

"SELDOM HAVE I ENJOYED A BOOK MORE THAN THIS ONE!" RANDY ALCORN



Lit!

A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO READING BOOKS

TONY REINKE

“I read many books, but seldom do I enjoy one more than I did Tony Reinke’s *Lit!* Many of my greatest childhood adventures, and much of my growth after I was converted as a teenager, came through reading imagination-expanding and life-changing books. Tony’s writing is thoughtful, perceptive, concise, and God-honoring. He upholds biblical authority and offers helpful guidance, while allowing for a range of tastes. *Lit!* rings true to my own lifetime of reading experience. As a reader and writer of both nonfiction and fiction, I appreciate the breadth of Tony’s treatment, which includes a variety of genres. For book lovers, this is a treasure and delight. For those who aren’t book lovers, it makes a great case for becoming one.”

Randy Alcorn, Founder, Eternal Perspective Ministries;
author, *If God Is Good and Heaven*

“If you don’t read books as both a discipline and a delight, then you should; and if you need help here, as in truth all of us do, then this is the book for you. Don’t miss it!”

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College;
author, *Knowing God*

“This is the perfect book for someone who doesn’t like to read, or who likes to read but isn’t sure it’s a good use of their time, or who loves to read a little too much and needs to proceed with discernment. Reinke has made a wise, theological, and edifying case for why words matter. I’ll mention *Lit!* every time someone asks me why in the world Christians should read fiction—a question that never fails to shock me. Now, instead of snapping, ‘Are you serious?’ and spouting opinions, I’ll just smile and slip them a copy of this book.”

Andrew Peterson, singer/songwriter;
author, *The Wingfeather Saga*

“There is so much to commend about this book that it is hard to know where to start. The most obvious virtue is its scope. On the subject of reading, Reinke covers every possible topic. Each topic, in turn, is broken into all of its important subpoints. With a lesser writer, this could produce a tedious book, but the opposite is true here. Reinke says just enough, but not too much. The effect is like seeing a prism turned in the light. There is never a dull moment. Once I sensed that Reinke was going to cover all the important topics, and with unflinching good sense and Christian insight, I could hardly put it down. ‘What will Reinke say about *that* topic?’ I found myself asking. But to add yet another twist, he has read so widely in scholarly and religious sources that I do not hesitate to call the book a triumph of scholarship. Reinke writes with an infectious and winsome enthusiasm. It is hard to imagine a reader of this book who would not catch the spark for reading after encountering Reinke’s excitement about reading and his carefully reasoned defense of it.”

Leland Ryken, Emeritus Professor of English, Wheaton, College;
author, *The ESV and the English Bible Legacy*

“How to read, what to read, who to read, when to read, and why you should read—Tony Reinke answers all these questions and more in this very good and (surprisingly) brief book on reading. As he shows how reading can bring glory to God and growth to the church, Reinke encourages Christians to take up the discipline of reading widely and wisely.”

Trevin Wax, Bible and Reference Publisher, B&H Publishing Group;
author, *Holy Subversion: Allegiance to Christ in an Age of Rivals*

“Since God decided ideas are best expressed in words, and that The Idea—the revelation of his Son as Lord and Savior—is to be learned through his timeless and matchless Word, Christians dare not lose sight of the primacy of books amidst the torrent of fast-moving, visual images of our culture. Tony Reinke argues from Scripture and life experience that ‘reading is a way to preserve and cultivate the sustained linear concentration we need for life.’ As an educator, I couldn’t agree more! Sustained reading must remain the heartbeat of any worthy educational program that seeks to produce Christian thinkers, leaders, and apologists. Homeschooling parents who are trying to craft reading lists as they raise Christian children will find gracious and principled guidance here. Moreover, Tony offers great ideas for parents to foster a love for reading, beginning with their own example.”

