

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#130 Tips for Daily Bible Reading

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### **Alastair Roberts**

Tips on daily Bible reading for laypeople.

Within this episode I recommend the following Bibles, books, and resources:

ESV Reader's Bible: <https://amzn.to/307w1ug>

Bibliotheca Reader's Bible: <https://amzn.to/2VZVW7S>

Robert Alter's The Hebrew Bible: <https://amzn.to/2vS7sDS>

ESV Hebrew-English Interlinear: <https://amzn.to/2VWsaRt>

ESV Greek-English Interlinear: <https://amzn.to/2HbWD5T>

The Greek New Testament: Reader's Edition: <https://amzn.to/2Vvew8o>

Genesis 1-11, Samuel Bray and John Hobbins: <https://amzn.to/2PWM0GY>

Peter Leithart, 'A House For My Name': <https://amzn.to/2YkLhCm>

Peter Leithart, 'The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes, Volumes 1 and 2':  
<https://amzn.to/2E0saFT> & <https://amzn.to/2vPSIKX>

This is the podcast that we did with J. Mark Bertrand on Bible design:  
<https://alastairadversaria.com/2016/11/08/podcast-on-bible-designs/>

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:  
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## **Transcript**

Welcome back. Today's question is, I was wondering what your thoughts are on daily Bible reading for laymen. First of all, you should be doing it.

If you're depending upon sermons and public Bible reading for your comprehension and knowledge of Scripture more generally as a text, you will be very limited. There's only so much that can be done on a Sunday. Whereas if you're reading every single day, you can get through a lot.

You can also get through the text and think about the text in ways that you would not be able to do on a Sunday. Now, I'll think about a few of those as we go along, but think about the ways in which you can get the most out of your Bible reading to complement what you have in the context of a Sunday service. Read your Bible inefficiently.

The Bible was not written in a culture like ours where we're accustomed to reading things very quickly to get information. That's not the type of book that the Bible is. The Bible is written in a society where there were few books and those books were all written to be read in depth, to be studied, to be poured over.

Now, to help you think about this, consider that before the 10th century, most books in Europe did not have spaces between words. Why not? Well, why would you need spaces between words? There aren't many books in the world and they're not the sort of thing that you want to read quickly. A book is something to think over, to chew over, and so it's like a musical score.

You need to practice it a few times and as you practice it, you get to understand it better in the same way with a book. No need to hurry. Take your time over it.

And so we should be reading our Bibles inefficiently. Beware of simply trying to work through the study notes. I've found that this really stultified my reading of Scripture, so I've generally just abandoned studied notes.

I found it also a bit legalistic, or that's how it worked out for me. I felt this pressure of guilt to work through this program and I was always falling behind and so I eventually abandoned it and read the Bible in a far less disciplined way. And I'm using disciplined in a rather stricter sense.

It wasn't a way that I was just letting everything go, but I wasn't following the sort of strict rules and structure that a study program would usually give you. I was exploring the text, spending time in a particular passage, reading it over several times rather than trying to get through the set passages for the day. No reason to have to read through your Bible in a year.

Take more time over it if you need to. The important thing is to get deep into the text, not to fulfill the program. And often there are ways in which study programs can become an end in themselves rather than actually a servant of your getting to know the Bible better and deepening your understanding of the text.

So find something that works for you in a sustainable way. On that front, consider what time of the day works best for you. Now I find evening can often be better for me than morning, but reading in the morning has the benefit of you're able to chew over the thoughts that are raised over the rest of the day.

But reading in the evening, often you can be in a more meditative state of mind. You can consider and reflect and chew things over. So find what works for you.

You don't have to do it like everyone else. The point of all of this is to get you into scripture, not to make sure that you follow a program or that you read the Bible in a way that looks very disciplined. It doesn't have to look very disciplined.

The important thing is that you're reading your Bible and really getting into it. Now I've found one of the things that has been very important for me in my reading of the Bible is reading things over again and again, partly because what I'm concerned to do is to get into a state where I'm paying attention to the text, where I'm not just bringing the text my questions and trying to answer them. And that's often something that's encouraged by study notes.

You're trying to answer the questions of the study notes rather than actually trying to think about the text and be reflective and to attend to the questions that emerge from the text itself. Do that and I think you'll find you gain a lot more from it. You also need to find delight in the text.

