

My Reading Strategy

By Nick Roark

Hi Cole,

I've attached a pair of emails I've sent to others in response to this question. You might find something helpful in them.

Without knowing you personally, I wouldn't presume to give you any guidance on a reading plan or goals. I can tell you a bit about my approach. But everyone is wired differently and what works for me might not be the best approach for you. Our individual callings shape and inform our habits of reading.

Please understand that I am assuming that as a disciple of Jesus the Bible takes preeminence in your reading diet. There is only one "must-read" Book, only one Book through which we enjoy and judge all other books. The wisdom of this world is passing away but the word of the Lord remains forever. With that firmly established here's my reading strategy: **I read on a *whim*, for *wisdom* and for *pleasure*.**

By "whim," I mean I read the books that interest me. I am not trying to read through a list of books someone else says I should read. My approach to reading is best summarized in Alan Jacobs' book, ***The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction***.

I read for ***wisdom*** and I read for ***pleasure***. These aren't separate categories for me as they often meld together into one. To help me with the *former*, I have a canon of dead theologians I spend time with each month every year. As far as the *latter*, I read widely through various genres and often reread old favorites, especially the classics.

I read whatever I *want* to read. I have found that my personal interest in a book is often the fuel that helps me finish a book. Life is too short to spend your life *slogging joylessly* through "must-read" books other people have told you about.

I don't have reading goals because they seem to encourage a posture of "*having read*" instead of the liberating enjoyment of "*reading well*."

I don't try to box myself into certain categories. I have two categories: 1) theology/biblical studies and 2) everything else.

I am not a very fast reader so it takes me a while to go through books. I read *slowly* and this helps me retain much of what I read. I use my blog to write up key quotes from the theology that I'm reading and this also helps me slow down and digest what I'm reading.

I am able to read several books at the same time. I don't recommend this practice but it seems to work fine for me.

I do read some books on my trusty Kindle but most of the books I read are the print editions.

At every stage of life my *reading* life has looked a bit different. When I was single, I could read whenever I wanted. Now as a husband and dad of three teenagers, my days look differently and therefore my time for reading has adjusted. I often do much of my theology reading early in the morning after I read my Bible and spend time in prayer. I do most of my fiction and pleasure reading in the evenings after I get the kids to bed. As a pastor, I often am required to read certain books that help me disciple and shepherd my flock.

I am wired in such a way that I need to read like I need to eat and sleep. Reading is as necessary to me as breathing. So it's easy for me to "find time" to read. I find the joy of reading utterly life-giving. Instead of prioritizing my schedule, I schedule my priorities. I make time to read because, like David Copperfield, I read as if for life itself.

I just prayed for you, Cole, that the Lord would continue to grant you wisdom and insight into the knowledge of His will and that you'd continue to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. Happy reading!

Cheers,

Nick

Levi,

I saw your comment on the blog about developing a personal reading plan. I'm not sure what Mike P is referring to exactly but here a few thoughts right off the front burner. I hope this helps but I'm not making any promises.

1. Read the Bible.
2. Repeat step #1.
3. Read *widely* to find out what you like.
4. Read what you like.
5. Read *deeply* once you find out what you like.
6. Read with, to, and for others.
7. Pray for wisdom to do steps #1-6 well.

1. Read the Bible.

There's only one Book that's a must-read book and there's only one Book through which we enjoy and judge all other books. The wisdom of this world is passing away but the word of the Lord remains forever.

Step #1 Recommended Reading:
The Bible / God

2. Repeat step #1.

See above.

Step #2 Recommended Reading:
Think / John Piper

3. Read widely to find out what you like.

Read lots of different kinds of books in order to discover what kinds of books you actually enjoy. This would include everything from literature to poetry, everything from biographies to fiction, everything from William Shakespeare to RC Sproul. You're a literary omnivore and the public library is filled with thousands of free samples. Get to tasting.

