

# How Much Time for the Bible?

by R. Stanley

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*Spending unhurried quality time with the Bible is essential for receiving the intended benefit from God's Word and being equipped to face life's challenges.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 16:14, Psalm 19:10, Proverbs 2:4, Isaiah 28:10, John 16:12, Acts 17:11, Ephesians 6:17, 2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:1

**Topics:** "Bible Study", "Scripture Memorization"

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## Description

R. Stanley delivers a sermon emphasizing the importance of spending quality time with the Bible, comparing it to the hard work of bees in producing honey. He highlights the need for patience, dedication, and daily commitment to studying God's Word, drawing parallels to the production of manna in the wilderness. Stanley urges parents to instill a love for Scripture in their children from a young age, emphasizing the value of memorization and consistent Bible study. He stresses the significance of thorough Bible study, application, and the use of study aids to deepen understanding and guard against false doctrines.

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## Transcript

To produce one tablespoon of honey, the little bee makes 4200 trips to flowers. It makes about 100 trips a day to the fields, each trip lasting 20 minutes average and 400 flowers!

Wow! When my eyes hit this piece of astounding information in a book of illustrations, my mind instantly switched on to think about the Holy Bible. The Bible is compared to honey and honeycomb (Psa 19:10; 119:103). The Bible was written over a span of about 1500 years. God spoke in parts and in different ways (Heb 1:1). He has revealed His will and ways to us in stages--"precept upon precept; line upon line; here a little, there a little!" (Isa 28:10). In other words, the Bible was not written overnight and released in the early morning as a newspaper. God was not in haste while writing His book. He was extremely patient throughout the production of this unique piece of literature which would never need be revised or updated.

### Daily Bread

I would say that the underlying reason for our poor understanding of the Scriptures is our impatience. The modern generation of Christians is more impatient than those of the earlier generations when it comes to Bible meditation. The spirit of this age of fast food and junk food has prevaded us. Preachers and pastors teach God's people strictly to give atleast one tenth of their income to God. But hardly do we hear sermons

which persuade us to spend at least one twentieth of our time, which is about an hour per day, with God's Word. On the other hand we come across slogans like "Just Five Minutes a Day!" in the context of daily devotions.

Manna, the daily bread with which God fed His people for forty years in their wilderness journey towards Canaan, is a type of the Word of God (Ex 16:14-36). This seedlike substance did not come from Heaven as food packets thrown from an airplane. It was not a readymade food. Folks had to go about and gather it and grind it with handmills or pound it in mortars. They had to boil it and make it into flax cakes (Num 11:7,8). It did take time. If we are serious about receiving the intended benefit from God's Word, we must decide once and for all that we would spend unhurried quality time with it. There are no shortcuts.

### Hidden Treasures

Pebbles can be picked up from the banks of rivers. But if we look for pearls we must go for deep sea diving. God has compared His words to "hidden treasures" (Prov 2:4,5). What is hidden is not readily available on the table to be picked up. One must extensively and patiently search for it. Bible study is like a treasure hunt. We are called to "search from the Book of the Lord and read" (Isa 34:16a). Unless we do the searching the Holy Spirit will not help us (v 16c). Blessed are those who make the searching of the Scriptures a daily practice. This is what made the believers of Berea stand out! (Acts 17:11). They excelled even the Thessalonian Christians whom Paul showed as models to challenge congregations everywhere.

St. Augustine (AD 354-430) in a letter to his son wrote, "Such is the depth of the Christian Scriptures that even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else from early boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and talents greater than I have, I would still daily be making progress in discovering their treasures!"

### Start early!

The discipline of spending enough time with the Bible must start from childhood. The responsibility lies primarily with parents. Paul was a spiritual giant. He had been bestowed with unsurpassed skills and potentials. His intellectual brilliance was unusual. His accomplishments were unparalleled. Can we find a secondline leader to walk into his shoes? Paul had an eye on young Timothy, but was he not too timid and too apprehensive to take up the mantle? (1 Cor 16:10,11; 1 Tim 5:23). Nevertheless there was an outstanding attraction in Timothy. His love for the Scriptures which was born in his childhood itself, perhaps even before he attained the age of accountability to repent of his sins and receive Christ as his Saviour (2 Tim 3:14,15). The credit goes to his granny and mummy (2 Tim 1:5).

### Parents & Children

Parents spend so much time each day with their children, outside the classroom hours, in coaching and coaxing them to study their textbooks. This is fine and necessary in a world of competition. But how much time are the children made to spend with the Bible? We little realize that such a partiality angers God. He lamented through Prophet Hosea, "I have written for My people the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing" (Hos 8:12). In His anger He said, "Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hos 4:6b).

