

How to read the Holy Bible

Why should we read the Holy Bible?

What are the some of the benefits of reading the Holy Scriptures?

Blessing 1: You will become a strong Christian

Blessing 2: You will be cleansed of sin

Blessing 3: You will bear fruit

Blessing 4: You will learn how to pray

Blessing 5: You will know God's will

Blessing 1: You will become a strong Christian

“As newborn babes, desire the milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2)

In order for a baby to be strong and healthy, he or she must have milk. There’s no substitute for milk. The baby must feed on milk daily in order to grow stronger and healthier. The Word of God is our source of nourishment for spiritual survival, health and growth.

We will remain spiritually immature in our understanding of God and spiritual matters until we receive the necessary nutrition from the Word of God.

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal.” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Blessing 2: You will be cleansed of sin

King David learned this and wrote, “ **Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You**” (Psalm 119:11) The Lord Jesus said to his holy disciples, “**Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken to you**” (John 15:3) Saint Paul teaches that Christians are cleansed by the “**washing of water by the word**” (Ephesians 5:26)

As we walk daily in the world, we get spiritually ‘dirty’-we sin. The Bible is God’s divine *mirror* that shows us His perfections and reveals our sins. “**For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.**” (James 1:22-24) At the same time, the Bible is also like a tub of hot water that the Holy Spirit uses to cleanse us. After this spiritual bath, we are cleaner than before.

Blessing 3: You will bear fruit

Our Lord Jesus called us to bear fruit: **“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.⁵ “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:4-5) The Holy Spirit produces the fruits of the Holy Spirit in us as we abide in Christ through our meditation on and application of the Holy Scriptures²² **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control”** (Galations 5:22). David the prophet bears witness to this saying: **“Blessed *is* the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ² But his delight *is* in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.³ He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season”** (Psalm 1: 1-3)

Blessing 4: You will learn how to pray

The Lord Jesus said, **“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will^[a] ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you”** (John 15:7). Jesus’ words abide in us as we study the Bible and allow His words to take root in our hearts. The words of God express the will of God. We learn how to pray as we learn the will of God. More importantly, when we know that we’re praying according to God’s will, we can have confidence that God is going to say “yes” to our prayers.

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.” (1 John 5: 14-15)

Blessing 5: You will know God's will

One of the reasons God gave us the Bible was to enable us to know His will. We all need guidance. We all have many decisions to make along life's journey. How can we know what to do? How can we know what is right? How can we decipher God's will?

We know God's will through personal Bible Study:

“Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path”
(Psalm 119:105)

Obstacles to Bible reading

- 1) *The first obstacle is laziness.* Bible reading and Bible study requires effort, commitment and discipline. When this is realised, it is then that some may lose their zeal to study the Bible and justify their unwillingness to read the Bible with many excuses. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III often candidly shone light upon this matter saying that **the one who says, “I don’t have time to read the Bible” is really saying “I don’t want to read the Bible”.**
- 2) The second reason why believers may not study the Bible as they should is because they *don’t know how to study God’s word.* They don’t have a sound system for Bible study, and no reference to illuminate their understanding.

5 suggestions on how to prepare to read the Bible

- 1) Commit to reading the entire Bible.** It is important that you read the whole Bible all the way through before you begin to personally study its parts. It is a coherent work-one complete work. If you don't have an overview of the entire story of salvation, you will not be able to fully appreciate the various parts of this narrative. Like any other book, begin at the beginning- either at the beginning of the New Testament or the Old Testament (depending on you personal preference).

2) Commit to reading the Bible every day. We feed our bodies several times each day to keep them strong and healthy. We must feed our spirits with the word of God on a regular basis. Many people are weak spiritually because they neglect their spiritual food. Have you noticed how many times we eat even though we may not feel hungry at the time? This is because we eat out of habit-it is part of our daily routine. Likewise, and more so, we need to feed our spirits with the word of God even though we may not feel like it. As His Holiness Pope Shenouda often said (up till his final sermon even) that by forcing ourselves to study the Bible we demonstrate to God our loyalty of heart and our love for Him, and gain in the process the virtue of ‘forcing/striving with one’s self’ in a spiritual exercise.

What if you were to read the Holy Bible for approximately the same time (or even less) that it may take you to consume one meal during the day- 15 minutes?

