

Chapter 8

Rule #8: “Think About It”

If I had to pick the most important rules in this book, I would say it is Rule #1: “Read Your Bible Prayerfully”. I would then say the second most important rule is Rule #8: “Think About It”. These two rules are designed to go hand in hand. This rule simply means to pause and think about what the Bible is saying, and not just to read it straight through like a novel.

Let’s start with a renowned bible verse on this topic.

“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” (Joshua 1:8 NIV)

Joshua was the second leader of the Israelite people after Moses. When Moses died, Joshua became his successor. In the opening chapter of the Book of Joshua, God spoke Joshua and gave him advice on how to be a good leader. In this chapter, there was only one bit of advice about the topic of reading the Bible, and that was this verse. God told Joshua to meditate on the “book of the law” day and night.

Now Joshua’s job on bible reading was much easier than ours. At that time, there were only the five books of Moses, so it didn’t take him as long to get through the Bible as it was for us. The verse itself tells Joshua to meditate on “The Book of Law”. Most people believe it just refers to the 5th of the five books of Moses – Deuteronomy, and others say it refers to all five books. The point is God is telling Joshua in effect, “Read this book, meditate upon it, and then you will be prosperous and successful.

Well I don’t know about you, but I like the idea of being prosperous and successful, so I thought I would follow God’s advice to Joshua. Remember that studying your bible often means to look for patterns for us to follow. The key word in this passage is “meditate”. To meditate on the Bible does not mean to sit in the lotus position balancing a bible on your head and saying “oohm”. Meditating on the Bible simply means to think about it. It means to pause and think about what the text is saying. Of the eight rules I lay out in this book, this is the one I can biblically support the strongest. It is the only one that God states one can receive a reward for doing. The pattern for us to learn from God’s advice to Joshua is that if we spend regular time in the Bible and think about what the text is saying (i.e., “meditate” upon it), we will be prosperous and successful in whatever endeavors we partake. The reason we get this reward is the Bible teaches that we are rewarded if we live to give God the glory in all we do. God will honor that commitment and make us “prosperous and successful”.

Let me give you another example of “biblical bible reading”:

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. (2nd Timothy 4:13 NIV)

This is from Paul's second letter to Timothy. It was written near the end of Paul's life. In fact, it is written in the last chapter of the last recorded words of Paul. Paul was arrested by Emperor Nero at this time. Christianity was illegal. Paul knew that his death was eminent. Paul knew that he was either going to die in a matter of days, weeks, or months. Yet among the things he asks Timothy to bring Paul in jail are a cloak to keep him warm and "his scrolls". I am convinced these are bible scrolls. Paul wrote a large chunk of the New Testament and was a walking scholar on most of the books that are in the Bible. He quoted the Old Testament frequently in his writings. Yet Paul wanted to spend his dying days reading and studying the scripture further. It is simply another proof text of the desire for regular bible reading and thinking about what the Bible teaches. This goes for a beginner like Joshua to a veteran like Paul.

In the Book of the Psalms, you will occasionally come across a Hebrew word that is usually left untranslated. The word is "Selah". It is used 71 times in the Psalms. The word means to "pause". The word Selah is written every now and then after a particular verse in the Psalms. Some people believe it is a musical reference to pause at this point when the Psalm is sung. The author of the Psalms, which is mostly David, wants you to pause and think about that verse, or that last set of verses is saying. It is almost as if David is reminding you to apply Rule #8: "Hey you, reader, stop here for a second and think about what the text is saying!"

I heard a wonderful illustration by a bible teacher named Jon Curson on the topic of reading the Bible meditatively. I'm going to change this illustration a little from how I first heard it. Imagine a conversation with someone you know intimately, say your spouse or your best friend. Now imagine a set of chess clocks. If you have ever watched two professionals playing chess there is a pair of clocks. They each have, say ten minutes to make a move. When they finish, they punch the clock. The other person can't make a move until the first person punched the clock. Now imagine a conversation with two people using chess clocks. One person talks, talks, talks, and then punches the clock. Let's say it goes on for ten minutes. Then the other person talks, talks, talks, and after 10 minutes, punches the clock. This goes back and forth until both people run out of things to say.

