

"The less we read the Word of God, the less we desire to read it, and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray."

—George Mueller

**17-Jul-15**

## **Are You Biblically Literate?**

The Bible may be the world's bestselling book that is never read. "Never" may be a bit hyperbolic, but people who study such things tell us that fewer people are reading it and not as often. Ninety percent of American homes contain a Bible—most contain at least three. Many free versions of Scripture are a click or two away on the Internet or can be downloaded directly to a smartphone. The problem is clearly not availability.

It remains at the top of the sales charts, but the dust settles on the Bible's cover far longer than it once did. And it is not just God's Word that Americans are not reading; nearly a quarter of Americans have not read even any kind of book in the past year (just 35 years ago, only 8% had not read a book in the past year). One could conclude that the decrease in Bible reading simply mirrors the general decline of reading books.

But what about churchgoers, those who are supposed to be basing their beliefs on that very Book? Sadly, the figures are not much better. According to LifeWay Research, only 19% of those who regularly attend worship services read the Bible every day, not an encouraging figure. Worse, a nearly equal percentage of attendees never read Scripture at all. The 63% majority

in between read it only occasionally, perhaps once or twice a week or a few times a month. This is why many people think "To thine own self be true" and "Charity begins at home" are quotations from God's Word.

Lest we leave other, once-more-Christian nations out, Australian figures on daily Bible reading by professed Christian churchgoers—2 in 10—are comparable to the U.S. ones. Only 11% of Canadian churchgoers read the Bible every day and 34% never read it, statistics that are somewhat worse than their American counterparts' figures. A recent British poll conducted by the Bible Society found that, while church attendance is distressingly low (near an abysmal 10% of the adult population), 35% of lay-members who regularly worship in a church read their Bibles daily, but as many as 40% of their fellow members do not read it at all.

Of course, people who do not read God's Book of Instruction would not know how necessary Bible study is to Christian knowledge and growth unless it had been taught to them through preaching. We can only assume that exhortations to study Scripture have been few lately, especially in the dwindling mainline churches. This should not be the case among the churches of [God](#).

Those whom God has called should know Paul's admonition to Timothy, "Till I come, give attention to reading [Scripture], to exhortation, to doctrine" ([I Timothy 4:13](#)). In his second epistle to him, the apostle reminds his protégé "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](#)" ([II Timothy 3:15](#)), and that "you must continue in the things you have learned and been assured of" (verse 14). He also writes that he should be "rightly dividing the word of truth" ([II Timothy 2:15](#)).

As Paul mentions, Timothy was steeped in Scripture from his early childhood through the efforts of his mother and grandmother, but that tradition of early Bible training has all but disappeared from Christendom. In 2014, the United Kingdom Bible Society [surveyed](#) British children ages 8-15 to find their level of biblical literacy, and the results are astonishingly poor: Just under a third of them did not know that the birth of Jesus came from Scripture! Forty-one percent of British children did not identify the story of David and Goliath as biblical. And a whopping 59% failed to realize the

origin of the stories of Jonah and the great fish and of Samson and Delilah. Sadly, a full 23% claimed that they had *never even heard* of Noah's ark, while a stunning 85% were completely ignorant of the existence of King Solomon. These horrific percentages become more understandable, however, when we realize that 54% of British *adults* suppose that the plot of *The Hunger Games* could have come from the Bible.

It was not that long ago—perhaps a century or so—that the Bible formed the foundation of most Americans' education. They began life listening to their parents read stories from the Bible then graduated to learning to read from it, doing school lessons based on it, and studying it daily as part of their routine religious practice. Society expected its citizens to recognize allusions to biblical stories and quotations; no one ever stopped to ask if the hearer or reader knew their origin. Such common knowledge provided accepted boundaries of human behavior and belief.

In terms of biblical literacy, America has left that sort of familiarity with Scripture in the past, and forsaking it has resulted in profound consequences to the social order. With the boundaries down, people now feel "free" to embrace extreme views, and the rest of society is expected, not just to look the other way, but to tolerate, even welcome, these beliefs and their perverse behaviors. Our forefathers, with their traditional ways, had more wisdom than we credit them for.

Why did they place so much value on familiarity with Scripture? Notice Paul's explanation in [II Timothy 3:16-17](#) from *The Living Bible*, whose vernacular gives us a better sense of what the apostle means: "The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives; it straightens us out and helps us do what is right. It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point, fully equipped to do good to everyone."

To put it in a few words, the Bible is a force for good. It is God's personal instruction to us, designed to help us along the road to maturity so that we can be useful and helpful to ourselves and to others. It gives us straight talk, tells us where we have veered off the path, provides solutions to our

problems, and urges us to live with integrity toward all. By no means does it try to bind us, repress us, stifle us, or cow us. As Jesus says, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" ([John 8:32](#)).

But as He says, to enjoy this liberty, we have to know the truth first. We have to hear it, read it, study it, think about it—or it will not work its miraculous influence upon us. We will not receive its benefits. Most importantly, we will not know God, the essence of eternal life ([John 17:3](#)).

We will be well-served to evaluate our level of biblical literacy. How well do we know it? How often do we read and study it? Have we memorized certain parts of it? Can we find significant scriptures quickly? Can we paraphrase its teachings? Do verses come to mind when associated situations arise in our lives?

As God's people, we have the responsibility not to be like [the world](#). The world is losing its biblical knowledge. We, as exhorted in [II Peter 3:18](#), should be growing in it.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Studying the Bible](#)

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

We must rekindle our ardency for Bible study, God's personal instruction to us on the big questions of life. Because of the busy times in which we live, we may feel overwhelmed, forgetting the awesome intent and responsibility of our calling. Bible study provides a personal means of attaining the mind of God, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. This message provides a practical alphabetical, mnemonic guide to systematically and analytically process (including asking questions, outlining and analyzing the books, chapters, paragraphs, verses, and individual words, understanding

their contexts) biblical information we may have otherwise discarded. Alternate methods (themes, topics, principles, proverb indexing, and scripture cards) are also modeled.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[How Much Is the Bible Worth To You?](#)**

by Staff

In one sense, we take the Bible for granted. In other times possessing God's Word was rare and expensive. Here is why having such ready access to God's Word is one of our richest blessings.

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