

Read the Owner's Manual

I got a letter from my wife, Janie, back awhile ago. It was probably about eighteen months ago that I received it from her. I haven't opened it up yet. Now don't get me wrong. Don't get me wrong. I care deeply for her and I am really interested in what it is that she has to say to me, and I would like to know what was on her mind the day she wrote the letter. As soon as I get some time—I promise you—I am going to sit down and I am going to open up that letter and see what it is that she has to say to me.

Well, you can't imagine something like that happening. Now occasionally I do get mail from Janie, and I can't wait to open it up; because it is usually something kind of romantic or complimentary, or sometimes it might even be a gentle reminder on some areas in which I need to improve. But regardless of the contents, I can't wait to read it because it always improves my relationship with her and helps me to know her better.

God has preserved for thousands of years a compilation of letters to us. The Old Testament reminds us that Jesus is coming. The New Testament Gospels assure us that Jesus is here. And the remainder of the New Testament warns us that Jesus is coming again, but this time He is coming in power, not in love. The Bible is not addressed "To Whom it May Concern." The Bible was written for you and the Bible was written for me.

If we really, truly want to have a close relationship with the Lord and truly get to know Him better, then we must read His Word. You see, we find ourselves in the midst of a society that has a deep spiritual hunger, and you don't have to look really far to realize that. If you were to notice all of the different places that people are looking for satisfaction and fulfillment, it would become quite evident rather quickly that there is a desire and a hunger for something, that there is something missing. This morning I would suggest to you that the Bible contains the answers for how you can fill that void. Somebody said that "a Bible that is falling apart often belongs to a person who isn't falling apart."

I. God's Word is Durable.

So let's begin by describing God's Word. Notice that, first of all, God's Word is durable. It is durable.

1 Peter 1:22-25

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable—" Listen to this: "—through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.'"

The Bible certainly has stood the test of time. It's by far the bestselling book of all time. There is not anything even close. Last year alone 29 million Bibles were sold.

But the reason that the Bible has stood the test of time is because God has preserved His Word.

Josh McDowell in his book *More Than a Carpenter* writes:

Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* around 343 B.C. and yet the earliest copy we have is dated A.D. 1100. That's a gap of some 1400 years and there are only five manuscripts that are still in existence. Caesar composed his *History of the Gallic Wars* between 58 and 50 B.C. Its manuscript authority rests on nine or ten copies dating a thousand years after his death. But when it comes to the manuscript authority and evidence for the New Testament, the abundance of material is almost embarrassing in contrast. There are over 20,000 copies of New Testament manuscripts that are in existence today, some dating back to less than 100 years from Christ's ascension.

For centuries, skeptics have enjoyed trying to excuse away the authenticity of the Bible by saying, "Well, sure Jesus fulfilled all of the prophecies from the Old Testament. All they did was to conveniently insert specific details about the life of Christ back into the Old Testament manuscripts, making the predictions appear to come true when in actuality it was done after the fact. They just wrote that in, in later manuscripts hundreds of years later after Christ." That's a nice attempt by the skeptic.

But in 1947 that argument fell flat on its face when a shepherd boy near Qumran by the Dead Sea was out looking for his sheep. He took a rock and he fired it up in the air, and all of a sudden, when it landed he heard it break some pottery. He went and checked it out. He got his parents and some other people involved, and they unearthed a library that the Jewish people had buried during a time of war. It contained the most ancient manuscripts ever discovered. We refer to them as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The experts estimated, after careful study, that the manuscripts were written somewhere between 400 and 300 years before Christ. And when they carefully unrolled the scrolls and looked at those Old Testament manuscripts, they saw that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. They saw that He would be born in Bethlehem. They saw that He would be betrayed by a friend. They saw “led like a sheep to the slaughter.” And time and time again, every prophesy was there concerning what was going to happen through the Messiah hundreds of years later.

You see, prophesy is one of the strongest proofs as to the durability and to the authenticity of the Bible. Archaeologist William Dever says, “The only new facts about the Bible are coming up out of the ground.” Do you know why? Because it is durable and God has preserved His Word.

2 Timothy 3:16

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

II. God's Word is Demanding.

Now not only is the Bible durable; it is also demanding. It's very demanding. First of all, it is demanding to understand.

a. ...to understand

There are questions that you should ask while you are reading a passage: -

- Where does a story take place?
- When does it happen?
- Who are the characters in the story?
- What is it that takes place?