My question is, is that the way conversation works in real life? Of course it does not happen that way. In a normal one-on-one conversation, one person talks and listens for a moment. He or she pauses or completes their thought. The other person asks a question or interjects a different thought. A normal conversation goes back and forth. Now let's go back to my illustration in Chapter 1 of the seventeen year old boy interviewing the seventeen year old girl. He thinks he's in love and wants to find out all he can about her. During the interview, he notices details about her. When she pauses after a thought, he thinks of follow up questions or shares other thoughts with her. As they talk, the conversation becomes more intimate.

One of the great lessons that I have learned about reading my bible is to treat it like a conversation. The mistake of bible reading is just to read it, put it down, pick it up again the next day, read it some more, put it down, and keep that pattern going. That is how one reads a novel. It is not how God wants us to read our bible. God, in his infinite love for you, wants you involved in a conversation. He wants a two-way dialogue and not a one-way lecture. How do we respond when reading the Bible? By pausing, and thinking about it.

The actual practice of Rule #8 takes a little practice. Sometimes you want to read your bible like a reporter who has to write a story on a person he is interviewing. As you read your bible, ask yourself “who, why, when, where and how” questions. Ask yourself, “Why is the writer saying this?” Why is he not saying it another way? What is the writer trying to accomplish by that point? What is so special about this geographical location that they mention the location in the story? Here is the great part: The questions you are asking are actually prayers to God. We tend to think of prayer as just praising God or giving God our laundry list of requests for Him to accomplish. Those are both biblically supported and desired by God. God also desires simple conversation. “Meditatively” reading your bible means to stop every now and then and think about what the text is saying. If you are not sure what to think about, just ask yourself a good “who, what, when, where or how” type of question as you read. The goal is to get better understanding. Ask God for help. You can’t offend God by asking the wrong question.

Remember that the Holy Spirit promised to teach you all things written in the Scripture. (John 14:26). Sometimes answering those questions requires some time. Sometimes, God expects you to use the brain he gave you to figure it out for yourself. Sometimes he wants you to do some research to answer the question and use a bible concordance or some other tool. Rule #8, which means to “think about it”, ties all eight rules together. It includes reading your bible prayerfully, systematically, studying it in context, comparing it to other passages of the Bible, taking it seriously and making sure you are not reading something into the text that is not there. There, I just summarized all eight rules of the Bible in one sentence. That wasn’t too bad, was it?

The next question becomes, how often do I have to pause? Do I do this after every word? Do I do this after every sentence? It would take me years to read the entire bible at that pace. So just when do I pause anyway? It is because of these questions that I state that Rule #8 requires practice. My best answer is to think of a normal conversation. Do you ask the person you are talking to pause after every word or sentence so you can stop and think about it? Of course not. God is not putting pressure on you to read and contemplate his word at any particular pace. Some days I can read chapters and chapters. Some days I can only read a little bit as I spend a lot of time thinking about and contemplating passages. It is not a race to the finish line. One has to develop a good balance of reading your way through the entire bible with the concept of stopping every now and then and thinking about what you have read.

Let me give you another illustration. Suppose you are going to listen to a lecture. You listen, and then give a nice round of applause at the end, and then you go home. Now suppose you were told before the lecture that you have to give a ten-minute speech on that lecture the next day. Are you going to pay more attention to what the speaker has to say? Of course you do. I have heard that the best way to learn anything is to pretend you have to do a presentation the next day on that topic. You are going to be more focused because you now have more motivation. Reading your bible meditatively, that is, pausing to think about it has the same effect. In a sense, you are stopping to ask questions. You may think, “How does this apply to me? What is the author trying to tell me? What is so important about this passage? How does it fit in with the rest of the text?”

One of the great lessons I learned early as a bible teacher is the following principal: “Who cares about the Hittites, Perizzites, Amorites, Jebusites? I have bills to pay! “ For those who don’t know, these are the names of some of the tribes that occupied Israel before the Israelites ever entered the Promised Land. They are mentioned every now and then in the Old Testament. A similar thought is, “Who cares about some trivial long dead king who lived thousands of years ago? My kids are home sick!” The answer to both of those questions is my constant reminder as a Bible teacher to keep the topic relevant to the audience. Learning your bible is all about learning how it applies to your life. Some of the references are more trivial than others and requires some additional study. Some references are far more obvious and can be applied from the simple reading of the text. The point is studying your bible is not just an exercise in learning history, it is learning what God expects from you in a relationship with Him and a relationship with other people.

