

back to basics : the Christian reading list

Zack Millar on how to read Christian books as a medical student

My first week of medical school was punctuated by reading lists. Each department presented us with a honed array of textbooks, study guides and flashcards, all promising to be the definitive resource for our learning. Utterly dizzying in its volume and scope, I wondered, *'How on earth can I cover all of that?'*

The trouble is, my arrival at church as a student felt eerily similar. 'Have you read this book, or this one? How about *this* one?' I looked at other students with less contact time and I thought, *'That's all right for them, but I don't have as much time as they do.'* Dutifully, I raided book stalls and borrowed from my friends, but I was terrified that I would finish medical school knowing nothing about hyperkalaemia and everything about dispensationalism instead. I watched dejectedly as the stack on my bookshelf grew ever higher.

It is possible to achieve significant Christian reading whilst studying medicine to the best of our ability; we can graduate with both the satisfaction of a degree and a richer understanding of our God. But to do this we need to form a realistic and achievable plan.

the first (and essential) book

The best way to get to know someone is never to read about them but rather to let them speak for themselves. If we want to get to know God, what better way is there to do that than to read the Bible? Any Christian book, no matter how well-respected, is written by a fallible imperfect person. The Bible is entirely different. 'All Scripture is God-breathed,' writes Paul to Timothy, 'and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) The Bible is the word of God breathed out for us. When we read the Bible, we can rest assured that what we read is completely true, accurate and applicable to our lives.

Whatever Christian books you want to read, make sure that the first one is the Bible. There is of course much blessing to be gained from reading the wisdom of others, especially when it comes to passages of the Bible that are more difficult to understand. However, we must not let that wisdom take the place of the inspired word of God. When we find life getting in the way of the Bible (or church),



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the first and most crucial step is to refocus. Then we can worry about other books!

what to read next

The trouble with specialist medicine is that you risk losing sight of the bigger picture. The same is true for theology; we get so excited about the minutiae and end up missing the wood for the trees. First and foremost, theology is 'the study of the *nature of God* and religious belief'.¹ When we read something theological, we must remember that primarily we are studying God himself and not simply accruing knowledge for its own sake.

With that in mind, before starting any Christian book, ask yourself: *is this going to build me up as a Christian and bring me closer to God?* The answer to that question could be 'no' during one period of your life and 'yes' during another. If the answer is 'no', right now, then are you really making the best use of your limited time? Of course, there are very few books that would yield absolutely no benefit whatsoever! As medics though we need to prioritise our reading.

SMART goals

The SMART criteria² have been helping individuals and organisations achieve their goals since 1981. They are just as applicable here too!

First, be *specific*. 'I want to read more' is an incredibly vague sentiment. Instead, choose a particular topic you would like to study. After choosing your topic, set a target that is *measurable*, *achievable* and *relevant*. Decide on a number but be sensible. As tantalising as a 14-volume set may be, most likely you would need to be prepared to dedicate at least a year to the project (and then set your goal as one-two volumes per month). Unless you have extraordinary determination, a shorter-term goal may be more realistic (such as one book per term or every four weeks). Finally, once you have set your target, make it *time-bound* and stick

to it. Do not succumb to the temptation to let it drag on. If you know that a chapter a day will achieve your goal, make sure it happens!

how to read (effectively)

Some of us may be thinking, '*I read all of Harry Potter³ in two weeks. Surely one book a term is a bit pessimistic?*' When we read Harry Potter, how much did we really savour the words? Did we take the time to mull over profound writing, or were we swept along by a compelling narrative? Many parts of the Bible (and indeed Christian books) are indeed compelling to read, but we must not romp through them.

What does it mean to 'meditate on your [God's] precepts and consider your [his] ways?' (Psalm 119:15) It means to spend time thinking about what we just read, placing it in its context and considering how it applies to us. After reading anything, think: *how will tomorrow be different because of what I read today?* If it takes an entire term to get through one book, but we get through it properly, then it is far preferable to reading shelves of books superficially.

achieving our goal

As Christian medical students, our goal should be to leave medical school with greater knowledge of both our Creator and the humans he created. When we prioritise the Bible first and relevant books second, we can begin to set realistic targets for ourselves and devote enough time for proper meditation from our reading. How will you get excited about God without taking the time to get to know him better by delving into his word? Then set a target today, pick up a book, and marvel at the rich complexities of our Lord. ■

REFERENCES

1. Oxford English Dictionary (emphasis author's), bit.ly/2ecVL5
2. Doran G. Management Review. *AMA Forum* 1981; 70 (11): 35-36
3. Other fiction is available.