

Read, Mark, Learn and Inwardly Digest – a Bible study guide

Background: Thomas Cranmer

Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) was a leader of the English Reformation, and Archbishop of Canterbury during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and – for a short time – Mary I (often known as “Bloody Mary” for her tendency to kill as heretics those who had led the Church of England away from her beloved Roman Catholic faith, including the execution of Cranmer).

One of Cranmer’s greatest contributions to the church has been the *Book of Common Prayer*. He is not solely responsible for it. Others contributed, and he also used a great deal of material that was borrowed from previous prayer books. But he is largely credited with responsibility for producing it and shaping it, and he certainly wrote much of it.

Read, mark, learn, inwardly digest

Some of Cranmer’s most beloved words come in the form of the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, which reads:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, the language may be a little dated and obscure to the modern reader. But there are some great words there that capture what we should do when we read the Scriptures. We should “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.”

I suggest that these words provide an excellent model for our reading of Scripture, either individually and personally or in a group discussion.

Read

First, we should *read* the Scriptures.

This is our starting point. Our aim is not to study my opinion or yours, or to reflect on this or that current issue or debate. It is to let God’s word shape our lives.

There are plenty of Bible verses that teach us the importance of reading God’s word. Psalm 119:105 says: *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Jesus in Matthew 4:4 cited Deuteronomy 8:3: *“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* And in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul tells us: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

We need to read God’s word. We need to read it on its own terms. We need to let it set the agenda. So, begin by reading the Bible.

You may follow a set pattern of readings, as set forth in the lectionary. You may work through the Bible book-by-book, reading a chapter at a time. You may follow the preaching plan of your church, reading the passages that are being preached on either beforehand or afterwards.

However you do it, read the Bible. Read whole passages, not just random verses taken out of context.

Mark

As you read it, *mark* it. That is, take note of what it says.

Ask yourself: “What is this saying?” What are the key points being made in this passage? There may be one simple point being made, there may be several. Write them down, or discuss them.

Also, note (or if you’re in a group, point out and discuss) the things that particularly strike you. Which words or phrases or ideas, did you find particularly impressive, or intriguing, or challenging?

You may actually want to mark your Bible, by underlining or circling key words or phrases. If you don’t want to mark your actual Bible, try printing out the passage so that you can do this on a sheet of paper. [A good place to access the Bible for printing is at <https://www.biblegateway.com/>].

You should also mark, or note, the things you don’t understand. That may be words you don’t know the meaning of, or sentences that you can’t make sense of. If you’re in a group, discuss what these things are for each of you. The things that puzzle one person might be quite different to the things that another person struggles with.

Learn

This brings us to the next stage, *learning*.

Begin by finding answers or explanations for the things that you noted in the previous stage as puzzling. There may be clues in the context, what the writer was talking about just before this, or what happens after this. There may be people in your group who know the answers, having studied this before. There may be footnotes in your Bible that offer explanations. Or you may need to look up a commentary. If you don’t have a commentary, there are lots of aids online these days. [Try places like <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/>].

It is important that your Bible study is more than just a pooling of ignorance, a mutual sharing of incomprehension and confusion. There is usually an answer or an explanation to be found – search it out. In the process, you will undoubtedly learn something.

Also, in reflecting on the passage and discussing it, try to identify the things you have learned – or need to learn – from the passage. Are there instructions on what to do (or not do)? Are there examples being set that we should follow (or not follow)? Are there things about God, or about ourselves, that we should learn from this?

Inwardly digest

Finally, we need to *inwardly digest* what we have read.

That is, we need to take what we have learned and apply it to our lives.

Ask yourself: “What do I need to stop doing, or start doing, as a result of reading this? What good habits are being reinforced here, or what bad habits challenged?”

This is a very personal stage of the process. There are ideas we can discuss and share with each other. But each of us needs to go away privately and think about – and pray about – how this applies to my life.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says: *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.* And in the next chapter (2

Corinthians 4:16), he goes on to say: *Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.* Our spiritual life is an ongoing process of growing and changing, of being renewed and transformed daily.

This means that your study of this passage doesn't finish when your meeting or allocated reading time finishes – it continues in the hours and days that follow, as you work out how to put this into practice, and let it change and guide you.

Checklist

To check you've followed the process through and not gotten sidelined (it easily happens!), finish by running yourself through a quick checklist:

- * Have I read a passage from the Bible? What passage was it?
- * Have I “marked” it? What did I mark as interesting, or striking, or puzzling?
- * Have I learned something? What did I learn about the passage, about God, or about myself?
- * Am I inwardly digesting it? What do I need to put into practice as a result of reading this?
- * Finally, never forget that Cranmer's words were part of a prayer. That is, the growth that should come from *reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting* God's word will only come with God's help as his Holy Spirit does its work in us. So make sure you *pray!* You might even like to use Cranmer's brilliantly thought-through words in the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent.