

HOW TO MASTER THE ENGLISH BIBLE

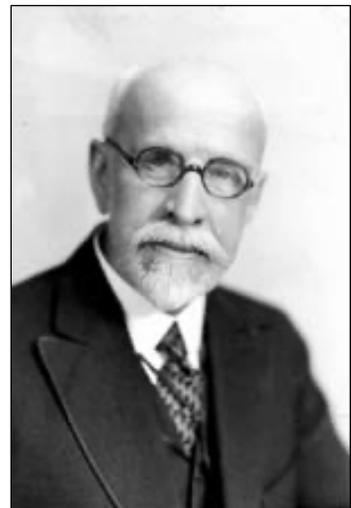
James Gray on Mastering the Bible

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James M. Gray (1851-1935) was one of the most famous Bible teachers of the early 20th century. He was a key player in the generation that established the Bible institute movement, serving as dean/president of Moody Bible Institute for more than two decades. He had worked alongside Dwight L. Moody, and was academically qualified to lead an educational institution into the twentieth century, institutionalizing his signature “Synthetic Bible Study” method.

So when he wrote a little book in 1904 called *How To Master the English Bible*, you can imagine how eager people were to read it. Here was a “How To” book from a man who knew his Bible and could make it come alive in the church or classroom. What tips, tricks, and techniques would he share?

In fact he offered almost no tricks at all, and certainly nothing that seems like advanced or specialized knowledge. His program is so basic that it’s easy to ignore, and most people go right on ignoring it. But it really can take you deeper into the Bible than you’ve ever been, if you’ll just try it.



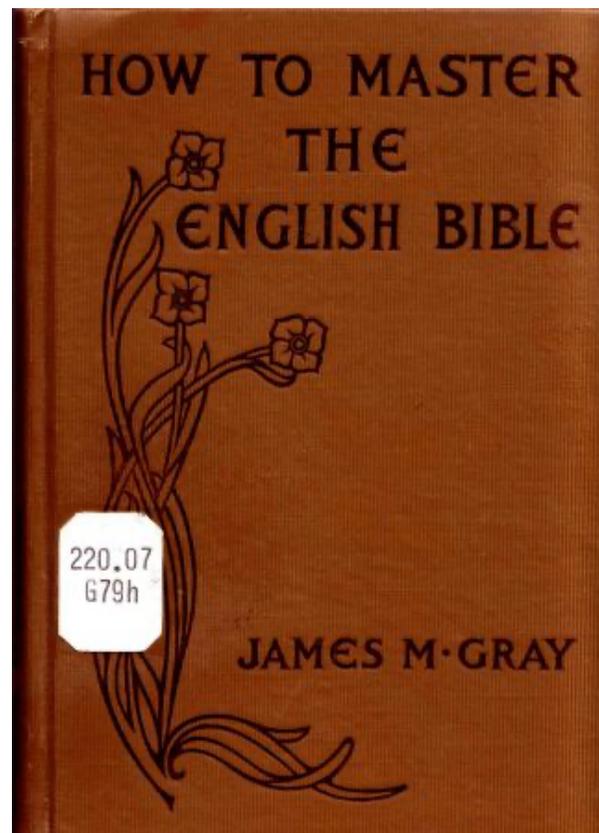
The fundamental idea is to pick one book of the Bible and read it over and over. And over. And, yes, over again.

That’s pretty much all. Gray manages to get a whole book out of that (a short book) by explaining the rationale behind it, walking you through it in detail, providing illustrations from personal testimony and citing authorities who point in the same direction. But if you’re in a hurry to get into mastering the Bible, you can stop reading now and just go do this: pick a book and saturate yourself in it by reading and re-reading it obsessively. If you’ve got a little more time to spend reading the theory, here’s my summary of Gray’s 1904 *How to Master the English Bible*.

There are many ways to study the Bible, but Gray isn't interested in studying it, he wants to MASTER it. Study could involve detailed analysis, careful observation, and thoughtful comparison on many levels, all of which are worth doing, but none of them would necessarily put you in the position of saying, "I've got that book, I've mastered it." He borrows a farming analogy to illustrate this:

How to master the English Bible! High-sounding title that, but does it mean what it says? It is not how to study, but how to master it; for there is a sense in which the Bible must be mastered before it can be studied, and it is the failure to see this which accounts for other failures on the part of many earnest would-be Bible students. I suppose it is something like a farm; for although never a farmer myself, I have always imagined a farmer should know his farm before he attempted to work it. How much upland and how much lowland? How much wood and how much pasture? Where should the orchard be laid out? Where plant my corn, oats, and potatoes? What plot is to be seeded down to grass? When he has mastered his farm he begins to get ready for results from it (p. 13).

