

## **How to Read the Bible**

Study is one of the three basic disciplines of the Brotherhood. As Bob has suggested in his guide "Equipping the Saints," the Bible is the place from which all study begins. It's amazing how much I managed to read about the Bible without reading much of it as I was coming up in the church. I've learned, though, that there's no substitute for spending time "in the Word."

Before I get into the "hows" of reading the Bible, though, I am desperate to address the question of "Why?" I suspect that each of you, reading this, had an instant response of one sort or another. Many of those responses would run along the lines of "Because we're supposed to!"

### **But why? What's the purpose?**

If you're like me, you have come up in the church thinking that reading the Bible is what you do to know about God, and to know about what you're supposed to do. I know that's what I believed, even though I couldn't quite put it into words at first.

And boy, was I wrong.

We don't read the Bible to know about God, we read the Bible to know God. And we read the Bible to know ourselves.

Yes, the Bible has much in it that can guide our footsteps, but all of that is utterly useless until the pages of Scripture have led us into His Presence and introduced us to Him in all his Majesty and Mercy. In the Word, God reveals Himself, and He reveals us to ourselves, broken and beloved.

In Him we discover what it is to be loved by a God whose very nature is the love He bestows on us. And in Him we also discover who we were created to be, and how far we've fallen from that lofty purpose, and how far He'll reach to gather us back to Himself.

I know many, many Christians who do not spend time in the Word because someone convinced them that this was just about learning more stuff about God. Or it was about learning more stuff they were supposed to do each day. No one ever taught them how to enter into the sweet pages of the Bible and bathe in the love that irradiates every stroke of the pen.

If Christians understood that they can pick up the Bible and walk into the arms of the Father that receives them with love and kisses every time they return to Him, there wouldn't be one of them who didn't keep a secret text in her pocketbook or in his desk at work.

If Christians read the Bible to experience Him, rather than to add to “knowledge,” we'd all glow with such utter rapture that our co-workers would think us as drunk as the disciples were accused of being on the Day of Pentecost. And remember, Peter converted 5000 to Jesus on that day alone! Imagine the full pews in the Episcopal churches!

So, let's get the order right. Until you can look into the pages of the Bible and see the Eyes of Love looking back out at you, your first task is to pursue Him in your reading. Pursuing “knowledge” before you can do it while resting in Him leads only to division and frustration. “We know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” (I Corinthians 8:1b-3)

This means that we place all reading of His Holy Word in the context of worship. Indeed, we cannot read the Word aright without doing so in His Presence, and we cannot bear to be in His Presence without worshipping Him!

Some of you have been a part of the Cursillo movement. Did you know that the prayer we often use to begin our group reunions was first used as a prayer before reading the Bible?

“Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of Your love. Send forth Your Spirit, and You will renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise, and ever enjoy His consolations.”

Amen.

This was not its only use, but I have a Bible from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with that prayer printed in the very beginning.

Now, I've said that prayer so many times I hardly hear what I'm saying any more, but this is what it means to read the Bible in the context of worship. Not the reading of a set prayer before opening the book, but the seeking of His Spirit, His fire. We would all do well to refuse to open it at all until we are starved for His Presence.

Then, when we enter into this gift that is the Bible, the words will set us alight as they did Clopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32)

Of course, not many of us are accustomed to spending time in His Presence. We don't really know how to seek Him. I have found, though, if I persist in my desire to

experience Him in the Word, He is faithful to reveal Himself. I cannot say this often enough, or in enough different ways. The desire to find the One that Jesus called "Father" in the Bible, the transformation that we can experience in our contemplation of His Glory, that is why we read the Bible. Everything else is secondary.

## **About the "How's"**

So, if we are first to go to Scripture to experience God, to know Him and His Son, and the power of the Spirit, what do we DO?

