

## **Introduction**

I once heard my wife tell someone that I'm a "**bookworm.**" I'm not sure if she meant it as an insult or compliment but it's true. I am. At the same time though, I'm something far more significant than that. I'm a "**Bibleworm.**" And I hope that by the end of our "**Bibleworm**" month, you will be too if you aren't already.

The word "**bookworm**" denotes any insect (there are no worms) that feeds on books. Insects that do so are rare but there are several that can, like the dead watch beetle and the booklouse. A literal bookworm, therefore, is an insect that consumes books. That was the word's original usage but over time, it evolved into a metaphorical term. It now describes a person who consumes books figuratively as insects do literally. He or she has a passion, an enthusiasm, for books.

The word "**Bibleworm**" is a sort of parody or takeoff of the word "**bookworm.**" Generally speaking, it describes a person who has passion, enthusiasm, for the Bible and eagerly consumes it as a result.

Thankfully, we have a model to emulate or follow in that regard. That model is Ezra. This great man of God was a Bibleworm and the text we read, Ezra 7:8-10, reveals particularly what made him that.

## **The Text**

In 587 BC, the Babylonians conquered the Jewish people and exiled all but the poorest of them into foreign lands. In 537 BC, the Persian King, Cyrus, after conquering the Babylonians, issued a decree allowing any exiled Jews who wanted to return to their homeland. Tens of thousands then did just that. At first, the returned Jews were faithful to God but by 458 BC, 79 years later, their faithfulness had waned. They had mingled with the Gentile peoples the Babylonians had settled in Judah, intermarried with them, and adopted some of their pagan ways.

That's when Ezra came on the scene. Ezra was a scholar-priest who lived in Babylon. He is one of my heroes of the faith. If I had had a

third son, in fact, I would have named him Ezra. Anyway, in 458 BC, he left Babylon and went to Jerusalem in order to reform the Jewish people. Verses 8-9 record that he had a safe and speedy trip and explain why. The good hand of God was upon Him. God expedited his trip in other words. Verse 10 then reveals his basic strategy for reforming the Jews.

The centerpiece of that strategy was what verse 10 calls the **"law."** The **"law"** refers to the written word of God that Ezra and the Jews had - the Old Testament books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Since then, God has added 61 books to His written word, 34 more in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. Those 66 books together comprise what we call the Bible.

Now, according to verse 10, Ezra's strategy for reforming the Jews featured the Bible. He set his heart or resolved to do three things with regard to it. Those three things made him a Bibleworm, and you know what, they make us one as well. So, let's examine each of the three.

### **Study the Bible**

The first thing that Ezra did and that we should do is **"study"** the Bible. Study requires two things.

One is time. The Barna Research Group conducted a survey to find out how much time professing Christians spend reading the Bible. 18% read it every day of the week. Another 18% read it between three and six days a week. 37% read it one or two days a week. And finally, 27% don't read it at all. Those are telling statistics but this one is as much so. The survey found that those who read it average only 9 minutes a day doing so. That's 1 hour and 3 minutes a week for those who read it every day and 18 minutes a week for those who read it two days.

It's safe to say Ezra devoted more than 18 minutes a week to his Bible and so should we. I can't tell you though how much more. You'll have to determine that yourself by doing two things. First, learn the nature of the Bible and the value of knowing it, which we'll explain this month. Second, then prayerfully and thoughtfully calculate how much of

your time that its nature and value deserve. I would share this guideline in that regard. If we're too busy to give it the time its nature and value deserve, then we're busier than God wants us to be. If we don't *have* the time to study it as we should, we need to *take* it.

Studying the Bible requires a second thing – concentration. To concentrate means to center our minds on it – to focus our attention on the content of the verse or text before us. That definition clearly distinguishes concentrating from just reading.

For many Christians, consuming the Bible is like taking medicine. They're told it's good for them and so choke it down in regular doses. That's what I used to do. In college, for instance, I got up at 6:00 every morning and read at least three chapters - as fast as I could. I was just trying to get it over with so I wouldn't feel guilty the rest of the day.

I realize now that approaching the Bible that way isn't very helpful, not nearly as helpful at least as it could and should be. It will transform our persons and lives, but only if we concentrate on it. Doing that is difficult I know, because we live in a culture that values distraction not concentration. But we must discipline ourselves and persevere in concentrating. It will eventually become our habit if we do.

The basic methodology for concentrating is asking and answering questions about the verse before us – like these. What are the key words in it? What do they mean? What are the key statements made and questions asked in it? What do they mean? How do the key statements or questions relate to the verses before and after them, if they do? What are their practical implications generally and, more personally, to us?

Let me illustrate by concentrating on 1 John 4:18. Question - What are the key words? They are "**fear**" and "**love.**" Question - What do they mean? The word "**punishment**" in the verse helps us define fear. It's the anticipation of being harmed by someone. The Greek word for love, "**agape,**" defines it. It's desiring and pursuing someone's well-being and joy. Question – What are the key statements? They are "**There is no fear in love**" and "**Love casts out fear.**" Question –

What do they mean? It's the same thing. People don't fear being harmed by those who truly love them. Question – How do those statements relate to the verses before them. Those verses are about God's love for those who abide in Him. Verse 8, therefore, teaches that God always benefits and never harms them. Question – What are the practical implications of this verse? The primarily intended one is that I abide in God and can count on him always benefiting and never harming me.

