

Living Well

Christian Practices for Everyday Life

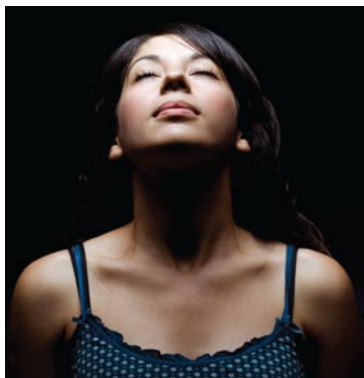
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Reading the Bible



11 Reading the Bible

Yearning



Can you hear God speaking to you? God speaks to us all the time and we all have the opportunity to listen, but can you hear God's voice? There are many ways to hear God's voice, but we hear God speaking in a very distinctive and remarkably clear way by listening to God's word in the Bible. The Bible is a privileged book above all other books, and it gives us a special opportunity to hear God speak. Here are three stories of people who are surprised and encouraged by reading the Bible.

I Found Courage in My Closet

August 2, 2004 was no ordinary Monday evening in our home. Friends and relatives were gathered to pray with me and show their love and support as the next morning I would have brain surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. I was hugging and kissing everyone; I was sure it would be the last time I would see them. Someone commented that it appeared like I was saying my last goodbyes: I was. I wanted them all to know how much I loved them—just in case. Who survives brain surgery anyway, I thought. Many prayers were said and many tears were shed, and when our guests took their leave and the house was quiet, I turned to God in private prayer. *Oh please, dear God, let me live. My three children need me. Please let me have a steady hand after the surgery so I can still do my work. I just want to be the same person when it's all over.* Then I drifted off to sleep.

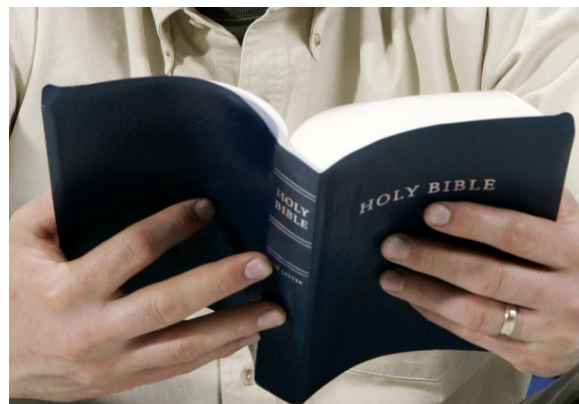
The next morning as I was walking out the door to go to the hospital I remembered that I would need a book to read. The first book that came to mind was a spiritual book that a friend had recently given to me, but then I realized that I needed only one book: the red paperback Bible I had received from our church's family program. It was on the shelf in the hall closet. I'm embarrassed to say that it had been there undisturbed for at least a year.

When I opened the closet door and reached for it, I inadvertently knocked it to the floor. It fell open to Isaiah chapter 41. As I lifted it up to my eyes, they were drawn only to verse 10, and that was all I read on the page.

Do not be afraid—I am with you! I am your God—let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save you.

Tears came to my eyes. God was with me. I could get through this! I really heard God telling me personally that everything was going to be fine, and the image of Jesus holding my hand filled my mind; it brought me great comfort and joy. In that moment I moved from fear to courage. With Bible in hand I marched out to the car and headed off to the hospital with my family.

I survived the surgery, and after 33 treatments of radiation and some drug therapy, I have a clean bill of health.



From the day I survived brain surgery up to the present day, I have been reading the Bible every morning and evening. I began by reading the entire Bible, twelve chapters a day at first, and then I dropped it to seven a day. Now I focus on the New Testament.

Through all of my radiation treatments and MRIs, the image of Jesus holding my hand has sustained me. In a way, I'm thankful for my brain tumor because without it, I would never have developed the daily practice of reading God's word, and I would never have had the opportunity to become so close to Jesus.

I share my joy with people by visiting hospitals on a regular basis to encourage people who are ill. When the opportunity presents itself, I share my story and urge others to pick up their Bibles. I think if more people would read the Bible there would be less tragedy, less depression and less anxiety in the world. It gives us so much strength, and it's so simple; it doesn't cost anything to pick up your Bible and read, but the benefits are priceless.

(Interview by Jim Merhaut with Debbie Hunkus, April 2008)

Cover to Cover

My older sister gave me my first Bible when I went away to college. It sat on a shelf in the dorm for months, unopened. Frankly I might never have used it if not for the example of my Protestant roommate, who read her Bible every night. I admired her dedication and even envied it. But like many folks, I found the Bible intimidating. I was pretty sure I wouldn't understand it, would find the language confounding and the ancient context alienating. Also I secretly expected to be bored silly.