TRIVIA:

Did you know that in just 15 min a day you can read through the entire Bible in one year. There are 1,189 chapters in the Bible- 929 OT and 260 NT. The average chapter length is about 25 verses. A person with average reading skill can read a chapter of Bible in about 5 min; about 3 chapters in 15 minutes. If you begin in January and read 3 chapters Monday through Saturday and 5 chapters on Sunday, you will finish reading the OT in the middle of September and the NT at the end of November!

3) Commit to read at a regular time. Are you a morning person or an evening person? Would you prefer to work Bible reading into your evening or morning routine? It is vital to set aside a regular, established time for reading the Bible each day. You need to actively protect this time from any other distraction-you have consecrated it to God. We dedicate time to socialising with our friends, to studying etc...we ought not to be stingy, careless or indifferent to the One who gave us our very lives, friends and talents.

4) Commit to reading at a regular place. Choose a suitable place where you can be alone each day with God, away from distraction. You may read your Bible sitting at a desk, on your knees or standing up (everyone has their own preferred posture).

5) Commit to writing as you read. Use a blank spiral notebook to write down particular verses that touched you or grabbed your attention as you were reading. Our minds often wander when we are reading. Sometimes we see and read words but have not really ‘read’ the passage of Scripture. Seeking a key verse(s) to note in a personal journal ensures that we read actively and with purpose. Your journal may also be used to write in your personal reflections on what you have read, how it may apply to your life, how it made you feel, what you feel God is saying to you personally. You may even wish to date these entries you make. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III highly recommended the use of such Spiritual Journals which could be referred back to in times of trial, spiritual dryness, lukewarmness etc as a source of encouragement and edification.

Heart-attitudes

The main purpose of studying the Bible is to hear the voice of God. There are 5 heart-attitudes that are necessary to hearing God's voice.

Attitude 1: A New heart

Attitude 2: A Humble heart

Attitude 3: An Obedient heart

Attitude 4: A Hungry heart

Attitude 5: A Diligent heart

Attitude 1: A New heart

We have received the New heart and New Spirit in Holy Baptism and Chrismation. **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”** (Ezekiel 36:26)

The Holy Spirit is the One who teaches us and guides us into all truth. **“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.** (John 16:13)

So obviously, if a person does not have the Holy Spirit, he or she cannot understand the words of God. These people can acquire much knowledge of the Bible, its history and people and even have an appreciation for the teachings of Jesus. However, they can never understand the spiritual truths of the Bible unless they are born again. Read how St. Paul very clearly asserts this privilege bestowed upon the children of God: **“But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”**

13 These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy^[a] Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. 14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:10-14)

Attitude 2: A Humble Heart

God will not teach the proud. He reveals Himself to the humble.
“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).
A humble person is one who realises that he/she does not know it all and is open to further instruction-they have a teachable spirit.

Attitude 4: An Obedient heart

God will give understanding and enlightenment only to those who obey Him. He does not tell people things if He knows they are not going to do them. At times we may complain that we cannot hear a message from God in our Bible reading or otherwise. The fault often lies with us in that He has delivered many a message to us, many a commandment, many a personal invitation to respond to his love in a certain way, but we have not practically responded. So what's the point of further instructions? If we don't walk in the light that He has already given us, then He won't give us more light. Furthermore, we can deceive ourselves with a belief that we are going to hear from God when we are not willing to obey what He wants to tell us. St James wrote **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”** (James 1:22)

Attitude 5: A Hungry heart

God teaches us whenever we are hungry for Him to teach us. Hunger and thirst is a requirement.

**“Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled”** (Matthew 5:6)

Not just any sort of hunger is meant here, but that craving, insatiable, loud, incessant, intent, persistent, hunger of a newborn baby crying for life-giving and sustaining milk!

