

Weekly Newsletter

13th January 2026



Reflection: Robert Murray McCheyne Was Wrong!

By Jon Gemmell (this is an edited version of the full article [here](#) and Jon is writing regularly at <https://ostrichesareodd.substack.com/>)

The name Robert Murray McCheyne commands immediate respect in evangelical circles, and rightly so. His devotion to Christ, his pastoral heart, his early death at twenty-nine after pouring himself out in ministry. These facts alone secure him a place among the great saints. His Bible reading plan, designed in 1842 to take believers through the Old Testament once and the New Testament and Psalms twice each year, has become one of the most widely used spiritual disciplines in Protestant Christianity. Millions have attempted it. Most have failed. And here I must say something that feels almost sacrilegious: I think McCheyne was wrong. Not about the authority of Scripture. Not about the necessity of reading God's word. But about the method. The mysticism that good Christians read their Bible cover to cover each year is an unhelpful myth that burdens people unnecessarily, defeats them repeatedly, and puts far too much pressure on January.

Let me be clear from the outset. Reading God's word is absolutely essential. No Christian worth the name would dispute this. Scripture is God-breathed, profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It is the means by which the Spirit sanctifies believers, the lamp to our feet and light to our path. Without regular engagement with the Bible, our faith withers. Our prayers become aimless. Our theology drifts toward whatever winds of doctrine happen to be blowing through our culture at any given moment. The question is not whether we should read Scripture. The question is how.

McCheyne's plan emerged from genuine pastoral concern. He wanted his congregation at St Peter's in Dundee to know the whole counsel of God. He wanted them immersed in Scripture daily. These are good desires. Laudable desires. But somewhere between McCheyne's original intention and our contemporary practice, his plan became less a helpful tool and more a spiritual metric, a way of measuring devotion, a badge of serious Christianity. You meet someone at church and mention you're doing the McCheyne plan. Their eyes light up with recognition and respect. You meet someone and admit you're not following any particular plan, just reading a bit here and there. The response is more muted. Less impressed. There's an unspoken hierarchy at work.

This is where the burden begins. January arrives with its customary promises of renewal and fresh starts. Believers purchase new journals, sharpen pencils, download apps, and commit themselves once more to getting through the entire Bible in twelve months. For approximately three weeks, things go well. Then February arrives. Life intrudes. A sick child. A work deadline. A bout of flu. Suddenly they're five days behind. Then ten. Then they're still slogging through Leviticus in March while the plan says they should be in Judges.

What happens next is drearily predictable. Guilt sets in. The voice of condemnation whispers that real Christians, serious Christians, committed Christians don't fall behind. They don't skip days. They don't find the genealogies tedious or the ceremonial laws bewildering. For real Christians every 'quiet time'



is exhilaratingly refreshing. The believer tries to catch up, reading multiple days' worth of chapters in one sitting, eyes glazing over as they race through passages, desperate to tick boxes rather than encounter the living God. Eventually, many simply give up. They abandon the plan entirely, often abandoning consistent Bible reading altogether, defeated by a system that promised blessing but delivered only frustration.

The problem is not laziness. The problem is not lack of devotion. The problem is that the Bible does not yield its treasure to hasty enquiry, to rapid coverage, to the kind of superficial engagement that treating it like a checklist inevitably produces. Scripture is not a book to be conquered, a mountain to be summited so we can plant our flag at the top and feel accomplished. It is a library of sixty-six books, written over fifteen hundred years, in three languages, spanning multiple genres, addressing countless situations, revealing one magnificent story of God's redemptive purposes in Jesus Christ. This kind of literature requires something other than speed reading.

Think about how we approach other great books. Suppose you wanted to understand Shakespeare. Would you read all thirty-seven plays in a year, racing through one every nine or ten days? Or would you take a single play, perhaps Hamlet, and read it multiple times? You'd read it once for the plot. Again for the characters. A third time for the language. A fourth time noticing the themes. You'd read scholarly introductions. You'd watch performances. You'd memorise soliloquies. By the end of this process, Hamlet would be inside you. Its phrases would surface in your mind unbidden. You'd understand not just what happens but why it matters. You'd see connections and patterns that completely escaped you on first reading. The play would have become part of your mental furniture, shaping how you think about revenge, madness, mortality, duty.

This is what I'm proposing for Scripture. Better to pick a single book and get massively familiar with it through repeated, consistent reading. Choose Philippians, for instance. It's four chapters. You could read the entire letter in fifteen minutes. Now read it every day for a month. Then for another month. Then for a third. What happens? Initially, you notice the basic content. Paul is in prison. He's writing to a church he loves. He's joyful despite his circumstances. But keep reading. You start noticing the structure. The recurring themes. The way Paul deals with conflict. His theology of suffering. His Christology in chapter two. The warning against false teachers. The personal notes about Timothy and Epaphroditus aren't just filler but wonderfully instructive. His own testimony about counting everything as loss compared to knowing Christ...

This is not a call to read less Scripture. It's a call to read it better. To read it more deeply. To read it more sustainably. To read it in ways that actually transform us rather than merely inform us. To recover what the Puritans called closeness with the text, that intimate familiarity that comes from living with portions of Scripture until they live in us. This is what we need. This is what will actually make us people of the book.



This Week

Joe is attending the Ministry Training Conference this week being offered by the Free Church. Pray that he has a restful and refreshing time. He would also value prayer as he speaks to the men at Re-deemer Church in Colinton on Saturday.

Women's Discipleship at Holyrood

Our Women's Bible Reading Plan begins on **Monday 19 January** and we'll be using Glen Scrivener's *Reading Between the Lines*. Anna will be in touch with the details if you have signed up.

Our in person Women's Bible Studies will resume on **Thursday 22 January** at 10.30am in the church. We'll be continuing our studies in the book of Acts and coffee and scones will be provided!

Christmas Appeal 2025

The current total for the Christmas Appeal comes to **£15,461**. This is that last Sunday of the Appeal!

There are four projects that we are supporting this year in our Christmas appeal:

- Women's Workers for Tranent Community Church
- Cross Training Ministries
- Craig Anderson and the Church Plant in Galashiels
- East of Scotland Gospel

Tranent Community Church and Cross Training Ministries will each receive 40% of the total raised with Craig Anderson and the East of Scotland Gospel Partnership each receiving 10%.

The Christmas Appeal is still open and as usual people can transfer money directly into the church bank account <https://holyroodevangelical.org/giving/> or place donations into the offering box marked Christmas Appeal. Thank you!

Home Groups

Our Home Groups will resume this **Wednesday (14 January)** and meet on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of the month. This term we'll be looking at some of the training sessions produced by Passion for Life as we think about witnessing in a cross cultural context. If you're not in a Home Group yet, please contact Liz@holyroodchurch.org



Church Calendar

For your info and prayers:

- Wednesday: Home Groups
- Sunday:
 - Morning Service at 10.30am – Joe Barnard preaching (live streamed)
 - Evening Service at 6pm – Jon Gemmell preaching (live streamed)
- Monday: Baby and Toddler Group from 10am – 11.30am

