

# BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN



## How to Use the Plan

Two thousand years ago, Jesus had a conversation with two dispirited disciples as they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Later, over a dinner blessing, he miraculously vanished. The disciples' first response was not to marvel at the miracle but to reminisce: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road, *as he opened to us the Scriptures?*" (Luke 24:32, emphasis added).

God's intention for us today is the same: to open the Scriptures so that in them we meet him. We read the Bible in order to see, hear, and know Jesus. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, "We come to Scripture not to learn a subject but to steep ourselves in a person."<sup>1</sup>

**The *Scripture Meditation Plan* is designed to help you personally hear and know God as you meditate on his Word. It offers a unique blend of daily Scriptures (that you read at your own pace) followed with a time of biblical meditation.**

I developed this plan years ago for my own use after dozens of failed attempts with other plans. It's not about reading X number of verses on a given day, nor is it interacting with the ideas of study-plan authors. It's about connecting with God through his Word.

I wanted a plan that was flexible, intuitive, engaging, and personal. This plan is all of those things. But most importantly, I think you'll love how it turns Scripture reading into a conversation with God and a feast for your soul.

# Three-Pronged Approach

The *Scripture Meditation Plan* has three simple elements: (1) Personally Paced Readings, (2) Biblical Meditation, and (3) Bookmarks.

The bookmarks are integral guides to the readings and meditations. There are five of them at the end of this reading plan. If you use a print Bible, print and cut these out, and leave them in the pages you plan to read tomorrow. If you use an electronic Bible, save the bookmarks to your desktop.

You'll get better acquainted with the bookmarks in a bit, but let's begin with a quick look at them:



**PSALMS** organizes the Psalms into 121 readings of around twenty verses, to be read consecutively.

**OLD TESTAMENT, NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES, & NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS** set the reading order for each of these three categories.

**MEDITATION** guides you in prayerful reflection on the passages you've read.

The bookmarks give you structure and guidance for the plan's two activities: personally paced reading and biblical meditation. Here's how it all works.

## Personally Paced Reading

Plan on about fifteen minutes for this part. But that's just an average. Whether you spend five minutes or thirty is up to you. What counts isn't how much you read—it's what you get out of it.

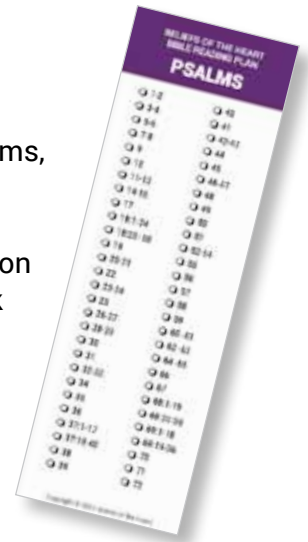
Four of the bookmarks—**Psalms**, **Old Testament**, **NT Narratives**, and **NT Letters**—will guide your daily reading. (We'll get to the fifth bookmark, **Meditation**, in the next section.)

## PSALMS

The Psalms bookmark partitions the Psalms into 121 daily readings averaging twenty verses each. Each day's reading may consist of a single psalm, two psalms, or sometimes—with longer psalms such as Psalm 119—only part of a psalm.

The Psalms serve as an anchor for the *Scripture Meditation Plan*, with the intention that each reading be completed in its entirety. If you miss a day or two, just pick up where you left off.

Continue till you've read through all the Psalms. Then start over. Depending on your pace, you will read through all the Psalms two and a half to three times in a year.



## OLD TESTAMENT, NT NARRATIVES & NT LETTERS

Unlike Psalms, these bookmarks don't tell you how many verses to read each day. Instead they provide the *order* of the books to read. After reading the Psalm(s) for the day, read a section each from the **Old Testament**, **New Testament Narratives**, and **New Testament Letters**. I usually read ten to twelve verses from each of them, but it varies widely.

Read at your own pace. Tailor your day's reading according to how God is speaking to you. Don't feel the need to follow the plan rigidly. Some days I sense God speaking to me in a Psalm and I simply skip the other passages (I'll read them tomorrow). Other days I may just read the passage from a gospel. But most days I read from all four bookmarks.

Once you've completed the entire order on a given bookmark, start over again, just as you'd do with the Psalms. Don't try to finish all the bookmarks at the same time—I've never even finished two of the bookmarks at the same time.