Step #3 Recommended Reading:
Wordsmithy / Douglas Wilson

4. Read what you like.

I imagine reading books is sort of like drinking wine. You may find it difficult to explain *why* you enjoy *what* you enjoy. Your tastes will likely change over time. You'll likely encounter vicious snobs along the way. Here's my advice: **Ignore the snobs and just read what you like.** I don't subscribe to the "Great Lists" approach to reading. I read *to read*, not to *have read*. There's a huge difference between the two. (Yeah, so you should probably try to read some of the great books in the Western canon... see Step #3.) I don't abide by those paralyzing reading charts with 17 different categories and monthly quotas. Here's what I do: *If I see or hear of a book that really interests me, I read it.* I read what I like to read. I read on a whim. Life is short and that's just how I roll.

Step #4 Recommended Reading:
The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction / Alan Jacobs

5. Read deeply once you find out what you like.

Once you have an idea of what you like to read, then take the plunge and confine yourself (most of the time) to hanging out with those books and those authors that you enjoy and are most edified by. Books are like friends. We may know lots of people, but we often only have a handful of close friends that we spend the majority of our time with. It should work the same way in our reading.

After reading widely in theology, I narrowed down the field to what I call my canon of theologians. I want to spend some time every month with dead theologians whose writings have withstood the test of time. I'm sure as a seminary student you've seen the benefit of reading old books. I think Lewis is correct when he writes: "It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you

have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones. Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.”¹

I look forward to keeping company with these old friends and having the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through my mind for a little while each month. See the details here:

<http://tollelege.wordpress.com/canon-of-theologians/>.

January: Augustine (354-430)
February: Martin Luther (1483-1546)
March: John Calvin (1509-1564)
April: Richard Sibbes (1577-1635)
May: Thomas Brooks (1608-1680)
June: John Owen (1616-1683)
July: John Bunyan (1628-1688)
August: Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
September: J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)
October: Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)
November: Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)
December: C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

How did I determine my canon? I just noticed the writers that I was most edified by and I put them in chronological order. Pretty simple. When I'm not reading *for others* (see below), I simply read something from my canon. This month I'm reading Sibbes. This step serves me well because I've already decided beforehand what authors I want to read. This means that I have to say "no" to most of the popular books and popular authors that will be published in my lifetime. But of the making of many books there is no end. Choose wisely who you keep literary company with and then enjoy spending the rest of your life getting to know them.

Another aspect of reading "deeply" is the discipline of re-reading. Selecting a personal canon of theologians liberated me to re-read the classic books in my canon. I don't feel the pressure of having to read something new. So, for example, I typically re-read Augustine's *Confessions* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* every year. Re-reading deeply in a few choice dead authors has been vastly more rewarding in my experience than trying to read every new "must-read" book that comes along.

Luther gives some good advice: "A student who does not want his labor wasted must so read and reread some good writer so that the author is changed, as it were, into his flesh and blood. For a great variety of

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Introduction" in St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944/1993), 4-5.

reading confuses and does not teach. It makes the student like a man who dwells everywhere and, therefore, nowhere in particular. Just as we do not daily enjoy the society of every one of our friends but only that of a chosen few, so it should also be in our studying.”²

Step #5 Recommended Reading:

How To Read A Book / Mortimer Adler

6. Read with, to, and for others.

Read books *with* others. I've read a slew of books over the past five months with some dear brothers in my church here in DC. We've discussed, debated, and dialogued about what we've read and this has enriched the entire reading experience. If you come across a wonderful book, buy a second copy, and read it together with a brother in your church over coffee.

Read books *to* others. I've got three kids and I read aloud to them every day, usually during breakfast and at night after bath time. In other words, most of the people that I read aloud to are wearing pajamas. But pajamas aren't required for this step. Just don't rob yourself of the joy of reading aloud to others and being read aloud to. I'm currently reading aloud the Narnia books to my sons. They love it and I love it. Just the other day Elijah rebuked Hudson for acting like "old whiney Eustace" instead of "new heart Eustace." I'm currently listening to an audiobook about WWII when I walk the 15 minutes from my house to the church office. It's superb. (FYI: You can download audiobooks for free from your public library.)