Marcia Somerville, Founder, Lampstand Press;
author, *Tapestry of Grace* homeschool curriculum

“You might wonder why you need to read about reading. Some of you have piles and piles of books on your shelves, or on your nightstand, but have no idea how to choose what to read, and when. Some of you are being altered in ways you don’t even recognize by digital technology such that you can’t see how you’re too distracted to summon the deep attention needed to read. This engagingly written book will make you think, but it will also provide practical, winsome advice on how to become the right kind of reader for the glory of God.”

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Tony Reinke does not just read, but he reads well, and these are two very different things. If you are not much of a reader, consider *Lit!* a part of your education. Tony will teach you to read, to read widely, and to read well. If you are already an avid reader, consider *Lit!* an investment that will instruct you in how to read better.”

Tim Challies, blogger, challies.com;
author, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*

“If you read one book a week for the next 50 years, you’ll read about 2,600 books. Not a lot when you think of all the books you *could* read. So should you include this book in your list? Yes! Because *Lit!* will help you read the right books in the right way. Tony Reinke sets our reading in a biblical framework and provides practical tips to make the most of books. I warmly commend it.”

Tim Chester, Pastor, Grace Church Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire;
author, *You Can Change* and *A Meal with Jesus*

“With a discerning eye, Reinke captures the importance of the gospel story for our habits of reading, thus providing a worldview for reading. He challenges us to beware of how the carved images of the Internet can draw us away from the grace of reading for comprehension and simple delight. Yet he equally gives a proper place to secular literature among all types of works that those who love Christ should appreciate. This is the sort of book that I have longed to place into the hands of believers in order to help churches recapture a love for literature and literacy—both biblical and extrabiblical. Practical and enjoyable, *Lit!* is an outstanding and valuable gift to the church.”

Eric C. Redmond, Associate Professor of Bible Moody Bible Institute

Lit!

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A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO READING BOOKS

TONY REINKE

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Contents

Foreword by C. J. Mahaney	II
Introduction	15
PART 1: A THEOLOGY OF BOOKS AND READING	
1 Paper Pulp and Etched Granite	21
<i>Laying the Cornerstone of Our Theology of Books</i>	
2 Wide-Eyed into the Son	29
<i>How Personal Sin and the Gospel Shape Our Literacy</i>	
3 Reading Is Believing	39
<i>Savoring Books in an Eye-Candy Culture</i>	
4 Reading from across the Canyon	51
<i>How a Biblical Worldview Equips Us to Benefit from Books</i>	
5 The Giver's Voice	65
<i>Seven Benefits of Reading Non-Christian Books</i>	
6 The God Who Slays Dragons	81
<i>The Purifying Power of Christian Imagination</i>	
PART 2: SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE ON BOOK READING	
7 Read with Resolve	93
<i>Six Priorities That Decide What Books I Read (and Don't Read)</i>	
8 How to Read a Book	109
<i>20 Tips and Tricks for Reading Nonfiction Books</i>	

Contents

9 Literature Is Life	119
<i>Tapping into the Benefits of Fiction Literature</i>	
10 Too Busy to Read	129
<i>Six Ways to Find (and Protect) the Time You Need to Read Books</i>	
11 Driven to Distraction	137
<i>How Internet Habits Cripple Book Reading</i>	
12 Marginalia	147
<i>The Fine Art of Defacing Books with Pencils, Pens, and Highlighters</i>	
13 Reading Together	155
<i>Building Community One Book at a Time</i>	
14 Raising Readers	165
<i>How Parents and Pastors Can Ignite in Others a Love for Book Reading</i>	
15 Happily Ever After	177
<i>Five Marks of a Healthy Book Reader</i>	
Acknowledgments	187
Notes	189

“In your light do we see light.”

Psalm 36:9

Foreword

C. J. Mahaney

Growing up, I hated to read.

Except for two things: as a teenager, I read *The Washington Post* sports page and *Sports Illustrated*. After the *Post* arrived on our doorstep each morning, my dad read the sports page, then my older brother, then me. (And if I ever got hold of it before my brother did, the consequences could be severe.) *Sports Illustrated* got devoured weekly as soon as it arrived.

