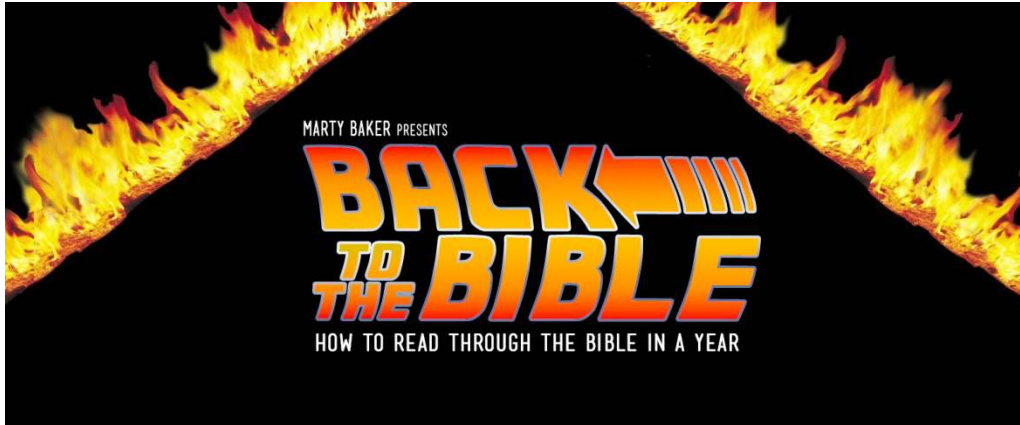


Back to the Bible

New Year's Message

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It happens the same time every year. Just after the Christmas climax and right before the dawning of the New Year, most Americans look back over the past year in an evaluative way and make resolutions to shore up weak areas in their lives. For some, they will make a valiant attempt to push themselves away from the table. Others will decide that this is the year they will get the garage squared away so they can actually park the car in it. Still others will strive hard to gain control of some nasty habit.

Time magazine offers this advice to those who cannot come up with any ideas. My comments will be italicized.

- Order an annual subscription to the Fruit Guy. By committing to a weekly service that delivers fresh fruit, we make having healthy food a reality. This approach has the added sweet side effect of urgency. Every week when the fruit is delivered, we know all too well that if we fail to consume the fruit in the next week, more of it will show up and we will have to waste the unused fruit. And if you like real adventures, what about a more extreme version of this? A weekly subscription to the Kale Guy? *Are you kidding me? Who wants a whole bunch of fruit boxes full of fruit cluttering your porch, attracting all kinds of fruit flies, and mice, and Chipmunks, and, well, you fill in the blank.*
- Give a good friend the ability to take some money from your bank account if you break your diet. Tell this friend that if he sees you eating something unhealthy, he should withdraw a specified amount of money from your

checking account and spend it. And if you find that this is not sufficiently painful, either make the amount larger, or make the deal with someone you don't like that much (maybe your boss). *Really? What happens if the friend starts making a whole lot of withdrawals based on food infractions you didn't even know you made?*

- Set up an automatic monthly transfer from your checking account into a savings account. This quick, onetime decision to transfer money will help you spend within your budget, while also helping your future financial security. *Not a bad idea, providing, of course, you have extra money to actually move, right?*
- Working out every day takes a lot of ongoing willpower. Joining a gym is nice but still requires the daily decision to go to the gym. Instead, a better approach is to set up recurring weekly "meetings" with friends or co-workers for workouts. This kind of social obligation is likely to hold you, and them, accountable to show up, and once you have shown up, you might as well start sweating. *If you do this, you had better pick friends who don't like to talk, because if you do you will not be pumping a whole lot of iron.*
- Go to the nearby shelter and get a dog. Once you make this quick onetime decision, you are going to go for daily walks for the next decade. You have got to be joking. Get a dog? *I've got one of those and I love him, but he's a whole lot of work. It's like having another child, or two, or three. And with that dog will come dog licenses, vet bills, dog food bills, dog toy bills, dog clothing bills for the winter months around here, dog beds spread throughout your house, and costly dog treats. Talk about a way to make sure you don't have any money to move from your checking to your savings.*

Actually, I think there are better resolutions. Like what? Well, if you are a Christian what could be better than actually reading your Bible? No, I'm not talking about a verse or two a month, but actually opening up the book and getting into it. Why should you take this particular book off the shelf, blow the dust off of it, and began to pour over its vast contents?

