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Participant's Guide

# Growing in Faith ↑

An  
Introduction to  
Spiritual  
Disciplines





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# Reading the Bible



The people who taught me the way of Jesus (my family and my home church) pressed into me a deep conviction that daily Bible reading and prayer are perhaps the two key practices of being a Christian. Although following Jesus certainly involves much more than these two things, my people were right to teach me that these practices are essential to being formed as an authentic follower of the Lord.

I have also learned, both personally and from others, that the daily disciplines of Bible reading and prayer can be challenging and difficult. At first the difficulty may come because we are not quite sure what to do or how to do it. Later, the challenges can arise as a matter of discipline and consistency. Either way, these things do not really come to us naturally, but are the tasks of discipleship—of learning and practice. What are the best practices for developing a daily discipline of Bible reading? That's the question we'll discuss in this session.

## THE BIBLE AS GOD'S WORD

When we speak of the Word of God, we are first and foremost speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John gives us this language as the story opens with, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). As the story continues, we learn that this “Word” is none other than the very One who “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14, NRSV). God is first revealed to us not in the writing of a book called the Bible: God’s love for us and for the world is revealed most fully in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. That said, the Bible is God’s precious and trustworthy gift to us to tell us this grand story and to teach us “the Way” (Acts 9:2).

10 So, we read the Bible in order to know God. It’s not the only way we know God, but it is central and essential to our knowing. Scripture is foundational for our faith to such an extent that we affirm nothing as a rule of faith that does not rise from the careful, Spirit-anointed reading and hearing of Scripture.

We have the Bible because the Holy Spirit inspired people to write the story of God. Even more, the Spirit guided the people of God as they shared the stories of God’s relationship with his people—stories that became the content of our Bible. The Holy Spirit guided the church of Jesus Christ as our forebearers prayerfully decided which material should be included in what the church recognizes as authoritative Scripture. We also understand that the same Spirit who inspired the writing of Bible texts also inspires our reading and understanding of Scripture when we engage it personally and in communities of faith. This is why throughout Christian history, followers of Jesus have prayed for the illumination of the Holy Spirit when we come to read the Bible, whether individually or in our churches. One such prayer says, “*Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.*”<sup>1</sup>

It is by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who indwells us by faith and gathers us as the people of God, that the words of the Bible are inspired to become for us a living and life-giving word that points us to the Word, who is Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 1992, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship>.

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

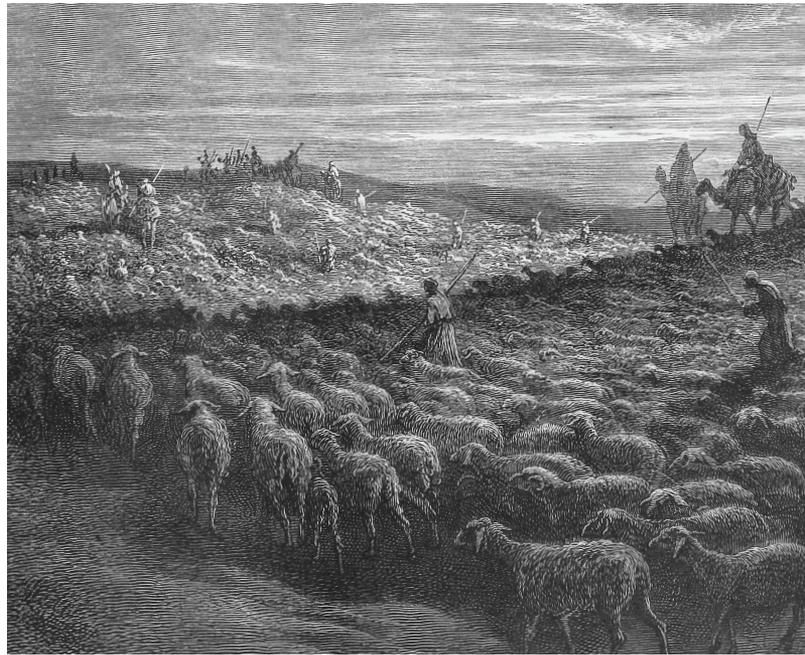
When we are new to the Bible, we may think of it like other books we read, which have a singular narrative that runs from beginning to ending with plot, setting, characters, conflict, and resolution. In one sense this is true, and it is important to have a sense of the overarching story of God in order to know how to locate any particular component. There is a narrative arc to Scripture that begins with God creating the world and declaring it good. The pinnacle of God's good creation is the formation of humanity in the image of God to share in the holy love of Father, Son, and Spirit (Genesis 1 and 2).

Sadly, this beautiful and good creation became marred and broken by sin, leading to guilt, shame, and relational distance rather than intimacy (Genesis 3). But, God works continually to bring creation back into covenant, which opens the central story of a chosen people through whom God reveals the holy, merciful, unfailing love of God and God's persistent, initiating movement toward us (Genesis through Malachi). The story ends with a new creation, a new heaven and new earth where God once again dwells in unbroken intimacy with God's people and with creation (Revelation 21 and 22). The remarkable feature of this story is the unexpected plot twist. The "good ending" of the story breaks right into the middle when God comes in Jesus to forgive, heal, and restore through his birth, life, death, and resurrection (the Gospels). The universal reign of God in Christ has

begun, and God's people (the church) are invited into the story, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a living sign of the new creation right here and now (Acts and the epistles). Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords. Now, all who are redeemed by grace through faith are gathered by the Spirit as the body of Christ in the world to announce in word and deed the good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God! The reign of God will come to completion and fulfillment when the risen Lord Jesus Christ returns and brings the fullness of new creation, the healing of the world.