But to my surprise, once I started reading the Bible, I was never bored. I even used the method most frowned upon by every source I've since consulted: I read the whole thing front to back, down to the footnotes. If you're



a disciplined kamikaze reader like me, this approach may work for you. I paced myself at three chapters a day, which took about 20 minutes each morning—I've squandered that much time deciding which shirt to wear. At that humble rate I reached the end of the Book of Revelation in just under two years.

This life-transforming encounter led me to study the Bible more formally. Now I teach Scripture to help casual readers feel more comfortable with venturing into that undiscovered country for themselves.

(Alice Camille, *Step One: Open the Book*)

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Johnny Cash's Lifesaving Verse

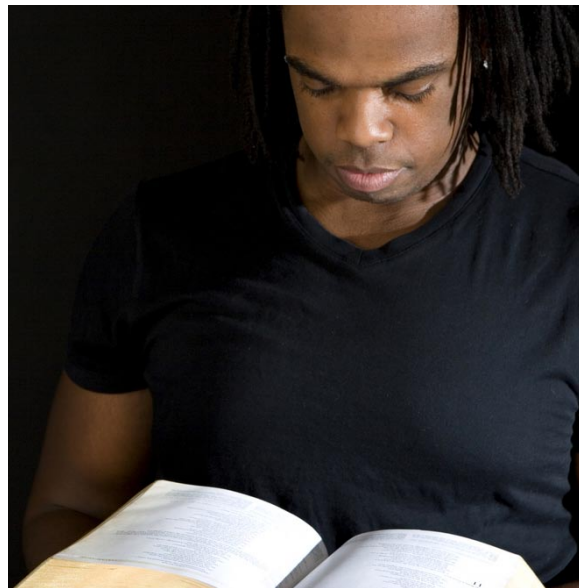
Some people settle in on one life-defining Bible verse. This doesn't mean that the rest of the Bible becomes irrelevant, but we all have particular needs as we approach God in the scriptures. God will speak to us in the way we need to hear the divine voice.

Perhaps the most recognized voice in country music history, Johnny Cash recorded more than 1,500 songs in a career that spanned six decades. He lived and worked at a hectic pace—a pace that took its toll on him. Turning to drugs only brought more chaos to his life. But through it all he remained a man of faith, and his life was saved, he says, by his “one verse.”

Born in Kingsland, Arkansas, in 1932, Cash grew up on his parents' cotton farm, farming by day and singing hymns from his mother's hymnbook at night. Upon completing high school, he enlisted in the Air Force, and was stationed in West Germany as a radio intercept officer. It was in Germany, in the early '50s, that Cash bought his first guitar and penned what would become one of his best-known songs, “Folsom Prison Blues.”

When his Air Force posting was completed, Cash moved to Memphis to try to break into the music business. In 1954, hoping to record some gospel songs, he auditioned at Sun Records. Instead, Sam Phillips—who had discovered Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis—pushed Cash toward a more commercial style.

The advice proved to be sound, and by 1958, Cash had appeared at the Grand Ole Opry, published 50 songs, and sold more than 6 million records, with hits like “Cry, Cry, Cry,” and “I Walk the Line”.



Away from the spotlight, however, Cash's life was becoming more chaotic. The strain of fame “was hard to handle,” he would later say, “that's why I turned to pills.” But in reality, the drugs that he took only amplified the stresses in his life, resulting in several arrests, and the end of his 12-year marriage to Vivian Liberto, in 1966. As Time magazine put it, “Here was a man who knew the Commandments because he had broken so many of them.”

“There is a spiritual side to me that goes real deep,” Cash once told Rolling Stone, “but I confess right up front that I'm the biggest sinner of them all.”

Romans 8:13 reads: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (NKJV)

“Years ago I claimed this Scripture as my own promise, and I feel that there were many times a lifesaving situation was realized by turning to this Scripture for counsel,” Cash said in a 1997 devotional book by Art Toalston, called “Lamp Unto My Feet.” “In other words,” he continued, “the Scriptures, or God speaking through them, have saved my life. This Scripture especially.”

(Robert Everitt)

Reflecting

It is a well-known fact that the Bible is the best selling book in all of history. There is an enormous hunger in humanity to be in touch with the word of God. That hunger seems to fluctuate depending on our perceptions about our security. In one New York City bookstore Bible sales increased between ten and twenty percent during the first Gulf war in the 1990s. When the World Trade Center towers collapsed after the terrorist attacks in September 2001, Bible sales at the same bookstore increased fifty to sixty percent. When Americans are not in crisis, Bible sales and sales of other religious and spiritual books tend to decline. You've heard of fair-weather fans; well, reading God's word, at least for some, seems to be a foul-weather practice. But the hunger is still there. We just can't feel it strongly when we are filling ourselves with other distracting preoccupations.

