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“*Read This First* gives readers simple steps to understanding God’s word and gets their noses into Scripture by getting them to answer questions from the Bible. It works brilliantly for both mature Christians and those who are new to Christian things.”

JANE TOOHER, Lecturer in Ministry and Church History; Director, Priscilla and Aquila Centre, Moore College

“Gary Millar has a knack for taking complicated issues and making them clear. More and more people in our churches and in society are unfamiliar with the Bible. Here we find a wonderfully accessible book on how to interpret and understand the Bible. Behind the simplicity of this book is a deep and profound wisdom. An ideal resource for personal study, for small groups, and for continuing Christian education.”

THOMAS R. SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What could be more important than learning how to read, understand, and apply God’s word? *Read This First* is an accessible, encouraging, and jam-packed primer to help you read the Bible. This book answers so many questions—even questions you didn’t know you had!”

GLORIA FURMAN, Co-editor, *Word-Filled Women’s Ministry and Joyfully Spreading the Word*

“This is a wonderful book—fresh, engaging, accessible, practical and rooted in good scholarship. I particularly appreciate the superbly clear examples from Bible passages, and the way Gary Millar makes some pretty meaty thinking come across as not nearly so difficult after all. Thank you so much, Gary! I shall be recommending this with enthusiasm.”

CHRISTOPHER ASH, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge; former Director, The Cornhill Training Course

READ THIS FIRST

A Simple Guide to Getting
the Most from the Bible

GARY MILLAR

Read This First

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*For everyone at Elmwood Presbyterian Church, Lisburn,
and especially Sharon, John, Alistair, Pauline and
Mr. Lockhart, who taught me to read the Bible.*

INTRODUCTION

The Millars are definitely a “dog” family. For years, we have had a labradoodle. Our first labradoodle, Hamish, was a shambolic, mischievous bundle of shagginess. The fact that he had three legs for most of his life (after a road accident) somehow just made him even more loveable. But, I have to confess, he was very badly behaved. And it was our fault. We made a cursory attempt to train him with a short spell at “puppy school”, but, to be honest, our plans petered out pretty quickly. We didn’t really know what we were doing and were easily defeated by his stubbornness—and that combination led, inevitably, to a badly behaved dog.

After Hamish died, we welcomed a new puppy to our family: Nessie (my wife is Scottish!). But this time, we were determined to do a better job with the training. This time, we sought out the help we needed at the beginning. This time, we decided to invest hours, energy and some of our cash into training Nessie. It’s been a revelation! We’re less than a year in, so there is still a long way to go.

But it is fair to say that something that initially appeared completely baffling to us has, with a little bit of help, become so much clearer. It's still hard work continuing Nessie's training. But thanks to some people who know what they are doing, we're at least on a better trajectory this time around! And owning a dog is a lot less stressful and a lot more enjoyable as a result.

This book aims to help people who would like to read the Bible but don't really know where to start or how to go about it. You may be a Christian who enjoys being part of a church or a Bible-study group, but you end up feeling lost and confused whenever you attempt to read the Bible for yourself. You may have even tried to embark on a Bible-reading regime, but—like me with Hamish—it didn't take long before you gave up with a sense of defeat: you just don't get it. If that's you, don't despair. Lots of us struggle to read the Bible. But that doesn't mean you can't learn how. That's why I've written this book: to guide you through it. My hope is that you'll *read this first* and go back to the Bible with the skills and confidence to truly enjoy it.

Or you may be pretty new to Christianity. You may have always thought that the Bible seems interesting enough for you to take a look, but you've been put off by the small print, strange "religious" language, its distance from your culture, or even just its size. You may have been encouraged to read the Bible by a friend, or heard a snippet of what it says at a wedding or funeral, or come across a quotation somewhere. It's often said that the Bible is one

of the best-selling books of all time. That alone seems like a good reason to at least dip into it.

Whatever has brought you to this point, I'd love to help you to get started with reading the Bible. I want to reassure you that reading the Bible is not as baffling as it might initially appear, and that anyone who comes to it with an open mind and a sincere heart can learn to understand and enjoy it—including you.