Read books *for* others. In Christian ministry, I often read books for others in the sense that I'm reading certain books that I probably wouldn't normally read on my own. I'm reading said books in order to understand an author or a specific problem that will enable me to serve my neighbor, co-worker, fellow church member or friend. Part of what it means to read *Christianly* is being willing to read in the service of others. We are not our own.

Step #6 Recommended Reading:

Lit! / Tony Reinke

An Experiment in Criticism / C.S. Lewis

7. Pray for wisdom to do steps #1-6 well.

There is a finite number of books that you will read in your lifetime. There are millions of books that you could read at any given moment. Pray for wisdom to know what book to say "yes" to and what books to say "no" to.

Step #7 Recommended Reading:

Psalms 90 / God

Proverbs 2 / God

² *Martin Luther, What Luther Says: An Anthology*, comp. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), entry no. 344, 112.

In terms of keeping up with what I've read, that's where my blog comes in handy. I post quotations that I come across in my personal study that are encouraging and Christ-honoring. I once heard Iain Murray stress the importance of developing a system to keep track one's reading. So the blog was born out of a desire to be a good steward of my studies. After reading a book, I try to type up the "best" quotes and post them on the blog. The majority of the quotes are from my canon of theologians. I abstain from posting personal commentary and application. Both are necessary. Both are important. Both happen in the context of my local church ministry. But both would require more time and energy than I am willing to give to the blog.

Cheers,

--Nick

Hi Chris,

Thank you for your encouraging words about the blog. As far as my strategy for reading here are a couple thoughts. In terms of how I think of the process of reading in general, I've been shaped in different ways by the work of Mortimer Adler, particularly *How To Read A Book*, and by Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*.

- 1. Read the good books.** There are very few books that are actually worth reading. Spend your precious time reading the best of the best. I am a slow reader. I wish I could read faster than I do. But this has forced me to realize that I will only read between 50-70 substantial books in a year. I want those books to be good books.
- 2. Read at a whim.** I read the books and the authors that I enjoy reading. I find it easier to read about a topic that fascinates me. If I'm not intrigued after around 100 pages then I put the book aside and move on to the next one on my list. Discover what you like to read and then read what you like.
- 3. Read to read, not to have read.** The point isn't to check off a book on a reading list. Read for the sake of reading. Read for the sake of enjoying. Read for the sake of learning. Read for the sake of growing as a disciple. Read for the sake of reading, not so that you can say you've read it.
- 4. Re-read the good books.** Repetition is the handmaiden of memory. If you want to grow in your comprehension of a book then re-read it. I find this to be the single most important thing in understanding and comprehending a book. If this idea seems daunting, begin by just rereading a key chapter in a book. If you come across a great book then try to reread that great book on an annual basis.
- 5. Make a reading and recording plan.** Set a goal for what you want to read and make a plan and schedule to meet that goal. I have a series of authors that I try to read through every month and I have

thoroughly enjoyed this plan. I would also stress having a plan to record the key thoughts of what you're reading. That was one of the main goals I had in starting my blog. I try (I'm not the best at this) to type up the key quotes after I complete a book. If you don't have a way of writing down what you are reading, then after a few years it will be as if you have never read.

6. Redeem your reading time. I've heard others say "I just don't have any time to read." We make time for the things that are important to us. We all have the same 24 hours every day. We choose how to spend those hours. So, I choose to spend some time every day reading. I always have a book with me (or my Kindle). If I have 15 minutes in a waiting room, I don't want to be caught there without a book to read. If you can carve out just 45-60 minutes a day (even if that time comes in 15 minutes chunks!), you will be amazed at how that can free you up to make progress in your reading goals.

I hope this helps brother! Happy reading!

I'd love to hear your thoughts about how you approach reading.

--Nick

Hi Eric,

Just saw your comment on the blog.