The Bible in Our Lives

Consider the following questions as a guide to help you get in touch with your own hunger for the word of God:

- What feelings do I experience when I see a Bible? Am I curious? Do I feel a sense of anticipation? Am I intimidated? Am I angry?
- Where do I keep my Bible in my home? Does its location help or hinder my Bible-reading habits?
- How often do I read the Bible?
- How often did my family of origin read the Bible together?
- Have I ever participated in a Bible study? If so, when and where? If not, why?
- If I wanted to study the Bible, where would I go to find a reputable Bible study?
- Do I get discouraged from Bible reading when I meet other people who seem to know a lot about the Bible? Why?
- Do I experience the Word of God in places other than the Bible? If so, where? If not, why?

What Keeps Us from Reading the Bible?

Christians are intimidated by the Bible; that's a funny thing to say, isn't it? It's kind of like saying chefs are intimidated by cookbooks. Well, it's not exactly the same thing, but it does make a point. Why should Christians be so wary of the book on which they base so much of their faith? In general, Christians don't see themselves as competent Bible readers. Too many Christians think the Bible is inaccessible to them, and they rob themselves of hearing God's word in a way they otherwise cannot.

It's true; the Bible is a book that was written a long time ago in a land far away. Some of the names and places are strange and hard to pronounce. Some of the customs and ideas described in the Bible are completely foreign to us. This certainly does make reading some parts of the Bible quite challenging for the average person; but that's not all there is to the Bible.

The Bible has as much simple wisdom as it has complex theology, and with a little work, even many of the difficult parts can make sense. But the main reason we have to read and listen to the Bible is because it is the clearest way for us to hear what God has to say to us. The Bible puts us in touch with Jesus like nothing else can, and if we claim to be Christians, we have to be in touch with Jesus. Our lives depend on it.

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Exploring

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.

(Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book*)

Reading with Mind and Heart

Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

—Matthew 22:37–40

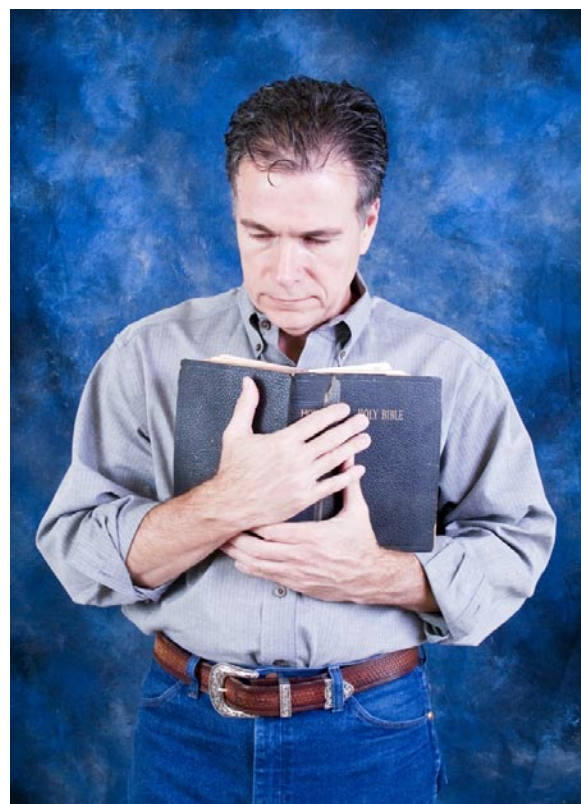
Some people study the Bible. They can tell you all about its literary structure. They can tell you when each book was written. They can tell you the historical circumstances that influenced the author. They can even pronounce all of those lengthy foreign names. But they can't seem to understand that God deeply desires a relationship with them. These people read with the mind but not with the heart.

Some people become deeply infatuated with the Bible. They savor every word they read, although they may only read certain sections of certain books. They read the ones that feel good. They take these readings to heart and build their lives around them, and they try to build others' lives around them too. They desperately want everyone to feel the way they feel. Some people read with the heart but not with the mind.

The Christian practice of reading the Bible calls us to read with both mind and heart. We need to open our minds to the wisdom of those who have given their lives to studying the biblical texts. It's important to get beyond private reading and allow the community of faith to guide us. Joining a reputable Bible study can help us read with an open mind. A good Bible

study will challenge us to hear God's word with someone else's ear. We can become more Christ-like when we welcome the perspectives of others who share the body of Christ with us.