I don't worship Mary but I do hail her! How much she cooperated with God in preparing her Son for His redemptive ministry! Think of her efforts in filling the mind and heart of Boy Jesus with so much of Scriptures that even the teachers in the Temple were amazed! (Lk 2:46-48a). She continued to be a Bible tutor for Him from His twelfth to thirtieth year. For a young rural woman, in a carpenter's home, with very little academic exposure, and amidst so many domestic responsibilities, spending time with her Son alongwith the other children for the study of the Scriptures would not have been easy. The name "Mary" is common in Christian circles, but mothers like her are a rare breed.

## Memorization

Memorizing is so easy in childhood and youthhood. The multiplication tables we memorize in school stay with us to old age. Childhood memories are like a nail on the green tree! John Newton (1725-1807) was a hymnwriter and an Anglican pastor. He played a leading part in the abolition of the slave trade. "Amazing Grace" is his hymn. Hear his testimony: "My mother stored my memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of Scripture, Catechisms, hymns and poems. When the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found great benefit from the recollections of them!" How many children today can testify so about their parents? My younger brother Christopher and I can certainly hail our late mother for it! So will our daughter remember my wife for sitting with her to teach the Bible.

I urge youngsters to take advantage of the formative years to memorize Scripture passages. You certainly can't be too busy to memorize just one verse a day! What an asset to add over 300 verses every year to your memory! You will be full of joy, wisdom and discretion. Fleeing lustful desires and overcoming Satan become easy (Psa 119:9,11; 1 Jn 2:14b). Dr. Billy Graham (1918- ) tells us, "Like Joseph storing up grain during the years of plenty to be used during the years of famine that lay ahead, may we store up the truths of God's Word in our hearts as much as possible, so that we are prepared for whatever suffering we are called upon to endure!"

It is suggested that the initial memorisation of Bible verses is done in one's mother tongue. As a school boy I memorized Scripture passages in Tamil. It then became easy for me to memorize them in English when I entered college at the age of sixteen. Today I enjoy the advantage of knowing both English and Tamil Bibles, and writing devotional articles in both the languages. The hours spent for the memorisation exercise have been a lifetime investment. South Indians who hated the Hindi language and failed in Hindi exams started studying this language with intense interest in order to watch Hindi movies! Everything is possible if only we have a heart to do it! Hours spent with what we like will appear just like minutes!

## Read aloud!

Family prayertime is either not there or too short in many a Christian home. Not much can be accomplished in a family prayer which hardly lasts for thirty minutes. The time can be divided equally between Bible meditation and prayer. During the restoration ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people were reading the Scriptures from morning six to noon twelve, and then on upto evening six they were confessing their sins and worshipping (Neh 9:3). This is a healthy proportion. The first fifteen minutes in family prayer may be allotted for reading and meditating the Bible. That will make praise and prayer in the remaining time meaningful. The sons and daughters must be encouraged to read portions of the Scriptures aloud. Since this is not practiced in many homes, most of our young people don't know how to follow the punctuation marks in reading aloud. Paul instructed Timothy, "Give attention to reading" (1 Tim 4:13). This actually meant public reading. Jesus was good at it. Folks listened to His reading with rapt

attention (Lk 4:16,17,20).

I did not miss a single service in the Anglican Church at Nazareth where I grew. Two elderly gentlemen used to read the first and the second Scripture lessons. I can never forget their majestic voice with which they read. This part of the service was more appealing to me than the rest. I would read along with them, of course without sound. This was the training for my Scripture reading in pulpit preaching today. Several free Churches have dispensed with this practice of reading Bible lessons. I pity the members, especially the youngsters!

"Dry as a stick!"

The more we read the Bible the more we would like to read it. There will be times when we may not find Bible reading and meditation interesting. The excitement may not be there. This is when we must be careful. We may be tempted to give up the customary practices of Bible reading until a new desire and enthusiasm springs up. John Bunyan (1628-1688) the author of Pilgrim's Progress testified, "I have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible than I could well tell how to stand under, and yet at another time the whole Bible has been to me as dry as a stick!" Such dry spells will be common in our interaction with the Scriptures. We must neither decrease the time nor discontinue the routine. We don't know when and from which passage God would speak to us. We must not be like little boys who knock at the neighbour's door but disappear when the owner opens it!

Ask questions!

The Bible is God's Word. The message we receive from it is God's voice. In Greek the former is called "logos" and the latter is "rhema." Under normal circumstances we don't receive "rhema" instantly. We must dwell on a passage of the Scripture long enough until the message comes out. We must read that passage several times. Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) was a Bible translator. His was the first printed English Bible. His version became the basis for King James Version. He has written his own Bible study technique in the preface to his translation, in the 15th Century English:

It shall greatly helpe ye

to understand the Scripture,

If thou mark

Not only what is spoken or wrytten,

But of whom,

And to whom,

With what words,

At what time,

Where,

To what intent,

With what circumstances,

Considering what goeth before

and what followeth.