How is it that "the Bible must be mastered before it can be studied?" What Gray is emphasizing is that a student needs a grasp of the whole before he can profitably investigate the parts. He is nearly phobic about methods of study that put you too deep into details before you have an intuitive grasp of the entirety. This is why, by the way, Gray recommends mastery of the *English Bible*. Studying the Bible in its original languages (Greek and Hebrew) is obviously better in that it removes the veil of the English translator who otherwise stands between us and the ancient text, and puts us in direct contact with what the author wrote. But as long as you have a tolerably responsible English translation, you can get to work on it with confidence that you can know the words that God



inspired, and hear the voice of the living God. Speaking for a moment from the side of the academically-trained expert, Gray says, “One is grateful to have studied Hebrew and Greek, just to be able to tell others who have not that they do not require either to hearken to our Heavenly Father’s voice” (p. 14).

The kernel of the book is a section which Gray gives in the form of personal testimony because his own discovery of this method changed the course of his life and ministry. It only runs about five pages in length (pages 15-20), and here is most of that text:

That which follows grows largely out of the writer’s personal experience. For the first eight or ten years of my ministry I did not know my English Bible as I should have known it, a fact to which my own spiritual life and the character of my pulpit ministrations bore depressing witness. Nor was I so fortunate as to meet with more than one or two brethren in the ministry who knew their English Bible very much better than I knew mine. They all declared that the theological seminaries did not profess to teach the English Bible. They taught much about the Bible of great importance for ministers to know, such as the Hebrew and Greek tongues, the principles of exegesis and interpretation, the history of the text, and the proofs and illustrations of Christian doctrine; but, in the words of one of the ministers referred to (which have appeared in print), ‘while we had some special lessons in one or two of the epistles, several of the psalms, in some of the prophecies, and in a few select portions of the gospels, other and vastly important parts of the Bible were left out altogether. We had nothing on the book of Revelation, no elaborate study of the Mosaic ritual and its profound system of types, and especially were we left uninitiated into the minute and wonderful coordination of parts in the various books of the Old and New Testaments, which disclose a stupendous divine plan running through the whole, linking them all together as an indissoluble unit and carrying with them an amazing power of conviction.

The seminaries have assumed that students were acquainted with the great facts of the English Bible and their relation to one another before matriculation, but so competent an authority as President Harper declares that “to indicate the line of thought and chief ideas of a particular prophet, or the argument of an epistle, or to state even the most important events in the life of our Lord, would be impossible for the average college graduate.” It is such an unfortunate state of things which, to a certain extent, accounts for the rise and maintenance of those excellent institutions, the Moody Bible Institute in this country and Spurgeon’s College in London, with their almost countless offspring and imitators everywhere, creating as they have a distinct

atmosphere of biblical and evangelistic teaching and preaching. It is commonly supposed, it may be said in passing, that these institutions cater to or attract only men or women of very limited educational attainments, but in the case of the first-named, at least, an incidental census taken recently disclosed the fact that one-third of the male students then on the rolls or who had lately left were college-trained; one may safely hazard the opinion that in the woman's department the proportion of the college-trained students would have been still larger.

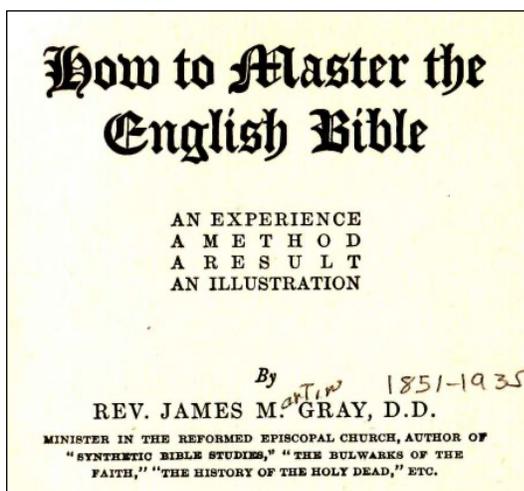
The first practical help I ever received in the mastery of the English Bible was from a layman. We were fellow-attendants at a certain Christian conference or convention and thrown together a good deal for several days, and I saw something in his Christian life to which I was a comparative stranger –a peace, a rest, a joy, a kind of spiritual poise I knew little about. One day I ventured to ask him how he had become possessed of the experience, when he replied, "By reading the epistle to the Ephesians." I was surprised, for I had read it without such results, and therefore asked him to explain the manner of his reading, when he related the following: He had gone into the country to spend the Sabbath with his family on one occasion, taking with him a pocket copy of Ephesians, and in the afternoon, going out into the woods and lying down under a tree, he began to read it; he read it through at a single reading, and finding his interest aroused, read it through again in the same way, and, his interest increasing, again and again. I think he added that he read it some twelve or fifteen times, "and when I arose to go into the house," said he, "I was in possession of Ephesians, or better yet, it was in possession of me, and I had been 'lifted up to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus' in an experimental sense in which that had not been true in me before, and will never cease to be true in me again."