We also need to open our hearts. We can be surprised by joy when we discover a deep and personal relationship with the person who lives behind the text. As we read the Bible, our intention should be to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ and his followers, as well as increase our love for God and for our neighbor. All of what we learn when we read the Bible should be at the service of these loving relationships. Robert Mulholland puts it this way:



Yes, we must love God with all of our mind. We must seek to utilize our cognitive, intellectual, rational dynamics to the best of our ability. We cannot shirk this at all. However, we must remember that the injunction to love God with all of our mind comes a little bit farther down the road in Jesus' list; loving God with all of our heart and all of our soul precedes loving God with all of our mind.

(Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*)

A heartfelt reading of Scripture is of primary importance. Our academic study of the Bible helps keep our hearts in balance, but it is not the goal of Bible reading. Study serves the loving relationships we have with God and others; love should never take a back seat to study.

Hearing and Obeying

When Jesus had said this, a woman spoke up from the crowd and said to him, "How happy is the woman who bore you and nursed you!" But Jesus answered, "Rather, how happy are those who hear the Word of God and obey it!"

—Luke 11:27–28

Hearing the Word of God and obeying it is the secret to living well and living a Christian life. It is even more important than a blood relationship with Jesus. Mary's holiness is not based upon her physical relationship with Jesus; rather, it is based upon her openness to hearing God's word and obeying it. Jesus is not contradicting the woman's assertion in Luke 11:27; he is redirecting it.

Reading Scripture with human "eyes" alone is like mentally registering the words of the text without recognizing who is speaking through them.

(Richard Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*)



It's one thing to read the Bible; it's quite another thing to hear the word of God. Are you really listening to the word of God when you read the Bible, or are you simply looking at black ink on white pages?

"Listen, then, if you have ears!"

—Matthew 11:15

Jesus frequently exhorts his followers to listen, but it is not simply listening to sound waves from another voice. The listening that Jesus wants us to do is listening with our hearts. It is a listening that changes us, like Elizabeth listening to Mary's greeting in Luke's gospel.

Soon afterward Mary got ready and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby moved within her. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and said in a loud voice, "You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Why should this great thing happen to me, that my Lord's mother comes to visit me? For as soon as I heard your greeting, the baby within me jumped with gladness. How happy you are to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true!"

—Luke 1:39–45

Mary heard the word of God when the angel appeared to her earlier in Luke's gospel. She believed it and obeyed it. Likewise, Elizabeth was a woman who heard God's word and obeyed it. She had ears that were connected to her heart, and when she heard the greeting from the woman who was filled with the living Word of God, she heard it and it caused a stirring deep within her body. And then she could not help herself. She had to proclaim in a loud voice what she had heard.

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Hearing with Hopeful Obedience

When we listen to the word of God in the Bible, we should listen through the lens of hopefulness. The text calls us to an obedient response. The words of the Bible are not empty promises; they are promises full of the power to change our lives and the power to change the world. We should expect that power to be released in us every time we open the Bible.

Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if any hear my voice and open the door, I will come into their house and eat with them, and they will eat with me.

—Revelation 3:20

Opening the Bible is like opening the door to a world filled with hope, because Jesus is on the other side of the door waiting for us to let him in. His promise is that if we open the door, he will come in and share nourishment with us, and his nourishment will strengthen us for our life's journey. It is important for us to hope for this power to be unleashed when Jesus speaks, as Jesus rewards those who listen to him with hopeful obedience.

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a Roman officer met him and begged for help: "Sir, my servant is sick in bed at home, unable to move and suffering terribly." "I will go and make him well," Jesus said. "Oh no, sir," answered the officer. "I do not deserve to have you come into my house. Just give the order, and my servant will get well. I, too, am a man under the authority of superior officers, and I have soldiers under me. I order this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and I order that one, 'Come!' and he comes; and I order my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was surprised and said to the people following him, "I tell you, I have never found anyone in Israel with faith like this. I assure you that many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven. But those who should be in the Kingdom will be thrown out into the darkness, where they will cry and gnash their teeth." Then Jesus said to the officer, "Go home, and what you believe will be done for you." And the officer's servant was healed that very moment.

—Matthew 8:5–13

The Roman officer believed in the power of Jesus' word. He hoped obediently for that power to change things in his life. But notice that his obedience was not forced. He freely approached Jesus, and Jesus freely gave him that for which he hoped. Jesus does not drag us into obedience. We are invited to open the door, hear the word, and obey it freely.

Acting on What We Hear

When Jesus calls, will you go?