How can we find answers to these ten questions without spending time? They are only fundamental! If the Bible is to get into us, we must get into it.

When we are stingy with the time to be spent with the Bible, we tend to be choosy with the passages. We read certain portions of the Scriptures again and again and leave out the rest. The result is that we don't get "wholesome" food. We miss the "whole" counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The Bible claims that "all" of it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17). We cannot become "complete" and be "thoroughly" equipped if we neglect portions of it. On the face of it certain books and passages may appear disinteresting. But when we discipline our minds and force ourselves to read and meditate them, we will be amazed at what we get out of them. God unrolled a scroll before Prophet Ezekiel. Its both sides were writings of "lamentations, mourning and doom." God asked him to eat it! When he overcame his hesitation and ate it, it tasted "as sweet as honey" (Ezek 2:8-3:3).

### Reading & Rereading

There are several Bible reading calendars which will take us through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in one or two or three years. Choose a plan that suits you and be regular to read the daily portion. Early hours of the day are the best because your mind will be fresh enough to absorb a lot. This is just reading. Close meditation can be on a few verses from the daily portion or from elsewhere. When you read through the Bible again and again, comparing Scripture with Scripture becomes easy. Thomas Watson has interestingly said, "Nothing can cut the diamond but the diamond; nothing can interpret Scripture but Scripture!" There are two outstanding benefits of this method of studying the Bible. One, very difficult passages suddenly become clear when other passages throw light on them. Second, we can be saved from wrong interpretation leading to false doctrines. False doctrines, like false witnesses, agree not among themselves!

The unnamed Ethiopian government official had the habit of reading through the Scripture even if he didn't understand it. He had picked up the Book of Isaiah for his recent trip to Jerusalem. See how a brief exposition by Evangelist Philip could bring him to a consummate understanding of Gospel truth! (Acts 8:26-40). Keep a fine ballpen or pencil, whenever you open the Bible, to underline words, phrases and sentences which have a special appeal to you. Because the Bible paper is thin, don't use poor quality ballpens which bleed and smudge. Leave a question mark on the margin against a verse or passage you don't understand. You will have the joy of striking out some of them in your next reading! Questions will disappear one by one in subsequent readings. God reveals His truths to us in stages according to our level of understanding and maturity. Once Jesus told His disciples, "Oh, there is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now!" (Jn 16:12). Growth in Biblical understanding will be in proportion to our response to the illumination of the Holy Spirit (v 13). On another occasion Jesus said, "You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will" (Jn 13:7). Keep a notebook exclusively for jotting down points which make your heart glow. Laziness will prevent you to do this, and the loss will be heavy.

### Bible & Prayer

The time we spend with the Bible will enliven and enrich our prayertime. The Bible is a book of prayers. Out of 667 recorded prayers, there are 454 recorded answers. We can articulate the very words of the

Scripture when we lift up our hearts to God in prayer. Even though David was a King, he went through almost all the problems and crises we face as average citizens. He had his failures, struggles, questions, puzzles, oppositions, betrayals, sicknesses, loneliness, and name what. Many of his Psalms were born out of deep stirrings of the heart. He verbalised them as songs of prayer and worship. Everyone of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 is a prayer of praise or confession. Interestingly 171 of these verses refer to God's Word. David formatted this Psalm in alphabetical order from "aleph" to "tav", as from A to Z. Dr. Ravi Zacharias writes in his recent book, *Recapture the Wonder* (2003), "God's Word exhausts the very alphabet!"

### Study Aids

If only we know how much time the Bible translators take to translate a single portion of the Scripture, we will not consider Bible meditation an extracurricular activity! What a privilege to have the entire Bible in our mother tongue, that too in so many versions! There are still over 1000 languages without a single line of the Scripture translated into them. This generation is enviably blessed with an abundance of Study Bibles and study aids. I could not afford to buy a single Study Bible during the first eight years (1962-1970) of my spiritual life as a student in the college. Oh, how I prayed for one with my campus prayer mates! God granted the desire of my heart in 1970 when my father-in-law presented me a Dake's Annotated Reference Bible when I got engaged to Lilian. It was a 1965 edition and the price was Rs. 161/- It took Finis Jennings Dake (1902-1987) about 100,000 hours during a span of 43 years to produce this Study Bible. Today I own dozens of Study Bibles. I handle them with reverence because as a Bible teacher I can understand what it would take for the authors of Study Bibles to complete such works. It's good to buy Study Bibles but do we set aside time to study them? For most of us Sunday is the only holiday. If you attend more than one worship service or meeting on Sundays, you will hardly be left with any time for the family and personal study. Sunday afternoons after a siesta may be set aside for rigorous study of the Scriptures through study aids. Try and see!