But aside from those two things, I simply did not read. I did not read any other part of the newspaper. I did not read the books I was assigned in high school (and I have the grades to prove it). I didn't even read CliffsNotes thoroughly—they were too long! I had one passion: sports. I put my school books in my locker, where I thought they belonged. Reading had no place in my life.

By the time I graduated from high school, I'd picked up a few more passions: partying, drinking, and drugs. I was, sadly, immersed in the drug culture, pursuing pleasure as passionately as I could, and recruiting others to join me. I had absolutely no use for books of any kind, least of all the Bible.

So I thought nothing of it when my friend Bob, with whom I had partied frequently before he moved away, called to say he was com-

ing to visit. I was unaware that Bob had been converted, and that his visit would mark a turning point in my life.

Bob came in and like always, I prepared my room for another drug fest, putting a rolled-up towel at the base of the bedroom door so my family supposedly couldn't smell the smoke. (It never worked.) I offered Bob some hash, was momentarily perplexed when he declined, and began to smoke anyway. Then Bob began to share the gospel with me.

That night the impossible happened: in that smoke-filled room, God in his sovereign mercy acted upon my heart, and I experienced the miracle of regeneration. I believed, I turned from my rebellion, and I trusted in the Savior for the forgiveness of my countless sins. The worst of sinners, in the midst of his sin, was born again.

I don't remember every detail of that evening, but I do know that Bob eventually left, and I began reading a King James Bible that he must have left behind. I stayed up all night reading it. I was even underlining it. I didn't understand much of what I read, but I was beginning to perceive eternal life revealed in those words. I was seeing a relationship between the gospel I'd heard, the new birth I'd just received, and this book. And I had an insatiable hunger to read it.

So if you had met me the next day and asked me for evidences of my conversion, high on my list would have been this new, miraculous appetite for reading. And if you had known me, you would have been shocked: the guy who never read books, who was immersed in the drug culture, who was passionate about partying—now this guy could not get enough of a King James Bible.

In spite of all my theological ignorance (which was massive), I knew that Christ loved me and gave himself for me on the cross. And I knew there was life in his words.

Not long after that I got a job at a Christian bookstore just so I could read as much as possible. Boxes of books would arrive daily. Every day was like Christmas! I would assemble stacks of books on the counter and start reading, assuming this was my role: to read the books. And in my immaturity, I viewed customers as an interruption to my reading. I shouldn't have been surprised when my manager eventually informed me that I wasn't hired to read; I was

actually supposed to put the books on the shelves. That took some of the joy out of the job.

In the years that followed, various kind and wise people—no doubt seeing my uninformed zeal and desperate need for instruction—began to give me books. The formal education I wanted (another evidence of conversion!) never became possible. But reading—primarily Scripture, and then other books, many of them given to me by these friends—made all the difference in my life and ministry.

Books by authors like Charles Spurgeon, D. A. Carson, R. C. Sproul, Sinclair Ferguson, David Powlison, J. C. Ryle, Jerry Bridges, John Owen, J. I. Packer, John Stott, Wayne Grudem, and so many more—these books helped me understand Holy Scripture. They preached the gospel to me. They taught me to think deeply about the gospel and to preach the gospel to my own soul. This is vital, because thinking deeply about the gospel is the only way to consistently feel deeply about the gospel. You cannot cultivate affection for the Savior without reading and studying the Word of God.

I am even more grateful for these books when I imagine what the last forty years of my life would have been like without them. I would have been vulnerable to every wind of doctrine. I would have assigned ultimate authority to my own emotions or possibly to some personal experience. I would not have grown in my understanding of the gospel. Apart from the mercy of God, I would have continued to read nothing but the *Post* sports page and *Sports Illustrated*, and eventually shipwrecked my faith. (And I'd probably be calling in to sports talk shows daily, arguing obnoxiously about the latest stupid free agent signing by the Redskins, as if sports were all that mattered.)

