## **Inspired through Scripture**

There's a lovely Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why on our hearts, and not in them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.”

― Anne Lamott[[1]](#footnote-1)

***Why explore the Bible?***

If one of the major goals of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is to become more and more like him, then it seems rather obvious that we need to learn as much about him as we can. We need to know how he lived his life, understand his values, catch his vision of the kingdom of God, and internalize the stories which shaped him and his people. Thus, it is imperative that we develop a daily discipline of reading scripture.

Despite its importance, most Christians only encounter the Bible on Sunday mornings. Obviously there are some major barriers to reading and understanding the Bible. As we saw in Session 3, many people are intimidated by its size, complexity, and by their lack of confidence that they are qualified to interpret it. And yet the Bible remains the single most important tool in shaping the life of a Christian.

The ultimate purpose of Bible reading is to immerse yourself in the way that God sees the world. The stories, poetry, history, wisdom literature, all serve to shape our worldview until we, too, see the world through a lens of love and justice. That takes time and some degree of intentionality. The books of the Bible don’t read like a novel. Therefore, especially at the beginning, a daily exploration of

scripture requires discipline.

***How to get started reading the Bible***

First of all, you will need a Bible. There are many translations out there from which to choose. If you wish to have a translation that uses everyday language, you might choose the *New International Version* (NIV). If you’d like to have a paraphrase which combines the biblical text with the author’s interpretation of it and then puts it into a more conversational type of English, then try *The Message*. If you wish to read from a more accurate translation which also seeks to use inclusive language, check out the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). Most people steer clear of the *King James Version* as it uses very archaic language which adds an additional barrier to understanding.

When picking a Bible, you will also want to consider getting a study version which gives you notes on the text you are reading. We have had good experiences with the *Access Study Bible[[2]](#footnote-2)* and *The New Interpreters' Study Bible*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

You also have the option of getting most translations in digital format. If you are using a computer, there are a number of sites which offer free access to the scriptures, often with handy tools which allow you to search the texts in case you can’t remember where that particular story is. Another possibility is to purchase software programs which allow you to access the scriptures even when you are not online. If you have a smartphone, there are a multitude of Bible apps.

***Don’t get intimidated***

The Bible is big, old, chock full of life-changing stuff, people routinely disagree on what it means, and it’s holy – but you can’t let it intimidate you into not reading it. Even if you have no experience with it at all, there is immeasurable value in getting acquainted with its stories and its record of others’ experience of God.

Likewise, don’t be intimidated by your preacher who seems to be able to see things in the texts that you would never have suspected were there. Full time Pastors have received a fair amount of education in biblical studies and are privileged to spend many hours with the biblical texts each week as they prepare for worship. We also have libraries of commentaries and Bible resources which help us to interpret the text. Biblical interpretation also benefits from a lot of practice. The truth is most of the time we preachers discover something new within the text each time we get to preach on it.

This does not mean that reading the Bible without these advanced skills or without a large amount of time to devote is a senseless endeavour. Although we aim at discovering what the author was trying to say to their audience in their time and place, it doesn’t mean that a less “scholarly” reading won’t reap huge benefits. Any discipline of reading of scripture is likely to move you, inform you, and change you in some way. Remember that the Holy Spirit is hard at work bringing the scriptures alive inside you. If you approach the Bible with the expectation that God will speak to you through it, then it really doesn’t matter what your purpose is in reading it. Whether you are reading it to get a basic grasp of the themes in scripture, or are doing serious exegesis, it is all devotional if you invite God into that experience.

***When and where to read***

Deciding when to do your Bible reading is a matter of personal preference. Some people do very well reading the Bible first thing in the morning, while others believe that God doesn’t get up before noon. Some thrive on reading the Bible in private, while still others crave discussing it with others in a Bible study group. The key is to match your personality preference with when and where

you read it. There are no “right” times or places since both of those factors interact with your personality and lifestyle.

