

B I B L E S T U D Y

Read the Bible in a Year?

It seemed impossible, but was it?

BY MERLE POIRIER

OK, I CONFESS. I'VE NEVER READ the Bible through in one year, or any time period, for that matter. Oh, it isn't for a lack of trying. The first of the year rolls around, and "read the Bible through" is right at the top of my list of resolutions. I've even gone the next step and started at the beginning (where else?) with Genesis. Many years, in fact. I'm guessing I've read the book of Genesis eight to 10 times. One year, with a certain amount of satisfaction, I actually made it into Exodus. This is easy, I thought with confidence. So Exodus is a tad bumpy once you get past the Ten Commandments, but this is doable. But it seemed that every time I closed the Bible and then returned to Exodus, Moses had added more chapters, and finding the end of it was--well, it appeared to have no end. One year I remember making it briefly into Leviticus, but it was short-lived. This just wasn't as easy as it looked.

One year I took a different approach. Forget the Old Testament for now, and start with the New. Yes, that's it--parables, miracles, and the life of Christ--why didn't I think of that before? It worked fine until I got to Romans. Why do they put the Bible together like this? You get just far enough to think you've got something going, and they plant an impossible book in your path, and you're finished. My admiration for the likes of saints such as H.M.S. Richards, who read the Bible through not just once a year but several times, suddenly soared. How did they do

it, and what was wrong with me? Reading the Bible through must have something to do with retirement.

Sound familiar? I hope so. I'm counting on the fact that plenty of people like me have every intention of reading their Bible through in a year--or any given amount of time--but have never been successful. But I'm also here to say, with cautious optimism, that by the time you read this article I will be among those who have--and in one year at that. No, I did not opt for an early retirement. I simply discovered a new way of doing things, and it made the difference. Here's what I did.

1. I just did it. This time I didn't get hung up on a magic starting date such as January 1. In 2003 I started on January 27, and the plan I selected had me reading Matthew 18:1-21 and Exodus 16; 17; and 18. So that's where I started. As I had free time I went back and picked up the beginning of Matthew and Exodus, and surprisingly it didn't affect my ability to understand where I was, even though I had started in the middle. I discovered that simply putting my decision into action--rather than the date I started--was what was really important.

2. I found a plan that fit my lifestyle. I'd like to say that I studied all the different plans available (and there are many), but I didn't. Prior to this, I had never followed any plan, and I think my success now is largely because I found one that worked for me. While it shouldn't add stress to our lives, a plan should give some structure as well as a measure of where we should be at a given point in the year.

I happened on a plan in the Canadian Adventist Messenger, and it appealed to me. This plan has a reading of the New Testament in the morning and a reading of the Old Testament in the evening. I didn't adhere to the morning and evening plan, but made up a schedule that worked for me. But it did help to read both the Old and New Testaments at the same time. Both are unique and appealing in different ways. Often I would be thoroughly enjoying one more than the other, and that gave me a reason to continue. When we read only one or the other, we can get bogged down, and that's discouraging. For example, when I was reading Leviticus (which, I might add, has earned an unfair reputation), I was also reading Matthew and Mark, which were easier and, yes, sometimes more interesting. This was important in keeping me motivated.

3. I chose a Bible translation without devotional comments that was easy for me to read and understand. Most of us have an abundance of Bibles in our homes, and we might think that any of them will serve this purpose well. Maybe, but I think the choice of Bible made a difference in my success.

Today's Bibles are rarely just the Scriptures. Many have become specialized devotional Bibles for men, women, couples, and singles; Bibles designed to be read in one year, with added commentary; Life Application Study Bibles; etc. I own many of these, and in using them for Bible study, I discovered I was spending a lot of time reading the commentary or devotional thoughts and neglecting the Bible. Oh, I'd read the accompanying text, but the contemporary thoughts were much easier to read, sometimes humorous, and often gave me something to think about. The Bible didn't do that--oops, see what I mean? These were becoming a distraction and diverting me from my task. And while I actually found a Bible with commentary that was interesting and applicable, after I'd spent my time reading the application I didn't have time for my Scripture reading!

So out to the Christian bookstore I went and purchased a Bible--and that's all it is. It has a concordance and references in the center margin. It has a soft maroon leather cover, gold-leaf pages, and larger type that is easier on the eyes. I dedicated this Bible as the one I would read throughout the year.

4. I found a good Bible reference companion. I'm full of questions. I'm constantly interacting with the text and wondering why this or why that. I get frustrated if I'm a little lost or lack understanding. This can be a problem if you've decided to read the Bible through in one year, because time is not on your side. You have to stick to some type of schedule, or you won't get it done.