### The How and Why of the Format

*Mixing it up.* A glance at the bookmarks shows that the Old Testament and Epistles don't follow the order of books in the Bible. Once you've finished with Genesis, for instance, you proceed to Hosea, not Exodus. That's intentional. Shuffling the order keeps things fresh—particularly in the Old Testament, with its rich variety of genres. Narratives, major and minor prophets, and poetry are intermingled. Some of the major prophets and the book of Proverbs are also broken into smaller sections so you don't bog down.

*Keeping it fresh.* Perhaps you've noticed that the daily mix of Scriptures is unlikely to ever repeat itself. I recently read parts of Psalm 119, Jeremiah 2, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 15. I doubt I will ever read that unique mixture of Scripture again. Each day offers unique combinations of passages you would never put together on your own. I find that freshness delightful! The possibilities are endless, and there's no telling what you'll discover if you keep your spiritual ears open for God's voice.

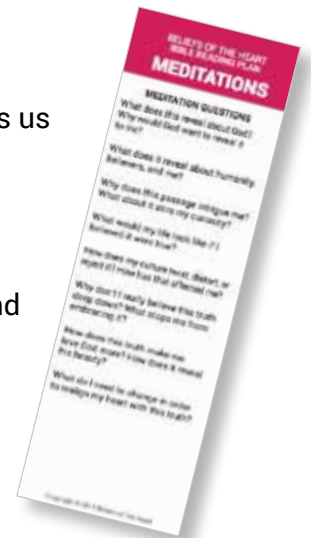
*Customizing your approach.* What you read daily is between you and God. The default is to read a small section of each book at a time. But sometimes you may want to cover an entire book or letter from a bird's-eye view. There is no right or wrong way.

A typical day for me averages a dozen verses each from the Old Testament, the New Testament Narrative, and the Epistle (though I begin with the selection from the Psalms). I read each passage until I sense I have something to chew on; then I move on to the next passage on the next bookmark. Sometimes I get stuck (in a good way) on one verse, and I'll read and reread it each day for a week. But I've also completed the whole book of Esther in one sitting and then read it again the next day.

## MEDITATION

The goal of the daily readings is to hear God speak through them. And that brings us to the last of the bookmarks: Meditation.

In biblical meditation,<sup>2</sup> we fill our mind and imagination with God's words, and in that meditative mix, we ask God to speak. Scripture itself encourages us to approach the Bible this way: "Blessed is he who ... delights in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1–2 par).



Here in a nutshell is how to proceed:

- *As you're doing your daily readings*—take note of what stirs you most (I jot it down in a journal). Usually it will be a verse or a phrase, but sometimes it's a general insight. "What stirs you most" doesn't mean that the heavens part; it just means you identify the verse that has the most impact, even if the impact isn't all that big.
- *After you've completed all four readings*—decide what you are going to meditate on. Sometimes it's a simple verse (or phrase) that especially moved you; sometimes several passages are wonderfully linked, and you'll meditate on how they complement and illuminate each other.

That's the general idea. Now let's break it out into the four different approaches shown on the Meditation bookmark. Each day you'll choose one of the meditation methods below (though some days you may choose to blend a couple of the methods together).

## Meditation on a Passage

When one passage in particular moves you—whether it’s a phrase, a verse, a story, or a concept—prayerfully meditate on that passage and feel free to skip meditating on the other readings. You’ve found what you’re looking for. Now focus on it by asking the following questions (as shown on the bookmark):

- What does this reveal about God? Why would God want to reveal it to me?
- What does it reveal about humanity, believers, and me?
- Why does this passage intrigue me? What about it stirs my curiosity?
- What would my life look like if I believed it were true?
- How does my culture twist, distort, or reject it? How has that affected me?
- Why don’t I really believe this truth deep down? What stops me from embracing it?
- How does this truth make me love God more? How does it reveal his beauty?
- What do I need to change in order to realign my heart with this truth?

You need not answer all of these questions. The passage will suggest to you which questions are most relevant. Let those serve as a springboard for conversation with God. You’re listening for him to speak to you as you pray through his Word.

## Paraphrase Meditation

A powerful and vastly underused method of biblical meditation is to paraphrase. Not, of course, to create our own truth, but to discover truths of God that we easily miss. In his book *Prayer*, Tim Keller recommends this practice:

Another way to fix the mind on the truth of the passage is to paraphrase the verse in your own words. Read the verse(s) and close the Bible and try to restate it. [Comment from Sam: I write down my restatement in a journal.] Then look back at the passage and you will see how much you missed. Do this until you are satisfied with your paraphrase.