Read This First assumes nothing. I've tried really hard to “start at the very beginning”, and walk through the basics of reading the Bible. If you're completely new to all this, you might want to start with the appendix on page 115 (“What exactly is the Bible?”) before jumping into chapter 1.

My aim is to get you (very quickly!) to the point where you can read the words on the page and pick up what they're talking about. Learning to read the Bible—like training a dog—does take a little bit of time and energy. But the payoff is even better: when you read the Bible, you hear the very words of God himself, the Creator of all time and space, speaking to you, personally. And that makes it more than worth the effort.

So, let's get started...

1. WHY BOTHER WITH THE BIBLE?

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
(2 Timothy 3 v 16-17)

Here are seven good reasons *not* to read the Bible:

1. It is extremely old. (What can it possibly say about life today?)
2. It is hard to read. (As in, hard to understand—although the small print doesn’t help either!)
3. It says objectionable things. (About sexuality and slavery, for example.)
4. It describes horrible events. (Like God sending a flood to judge people and whole nations being destroyed.)

5. It has been used to justify terrible things. (Like Apartheid in South Africa, and the Crusades in the Middle Ages.)
6. Life's too short. (Reading it doesn't seem to promise much payback.)
7. Add your own reason here... (Why don't *you* read the Bible?)

Given all that, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you have never read the Bible and don't have much clue about what's in it or why it matters. It seems strange and hard to read. You're wondering, "Why bother?"

ONE COMPELLING REASON TO READ THE BIBLE

I know lots of people who haven't read the Bible for some or all of the reasons above. And I think that's a real shame. For one thing, most of those reasons don't actually stand up.

Yes, the Bible is old, but if we are going to ignore everything that's old on principle, it will make for a deeply impoverished experience of life. Yes, *parts* of the Bible can be hard to understand, but most of it is surprisingly simple (as I hope you'll see by the end of this book). It *does* say some things which challenge all of our values, but since when was that a reason not to read something? And while some parts of the Bible (and the events it describes) are pretty shocking, that's because it is dealing with the real brokenness of our world. In this sense, the Bible is no more shocking than our newsfeed. And even though

the Bible's teaching has been abused and misused over the years, had its *true* message been lived out, the world would be a very, very different place.

Whatever you think of the Bible, you can't deny that it's had a huge influence on Western culture. Our language and literature bear the stamp of the Bible at almost every turn. And it contains the teaching of arguably the single most influential individual who has ever walked on this planet—Jesus of Nazareth.

But none of those are the reason why I think you should make reading the Bible a regular part of your life.

I think you should read the Bible because it's unlike any other book you will ever see or handle; when you read the Bible, you read the words of God.

AN UNUSUAL CLAIM

The idea that the Bible is the words of God might sound weird. In one sense, it should sound weird. How can a book be a message from God?

Towards the end of the 1st century, Paul, one of the early leaders of the movement which came to be called "Christianity", wrote to a young protégé named Timothy. In his letter—which is included in the Bible today—he says this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3 v 16)

Notice that phrase “God-breathed”. Paul (who was writing in Greek) may have made up this expression to capture precisely what he wanted to say. His point? That the Bible, even though obviously written by ordinary human beings (like him), has its origin and authority in God himself. This is God’s book, which contains God’s words, expressed through the personalities and styles of a whole range of human authors. Or, to use Paul’s shorthand, the Bible is “God-breathed”.

This statement of Paul’s comes pretty near the end of the Bible, but it’s a claim that’s made repeatedly throughout its pages. The first 75% or so of the Bible tells the story of the Israelites, describing how they started out as one (very dysfunctional) family and grew into a great nation, before eventually being overpowered by others. From the very beginning of Israel’s story, God’s words were right at the heart of their national existence.

After they had escaped from slavery in Egypt (around 3,500 years ago), their leader Moses said that God had acted...

... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8 v 3)

Over the years, God kept speaking to his people, usually through particular spokespeople, such as prophets and kings. The messages were written down and read and reread as the words of God. (This is what we have in our

Bibles as the Old Testament.) That's why King David, Israel's second monarch, who ruled around 1000 BC, could write these words:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring for ever.
The decrees of the LORD are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

(Psalm 19 v 7-11)

From the earliest times, God's people knew that God had spoken to them, and when his words were written down by human authors, he continued to speak as they were read. It's no accident that the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, is all about the fact that we need to listen to and act on God's words to enjoy life with him.

In one of its most memorable phrases, the writer calls God’s word “a lamp for [our] feet and a light on [our] path” (Psalm 119 v 105).

When Jesus shows up in the 1st century, one of his central claims is that he picks up where the Old Testament prophets have left off, and that he speaks the words of God. This was obviously controversial with the Israelites of his day. Yet in one incident recorded in John’s Gospel, as people began to react against Jesus, his friend Simon Peter refused to walk away, saying:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6 v 68)

Paul’s statement that the Bible is “God-breathed”, then, basically summarises what this book says about itself from beginning to end. Yes, it’s an actual human book, written by a huge range of people across a vast swath of time. Their personalities and passions come across on every page. But behind all that stands the God who brought this book together and brings it to life. That’s what makes the Bible a book like no other.

This book, then—the one that you’re holding with my name on the front—isn’t intended to improve your literacy or your knowledge of Bible trivia. I’ve written this book to help you to meet a person—a living, loving being like no other—through the pages of a book like no other. The God of the universe has set things up so that he relates to ordinary people like you and me in real time.

He made us, he loves us, he knows us inside out, and he speaks to us. And he does that through the Bible. That's why reading the Bible matters so much—because when we read it, we meet the one and only God.

THE BOOK LIKE NO OTHER BOOK

Maybe you're still not convinced. To say that the Bible is God's word is a massive claim. How can we possibly prove a claim like that?

When you think about it, outside the world of maths, “proof” is hard to come by. Even in scientific experiments (and criminal investigations!) we're usually dealing with the weight of evidence rather than undeniable “proof”. When I get on a plane, no one can actually “prove” that it will stay up. If the aeronautical engineers are right, it should. If it has been constructed properly, it should. Given the fact that lots of similar planes take off and land every day without incident, it probably will. I have flown hundreds of times before without crashing. So even though I can't prove it will stay up, I get on the plane and don't worry too much!

So what are we to do when it comes to the Bible? Well, the Bible *says* it is God's word. Countless people before us have read it to enormous benefit and, after immersing themselves in it, are convinced that it's God's word. My suggestion is simply that, at this point, you “get on the plane” and read it for yourself, with as much of an open mind as you can muster. I suspect that as you read, it

won't take too long before you see why this really is a book like no other.

A UNIQUE BOOK REQUIRES A UNIQUE APPROACH

If the Bible is breathed out by God, that means we may need to adjust our approach a little. In many ways, reading the Bible is like reading any other book (as we'll see in the next chapter). But there are some key differences that we need to take on board right at the start.

1. If the Bible is God-breathed, then it demands our attention

My wife, Fiona, is an English Literature teacher by background, and an avid reader. Because of that, there is an endlessly growing pile of books by my bed (and on my Kindle) which Fiona has recommended. I never get through the pile! In fact, I tend to pick and choose. Some of her recommendations are read and relished. But some just get ignored (if I don't like the look of them). Some are started but cast aside after a few pages (if I don't get into them). And to be honest, it doesn't really matter.

But when it comes to reading the Bible, it is a bit different. If the Bible contains God's words, then we can't just "take it or leave it"! If this is how God speaks to humanity, then this book demands our attention.

And that's not all...

2. If the Bible is God-breathed, then we can trust what it says

Usually when we read a non-fiction book or article, it's important to weigh up whether or not it comes from a reputable source. We might try to identify any bias, ask ourselves if it fits with what we already know to be true, weigh up the arguments and so on.