For starters, the Bible is, according to Jesus, the ultimate meal. Regarding it, our Lord said decisively:

It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

Think about this pragmatically. Which do you spend more time doing: eating physical or spiritual food? If you spend more time chowing down on burgers and fries than you do on God's word, then your life is seriously and dangerously out of spiritual balance. Just imagine how your life might change if you reversed the order of your food intake. Really, what would happen if you spent more time reading the living word of God then you did enjoying breakfast, lunch, dinner, and assorted snacks. Makes you wonder.

While you are still thinking about the words of Christ, why not fast-forward to the words of Paul in second Timothy 3:16,

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Did you get that? According to Paul, the Bible you hold in your hands contains the very breath of God! You might need to read that again so you can properly process it. What a thought. What a privilege. God spoke and the prophets wrote; therefore how can we not heed and read?

And if you are sitting here thinking, "Hey, I do read my Bible. Why would I want to read it even more?" We'll get to that answer in a moment. Suffice it to say, another good reason to read the Bible is because so many people are not like you. They are biblically illiterate. The Barna Research Group examined how often Americans read the Bible how much they know about the Scriptures. The survey revealed that 93% of all Americans own a Bible. That is fantastic. Question is, "Do they read the Bible they own?" Only 18% of all who say they are born-again Christians said they read the Bible every day. Beyond this, one Gallup poll revealed that many Christians could not name the first five books of the New Testament. These statistics, combined with the fact that the Bible is God's word to move each of us to make a resolution this year to read the Bible and to be known as people of the word. True, you might be one who feeds upon its truths more than others; however, there is always room for improvement, there is always time for another spiritual meal, and there are always spiritual discoveries waiting to be made between you and your encounter with God through His Word.

So, in light of all of this, I would like to challenge you to get into the word of God in 2014. To make sure that you start things off on solid footing, I would like to address three questions this morning. Each question will be directly related to the topic and challenge at hand:

Let's get back to the Bible in 2014

To guide you toward this goal, I would like to first pose an obvious question:

What's The Motivation?

Paul's words to the Roman Christians in chapter 12 of his letter to them give us the ultimate motivation for spending quality time in the word of God.

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:1-2a).

Paul gives us first negative and a positive command. Negatively, the Greek prohibition means to stop doing something that is already in progress. It is equivalent to saying, "stop conforming to the world!" Positively, the Greek prohibition means to begin to do something. Taken in this manner it could be translated, "Begin [and continue] to be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Before we consider how to go about moving your mind away from the old, sinful you to the new, holy you, let's first make a brief note about the word transformation. The Greek is *metamorphoomai*, which is a preposition (meta) wedded to a verbal concept "to be transformed." As I've taught on other occasions, this speaks of a radical transformation, a complete change.

Think of how a tadpole becomes a small frog and you've got the Greek concept of transformation down. It is to move into a completely different form altogether. Applied to your mind it speaks of a constant change from the old sinful you, to the new godly you.

How do you go about gaining a transformed mind, one which is not stuck in your old sinful ways, one which thinks wisely, one which is full of discernment, and one which is honoring to God and knows how to live life to the fullest? One way is to fill your mind with God's Word. The Word will challenge your thinking, it will evaluate your motives, it will help you see the difference between godly and godless behavior, it will show you what is sin and what is not, it will teach you how to think about and treat others and so on and so forth. Really, with the Word in your mind you are going to experience a radical transformation in every facet of your life, from how you live as a single person to what you do, or don't do, on a date.

Talk about the ultimate reason for reading the Bible! It is going to change your life for the better.