You need to read the Bible in a way that helps you to recognize its goodness. Meditate upon it and meditate upon it in a way that helps you to see how good and delightful it is. As you do that I think you'll find it a lot less hard to read your Bible.

And I find that a lot of the Bible reading that I do is just because I want to look something up, I want to understand something, I want to explore something more deeply. So I'm looking at a passage in great depth and trying to work out the riddles of the passage or I'm trying to understand how passages connect together. I'm always moving around in my Bible or I'm always getting into depth in a passage and reading it over again and

again.

Pray the Bible. I've found praying the Psalms to be a delightful and powerful practice. These are words that God has given us that we can speak back to God.

And so in your daily Bible reading don't just read the Bible, pray the Bible as well. Spend time thinking over the Bible in a devotional way that helps you to develop a language for speaking to God that God has given us. God has given us this language and then as we start to immerse ourselves in that language we learn to speak more effectively in the way that God has spoken to us.

Getting a good Bible makes you want to read it more. Now I think one of the important things that we tend to forget is the significance of the physical object. And there is something about a physical object that has a uniqueness in the world that bonds us to the world, that bonds us to that object, that bonds us to what it represents.

Now we live in a world of mass-produced objects, of objects that are multiple and exchangeable. But yet there are ways in which we can form a relationship with these things over time that helps us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of what they represent. So for instance if you receive a desk from your grandfather, that desk is not just another desk in the world.

It is a desk that bears with it all the emotional and the symbolic significance of your relationship with your grandfather, particularly after he's died. It may be the only thing that you have left of him. And as you see that particular object you'll find that it's not, it can't just be an object in the world.

It's a mediator of relationship. I've enjoyed creating things for this reason. Knitting is a great way to find a sense of investment in a physical object.

There are other ways that we can create things that give us a connection and help to mediate a sense of presence. Now bringing this back to the subject of the Bible, historically Bibles very much mediated an intense presence. If you think about a traditional Bible, even thinking about Bibles after printing, something like Gutenberg's Bibles would have taken 180 calves to produce just one of those Bibles.

The skins of 180 calves, the equivalent of 300 sheep. The medieval Bible was a Bible that was produced with a very particular provenance. It had a specific character.

It was, if you think about Bibles in the northeast of England, why did the northeast of England produce such good books? Because it had a lot of rain, healthy sheep, and that leads to good skins. And in the same way, when you're thinking about a Bible, it should be a book that has a particular presence. A book that symbolizes something to you.

I have found that very important for my experience. Now it may not work in the same

way for you, but this has been really important in attaching me to the text. That I've invested myself in the text and the text bears something of that investment.

For some people it's underlining and highlighting their Bibles. I've never been able to do that. I've always found that something that I instinctively resist.

I also find that I'm looking at the Bible so much and there are so many different connections that it's just not going to bear it on the page. But I use the Bible still that I was given when I was eight years old. And this is whenever I'm doing my videos, this is the Bible I have just below the level of the screen.

This is a Bible that is falling apart somewhat, but it's a book that I've found great delight in. A book not just in terms of the contents, but in terms of the actual physical object. This represents to me my spiritual journey in many respects.

This was given to me and it has a verse at the beginning. But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them and that from childhood you have known the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. It was given to me from the evangelical church in Clonmel.

And that's so much part of my story. This has been a fellow traveler for me for my entire Christian life pretty much. And as a result, whenever I open this up I have a sense of connection to it and for that reason I'm always using this Bible.

It's always near to me and I don't tend to bring it on travels anymore because it's falling apart. But it is a text that makes, a book that makes me want to get more into the text if that makes sense. The other thing I've found more recently and J. Mark Bertrand has spoken a bit about this on the Bible Design blog and elsewhere, is that with the design of biblical text, digital texts for the scripture and other forms of things like that, the Bible no longer has to be a Swiss army knife.

It can perform a number of different purposes. So now we have for instance Reader's Bibles. Now I've really enjoyed this ESV Reader's Bible and you'll see the Bibles I'm mentioning are behind me at the moment.

This is a very beautiful text. You can see the typography there. Very elegant and it's designed to be read.