First, let me comment on one thing that is a pet peeve of mine. Most of us read the Bible silently to ourselves. This surely has blessed a lot of people over the years, so I don't want to say it "doesn't work," but I do want to point something out. The Bible was written to be heard, not read silently. When God inspired the writers of Scripture to put those words on vellum or parchment, He did it in a world where very, very few people could read. Almost all of the early believers, whether Israelite or followers of Jesus, were people who heard the Bible. If it is possible to "read" the Bible with your ears, I strongly recommend it.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

The best way to "read with your ears" is to read in the company of other believers. Take turns reading so that no one is prevented from enjoying the "hearing" of Scripture. This is the best way, because the addition of other believers to the time spent in Scripture enhances the power of the Spirit to move in the gathered. Wherever two or three of us are gathered, He is present. Still, many of us live in secular environments (even our families are essentially secular) and so reading together is not always possible as a part of personal devotion. Even so, there are ways to "read" Scripture with our ears that do not require the presence of others.

The first of these other ways is simply to read aloud rather than silently. I remember being taught not to do this in first grade. Our teachers even fussed at us if we moved our lips! The older I get, the more I think this was a mistake. Somehow, this reading silently to ourselves seems to be a way that society cut us off from one another long before computer keyboards and playstations came along. Reading aloud to our children has proven to be a great way to bond with them and teach them to love reading, but the reading they come to love is reading in community. Reading silently then becomes a way to recall that comfort, and so children read a lot. But they read to themselves. Alone.

If you don't have anyone with whom to read the Bible aloud, read it aloud to yourself. It's amazing how the very voice of the Father can fill your own words, and you can hear it as if He were reading it to you. So you read and listen at the same time. There's something spiritually important about listening, something it's much harder to do with our eyes. Somehow, our ears perceive presence. Our eyes tend to gather information.

So, read aloud.

But that isn't the only way to hear the Scriptures.

The Bible is also available in audio file format for free, by way of the Internet. The King James translation has been available that way for some time, but lately, other English translations have also been offered. Here is a site with several links to free downloads:

[AudioTreasure](#)

There are also a number of websites where you can listen while online. My favorite is the ESV site (English Standard Version). As with many Bible websites, they offer a daily email reading to which I subscribe. In this email is a link that says, "Listen." If I click this, the passage before me opens in my media player, and I can hear it read by Max McLean.

Here's the link for the ESV Bible: [ESV Bible](#)

I did that a lot until I discovered that I could purchase the whole ESV in audio format for my Ipod. So now I can listen to any of it that I want to and anywhere I want to. Whatever the way, though, I can't overstate the value of learning to be listeners, and not just readers.

What Translation Should I Read?

I have some pretty strong preferences when it comes to Bible translations, but I also think that I exaggerate the differences sometimes, so take this section with a grain of salt. I believe that God can make Himself present to us even through really bad translations, like the Message.

Here are my favorites.

1) The English Standard Version is my favorite for "study." When you want to read a translation that tries harder than any other translation to give you a word for word translation, the ESV is your best choice. Unfortunately, this means that the English is a little awkward in some places, so that it doesn't read quite as smoothly as do some other good translations.

2) For devotional reading, my favorite translation is still the New King James Version. There are some archaic translation choices in it that leave me wondering here and there, but not many in the NKJV. Also, the NKJV has a more poetic cadence, which I think echoes the inspired nature of the text. (When people speak in a way that is Spirit filled, it tends to resemble poetry. Look at the way new translations print the oracles of the prophets.)

3) Among older translations, the old King James and the Revised Standard Version are still solid choices. Both of them translated the texts they had as accurately as they could, though the English is sometimes difficult to understand, especially in the KJV. The ESV is really an updated version of the RSV, without the difficulties of the "dynamic translation" strategies of the NRSV and the NIV.

4) I have less experience with some other popular versions like the New American Standard Bible or the Contemporary English Version. I haven't had any unhappy experiences with them, though.

There are some translations I would suggest that you avoid.

First among those are the paraphrases like The Message and The Good News Bible. These "translations" make no claim to accuracy, preferring to try to tell you what the writers (they just aren't translators) think the Bible means to tell you. While I'll admit that every translation has some of the translator's bias in it, these easy-to-read versions have put the modern authors squarely between you and me and the real Author. I'd rather not play "telephone" with my Scripture.