Check out Mortimer Adler for a general approach to reading, especially his insights on reading *actively* instead of *passively*. I'd also strongly encourage you to check out *The Pleasures of Reading* by Alan Jacobs. I think his approach to reading is basically correct and he says it far more beautifully than I do.

You asked about when I read. I'm a pastor of a church in the DC area and so a bunch of my theological reading during the week revolves around my preparation for public teaching or my various writing projects. For example, I just preached through John's Gospel so recently I was reading lots of great stuff on John.

I'm preaching through the Psalms this summer and then the Book of Job in the Fall. So, much of my exegetical reading involves my study of those books. I'm finishing up a writing project that centers on Biblical Theology so a bunch of my reading in 2016 has been a diet of BT volumes.

Something I'm sure you know, but it's worth reminding yourself is that the only must-read book for the Christian is the Bible. Anything I read after my time in the Word is icing on the cake. The Bible is always to be the lens through which I view and judge all my other reading.

I'm a husband and father of three kiddos so if I'm going to enjoy other times of reading then it usually has to come in brief snatches of time. I am a plodder, not a speed reader. But by God's grace I am able to read slowly through several books at a time without losing the plot-line, so to speak.

I mostly read print books because I enjoy marking them up with pencil, but occasionally I'll read a book on the Kindle or listen to an audiobook.

You asked about my Canon of Theologians. I hang out with a lot of dead people in my literary diet. This reading of old books is wonderfully freeing because I'm not bothered by the tyranny of the present. Most of the books published today and especially the ones pushed by so many Christian marketers will not be read 5 years from now let alone 50 years from now. You're on safer ground by reading authors and books that have withstood the test of time. Don't neglect the reading of old books.

We all have 24 hours in the day. We all make choices about what we want to do and how we want to spend our time. I thoroughly enjoy reading stories. So, I make time for at least 30-45 minutes of "pleasure reading" every day that involves some serious fiction or novel.

I also try to pick one historical figure each year who has exhibited a mastery of English prose. I spend time marinating in their biography and writings and hoping to pick up something from them by literary osmosis. In past years I've focused on folks like William Shakespeare, Winston Churchill, and Abraham Lincoln. This year I've been hanging out with Theodore Roosevelt and it's been awesome.

I cannot stress this enough: ***read what you like to read***. Read what brings you joy and wisdom. Read to read, not to have read.

I'm not sure this is what you were asking about, but I do hope this helps. Happy reading!

Cheers,

Nick

Read Well to Live Well: A Review of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books* by Karen Swallow Prior ([TGC Reviews](#))

By Nick Roark
October 4, 2018

Some of the most powerful words in the English language are, “Tell me a story.” Human beings are storytellers and story-listeners and, as James K. A. Smith [observes](#), “Our hearts traffic in stories” (108). The literature of the world expresses our greatest stories, tales that transcend time and place and convey universal human experiences.

In [On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books](#), Karen Swallow Prior—Liberty University professor and author—argues that reading these great works of literature can cultivate a desire for the good life, a life of virtue and excellence. “Reading literature, more than informing, forms us” (22). Prior shows how this virtue formation happens: “Reading well adds to our life,” she observes, “in the way a friendship adds to our life, altering us forever” (18). Prior speaks from experience—great books altered her life forever. (For more on this see her earlier work, [Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me.](#))

In 12 chapters, Prior elegantly examines how 12 virtues are embodied in the classic works of authors like Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Cormac McCarthy, Mark Twain, Shusaku Endo, Leo Tolstoy, and Flannery O’Connor. Prior highlights the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and courage; the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love; and the heavenly virtues of chastity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility.

Prior begins by grounding the cultivation of virtue in the glory of God: “Human excellence occurs only when we glorify God, which is our true purpose” (23). And because literature can embody both vice and virtue, she aims to help her readers grow in recognizing both, opposing the former and cultivating the latter.

Prior proves an insightful guide to great works of literature. I’ve included a few examples to give a sense of her lucid brevity. In her discussion on temperance and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Prior laments the “suffocating weight” of Jay Gatsby’s excess consumption, and then wisely observes, “Consumption does indeed consume us” (59).

