

## INTRO

Romans 12:2

The idea for this Bible study is something God has put on my heart for a while, but there was one particular incident that made me realize that we really should do this. I heard a preacher on the radio say that we can read the entire New Testament in 18 HOURS! And I thought, why am I not doing this all the time? In 18 hours, you could read OUT LOUD the entire New Testament from Matthew to Revelation. Maybe even less if you were reading silently to yourself.

How much different would I be if I did this more?

Some years ago, we did a Beth Moore Bible study where she talked about our minds and our thoughts being like a room. And often we “wallpaper” that room with lies, both from the world and lies we tell ourselves. We can tear down that wallpaper by the mercy of God, but we also need to re-wallpaper our minds with the truth of God’s word.

That’s one of our goals for this year—to fill our minds with God’s word, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the comforting and the challenging.

So we are going to study together ALL of the epistles, or letters, of the NT.

All the teachings that the early church needed to hear, I need to hear.

All the practical details and larger principles they needed to live the Christian life, I need to live my Christian life.

Think of the epistles as letters from God to you – you’ve got mail! Your mailbox is full.

But we’re going to study them a little differently.

We’re going to read them in the order that they were written, which is not the order they are in in the Bible.

We’re going to follow along with the story of the early church in the book of Acts and in history,

and read the letters in the context of what was happening at that time.

We're going to read about one book a week; some of the longer books, like Romans, I've split up into two weeks.

Here's your part—I'm challenging you to read whatever book we are studying that week

every day for one week. Just read right through, from start to finish.

Get the big picture! It's not so overwhelming if you don't get caught up in the kind of detailed word-by-word study we often do. Don't even look at the notes at the bottom of the page until you're done! (or at all.)

It's a letter—read it like it just showed up in your mailbox. If you got a letter from a friend, and there was something you didn't understand in it, you wouldn't stop and not read the rest of the letter! You'd say, "I'll come back to that" and keep going! That's what I'm hoping, by the grace of God, that we can do.

Remember, most of them are just a few pages long!

The more you read it, the more you will get out of it.

Just think, how familiar those words will be to you by the end of the week!

Just think how familiar they will all be by the end of the year!!!!

Then, when we get together on Tuesday morning, I'd like it to be a time of sharing what

God was saying to you through that letter you just read.

Tell us what you think the theme of the book was.

Show us what passages meant the most to you as you read.

Here's my part—I am not going to be "teaching" all the books of the New Testament.

I want God to be your teacher as you read it over and over throughout the week, and for you to share what He's taught you.

Here's what I WILL do:

I'm going to give you some background on each book before you go home to read it. There are things that the readers of the original letter knew, that were common knowledge, that we don't know. We're going to learn a few of those things.

If there are any really difficult passages and I can find out any good explanations of their meaning, I'll share that with you before you read it, so we don't get bogged down by them.

We're going to walk through the timeline of what was happening in the early church and the world at that time, so that we can understand what the writer is saying even better than we could before.

We're going to talk about what was happening in the different churches that are being written to so we know why the writers are emphasizing the things they are emphasizing.

I have been amazed how much more I could make sense out of what I was reading when I understood why he was writing it and why at that particular time.

I have picked up information from a lot of sources—a bunch of books and commentaries, and Bible study guides. If any of you are familiar with the Ray Vander Laan videos, I have quite a few of them, and you'll recognize a lot of info from there.

Let me give you an example from one of the videos, that illustrates what I mean (and because I think it's the coolest thing ever):

Colossae (where the book of Colossians was written to)

was part of a triangle of 3 cities (like Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton)

These were Laodicea, Colossae, and Hieropolis

Colossae was at foot of large snow-capped mountain, known for cold water from the mountain streams all year long. Famous for its refreshing, invigorating

cold water.

Hieropolis was known for its hot mineral springs. People came for its hot baths for healing and

and to drink the mineral water from the natural hot springs for cures for diseases

Laodicea had terrible water, it was lukewarm and filled with minerals.

But they were rich and powerful and had a banking center and a gold exchange.

They manufactured a very soft black wool used for expensive clothing, and a

mineral used to make eye salve

If someone mentioned these cities, that's what you would think of.

read Rev.3:14-20

God says I wish you were either hot (healing like Hieropolis) or cold (refreshing like Colossae).

But you're neither, so I'm going to spit you out.

Do you see what He's saying to them?

Everything you think you are—you're not!

You are proud – but you're really wretched and pitiful

You think you're rich—but you're poor, spiritually

You think you're the world leader in healing blindness—you're blind yourself

you need my eye salve --so you can see your need for God

You think you make the most beautiful clothing and fabric in the world—but you're

really naked, spiritually. You need my white garment of righteousness --

to cover your sinfulness.

You think your banking center and gold exchange make you powerful—but you need

to buy gold from me (God) and be really rich—rich with spiritual riches that

Won't disappear.

He was talking about all the areas they were proud of, all the things that made them think

they were powerful and didn't need him as much, now that they were saved.

Perhaps they were falling back into their old ways, and turning to their old “idols”

again, instead of to him. Perhaps it was becoming all about them and not about Him.

That’s why he’s standing at the door knocking.