As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, catching fish with a net. Jesus said to them, “Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.” At once they left their nets and went with him.

—Mark 1:16–18

And so the lives of two true disciples began. They heard the word of God and they acted on it. They gave up everything for Jesus, who would love them and save them.

The true test of whether or not we are hearing God’s word is how we are living. Living well in response to God’s word means that we allow what we hear in Scripture to guide every dimension of our lives. We all know and believe that Jesus came to save us, but we often forget that he saves every part of us: heart, soul, mind, and body. We won’t experience the true depth of God’s love for us until we surrender every part of our lives to the guidance of God’s word. Our jobs, our pastimes, our households, our finances, our friendships, our battles, our thoughts and our words must all be guided by God’s word.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. He spoke the word of God to them, explaining how all Scripture points to him. They heard the word of God, took it to heart, and were prepared to encounter him personally in the breaking of the bread. Their response was action:

They said to each other, “Wasn’t it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” They got up at once and went back to Jerusalem, where they found the eleven disciples gathered together with the others and saying, “The Lord is risen indeed! He has appeared to Simon!”

—Luke 24:32-34

What makes this action more compelling is that they raced back to Jerusalem at night, a dangerous adventure in those times. The fear of the night could not overpower the fire burning in their hearts, a fire burning for love of Jesus and for love of their neighbors who needed to hear the good news.

Hearing the word of God set their hearts on fire. Does your heart burn when you hear God’s word in the Bible? Do you allow the fire to motivate you into action? How do you live well through the Christian practice of reading the Bible?



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Whatever merit there is in anything that I have written is simply due to the fact that when I was a child, my mother daily read me a part of the Bible and daily made me learn a part of it by heart.

(John Ruskin)

You may as well quit reading and hearing the word of God, and give it to the devil, if you do not desire to live according to it.

(Martin Luther)

Reading the Bible

The first practical task for a Christian who wants to practice reading the Bible is to get into the habit of reading the Bible. This takes some self-discipline, but the effort will pay great rewards. Consider these few suggestions:

- *Choosing a Bible.* Get a translation of the Bible that you can understand. The Good News Translation and the Contemporary English Version (American Bible Society) are written in plain English. Some translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New International Version (NIV) or the New American Bible (NAB), use language that is closer to the original meaning of the Hebrew or Greek words in the Bible, and are excellent study Bibles.
- *Browsing the library.* Most people will not read the Bible from cover to cover, and there are plenty of reasons not to. The Bible is a collection of widely diverse books written by different authors, who wrote to different audiences while having particular purposes in mind. Therefore, each book has a unique flavor of its own. One book does not necessarily follow the book that precedes it.

Just as you wouldn't go into a library and read each book, from the first shelf to the last, you don't need to feel obligated to read the Bible from the first book to the last. It will help to join a Bible study or read a book about the Bible to get a sense of how the whole thing is put together and how you can develop a reading plan that will work for you. That being said, we also need to acknowledge that there is a certain unity in the Bible. Even though each book is different, they are all inspired by the one God, and God's unifying presence can be discovered anywhere in the Bible.

- *Seeing your Bible.* Keep your Bible visible. If you don't see it, you're not likely to read it. Some people like to create a little Bible space in a room in their home. Choose a location that is visible and accessible to the whole family. Place your Bible on a stand in a corner. If you have young children, make room for a children's Bible as well. Adorn the area with items such as a candle, a cross, a statue, or a plant. This is fine as long as it doesn't become a dust-collecting decoration.



■ *Playing the name game.*

1. Write the following Bible names on separate slips of paper: Mary, Adam, Samson, Herod, Eli, Esau, Elizabeth, David, Martha, Ruth, Rebecca, Cain, Paul, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Simeon, Elijah. Put these names in a bowl.
 2. Write the following Bible names on separate slips of paper: Joseph, Eve, Delilah, Herodias, Samuel, Jacob, Zechariah, Jonathan, Mary, Naomi, Isaac, Abel, Barnabas, Abraham, Rachel, Aaron, Anna, Elisha. Put these names in a separate bowl.
 3. Each player takes turns drawing one piece of paper from each bowl. If the player believes he or she has a biblical match, the player must say so. If correct, the player is awarded a point. If incorrect, the player loses a point.
 4. Continue play until all characters are appropriately matched. Players can get a bonus point by telling a detail about the biblical pair that they match.
5. Here are the proper matches and corresponding Bible verses:
- a. Mary and Joseph: Luke 2:4–7
 - b. Adam and Eve: Genesis 2:7–3:24
 - c. Samson and Delilah: Judges 16:4–22
 - d. Herod and Herodias: Matthew 14:1–12
 - e. Eli and Samuel: 1 Samuel 3:1–18
 - f. Esau and Jacob: Genesis 25:19–34
 - g. Elizabeth and Zechariah: Luke 1:57–80
 - h. David and Jonathan: 1 Samuel 20:1–42
 - i. Martha and Mary: Luke 10:38–42 and John 11:1–44
 - j. Ruth and Naomi: Ruth 1:1–22
 - k. Rebecca and Isaac: Genesis 24:1–66
 - l. Cain and Abel: Genesis 4:1–16
 - m. Paul and Barnabas: Acts 13:43–52
 - n. Sarah and Abraham: Genesis 18:1–15
 - o. Jacob and Rachel: Genesis 29:15–30
 - p. Moses and Aaron: Exodus 4:1–17
 - q. Simeon and Anna: Luke 2:22–38
 - r. Elijah and Elisha: 1 Kings 19:9–21



