

Main Idea: To be a growing Christian in 2023, we must love two things, according to 1 Peter 1:22-2:3. We must love God’s people and God’s Word, and the two are related. Indeed, the second (loving God’s Word) is the key to the first (loving God’s people).

- I. A growing Christian loves God’s people (1:22).
- II. A growing Christian loves God’s Word (1:23-2:3).
  - A. The Lord used His Word to give us salvation (1:23-25).
  - B. The Lord uses His Word to grow us up in our salvation (2:1-3).
    1. In order to long for the Word, we must remove our sin (1).
    2. In order to long for the Word, we must recognize our need (2).
    3. In order to long for the Word, we must remember the Lord’s goodness (3).

Ten Resolves: We will show that we long for the Word in 2023 when we...

1. Read the Word (1 Timothy 4:13).
2. Study the Word (2 Timothy 2:15).
3. Search the Word with our church family (Acts 17:11).
4. Memorize the Word (Psalm 119:11).
5. Meditate on the Word (Psalm 1; Joshua 1:8).
6. Sing the Word (Habakkuk 3:19b).
7. Pray the Word (Daniel 9:1-3).
8. Share the Word with others (2 Timothy 4:2).
9. Guard the Word (1 Timothy 4:16; Jude 3-4).
10. Quote the Word when solving problems (like Peter did in 2:6, 7, 8).

Five Cautions: We need to guard against five dangers in 2023.

1. Be careful of being in the Word merely for the sake of knowledge.
2. Be careful of making the Word say what we want it to say.
3. Be careful of letting our feelings determine our intake of the Word.
4. Be careful of thinking only of others when we receive the Word.
5. Be careful of thinking only of ourselves when we receive the Word.

Do you have anyone in your life that you’re struggling to love right now? Perhaps it’s someone you work with, or go to school with, or go to church with. Perhaps it’s a family member, perhaps your spouse.

What’s the best thing you can do to help that relationship in 2023? Go to a marriage rekindle retreat? Have a pow-wow and talk it out? Take a class on communication? Those may be helpful, but there’s something else that is far more important *first*. It’s what Peter says we are to do in the passage before us.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “You don’t know the person that’s making my life miserable right now. They’re impossible to live with. I just can’t have a good relationship with them until they change. There’s nothing I can do.”

That’s not true. According to the text from the Word of God that we’re about to consider, you can and I can have the relationship God wants us to help with that person. But there’s something we must do with all our might.

The passage we’re about to consider will change the way you look at your church family this year. It will change the way you look at your own family, and the people you work with, and go to school with.

The most important thing you can do for that relationship this year, and every other relationship, is to long for the Book. This is the vital connection we’ll see today from 1 Peter, the connection between loving people and loving the Book.

*Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 2:22-2:3*

We are an incredibly blessed people. We have something that many don’t have, for which many others have given their lives. We have the Scriptures, God’s holy Word.

Please notice the verb Peter uses in verse 2. He says we are to “*long for*” the pure spiritual milk. The KJV reads, “As newborn babes, *desire* the sincere milk of the word.”

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

There are many things we ought to do with God's Word. We ought to read it, study it, preach it, and memorize it. But it starts here. Indeed, even an unregenerate person can do the others. We are to *long for the Word*. The verb means "to have a passion for, to yearn for, to crave." We see the same word in the LXX in Psalm 42:1, "As a deer *pants* for flowing streams, so *pants* my soul for you, O God."

It's a word that communicates intense longing and desire, so intense that the heart aches until the desire is met. In the New Testament we see this word used to depict the longing of separated friends to see each other. In 2 Timothy 1:4 Paul says of Timothy, "greatly *desiring* to see you." In Philippians 1:8 Paul tells the church in Philippi, "God is my witness how greatly I *long after* you all."

We all know what it is to long to see someone. Most of us have experienced homesickness before. Perhaps you did when you were an eight-year-old camper at Scioto Hills, or when you were an 18-year-old college freshman after three weeks in the dorm. Or you felt it as a deployed soldier, far from your family.