Just in case this is not motivation enough, allow me to give you some additional ones:

- It will convict you of sin. Hebrews 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."
- It will strengthen your faith and the role of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. John 17:8, "...for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received *them* and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me."
- It will increase your faith in the fact of your possession of forgiveness and eternal life. Romans 10:17, "So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."
- It will cleanse and sanctify you. Ephesians 5:26, "...so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word ..."
- It will enhance your ability to be victorious spiritual warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Ephesians 6:16 "In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil *one*. 17 And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."
- It will empower you when you share your faith with the non-Christian.
- It will give you God's moral standard for living in a society entrenched and godless standards.

You probably don't need any more divine motivations for getting into the Bible this year, so we will stop right there. We now know what some of those motivations are for actually reading our Bible on days other than Sunday. What is the second question we need to answer to make sure we accomplish this worthy, lofty goal?

What Are The Methods?

Believe me, there are many ways you can read the Bible. I have tried them all and have found each one of them to be most beneficial. Let me share the top three methods with you.

The Whole Enchilada Approach. I'm reaching back here into my upbringing on the border so bear with me. Quite simply, this is merely reading the Bible through in a given year. Depending on the Bible you own, this one till reading around 1300 pages. Taking in to account the number of days in the year, this breaks down to reading roughly 3 chapters a day. Give or take a chapter here and there throughout the year, of course. Yes, this is a monumental task, but it is entirely achievable. How do I know this? Because many people, like myself, have done it.

For instance, a French nobleman by the name of M. De Renty, read the Bible daily for three hours on his knees with his head covered. Robert Cotton, read the whole Bible through 12 times a year. Joshua Barnes read a small copy of the Bible, which he always carried with him, over 120 times in his lifetime. Susanna, Countess of Suffolk, read the Bible twice yearly for the last seven years of her life. And it has to be a constant goal for us, especially as pastors and elders who are responsible for teaching the Word of God. Dr. Martyn-Lloyd Jones, who for over 30 years preached as Westminster Chapel in London, England, states in his famous book for preachers called appropriately, *Preaching and Preachers*, that at a very minimum we, as leaders, should read the whole Bible through each year ... every year of their pastorate. In addition, he states he went so far as to read the Old Testament at least once per year, and the Psalms and the New Testament twice (*Preaching and Preachers*, 183).

Indeed the achievement of these people is remarkable, and it may be out of the realm of your particular schedule; however, their accomplishment shows that you can at least read the Bible one time in a given year.

For those who would like to attempt this particular goal, I would invite you to go to www.Bible-reading.com. On this website you can print out a one-page 52-week Bible reading plan. Simply pick a day began and check off the boxes as you read the Scriptures. You can also go to Biblegateway.com and set up having the actual passages sent to you each day, and/or they can also send you the audio files. Additionally, they have a nice 61 day plan for reading chronologically through the major events of the Bible. For a more detailed plan I would direct you to the following web address: <http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.chronological.pdf>. This is all so interesting. All of this information leaves us with one logical conclusion: Really, there is no viable reason for not getting into the Word of God, is there?

I must confess: I never read the Bible all the way through until after I finished a Bible degree in Bible from Azusa Pacific University. Shocking, isn't it? Sure, I read vast portions of the Scriptures during school, and during my upbringing; however, I had never sat down and read from Genesis to Revelation. The following poem really describes what God taught me as I committed to a complete reading of the Bible.

And I suppose I knew my Bible,
reading piecemeal, hit or miss;
now a bit of John or Matthew,
next this narrative Genesis.
Certain chapters of Isaiah,
certain Psalms, the 23rd

12th of Romans, first of Proverbs.
 Yes, I thought I knew the word.
 But I found a thorough reading
 was a different thing to do,
 and the way was unfamiliar
 when I read the Bible through.
 Ye who treat the crown of writings
 as you treat no other book--
 just a paragraph disjointed,
 just a crude, impatient look--
 try a worthy or procedure,
 try a broad and steady view;
 you will kneel in very rapture
 when you read the Bible through.¹

I now know the meaning of this poem where Bible reading is concerned. Reading through the Bible in one year, I must admit, was one of the most life-changing goals I have ever achieved. God spoke in ways which were, well, astonishing, and I found out information I didn't even know was in the Bible. I also walked away from each reading just feeling clean and fresh in my spirit, like the world was now perfectly centered and everything was going to be all right. I am sure the same will happen for you.