That's why I'm so excited that my friend Tony has written the book you hold in your hands. Though I now love to read, it's still work. It always involves discipline. Perhaps reading is a challenge for you. Maybe you despised reading in college, and one of the joys of your graduation was the thought that you would never have to read a book again! Then your pastor or other Christians started recommending books. Now you look at the books on your shelves and see a few that you've started, but not one that you've finished. Perhaps you haven't read through the whole Bible yet, but you would never

divulge that information to anyone. If that's you, here's what you need to know: *Lit!* is a book for nonreaders.

So let me prepare you for what you'll find in this book. Tony is not like your college profs, burying you under reading assignments in books that should only be used as doorstops. Instead, Tony will give you hope that reading can make a difference in your life. He'll kindle your appetite for reading. He'll provide you with expectations that are realistic and practices that are achievable. You won't be discouraged; instead you'll be hopeful—and you'll actually want to read. And most of all, you'll find that Tony leads you to keep the cross of Christ central in all the reading you do.

I wish I had received a copy of this book when I was just converted. It would have focused my youthful zeal and taught me what to read and how to read it. But you have a copy of it now. And I'm grateful you do. Because I think you will be surprised by the difference it makes in your life.

Introduction

Perhaps you love to read. You get the same feeling from a new stack of books as you get from looking at a warm stack of glazed donuts. Maybe not. For most, reading a book is like trying to drink down a huge vitamin. You know you need to read—you'll be healthier for it—but everything within you refuses to swallow!

Reading books is hard work. A world of reading distractions doesn't make it any easier. Our email inboxes *ding* with new messages, our phones *beep* with new texts, and the Internet lures us with new blog posts and video clips. Meanwhile, streams of social media in our life (like Facebook and Twitter) fill our screens constantly. Dare to look away, and you'll miss the conversation!

Yet here you are reading a book, unplugged and disconnected. Or maybe you are reading with a book in one hand and a smartphone in the other. Like the pull of gravity keeping us in our seats, our attraction to those illuminated screens can become so habitual that we never really think about it. The screens intrude, the free time we need to read books gets sucked away, and our attention gets divided.

Maybe you don't read because you think sitting in one spot for more than fifteen minutes is a waste of time. You've got to be "doing something," and reading feels like "doing nothing."

Or perhaps you don't read because when you're not working or sleeping or going to school you'd rather veg in front of television sitcoms, watch ESPN, and game the night away.

We all have our own reasons for why we don't read.

Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books is for any Christian who wants to read books, and read them well. This book covers a wide range of topics: why we should read books in the first place, how to choose the best books, how to find time to read books, and how to find joy—not drudgery—in the pages of books.

This book is particularly relevant to Christians, to men and women who have discovered the deep reality of their own sin and who now trust in the work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of those sins. The work of God's grace in your life is the solid foundation that supports lifelong reading goals.

Lit!

This book is all about light, but not the flickering illumination of a computer screen, smartphone, or television. The short title—*Lit!*—represents three things.

First, *lit* is short for *literature*, which is long for *books*, which is the topic of this book. *Lit* is a tiny word that represents many millions of books we can pick up and read.

Second, *lit* reminds us that the glow of God's creative power is all around us. God is the Supreme Being in the universe—supremely true, supremely good, supremely beautiful. He is an extravagant Creator, and his truth, goodness, and beauty are soaked deeply into his creation. In fact, “the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa. 6:3). Even in its fallen condition, creation continues to emit the Creator's glory, a glow that can be found in the pages of great books.¹ In this sense, so much “mere human” writing is truly *lit* by God, glowing as a result of his creating power and shining to the praise of his glory.

Third, and most importantly, *lit* represents a conviction underlying this entire book: Christian readers are illuminated by “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). Illuminated by the gospel, we now perceive and enjoy God's truth, goodness, and beauty—whether it's in the blazing sun of the inspired Word of God, in the moonlight of creation, or in the starlight of great books. The Holy Spirit has

opened our spiritual eyes, and our entire reading experience is now “lit” by God’s illuminating presence.

