

## Guidelines for Reading the Bible by Brian D. Russell

Learning to read the scriptures well involves nurturing attitudes that support our study and gaining technical skills that make it possible to participate in a close reading of the biblical texts. Both elements are necessary for becoming skilled and inspired readers who are able to engage the Bible as Christian scripture.

The goals of reading the scriptures are to hear God's Word and to be shaped by their message. Reading the scriptures is an opportunity to enter into the world imagined by the biblical writers and to experience personal transformation so that we as modern readers may then serve as witnesses to their good news for humanity and all creation.

History testifies to the power of the scriptures to shape the individuals and communities of faith who devote themselves to their study. This witness begins within the pages of the Bible and continues to the present day.

- The book of Psalms opens with this description of the "happy person," in contrast to the ways of the wicked: "these persons love the LORD's Instruction, and they recite God's Instruction day and night!" (Ps 1:2). The psalmist reminds us of the power of intentional and consistent reading of the scriptures.
- In Luke 4:16-21 Jesus began his public ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah, and he lived out his life and mission in fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. After his resurrection Jesus taught his disciples from the scriptures. Luke 24:45 says Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Scripture shaped the story of Jesus' life, and we read scripture to find the grand story of God so that we may align our lives with it as Jesus did.
- The apostle Paul reminded his coworker Timothy of the crucial role the scriptures played in the life of the early church: "Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good" (2 Tim 3:15-17).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, the prominent 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-century bishop and theologian, famously recounted his own conversion in which he interpreted the sound of children saying *tolle, lege* ("Take and read") as a sign to pick up the Bible. He opened to a passage from Romans and began to experience transformation in his life with the gospel.
- John Wesley, and 18<sup>th</sup>-century evangelist and reformer, wrote this about the Bible: "I want to know one thing: the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]."

As we study the Bible we open ourselves up to the same deep and life-giving influence. Perhaps we too may add our voice to this chorus of witnesses as a result of our study of scripture.

### Attitudes for Reading Scripture

*Study the Bible prayerfully.* Prayer can enhance our study by putting us in touch with the subject of the Bible – God. Prayer can help to shape and create in us a proper mindset for

engaging the scriptures as God's word. Begin each Bible study with a prayer for illumination, such as "Lord, surprise and astonish me anew with the beauty and power of your Word." The word "astonish" captures the potential power that we readers may find in the Bible. When we come away astonished, we know that we have been in the presence of the divine. When we pray for astonishment rather than mastery of the material, we learn a key truth about reading the Bible as Christian scripture: it's less important that we learn about the text and more important for the text to shape our lives.

*Study the Bible expectantly.* We read the Bible in the expectation of encountering the living God. Open the scriptures not merely to learn but to be transformed by the words you find. Come to the Bible to gain wisdom and to be shaped by its message. When you read, be grateful for the opportunity for study and anticipate the life-giving insights you'll find in the Bible's pages.

*Study the Bible persistently.* Learning to read the Bible well is a habit to be nurtured over the course of our lives. Wise interpreters are not born but formed over time through consistent, careful study. In other words, if you find yourself struggling with reading the Bible, stay with it and give it time. Like a farmer who methodically prepares the field, sows seeds, waters, pulls weeds, protects the fledgling plants from insects, and applies fertilizer – all in the hope for a bountiful yield at the harvest – so we as readers must be patient and persistent in doing the work necessary for receiving the benefits of the scriptures. Think of scripture study as a behavior to practice faithfully rather than as a skill to be mastered.

*Study the Bible intelligently.* Christians read the Bible as God's Word, but we cannot forget that it was written by other human beings in the living languages spoken by the people of God in the ancient world (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). The Bible isn't a code to be deciphered but literature crafted carefully and intentionally to communicate its message clearly to its audience. As modern readers we must use all of the tools available to us for understanding it, including our minds. We've affirmed the need to read prayerfully, but this doesn't mean we should turn off our intellect. As thoughtful Christians, we profess the need for prayer *and* the importance of close and serious study of the text. In doing so, we not only gain fresh and profound insight from the Bible, but we also learn the meaning of Jesus' command to love God with our minds (Matt 22:37).

*Study the Bible confidently.* Bible study can sometimes be intimidating. On occasion we may not feel worthy or qualified to decide about the meaning of the text. Yet as generations of faithful and persistent readers bear witness, the scriptures remain vital, offer profound insights, and speak words of life. Bring a sense of anticipation and expectation to your reading of the Bible, and you won't be disappointed.

### Reading in Context

The key to understanding any passage in the Bible is learning to read it in its literary context. Reading scripture is a dance between the reader, the text, and the text's wider context. Just as a dancer must maintain awareness of both music and dance partner, so must the reader keep in view both the details of the passage being studied and the wider movements of the passages surrounding it. In biblical interpretation, literary context is everything. By literary context we mean the interlocking levels of immediate context, wider context, historical context, and the context provided by related texts.

