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INTRODUCTION:

# TOO DAUNTING OR TOO FAMILIAR?

Have you ever been intimidated by the Bible? It happened to me again thirty minutes ago. I came to a section in my Bible reading plan that has long puzzled me.


This experience isn't uncommon. Few of us are biblical experts—though we may have started enough annual reading plans to be really comfortable with Genesis.

So why does the Bible intimidate us? Sometimes it's because of its *size*. The thing is massive, if you haven't noticed—a whole library wedged between two covers.

Other times we're intimidated by what we *don't* understand. It is an ancient book, after all, filled with names and places and customs and conventions from another cultural world.

Still other times the Bible intimidates us because of what we *do* understand. I think it was Mark Twain who quipped that the parts of the Bible that troubled him most were not the ones he didn't grasp but the ones that he did. It's true; Scripture often doesn't say what we wish it did.

Others, meanwhile, wouldn't say they're necessarily intimidated by their Bibles. A better



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word might be *bored*. They believe in it, but they've ceased to be amazed by it because of sheer familiarity.

No matter how valuable or precious they are, it's incredibly easy to take familiar things for granted, isn't it? Familiarity can be one of the most dangerous things in the world.

How we approach things matters in a huge way. The world of sports is an obvious example—and a general analogy for life. Whether we’re talking about a pitcher on the mound or a runner at the starting line, an athlete’s simple approach can make all the difference.

So whether you are new to the Christian faith or someone who has been following Jesus for a long time, and especially if you are just exploring what Christianity is all about, I hope this book will help open your eyes to all that awaits you in God’s Word—and what you may be missing out on simply because of your approach. At the risk of sounding like your mother, the issue could be “poor posture.” Of the heart, that is.

Thankfully, there are many good resources on how to read, study, and apply the Bible. But I’m not aware of any that focus exclusively on how to approach it in the first place. This little book aims to do just that. For without the right heart postures, we’re not yet ready to start reading.





# 1

## APPROACH YOUR BIBLE PRAYERFULLY

I might as well begin with a confession: I wasn't planning to include this chapter.

I nearly omitted it for the same reason you're tempted to skim it or skip it.

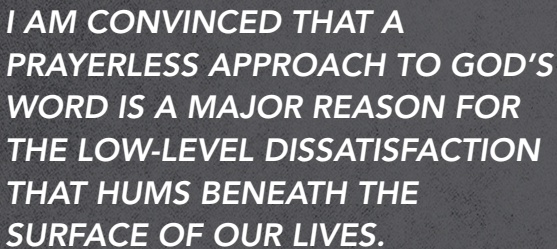
For most of us, the importance of prayer is not a breaking headline. It's "old news." We are aware that it matters, even if we don't get how it all works. (*If God has planned everything, you may wonder, why bother asking him for anything?*) Even if you're not religious at all, you know that followers of Jesus pray. They talk to him—or

think that's what they are doing. And if you are a believer, well, is there a topic more basic?

If the Christian faith had a curriculum, the class called "Prayer Matters" wouldn't be an elective for college; it would be a prerequisite for kindergarten.

## NEVER ASSUME

Okay, so prayer is foundational. It's really important. But can't we just assume this is true and graduate to the "practical" stuff? Not so fast.



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The most important things in life should never be glossed over or simply assumed.

I am convinced that a prayerless approach to God's Word is a major reason for the low-level dissatisfaction that hums beneath the surface of our lives. We rob ourselves of joy and peace



when we fail to pray. Indeed, approaching Scripture apart from prayer is one of the most counterproductive things we do. For prayerless Christianity is powerless Christianity.

## I-O-U-S

You may be familiar with praying in *response* to God’s Word, but what does it mean to pray in *anticipation* of it? What does it look like to approach your Bible prayerfully?

It means not rushing into your Bible reading, expecting the pages to magically microwave your cold heart. Now, God is sovereign—which is another way of saying he’s *God* and does what he wants (Ps. 115:3). He is more than capable of turning on the microwave even when you haven’t asked him. But why not ask him?