It in many ways feels like a novel but a book that sits beautifully in your hand. It feels very pleasant and it's not squashed on a single page. It hasn't got chapters and verses and it teaches you to read the Bible in a different way for that reason.

When you read the Bible usually you're thinking in terms of, as it were, GPS coordinates, the chapters and verses and finding your navigation that way. Whereas reading a

Reader's Bible is a different experience. It's like learning to follow an itinerary.

When you're reading such a text you're thinking about what comes next and what comes beforehand and to give your bearings within the text you need to know the story and how you work through it. So if you're giving a text in Genesis for instance you're not just saying Genesis chapter 35. You'd be saying well it's in the story of Jacob where God promises that kings will come from him and then it's about the death of Rachel after that and the actions of Reuben concerning Bilhah and all these sorts of things.

You know your place in the text not just from a chapter and verse to sort of GPS coordinates but you know it from just knowing the story and the movement of the story. So I found that very important. Another example of a great Reader's Bible, the Bibliotheca Reader's Bible.

It's such an elegant book and again it's a delight to read. It's a translation that is slightly different but I've spent a lot of time in this and I spent a lot of money getting that copy. It's one of the things I've actually put money in from the videos that I've done and the support.

One of the first things I ever got was that Reader's Bible because I thought this is something that will help me spend more time in scripture. It's something that I find delight in as a physical book. It's an elegant thing but it's also something that makes me want to spend time in God's Word to a degree that's even greater than I would otherwise.

I have this big Bible that was given to me by my father. It's the Hark Bible. It's the English translation of the Dutch starting Bible and again a beautiful text that has a facsimile copy of that Bible from the 17th century.

I love old books. I've spent time studying old books. My most amazing experiences of books have been in Durham Cathedral Library and also in the Palace Green Library in Durham where there are books that I've handled that go back to the 13th century and just having your hands on such a book it's incredible seeing some of the the detail of these texts and the way that they convey a sense of history and presence.

Now many Bibles don't do that but I want a Bible that I can feel really connected to. A Bible that draws me into it and so finding a good Bible that works for you I think is important. Read Bible translations that try and capture the sound of the text and the literary character of the text.

Now one translation that I've enjoyed recently is Robert Alter's Old Testament translation. Now if you look at the translation there's a great deal of commentary on the bottom and those can be very helpful. It helps you think through some of the textual and the translation decisions that he made.

It's not as easy a text to read and it's not written primarily for the reader in the way that something like the ESV Reader's Bible is which I highly recommend but it is a book that captures something of the literary character of the biblical text, the Old Testament text. Another thing along that line is thinking about how the Bible is translated. One book that I have recommended on this front is this by John Hobbins and my friend Samuel Bray.

It's a translation of Genesis 1 to 11 but it has alongside it a large section that discusses all the interpretive and translation decisions that they had to make. So as you're reading through it you'll think that sounds different from the translation that I'm used to. Why did they choose this particular way of translating it? And often they've got a very considered answer for that and a particular theory of translation behind it.

They're trying to capture something of the language of the old Tyndale version for instance and the way that he captures something of the power of the potential of the English language. I have Tyndale's Old Testament up here and I've again I love those older Bibles and some of the ways in which they get at the strength of the English language. Whereas so many modern Bibles just aren't written for the ear, they're not written in a way that understands the power of the English language and its potential to communicate scripture in a very effective register.

Now if you're using a dynamic equivalent translation, if you're using something like the Living Bible or the Message, those will be very limited in getting you into the literary aspects of the text. But if you're reading something like these translations that I've just mentioned, Alter or Hobbins and Bray, you'll get something more of the feel for the text and the character that it has. If you're thinking about a general translation that captures something of the Hebraic literary character of the Old Testament for instance, I'm still bound to the King James Version.

I use the new King James Version because it's the version that I grew up with but the King James Version is just such a powerful and resonant text. I mean I hear the King James Version and I think it goes down deep into my English soul as it were. I've heard these words so many times and it captures the idiom and other aspects of the Hebrew text that you don't find in most translations.

If you're someone who does have a rudimentary knowledge of the original languages, then reading an interlinear can be very helpful. I've got this recently published interlinear by Crosway of the Greek New Testament and then there's the Hebrew up there for the Old Testament. Again, both of these are really great texts to use and very well laid out.