- Why is this so important that God included it in the Bible?
- How does this passage speak to me?
- And, more importantly, how will I respond to it now that I’ve read it?

Those are good questions to ask in order to understand the real reason and purpose. You see, you can take any verse out of context, twist and distort it, and make it say whatever you want it to.

A farmer who was walking along the road with his dog and his horse. A pickup truck came around the corner driving too fast, a little bit recklessly, and it kind of bumped into all three, knocking all three of them off into the ditch. Of course, the man was badly injured, so he sued the man and took him to court for back pay and claiming he had a broken leg, facial injuries and some cracked ribs. The court case began and the defense attorney told the judge, “Your Honor, I just want you to know that shortly after the accident occurred, my client heard that farmer say that he had never felt better in his life.” And the farmer jumped up and said, “Your Honor, you’ve got to understand the setting.” He said, “After that guy ran into us, he came walking back and he brought his shotgun from his truck with him. He looked down and here was my horse with a broken leg. He looked down at the horse and he didn’t want the horse to suffer anymore, so he shot the horse and put him out of his misery. He walked over to my old dog, and my dog was in worse shape than the horse was. He saw him suffering, so he shot the dog. Then he stood over me with smoke still coming out of his shotgun and he said, ‘How are you?’” He said, “I looked up and said, ‘Never felt better in my life.’” context is so important. Take the *text* out of *context* and you’re left with a *con.*

We see that when Jesus was tempted by Satan, and Jesus answered Satan each time with Scripture verses. Christ began talking to him about what God’s Word has to say, and Satan answered Him with Scriptures. He twisted it. He took it out of context. That’s why the Apostle Paul says, “Study to show yourself approved, a workman who needs not be ashamed but who correctly divides the word of truth.” So it is demanding to understand, but it is also demanding to obey.

b. ...to obey

Have you ever been on a diet that restricted you from some of your favorite foods? Sometimes I'll go and visit somebody in the hospital and I'll say, "Hey, how is the food here?" And they'll say, "Man, I am on a 'no salt' diet. I mean, it is so bland. The food has no taste to it at all." This drives them crazy, you know? They just can't get used to that. Peter reminds us that accepting the authority of the Bible requires removing some things from our menu. He lists some of the items that have to go, and for Christians they are just as demanding a regime as if you had to delete salt, chocolate or caffeine from your diet.

1 Peter 2:1

"Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind."

You see what he's saying is that, if you accept the authority of God's Word, then there are some changes that you have to make in your own life. There are some alterations; there are some corrections and adjustments that need to happen.

You see, the Bible is to be the standard. When we look at our lives, when we read God's Word and we realize the adjustments that need to be made, at first it's rather painful and we think it is rather restrictive to our freedom. We say, "Boy, this really hurts!" But what happens is that through time it hurts less and less, because God is sharpening us and His Spirit is working inside of us.

I wonder if there are any gaps in your life that maybe the Lord is trying to work on correcting. You see, the Bible contains so many great things. There are so many passages that are so encouraging to me. But the Bible also contains a lot of verses that I swallow kind of hard on. I'm just not certain about that one. John 3:16 (You all have known it since you were a kid.), "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life." I like that verse. But over here in Matthew 16:24 Jesus says, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." I am not crazy about that one, you know?

Romans 8:1 (I like this one.), "There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That's a good verse—God's amazing grace—

but over here back in Philippians 2:14, “Do everything without complaining or arguing.” Eh, I can do without that one as well, you know?

James said, “Be ye doers of the word, not just hearers only.” And in John Jesus said, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” You see, some books are for our inspiration and some books are for our information, but the Bible is for our *transformation*. It is durable; it is demanding, and it is desirable.

III. God’s Word is Desirable.

1 Peter 2:2,3

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” And if you are relatively new to church and to the Bible, listen to this invitation that the Psalmist sends out there for you.

Psalm 34:8

“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.” It’s like, “Try it. You’ll like it.” God has so much to offer. His Word is so desirable.

I know people who have started studying God’s Word, and they just grow by leaps and bounds because of what the Lord does in their life, because they are not living by their own authority; they are living by the authority of the Lord and His Word. You see, all of life’s questions can be answered in the Bible.

