



What if I Don't Want to Read the Bible

How I long for your precepts! In your righteousness preserve my life. May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise... (Psalm 119:40-41 NIV)

Many of us wrestle with a basic problem: what if we don't want to read the Bible in the first place? This can be tough to even admit for some of us. For many Christians, Bible reading--especially as part of a daily devotional schedule--is one of the big "shoulds" of faith. In fact, that's likely part of the issue. Many of us have been told that we should read the Bible, but we've hardly ever been told how to stick with it or why we should want to in the first place.

But there's nothing wrong with simple honesty. Given enough years of growing faith, we simply will encounter times when the Bible feels "blah." (Yes--that's the technical theological term.) Such times are a chance to learn, shake things up, and move toward the reason we're passionate about living Bible-rich lives in the first place--finding our place in the story that points to Jesus. With that in mind, I'd like to offer four things that any of us can do when (not if) we don't want to read the Bible.

1. Ask an Honest "Why?"

We often live "the unexamined life," so bringing thought and intention to the why beneath our feelings or choices can be powerful. At first many of us may be tempted to stick a quick shame message here, like: "I know my heart is wicked. I don't even want to read the Bible anymore. Man, I am a terrible Christian... ."

Wait. We wouldn't even care about caring if this was the case, right? The very fact that we are bothered when we don't shows how much we care that we do. That is a profound place to begin.

Yes, our very lack of desire might reveal how deep our real desire is.

And when we ask the honest "why," we'll often gain rich insight into our spiritual experience. Perhaps what lies under the why is the fact that we're exhausted from overwork, extra childcare duties, a brutal school schedule, or the stress of unemployment. Perhaps what lies under the why is grief, or a need to get outdoors and move, or a longing to socialize. In any case, probing beneath the surface often yields real insight. This helps us start with grace for ourselves and affirmation of our deep desire to be a person whose life is deeply connected to the Bible.

2. Trust Your Spiritual Instincts

Just like you can (in general) trust the signals of your body for hunger, thirst, sleep, and exercise, you can (in general) trust your spiritual instincts too. This doesn't mean that we should follow our feelings without critical reflection, but sometimes when we don't want to read, there's some pause or practice other than Scripture reading that could be valuable to engage in.

For me, it was encouragement from a mentor to turn my daily commute (which was then six miles by bike across prairie trail in Illinois) into time spent freely with God. It was a post-seminary season where I was positively stuffed with the Bible in three different languages, and reading it felt impossible, exhausting, and discouraging. It was so freeing to consecrate those rides, and I often found that phrases and passages of Scripture would come to mind as I prayed and pedaled. In hindsight, I needed to trust my spiritual instincts, which were saying, “Enough reading! You need some time to process this!”

You might be surprised at what comes up when you give yourself permission to trust your gut while still pursuing the wisdom of God. And when you’re ready for more classic reading again, you’ll appreciate it that much more.

3. Switch Things Up

Along these lines is the ability to proactively introduce a positive change. After all, the human mind is wired to keep itself sharp by seeking variety. “A change is as good as a rest,” the old saying goes, and it is right. A few ideas:

Try a new translation or a new layout. If you read the Bible, try listening to it (free audio versions abound). If you listen to the Bible, try reading it (try one of the many artfully designed versions available today). If you’ve hung out in the same passages for while, switch to something you’ve never read or have rarely read. Try reading a familiar book of the Bible from the last chapter to the first (sure it’s weird, but seriously—you’ll be surprised by the details you notice in reverse order). Choose an important theme or image and follow it carefully through a book or section (“love” in Deuteronomy is an old favorite, as is “silence” in the book of Mark. Select a passage and use it as a prompt for painting, writing, prayer, or another creative response. (There’s a reason the Bible has inspired centuries of art and thought!) Watch one of BibleProject’s videos before your reading.

The basic principle is simple: try something new, something that feels natural and engages you, and have fun with it.

4. Know It's Not Forever

This is equally true no matter how you feel about the Bible at this moment in your life. Like the seasons of the year, each of which has important work, our times of varying response to the Bible have their purpose. But in any case, they won’t last forever. Feelings come and go, even as the roots of our desire deepen. In a balanced life, engaging with the Bible should be both a discipline and a desire. My hope is that we can become better about encouraging each other to cultivate a rich desire to be frequently and deeply in Scripture. As well, I hope that we can help one another find practical strategies to better understand and enjoy the Bible’s rich (but complex) literature.

What’s important is to do your best to let this season do its work, remembering that engaging the Bible is meant to be done long term, over the course of a lifetime, not in the span of a few months or a year. When we truly embrace that, we’ll be able to make some peace when the times come---as they will---when we just don’t feel like reading the Bible.