This is the word that Peter uses to indicate how we ought to feel about this Book. We are to *long for it*. God wants us to crave His Word, to become so hungry for it that all other desires wane in comparison.

People who are close to God have always delighted in His Word. Job said in Job 23:12, "I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food." Jeremiah said, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts (Jeremiah 15:16)."

The Lord Jesus Himself made it clear in Matthew 4:4 (quoting Deuteronomy 8:3), "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

How intense is your desire for the Word? If we're honest with ourselves, most of us don't desire it as much as we ought. Why not? It's not complicated. In fact, it goes back to a lesson that our mothers taught us at an early age. I know mine did.

So I'm seven years old, and I love Milky Way candy bars. So I approach my mother with a very reasonable request. "Mom, can I eat one of the Milky Way candy bars that I got for Halloween.

To which she replies, instantly, "No son."

To which I reply, "What? Why not?"

To which she replies, "Because it's 4:30 and we'll be eating supper in half an hour."

She was a smart woman. She knew the power of a Milky Way candy bar, and what it would do to my appetite, and that if I ate it, I wouldn't want the nourishment that my body needed from the nutritious food she was preparing.

So, you ask, "Why don't I long for the Bible as I ought?" Here's the first place to check. Have you been eating too many Milky Way bars?

Allow me to speak plainly. Podcasts are fine. Al Mohler has a good one. So does Kevin DeYoung. So does Tri-State Bible College with Level Paths. And then there are sermons on the radio and television. They too have their place. As do devotional books. And there are wonderful, deep theology books to enjoy, as well. All of it can be helpful.

*But.* But all these resources have two things in common. One, they were all written by human beings. And two, they cannot do what God's Word alone can do for your soul and mine. What's worse, they can curb your appetite. They're like the Milky Way bar.

"So what can I do to restore my spiritual tastebuds," you ask, "so that I long for the Word as I ought, so that spending time in the Word is a delight and not a boring obligation?" Peter answers this question for us in today's passage.

Let's invite Peter to show us the answer. To do so, we must first set the context.

1 Peter is a very important, very relevant letter. God graciously gave this letter to encourage a group of Christians who were living in a counter-Christian culture. Life was not easy for the Christ-followers living in Pontus, Galatia, etc. Many had been forced to abandon jobs and houses because of the pressure they endured for the sake of the Name.

How did Peter encourage these struggling friends? First, he reminded them to bless God for their salvation (verses 3-12). As Christians, we have every reason to bless God. When we were born again, He gave us a living hope (3), and guaranteed us an inheritance reserved in heaven (4). Right now, He is using the trials of this life to shape our character and refine our faith (7).

This is how Peter begins this letter of encouragement. He exhorts his brothers in Christ to reflect on God's marvelous salvation.

Then, in verses 17-21, Peter addresses the question of HOW. How were we saved? How did God redeem us? How did He set us free, we who were once hostages to sin and death? It wasn't due to our effort. No, He redeemed us. He ransomed us at a great cost to Himself. We have been redeemed by the precious blood of His Son.

This raises a question. So, how can you tell if someone has been redeemed? Is it by what a person says? Possibly, for redeemed people are supposed to *say so*, as Psalm 107:1 indicates. But that's not the evidence Peter mentions. According to Peter, you can spot a redeemed person by looking at what he or she *loves*.

We see this evidence in the very next passage. The redeemed person, says Peter, loves two objects that he previously did not love. First, he loves God's people. Peter mentions this evidence in 1:22, and then returns to in 2:4ff. Second, he loves God's Word (1:23-2:3). These are the two loves of a redeemed person, of a person who truly loves the God who redeemed them. And these two loves are related, as we'll see. In fact, the second love fuels the first.

This is basic, yet vital. Redeemed people love God's people *and* God's Word. And it's their love for God's Word that informs and empowers their love for each other.