As strange as it sounds, our eyes are filled with the Creator’s glory in literature because we read in the presence of God’s radiance. The motto of the reading Christian is a dazzling doxology: “in your light do we see light” (Ps. 36:9).² Christian readers can now see and treasure the truth, goodness, and beauty that flicker in the pages of books. The whole thing is like reading books under high voltage stadium lights. We see by the illuminating grace of God.

Quest by Questions

For all that it does do for us, however, divine illumination does not make book reading easy. In fact reading will always present us with several challenges. Before I wrote this book, I listed common questions that surfaced in my own reading, such as:

- What makes reading books like swallowing a large vitamin?
- Why should I prioritize book reading in the first place?
- What do I lose if I don’t read books?
- What biblical convictions must I have before I shop at the bookstore?
- Does the gospel really shape *how* I read books? How so?
- What books should I read?
- What books should I *not* read?
- Should I read non-Christian books? Why or why not?
- How can I best read nonfiction books?
- What, if anything, can a Christian gain from reading fictional literature?
- How can I determine the difference between good fiction and bad fiction?
- Where do I find all the time I need to read books?
- Should I write marginal notes in my books?
- What are the pros and cons of reading books on an e-reader device?
- How can I encourage my friends to read books?

- How can I use books and reading groups to encourage other Christians and to build my local church?

Those questions launched me on a quest for answers. In this book I address each question as directly as possible—thanks to Scripture, a few teachers in church history, some old books, a few new books, my friends, and my own experience (mostly mistakes).

This book separates into two main sections: (1) a theology of reading books and (2) a collection of practical suggestions for reading books.

Short, Sweet

This book is short and to the point, or at least as short as I could possibly make it. The shortest chapters are short because they could be short; the longer chapters are longer because there was no possible way to make them shorter.

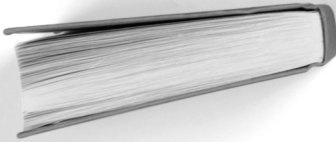
This commitment to brevity also means I make points quickly and briefly. The danger of brevity is that my suggestions may sound to some readers like edicts. Please remember whenever I give advice in this book, it is nothing more than that—advice. It's not a law or a command. Please listen to the advice, try it out, learn from it, improve it, or simply drop kick what doesn't work for you.

My prayer is that under his illuminating grace, God will be glorified as we read books full of his truth to be discovered, his goodness to be heeded, and his beauty to be cherished.



PART I

A Theology of Books and Reading



I

Paper Pulp and Etched Granite

Laying the Cornerstone of Our Theology of Books

Commit yourself to the serious reading of books, and your life will be enlightened.

That's a pretty straightforward promise, but let's be honest, there is a warning as well: books will also complicate your life.

Consider the complexities we face by walking through a bookstore. Here's how it typically works for me.

First, I start out excited. I've been looking forward to this trip to the bookstore because I need a great book. Before I even swing open the doors, I'm greeted by clearance books—hundreds of them—daring me to look at their discounted tags. What should I do? Should I give attention to these unsheltered books that got kicked to the curb? I'm suspicious. I do my best to ignore them, and suddenly feel the urge to whistle, look to the sky, and comment on the weather.

Once I'm inside the bookstore, a greater challenge awaits: the new releases. These books draw the most attention from shoppers and apparently draw the most money from their wallets (full retail

price). But the browsing is good, and there are a lot of attractive book choices.

After picking up a few books (then setting them down again), I free myself from the new releases and convince myself that an older (and more proven) book would be a better investment. So I snake my way through the maze of head-down statues and find open spaces in the Christian book section. Very few of these titles are new to me. I pick up one or two and flip through the pages.