The Bible is different. Its authority (and trustworthiness) comes from God himself. It gives us God's perspective on our world and on us. There's no need to fact-check it because, if it is God who is speaking, then his words are, by definition, true and reliable (and if we do check the facts, we'll always find that they match up anyway). If and when it clashes with our perspective on reality, it's our perspective that's skewed, not his. God's words are profound, wise, searching and life-giving. We really can trust them.

3. If the Bible is God-breathed, then we need to do what it tells us

If we put those two things together—if the Bible comes to us carrying God's authority (as the Creator and Ruler of the universe) and is utterly trustworthy—then we need to do what it says. This a bit different to just *trusting* the Bible. Over the years I have read and ignored quite a lot of books. Books on how to train my dog; how to organise my desk; how to become an ultra-effective leader; and how to make green juices. I have no reason to doubt that

those authors wrote true and helpful things. In this sense, I trust them. I just didn't bother doing anything they said.

When we read other books, not only do we assume that we are free to assess what they say; we also know that it is entirely down to us whether we act on whatever it is they are suggesting. And if we don't follow through? It's no big deal. We have probably never met the author, and he or she certainly has no authority to tell us what to do. But what if God himself is the ultimate author? That changes things—we need to do what he tells us! If the God who knows all things speaks to us, then we would be really foolish to ignore what he says. We need to do what this wise and generous God tells us. It just makes sense.

4. If the Bible is God-breathed, then it's worth investing in

The final difference is really the culmination of the others. If the Bible is God's word, then we need to listen to it, believe it and do what it says—and to do all *that* requires investing time and energy into reading it carefully.

Reading the Bible isn't *just* reading words on a page but listening to one who loves us more than life itself, and who has a very clear agenda for our lives and our world. That's why it makes sense to ask for God's help when we read the Bible—help to understand what it means and how it applies to us.

It's also why we can't easily rush reading the Bible. We need to give it time—preferably regular, uninterrupted,

unhurried time. These words are ancient—and because most of us don't read a lot of ancient literature, that in itself will slow us down. But more than that, the Bible is so deeply personal—addressing all kinds of weaknesses and sadness as well as awakening all kinds of joys and resolve—that we need to make sure we have time to think carefully about what it means and what it says to us.

When we start to read the Bible, we face twin challenges. The first is the fact that it's so rich—which means learning to read slowly and carefully, word by word, line by line, so that we can squeeze every rich drop of meaning out of what's on the page. But the second is the fact that the Bible is so long. If we are to get the most out of the Bible, and appreciate the soaring storyline which stretches from Book 1 (Genesis) to Book 66 (Revelation), then we need to move quickly enough to get to the end before we've completely forgotten the beginning! We need to learn to read slowly and to read quickly, and to make time to do both. That's why this book will give you some strategies and tools to help you both to savour the detail *and* gasp at the broad sweep of the storyline as you read the Bible.

ONE STEP AT A TIME

There is an old Chinese proverb which says, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. Getting to know the Bible, God's unique book, starts with reading it. Yes, it might seem daunting. Yes, getting our heads around it may take some time. But from the very first page, we can be sure of two things. First, that God will speak to

us—because he *wants* to speak to us and has “breathed out” this book for us. Second, that when God speaks to us, it will change us. We cannot meet with our beautiful and powerful God without being deeply affected. Spending time with this God—who is more tender, more creative, more forgiving, more powerful and more blazingly pure than we can ever imagine—will have an impact on us. As God speaks to us, he has promised to gently correct, shape, humble, challenge, stretch and thrill us. To make us more like Jesus.

And if *that's* what reading the Bible will do, then I really *do* want to read it. Don't you?

YOUR TURN ○

Read Psalm 19 v 7-14

Think about the implications of the Bible being God's word listed on pages 18-20. What things does the writer of Psalm 19 say about God's word that get at each of the following?

1. God's word demands our attention.
2. God's word is trustworthy.
3. We need to do what God's word says.
4. God's word is worth investing in.