This is such an important text. Let's unpack it briefly, and then finish by briefly considering ten important resolves and five vital cautions regarding the Book.

### I. A growing Christian loves God's people (1:22).

Notice again 1 Peter 1:22, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart."

What's true of our souls? Peter says they have been purified. How did that happen? By obeying the truth, that is, the truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ. And this truth isn't something we merely believe, but also obey. We became a Christian when we believe in Jesus and declare our allegiance to Him.

And notice the outcome of this purification of our souls. Peter says it produces a sincere brother love. Before Christ saved us, we were self-focused people. But when He entered our lives, He immediately recalibrated our compass, as it were, and we started loving others, specifically, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Peter will have much more to say to us about love in his letter. In 2:17 he exhorts, "Love the brotherhood." In 3:8, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love." In 4:8-9, "And above, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

There's no question about it. If we have been redeemed, we will love God's people. If we're not loving God's people, it's an indication we are resisting Christ and the new orientation He produced in us when He purified our souls.

We must see this vital connection. Peter says a sure way to tell if a person has been purified on the inside is to look at his relationships on the outside.

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach at UCLA, once shared his coaching strategy as follows.<sup>1</sup> One, get the team in condition. Two, teach them the fundamentals, the basics. Three, get your men to work together as a team, not as individuals.

That's basically what Coach Peter is doing here. He reminds his readers that God designed His church to function as a team. His aim is for His people to work together, as an expression of their love for each other.

Peter uses an athletic term when he says, "Love one another *earnestly*." The AV says, "fervently", which means, "striving with all of one's energy". That's what good athletes do. Strive. Work hard. And that's what redeemed people with purified souls do. They love each other *earnestly*, from a *pure* heart.

You say, "Okay, that makes sense. But some people are hard to love, aren't they? What makes this love possible?"

Listen carefully. The type of love that God requires is not something we can manufacture. No. It must be produced in us. By nature, all of us are selfish. It takes a miracle of God to enable us to love.

That's exactly what God did. He gave us the capacity to love. When? Notice carefully the first word in verse 23. "*Since* you have been born again." Who is it that can love one another, including the hard to love one another, with a pure heart? Those who have been born again can. It's the new birth that makes this love possible.

The apostle John makes the same point in 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." Who loves? The person who has been born of God does. Love for one another is an evidence that we have been born of God.

Are you a loving person? Do you reach out to those in this church family? Do you initiate conversations? Do you seek to edify people with your words? Do you sacrifice your time and energy and resources to meet the needs of the people in your forever family? Do you make coming to the church-house a priority in your weekly schedule, and do you come, even when you don't feel like it, because you want to show your brothers and sisters that they mean much to you?

Love is not a matter of feeling. It's a matter of choosing to live in light of the new nature we have received. Since we have been born again, we love. We love God first and foremost, and because He has redeemed us, we now love His people. Do we love lost people too? Yes, but Peter says it starts here, with God's people.

You say, "Sounds good, but as I said a moment ago, it's hard to do. Frankly, there are certain people I'd prefer not to be around, even if they are my brothers and sisters. I know that's wrong, but what can I do about it? What makes this love for God's people possible?"

Here's the answer. A second love, which actually fuels the first love.

## II. A growing Christian loves God's Word (1:23-2:3).

There's an unfortunate chapter break between 1:25 and 2:1 that prevents us from seeing the flow of Peter's argument. Remember, this is a letter. When Peter wrote what we call 1 Peter, there were no chapter and verse numbers. Those were added much later by the translators.

This entire section, from 1:23 through 2:3, is about the Word of God. Peter reminds his readers that God's Word is the key to God's power. God has chosen to use His Word to bring about what He desires in our lives, two outcomes. First, He uses His Word to

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<sup>1</sup> taken from H.Hendricks tape on "motivation".

give us salvation (that's 1:23-25). Second, He uses His Word to grow us up in our salvation (that's 2:1-3).

