

Title: "Will You Take the Bible Reading Challenge?"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 12/13/2009

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## **Introduction**

Today I'm going to depart from our current series in the book of Colossians to bring you a special message, and a personal challenge.

Did you know that today, only 15% of the people who identify themselves as Bible-believing Christians regularly read the Bible? Did you know that 35% of the people who identify themselves as Bible-believing Christians, never read the Bible at all? And, did you know that the other 50% of the people who identify themselves as Bible-believing Christians only read God's Word once in a while?

Where do you stand? Are you one of the 15% who read the Bible regularly? Are you among the 50% who only read it now and then? Or are you among the 35% who never read the Bible at all? If it is your personal practice to read the Bible through, to read it systematically, let me commend you for what you are doing, because you are among a small minority of Christians today.

I could tell you many, many reasons why you should read the Bible. But today I want to focus on telling you why you should read the Bible *systematically*. My purpose in doing this today is to give you a personal challenge: a *Bible Reading Challenge*. I'm praying that you will make a commitment to read the entire Bible all the way through in the coming year.

## **The Age of Biblical Illiteracy**

The statistics I just gave you confirm what one religious magazine said about the position of the Bible, even among Evangelicals today: It has become "The Greatest

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Story Never Read." There's far too little Bible reading and Bible knowledge today, even among people who claim to be Bible-believing Christians.

But there's also another Bible-reading problem among Christians today. If you do read the Bible, it's easy to fall into a pattern. It's easy to fall into a spiritual rut. And you fall into that spiritual rut by just reading your favorite books or your favorite passages, over and over again. I've known some people who read nothing but the New Testament. I've know other people who don't read anything but the four Gospels. I remember encountering one long-time Christian who said she never read anything much except the Gospel of John. Some folks read little else but the Psalms and Proverbs. And I've actually known men who were respected as experts on the Bible, who admittedly privately that they had never read the entire Bible even once!

Many people have bought into an idea that developed through Dispensationalism, which says that different parts of God's Word are written to different people in different dispensations. For many people who hear this sort of teaching, it logically follows that you only need to read the parts of the Bible that these teachers say are written "to" you. For this reason, today many people concentrate just on Paul's epistles and on Bible prophecy.

Now reading only the parts of God's Word that we choose to read may be comfortable or convenient, or it may conform to a certain man-made matrix laid over Scripture, but it's not what God wants.

Both of these problems — neglecting God's Word and cherry-picking God's Word — both of them lead Christians into a lot of pitfalls. Not reading the whole Word of

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God produces Christians who are weak and shallow. It produces Christian parents who are not able to instruct their children in the true faith. It produces Christians who are overdeveloped in some areas of truth, but underdeveloped in others. And, failing to read all of God's Word produces Christian soldiers – and every believer is a conscript soldier in the battle against Satan and his forces – Christian soldiers who stand in the battle without their spiritual armor, and without their one offensive weapon, the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

### **"All" Really Means All**

Dear friend, the Bible itself is very clear about this: It says that *you need the whole Bible*. You need to read it all. In those familiar words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul declares, "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" Complete and thorough equipping of the Christian involves complete and thorough exposure to God's Word.

All Scripture is inspired, and all of it — not just the parts we may pick and choose — is profitable. It's profitable for four things. It's profitable for *doctrine*, teaching us the truth by which we are saved, and which is to govern every area of our thinking and living. It's profitable for *reproof*, putting the finger on the places in our living and thinking where we've gotten off the path of sound doctrine. It's profitable for *correction*, bringing us back onto the right path when we've strayed from it. It's profitable for *instruction in righteousness*, keeping us on the path of sound doctrine.

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The book of James puts it this way, in chapter one beginning at verse twenty-two: "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

Immediately after his declaration about all Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul exhorts Timothy, at the beginning of chapter four, "Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season!" The force of the original, in context, is this: "Be ready [to preach all Scripture] when it is welcome in the ears of your hearers, and also when it is not welcome." If that is what God wants from the preacher, He certainly wants us to follow the same principle in our Bible reading. We need to be ready to "hear" from God's Word not just the parts we want to hear, but also all of the rest, because all of it is profitable.