Before long, my curiosity draws me to the rural reaches of classic literature on shelves that reach to the heavens (do shoppers buy many books that are shelved nine feet off the floor?). Here in classic literature, the crowds have thinned, but the browsing is more daunting and incriminating. Many of these books are classics that I should have *already* read. I am shamed for my inattention in school.

My hanging head notices an eight-hundred–page Russian novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The book cover is beautifully designed, the book was translated into English with great care (according to a friend of mine), and the novel is reasonably priced. My eye has caught the spine of this book many times before, and I've nearly purchased it on several of my frequent trips to the bookstore. But it's also a very thick book that asks me for a serious commitment. And I'm already married.

Now the questions are swirling in my mind: *Which book should I buy? Should I buy a bargain book? A new release? A Christian book? A business book? A classic novel? Should I browse the entire bookstore? Should I buy one book or three for the price of two? Should I read only Christian books? Wait, did I just consider three books? What am I thinking? I hardly have the time to read one book!*

Inhale. Exhale. Look to the ceiling. Reshelve Dostoyevsky.
Maybe I'll buy a DVD and a pack of gum.

I have been overwhelmed in a bookstore. Eventually, we will address the practical matters of how to select and read great books. But before we talk about how to pick the right books and how to read them (chaps. 7–15), we need to develop some biblical and theological convictions about books, reading, and bookstores (chaps. 1–6).

Our journey begins in the dust, at the base camp of a desert mountain.

Base Camp

Somewhere around 1450 BC, on a remote Egyptian mountaintop called Mount Sinai, an author wrote something so earth-shaking that the publishing industry has never recovered. It never will.

But to appreciate this moment in literary history let me set the backstory. Several weeks before Mount Sinai appeared on the skyline, God had redeemed his people from slavery. We call this event “the exodus.” This exodus was so historic that it became the central salvation event in Old Testament history. Using an army of gnats, flies, locusts, and frogs—and with the help of widespread skin disease, hailstones, a bloodied river, the death of firstborn sons, and the divine power to split the sea—God pried his people out from the tight grip of the Egyptians. Israel was now a liberated people, on a mission to gather around a mountain and serve God together (Exodus 7–12).

The voyage to this mountain was not far, and the wait was not long. In three months Israel had packed up, bolted from Egypt, and arrived at the foot of the mountain—*that* mountain, Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1).

This chosen mountain may have appeared like all the other mountains of the Sinai Peninsula—red, rocky, dry, and treeless—but it was not like all the rest. This mountain was chosen by God. It was holy. And under the threat of instant death, no man, woman, child, or red heifer dared touch it.

For two days, God’s people were to clean house and to purify themselves from all defilements. They were to bathe and wash their clothes and consecrate themselves and prepare to meet with God. On the third day, God would descend, and there they would meet together.

All was calm for two days.

On the morning of the third day, God descended.

God’s people rubbed the sleep from their eyes to behold a frightening sight. Tree-bare Mount Sinai was ablaze like a forest fire. The fire raged vertically into the heavens, and the heavens bombarded

the mountaintop with thunder and lightning. The foundations of the mountain trembled and quaked. Loose rocks crackled and thudded down the mountainside. A thick, black cloud blanketed the scene.

God's people locked their eyes on the explosive storm. It was hard to look away. Their mouths were wide and speechless, and their desert-cracked skin burned from the heat of the golden flames. Lightning flashes blinked off their clean robes. Fear quickened their hearts.

As the day progressed, the mountain roared with even greater ferocity. The fire grew white-hot, the quaking grew deafening, and lightning continued pounding the peak.

It was the sound and fury of a collision between heaven and earth, "a decisive moment in human history when the celestial and terrestrial realms are brought into panoramic engagement," where "every sort of natural fireworks let loose, so that trembling seizes not only the people but the mountain itself."¹

Especially now, no one dared approach the mountain. God's people stood at the mountain base, iced with fear. But as the people stepped back in fear, Moses stepped forward in faith (Ex. 20:18). In the face of a blazing mountain covered in dark gloom, a mediator sounded like a very good idea. *Someone* could climb the mountain to represent the people. So Moses climbed into the "thick darkness where God was" (Ex. 20:21).