Friends, this is so practical. It will make 2023 an amazing year if we take it to heart. If we want power to love the hard to love people in our lives, then we must take advantage of the source of that power, which is God's Word.

How powerful is this Book? Here's how powerful it is. Demonstration #1.

**A. The Lord used His Word to give us salvation (1:23-25).** Notice verse 23, "...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."

What did God use to bring about the miracle of the new birth in our lives? The answer is the same for every one of us. Peter says this miracle happened "through the *logos* of God". *Logos* refers to God's self-revelation, which includes His spoken and written word.

Peter elaborates on what he means by the word of God in verses 24-25, "For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,<sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you."

How were Peter's readers born again and brought into God's family? Peter reminds them, "You were born again when someone came to you, and announced to you the good news concerning the Person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. That message was the Word of God. And that Word was the instrument that the Spirit of God used to bring you from death to life."

What is it about the Word of God that makes it so powerful? Peter highlights two features of the Word in verse 23. First, he calls it the 'living' word of God. Second, he refers to it as the 'abiding' word of God.

Let's focus on the second characteristic first. When Peter says God's Word is abiding, he means we can count on it. It won't change or lose its power. He illustrates this truth by quoting Isaiah 40.

Remember what happened in Isaiah 40? God announced in Isaiah 1-39 that He'd had it with His disobedient people in Judah. He was going to judge them. He would send them into exile in Babylon, where they would be oppressed. But they wouldn't be forgotten. In chapter 40, God promised His people that He would bring them back to the promised land.

And what assurance did Isaiah give those exiles that God's promise would actually happen? He told them this in Isaiah 40:6-8, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

God's Word is *abiding*. It was true in Isaiah's day in 700 BC. It's true, says Peter, in my day, in AD 60. It's true in 2023 as well. This Book never goes out of print. It abides forever.

That's because it's *living*. What does that mean? These aren't just words on a page written by dead people. These words are just like the One who gave them. Living!

"For the word of God is living and active," says Hebrews 4:12, "sharper than any two-edged sword."

When Peter says that God's Word is living, he means it imparts life. Psalm 33:4 says, "For the Word of the Lord is upright." Psalm 33:9 says, "For He spoke and it was done (AV)."

Listen to what God Himself said about His Word in Isaiah 55:10-11, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Why do we need the Word of God? Because it is living. Brothers and sisters, think back to the day God saved you. One moment you were dead in your sins, without God and without hope. And the next moment, you were alive, born again into the family of God! What brought about that transformation? Listen to Peter. You were born again through the Word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ that was preached to you.

William Still, a Scottish evangelical minister, has written a little booklet titled, “The Work of the Pastor.” In it he makes a blunt but helpful observation, “The pastor is called upon to feed the sheep. (Now that may seem quite obvious.) He is called upon to feed the sheep even if the sheep do not want to be fed. He is certainly not to become an entertainer of goats. Let goats entertain goats, and let them do it in Goatland. You will certainly not turn goats into sheep by pandering to their goatishness.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, churches can do a lot of things to get sinners to enter their doors, and there’s certainly a place for new methods. But let’s never forget this. There’s only one way for a sinner to be made new inside out. And this explains why we most always prioritize the preaching of this Book at WBC.

How powerful is God’s Word? If you’re in Christ, you know firsthand, don’t you? The Lord used His Word to give us salvation.

But He doesn’t stop there. It’s not just *used*, but *uses* in the present.

### **B. The Lord uses His Word to grow us up in our salvation (2:1-3).**

Here’s the unfortunate chapter break. Notice the first word in verse 1, “So.” Peter isn’t changing the subject. He’s showing the logical outcome of the same subject. If God used His Word for our good in the past (and He certainly did), and if this Word is living and abiding (and it certainly is), then we ought not surprise us that He intends to keep using His Word in our lives throughout the rest of our lives. And He will.