I also have to admit that one of the great joys of learning the Bible is to learn what the text does not say as opposed to what it says. Here are some examples of questions to ponder as you read your bible: “Why did Jesus not say “such and such” when he was being criticized? Why did Jesus perform a miracle this way when last time he performed a similar miracle that way? Why did Moses not say to God “such and such”? Why did God not respond the way he did? The point is some of the great lessons one can learn from the Bible are to read what the text does not say as well as what the text does say.

One has to remember that the printing press and copying machines did not exist when any of the Bible books were written. There were no stationary stores to buy ink and paper. Both ink and paper were difficult to get and to come by. Imaging copying by hand a single book of the Bible one letter at a time, one word at time, one sentence, one book, etc. This would take a lot of time. Because you are dealing with the Word of God, you did it slowly and meticulously to keep it accurate. A Jewish tradition is that if you made a mistake, you burned the page and started over again. By the way, both Hebrew and Greek assign numbers to each letter. One can mathematically make sure you were accurate by adding up all the letters in a row or column and make sure the original is the same as the copy. My point is that no words were wasted in the Bible. If a topic was repeated, that means it was repeated for a reason. Paper and ink were hard to come by. If God wanted to say something twice, it is not because he is trying to write a 500-word essay and he is twenty words short of completion. If something is mentioned twice, that means there must be a reason it is included.

That principal of “Why is something written in the text twice?” can also apply to the idea of “Why is that text “missing” from the Bible?” Let’s get back to thinking about what the text does not say as well as what the text says. The Word of God is important both in what it says and what it does not say. Some of the most wonderful lessons in the Bible are to think about (that is Rule #8) what the text does not say.

I gave an example of this in an earlier chapter. The prophet Daniel was reading from the Book of Jeremiah and discovered that the City of Jerusalem would be desolate (no people) for a total of seventy years (Daniel 9:2). When Daniel read that passage, Jerusalem was going through that period and he estimated the seventy years were almost up. The point is that Daniel took that text literally. The text does not say, “Well, we can’t trust these copies of the Bible. What if

Jeremiah made a mistake? The text does not say, “Daniel read that passage and ignored Jeremiah’s warnings. The point is you can learn things by what the text does not say.

Let me give you another, longer example of this principal. This one takes place in the Book of Genesis when God tells Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering in order to test Abraham’s faith. Right before Abraham was about to strike his son, an angel told him to stop. God tested Abraham to see if he loved God even more than he loved his own son. When he passed that test, God provided an animal as a substitute sacrifice to complete this offering. Here is the verse I want you to notice.

“Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Genesis 22:13 NIV)”

In Genesis Chapter 22, Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain to perform this sacrifice. Right as Abraham was about to place the knife into his son, an angel told Abraham to stop and God provided a ram as a substitute offering instead of Isaac. That is what is stated in this verse.

On a different but related topic, Paul says that Jesus died and was buried and rose again on the 3rd day according to the Scriptures (See 1st Corinthians 15:4). When you read that passage, you wonder, “Paul said Jesus rose again “according to the Scriptures”. What Scripture is Paul referring to? The New Testament was not written yet. Paul must have been referring to some Old Testament passage that predicted Jesus would die and rise again on the 3rd day.

Most Christian bible scholars believe Paul was talking about Abraham offering Isaac as a pattern that speaks of Jesus. When Abraham was told to offer Isaac, it was a three-day journey to the location of the sacrifice. (See Genesis 22:4). In Abraham’s mind, Isaac was “dead” when God told him to do this deed. In Abraham’s mind Isaac became “alive again” on the 3rd day when the angel interrupted the sacrifice. My point of this whole example is the following text:

“Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba. (Genesis 22:13 NIV)”

Let us get back to my point about what does the text not say as well as what does the text say. Notice who the text does not mention – Isaac. There is no mention of Isaac coming off the mountain after the sacrifice. Just Abraham returning to his servants. If Isaac is a model of Jesus in this word-picture series in Genesis, then the model is completed by Isaac “not being there” after the resurrection! The Bible “accidentally” forgets to mention that Isaac returned with Abraham (which he probably did) to complete the model of Isaac as a type of Jesus being resurrected. In fact, we don’t read of Isaac for two more chapters until a “bride” is arranged for the marriage of Isaac. In the Book of Revelation, the church collectively is referred to as the “bride of Christ”. (Revelation 19:7, 21:2, 21:9, 22:17).