I confess that as I listened to this simple recital my heart was going up in thanksgiving to God for answered prayer, the prayer really of months, if not years, that I might come to know how to master His Word. And yet, side by side with the thanksgiving was humiliation that I had not discovered so simple a principle before, which a boy of ten or twelve might have known. And to think that an "ordained" minister must sit at the feet of a layman to learn the most important secret of his trade!

Since that day, however, the writer has found some comfort in the thought that other ministers have had a not unlike experience. In an address before the National Bible Society of Scotland, the Rev. Dr. Stalker speaks of the first time

he ever "read a whole book of the Bible straight through at a sitting." It was while as a student he was spending a winter in France, and there being no Protestant church in the town where he was passing a Sunday, he was thrown on his own resources. Leaving the hotel where he was staying, he lay down on a green knoll and began reading here and there as it chanced, till, coming to the epistle to the Romans, he read on and on through to the end. "As I proceeded," he said, "I began to catch the drift of Paul's thought; or rather, I was caught by it and drawn on. The mighty argument opened out and arose like a great work of art above me till at least it enclosed me within its perfect proportions. It was a revolutionary experience. I saw for the first time that a book of Scripture is a complete discussion of a single subject; I felt the force of the book as a whole, and I understood the different parts in the light of the whole as I had never understood them when reading them by themselves. Thus to master book after book is to fill the mind with the great thoughts of God."

One thing Gray is careful to emphasize in the following pages is that he does not recommend reading the whole Bible cover to cover "in course," at least not if you're attempting to achieve mastery. Reading all 66 books is just too much. Your mind can't retain it all, and even if you read cover to cover twenty times in a row, you will not master that bulk of material. Pick one book and devote yourself to it until it belongs to you. "The plan was to read and reread each book by itself and in its order, as though there were no other in existence, until it had become a part of the very being." (p. 21) Of course it's great to read straight through the Bible, and in other contexts Gray would no doubt commend that exercise. But "mastering the English Bible" means something very specific for him, and the way to mastery is one book at a time.



Gray's mastery method, or "synthetic Bible study" as it was often called in his time, is all about the completeness and sufficiency of a biblical book as the basic unit of thought. A word is too atomistic to be the primary unit of thought; nor is a verse the fundamental building block, nor is a chapter the primary bearer of meaning. All of these get their meaning from being rightly situated in the book. When you've grasped the book, you can make progress with its constituent parts.

Gray extends his point with reference to other academic subjects and the hapless way they are often taught:

To illustrate, I have always felt a sort of injury in the way I was taught geography; capes and bays, and lakes and rivers were sought to be crowded on my understanding before I ever saw a globe. Should not the globe come first, then the hemispheres, continents, nations, capitals, and the rest? Does not a view of the whole materially assist in the comprehension of the parts? Is it not vital to it, indeed? And history – what is the true method of its study? Is it not first the outline history of the world, then its great divisions, ancient, mediaeval, modern, then the separate peoples or kingdoms in each, and so on? How could you hope to interest a child in botany who had never seen a flower? How would you study a picture of a landscape? Would you cover the canvas with cloth to study one feature of it at a time? What idea of it would you obtain under such circumstances? Would you not rather say, “Hang it in the proper light, let me get the right position with regard to it, and take it all in at a single glance, fasten the whole of it at once on the camera of my consciousness, and then I shall be able and interested afterward to study it in detail, and to go into the questions of proportion, and perspective, and shading, and coloring and all that”? Is it not the failure to adopt the corresponding plan in Bible study which accounts in large measure for the lack of enthusiastic interest in its prosecution on the part of the people? (pp. 32-33)

Again, following his own logic, Gray would want to lead on to a higher level where all the books of the canon are related as the meaningful constellation called Scripture. But he is not simply seeking the broadest possible context. He is not trying to identify the universal horizon of meaning that all smaller bearers of meaning are situated within. This is a “How to Master” book, and he has settled on the single book of scripture as the fundamental unit of thought where mastery can be achieved. A book of the Bible is that place from which the mind can look down into detailed investigation, or up into the total Christian message of the canonical scriptures and their doctrinal implications.