I can pick up a magazine, a book or a newspaper, and it is very natural for me to sit down and dig into it. But when I pick up my Bible and I sit down to read it, immediately I am met with resistance. That should make sense to you. Do you know why? Because there is somebody who doesn’t want you to read God’s Word. Because Satan knows how powerful this book is. He knows that it has changed lives and it will continue to change lives through the power of the Lord. That is why we need to study it; that is why we need to read it and to obey it.

The most popular paraphrase that is out right now is called *The Message*. It’s been very well-received by longtime Christians who are anxious for a fresh

look at God's Word. Familiar verses come alive in today's vernacular. But it takes motivation, regardless of what type of a Bible or paraphrase you might read. It takes the motivation to say, "I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna read it." It's a motivation to go to bed early so you can get up earlier in order to study. It's a motivation to turn the TV off and to take that time and read God's Word. What is your motivation?

It reminds me of the lieutenant who went into his colonel and he said, "I tried to sell the soldiers GI Life Insurance but nobody wants any." The colonel said, "Well, did you motivate them?" The guy said, "Well, how?" The colonel said, "Follow me." And he went out and he said, "All right, soldiers, for \$20 a month you can buy a \$5,000 life insurance policy. If you die, your loved ones will get \$5,000. Who wants it?" Nobody raised their hand. He said, "Okay, let me explain it to you this way. You pay \$20 a month, and if you die the army has to cough up \$5,000 to your family." He said, "Now when we go into battle, who do you think the army is going to put at the front? Those who if they die the army has got to pay \$5,000 for, or those of you who don't have the insurance?"

Now that's motivation. That's probably not the highest form of motivation but it's motivation.

The Psalmist says, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for your love." Most all of you claim a belief in God. If you were asked, you'd say you've been a Christian for years. You put your trust in the Lord. Yet, many of you have never bothered to take the time to pick up God's love letter and read it. You're too busy. You're too lazy or... well, you don't like to read, or it's too boring. Those are your excuses. If you think the Bible is boring, read the book of Genesis. It will put any soap opera to shame.

Let me challenge those of you who are relatively new to Bible reading to do this for the coming week—to read a chapter in Proverbs each day this week that corresponds with the numerical day of the month. I would also encourage you... That will take about three minutes. I also encourage you to take an hour sometime this week. Block out one hour and read either the Gospel of Mark all the way through or read the Gospel of John all the way through. (That is) the life story of Jesus Christ. Go to a Christian bookstore and browse around and see some Study Bibles.

Now there are others of you for whom the situation is a little bit different. You occasionally read God's Word, but it's more hit or miss. There is no rhyme or reason to it. It's a haphazard approach. You flip it open and... "Okay, well, that's what I'll read today." And it's tough to tell if you're growing, because you're not really certain whether you are hitting the target. If you find yourself in this camp, let me challenge you to try for the next three weeks to read your Bible on a regular basis ten minutes each day. You will be amazed at how much you can read in those 210 minutes. Someone said, "The Bible will help keep you from sin, or sin will help keep you from the Bible." Why do I say three weeks? Because most people say that if you do something for twenty-one straight days you have developed a habit. So read the book of James or read the book of Philippians, or read a gospel or the book of Acts.

Now others of you are quite disciplined in your reading, but when it comes to remembering and understanding what you have read, that is a different story. Did you know it only takes 4 ½ hours to read all four gospel accounts? It takes another 4 ½ hours to read the remainder of the entire New Testament.

If you're a slow or poor reader, get the New Testament in an audio format.

Or maybe discipline yourself to do a study of a book—1 and 2 Samuel and study King David's life. Or do a word study and look in the back of your Bible and find a concordance and say, "I'm going to study the word *grace*, or I'm going to study the word *greed*, or I'm going to study the word *honor*." Take some notes and write some verses down.

"Walk Thru the Bible." is an overview of the entire Bible, and it really gives you a good grasp of what is taking place, and it shows how the entire Bible blends together.

The Lord wants to bless those who meditate on His Word. That is what David tells us in the opening words of the book of Psalms: "Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."

When I was a kid, I used to go to summer church camp each summer. Church camp always begins the same way every morning. At about 6:30 in the

morning you are out there circling around this flagpole. You say the pledge to the flag and then you say the pledge to the Christian flag. Then there will be a little camper that stands there and they open up a Bible, and all the campers say, "I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God's Holy Word, a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path. His words will I hide in my heart that I might not sin against God."

Let me ask you something today. When the sirens of life begin to sound and you or your loved ones find yourselves in the most frightening moment of your life, what will you cling to? What will you quote? What will you pledge allegiance to?