Moses climbed to meet with God, to worship, and to receive God's words. Moses later recounted the experience in his autobiography:

When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone *written with the finger of God*, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. (Deut. 9:9–10)

Moses climbed back down to the people with two tablets of the Ten Commandments under his arms. These words were permanent, eternal, and etched in stone by the very finger of God.

The One who created the cosmos by the word of his mouth in the beginning, the One who invented human language in Eden, the One who spread languages across the land at Babel, now put pen to paper—or finger to stone—and wrote. To this day, those words can be found in any major bookstore.

Many thousands of books would later be devoted to talking *about* God—proving God, doubting God, explaining God. But these stone tablets held God’s words. The day God ran his fingertip over the stone tablets was the day that he forever shaped the world of book publishing.

Written in Stone

In the world of books, the Bible is without equal. We see this in six of its qualities.

The Bible is *inspired*. God is the ultimate and final author of those two tablets, and every other word of Scripture has been breathed out from the mouth of God. The Bible is the product of God’s will (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

The Bible is *inerrant*. It is true in everything it teaches. God’s Word is like silver that has been smelted sevenfold and is free of all impurities (Ps. 12:6). God’s words are always true, because God’s words are self-validating. God speaks, and his words shape and resolve what is true and good (see Gen. 1:1–31 and John 17:17).

The Bible is *sufficient*. It provides everything we need for faith, salvation, and godly living (2 Tim. 3:15–16).

The Bible is *living and active*. The Bible is composed of living and active words that revive dead hearts, rejoice broken hearts, and feed hungry souls (Matt. 4:4; 1 Cor. 1:21–24; Heb. 4:12; James 1:21).

The Bible is *supreme*. It contains the highest expressions of truth. Combine every book from every culture in human history and pile all those volumes into one vast library, and it cannot trump the supremacy of the life-giving truth in Scripture (1 Cor. 15:3–5).

The Bible offers us a *coherent worldview*. The Bible explains where we came from, where we are going, our biggest problems, and our greatest need. The Bible interprets the realities that affect us—both

physical realities that we can see and spiritual realities that we cannot see (see Rom. 4:23–25 and Eph. 6:12).

Scripture is unique. It is eternal. It never contradicts itself. It needs no editing or revision. It is perfect (Ps. 19:7). When all else has disappeared, God's word remains (Isa. 40:7–8). It lacks nothing. And it was all written by the same God who rocked Sinai.

Compost and Granite

The purpose of this book is to study reading from a Christian perspective. So how does Sinai change the way I scan rows of literature at the bookstore? What does a combustible mountaintop have to do with a classic novel by Dostoyevsky, a contemporary novel by Cormac McCarthy, the latest social insights by Malcolm Gladwell, the latest marketing book by Seth Godin, or the latest biography by David McCullough?

Everything.

Scripture is the ultimate grid by which we read every book. Scripture is perfect, sufficient, and eternal. All other books, to some degree, are imperfect, deficient, and temporary. That means that when we pick books from the bookstore shelves, we read those imperfect books in light of the perfect Book, the deficient books in light of the sufficient Book, and the temporary books in light of the eternal Book.

Man-made literature may be inspiring, but it is not divinely inspired—not in the way Scripture is inspired. Man-made literature may be empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody biblical truth, but it's not breathed out by God. Man-made literature may contain truth, goodness, and beauty, but it is also fallible, imperfect, and of temporary value.

We could say that in contrast to God's word all other books are temporary.

All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,

but the word of the Lord remains forever. . . . (1 Pet. 1:24–25; cf. Isa. 40:7–8)

Many authors are average (grass). Other authors are incredibly talented, fruitful, and colorful (flowers). But all authors (grass or flowers) are fragile. Every book that has ascended and descended from the *New York Times* bestseller list is as temporary in value as the green grass under the sweltering summer sun. Authors (including me) and their books (like this one) will return to dust. Man-made literature can help us live more wisely or grow spiritually, but only the God-inspired word is eternal.