Often Bible reference books are four-inch tomes on deep theological discussion and debate, original meaning of language, and 2,000 years of history. While all of that has its place, I don't have the time to read six chapters of exposition on two verses. I needed a quick and easy reference guide that would give me context, maybe some history, and throw in some vocabulary now and again.

I stumbled across a wonderful Bible reference companion that did all this for me. While it may not be the only one of its kind, it is one that I can recommend. QuickStart to the Books of the Bible, by Greg Brothers, describes itself as "a reference for bright, busy people." It has lived up to its name and description, since it gives quick and easy information; and I have no problem considering myself bright or busy.

5. I made sure I had a highlighter and pen handy. To make the Bible something I looked forward to reading each day, I needed to interact with it as if in conversation. As I read, I let it speak to me, and whatever moved me, had a familiar ring, or was particularly apropos I highlighted. I wrote in the margins. I made notes and wrote questions. As I look back through the pages I'm struck with what I noted, and marked, and with the variety of colors. It has become in many ways a private journal--not in the typical sense, but one that speaks between me, the Bible, and God.

6. Before I began, wherever I was, I prayed. This is crucial and incredibly important. I didn't make a big deal of it; I didn't kneel, or pray a long list of confessions. My prayers were short and simple, almost like taking a deep breath in and then out. Help me, God, to find You today, or something similar. I prayed for guidance, impressions, interest, meaning, or application. It often didn't take more than 30 to 45 seconds, but they became some of the most valuable seconds spent.

7. I read to discover God, not to understand deep theological issues. This was my most important breakthrough, and it actually came just about the time I hit Leviticus. I had never successfully read past this book, and I didn't want history to repeat itself. I knew I needed to see Leviticus from a different perspective. That's where QuickStart came through for me.

"Leviticus is more than just a book of rituals. It's a book about relationships--a step-by-step manual, as it were, that describes how God and His chosen people should love each other."*# That was a new concept. I decided to read Leviticus and look specifically for the relationship. It's there; I don't know how I missed it before!

I made looking for God my new purpose in each book I read. I was quickly overwhelmed at how much is revealed. Each book is rich in His all-consuming love for His people. The Bible became a love letter, whether it was through history, prophecy, or biography.

8. When all is going well, expect interruptions. The devil is totally consumed with ways to distract me from my Bible-reading time, and he's blatantly obvious about it.

My first plan involved waking up about 15 minutes earlier and going to a quiet place in the living room. This worked well for about three weeks. The house was quiet, dark. Spouse and kids were nestled under the covers. I was pretty smug about it until my youngest daughter started waking up 15 minutes earlier. So I switched to evenings. My church and school committee schedules suddenly exploded, and the help for homework rose exponentially.

I began to realize that spending 15 minutes with my Bible was often shorter than the time spent on a phone call with a friend, which I always seemed to be able to manage. When I put Bible reading in that context, my 15 to 20 minutes became easier to find. I looked for time spent waiting in the car, sitting at a doctor's office or music lesson, waiting for church to begin. Suddenly many short intervals of time were out there just waiting to be discovered.

9. I said to myself, "If you fall behind, don't panic." I did; at one point, one entire month. Somewhere I missed an entire month of reading in the Old Testament. I managed to keep up with the New, but my time in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel had been much more difficult to manage. I didn't panic; I just made it happen. Even though I was on the "wrong" day, I kept up with my daily reading so that I wouldn't fall farther behind. There are times to catch-up: airplane rides, vacations, days off, Sabbath afternoons (wonderful catch up times). Over the Thanksgiving holiday I made up about 25 days of reading in Ezekiel.

Falling behind is inevitable, but catching up is possible.

I came to realize that the one-year mark is a goal, but not the purpose. The purpose is to discover God in the pages of the Bible in 365 days. If it is 385 or 400 is not as important as why I'm doing it and the blessing I will receive.

I fully expect to finish reading the Bible on January 26, 2004. But, interestingly, while I started out committed to reading the Bible in a year, along the way the one-year goal faded and was replaced by the joy of reading and uncovering what a wonderful God I have--One who loves with an overwhelming sense of passion; Who yearns to have me turn to Him and spend a few moments with Him each day. It is for that reason that I sit down to read.

I think I know why H.M.S. Richards was able to do this so easily--he'd fallen in love.

* Greg Brothers, *QuickStart to the Books of the Bible* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2002), p. 55.

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