■ *Connecting your cell phone and Bible.* What would happen if you gave your Bible the same attention you give your cell phone or personal planner? How many times do you look at your cell phone or personal planner each day? Get a pocket-sized version of the New Testament. Every time you pull out your cell phone or planner, pull out your Bible and read a verse or two.

■ *Reading to each other.* One of the greatest joys in the life of a young child is hearing a parent read a story. Reading out loud to children accomplishes so much. It helps to develop language skills. It strengthens the bond of love by providing quality time together. It engages the senses in so many ways:

- touching: parent and child snuggle together
- hearing: each hear the words
- seeing: each see the pictures
- smelling: children frequently comment on the comforting fragrance of mom or dad

There are many outstanding children's Bibles that parents can use during these intimate moments. Also, there's no reason to stop doing this as children grow older. While it may not be appropriate to get into your child's bed after a certain age, you can still sit on the sofa together and enjoy shared reading of Scripture on a regular basis.

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■ *Using devotional aids.* There are a lot of small prayer booklets available on the market with short Scripture readings for the day along with a brief meditation on the reading. These can be very helpful because they are easy to use and small enough to transport anywhere. One drawback is that it releases you from the task of walking your fingers through the pages of the Bible. If these devotional books are your only exposure to the Bible, then you will miss the opportunity to get comfortable with the Bible as a single volume.

■ *Reading with the heart.*

1. Read a Bible passage slowly.
2. Read it again and pay attention to any verses that draw your attention.
3. Read those attention-grabbing verses again until one really settles in your heart.
4. Write that verse down on a piece of paper and carry it with you for the day.

■ *Proclaiming a Bible verse.* If in your reading you come across a verse that really excites you, proclaim it to everyone in the household. Share your pearl of wisdom. Let your family know what you've found. Tell them what it means to you and how it will change your life. What you hear in the dark you should proclaim in the light (see Matthew 10:27).

■ *Searching for life messages.* Search the Bible for a few verses that are especially meaningful for you at this time in your life. Many people find simple phrases in the Psalms, the Gospels, or in one of the New Testament letters that seem to have been written especially for them at a particular time in their lives. These verses can be committed to memory and be a source of guidance, comfort, or celebration depending on why the verse was chosen.

■ *Sharing your life message.* Invite everyone in the family to choose a life verse and share it around the meal table. As family members grow and change, life verses will change as well. Do this exercise regularly.

■ *Decorating a Bible story.* Here's an activity that works with all ages. Select a weekly Bible story (perhaps one that you heard at church). Write some of the key verses from the story on a piece of blank paper. Include the book, chapter, and verse reference on the paper. Keep the paper in a prominent place, such as the meal table. Each day, invite the members of your household to decorate the paper by adding one symbol or drawing inspired by the reading.

■ *Developing a lectionary reading plan.* Try a lectionary-based reading plan. The lectionary is common to many Christian denominations. Ask your pastor if your church follows the lectionary readings at your Sunday worship service. Your pastor should also be able to provide you with a schedule of the readings for the three-year cycle of the lectionary.

The lectionary has a consistent structure that includes three readings and a psalm. The first reading is usually from the Old Testament. The second reading is usually from one of the epistles (a New Testament letter). The third reading is always a Gospel reading. Here's a seven-day reading plan to make Sunday worship the center of your Bible-reading spirituality:

- Thursday: read the first reading for the upcoming Sunday.
- Friday: read the second reading for the upcoming Sunday.
- Saturday: read the Gospel for the upcoming Sunday.
- Sunday: worship with your church community and hear all the readings proclaimed.
- Monday: read the gospel from the previous Sunday.
- Tuesday: read the second reading from the previous Sunday.
- Wednesday: read the first reading from the previous Sunday.
- Thursday: begin the process again with a new set of readings for the upcoming Sunday.