Two Genres

Since Moses descended from the mountain with two loose-leaf stones under his arms, all literature can be divided into two genres:

- **Genre A:** *The Bible*. The Bible was written by God through human authors, but it is fully inspired in all its parts. It is the only book that is inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, and wholly consistent in its worldview.
- **Genre B:** *All other books*. However “inspired” all other literature may be, no matter how “lit” it is with truth, goodness, and beauty, no other book is infallible. All man-made books are hindered to some degree by errors, inconsistencies, and insufficiencies.

These two categories were shaped when God broke into history and ran his finger across a stone tablet. All literature is now divided into two genres—and one soars above the other in importance.

Nineteenth-century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon makes this point well:

All other books might be heaped together in one pile and burned with less loss to the world than would be occasioned by the obliteration of a single page of the sacred volume [Scripture]. At their best, all other books are but as gold leaf, requiring acres to find one ounce of the precious metal. But the Bible is solid gold. It contains

blocks of gold, mines, and whole caverns of priceless treasure. In the mental wealth of the wisest men there are no jewels like the truths of revelation. The thoughts of men are vanity, low, and groveling at their best. But he who has given us this book has said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9). Let it be to you and to me a settled matter that the word of the Lord shall be honored in our minds and enshrined in our hearts. Let others speak as they may. We could sooner part with all that is sublime and beautiful, or cheering and profitable, in *human literature* than lose a single syllable from the *mouth of God*.²

Exactly. And if it ever comes down to a decision between losing a page of Scripture or losing a comedy by Shakespeare, we must preserve Scripture.

But of course we aren’t forced to part with either of them. We get them *both*—the gold leaf *and* the gold bar. So we must ask more challenging questions: How do we rightly handle the gold leaf (man’s literature) now that we have the gold bar (God’s Bible)? Does the bar decrease the value of the leaf? Does the bar render the leaf worthless? Or does the bar increase the value of the leaf? Hold this thought, because in chapter 5 I hope to explain how God’s sovereign influence can be found in the gold leaf, even in non-Christian books.

The critical point I want you to take from this chapter is this: Before we step into a fully-stocked bookstore, we must be determined to read the *imperfect* in light of the *perfect*, the *deficient* in light of the *sufficient*, the *temporary* in light of the *eternal*, the *groveling* in light of the *transcendent*.

Mount Sinai demands that we distinguish between *temporary* books and the *eternal* Book, between a decomposing paperback from the pen of a sinner and a smoking stone tablet from the finger of God. If we fail to make this distinction, if we fail to prioritize the eternal Word over temporary books, our reading will never be distinctly Christian.



I love to read.

I hate to read.

I don't have time to read.
I only read Christian books.

I'm not good at reading.
There's too much to read.

Chances are, you've thought or said one of these exact phrases before because reading is important and in many ways unavoidable.

Learn how to better read, what to read, when to read, and why you should read with this helpful guide from accomplished reader Tony Reinke. Offered here is a theology for reading and practical suggestions for reading widely, reading well, and for making it all worthwhile.

READERS RECOMMENDING *LIT!*

"It is hard to imagine a reader of this book who would not catch the spark for reading after encountering Reinke's excitement about reading and his carefully reasoned defense of it."

Leland Ryken, Professor of English, Wheaton College;
literary stylist, *The English Standard Version® Bible*

"The perfect book for someone who does or doesn't like to read. A wise, theological, and edifying case for why words matter."

Andrew Peterson, singer/songwriter, *Counting Stars*;
author, *The Wingfeather Saga*

"If you need help to read books as both a discipline and delight—as in truth all of us do—then this is the book for you. Don't miss it!"

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors' Professor of Theology, Regent College;
author, *Knowing God*

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