But here’s where our responsibility enters. Notice verses 1–3, “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

This takes us back to the question. What if we don’t desire the Word as we ought? What can we do to restore our spiritual tastebuds, so we long for the Book? Peter is now answering that question for us. In order to long for the Word, we must take three steps.

1. *In order to long for the Word, we must remove our sin (1).* Here’s verse 1 in the NIV, “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”

In other words, the Milky Way candy bars need to go if we want to enjoy dinner. Nothing wrong with Milky Way bars, or podcasts, or Facebook either. It’s just that compared to the Word of the Living God, these man-made sources of information are like junk food. And we must not let them dull our appetite for the main course.

But there’s something else that will curb our appetite for the Word. Peter mentions by name five kinds of sin that we must remove. Interestingly, they’re all interpersonal sins. They’re the opposite of what loving God’s people looks like.

First, there’s *malice*, a word that speaks of general wickedness, primarily a negative attitude towards people. Badmouthing other people. If there’s any malice in us towards other people, even a hint of it, we must get rid of it. Put away *all malice*.

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<sup>2</sup> From Reformation/Revival Journal, Fall 1992, 68.

Second, we're to put away deceit (guile). This word was used to depict baiting a trap to get something. That's what a trapper does. So does a fisherman, who hides his true intentions by baiting a fishhook to get what he wants. It's what the world does, and we used to do. We told little lies (and big ones) to hide our true intentions from people. We used flattery too, telling people what they want to hear, in order to get what we want out of them. Get rid of it, says Peter, every trace of deceit.

And *hypocrisy* too. It's actually plural, hypocrisies. It means, wearing a mask, play-acting, pretending. We say of such people, "They're not real." But that must never be said of us, says Peter. We must put away all hypocrisies.

And *envy*. Again, it's plural. Envy. Envy is the heart issue that drives the first three sinful actions. When we exhibit malice towards someone, or are deceptive, or hypocritical, it's always because we're wanting something. We spread rumors about people because we want the attention, the recognition, the applause, the approval, that others are getting. We want it. We actually lust for the approval that others seem to be getting. "I deserve that! I want that!" we tell ourselves. No, says Peter, we must get rid of that envy, every trace of it.

And *all slander*, too. Evil speech. Speech that injures. It could be gossip, but it could be the truth too. Love without truth is hypocrisy, but truth without love is brutality. If I am slandering people with my tongue, then I must strip off that kind of behavior.

At baptismal services in the early church, Christians were known to strip off their old clothing and receive a new wardrobe when they left the baptismal service. Why? To symbolize that they were abandoning their past and adopting a new life.

My friend, if we're wondering why we don't crave God's Word as we once did, here's the place to begin. It may be because sin is ruining our spiritual tastebuds.

As the old saying goes, "Sin will keep you from this book, and this book will keep you from sin."

We'll never desire the Book like we ought until we get down to business and get rid of that malice, that deceit, whatever that sin is. Every trace of it.

Do you have any known, unconfessed sin in your life? If so, Proverbs 28:13 tells you exactly what needs to happen. "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

If we want to create a longing for the Word, this is step one. We must remove our sin.

2. *In order to long for the Word, we must recognize our need* (2). Listen to verse 2 in the KJV, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby."

Peter says we're to desire pure spiritual milk. *Pure*, unadulterated, not mixed with anything else. *Spiritual*, the Greek term "logikon," a difficult word to translate. It appears in Romans 12:1, there translated, "I beseech you, brothers...present your bodies to God...which is your reasonable service (your spiritual worship). Literally, "of the Word," or "pertaining to the Word".

Pure, spiritual, *milk*. Babies don't know much. But there's one thing a baby knows. A baby knows what it wants. And it's not pretty curtains, or pizza. It's milk. A baby craves milk! And that little infant will become violent if that need is not met.

What does Peter mean by *pure, spiritual milk*? He doesn't actually mention the Word by using these words. But he doesn't have to, because that's what he's been talking about in the previous section. The nourishment that our souls need, that we must receive if we're going to grow up in our salvation, is the *logikon*, the same book He used to save us, that He now intends to use to grow us up in our salvation, the Word of God.