### **The Whole Picture**

You need to read the whole Bible because a Christian needs to understand the whole picture of God's eternal plan for all things, and your place in it. You also need to understand that there are no contradictions or paradoxes in the Bible. You can't truly understand that the Bible is one Book, God speaking with one consistent voice, unless you read the whole Book. Let me give you just a few examples.

Every major Bible doctrine has its beginnings in the Book of Beginnings, in Genesis. The doctrine of God, and the doctrine of the Trinity, begin right at the

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beginning of Genesis. The doctrines of origins, man, Satan, sin, Christ, and salvation all begin in Genesis. The doctrines of marriage, the family, stewardship, justification by faith, the origin of languages, angels, God's moral law, the abomination of homosexuality, Israel, the divine covenants, and eschatology (the doctrine of last things), all begin in Genesis.

The first five books of the Bible tell us the beginnings of the history of Israel and God's dealings with them. Understanding that history will help you better understand the rest of the Old Testament. Why did the Psalmist say he loved the law of God? Why did God become angry with Israel and Judah and evict them from the Promised Land? What happened when God permitted them to return? What were the promises regarding a future Messiah? You need to know these things.

Better understanding the Old Testament will vastly improve your grasp of the New Testament. What are all the prophecies of Messiah that were fulfilled in the first coming of Christ? What is the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah and elsewhere, and when did it actually begin? Why did Paul make a distinction between someone who is a Jew only outwardly, and someone who is a Jew inwardly? Why did Paul make such strong point of connecting all of fallen human beings with Adam, and why did he make such a strong point of connecting all who are in Christ with Abraham? Who are all those people in the roll call of faith in Hebrews chapter eleven, and what happened in their lives? What is the writer to the Hebrews talking about as he explains all the Old Testament types and figures of Christ? How do Old Testament prophecies shed light on the book of Revelation? You can't fully understand these things, unless you read the whole Bible.

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The first five books of the Old Testament are quoted nearly 300 times in the New. All told, there are over 4,000 references to the Old Testament in the New Testament. Twenty of the twenty-six books of the New Testament directly quote the Old. Thirty of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are directly quoted in the New, and all thirty-nine are referred to. You can't get the whole picture of what God has done, is doing, and is going to do, and your place in it, unless you read the entire Word of God.

### **You Can Never Outgrow God's Word**

But you know, some Christians have a "been there, done that" kind of an attitude toward reading the Bible. I've been there, I've done that, I don't need to do it again. Some people think they've outgrown the Bible, and they turn to other books, and other pursuits, that they think are more suited to their level of spiritual and intellectual attainment.

But the fact is, as soon as you stop reading the Word of God, you begin to forget who God is, and you begin to forget who you are in God's sight. You create a spiritual vacuum in your life, and Satan is only too ready to fill that void with un-spiritual thoughts.

This fact was illustrated in the story that is told of a small advance Marine patrol that landed on a Pacific island during World War Two. When the patrol came to a village, a man who turned out to be the native pastor who spoke English came out to meet them. He proudly showed them his Bible, which had been translated into the local language by American missionaries before the war. But one of the soldiers scoffed at it, and said, "Oh, in America we've outgrown that sort of thing." But the

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native pastor said, "You know, it's good for you that we haven't outgrown the Bible. You see, we were once cannibals. But God changed us. If it weren't for this Book, if it weren't for the Bible, you men would have been our next meal!"

Psalm 119 records the inspired thoughts of a man who read God's Word over, and over, and over again. Verses 15 and 16 sum up his resolve. He says to the Lord, "I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget your Word." The force of the Hebrew is that he would meditate, contemplate, and delight in the Scriptures continually, without ceasing, and the result would be that he would never forget God's Word. We need continual, repeated, thoughtful, systematic exposure to the truth, so that the truth will stay with us and in us.