The other translations that I avoid, both for study and for devotional reading are those versions where the translators have much more subtly inserted their theology into the text. These translators also tell us what they think the text means, rather than what it says. Though their texts don't vary frequently from the more accurate versions, they vary in important ways when they do. Among these "dynamic" translations (though some of them would deny that they have done this) are the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Scofield Bible. (the Scofield Bible does this by putting notes into the text in a way that gives them almost the weight of Scripture. It's confusing and wrong.) I don't own any of these translations, and I wouldn't recommend any of them or their like to you.

## **What To Do?**

Now that you've determined to study the Bible, that is, to explore it as a great treasure trove whose object of greatest value will be His own gift of Himself to you, where do you start? As tempting as it may be to try to dive in a "read the Bible in a year," let me suggest that this is not as valuable a goal as it sounds. I am not one who believes that we need to master all of the Bible in order to know Him. At the same time, I'm not inclined to toss aside those difficult parts of Scripture that our lectionary designers find undesirable. Read all of the Bible when you're able and ready. Just don't set out to do it first.

The Bible itself has some guidelines for reading it. Most of us are familiar with this passage from I Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (I Timothy

3:16) This might even seem to contradict what I just said, but not many of us are as familiar with what Paul has to say about reading the Scriptures in II Corinthians.

"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (II Corinthians 3:12-18)

Here, the Bible itself tells you and me that it is only through Jesus that you and I can read the rest of the Bible without a "veil" over our minds and hearts. In other words, we need to begin our reading of the Bible with Jesus. We need to read the Gospels first. We need to let God reveal Himself to us in Jesus before we go seeking Him in the Hebrew Scriptures, the "old covenant." Scripture says of Jesus that "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15) Later in that chapter we also read, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Colossians 1:19) As we go seeking for God, we have no need to look further than Jesus. He is the very image of the God that we seek. In Him God dwelt in all His fullness. There is nothing left of God that is not revealed in Jesus. As we read the rest of the Bible, our goal is to find Jesus in each page, each God-breathed word. There has always been a tendency among Christians to add a "Well, yes, but...." to that. But the Bible itself says to stop yourself before you go any further. Let Jesus be your lens, the One through whom all of the rest of the Scriptures acquire their meaning. Begin with the Gospels.

Genesis, the Fall, the Flood, Joseph's taking of Israel to Egypt, the Exodus, the story of the Judges and Kings, the Prophets, none of them make sense on their own. They only make sense in the light of the image of God reconciling the world to Himself in Jesus on the Cross. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus" first. Find Him, know Him, let His Spirit free you to read the rest of Scripture in the light of His redeeming love. Not because I said so, but because the Bible itself says we cannot read it correctly any other way.

### **Which One?**

I hope that I've convinced you that until you have come to know Him intimately through the Gospels, the value of the rest of the Scriptures will evade you. If I have, then we have next to decide where to begin among the Gospels. I recommend John.

My reasons for this are several. First, John's is the only Gospel based on the first-person recollections of one of those who walked with Jesus. ("The disciple whom Jesus loved,"

sometimes just called the Beloved Disciple in Bible Study circles.) While some folks confuse that disciple with John, son of Zebedee, there is little reason other than the author's name being John to do this. The author writes of the Beloved Disciple as though he were not that disciple himself (John 21:24) and I tend to believe him. So, though the writer of the Gospel and the Beloved Disciple were not the same person, we still have access to Jesus' intimate circle through the one who reclined at His breast at the last supper, to whom Jesus entrusted His mother from the Cross.

It is this intimacy with Jesus that all of the other Gospels lack. They tend to view Him from the standpoint of the Crowd. The writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were not intimates of Jesus, and they did not know any of them personally. They knew Jesus third hand. I want to know Him first hand, so I go first to John.