Crosway are great at book design and so I'd recommend those if you are someone who wants to think about how the English relates to the original Greek or Hebrew. If you're someone who has a bit more of a knowledge of the original language, then maybe something like this which is the recently published Greek New Testament and Reader's

Edition. Again, this is Crosway, a very elegant format I think.

I've enjoyed using this. So think about a Bible that works for you. Think about different translations, read translations alongside each other but depend primarily upon one.

For me, that's the King James Version because it's the one that I have the deepest personal attachment to and personal attachment really matters when it comes to reading your Bible. You need to feel that this is a book that is your book to read. It's not just some book out there in the world but it's a book that you are entangled with and so a translation that is familiar to you, has been with you from childhood, that really matters, that makes a difference.

Keep a Bible nearby at all times and consult it frequently. I always have a Bible within easy access and I'm often, almost always anyway, sometimes when I'm out I don't have one with me, but I find that I'm always thinking about the Bible and I want to look at a Bible and I'm constantly flicking to and fro and maybe looking at a text in more detail. Have it so that you have a lot of time to do intermittent, occasional and more passive forms of reflection upon Scripture.

So have Bible passages simmering in the back of your mind for much of the day and then have a Bible nearby where you can check things up if you're thinking about something and don't have the information to hand. Read large chunks at once. N.T. Wright has spoken about the Bible as like riding a bike.

If you go too slowly you'll fall off. And when you read a large chunk of the Bible at once you'll find that it will often come into a clarity that it does not have when you're reading it just little bit by little bit. And often you find this in sermon series.

Someone's taking so many little sections that they lose the flow of the narrative. It's one thing I've found going through the story of Joseph for instance and the story of Abraham's family more generally that usually you'd hear that sort of thing within a sermon series and that sermon series might last a whole year even. Certainly the sort of detail that I'm going into it would take a year's series to get through.

But when you're doing four in a week you really get embedded in the text and the text is not something that you're detached from at any point. I'm thinking through the story of Joseph all the time and seeing all these different connections. So get into a text in great detail.

Read over a chapter again and again and again until it's part of you and you're always thinking about it during the day and you'll see all these different connections with it in the events of your life in issues that are raised in conversation and even today I've had three different occasions in conversation where the story of Joseph has come up and it's not been explicitly about the story of Joseph but Joseph is all in my mind at the moment



and it's one of the things that helps me to read the Bible more fully that getting embedded in a particular story and just reading it through in one sitting and then reading it through in intense sections where you read it through about four or five times over a single passage and just try and be attentive to it. You're always thinking about it for the rest of the day when I, or I am at least when I do that and I've found it a delight and something that really stretches me. Read alongside others and that's one of the best blessings of a Bible reading program.

I've never been able to get a Bible reading program to work, never. It's just not worked for me. That's not the way that I read my Bible.

It may work for you though and if you're reading the Bible alongside others it really makes a difference. Again it's something that I've enjoyed about going through the story of Joseph that there are other people commenting on this story with me and having conversations about it and it's not just me that's reading the story but we're sharing this experience of getting into the story of Joseph because it's such a fascinating story, the story of Abraham and if you're just reading by yourself you maybe won't have quite as many stimulating conversations and interactions that will deepen your understanding of the text nor will you be exposed to the same number of different perspectives and people will often see things that you miss. Listen to the Bible.

Apart from anything else this will give you time that you would not be able to read the Bible in. You can't sit down and pick up the book and look through it but you can listen to it on your commute to work for instance when doing the dishes or when cooking. Now I've found listening to the Bible when I was at work was an amazing benefit.

I used to do packing and organizing boxes in a storeroom and during that period of time I was always listening to lectures and sermons and the Bible and during the period of that I did it for a few years but during a period of a year I went through the Bible a couple of times. I went through it for the entirety of in its entirety over one Lent for instance. Now if you want to read through the Bible you can follow a Bible reading program over a year or you can listen to the Bible and you'll find that you'll probably get through it a lot quicker.

Also if you're going to use a Bible, a reader's Bible again that's so much easier to work through. It's written something like this. His Bibliotheca is designed to be similar to reading a novel.