### **No Spiritual Elites**

In a future message in a few weeks, we're going to consider Colossians, chapter one, verse 28. There the Apostle Paul says this: We preach Jesus Christ, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Warning every man – teaching every man – that we may present every man. Every man needs to be warned. Every Christian needs to be taught. And every Christian needs to be presented perfect, or complete, or mature. There are no spiritual elites in the church of Jesus Christ.

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## **Every Man Needs to Be Warned**

Every man needs to be warned. "Him we preach" – "We preach Christ" Paul says in verse 28, and the word "preach" here means, "We tell about Christ everywhere, and we tell about Him with conviction." And it's something we do continually, we never stop.

How do we to do it? First of all, Paul says, by "warning every man." We point every man to the only way of salvation. And we warn every man of the consequences of unbelief. And in the verses preceding verse 28, Paul sets the stage for this. He talks about the nature of the warning that the church is to proclaim through the preaching of the Word.

Every man needs to be warned about the power of darkness. Every man needs to be warned about his alienation from God, warned that he is actually the enemy of God, apart from faith in Christ. Every man needs to be warned about his need for redemption. Every man needs to be warned about his need for reconciliation. Every man needs to be warned that he is hopeless and damned. Every man needs to understand how terrible it is to be lost. Every man needs to be shown how glorious it is to be saved. And every man needs to be told that the only One who can save him from Hell is God Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every *Christian* needs to be warned as well. We see this in verse 23. Paul says, "If indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which you have heard."



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This is a warning to us as believers. And in the next chapter, Colossians chapter two, Paul says the same thing a little more forcefully. He says, Beware lest anyone cheat you by putting things into your mind that are not in agreement with Christ and His Word. Don't let anyone rob you of the riches that you have in Christ. The unbeliever needs to be warned about his lost condition. And the believer needs to be warned about being robbed of our riches in Christ. Every man needs to be warned, and the Word of God does that.

### **Every Christian Needs to Be Taught**

And that brings us to the second point of chapter one, verse 28. "Teaching every man." Every Christian needs to be taught. Every Christian needs to be built up in Christ.

And, Paul adds this: "Teaching every man in all wisdom." In all wisdom. The force of the phrase in the original is like this: We are in the business of imparting specialized wisdom. Wisdom that the world does not have. Wisdom that the unbelieving world knows nothing about.

Wisdom about what? We have the answer at the end of verse 27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Every Christian needs to be taught. Taught about what? About "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Continually taught. Life-long learning. It can never stop.

Every Christian needs to be taught "in all wisdom." Each and every aspect of the wisdom found in the Word. The whole Book. You need the whole picture, the whole panorama. That is why every Christian should be reading the Bible through, on a

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regular basis. If you devote just 20 minutes a day, you can read the whole Bible in a year. The important thing is to have that wide, panoramic view of the Word of God, to see Christ revealed in the pages of the Bible from beginning to end. Every Christian needs to be taught from the Word of God.

Every man needs to be warned. Every Christian needs to be taught. And, lastly, Paul says, every Christian needs to be made complete.

### **Every Christian Needs to Become Mature**

“Him we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” The force of the phrase is to bring every Christian to the point of being fully grown up, fully mature. That’s what the word “perfect” means there. We start out the Christian life as “babes in Christ,” the Bible tells us. But we are not supposed to stay at the baby stage.

The Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth because they were acting like babies in Christ. They had abandoned the authority of the Word of God. They had gone off after the worldly wisdom and humanistic philosophies that abounded in Corinth in those days. They had gone off into preacher worship, and all kinds of disorder in the church. And the people in the church at Corinth thought they were sophisticated – so sophisticated, in fact, that they were tolerating open immorality among the members of the church.

But the Apostle Paul takes the Corinthian church to task in the strongest possible terms. He says to them, So you think you’ve really arrived. So you think you’ve

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become the spiritual elite. Well, the fact is, you haven't matured. You've regressed. I can't even write to you as spiritually mature people, because you're acting like babies. You've got to grow up. And the way you're going to grow up is to get back under the authority of the Word of God.