We must not misunderstand this milk analogy. Peter's not primarily talking to baby Christians here. He's making a comparison. Just as a baby knows its need, and just as that baby craves milk, so *all* Christians need to long for the Word of God.

And why? Again, notice the end of verse 2, "That you may grow thereby." Just as God used the Word in the past to bring about our salvation, He's still using the Word, right now in the present, to bring about our growth.

Which is why we must *long for it*. If we don't long for it, we'll hit the snooze button and miss our morning quiet time, and miss Sunday School too, and the Wednesday evening Bible study, and all the other wonderful opportunities we have to feast on this Book.

If we're going to long for the Word, we must, first, remove our sin, and then, recognize our need. What's the first thing you do in the morning? How about saying these words out loud? *I need You today Lord!* And then show you really mean it by going to that special place in your home where you invite Him to nourish your soul through His Word.

There's one more step, according to Peter.

3. *In order to long for the Word, we must remember the Lord's goodness (3).* Notice how Peter concludes his admonition in verse 3, "...if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." Since is probably a better word. It's a first class condition, something that's already happened. Why should we be passionate about the Word? Because our tastebuds have been triggered by the Word. When? When we tasted that the Lord is good.

If you're a Christian, you know what I'm talking about. Do you remember the day you first tasted the Lord's goodness, the day He said to you, a hell-bound sinner, "I want you to come home and live with Me forever!?" And you not only tasted His goodness, but began to feast on it, that day you invited His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ into your life. Do you remember?!

Now keep remembering! Remember how you tasted His goodness, and what He used to feed your starving soul, how through the ministry of His precious Word, He brought (as it were) to His dining room table, and said, "Feast, my child, on My goodness."

And now, having remembered, wouldn't you like to taste some more! Yes!

The psalmist said it well, in Psalm 19:10 (KJV), "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."

My non-Christian friend, may I ask you something? Wouldn't you like to taste the same, the goodness of the Lord? Right now, through the preaching of His Word, the Lord is offering you a feast. Will you receive it? Will you repent of your sin and receive the nourishment, and forgiveness, and eternal life that His Son alone can offer?

So what's the proper response? Ten resolves, and five cautions.

Ten Resolves: We will show that we long for the Word in 2023 when we...

1. *Read the Word (1 Timothy 4:13).* Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:13, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." This is talking about church, but the principle holds for us individually. Longing for the Word leads to reading it.

Do you have a special place in your home where you daily read the Book? For me, it's a room in the basement that I and my grandchildren call Narnia (that's a story for another time!). I'm convinced we need routine and rhythm if we're to be consistent in our time in the Word. Same place. Same time. Every day. And it starts with simply reading the Word.



2. *Study the Word (2 Timothy 2:15)*. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV), “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

One of the most helpful ways to study the Word is by using a good study Bible? I’m presently using the ESV Study Bible for my morning quiet time. I’ve used the NIV Study Bible before, and the Schofield Study Bible before that. There are other good ones, too. But I encourage you to use the same one, day after day, year after year if possible, with a pencil in hand, marking it up, making notes to yourself when you taste the goodness of the Lord.

Again, routine is important, so I advise using a plan. Right now, my plan which I’ve used for several years is, read three chapters from the Old Testament first thing in the morning, and then read one chapter from the New Testament as my final act of worship to the Lord every night. Four chapters a day will take you through the Book in a year. And you will taste His goodness again and again and again. That will intensify your longing for this Book, which will lead to the next step.

3. *Search the Word with our church family (Acts 17:11)*. Acts 17:11 tells us, “Now these Jews [those in Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

It’s good to read and study your Bible by yourself. But it’s actually dangerous too. If all we do is read and study by ourselves, we will tend to see what we’ve always seen, and miss what we need to see. The Lord intends for the study of His Word to be a community project.