This kind of meditation forces you to think more deeply about the text than you would otherwise. If you realize you don’t really know what a word or concept means, take time to study and find out. Putting it in your own words—your own heart language—will send it down into your inner being more easily.<sup>3</sup>

As I meditate on a verse, I also read other translations and commentaries. Then I set out to write my own paraphrase. This practice, more than any other, has brought to light my biases and misunderstandings. And through it, I regularly hear God sing his words to my heart.

## Intermingling Meditation

Sometimes what moves you won't be a single passage but a unique interaction between all four readings. It's the sum of the parts, how each passage sheds light on the others. Ask God to speak to you through their intermingling.

When I meditate this way, I consider how various verses complement, add to, and enlighten (or sometimes confuse) the other verses. Then I write down their interplay as prayerful conversation with God. For example, this morning I wrote,

God, I long to love your law and meditate on it day and night (Ps. 119:97). But I recognize that my heart hates to admit my failures; that I prefer to think the best of myself (though not of others!); and that I hate the shame of uncovering my idols (Jer. 2:23).

Yet I read that you "eagerly longed" to share the Passover meal before your suffering, and the words you used for "eagerly longed" was to "lustily lust." I know that your suffering for me expresses your heart (Luke 22:15).

Finally, I realize that your greatness more than compensates for the evil of this world and my own actions; that death itself has been swallowed up (1 Cor. 15:54); and that your victory is more than a return to status quo. Your victory means that your wounds become your glory, and your wounds-into-glory reveals your pattern for the hope of suffering in my own life.

If you haven't tried this form of intermingling meditation, prepare yourself for a delight!

## The Study Meditation

The first three meditation methods deal with shorter passages. But sometimes God will stir you to examine something lengthier.

For instance, I've always found Revelation intimidating. So last spring, when the reading plan brought me once again to Revelation, I initially skimmed through it several chapters at a time. This time, though, something about the book intrigued me. So after reading Revelation, I reread it again more slowly, maybe half a chapter a day.

Then I returned for a third, even more deliberate reading. I made a detailed outline, read several commentaries, and reflected on God's patience and sovereignty. I was moved by the concluding marriage feast of the Lamb, its invitation ("The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'"), and the book's closing warning to neither add to nor subtract from God's Word.

The book of Revelation normally takes me a month to read; this time it took me nearly a year. And you know what? I came to see God in ways I never had before—in the intimidating book of Revelation!

## BORING AND CONFUSING PASSAGES

Let's admit it: not all of the Bible is easy reading. How do you handle those long genealogies? Those endless counts in the book of Numbers? And what about the stuff you can't make head nor tail of—the detailed directions for worship and sacrifices in Leviticus or the confusing prophetic imagery in Ezekiel?

It's okay! You don't have to understand every detail of every passage perfectly. When I encounter a genealogy or a lengthy description of the sacrificial system, I sometimes skip that section (or even an entire book). At other times I may find something fascinating in the same section. Give yourself latitude and don't force inspiration. Let it come when it comes. God will stir in your heart different ways at different times, and the passage you skipped today may fascinate you tomorrow, like Revelation gripped me last year.

*About Psalm 119.* This longest “chapter” in the Bible has more verses than fourteen of the Old Testament books and seventeen of the New Testament books. I've been reading the Psalms since I was twenty, and every time I come to Psalm 119, I inwardly cringe, “Not again!”

But also every time (well, *almost* every time), I find hidden treasures that I never saw before. Psalm 119 is itself a meditation—a meditation on the richness of God's Word. It's as if the writer couldn't find enough ways to describe his delight in God's voice; he wanted to contemplate it from many angles, like a magnificent, many-faceted diamond. If you read Psalm 119 with that idea in mind and ask God for the same love, the psalm comes alive.

The reading plan breaks Psalm 119 into eleven days. Whenever you arrive at that dreaded psalm, chances are you too will inwardly cringe, “Not again!” And every time (almost), you'll find unexpected gold.

## FOR ELECTRONIC BIBLE USERS

Electronic Bibles are great! I've been using mine for years; it offers easy access to other translations, and that is a terrific help in meditation. But obviously you can't use the bookmarks as actual physical bookmarks.

No problem. Just keep a copy of the Bookmark PDF on your computer's desktop and consult it as often as you need to. [You can download a copy of the bookmarks here](#) (remember, the password is all caps, “SMP”).

My favorite Bible software comes from [Olive Tree](#). It offers multiple translations, dictionaries, commentaries, and maps. The [ESV Strong's Bible](#) even includes hyperlinks to the original Greek and Hebrew words. It runs on Windows® and Mac® desktops and all the major smartphones and tablets.