Probably to satisfy the yankee hunger for numbered lists and detailed steps, Gray provides a set of pointers in a chapter entitled “The Plan at Work.”

1. Begin at the Beginning. Here he does recommend working through the Bible from Genesis on.

2. Read the Book. That is, don’t study it minutely, but read through it at a natural reading pace.

3. Read it Continuously. “The adjective may not be the most lucid, but the idea is this: It stands for two things –the reading of the book uninfluenced by its divisions into chapters and verses, and the reading of the book in this way at a single sitting.” (p. 45)

4. Read it Repeatedly. Over and over and over and over and over.

5. Read it Independently. Commentaries are great, but your bad outline is better than an expert’s good one. Why is that the case? Because the goal of mastery is not to produce the best possible summary of the book itself, but to develop your own skills. “The independent reading of a book in this sense is urged because of its development of one’s own intellectual powers. To be ever leaning on help from others is like walking on stilts all on e’s life and never attempting to place one’s feet on the ground. Who can ever come to know the most direct and highest type of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in this way?” (p. 49)

6. Read it Prayerfully. This is the great note that Gray ends his book with, and it is a welcome note in a book with a cheeky title that promises “mastery of the Bible.” I know this is only a matter of the connotations of the language, but it seems odd to strive to put myself in a position of mastery over the Bible – sort of like being ordained by getting a degree with the dubious title “Master of Divinity,” which made sense in 18th century English usage (“divinity” = “theology”) but now sounds crazy (when “divinity” = “God”).

So Gray ends his book on mastery of the Bible by pointing out how dependent we are on God’s power to understand the subjects which the Bible is about.

The most important rule is the last. Read it prayerfully. Let not the triteness of the observation belittle it, or all is lost. The point is insisted on because, since the Bible is a supernatural book, it can be studied or mastered only by supernatural aid. In the words of William Luff, “It is the Spirit’s Bible! Copyright every word! Only His thoughts are uttered, only His voice is heard!” Who is so well able to illuminate the pages of a given book as the author who composed it? How often when one has been reading Browning has he wished Browning were at his side to interpret Browning! But the Holy Spirit, by whom holy men of old wrote, dwells within the believer on Jesus Christ for the very purpose of bringing him into all truth. Coleridge said, “The Bible without the Holy Spirit is a sundial by moonlight,” and a great than he said, “We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we

might know the things that are freely given us of God" (I Corinthians 2:12). The dear old Scottish saint, Andrew Bonar, discriminated between a minister's getting his text from the Bible, and getting it from God through the Bible; a fine distinction that holds good not only with reference to the selection of a text to preach upon, but with reference to the apprehension spiritually of any part of the Word of God. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him; but God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit (I Corinthians 2:9,10). The inspired apostle does not say God has revealed them unto us by His Word, though they are in His Word. "For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so, the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." There is a parallel passage to the above in the first chapter of Ephesians which has always impressed the writer with great force. Paul has been unveiling the profoundest verities of holy writ to the Ephesians, and then he prays that the eyes of their heart (R. V.) might be enlightened to understand, to know what he had unveiled. He had been telling them what was the hope of their calling, and the riches of the glory of God's inheritance in the saints, and the exceeding greatness of His power toward them that believe; but how could they apprehend what he had told them, save as the Holy Spirit took of these things of Christ and showed them unto them? The Word of God is not enough without the Spirit of God. In the light of the foregoing, let the reader punctuate the reading of it and every part of it with prayer to its divine Author, and he will come to know "How to Master the English Bible." (pp. 53-55)

If you have never tried the method that James Gray recommends, you should begin immediately. Pick a book, pray for God's guidance, and then start reading and re-reading it constantly. Give yourself a month if you have to, but focus on that one book. By about the fifth time you read it, you'll probably be dreadfully bored. Stick with it. Somewhere around the eighth time you'll go through a wall and find riches of meaning you had not glimpsed before. When you reach the point of saturation and mastery, you'll know. There's a kind of click in your consciousness, and you feel the whole mass of the book shift as it is transformed in your understanding from a set of verses and disconnected lines of argument into one whole. I recommend starting with a short book, between 4 and 12 chapters, not much longer. Ephesians is great. Try it.

Source:

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