Several years ago, I heard John Piper share an acronym that he uses to ready his heart to hear from God. Each letter—I-O-U-S—corresponds to a prayer from the Book of Psalms.<sup>1</sup>

**I – “Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain” (Ps. 119:36, ESV)**

This is not a flattering request. It assumes our

hearts are bent in the wrong direction, away from what gives life. It's not that we dislike our Bibles; it's just that other things loom larger. Our wish lists seem more enticing, our to-do lists more pressing.

Most mornings, for example, my mind immediately goes to one of three places:

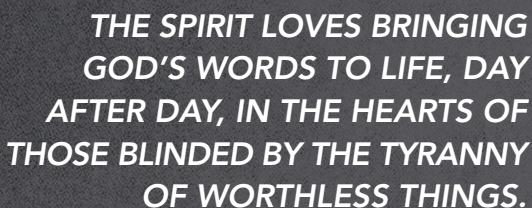
1. What do I have planned for today?
2. What am I going to eat for breakfast?
3. What's happening on social media?

Questions like these are not terrible, but they are telling. They expose the natural bent of my heart. They reveal that while it's effortless to be mindful of self, I have to work to be mindful of God.

Every day I need to be peeled away from my pathetic preoccupation with self. You do too. Thankfully, God loves to de-magnetize our hearts from what is worthless, and re-magnetize them toward what is priceless, all for the sake of our joy. This is where prayer comes in; we just have to ask.

**O – “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18, ESV)**

In many ways, reading the Bible is like reading other books. We ought to approach it the way we’d approach any piece of literature, being sensitive to genre, setting, the author’s intent, and all that other good stuff. But there is one



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major difference. *The third person of the eternal Trinity breathed out its words.* And the Spirit loves bringing God’s words to life, day after day, in the hearts of those blinded by the tyranny of worthless things.

What has captured your imagination? What is enamoring the eyes of your heart? When you open your Bible, don’t expect to be put under some mystical spell. Speak directly with the Author. Ask the Spirit to unblind you to the beauty staring you in the face. As Charles

Spurgeon observed, “Texts will often refuse to reveal their treasures till you open them with the key of prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

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**U – “Unite my heart to fear your name”**

**(Ps. 86:11, ESV)**

When I was a boy, my dad once explained why opening the Bible can be such a struggle. “It’s almost like Satan’s finger is pressing down on the cover,” he said. I remember thinking that was weird. Now I believe it’s true.

The Bible teaches us that the Devil is crafty. He knows the easiest way to keep us from God’s Word is to distract us, to hold up captivating shiny objects, to lure us into thinking about something—*anything*—else.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you recognize this scenario: *Okay, Romans chapter 2. Let's do this! Where did I leave off? Okay, this part looks familiar. Man, I love the apostle Paul . . . I am so hungry. Is my lunch meeting tomorrow at 11:30 or 12:30? Let me check . . .*

Amazing, isn't it? Our hearts are fragmented in a thousand different directions. As Piper has written elsewhere, in words that should haunt many of us, "One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time."<sup>4</sup>

We must pray earnestly for a *united* heart, lest it drift toward being divided, distracted, and distant from the words of the living God.

### **S – “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love” (Ps. 90:14, ESV)**

It's not just that we're distracted from God, though. We're also dissatisfied in God. Sure, we know he's a significant part of life, but we figure that if we want to be really filled up—really happy—we'll need to look elsewhere.

Sometimes religious people can give the impression that happiness is unspiritual. You can be happy or you can be holy, but surely not both.

Thankfully, the Bible has no patience for this kind of thinking.

Every human being on the planet is seeking happiness. That's not the problem; the problem is that we seek it outside of God. Right quest, wrong destination.

In his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, the late American novelist David Foster Wallace captured this universal, even primal, human dynamic. Wallace was not a Christian, and yet his words strike a profound spiritual chord:

*The compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more*

*power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they're unconscious. They are default settings.<sup>5</sup>*

Can you see yourself in the mirror of Wallace's words? I can. This is why I need to approach God's Word prayerfully, asking him to satisfy this restless heart with steadfast love.