

## HOW TO READ THE NEW TESTAMENT

Psalms 119: 97-105  
II Timothy 3: 10-17

Faith Community  
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### Introduction

We are people of the word. This book is at the heart of our faith, not because it has a handsome binding and gold gilt edges, but because of what's in it. The Bible tells us of the history and foundations of our faith; it tells of the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God and how he came into our world. To know this book is to know about our faith. So, it is critically important to read the Bible.

There are several ways to go about this reading. One method is the "flip and point" technique – you flip open the Bible and point to a passage and read it. An amazing number of people do that. Sometimes it can be helpful, but it can be dangerous too.

One person, wanting direction for his life, flipped open the Bible, pointed and read, "And Judas went out and hanged himself." OK, there must be a mistake. He tried again; flipped open the Bible and there he read, "Go and do likewise." You don't want to put too much confidence in that kind of reading.

Although I don't want to completely reject the usefulness of God speaking in this way. At a critical point in my faith I opened the Bible and just read what I found there.

It was a beautiful, warm, fall day; one of those Indian summer days when it suddenly turned warm. Our neighbor's pool had been closed up for the winter but we decided to pull back the cover and do some swimming. We pulled the plastic cover back under the diving board and dove into the water. Unfortunately, we didn't notice the plastic creeping back over the water.

When I dove from the board, I didn't make it over the plastic but went into it head first. The plastic sucked in against my face and body. I couldn't breathe; all I could do was kick my feet, which didn't help. Finally I realized if I was going to get help I would have to stop kicking. Shortly after that someone grabbed my feet and pulled me from the plastic. To my shock it was the kid who I disliked the most!

I ran home and went up to my room. I grabbed a Bible off the shelf and flipped it open. There I read, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Mt 18:6) I was stunned. I prayed. My life was never the same after that.

So, I can't discount this as a way in which God may speak to us, but for an overall understanding of the Bible it is better to read one book at a time and see its message in context.

### I

We are asking you to read the New Testament in a systematic way. I hope you will go home and put this sheet on the refrigerator and read one chapter per day. In this way you'll see the message in its context.

If there are two or more at home, I hope you'll read each chapter together. Try to take a little time to discuss what the chapter you read means. Kids can ask the best questions and can provide some of the most profound responses. Think of what a great experience it will be for your kids to read the entire New Testament! Lots of adults haven't done that.

I want to offer some suggestions for reading the New Testament that I hope will be helpful. As you read the Bible here are some recommendations that may help you understand it better.

## II

Read the New Testament like you're reading it for the first time. That will be easy for some of you because you will be reading it for the first time, so you will have an advantage. You'll be reading these words with fresh eyes. If you are familiar with a book or an account, try to see it as brand new. One of the roadblocks to hearing the full gospel is thinking you already know what it says.

I have studied Jesus' parables for most of my ministry. I wrote a Bible study on them, but I often find something that I never saw before. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, the man is beaten and robbed and left by the side of the road. Two officials from synagogue come by and do nothing to help, but then a Samaritan - the hated enemy - comes by and lavishes help on him.

We usually see the parable from the perspective of the Samaritan. Imagine the story from the beaten man's point of view. Here is a person who has to accept lavish help from his hated enemy. How does that feel? How good would we be at taking generous help from our enemies? When we read the story like we've never heard it before we can gain new insights.

One of the ways to hear the gospel in a fresh way is to hear it from a different person's point of view. In the Gospel of John, Jesus comes upon some people who are about to stone a woman to death because she has been caught in the act of adultery. (It's interesting they didn't stone the men caught in adultery!) Jesus steps into this situation and says, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone." Then John says the men put down their stones and went away, beginning with the oldest.

If you know that account, read it from a different perspective. Put yourself in Jesus' shoes - what courage does it take to face a group of men with stones in their hands and tell them to stop? And won't the church leaders accuse him of condoning adultery?

Or take the point of view of the woman - surely she is facing a horribly painful death and suddenly Jesus gives her a whole new life. How would she react? How must she feel? For passages that are familiar try seeing the story through different eyes.

## III

As you read, especially the gospels, keep the same authors material in mind. I mean when you read Mark just listen to what Mark has to say. That's one of the advantages of reading a gospel all the way through. You see that writer's perspective. When you begin to read Mark today, you'll notice that there isn't any Christmas story - no wise men, no shepherds, no Virgin Mary, no stable. In Mark, Jesus is already a young man coming to be baptized.

When you get to Matthew, you'll find wise men but no shepherds, and in Luke, shepherds but no wise men. Each author is a person with a perspective on the gospel and certain interests and biases.

Luke highlights the common person. So Luke tells about the shepherds at Jesus' birth. In Luke's account of the Beatitudes Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor," while in Matthew Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Read and appreciate each author for his own perspective.

One of the great gifts of the Holy Scripture is that we have four gospels, not one. I can imagine today if we had to decide what should be included in the New Testament, we'd try to choose the best gospel. Fortunately our ancestors included all four. I believe it is a gift of the Holy Spirit that we have these four gospels rather than one. Savor each one.

#### IV

As you read the New Testament ask if the passage is to be understood literally or metaphorically. Does the passage literally mean what it says, or does it point beyond itself to a larger meaning? For example, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Nicodemus' response is, "How am I, an old man, supposed to go back into my mother's womb?" By interpreting Jesus literally, he missed the point. Jesus is speaking figuratively and pointing to a more important message.

You'll enjoy it when you get to Gospel of John, because the disciples are always missing Jesus' point because they take him literally.

On the other hand when Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God," he means just what he says.

The people who read Revelations literally miss the point of what it's about. John is held prisoner on the island of Patmos. He writes to the churches to give them his message. It was written in a coded language to be understood by the churches but not by the guards and officials who would deliver it.

Ask yourself as you read, is this meant to be literal or figurative?

#### V

Most importantly, open yourself to God's spirit as you read each day. Before you begin reading, pray that God will speak to you as you read. Ask for God's spirit in your reading and pray for understanding in how each passage applies to your life.

As you read, don't do it just as an experience of your mind but of your whole self. Open your spirit to be touched by God's word and spirit. Don't just read it as an historical account of people 2000 years ago, but as people of faith living out what they believe. Ask yourself, "What does this mean for my life? How could this change my life?"

It can, you know.

## **Conclusion**

This is a wonderful project for our church – to read all of the New Testament together. I've tried to offer some guide as you begin. Enjoy the journey and let us know how it is going along the way.

Amen