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Back to Basics: How to Read my Holy Bible

Many of us struggle with reading our Bibles every day. Many of those of us who manage to read it complain that they do not understand what they are reading. While it is true that even “if you do not understand the Word of God, the demons do understand what you are reading and they tremble,” as one of the saints said (Way of the Pilgrim, 11), we are still commanded to “search the Scriptures,” because, “these are they which testify of Me,” (John 5:39).

Yet, despite the commandment, when we do not understand what we are reading, many of us get discouraged and give up. In fact, I am the first one who has this issue. I’ve started Bible reading plan after Bible reading plan and none have lasted me more than a week or two. This drove me insane because I can read novels for months at a time but never the Bible or any spiritual book for that matter. I’ve even found myself asking, why does God make it so hard to follow His way? Why can’t I just enjoy reading the Bible and understand it naturally? Why do I have to search? Then God sent me a verse in a Bible study that Abouna Mina Dimitri gave once. He quoted Daniel 10:12 in which an angel told Daniel, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words.” Now, Daniel had been fasting and praying for three weeks but from the first day God was preparing him to receive the answer.

So, I thought if it worked for Daniel, maybe it’ll work for me, and I fasted for three weeks – no, I’m kidding. I did start praying about it though and asking that God give me a way to understand what He was trying to tell me each day. Then God sent me the answer. He sent me two talks – one by His Grace Bishop Youssef from the southern diocese and the other by Abouna Mina Dimitri, again – and a close friend who was very good at reading the Fathers. I listened to the talks (HGBY’s was less than one minute long and Abouna Mina’s was three minutes – I don’t have much of an attention span) and started following what they suggested. When I didn’t understand something, I’d text my friend who would explain it from what he read from the Fathers. Eventually, God started to open my eyes and my heart to understand His Word and gave me a bit of impatience with waiting for my friend to reply to texts that drove me to read the Fathers myself. After some time and a lot of confused texts later, I started to enjoy reading my Bible and it became truly mine.

Then I messed up. I got busy and stopped my reading. Now I am trying to build back up. So, as I start the journey over again, I wanted to share what HGBY and Abouna Mina said and perhaps, some of you will join me on my new journey.

His Grace said that if anyone wants to benefit from reading the Holy Bible, he or she has to go through five steps:

1. Read it with your eyes.
2. Understand/Recite it with your mind
3. Keep it in your heart
4. Reflect on it
5. Apply it in your life

That’s all well and good but I stopped at number two most days – which is where Abouna’s talk came in. He said that in order to understand the Word of God, we needed to spend some time with it. Like a friend. You wouldn’t expect to get to know someone if all you did was say hi when you passed them in the DCC. Sounds good, right? But I also struggled with getting bored when I

read and ended up skimming the passages and moving on. Fortunately for me, Abouna had thought of everything and gave me an outline for what to do:

1. **Quiet my mind:** When I am about to start reading my Bible, I should sit quietly for a minute or two first and clear my mind of everything. He suggested singing a spiritual song in my head if I had trouble with this.
2. **Pray:** Before I read the Bible, I should pray for God to send me what He wanted me to know and to do for the day through my reading. I pray that God makes clear what He is trying to tell me in my heart and helps me apply it.
3. **Read:** Once my mind and heart are prepped, I can start reading. He suggested choosing shorter passages and reading them three times. The first time: just read the passage through quickly to get an idea of what is going on. The second time: read it through a little slower and highlight the verses that stick out to me. Here, I am starting to think about what I can personally take from this passage and what it means. The last time: focus only on the verses I highlighted and really try to understand what God means by them.
4. **Write/Reflect/Question:** I then write down one sentence in a notebook about what I read that day. It could be one of the verses I highlighted or a question I had or a comment on how a verse resonated with me. Anything really. This is also where I'd look a verse up in a commentary or text my friend or Abouna if I didn't understand something.
5. **Pray:** Finally, the last step is to pray and thank God for whatever message He sent me that day and ask for His help in making a real change in my life based on His Word as well as the ability to say with David the Prophet, "Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You," (Psalm 119:11).

This may seem long but it rarely takes more than 10-15 minutes depending on how long of a passage I read and it covered all of His Grace's steps except the last one: actually applying it.

An easy way to begin to apply what I've read that I found works for me is to apply it to my prayer life first. I got this idea from St Anba Karas' life. When he was ready to depart, Christ appeared to him and asked Anba Karas to ask for anything he wanted before he departed. The only thing St Karas asked for is to see David the prophet and king because whenever he prayed, he would quickly run out of words to say to Christ and so would use King David's from the Psalms. This made me realize that Bible is not a textbook of things that are right and wrong. It is a dynamic love letter that my amazing God sends me each day. It is a new text from the One I love every day that I simply can't just leave on read. So, when I reply, I play off what He said – like a normal conversation. I use the sentences that I write each day and talk about whatever He talked to me about that day. Whether it's a verse or a question or a thank you, it's definitely a lot easier to talk to God when I'm just carrying on the conversation rather than starting a whole new one each day. Eventually, I find myself using more and more of what He said and having to make things up to say less and less. I find a really great conversation flowing, made up entirely of His Word and – I know this sounds weird – but it's bliss. Completely euphoric. There is nothing else like it in the entire universe. That moment when you have a real conversation with God, nothing else matters. Nothing else deserves a first thought let alone a second.

And it all starts with reading His first text.

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

References and Resources:

The Way of the Pilgrim (pdf):

https://jbburnett.com/resources/french_way_of_a_pilgrim.pdf

His Grace Bishop Youssef's talk: (It's 49 seconds long)

<https://soundcloud.com/his-grace-bishop-youssef/qa-how-to-read-and-understand-the-holy-bible>

Abouna Mina Dimitri – Sorry, I don't have a recording of his talk.

St Anba Karas' Life

Movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RK9RpH118Bc>

Synaxarion:

<http://www.copticchurch.net/classes/synex.php?sa=1&month=11&day=8&btn=View#5>

St. Bemwa's Account of his meeting with St Karas:

<http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/synexarion/stkaras.html>

Prayer for before reading the Bible: (Thank you, St Pishoy Fellowship Family Servants!)

“O Lord Jesus Christ, open up the eyes of my heart to hearken unto Thy Word and to understand and do Thy Will, for I am a pilgrim upon the earth. Conceal not from me Thy Commandments, but unveil mine eyes that I may comprehend the wonders of Thy Law: Tell me the secret and hidden things of Thy Wisdom. O my God, I trust that Thou will illumine my mind and comprehension by the light of Thy reason, that I may not simply read the Scriptures but also live by them; that I may read the lives and words of the saints and not to sin unto myself, but unto renovation and illumination and sanctification, and unto the salvation of my soul and unto inheritance of life everlasting. For Thou does illumine those in darkness, and from Thee comes every good gift and every perfect gift, and unto Thee do we ascribe glory: now and ever, and unto age of ages. Amen.”

-St John Chrysostom

Prayer for after reading the Bible: (Thank you, St Pishoy Fellowship Family Servants!)

“I thank You, Lord our God, that again on this occasion You have opened my eyes to the light of Your wisdom. You have gladdened my heart with the knowledge of truth. I entreat You, Lord, help me always to do Your will. Bless my soul and body, my words and deeds. Enable me to grow in grace, virtue and good habits, that Your name may be glorified, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.”

- <https://st-takla.org/Prayers-Slawat>

More resources on the Holy Bible, including articles on the authenticity and infallibility of the Holy Bible as well as on interpretation, alleged discrepancies, and a more in-depth view of how to read your Bible:

<https://suscopts.org/resources/literature/orthodox-faith/holy-scriptures/>