*Immediate context.* The most important information about a passage is its immediate context. In most cases this is the text we're studying and the paragraphs immediately before and after it. For example, if we're studying the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13), it's important to notice that it occurs within a block of text that focuses on prayer (Matt 6:6-15). The verses just

before the Lord's Prayer contrast it with prayers that emphasize many words and religious formulas, and the verses just after it focus on the necessity of forgiveness. Our reading of the Lord's Prayer must be informed by and account for these elements.

*Wider context.* Each passage has a wider context in the book in which it's found. To get a sense of the book's context, we can take a few minutes to read the introduction to the book we are studying in the CEB Study Bible and look at the written outline of the entire book. This will help us gain an understanding of the role the passage we're working with plays in the overall message of the book. Looking at the Lord's Prayer again, we may observe that it falls within a larger segment (Matt 6:1-18) that serves to warn against public acts of godliness (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting) as a means of gaining rewards from God. Widening our lens a little more, we see that this text falls within a larger block of teaching materials traditionally known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). Within this larger block, Jesus trains his disciples for the ministry of announcing the good news of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 4:17-11:1).

Reading in the immediate context of the book is a vital protection against misreading the meaning of a passage. A truism about reading in context is, "A text without a context is pretext." When we don't read in context, it's easy to make the text say what we want it to mean rather than to hear the message of the text. A reader must remember to read a text in the light of its literary context. This practice alone will prevent many errors.

The next two kinds of literary contexts can add more time to the study of a scripture passage, but being attentive to them will further increase our understanding of the text.

*Historical context.* Having information about a text's historical context, or background, helps us gain a richer appreciation of that text. The study notes in this Bible draw attention to important historical details. We may also find it helpful to use a Bible dictionary or a full-length commentary. If, for example, we study Paul's letter to the Philippians, we'll notice that he mentions opponents harassing the Philippian Christ followers (e.g. Phil 1:28; 3:2, 18). Who are these opponents? Is there only one group of opponents or are there several? What's the nature of their opposition? Finding answers to these questions will provide us with helpful historical background for understanding Paul's words to the Philippians.

*Related texts.* We want to be aware of the related texts the passage we're studying alludes to and/or other texts that made allude to that passage. Psalm 8 models both of these situations This hymn of praise to the Lord reflects on the status and mission of humanity in light of the majestic nature of God. Its final verses focus on the stewardship role that women and men play over creation (Ps 8:6-8), and the psalmist is clearly referring to the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3. If we're going to fully understand the message of Psalm 8, we need to study how the psalmist uses the material from Genesis. We'll also want to know that Hebrews 2:6-8 quotes Psalm 8:4-6 because that will help us understand the full biblical meaning of Psalm 8. The cross reference system in this Bible connects related texts, including leading from Psalm 8 to Genesis and Hebrews. Many of the study notes also point to related texts.

### Reading with the Big Picture in Mind

Reading the Bible also involves understanding each individual passage and book within the overall context of the Bible. The Christian Bible proclaims an overarching narrative when viewed as a whole. We may observe the following framework holding the elements of the Bible together: Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus the Christ, Church, New Creation. The Bible begins with the story of the Creation of the world (gen 1-2) and ends with the description of a future New Creation (Rev 20-21). The biblical story opens with a very good world and ends with the

re-creation of very goodness. In between these bookends we find the story of the salvation of the people and all creation.

The need for salvation is first described in Genesis 3-11, which identifies the fundamental problem in the world: human alienation and sin. This problem has fractured the very good creation described in Genesis 1-2. God responds to the problem by calling a people through whom God will bless all nations (Gen 12-Mal). This people is named Israel.

God calls Israel's ancestors in Genesis 12-50 to be the start of God's own people. God rescues them from slavery in Egypt, establishes a covenant relationship with them as a means of preparing them to serve as a people of blessing to the world, and leads them through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan (Exod-Deut). The books of Joshua through Esther narrate Israel's life in Canaan and its times of obedience/disobedience, exile, and return. The Wisdom books (Job-Song) include the prayers of God's people and their reflections on the good life within God's creation. The Old Testament ends with the Prophetic books (Isa-Mal), which serve to call God's people back to their roots as the holy, redeemed people through whom God will bless the nations. The Prophets also envision a radical future act of salvation.

The New Testament opens with the four Gospels, which tell the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He announces the inbreaking of God's future and fulfills the hopes and expectations of Israel's scriptures. Jesus' death and resurrection mark the climax of God's saving work and serve to announce God's final victory. The books of Acts through Revelation 19 tell the story of the church, under the power of the Holy Spirit, witnessing to all nations about the good news of Jesus. Revelation 20-21 brings the story full circle by envisioning the complete consummation of God's victory in a new Creation.

Keep in mind this broader story as a means of understanding much smaller portions of the Bible. Again, we need to maintain a balance. If we focus only on this broad summary, we risk missing the many fine points that individual biblical books and passages within them offer. We're also in danger of flattening out the Bible by forcing its individual pieces to conform to our assumptions about the big picture. But if we focus on just the specific details of shorter passages, we may miss the overall message of the Bible. Paying attention to only an assortment of brief passages is like having all of our clothing piled randomly in a closet without any obvious organizing principle. The big picture serves as hangers and dividers that help us make sense of our wardrobe. Be aware of the broader narratives and themes of the Bible, while also hearing the witness of the individual passage under current consideration.