If you don't have Bible software on your computer, tablet, or phone, there are two great resources available online: [Bible Hub](#) and [Bible Gateway](#). Both services provide access to more than twenty translations as well as commentaries and other study aids.

## FINAL WORDS

Remember, we are looking for God to speak to us in his Word. He does so through the Holy Spirit, which he freely gives to all who ask. On the night of his betrayal, the last night Jesus would be with his disciples, he said,

“I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak.” (John 16:7, 13)

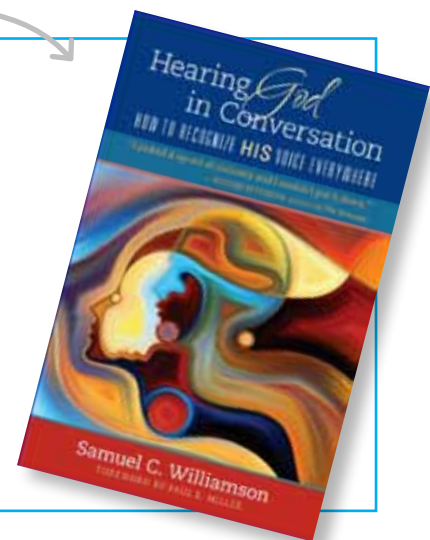
Jesus promises that he will continue to speak to us. His Holy Spirit will declare his word.

As we read God’s Word, we must ask him to speak into our heart so that the things we vaguely acknowledge in our heads become vibrant truths in our innermost being. As Paul observed, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). We need the Spirit of God to breathe life into his words.

And he loves to do just that.

Watch for Sam’s upcoming book, *Hearing God in Conversation*, to be released by Kregel Publications in July 2016. It includes chapters on hearing God in Scripture as well as others on how to recognize his voice in your daily life.

You can also visit Sam’s website for more articles on hearing God as well as other articles on engaging with God in daily life: <http://beliefsoftheheart.com/>



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## Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, quoted from David Sitton, “How to Know the Real Jesus,” *Relevant Magazine*, October 14, 2002. Originally in David Sitton, *Reckless Abandon* (Greenville: Ambassador International, 2013).
2. Biblical meditation is very different from Eastern (aka transcendental) meditation. They are, in fact, complete opposites, and the one should not be mistaken for the other.
3. Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 156.

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# BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN

## OLD TESTAMENT

- Narrative
- Poetry
- Major Prophet
- Minor Prophet

- Genesis
- Hosea
- Job
- Exodus
- Joel
- Jeremiah (pt.1) Ch. 1-29
- Deuteronomy
- Song of Solomon
- Numbers
- Jeremiah (pt.2) Ch. 30-52
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Joshua
- Isaiah (pt. 1) Ch. 1-20
- Lamentations
- Judges
- Ruth
- Isaiah (pt. 2) Ch. 21-35
- Micah

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# BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN

## NT LETTERS

- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- James
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Corinthians
- 1 Peter
- Philemon
- Romans
- 1 John
- 2 Corinthians
- 2 Peter
- Colossians
- Ephesians
- 2 John
- 3 John
- Philippians
- 1 Timothy
- Hebrews
- Titus
- 2 Timothy
- Jude
- Revelation

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# BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN

## NT NARRATIVES

- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John
- Acts

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BELIEFS OF THE HEART  
SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN  
**MEDITATIONS**

**MEDITATION QUESTIONS**

- What does this reveal about God?
- Why would God want to reveal it to me?
- What does it reveal about humanity, believers, and me?
- Why does this passage intrigue me? What about it stirs my curiosity?
- What would my life look like if I believed it were true?
- How does my culture twist, distort, or reject it? How has that affected me?
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- What do I need to change in order to realign my heart with this truth?

BELIEFS OF THE HEART  
SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN  
**MEDITATIONS**

**PARAPHRASE MEDITATION**

- Read the verse; close your Bible; try to restate it; see what you missed.
- Read two or three other translations, examine their different word choices.
- Prayerfully write your own paraphrase in your own heart language.

**INTERMINGLING MEDITATION**

- Prayerfully read the verses you are intermingling.
- Ask how they complement, add to, enlighten, or even confuse each other.
- Write a prayer to God using elements from each of the verses.

**STUDY MEDITATION**

- Read the book quickly from a bird's eye view.
- Re-read the book slowly.
- Read it a third time, consulting commentaries, and make an outline.
- Ask what God says to you through the breadth of the book.

BELIEFS OF THE HEART  
SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN  
**PSALMS**

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