls God’s word “the joy of my heart” and promises that his “heart is set on keeping [God’s] decrees to the very end.” Again, this is only one small section of a masterpiece expressing his love and devotion for God’s word.

Can I ask you, how much do you love the Bible? Have you even considered that question before? I would hope that many of us in this room would say, “Yes, I do love God’s word.” Maybe you are not going to write a 176-line poem about

² Ibid.

it, (although if you do, that’s great!) but I hope many of you simply spend time reading, studying, memorizing and pondering God’s word.

The Bible is full of answers, and the truth is, we live in a world where people are hungry for answers. Answers to life’s problems. People are hungry for hope. People are hungry for love. They are hungry for kindness, freedom, and safety. I truly believe that through the Bible, God provides us with these things and more.

But part of our struggle in reading this love letter of God’s is that we often don’t know where to start. Reading the Bible is like eating an elephant: the best way is to do it is one bite at a time.

The first thing to understand about the Bible is, although I called it a love letter from God, it is not really one book – it is actually a compilation of 66 books. (At least, the Protestant version is.) The Bible was written on three continents, by over 40 authors, over a period of about 1,500 years. It contains stories written in three languages that cover hundreds of controversial subjects. And yet the Bible has one consistent message, from Genesis to Revelation. **God works to redeem humanity.**

That is really amazing. These facts alone should motivate us to love and read God’s word. But let me give you a comparison, and maybe some advice, as you read the Bible, especially if you read it for the first time.

I know many people have read the entire Harry Potter series, all 4,224 pages. Look at the last page of your pew Bibles. The average Bible has around 1,200-1,500 pages. The word count in whole Harry Potter series is over one million. The Bible’s word count, depending on the translation, is around 800,000.

The point is, it is possible to read the entire Bible. You can go cover to cover if you want, but let me give you a secret: It's OK to read from the back first. Ever do that before? Spoiler: I did with Harry Potter. I read the last chapter of the last book so I would know how it ended. Don't judge me! That's a great way to start to read the Bible. Read the stories of Jesus first. I always tell young people to read Mark first, because it is short and full of action. Next you would probably want to read the rest of the gospels, then Acts, and the letters from Paul and other apostles. Then I would go back and read the great stories of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, and so forth. I would sprinkle in readings from Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs – now, there's a love letter, literally! Finally, I would examine the prophecy – all the Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation.

But in the end, it doesn't really matter how you read the Bible, as long as you do read it. The Bible was not meant to be read like a paperback, which you put on the shelf to collect dust after you're done with it. You can come back to the Bible again and again. That's why we call it the Living Word. Many times, you can read the same passage you have read before, and it will speak to you differently, because of something you have experienced. Pray to the Holy Spirit as you read, that he will reveal something new to you.

Maybe today I am acting a little like a salesman, making my pitch to you. But it is really God who makes the pitch to all of us. Take these verses for example.

Proverbs 8:1 and 11 – “Does not wisdom call out?...Wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Ephesians 6 tells us that God’s word is the sword of the spirit, helping us stand strong and resist the devil. Really, who doesn’t want that kind of power?

This is God’s grace to us: God gives us his word so that we can know his will. God gives us the Bible so that we can know his son, Jesus Christ, and have an intimate, loving relationship with him through the Holy Spirit.

Read God’s word. Get the Bible app on your smart phone, bookmark Biblegateway.com on your computer. Get a reading plan – there are thousands. Find one that works for you. Get a translation that is easy for you to read. I have so many Bibles to give away – for adults, for children, for parents to read to their kids. We all need to learn to love the Bible, not let it sit on a shelf collecting dust.

Read it slowly. Savor this love letter from God. It’s OK if you don’t understand everything you read – you can find study notes, commentaries, and other study helps. If you approach God’s word with an open heart and an open mind, you will find the living word does speak to you, and you will find light and direction for your path.

Memory verse:

“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” - Psalm 119:105

Questions for reflection:

1. How often do you read the Bible and why?

2. What motivates (or should motivate) you to read the Bible? Do you expect to hear from God when you read it?
3. Who can help encourage you as you read your Bible? What study helps can you access to make it more understandable?
4. Whom do you know that would like to have their own Bible? Would you give them one?