

State of the Bible 2020

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For the past ten years, the American Bible Society and the Barna Group have conducted a “State of the Bible” survey. From 2011 to 2019, an average of 13.7% of those surveyed identified themselves as daily Bible readers. In 2020, only 8.5% of those surveyed identified themselves as daily Bible readers. This was the largest single-year drop in daily Bible readers in the history of the survey. This dramatic decline is attributed to the pandemic and people not attending in-person church services. Notice how one researcher summarized the findings:

“This study supports the idea that the church plays a significant role in benefitting people’s wellbeing and Scripture engagement,” said John Farquhar Plake, ABS director of ministry intelligence. “To increase Scripture engagement, we must increase relational connections with one another through the church. The pandemic—and now this survey—have shown that when relational church engagement goes up, so does Scripture engagement, but when it goes down, Scripture engagement drops with it.”

This study is more evidence of the impact the pandemic is having on spiritual life. These declining trends are likely to continue as long as people are not regularly attending in-person assemblies. We should not be surprised that spiritual health is connected to engagement with the local church. This is by God’s design. Christians are parts of the body of Christ, members of one another (1 Cor. 12). Christians cannot grow in the image of Christ without actively participating in the local church. When we disconnect from what God purposed to strengthen us, our faith will weaken. For the sake of a thriving faith and our salvation, we need the Bible.

Why We Need the Bible Now

1. The Bible is God’s word. The Bible is the medium through which the Creator has spoken to us. This fact alone should spark an interest in reading the Bible. Jesus once said, “...What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (John 12:50). Jesus attributed His words to God.

Paul wrote, “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 (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The message of the Bible has come from God for our benefit. Paul describes the word of God as being profitable. Therefore, we must invest in the Bible. We must give our time to reading and learning the Bible. We must humbly submit our will to God’s word.

2. The Bible reaffirms God’s rule in our world. The world is constantly changing. Some of the change is unexpected and turbulent. Our lives can be altered in an instant. The past year has reminded us of how quickly the world can change. When life quakes around us, we anxiously search for stability.

The Bible reminds us that God is in control. David reflected on a calamitous time in his life. Men were seeking his life. His future was as uncertain as ever; yet, he wrote, “The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man” (Psa. 11:4). Many of the Psalms make this reassuring point of God’s rule of the world. Regrettably, some may never know the calm that can be gained from the Psalms for a simple reason: they have never read.

Near the end of His life, Jesus warned about cataclysmic changes coming to Jerusalem. This city would be destroyed. As He finished prophesying Jerusalem’s destruction, Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). When Titus and the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the apostles could find stability in the unchanging words of Jesus.

Based on the findings of this survey, reading the Bible was not the typical reaction of “believers” when the world came unhinged. Just the opposite. The Bible can reaffirm God’s rule in the world when the world appears chaotic. In other words, the Bible can strengthen our faith.

3. The Bible connects us to Jesus. Responding to a group of angry Jews, Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). The Old Testament documented events that pointed to the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The Scriptures were given to bring the people to the Messiah (Gal. 3:24). As well as they knew the Scriptures, they failed to embrace Jesus. Therefore, they would remain disconnected from the True Vine (John 15:1-8).

The only hope of eternal life we have is by obeying the words of Jesus. If we disregard the Bible, we will never learn and embrace His words. Jesus warned, “If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (John 12:47-48).

4. The Bible protects us from sin. David wrote, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psa. 119:9-11).

Reading the Bible is how we keep God’s word fresh in our minds. As we meet surprising challenges and or temptation, the Bible’s message will provide us with safe guidance. In those moments, we must practice what we have read. James wrote, “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (Jas. 1:25).

Conclusion

The pandemic has changed our habits and routines. Our spiritual lives have not been left unaffected. Too many have become disengaged from the activities of spiritual life. The State of the Bible 2020 shows this. However, more than just analyze findings from a survey, we need to consider ourselves. Is Bible reading part of our lives?

Reading the Bible seems such a simple activity; yet, we often struggle to find time to read it. This has been a problem that pre-dates the pandemic. However, we can change the trend. We must.