That has a lot of applications for us today—what do we go back to when we aren’t keeping

our eyes on the Lord?

What are we proud of, in what areas do we feel self-sufficient,

so we begin to think we don’t need his help anymore?

money? work? appearance or clothing? influence?

Understanding that world opens up a whole new world of understanding.

In ancient times there were a few places where people could go if they needed

to hear from a god.

One place was the oracle in Didyma at temple of Apollo—like oracle at Delphi

Oracle means “the very words of God”, and also is what the person giving the words was called.

Oracles were absolutely forbidden to Jews.

Gentiles may walk hundreds of miles to ask a question of the oracle.

After walking all that way (with a sacrifice) , then a priest would kill your sacrifice

(usually a sheep) and “read” the insides to tell whether

Apollo would even hear your question. If that was “yes”, the priest would take your question

into the temple to the oracle and shut the doors.

And there you would wait. Sometimes for MONTHS.

Inside the temple, the oracle was an old woman who spent her life sitting suspended over

a deep hole in the earth. Fumes came out of the hole that had the same effect as sniffing glue. The priest would tell her your question, and eventually she would give an answer. Then the priest would come out and give you your answer.

That's what they would do to hear the "very words of God".

We have the very words of God in our hands. No travel, no sheep sacrifice, no drug-crazed woman (hopefully) , no waiting for months.

I was so convicted!! But this year can change all that.

Together, let's become women of the TEXT, women who know the Very Words of God.

LET'S JUMP RIGHT INTO THEIR WORLD:

Inscription on denarius (used to pay tribute) : head of Caesar on one side,  
"the worshipped son of a worshipped god" on other

In this world, everything was religious

What had started out as a new sect of Jews is now being spread all over the world.

What's it like when the message of Jesus reaches a typical Greek-Roman city?

What's it like for a new believer in Jesus to live in that world where everything is religious?

Agora/ marketplace had a manager; all products sold in their market had to be devoted to the god of that city by putting some incense on the altar.

If you eject their gods, can't sell in their market

Suddenly, you may be out of business.

Your neighbors may be upset that you are angering the gods

In city council chambers, there is an altar in the middle of the room. As you come in you're supposed to sprinkle incense on the coals, acknowledging the authority of the god of the city. You can't be on the council if you won't do it. Now you have no political clout.

Each town had a town hearth with a fire that had been brought back from Mount Olympus.

(This made up for some town offenses towards the gods of Olympus)

The fire was dedicated to the goddess of the hearth and home, Hestia.

If your fire went out at home, you went there and got some fire so you could light yours again.

If you're a Christian, how are you going to relight your fire?

You got your water from a public fountain that was dedicated or carved in the shape of Athena, to show that all this blessing of water came from Athena.

Temples to other gods often provided food, sometimes even free food, low cost clothing, daycare, medical care; all provided by the goddess for the community.

Some temples had fornication as a part of the worship service.

And we thought our society was uninhibited!

Being a follower of Jesus was completely counter-cultural, economically, politically, socially.

The culture had iron-clad social structure, with high officials at the top and slaves on the bottom.

Now Christians had a new social order—serving each other. A slave may be served by a member of the upper class or an official. This was so radical, the entire social structure began to unravel.

There were many who were unhappy about that.

Churches met in houses, and often weren't very big as a result. Sometimes the owners of the house would break down some walls to make a larger room for the church to meet together in.

Believers became a family, a community, a “household of faith” because they were so different from everyone else, including their own families. This was a new lifestyle in that culture.

All the religions promised some form of heaven.

What did Christians have that other religions didn't? They didn't even have a temple.

But the Christians had the love of God in the flesh,

shown by how they lived in a spiritual community, loving and caring for each other and for others.

Zechariah 4:6 says “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the LORD Almighty”

This is how God changed the world.

This week is the easiest week—this week we read the book of Acts. You don't necessarily

have to read it every day. It's too long. But read it once or twice, so you refresh your memory about the stories in it, because we're going to be talking about them, and it's easier if you have read them recently.

Each week, we'll have a discussion time about what we've read at home that week.

Then, we'll talk about the background for the book we'll be reading in the coming week.

Then at the end, we'll have time to share prayer requests and pray for each other.

I know finding time to read is a problem, especially when you have little ones.

But you can do it! I just want to encourage you to read the letters, because

I know that this book has transforming power for us!

I'm not going to ask you how many times you read it that week! Sometimes we have days

that just attack us— God knows. But just pick it up the next day, and keep on

going.

I like to listen to it on CD while I'm cooking or folding laundry or in the car or any other mindless task. ( Now you know why I drive the way I do!)

Maybe it's easier to listen to it than read it.

Info about Bible on CDs or downloads:

Christianbook.com audio cassette NT \$5

CD \$20-28

Mp3 download \$10-20

biblegateway.com – you can listen for free online

go to “additional resources”, then audio bible

Or maybe you're the kind of person who just needs some structure in your daily

Bible reading. If I don't have a plan, I usually flounder around.

This is a structure that will take you through much of the New Testament by spring.

Check the schedule —if you miss a week, don't worry, you'll know exactly where to pick it up.