Now, here's what I want you to see. I read that verse scores of time in my life and it barely affected me. But when I concentrated on it, it radicalized my life – in two ways. One of those is that it made me far more at ease in my relationship with God than I was before.

So, that's the first thing that Ezra did and that we need to do to become Bibleworms. Study the Bible. Give it the time and concentration its nature and value deserve.

## **Practice the Bible**

Verse 10 reveals a second thing. **"Practice"** the Bible.

Please listen carefully to what I'm going to say. Our ultimate aim when it comes to the Bible isn't to know it. We don't study it to become a scholar and impress people with our knowledge of it. That's a trap that some Christians fall into and it's a dreadful thing. It cultivates a host of evils including quarrelsomeness, pettiness, and pride. Knowing the Bible isn't an end. It's the means instead to several ends.

One of those ends is practicing it. Consider the word **"practitioner."** A practitioner is one who practices something, especially a profession, occupation or technique. I once conversed with what is called a **"nurse practitioner."** She told me that she is licensed to do much of what physicians do in diagnosing and treating physical conditions. Well, each and every one of us needs to be a Bible practitioner. We've studied it and believe that literally everything it records or teaches is reality. We then act consistently with that reality.

America's most popular advertising slogan expresses well what

practicing the Bible is all about, **"Just do it!"** That slogan drips with intention. We intend to do everything the Bible says or implies. We then complete our intention by training and trying the best we can to do it.

Let's go back to 1 John 4:18. I identified one of its implications. God's love casts out fear if we abide in Him. But there's another logical implication that the Holy Spirit revealed to me as I studied it. It's that I need to cast out fear in my relationships with others, beginning with my wife. That's what verse 8 implies and so I'm practicing it. I've trained and am trying the best I can never to say or do anything that harms anyone. That's the second way this verse radicalized my life.

I received a call at the church from a telemarketer trying to sell us a mailing list. She was aggressive and persistent to the point of being overbearing. But I **"just did it."** I tried to live out 1 John 4:18 with her. I didn't inflict emotional harm on her either by content of speech or tone of voice. I spoke to her kindly and respectfully instead.

That illustrates the second thing that being a Bibleworm requires of us. Practice the Bible. Train and try to do all that it says and implies.

### **Teach the Bible**

There's a third it requires. The words **"statutes"** and **"ordinances"** in verse 10 are synonyms of each other and of the word **"law."** Ezra taught them and so must we. We must teach the Bible.

Certainly, teaching speaks to those of us who are preachers and teachers in the church as Ezra was in Judah. But it speaks to those of us who aren't as well. Whether we like it or not, the associations we have with people often thrust us into the role of teacher, counselor, or advisor. Sometimes, people ask us for our knowledge or advice. And sometimes, they don't, but we need to give it anyway.

One Sunday morning, someone told me that I had a nail in my tire. He noticed it on his way in to church. He knew something that I needed to know but didn't. That in turn gave him the authority and even responsibility to tell me what he knew and so he did. It would have been

irresponsible of him in fact, even unloving, if he hadn't.

That illustrates something profound about knowledge. Dallas Willard articulates what that something is in his book *Knowing Christ Today*: **"Knowledge . . . confers on its possessor an authority or right – even a responsibility – to act, to direct action, to establish and supervise policy, and to teach."** He's absolutely right. Knowledge confers on its possessor the authority, right, and even responsibility to teach or share it, which implies that we're sometimes irresponsible, even unloving, if we don't.

That's especially so when it comes to the Bible. We've studied it and, as a result, know the most vital and life altering of all realities and truths. And with that knowledge comes the responsibility to teach or share it. We're sometimes irresponsible, even unloving, if we don't.

A Christian was conversing with his son's non-Christian father-in-law who mentioned something a Christian governor had said. God doesn't hear the prayers of non-Christians. He then remarked in that regard, **"We're all children of God, Christian or not."** To which the Christian kindly replied, quoting Ephesians 2:3, **"No, we are not. Non-Christians are 'children of wrath' instead."** He went on to explain what the Bible means by that and was right in doing so. He had both the authority and responsibility to teach that man the truth about his condition and state.

## **Conclusion**

Those then are the three things Ezra did and that we need to do. Study, practice, and teach the Bible. Those three things are inseparably bound up with one another. To omit any of the three is to fall into dysfunction and error. What we *teach* we must first *live*, and what we *live* we must first make sure of by *study*. *Study* saves our *conduct* from uncertainty and our *teaching* from shallowness. *Conduct* saves our *study* from unreality and our *teaching* from insincerity. My point is that we need to commit ourselves to doing each of the three. We need to study, practice, and teach the Bible. Like Ezra was, we're Bibleworms if we do.