***How to start***

First, be realistic about how much you are going to read. Deciding you will tackle the whole Bible in a year is probably unrealistic and will likely lead to frustration. The most common approach is to just pick up the Bible and start with chapter one of Genesis. Big mistake! By the time you get to Leviticus you will regret that decision. It is better to start with one of the Gospels in the New Testament, preferably Mark or Luke. You can always go back later and pick up portions of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Another option is to pick up a resource like, *Biblical Literacy. The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*.[[4]](#footnote-4) This book seeks to concentrate on the most important stories in the Bible so as to give the reader a solid overview. It also leaves out all the boring bits!

If you do decide to get ambitious, we recommend reading the New Testament in a year using the schedule in the appendix. We also suggest finding a small group that is concentrating on the Bible so as to give yourself accountability, encouragement, and to get others’ perspectives on what you’re reading.

***The issue of finding time***

Sadly there are very few of us today who have “extra” time in our day. The prospect of having to find even fifteen more minutes to do something new feels oppressive. In reality, making time for your spiritual practices can be as simple as moving them up your priority list. We suggest that you consider replacing some of your screen time. If you're an average Canadian, giving up TV and internet would free up enough time to work another full-time job.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Another option is to combine your prayer time with scripture. Precede, end, or sandwich a reading of scripture with your prayer time for a simple and effective spiritual practice.

***Some helpful pointers***

Start off with manageable chunks. Many people get discouraged when they bite off too much. Remember, quality may be better than quantity when it comes to reading the Bible.

Read your Bible’s introductory notes to the book you are reading. They often will help you figure out the context and provide you with insight into where the author is trying to take you.

The Bible should almost always surprise you. If you read something and say, “Yes, I’ve always thought that” then you probably need to read it again.

Stay open to being changed.

Establishing any discipline in your life is hard. You might try to find someone else who will help you stay accountable to a regular reading of scripture.

Don’t just finish your reading and then head off into the rest of your day. Take a few minutes to reflect on what you’ve read.

***What to do with difficult passages***

From time to time, you will run across passages which simply rub you the wrong way. There are passages about God condoning violence and supporting slavery. There are passages which promote the subordination of women and still others which claim that homosexuality is a sin, as is wearing cloth made of two kinds of fibre. What do you do when you think a passage is wrong? First, don't decide that all 66 books of the Bible are wrong or misguided. Too often people dismiss the entire Bible on the basis of a few passages with which they disagree. Instead, there are a few things to consider. It is possible that we don’t completely understand the meaning of the passage. Sometimes the English translation of a Greek or Hebrew word conjures up for us something the author never intended. Other times, it could be that we haven't taken into account the context in which it was written.

Still another factor to keep in mind is these very human books reflect the theology of their time. As time goes on and we build on the previous generation's experience and understanding of God, we hopefully get closer and closer to the truth. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect that every writer got it exactly right. That doesn’t mean that everything of what they’ve written is out to lunch. Every book has something to offer you, even if it is to help you better articulate why you believe it is off base.

Still, there are passages which are just plain wrong. In those cases, we check them against what we know about Jesus. If the passage promotes violence, injustice, or claims to exclude anyone from the love of God, then it likely does not reflect a true picture of who God is.

***Sticking with it***

It is suggested that a good way to read scripture is to enter into a conversation with the biblical writer – asking questions and listening for responses, as well as being open to being asked questions and responding yourself. Such conversations with scripture open us to the guidance of the Spirit.

Finally, read the Bible with the expectation that God will meet you there. These are the stories of the sacred experiences of individuals and communities. So don’t be surprised if they move and form who you are as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

1. Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gail R. O'Day (Editor), David Peterson (Editor), *The Access Bible, Updated*, 2011, Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter J. Harrelson (Editor), *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2003, Abingdon Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Timothy Beal, *Biblical Literacy. The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A 2010 Ipsos poll found that the average Canadian spends 35 hours a week watching TV or surfing the internet. You can read the summary at: [www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=4720](http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=4720). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)