Notice how this structure places Sunday at the center of your reading plan, and it also places the Gospel at both the end and the beginning of your week (Saturday and Monday). You'll start your week off with Jesus and finish your week with Jesus. It will also get you in the habit of reading various parts of the Bible. A final feature of this plan is that you will be able to make easy connections between the first reading of the previous week and the first reading of the upcoming week because you will read one on Wednesday and the next on Thursday.

■ Finding topical readings.

Read the verses after the topic to assist you with a thematic reading of Scripture.

Affliction: Romans 8:18–25, 35–39; Sirach 2:1–18; John 14:1–3; Matthew 11:28–30; Philippians 4:12–13; 2 Corinthians 1:3–7.

Anger: James 1:19–21; Ephesians 4:26; Proverbs 12:16; Sirach 30:24; Colossians 3:12–13; Psalm 37:7–8

Charity/love: John 13:1–15, 15:9–13; Romans 12:9–21, 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; 1 Peter 4:8–10; 1 John 3:11–20; 1 John 4:7–12, 18–21.

Children: Proverbs 23:22–25; Sirach 3:1–8, 12–16; 7:27–28; Luke 2:2–52, Luke 9:37–43, 18:15–17; Mark 10:13–16; 1 John 3:1–3.

Confusion about God: Isaiah 55:8–9; James 1:13–14; 1 Peter 4:12–13; James 1:2–3; Luke 6:22–23; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Death: 1 Corinthians 15:19–22; John 11:1–44; Romans 5:12–15; Colossians 3:1–4.

Discouragement: Philippians 4:6–8; Psalm 138:7–8; John 14:1; John 14:27; Philippians 1:6; Psalm 94:18–19

Family: Colossians 3:18–21; Mark 3:33–35; Acts 2:42–47; Joel 2:15–16; Deuteronomy 31:12–13; 1 Corinthians 12:12–26.

Fear: John 4:18; 2 Timothy 1:6–7; Romans 8:15; Psalm 91:1–5; Proverbs 3:25–26; Isaiah 43:2; Sirach 34:14; Matthew 10:28

Forgiveness: Ezekiel 36:25–36; Matthew 18:15–18, 21–35; Luke 15:11–32.

Friendship: Sirach 6:5–17, 9:10–16, 13:1–13; Luke 10:25–37, 11:5–13; John 15:14–17, 20:11–18.

Happiness or joyfulness: Psalm 4:8–9; Psalm 16:11; Psalm 34:6; Psalm 71:23; Isaiah 29:19; Acts 2:28; 3 John 1:4

Hatred: Psalm 25:18–20; Deuteronomy 31:6; Jeremiah 1:8; Psalm 18:1–4; Psalm 25:1–2; Proverbs 16:7; Proverbs 24:17; Luke 1:69–71

Impatience: Romans 8:24–25; Psalm 37:7–8; Proverbs 25:15; Ephesians 4:1–3; James 5:8–10

Life: Isaiah 65:17–25; Genesis 1:1–2:4; John 15:4–7; Romans 6:3–11, Romans 20–23; Matthew 7:13–14; 1 John 5:9–13.

Loneliness: Psalm 25:16–17; Isaiah 41:10; Isaiah 41:13; John 14:18; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 73:23–24; Revelation 3:20

Marriage: Genesis 2:18–24; Deuteronomy 24:5; Isaiah 62:3–5; Matthew 19:3–11; 1 Corinthians 7:3–5; Ephesians 5:22–33.

Parents: John 19:26–27; Ephesians 6:4; Sirach 30:1–13; 1 John 5:1–2; Isaiah 66:7–13.

Peace: Ezekiel 34:25–31; Isaiah 2:2–5; John 20:19–26; Luke 24:36–43; Philippians 4:4–7; 2 Timothy 2:20–26.