### Suggestions for a Close Reading of the Text

There are three core elements in learning to study a text closely: observing details, asking questions, and seeking answers.

*Observe the details in the text and record your observations.* A good interpreter continually captures insights and observations through careful note taking. Read slowly. Take your time. This is particularly true for familiar passages. Don't assume you already know the meaning of any text. Instead, think about the words and phrases you find in it. Savor the images and the language used to convey its message. Notice how the individual words are connected to each other. You may find it helpful to read a couple of different translations and write down their differences as a means of reflecting on the text. Stay put within the confines of that passage, however, and resist the temptation to flip to another part of the Bible until after you've carefully engaged the text you're studying. Describe it. Paraphrase it. Analyze it. Observe recurring words, phrases, ideas, and themes. Establish an outline or create a chart to organize its content. Above all, don't give up. Persist in the process of

collection your own observations and insights. This process will produce insights, and new questions will emerge.

*Write out questions your observations lead you to ask.* Engaged reading requires this. The best interpreters of the scripture are those who ask the best questions. This process of reading the text carefully and recording a series of observations and questions is the secret to engaging the Bible at a deep level. Observations lead to questions, and questions guide the interpreter to new insights. Ask questions that engage the text on two levels: *defining questions* and *questions about function*. Defining questions attempt to gain a full description of the content of the text: What's here? What's the meaning of each element that's present? Functional questions focus on the So what? And attempt to probe beneath the surface to look for the deep meaning and implications. For example, if you're studying Exodus 19:4-6, you'll encounter a phrase that's unique in the Old Testament: "You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). The twin phrases "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy nation" are important for the interpretation of this text. You may ask the following defining questions about them: What's the meaning of those phrases? What's the relationship between them? Follow your definitional questions with functional ones: Why are these particular phrases being used here? What's their significance?

*Answer key questions.* In many ways biblical interpretation is nothing more or less than the answering of interpretive questions the reader asks about the text. Review your observations and questions. Select the handful of questions whose answers are necessary for making sense of the text, and begin answering those questions by looking at the observations you've already made. What evidence have you found through your close reading to begin to develop possible answers? Consult the study notes in this Bible. If you need additional help in answering your questions, you may find it useful to read other commentaries, look up subjects in a Bible dictionary, or use the concordance to study key words as they're used elsewhere in the scriptures. Also consider studying the Bible with others and work on answering questions about the text together. Once you've collected the necessary information, summarize your answers to the key questions along with the strongest evidence that supports those answers.

### Reflecting on the Text's Implications and Function

Once you've answered the key questions raised in your close reading of the text you'll want to begin to draw out the broader truths and ideas that are explicit and implicit in it. The goal here is to move from the specific details and facts in a passage to an understanding of how they work together to present a deeper message.

In light of your study, reflect on questions like these: If this were the only passage of scripture I had, what would I know? What broad truths emerge from reflecting on this portion of scripture? What does this passage teach me about God? What does it teach me about life in God's creation? What does it teach me about humanity and the role of God's people?

After reflecting on these questions, it's important to try to assess how the teach of a given portion of scripture relates to the whole. Are there other places in the Bible where similar teachings or ideas are found? Reflect on how the text adds to, affirms, or critiques other biblical texts. The purpose of this step is to understand the contribution of the text to the biblical message.

### Make Specific Applications

The goal of reading the Bible is to come away from it with changed hearts and lives. The power of scripture to shape us depends on our willingness to push beyond merely engaging

the Bible with our minds but also putting its words into practice in our world. Once we understand the message of a passage in light of the biblical message as a whole, we're able to explore how it may impact our lives in the present.

Here are a few questions you may find helpful for guiding you in this process: How does this passage understand God's mission in the world, and how do we fit into God's purposes? What kind of people does this text imagine us to be if we were to live out its message? How would my life be different if I took the truths of this text seriously? How would my community of faith need to change in light of what I've discovered during my study of the text?

Try to be as specific to your own life situation as possible when making applications.

### Suggestions for Group Study

Reading the Bible with others is a long-established practice, provides the opportunity for honest conversation and spiritual growth, and can greatly enhance the process of careful study. The following suggestions for ways to approach a text as a group will help make the experience a rewarding one.

*Focus on the text.* Work on making observations and asking questions together. Having an able facilitator will help keep the group on track and away from debates. It's also important for the facilitator to attempt to draw out the insights of all who's like to contribute.

*Reflect on implications.* Make sure the group doesn't get so bogged down in the details of a passage that it isn't able to move forward to reflect on what the text is attempting to teach.

*Make specific applications.* AS a group, challenge yourselves to agree on a few concrete ways in which you can appropriate into your lives the message of the text you're studying. Save time during each meeting to share how the group's study during previous meetings has impacted each of you.

Green, Joel B, and Common English Bible (Firm. 2018. *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, Nashville, TN.