

# Ten tips for better public Bible reading

The Bible is read at some point in almost every church service. Reading the Bible can be and should be, a high point in the service. After all, the Bible is an important way in which God speaks!

Here are some simple tips to help readers and hearers to understand Bible readings better. These tips are guidelines, not rules, and they won't apply in every situation so you will still need to use your judgement. But they are a great start!



## TIP 1: UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING.

If you as the reader you don't know what the writer intended, your hearers probably won't get it right either.

There is a big difference between the following two ways of reading Psalm 23 v 1 (KJV, NKJV), but only one of them is what the writer intended!

'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.'

'The Lord is my shepherd (*pause*) I shall not want.'

After all, why would the Psalmist not want the Lord as his shepherd!

Become familiar with the passage, and if necessary consult a study Bible or commentary, or ask someone who knows the Bible well, so you understand the passage and its context.

## TIP 2: EMPHASISE NEW IDEAS AND DO NOT EMPHASISE OLD IDEAS.

We do this naturally in our everyday conversations, for example 'We had **dinner** at **six o'clock**. **After dinner** we **watched** a **movie** (Bolded words show the emphasis). You can emphasise words by projecting your voice slightly.

Thomas said to him, "**Lord**, we don't know **where** you are going, so **how can** we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way ... and the **truth** and the **life**. **No one** comes to the Father except through me. (John 14 v 6 NIV)

When he had **finished** speaking, he said to Simon, "**Put out** into **deep** water, and **let down the nets** for a **catch**." Simon answered, "Master, we've **worked hard all night** and haven't caught anything. But **because you say so**, I will let down the nets." (Luke 5 v 4-5 NIV)

Sometimes old ideas come in new words, but they are still old ideas!

"**What makes you think I want** all your **sacrifices**?" says the Lord. "I am **sick** of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. (Isaiah 1 v 11 NLT).

The 'burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle' are, of course, the sacrifices referred to.



## TIP 3: EMPHASISE OPPOSITE IDEAS.

This can be difficult as sometimes opposites also work as new and old ideas, since the idea is introduced by the first of the opposite words. It's your call so think about which works better in the given situation. These are examples of where emphasising opposites works.

For the **wages** of **sin** is **death**, but the **free gift** of **God** is **eternal life** in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 6 v 23 ESV)



There are three very compelling opposites here. It would be a pity to miss them!

wages – free gift  
sin – God  
death – eternal life

For the Lord **watches over** the way of the **righteous**, but the way of the **wicked** will **perish**.  
(Psalm 1 v 6 NRSV).

**Righteous** and **wicked** are obvious. But **watches over** and **perish** can work as opposites too.

The people who walked in **darkness** have seen a **great light**. (Isaiah 9 v 2 GNT)

## TIP 4: DE-EMPHASISE ASIDES.

Asides are phrases that can be left out without losing the thread of the story. That is not to say they are not important – if they weren't important they wouldn't be in the Bible! De-emphasizing asides allows hearers to absorb this extra information without losing the thread of the story. Asides may appear in commas or brackets, but sometimes you have to work them out for yourself. A good test of an aside is to read the passage, leaving out the aside, and seeing if the storyline still makes sense.

Try reading the following passages leaving out the asides (greyed out). Then read them again with the asides in but de-emphasized.

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. (John 4 v 1-3 ESV)

*de-emphasise*

Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. (John 4 v 7-9 NLT)

But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each."  
(Luke 9 v 13-14 NRSV)

You can de-emphasize by lowering the pitch or the volume of your voice (but not so much that people can't hear you!)

## TIP 5: DE-EMPHASISE WORDS BEFORE OR AFTER QUOTATION MARKS.

Doing so draws attention to the quote and keeps hearers focused on the narrative.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go and tell the king of Egypt that he must let the Israelites leave his land.”<sup>12</sup> But Moses replied, “Even the Israelites will not listen to me, so why should the king? I am such a poor speaker.” (Exodus 6 v 10-12 GNT)

They all asked, ‘Are you then the Son of God?’ He replied, ‘You say that I am.’ Then they said, ‘Why do

## TIP 6: USE PAUSES TO MAKE MEANING CLEAR.

Pauses really do determine meaning, as you can see from the following example (Luke 2.16 NKJV).

‘And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger’  
It would have been a very crowded manger!

‘And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger’  
That sounds much more like it!

One way to pause is to take a breath. This creates a natural pause, and also helps you get to the end of the sentence without running out of breath!

## TIP 7: PAUSE FOR EFFECT AS WELL AS FOR MEANING.

You can add some texture or drama to your reading by keeping your hearers in suspense for a moment or two. These pauses can be as long as you need to get the effect.

When the Devil finished tempting Jesus he left him until the next opportunity came (Luke 4 v 13 NLT).

Pilate argued with them, because he wanted to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Luke 23 v 20-21 NLT)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6 v 23 ESV)

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last (Luke 23 v 46 ESV)

## TIP 8: PRONOUNCING NAMES.

Few things scare public Bible readers more than a list of unfamiliar names! One way to check pronunciation is to listen to an on-line audio recording. A reliable one is Bible Gateway. In Bible Gateway select the passage you will be reading, and click on the speaker icon at the beginning of the reading to hear it read. You can either memorise the pronunciation or write it phonetically into your Bible or a printout of the reading.

## TIP 9: DON'T FORGET YOUR AUDIENCE.

Try to maintain some eye contact with your hearers. Look at your hearers before you start reading and look up and around occasionally while you are reading.

If the lectern/pulpit is low try holding your Bible up, so that hearers can see your face and so the distance between looking at your text and looking at your hearers is not so far.

The safest way to make eye contact is to look up as you near the end of a sentence or paragraph, so that if you take a moment to find your place again it will seem like a natural pause. You can also put your finger on the place where you need to start reading again, although this can be problematic if you are reading from a touch-screen device!

## TIP 10: USE YOUR NATURAL SPEAKING VOICE.

The Bible does need to be read with reverence but that doesn't necessarily mean using a BBC voice! It just means respecting what you are reading and who you are reading it to. Imagine yourself in conversation with a friend about something exciting, or disturbing, or informative that has happened, and think about how you would tell them what happened.

If you do that, you will find that you have been applying most of these tips to the way you speak for all of your life – you just didn't realise it.

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