I’ll share a little secret. I don’t typically teach a Sunday School class. I haven’t for 35 years. And that’s intentional. When I first became a pastor I knew I needed to be under the Word too. I need to hear what others are seeing in this Book.

Friends, at WBC we have godly teachers who study and open this Book every week, during Sunday School, during the AM service, sometimes in the PM service, during community groups, on Wednesday evenings, in youth group meetings, in FLY for the kids, and more. Why so much teaching of this Book? Because we can’t get enough of it! We want to taste His goodness more, again and again.

This leads us to several other action points, which for time’s sake, I’ll just mention.

4. *Memorize the Word (Psalm 119:11)*. The psalmist said in Psalm 119:11, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”

5. *Meditate on the Word (Psalm 1; Joshua 1:8)*. Psalm 1:1–2 says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;<sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”<sup>3</sup>

6. *Sing the Word (Habakkuk 3:19b)*. Listen to the final verse of Habakkuk (3:19). After writing his prayer, the prophet says this, “GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.” This man of God took steps to help his people sing the Word. We’ll be doing the same again this year, with monthly Scripture benediction passages.

7. *Pray the Word (Daniel 9:1-3)*. Like Daniel did in Daniel 9:1–3, “In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—<sup>2</sup> in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua 1:8 “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.<sup>3</sup> Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.”

8. *Share the Word with others (2 Timothy 4:2).* Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

9. *Guard the Word (1 Timothy 4:16; Jude 3-4).* This was the reason Jesus’ half-brother, Jude, wrote the little book that bears his name. He says in Jude 3–4, “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.<sup>4</sup> For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

10. *Quote the Word when solving problems.* Like Peter did, in the very next section of his letter. Notice verse 6, “For it stands in Scripture.” Peter then quotes Isaiah 28:16. In verse 7 he then quotes Psalm 118:22. Then in verse 8 he quotes Isaiah 8:14. Even though he was an apostle, when helping churches solve problems, he made the Scriptures his authority, not his title, nor experience. We must do the same.

#### Five Cautions: We need to guard against five dangers in 2023.

1. *Be careful of being in the Word merely for the sake of knowledge.* Knowledge is good, but it also puffs up (1 Cor 8:1), particularly if we forget the point of the knowledge. Ever been around a Bible know-it-all? I have. Not a pleasant experience. When we study the Bible, friends, we must always have the Bible’s purpose in mind. It’s not knowledge for knowledge sake. It’s knowing and loving the Person of God better, for this is eternal life (said Jesus in John 17:3).

2. *Be careful of making the Word say what we want it to say.* It’s a fact. We can use the Bible and make it say what it doesn’t say. That’s not double talk. That’s what the cults do. It’s also what many, well-meaning genuine followers of Jesus do. When I read the Book, the first question I’m seeking to answer is *not*, “What is this passage saying to me?” Rather, it must always be, “What is this passage *saying*?” Observation and interpretation come first, then application.

3. *Be careful of letting our feelings determine our intake of the Word.* So what should we do on Thursday morning when we don’t feel like reading the Bible, or next Sunday when we don’t feel like coming to church? You got it! Get in the Book anyway, and watch what happens to those unpredictable feelings. They will change.

4. *Be careful of thinking only of others when we receive the Word.* As in, “Wow, what a great passage. My spouse needs this.” No, I need this. What is the Lord saying to me right now? But on the other hand...

5. *Be careful of thinking only of ourselves when we receive the Word.* God didn’t write this Book to me personally. Each passage had an original audience. And the application of what I’m presently reading may be perfect for someone else. To put it another way, the answer to the question, “Why am I reading the Bible right now?” must not merely be, “To get a blessing.” It’s not about me. It’s ultimately, “To give a blessing,” to the Lord first, and to others.

**Closing Song:** #273 “*Holy Bible, Book Divine*” (all four verses)

**Communion**

**Scripture Benediction for January** (sung by primary age children): 2 Corinthians 13:14