If all of this is confusing to you, here is the simple thing to remember: What the Bible does not say is as important as what the Bible says. By the omission of the name of Isaac in two chapters of Genesis, one can make a comparison of Abraham’s offer of Isaac to God’s offering of Jesus as a substitute for our sins. God offered Abraham as a ram substitute for Abraham’s sins. God

offered Jesus as perfect substitute for our sins. Isaac was “saved” from the offering requirement via a substitute. We are saved from the offering requirement via Jesus as a substitute. By thinking about what the Bible says and doesn’t say, one can learn lots of wonderful lessons and applications to our lives.

I can just hear the groaning of the “bible beginner” out there. “You expect me to see that? I can barely keep my Abraham’s and Isaac’s straight and you expect me to get that out of the text? How do I get refund on this book?” Let me reassure you that all of this takes time. The lessons on Abraham and Isaac and their comparisons to Jesus were many years into my life as a Christian bible student. Remember in my introduction that I wanted to write this book, go back in a time machine, and give it to myself when I was first learning the Bible. Since I can’t do that, it is written for those who want to learn more about God and his expectations for your life.

Let’s get back to the basic topic of Rule #8: “Think About It”. When you read the Bible, pause every now and then to think about the text. Don’t worry about trying to be an expert in one day or one year. Learning your bible is like trying to eat an elephant. You can eat an elephant if you take it one bite at a time. The first time you read through a passage, just read and contemplate the passage. If you are confused, pray to God “I’m confused, help, amen.” That’s it. If you want, stop and think about it for a few moments. If you are still lost, say, "God I’m stuck on this one. I’m going to file it in my brain for future thought, but right now I’m going to move on”.

Many people fail to get through the Bible in say, roughly a year because they come to an area of the Bible that is difficult to comprehend and give up. Those difficult passages are there for a reason. Yes, they are difficult. Let me reassure you from every veteran bible reader that the second time around is easier, and the third time around is even easier. You learn things the first time you work your way through the Bible and you learn things the fortieth time you read your way through the Bible. Your level of comprehension is going to be different every time. All adults have great knowledge on some topics and naïve on others. No one is an expert in all topics. There is no reason to be ashamed or intimidated about being naïve on the Bible. It is something to be learned and enjoyed no matter how long you have been a Christian. If you remember the example of the “complicated will” a few chapters back, you get the idea. The will may be difficult to comprehend, but there is a great reward for understanding what it says.

So let’s get back to the question of “How often do I pause and think about it?” The answer is every time you want to!” Sometimes, it may be after reading a few words or sentences, and other times it may be after reading a chapter or two. Think about eating a meal. If you eat it very fast, you never get to enjoy its wonderful flavor and you will probably get indigestion. If you eat it slowly, you will discover the wonderful taste of the food and you will feel better at the end of the meal. You still need to eat a certain amount of food regularly in order to survive. The Bible works the same way. A healthy diet requires a certain amount of food for sustenance. Being patient with the speed at which you read your way through the Bible helps you to appreciate more what the Bible says. Being patient and contemplating what you are reading helps you digest the text better.

I don’t have a set answer for how often one needs to pause and think about what the Bible teaches. I just know it is an important principal to do so. Asking questions to God and yourself about what the text is saying helps you to digest the Word of God and gives you better

understanding so that you can apply it better to your own life. Rule #8 is all about developing the habit of stopping every now and then and thinking about what the text says. It requires a little practice and discipline, but so does reading your bible in the first place. The great joy of a two-way conversation is to pause, ask questions and develop a dialogue. That is what God desires of us both in prayer and in daily bible reading. Applying Rule #8, "Think About It" is simply a method of not just to mindlessly read the text like mindlessly listening to someone speak. It is a call to active participation in a two-way dialogue. It is a call to think about what God is saying, and is not saying, and think about how this applies to your life.