A very well-produced attractive book that gives you the opportunity to read in a different way from that which you're used to. So I'd recommend that. Listening to the Bible also gives you a different posture towards the text.

You can be more receptive. You have more of a sense of its temporal movement of the large shape of stories. So you're not just thinking about an individual element within that

but you're thinking about larger chunks at once.

I've enjoyed Alexander Scoby. That's the one that I'm used to in terms of a reading of the Bible. I've not really used anyone else but other people recommend other readers of the Bible.

So find someone who works for you and then listen to the Bible. Listen to it on your commute or when you're cooking. Some other time when you're working in your shed.

Something like that. Helps you to get the big picture and the big picture will really help you to fit the details together. I found when I listened through the Bible in its entirety over Lent so many more things fell into place.

It came more clearly to me as a single text not just this cluster of largely different texts and then wasn't sure how they all fit together. It was one single text pushing towards the same point. Find some good commentaries.

If you have some good commentaries it can really help you get into the text. What a good commentary is is really someone who's reading alongside with you. A gifted skilled reader who can help you to understand things.

If you don't have a commentary listen to a series on the subject. Now I'm hoping with things like my series on the story of the family of Abraham that it will provide something of a companion for people as they're reading through the text. And so they listen to it.

They read the text and then they listen to my talk on it and then they're constantly thinking things over. That's I mean that would be ideal. That's what I'm really hoping for.

That I will be someone who's reading alongside you and then hopefully people will leave comments and thoughts that they've found as they've been reading. I found for a big picture view of the Old Testament something like Peter Lighthouse's *A House for My Name* is just a superb book. It's maybe a bit taxing for some beginning readers but yes I really recommend this.

Other things the *Through New Eyes* series of commentaries which again things like Peter Lighthouse's *Jesus is Israel* and *Matthew* volume one and two. Other things like this on *Ruth*. All of these are great commentaries for someone who's not really used to commentaries.

Tom Wright's *For Everyone* series of commentaries. I've enjoyed those too and I've recommended those. There are a number of commentary series that will be helpful for the beginner reader.

And push yourself. Stretch yourself a bit. At a certain point you want to be pushing yourself into maybe a more technical commentary.

Find some technical commentary that really gets your attention. And there are some commentaries that are written really well and can be quite riveting reading. Most are not.

I'm sorry. But there are occasionally commentaries that you read and it is a delight and it's exciting. But do that.

Listen to some people like James Jordan's series on various biblical books are just invaluable. They will help you to get into the text to such a greater degree. So he's got his complete collection on Word MP3.

I would recommend getting that. I've worked through all of those. And there's for instance on Revelation alone there's over 200 talks.

But the talks will get you into the text and get you thinking about things. Now that may not be something that you're doing in your devotional time and reading the text but it will help you deepen your understanding of the text. Memorize.

Now I've not memorized as much of scripture as I would like. Well actually I've memorized a lot but forgotten a lot. And so I have a lot of things semi-memorized and I have a good sense of the whole.

But memorizing the text is another way to make the text part of you and make you part of the text. We need to inhabit the world of scripture. Scripture is supposed to be part of us.

And I think it was someone commenting on John Bunyan that if you pricked him his blood would bleed bible. In the same way scripture should be part of us. And there are many occasions when I find unbidden certain parts of scripture just coming to my mind and I'm quoting them to myself or I'm praying a particular psalm that I've memorized.

This is just such a blessing. I don't have to open my bible to have the text. And also the text is part of me.

Something like Psalm 23 or Psalm 1. These are things that I learned when I was about four or five. They'll be some of the last things that I forget. And they're part of me.

They're deep within me. Teach your children as well. If you want to give your children something really important get them to memorize scripture.

Make it part of them. We want to have a deep connection between us and the text and daily bible reading in a way that is not just a chore but in a way that you find something of a sweet spot for you. Something that enables you to really connect with the text and makes the text really part of you.

That makes you want to get up in the morning for instance and spend time in the text.

Find whatever it is that helps you to do that. I've given you an example of some of the things that help me to do that.

I don't know what it will be for you. Maybe some of these things will help. Maybe they won't.

But search for that and then it will be a lot easier. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing you're having a good day.

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