“as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” (1Peter 2:2)

Attitude 5: A Diligent Heart: Digging for Gold

It's easy to find pretty shells as you walk along the beach. All you have to do is bend over and pick them up. It doesn't require much effort because the shells are laying on the surface. However, finding gold that lies beneath the surface is entirely different. Understanding the Bible is like digging for gold. The great truths of God lie beneath the surface. You must dig to find them. Solomon the king wrote **“If you seek her [wisdom] as silver, And search for her as *for* hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, And find the knowledge of God”** (Proverbs 2:4-5)

2 Suggested methods for Bible Study

Please note: It is vital to study the Holy Bible in light of how the Holy Spirit has explained it to the saints of the church throughout its history. Private interpretation is very dangerous, and leaves us susceptible to the trickery of Satan who is renowned for twisting the words of Holy Scripture. It is advisable to consult your Church library, Father of confession or Sunday school servants for a suitable study guide for you to use. The *Orthodox Study Bible* is a great first port of call.

METHOD 1

- ***Preparatory Prayer:*** offer to God all your will and actions, especially in this time of prayer;ask God for a specific grace that you need and desire right now (peace, consolation, hope, etc.).
- ***Meditate on the Biblical Text*** that you have selected:
- ***Read*** the biblical text through slowly, recalling what it is about; then let it come alive for you!
- ***Reflect*** on the truths that God wants to teach you in this text.
- ***Ponder*** the meaning of each word, phrase, and sentence in the text.
- ***Focus*** on two or three points (words, phrases, images, ideas) that stand out to you.

•***Embrace*** what God is saying to you; let your heart be moved with love and desire.

•***Notice*** what is going on *inside you* as you pray: joy, sorrow, peace, confusion, love, anger, etc.

•If you get *distracted* or your mind wanders, gently *return to the biblical text* and your focal points.

1. Colloquy: enter into a short personal conversation with Jesus (or God the Father, or the Holy Spirit); speak heart-to-heart, as if conversing with a close friend.

2. Closing Prayer: conclude by praying the Our Father, Hail Mary, or another familiar/favourite prayer; you might stand, kneel, bow, raise your hands, or adopt another posture to mark the end of your prayer.

Afterward, briefly *review* what you experienced during this time of prayer (maybe *journal* about what happened), and *look forward* to your next prayerful encounter with God (when? where? which biblical text will you use?).

METHOD 2

1. ***Begin:*** consider how God looks upon you and loves you; become aware of being in God's presence; stand for a moment, bow if you wish, then be seated comfortably for your time of prayer
2. ***Preparatory Prayer:*** offer to God all your will and actions, especially in this time of prayer; ask God for a specific grace that you need and desire right now (peace, consolation, hope, etc.).
3. ***Contemplate the Biblical Story*** that you have selected:
 - ***Read*** the text slowly and carefully; recall what it is about; then let it come alive for you!

- ***Place yourself inside*** the story, using your imagination; become one of the characters in the scene.
- ***Participate*** in the dynamics of the scene, dialoguing & interacting with Jesus and other characters.
- ***Observe*** what is going on around you in the scene: What do you see, hear, feel, smell, taste, touch?
- ***Dialogue*** with the other characters: What do they say or ask you? What do you say or ask them in reply?
- ***Notice*** what is going on *inside you* as you pray: joy, sorrow, peace, confusion, love, anger, etc.
- If you get *distracted* or your mind wanders, gently *return to the biblical text* and re-enter the scene.

1. ***Colloquy***: enter into a short personal conversation with Jesus (or God the Father, or the Holy Spirit); speak heart-to-heart, as if conversing with a close friend.
2. ***Closing Prayer***: conclude by praying the Our Father, Hail Mary, or another familiar/favorite prayer; you might stand, kneel, bow, raise your hands, or adopt another posture to mark the end of your prayer.

Afterward, briefly ***review*** what you experienced during this time of prayer (maybe *journal* about what happened), and ***look forward*** to your next prayerful encounter with God (when? where? which biblical text will you use?).

A FINAL NOTE

You may have noticed some common threads in these methods of Bible reading.

- 1) **Prayer:** it seems natural and necessary to pray before, during and after reading the Holy Scriptures to the God of His word for Him to explain its meaning and application for our personal life.
- 2) **Agility of mind:** it is a purposeful and deliberate use of an alert mind to understand, consider, meditate and contemplate (this is no different than the concentration or diligent mental activity required for understanding an academic textbook, 4Unit Maths, Chemistry, Physics etc...)
- 3) **Love:** It is a personal labour and sacrifice of love to a God whose love inspires us to draw nearer and walk nearer to Him. I yearn to hear the voice of the Immortal King of the Universe to me, the insignificant and unworthy recipient of His Love.