Physical illness: Psalm 103:2–3; Jeremiah 30:17; James 5:14–15; Exodus 23:25; Sirach 31:22; Matthew 10:1

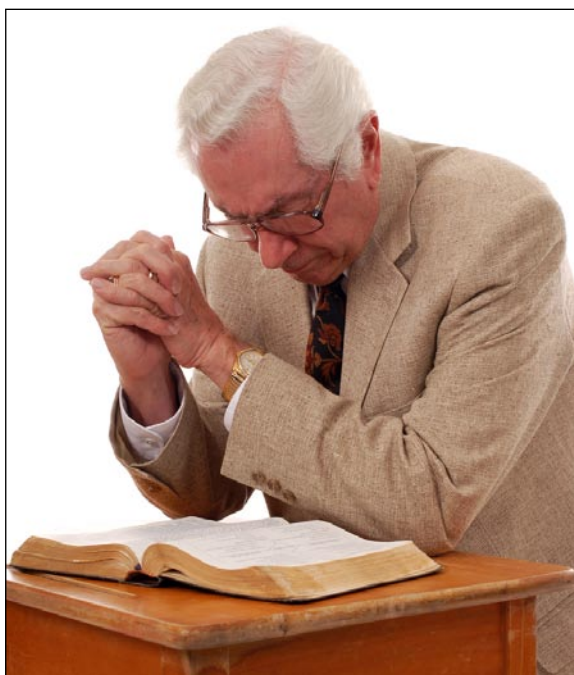
Sadness: Sirach 30:21–23; Matthew 5:4; 2 Corinthians 4:8–10; Ecclesiastes 7:3; Matthew 19:21–22; Isaiah 41:10; Proverbs 15:30

Temptation: Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4:15–16; 1 Timothy 6:9; Psalm 119:9–11; James 1:13–14; Ephesians 6:10–11

Thankfulness: Tobit 12:6; Psalm 107; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 30:13; Psalm 105:1; Psalm 118; Daniel 3:89; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Exodus 18:8–12; Psalm 111; John 11:41–42; Ephesians 1:3–6; Philippians 1:3–6.

Worry: Matthew 6:25; Matthew 6:34; 1 Peter 5:6–7; Philippians 4:18–19; Mark 13:11; Philippians 4:6

11 Reading the Bible



Studying the Bible

Any tool that you use to help you interpret and study the word of God in a Bible passage, whether it is a group Bible study, an Internet resource, a book, or a conversation with your pastor, should help you to answer at least three questions:

1. What is happening in the reading?
2. How is the happening in the reading present in today's world?
3. How is the happening in the reading present in my life?

Here's an example, using Matthew 18:1–5, that might clarify the three questions.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, asking, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" So Jesus called a child to come and stand in front of them, and said, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me."

—Matthew 18:1–5

1. *What is happening in the reading?* You can get to the answer to this question in a number of ways.
 - Identify the characters by name.
 - Identify the words and phrases that seem significant to you.
 - Identify the emotions or feelings that are expressed by the characters.
 - Identify the plot and theme of the reading.
 - Consult a commentary that will help you discover if there are any important details that a twenty-first century reader would likely miss. For example, the word that Jesus would have used for "child" is synonymous with the word "slave." Jesus is not instructing his followers to become childish; he is telling them to become humble, powerless, and dependent. This childlike or slave-like disposition, not arrogance or selfish ambition, is the path to Christian greatness.
2. *How is the occurrence in the reading present in today's world?* There are many people in our world who selfishly pursue greatness at the expense of others. Here are some sources and examples for you to consider:
 - Newspaper stories about murders that are committed for personal or financial gain.
 - Corrupt politicians who are more concerned about selfish desires than service.
 - Television programs that glorify selfish ambition at the expense of harmonious relationships.
 - An unbalanced competitive spirit that compels some people to cheat to get to the top.



3. *How is the occurrence in the reading present in my life?* This may be the most difficult question to answer because it requires an honest examination of conscience. Consider these suggestions:

- What characters do I like or dislike in the reading?
- Why do I like particular characters?
- Why do I dislike particular characters?
- How do I see what I like and dislike in my own personality?
- How do I compete with others in my life?
- What is my definition of greatness?
- Am I willing to be dependent upon others? Why or why not?
- Am I willing to hand my life over to God in the way that a young child must be dependent upon a parent? Why or why not?

The critical task here is to discern how the word of God you discover in the Bible is also calling you and guiding you outside of the Bible, in your daily life. When we develop an understanding of the word of God in the Bible, we are then in a privileged position to seek out and follow Jesus, the living Word, with more confidence in our daily experiences. The Bible helps us to clarify the identity of Jesus so we will recognize him when he presents himself to us in every moment of every day.

Resources for Living the Christian Practice of Reading the Bible

Go to our project web site
www.lifelongfaith.com
 for exciting ideas, practical resources,
 and recommended books and web
 sites to help you live the Christian
 practice of reading the Bible.

11 Reading the Bible

Praying

Pray the following prayer each time you read your Bible:

Open my ears to hear you.

Open my mind to absorb the meaning of your sacred book.

Open my eyes to see your living Word active in the world.

Open my heart to courageously love you.

Open my hands to serve you in others as I carry your word with me always.