And point by point, he addresses all of their problems and shortcomings, and he keeps on pointing the Corinthians back to the authority of the Word of God, and back to the authority of Christ as the Head of the church. He says to them, in the last chapter of that letter, "Do not be children in understanding...but in understanding be mature." And the word "mature" in First Corinthians is the same root word we have here in Colossians 1:28, translated "perfect."

Every Christian needs to be made perfect. Every Christian needs to grow up and become mature in his understanding of Christ and His Word.

How do we become mature? We have the answer just a few verses further down, in Colossians chapter 2 beginning at verse 6. Paul says, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."

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## **How to Become Mature**

How do we become mature as Christians? First of all, verse 6, "walk in Him" – literally, conduct your life in Him. Be like Christ. Behave as He would have you behave. You become mature by conducting yourself according to the pattern that you find in the Word of God.

Secondly, Paul says, be rooted and built up in Christ. Become established in the faith. A healthy tree becomes firmly rooted in the soil. A healthy Christian becomes firmly rooted in Christ. And not only be rooted in Him, Paul says, but be built up in Him. The idea is that of a strong, stable building rising up out of a firm foundation. A strong, stable Christian rises up out of the firm foundation of the Word of God.

And the Christian who is rooted and built up in Christ becomes firmly established, as we read in Colossians one verse seven. The idea is that the inner strength of the believer increases as we become firmly rooted in Christ, and in the Word, and as the edifice of our Christian life rises out of that firm foundation.

And verse 7 says that this rootedness, this building up, this increase of inner strength, comes from being taught. All Christians need to be taught, so that all Christians may become grown up and mature in Christ. We become mature by continually being in God's Word.

This thought isn't new with me, but I'm increasingly conscious of it as the years go by: The Bible is an infinitely vast and deep ocean of truth. There is always more to learn, more to apply to life. If you spend an entire lifetime reading it and studying its

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riches, as you leave this world and enter the glorious presence of Christ, I believe you will realize something that is also glorious — that in all those years of studying the Bible's ocean depths, you only got into it up to the soles of your feet. You cannot outgrow the Bible.

### **Will You Take Up the Bible Reading Challenge?**

So let me repeat the *Bible Reading Challenge*: Will you, by God's gracious enabling, make a commitment to read the entire Bible in the coming year, and stick with it? It is our prayer that you will.

And we'd like to help you with that commitment. Contact us and we'll mail you a free Bible reading schedule that will take you through the entire Word of God in a year, in about twenty minutes a day. Now this schedule takes you through the Old Testament and the New Testament simultaneously. And you'll find that many times the Old and New Testament readings on a given day will have a direct connection! You can start the schedule on January 1st, or on any day of the year. The important thing is to begin!

So I hope you'll take up the *Bible Reading Challenge*. Please contact us today, and we'll mail you your free Bible reading schedule. And if you don't have a Bible, we'd be happy to send one to you, without cost or obligation. You can reach us in any of three ways – by phone, by e-mail, or by postal mail.

You can call us toll-free right now, from anywhere in the United States, at 888-804-9655. So why not pick up the phone right now? Or, you can send us an e-mail by

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addressing it to [radio@teachingtheword.org](mailto:radio@teachingtheword.org). Or if you prefer, you can write to us by regular mail. Our mailing address is TeachingTheWord Ministries, Box 2533, Westminster, Maryland 21158 USA.

On our next program, we're going to resume our study of the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the book of Colossians, at chapter one, verse eighteen. So we hope you'll join us again at this same time next week.

Thanks for listening to The Scripture-Driven Church broadcast today, thanks for praying for the broadcast, and we thank those of you who financially support this program to keep it on the air on this station. Until next week at this same time, may God richly bless your personal study of His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word.

#### **About the Broadcast**

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The prayers of our listeners and supporters are vital to this ministry. Thank you for praying for us.

The broadcast is underwritten entirely by the gifts of God's people. If the Lord leads you to help us, you can do so in any of these ways:

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