Also, though scholars will tell you that the final version of John's Gospel is the latest of all of them, they will also tell you that the first drafts of John's gospel predate even Mark, the first complete Gospel ever written. So, in many ways, John's memories of Jesus are the oldest and most accurate. This includes John's timeline for Jesus' life and ministry. While the other three gospels seem to compact His public ministry into one year, John spreads it out over almost three years, which I accept as accurate. John also places the last Supper on the Night of Preparation rather than the night of the Passover itself, which I also accept, as the trial described in the Passion would never have occurred on the Passover. John seems to have a more accurate take on the life of Jesus than the other three.

Which leads me to the image of Jesus in John. This is a place where modern scholarship and I part company (for the most part). Most modern scholarship will write off Jesus' self-identification with "I Am" in John as the product of the community's reflection on Jesus' identity after His life. "He could not have spoken this way of Himself!" they say with ill-conceived certainty. It is true that in the other three Gospels Jesus never speaks of himself in that way. He never claims divinity for himself. Even the phrase "son of God" doesn't necessarily imply divinity in the Jewish circles of Jesus' day. "You are my son, today I have begotten you." (Psalm 2:7, for the coronation of the king.) Jesus also speaks of His Body and Blood differently in John than in the other three. All of this has been attributed to the "lateness" of the final edition of John that we now have.

I attribute it to the earliness of its first editions, to the personal memories of the Beloved Disciple. A good friend once said to me, as I spouted the "Traditional Wisdom" concerning Jesus' self-identification in John. "Jeff, if you speak differently to those whom you know and love intimately than you do to the crowds to whom you preach, why do you think Jesus didn't do the same?" Now I believe that He did speak differently to the twelve, and that only John has access to those memories through the Beloved Disciple. And I want you first to know Him as those twelve did. Then we can begin to wrestle with the question of how this all fits into the story of Salvation as it has evolved through the Hebrew Scriptures, a task the crowds and Matthew, Mark, and Luke take on.

So, if you were to ask me where to start, I'd say unequivocally, "Start with the Gospels. Start with John."

## **Some Nuts 'n' Bolts**

I began my Bible study backwards. I first learned (and to some degree taught myself) how to tear into the text with my mind, and break it down to its smallest parts. This was a faithful attempt for me, I was really trying to fill the hole that the absence of Jesus left in my life, but it was ill advised. It is also how most people begin to do what we nowadays call Bible study.

No, they don't learn to read the text in the original language and expose it to form and historical criticism. But they do go and read books by people who did that before they have discovered His Presence in the text. They do what I did, just one generation or two removed. And they have learned, unfortunately, to think that this is the important piece of study.

When you begin to study the Bible, study the Bible, not books about the Bible. I have recently been talking with a parishioner whose friend in another Episcopal church is participating in a study group. They're reading Marcus Borg's book, "Jesus" together. What a disaster. It made me want to shake the pastor, whoever he or she is. Episcopalians are notorious for reading about the Bible without actually getting to know it. It's the same mistake we make with Jesus. We read about Him, but don't seek to know Him, to enter into relationship with Him. Unfortunately, it's a mistake I would have made early on in my pastorate.

Don't make my mistake. Begin with the text of the Bible itself, and let the Holy Spirit guide your reading. I will offer some time-tested suggestions for doing this in a bit. Once you have discovered His Presence in the text, once you have learned to see Him in and through the words on the page, then it is good to begin to break things down, to look deeper. Then the Holy Spirit can use all those wonderful tools to open your eyes to things you weren't ready to see at first reading. But begin at the beginning.

## **Listening to the Text**

As I suggested above, it is vitally important that you and I make a habit of listening to the Bible, rather than reading it only with our eyes. These different ways of reading activate different parts of our brains, and I believe that the "eye part" is much more analytical than the "ear part." So, listen to the text.

And when you are ready to begin to study (John, I hope...), select a small portion for study, either alone or in a group. I recommend doing this together, for a multitude of reasons like the building of the Family of God, the additional inspiration present when



two or three are gathered, the ease of listening to someone other than yourself, but I do realize that our schedules nowadays make that more difficult. So, whether alone or in a group, pick a small passage. I won't set a limit, like "no more than ten verses" because that can be too rigid, but try to keep it under ten. The Gospels break themselves up well into small parts. There are any number of smallish stories or teachings that can be taken alone. Don't overwhelm yourself with many words. God can speak to you as well from one verse as from one hundred. (Modern notions of "Bible study" insist that we read every text in its context. While this adds to our understanding, it is in no way necessary in the beginning.)