There are three steps in Bible study. (1) Observation: What does this passage say? (2) Interpretation: What does this passage mean? (3) Application: How does this passage apply to me? In the step of observation, we discover the message; in interpretation, we digest the message; and in application, we demonstrate the message. Because of impatience, we jump from observation to application, skipping the essential step of interpretation. Interpretation is time-consuming. If we hurry through this middle step, we usually end up in falsehood and distortion of truth. We are admonished to "rightly divide the Word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15b). This involves patience and hard work (v 15a). You may not be able to look into study aids everytime you read the Bible. But you must atleast take advantage of the cross references given in the central column or at the foot of verses. What's the use of possessing a Reference Bible if you don't turn to the references? Cross references which connect the Old and the New Testaments are of inestimable value. Your heart will revel in finding that the New Testament had been concealed in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New. Time will fly off in this exultation!

### Which Translation?

New versions of the Bible are a stupendous asset to people like us who have not studied Hebrew and Greek. No one translation is absolutely perfect or totally faulty. Each has its strengths and defects. Don't be dominated by sentimentality and get closed to other versions. Take time to read your daily portions in one or two other versions. You will be thrilled at the fresh insights and understanding you receive! Let the King James Version addicts who are averse to other translations remember that the KJV is not the first

version of the English Bible but a revision of dozen versions. Several Indian vernacular editions of the Bible are also being updated and they are welcome.

Hard to understand

The Bible is both "milk" and "meat." For beginners it is milk, and for the grown-ups and the mature it is meat (Heb 5:12-14). Chewing of meat takes longer time than drinking milk. As we grow in our Christian life, we must allot more and more time for Bible meditation. We will come across several Bible difficulties and tough questions. Bible Dictionaries explain the cultural background against which each book of the Bible was written. I read through these Dictionaries from beginning to end at the rate of one or two pages per day. The entries in Dictionaries are of course in alphabetical order, but oftentimes I find myself reading just exactly what is necessary for the Bible passage I am meditating at that time! The Holy Spirit is simply anxious to help sincere seekers. Jesus said, "Seek, and you will find" (Mt 7:7). I understand it as, "Seek until you find!"

Just 71 hours!

Satan uses our Biblical illiteracy to his advantage. We are tossed to and fro by every wind of false doctrine (Eph 4:14). Though we possess the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, we don't know how to wield it against evil powers (Eph 6:17). On the face of trials and tribulations we lose our song and joy (Psa 119:92). Reading and rereading of the Scriptures is the surest way to keep our faith in tact and overcome temptations (Rom 10:17; Psa 119:9,11). "It is written" becomes effective only when "It is read!" To go for picnics and attend spiritual meetings we apply for leave. Why not go on leave for three or four days every year exclusively for reading through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation? The entire Old and New Testaments can be read aloud slowly and with expressions in less than 71 hours! The Church itself can organize such Bible Reading Retreats for its members in gardens, hills and quiet camp centres. I challenge that the Church then will not be what it is now! This would accomplish in the lives of Christians what million dollar seminars and conferences have failed to do!

Three day fasting prayers have become common. We need them and we can never pray too much. However, praying without an equal dose of Biblical intake is the shortcut to deception. Many false doctrines and questionable practices have had their birth during seasons of fasting where sufficient time was not spent for Bible reading and meditation. The spirit world is filled with deceptions (1 Tim 4:1; Eph 6:12). That's why the Bible clearly teaches that hearing from God should precede speaking to Him (Eccl 5:1,2). Audiotapes of the entire Bible in English and also vernaculars are available. We can play them and read along. This way our reading style also will be refined.

Fire in the Pulpit!

Thank God for Bible software that's flooding the market. But remember, it cannot become a substitute for your personal meditation of the Book on your knees. The extensiveness of Biblical knowledge one can acquire through these software is unimaginable. However, breadth is not the same as depth. The software can save us time in gathering facts but they cannot shorten the time we need to spend with God's Word to understand His mind. Knowledge is not the same as life. The Tree of Knowledge is not the Tree of Life. This explains why our pulpits are still void of message inspite of the tremendous access preachers have to computerised Biblical information. The laptop should not become lecterntop. When there's no message to inspire people we resort to theatrical performances and sensational practices to impress the audience. Revivalist Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994) lamented, "Too many dead preachers are preaching too many

dead sermons to too many dead congregations!" The only way to get back life in the pulpit is to strip pastors and preachers off all administrative and financial management responsibilities and shut them inside closets with their Bibles until they hear from God! (Acts 6:3,4). Then will the long-awaited revival come!

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