

Warning: Reading This Column Could Change Your Life!
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When I was 18, a friend asked me what I had been reading lately. I replied, "I don't read anything that isn't required to pass a course." He looked me in the eye and shot back, "If you don't read, you won't grow spiritually!"

Wham! His words hit me right between the eyes. I asked him for a recommendation, got started and was hooked. In the 34 years since then, *nothing* has impacted my spiritual life more than the books I have read.

When the apostle Paul was languishing in prison, he wrote poignantly to Timothy, "When you come bring ... the books, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). The British preacher, Charles Spurgeon observed, "Even an apostle must read. He is inspired, yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for 30 years, yet he wants books! He has seen the Lord, yet he wants books! He has had a wider experience than most men, yet he wants books! ... He has written the major part of the New Testament, yet he wants books!" I would add, "He is facing imminent execution, yet he wants books!"

Perhaps you would like to read more, but you wonder where to start. Start with the Bible, especially the New Testament. Read it regularly and repeatedly as the primary source for coming to know God and how He wants you to live. To read through the whole Bible in a year will take 20 to 30 minutes per day, depending on how fast you read. Reading the Bible should take precedence over all other reading.

Then, I recommend reading some of the great works from the past. C. S. Lewis told his readers that if they must read only the new or the old (remember, Lewis was "the new"!), he would advise them to read the old (*God in the Dock*, p. 201). Without a doubt, the greatest book that I have ever read, except the Bible, is John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Although it is over 1,600 pages, I have read it through twice, plus reading some sections numerous times. If reading the whole thing is too daunting, there is a modern English 125-page version titled *Biblical Christianity* to whet your appetite. Or, try *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*, which is a synopsis of a few chapters from the *Institutes* on self-denial. In the same vein of reading the classics, if you find it hard to wade through the Old English, there are a number of Puritan classics in modern English, condensed form.

The second area where I have found the most help is reading biographies of great Christians from the past. Don't bother with the biographies of some modern Christian athlete or movie star. Read the lives of men like Calvin, Martin Luther, George Whitefield, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Muller, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Francis Schaeffer. Read missionary biographies of men like William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, and Jim Elliot. I always come away with some helpful insights, some inspiring challenge, or a better understanding of myself through reading such books.

Here are a few more tips. First, improve your reading skills. Many people don't read because they don't read *well*. Get a book on how to read better and faster or take a course to improve your skills. It's the old "sharpen your axe" principle.

Then, set some attainable goals. It's better to read a few good books than to read many poor ones. I vary my reading between devotional, biographical, and theological. While I find some fiction enjoyable (I like the humor of P. G. Wodehouse and Tom Bodett), generally I haven't found much spiritual help through fiction. Read with a purpose. If a book isn't meeting the purpose, set it aside and start another. You don't have time to waste reading a useless book. I mark my books and write comments in the margins or at the end so that I can come back to them later. I'm always asking others, "What are the best books you've ever read?"

One of my seminary professors said, "Two things will have the greatest impact on where you will be at spiritually ten years from now: The books you read and your friends. Choose them carefully!" Through reading, I have made friends with some of the greatest Christians of all time. It has changed my life. Summer is a good time to grab a good book and watch God change your life!