Read that passage aloud, slowly.

Sit with the passage for a couple of minutes. Really. Just two is enough at the beginning.

Then read it aloud again. If you are not alone, take turns reading it so that no one is stuck doing the reading all the time, and you can hear it in different voices. And this time, listen for the single word that strikes your ear in a special way. It may cause your heart to leap with happiness, or it may cause you to cringe with a sense of conviction. It may soothe like oil on troubled waters, or it may stir up anger. Listen for that word. Just one word.

Now, sit with that word for a bit. This is God's Word to you today. Just for today, just for this time. You needn't be afraid that discerning this word will change the course of your whole life. (It may, but you won't know it until years after it happens!) God speaks to us for today. We receive bread for today, manna for today. This single word is your manna for today.

Sit with that word, and listen to it, let it speak to your heart. This time, give it several minutes. Five to ten at least.

What is it saying to you? Not about anyone else but you. What is it saying to you about your life, today, in this place? How is God using that word to call you another step down the road to maturity in Christ? Is He comforting you over a loss? Is He challenging you to face some fear? Is He calling you to repentance? Is he showing you some task He has for you? What is that word saying.

Read that text aloud again.

Now, take that word to God in prayer. Silent prayer for now. Enter into conversation with the One who began it with the single word. Tell Him how this word makes you feel. (He knows but He also loves it when we intentionally share ourselves with Him.) Does it make you afraid? Excited? Wary? Sad? Share your feelings with Him.

One important note. Paul tells me that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) Beware the enemy's attempt to poison a moment of contrition and repentance with condemnation. If you are feeling harshly judged, it is not from your Father in heaven. Keep the image of the Father from the parable of the Prodigal Son before you. Sadness in the face of our failings is entirely appropriate. I have shed many a tear of grief over the pain I have caused the Father's heart. But condemnation is not of God. If you are feeling that way, tell Him, because it is His desire to break off this condemnation and to free you from this chain of the enemy.

If you feel unable to enter fully into whatever your word seems to be saying to you today, tell Him that, too. Be as honest as you can be about your reaction to what He has given you this day. He will receive with joy whatever you bring to Him.

This time may take ten to twenty minutes. Longer if you have it. Don't rush. If you are in a group, having some quiet, inspiring music on in the background may help with our difficulties with silence. (I am fond of contemporary Christian instrumental stuff. The words of songs sometimes cloud my prayer time.)

Read the text aloud one more time.

This time, let the word He has given you bring you into His Presence. Let the fact that He cares so much for you in this moment, on this day, that He has chosen to speak directly to you from this text transport you into His chamber. Don't worry about what to say. Chances are good you won't have words for this time anyhow. Whether He has called you from darkness into new light (that word of repentance) or given you a word of comfort in a time of need, or asked of you, "Who will go for me?" He has given to you of His own self. His Word is His being, and He has given of this to you today. Sit and enjoy this love that will not leave you to flounder alone in a sea of pain and confusion. Sit and enjoy His pleasure in you. Hear His song over you.

Finally, share with those gathered what the Lord has been saying to you as much as you are able. Then take some time to pray for each other before departing.

### Some Closing Words

What I have suggested above is a rough adaptation of an ancient approach to Bible study known as "Lection Divina," or "Holy Reading." There are many books and guides available for this patterned way of reading, and this is just the way that I have come to use it.

If every Christian took the time to read the Bible in this way every day, there would be such transformation in the churches that the walls would burst. The Gospel would become so vital and so life-changing that our church buildings would be unable to

contain it. There is much to study beyond this beginning approach, but no one ever outgrows this pattern of study. No one can ever afford to leave it behind, as though they no longer needed it. No word study can ever take the place of His Presence.

May we all one day look into the pages of the Bible and in it see the World transformed and the Kingdom come.

In Him,

Jeff