

CYBERCOLUMN BY Berry D. Simpson: Reading all the way through

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This morning, I read a long hammerfest by the prophet Amos against a collection of evil nations—the Syrians, Philistines, Tyre, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites ... and so forth. I asked myself how this particular prophecy would speak to the rest of my day.

It was several years ago when I first decided I should try reading through the entire Bible in one year. I didn't have a plan or a schedule. I just opened to Genesis and started reading, doing the same the next day, and the next. I stayed on task until Leviticus, where I ground to a halt about halfway through. I tried again a couple more times but never finished. I wondered why it was so hard to read through the entire Bible when I read a lot of books cover-to-cover every year, some of them way longer. Why was the Bible so different? Why was it so much harder?

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A few years later, someone gave me a printed schedule for reading the entire Bible. It had a lot of little boxes, which were great fun to check after

each day's reading. The schedule helped solve the Leviticus problem by mixing passages from the New Testament and the Old Testament and from Psalms every day. It was a good plan, and I followed it for about six months, reading and flipping pages and checking boxes. Then I stopped out of exhaustion. Too much flipping.

I finally put myself in the camp of people who say, "Reading the entire Bible is OK for you, but I don't need to do it." I sat comfortably in that camp for years until my wife, Cyndi, bought a copy of "The Daily Bible" for me. It was a New International Version rearranged into chronological order and divided up into 365 dated readings. I didn't want it at first. I already had a shelf of Bibles, and when you get a new Bible, you can't throw the old ones away. (I think I could lose my church membership if they found out I threw away an old Bible.) So, they sit on my shelf. Forever. And now I had one more to worry about.

But Cyndi was so proud of this Bible I decided to give it a try. I started reading on Jan. 1 and kept reading and kept reading and stayed engaged all the way through Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy and rolled through the summer and fall until I finally reached Revelation 22:21 on Dec. 31. I was so happy with my success I started at the beginning of that same Bible the next morning and read it all the way through again the next year. And now, thanks to Cyndi's gift, I've successfully gone through it many more times, enough times that it has become an essential part of my day.

So I ask myself: What changed? Why was I finally successful? I'm not sure, but I think it had more to do with changes in me than in that particular Bible. Henri Nouwen wrote: "The daily practice of sacred reading, over time, transforms our personal identity, our actions, and our common life of faith." Somewhere down the line, my reasons for reading changed. I started out trying to read the entire Bible just so I could say I did. And so I could find a special verse for each day that would help me at work and play. And

then one morning, I realized I was no longer reading to find good verses or to learn more facts about God, but I was reading because I loved it. I compared it to my life with Cyndi. When we were dating, most of my conversations were designed to learn more about her—more facts and data and history and dreams. But now, after almost 28 years of marriage, we talk more than ever, and very little of it is about facts or information. We talk all the time because that's what people do who love each other. Somewhere, our motives shifted from information to relationship. I think in general, women make that transition much sooner than men—maybe by the second date—and it takes men a lot longer to understand the value of simply talking. But I eventually got there.

And so, my reading of the Bible moved from a system of information-gathering to relationship-building. It's been easier to keep reading ever since. Even on days like this morning. Just as I've learned to anticipate my conversations with Cyndi, even when the topic is something as unromantic as wireless microphones, I also look forward to my conversations with God, even when it's something as uninspiring as judgment against the Moabites.

And just like my lifetime of conversations with Cyndi have changed me—changed my thinking and my dreams and changed my heart—my reading of the Bible has changed me deeply. I'm not the same guy I used to be.

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