The Pizza Approach. I do not know how it is with your family when it comes to ordering a pizza, but when we order a pizza it is usually comprised of several different types of pizza to suit our various taste buds. Liz likes pineapple, Nathan and I like just about everything else. Hence, when it comes to eating the pizza, I am very careful to select those pieces which I like.

With this thought in mind, let's apply this concept to reading the Scriptures. Think about it. Nowhere in the Bible are you commanded to read from one end of it to the other. You are just called to be in the word. Most of us are conditioned by our culture that when we read a book we must start at the front and read toward the back. Granted, there is great value in reading the Bible all the way through. For one, you will gain a greater understanding of the plan of God for all mankind. For another, you will understand how the books all fit together. But this is not the only way to approach the Scriptures.

Why not get a calendar and write on it the Bible books you would like to read this year, and no it doesn't have to be all 66 of them. Maybe for you, it will only be 30 books. Write down those books on the weeks you would like to read them, and then get to work. Remember there is high-value in any type of Bible reading because it is the word of God. So, if you choose this approach don't feel like you are shortchanging yourself. Some progress, my friend, is better than no progress.

The Déjà vu Approach. I'm sure you've experienced this weird mind anomaly before. You know, it is a feeling that you have been in a certain place, at a certain time before. One time I had déjà vu so intense while I was on vacation in Spain, I told by Spanish uncle that I was pretty sure there was going to be red and white striped umbrellas on the beach when we finally

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 54.

reached our destination. When our bus finally pulled up to the beach on the island of Palma Mallorca, you guessed it, red and white striped umbrellas were everywhere ... Well and I had never been in Spain. Woa. How do you explain that?

Applied to Bible reading, the déjà vu approach means you read a given Bible book more than one time. For example on your reading schedule for the month of January, set a goal for reading Proverbs through two times. To accomplish this goal you would need to read two chapters a day, except for one day when you would need to read three chapters. How about the book of John two times in February? You'll need to only cover about 1 ½ chapters per day. Piece of cake.

The benefit of this type of reading is it will saturate your mind with the truths one particular Bible book. Pastor Martyn Lloyd Jones, a renowned Bible teacher, used to read the Bible book 50 times before he preached its truths. Undoubtedly, his mind was jam-packed with God's teachings, and no wonder we are still studying and listening to his sermons today. In any event, I will leave it up to you to devise your own déjà vu approach to reading the Bible.

As a side note, I would encourage you to sign up for *Evernote*. It is a free database program and it will allow you to create multiple files for reading multiple Bible books. Personally, what I do is I read my Bible in the morning with my *Evernote* program open on my computer screen. When I finish a given chapter, I create cards with topical ideas on them which relate to the chapter in question. I also make a notation of spiritual concepts which surface as I read. You do not want to forget this because many times these ideas and thoughts are directly from the Spirit of God and designed for you and your life situation.

We've consider the motivations for reading the Bible this year, along with the various methods. We have one more concept to address in this New Year's message.

What Are The Mysteries?

By this I mean, what are the questions which will most certainly surface as you read your Bible?

Which Bible Version Should I Use? Choose a translation which is close to the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. I like the New American Standard Version, but the NIV, the King James, and the New King James are good as well. I would stay away from paraphrases because they are one step removed from the inspired word of God, and they are one man's restatement of what he thinks the Scriptures are saying at any given point. The Message, by Eugene Peterson, is an illustration of a good paraphrase.

What Pitfalls Should You Be Aware Of? Good question. Here are a few I've encountered.

- Don't stop reading this because you discover that you cannot understand everything, or because you cannot see its spiritual relevance at the moment. Insight and understanding will come at the most unpredictable times, but they will come.
- Don't let the busy nature of your schedule pour water on the fire of your passion to read the Scriptures. Set the schedule for reading and keep it by addressing it first thing at the start of your day. If you can't get to the reading for some reason, then make sure you have the Scriptures downloaded on your iPhone, iPad, or like devices so you can at least hear the passages for the day

as you ride the bus into the Pentagon or the Metro train downtown. And if you happen to miss a day (or two), don't let the Devil get the best of you with his accusations. Just simply pick up where you should have been when you get the time to get re-committed. Remember, some Bible reading is better than no Bible reading.

- Don't Set Reading Goals Which Are Too Lofty. I used to run a mile every day until I went to college, and then I just stuck with lifting weights and walking. If I were to tell you that I am going to start training next week for a triathlon, which I want to participate in during the month of, say, March, you'd laugh, right? There is no way I would reach that goal and I'd probably hurt myself. Better to start out slower and achieve something, than to devise a hefty goal I'll never be able to reach. The same applies to reading the Bible. Please, don't come up to me after the service and say, "Pastor, I'm fired up. I'm going to read the Bible through ten times this year." Right. You might want to do that, but you will have absolutely no time to go to work, or talk with your friends, or surf the net, or go to school, or talk with your mate, or, well you can fill in the blank.

What should you do if you don't feel like reading the Bible at some point down the road? When, not if, that occurs, remember these three things.

- Recognize there may be sin in your life which needs to be confessed (1 John 1:9). Remember: a reading man will stop sinning, and a sinning man will stop reading.
- Ask God to give you a heart for reading His word. You know, He is in the business of getting men new hearts according to the Scriptures (1 Samuel 10:9, 26). He has changed hearts in the past, and He can, and will, change yours.
- Ask other saints to pray for you. There is power in prayer so use it to your advantage.
- Team up with somebody who's also reading the Scripture. There is nothing like a buddy to hold you accountable.

The pitfalls are most assuredly out there, but they need not trip you up as you give yourself to reading the Bible this year like never before.

Of all of the resolutions you can make for 2014, let reading your Bible be at the top of your list. You will be glad you did because it will transform you in a more mature Christian before God, and your transformation will, in turn, transform the lives of those around you. I know this is true because this is the nature of the Word.

Keith Miller reminds us of the transformative nature of the Bible in his book *Edge of Adventure*. He writes ...

Most of us have heard the story of the Mutiny on the Bounty, but few of us have heard how the Bible played a very vital part in that historical event. The Bounty was a British ship which set sail from England in 1787, bound for the South Seas. The idea was that those on board would spend some time among the islands,

transplanting fruit bearing and food bearing trees, and doing other things to make some of the islands were habitable. After 10 months of voyage, the Bounty arrived safely at its destination and for six months the officers and crew gave themselves to the duties placed upon them by the government.

When the special task was completed, however, and the order came to embark again, the sailors rebelled. They had formed strong attachments for the native girls, and the claimant and the ease of the South Sea island life was much to their liking. The result was mutiny on the Bounty, and the sailors placed Captain Bligh and a few loyal men adrift in an open boat. Captain Bligh, in an almost miraculous fashion, survived the ordeal, was rescued, and eventually arrived home in London to tell his story. An expedition was launched to punish the mutineers, and in due time 14 of them were captured and paid the penalty under British law.

But nine of them had gone to another distant island. There they formed the colony. Perhaps there's never been a more degraded and debauched social life than that of the colony. They learned to distill whiskey from a native plant, and the whiskey, as usual, along with the other habits, led to their ruin. Disease and murder took the lives of all the native men and all but one of the white man named Alexander Smith. He found himself the only man on an island, surrounded by a crowd of women and half-breed children. Alexander Smith found a Bible among the possessions of the dead sailor. The book was new to him. He had never read it before. He sat down and read through it. He believed it and he began to appropriate. He wanted others to share in the benefits of this book, so he taught classes to the women and the children, as he read to them and taught them the Scriptures.

It was 20 years before ship ever found that island, and when it did, a miniature utopia was discovered. The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony, and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality, insanity, or illiteracy. How was an accomplished? By the reading, the believing, and the appropriating of the truth of God!²

As God transformed Alexander and all those around him, He will do the same thing in your life, but you must first do what he did: Read the Bible!

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 50-51.