



Write as You Read

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Without question, next to the Holy Spirit, the single greatest help in my personal devotional life has been to read the Scripture with paper and pen in hand so I can record insights from the Word. As I write down what God is saying to my heart through His Word, the words are lifted off the page and become full of meaning and life to me.

The exciting thing is that this process doesn't have to be difficult or complex and doesn't require a graduate degree in theology. In fact, over the years I've challenged a number of young people to read through the Bible and write down two sentences about every chapter: one sentence summarizing the chapter and the other sentence expressing how that chapter spoke to them personally. Even this simple approach can be enormously beneficial.

There are several different types of writing that can be helpful in studying the Word; most of these are illustrated in the Scripture itself. Here are a number of examples of how I've incorporated these tools in my own devotional life to give you some ideas to get you started on your own journey.

Write Out Portions of Scripture

Prior to the invention of the printing press, people didn't have their own copies of the Word of God. The Bible was painstakingly copied out by hand and passed on from one generation to the next.

I believe something precious may have been lost for those of us who can so easily purchase a printed version of the Word of God, and that there is value in taking time to copy out portions of the Scripture word for word. On several occasions in the Old Testament God instructed people to do this very thing.

When Moses went up on the mount to meet with God, the Lord said to him, "Write these words . . . ' And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:27–28).

Forty years later, as the children of Israel were preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses rehearsed God's laws for the entire congregation and then instructed them: "You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut. 6:9).

Shortly before his death, Moses once again called the Israelites together and told them that after they crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan they were to select some large stones, set them up on Mount Ebal (about thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem), and “write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly” (Deut. 27:8).

What was the point? Do you remember in elementary school when the teacher would instruct the class to copy a list from the chalkboard or a page out of a textbook? It seemed like meaningless busy work at the time. But the teacher knew that if you wrote out the material for yourself, you were more likely to grasp and remember the concepts.

God knew how prone His people were to forget what He had told them. Over and over, He challenged them to “remember” Him, to remember His law, to remember what He had done for them. Writing out the Word of God was one practical way to help them remember. And it can help us remember. Taking time to write out specific passages from the Word forces us to think about what we are reading and to observe the details of the text more carefully.

Write in Your Bible

This suggestion isn’t specifically found in the Scripture (remember that hardly anyone owned a copy of the Bible before the sixteenth century), but it has been a practical help and blessing in my growing love affair with the Word. When I was a child, my parents encouraged us to underline verses that we found especially meaningful. (At one point, I got carried away with the idea, leading my father to suggest that perhaps I should underline only those verses that were not particularly meaningful to me!)

Over the years, I’ve read and “marked up” many different copies of the Bible. Each of those Bibles tells a story of my personal journey of faith during a specific period of time. In addition to underlining phrases or verses for emphasis, I frequently circle or bracket repeated words or phrases. I also write cross references in the margin, as well as jot down notes about the meaning of specific words or phrases in the passage.

When the Lord uses a verse or passage to address a specific need in my life or to encourage or convict my heart in an unusual way, I often indicate the date (and sometimes the city) on which that personal encounter with the living God took place. The space in the margins is sometimes used to write brief, personal responses to the truth, such as, “Yes, Lord,” “I agree,” “Change my heart, O God,” or “Make this true in my life, Lord.”

Record Insights and Responses

Over the years, I’ve recorded in my personal journals hundreds and hundreds of pages of observations and insights that the Holy Spirit has shown me while reading and meditating on the Word. Capturing these insights helps us to clarify, understand, and remember the ways of God. The process of writing them down deepens our love and appreciation for the truth of God’s Word.

Many Bible teachers suggest asking three basic questions each time you read the Bible:

- What does it say? (Make observations about the text.)
- What does it mean? (Look for the implications or the interpretation of the text.)
- What should I do? (Make practical application of the text.)

Each time I write in my devotional journal, I record the date and passage I'm reading. I then proceed to answer those questions.

What does it say? (Observation)

The following exercises will help you make observations about what the Scripture is actually saying. You probably won't want to use all of these exercises for every passage you read, but these are things to keep in mind as you record your observations:

1. *Summarize.* After reading the passage, try to come up with a title for the entire book, the chapter, and the individual paragraphs. Look for a key verse that captures the heart of the passage. Write a brief summary overview of the passage, including the major points.
2. *Paraphrase.* Try to write the passage in your own words.
3. *Ask questions.* Use the same questions you would ask if you were writing a newspaper account:
 - Who wrote it? said it? about whom? speaking to whom?
 - What happened? What are the main events? the major ideas? the theme?
 - When was it written? Did the events take place? Will it yet happen?
 - Where did this happen? Will it yet happen?
 - Why was this written? (Sometimes the answer will be right in the text, as in [John 20:31](#) and [1 John 5:13](#).)
 - How did it happen? Is it done?
4. *Look for patterns.* Look for repeated words or phrases to help you understand what the author intends to emphasize.
5. *Look for cross-references.* As you become more familiar with the Bible, you will find that as you read a passage, the Holy Spirit will bring to mind other verses that relate to, confirm, or shed further light on what you are reading.

What does it mean? (Implications/Interpretation)

In addition to the questions you've asked to help determine what the passage says, ask these kinds of questions to help you understand the implications of the text:

- What does this passage teach me about God?
- What does this passage teach me about Jesus?
- What does this passage teach me about man?

- Are there any promises to claim?
- Are there any commands to obey?
- Are there any examples to follow?
- Are there any sins to avoid?

What should I do? (Application)

As you meditate on the Scripture, ask such questions as:

- How does this truth apply to my life? to my situation?
- In view of this truth, what changes need to be made in my life?
- What practical steps can I take to apply this truth to my life?

Everything we read in God's Word calls for some type of response. That response may be to:

- Exercise faith in God's promises or character.
- Humble ourselves and acknowledge our need.
- Confess our sins.
- Turn from our old ways of thinking.
- Obey some command we have been neglecting.
- Worship and adore the God who has revealed Himself.
- Forgive one who has wronged us.
- Seek forgiveness from someone we have wronged.
- Seek to reconcile a broken relationship.
- Give to meet the need of another.
- Share the good news of Jesus Christ with a non-Christian friend or relative.
- Cry out to God on behalf of a needy friend.

Recording the responses that the Spirit has led you to make will help move you past hearing the Word to doing it. You may want to write out your response in the form of a prayer expressing your commitment to the Lord. Another helpful step is to share with another believer what God has put on your heart and ask her to help hold you accountable to obey the Lord.

When you write as you read God's Word, you'll find it easier to concentrate on what you're reading, and you won't have as many times when you'll look back and say, "I've just read three chapters, and I have no clue what that was about!"

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