According to Prior, diligence is the “most humble” and “perhaps even the most boring” of the virtues (178). Yet diligence is a necessary ingredient of perseverance. The steady, persistent effort of Christian on his dangerous journey to the Heavenly City embodies this virtue in John Bunyan’s Christian classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

“Even excessive injustice cannot extinguish the light of goodness,” Prior argues in her examination of justice and Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*. “From such a vast and dark ocean of wrong, bright rays shine forth from small towers of fortitude, lighthouses in the dark” (80).

In her exploration of the virtue of hope in Cormac McCarthy's dismal post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, Prior remarks: "Paradoxically, the bleak world of *The Road* is an affirmation, even a celebration, of what is good, all the more marvelous in a world with so little good seemingly left in it" (131).

Prior doesn't just show how these great stories embody virtue (or its lack). She also demonstrates how reading literature well provides readers with the opportunity to practice virtue through habits of mind. "Reading well is, in itself, an act of virtue, or excellence, and it is also a habit that cultivates more virtue in return" (15).

How, then, does one pursue the joyful and demanding goal of reading virtuously?

Reading virtuously begins by reading closely, by understanding the words on the page, by "being faithful to both text and context, interpreting accurately and insightfully" (15). This habit of close reading, or deep reading, actually helps to cultivate virtue, because this kind of reading requires patience, the fuel of attentiveness; it requires prudence, a key for interpretation; and it requires temperance, a necessity in setting aside the time required to read well.

Reading well will almost certainly mean reading more slowly. Literature ought not to be gulped down like fast food but digested slowly with careful consideration. "Just as a fine meal should be savored, so, too, good books are to be luxuriated in, not rushed through" (17).

We live in an age when skim reading seems to be the new normal, and so we're in constant danger of skimming ourselves to death. Certainly some books ought to be skimmed. Even Francis Bacon advised, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention" (73). But if we aren't careful, our ability to do deep reading will become [a constant and losing struggle](#) (5).

Slow reading fosters plodding, pondering, reflecting, ruminating, and lingering. In order to remain actively engaged, Prior encourages reading "with a pen, pencil, or highlighter in hand, marking in the book or taking notes on paper" (17). Aside from the highlighter option, this is sage advice.

This habit of reading literature well doesn't develop overnight. It takes time and practice. "Just as water, over a long period of time, reshapes the land through which it runs, so too we are formed by the habit of reading good books well" (19). But the effort that goes into such a cultivation of habit, Leland Ryken [notes](#), pales in comparison to the manifold rewards of reading these kind of stories well: "Literature helps to humanize us. It expands our range of experiences. It fosters awareness of ourselves and the world. It enlarges our compassion for people. It awakens our imaginations. It expresses our feelings and insights about God, nature, and life. It enlivens our sense of beauty" (34).

On Reading Well is exquisitely written and will appeal immediately to a certain kind of reader: the kind who reads a book review about a book about the virtues embodied in reading books; the kind of reader who finds it impossible to pass by a used bookstore without slipping inside in search of a story that will stir a homesick hope within; the kind of reader who, like [David Copperfield](#), reads “as if for life” itself (59); the kind of reader who joyfully [affirms](#) with C. S. Lewis, “My own eyes are not enough for me; I will see through those of others” (140).

But even if you’re not yet that kind of reader, Prior beckons you to become one. You won’t find a scolding tone or any long list of books you simply must read before you die. Instead, acting as the English professor we all wish we had in school, she humbly kindles a desire in you to leave her own book behind and reach for that daunting work of literature you’ve never quite finished and was never quite finished with you. I suspect this was one of Prior’s goals all along.

The 17th-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter [wrote](#), “It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good; but the well reading of a few, could he be sure to have the best. . . Good books are a very great mercy to the world” (151). Karen Swallow Prior has written a good book about some great books that help us consider and pursue the good life. That is a great mercy indeed, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For as the apostle James writes, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13).