There are many ways this story could be told, but these ideas are the overarching, coherent, hope-filled narrative of the story of God that is given to us in the Bible. However, the Bible is made up of many components; it is a library of sixty-six books that are very different, even though they are part of the same story. Let's look at the varied components of the Bible.

## THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE



Of the sixty-six books of the Bible, thirty-nine are in the Hebrew Scriptures, which comprise what we usually call the Old Testament. Twenty-seven books that tell the story of Jesus and the church are gathered into what we call the New Testament. All these books are different from one another, even though there are also remarkable similarities.

The Bible contains different *genres*. There are stories, songs, genealogies, histories, allegories, prophecies, and more. The Bible was written over a period of more than 1,500 years and by perhaps forty different writers. We believe that what makes the Bible so unique is that it is “God-breathed,” or divinely inspired, so that the human authors were enabled to convey God’s truth.

### The Old Testament

The Old Testament consists of three main divisions. It begins with *law* (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and *history* (Joshua through Esther). The stories of Creation and the Flood lead toward the story of Abraham, through whom God establishes a special, covenant relationship with a people that will be called Israel. The first five books

of the Bible (also known as the Torah) are about the life of these people and how their relationship with God was to be a sign to the world of the nature and character of the one true God. The *history* books tell the truth about how that relationship actually worked out. Sometimes, the people of God obeyed God’s laws and structured their life according to God’s will. Many other times, the people disobeyed and suffered the terrible consequences of their insistence to do things their own way.

The second section of the Old Testament is *wisdom* literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon). It is a treasure of poetry, prayers, songs, drama, and more. The Psalms are particularly important as they form Israel’s prayer book, giving us not only insight into how God is worshiped but also God’s vision for the people of God.

The third major division of the Old Testament is the *prophecy* books (Isaiah to Malachi). This section largely represents the life and work of Israel’s preachers who gave their lives to proclaiming God’s truth, reminding the people of God’s promises and provision, and calling the people to repentance and faith.



## The New Testament

The New Testament is the story of God's ultimate plan of redemption breaking into the middle of the story of sin and disobedience. It is the story of the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the life of the church, which becomes the "new Israel" in the world—a living sign of new creation hope. The Testaments are deeply connected in that the Old Testament hope of a Messiah who would deliver and redeem the people of God is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament also has different *genres*. The *Gospels* are the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Although they tell the same story, they tell it in different yet complementary ways. Each Gospel writer has a unique viewpoint and a distinct audience in mind. For example, Matthew is writing with his Jewish community very much in view while Luke has a Gentile audience more in mind. John takes a different approach altogether, focusing less on the chronological story of Jesus and much more on theological interests of who Jesus is and what the life of Jesus means for God's project of saving the world. Remember, we read the Bible to know God. John gives us a good guide in his Gospel for how to read the Bible when he says, "But these [miraculous signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

The primary *history* book of the New Testament is the Acts of the Apostles. Beginning with the birth of the church at Pentecost in the first two chapters, Acts tells the story of how the church reached out in all directions from Jerusalem in the first half of that century. Broadly speaking, the first twelve chapters reflect the leadership of Peter, and the last sixteen chapters trace the influence of Paul, especially with his three missionary journeys throughout the known world. Some have suggested that this book might be called "the Acts of the Holy Spirit", since the focal point of this story is how the Spirit compels the church into the world to preach and live the good news of God's redemption and hope for the renewal of all things.

The *epistles* are letters written to churches or individuals. There are twenty-one epistles in all, Romans through Jude. Some of these letters have passages that are easily understood. Some have more difficult lessons. The most important interpretive lens we have for reading all of Scripture is to understand everything in light of Jesus. If our conclusion about what any text means does not look, sound, and act like Jesus, we need to try again.

The final book of the Bible has often been understood as *prophecy*, particularly teaching about the culmination of history and the story of God's salvation. The name of this book comes from the first words, which are literally "the apocalypse of Jesus Christ." Apocalypse means *revelation*, hence the book's title. This helps us know how to read the book. It is not intended as some kind of map for the ending of the world, but as the revelation of what it means for Jesus Christ to rule and reign over all things. It was written as a word of encouragement and hope to a church that was under persecution, and we should read it from that perspective. If reading Revelation leaves us feeling confused or afraid, we are probably missing the point. We need most of all to hear the victorious words of our risen Lord, "I am making everything new" (Rev. 21:5).

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

The people who raised me in the faith of Jesus were right when they taught me that one of the most important things a Christian can do is to read the Bible daily. This is much more than mastering content—it is offering dedicated space to God where the Holy Spirit works in our lives through the Scriptures to form us in the way of Jesus.

As noted earlier, perhaps the critical first act of reading the Bible is to pray. Before we begin to read, we should pause and pray that God will illuminate our minds so that we might truly encounter God in the reading of Scripture. God is faithful to answer this prayer, which does not necessarily mean that something spectacular will happen. Our reading may feel quite ordinary, but God is always faithful to form us through our immersion in the word of God.

## **Where Should I Begin?**

One could simply read the Bible from cover to cover. Doing so would take about fifteen minutes each day for one year. However, given our discussion about the way the Bible is constructed, it may be more helpful to follow a reading plan that offers us selections from the various parts of the Bible each day. There are many daily devotional plans available. There are daily lectionaries, which are collections of texts for each day. One example is the daily readings that are part of the *Revised Common Lectionary*.<sup>2</sup> Typically, the daily readings include a psalm, an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, and a reading from the Gospels. There are also many digital Bible applications that offer various reading plans, such as the YouVersion Bible application. The point is to find a plan that seems to fit you best and commit to engaging

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<sup>2</sup> *The Revised Common Lectionary*, Vanderbilt University Divinity Library, <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>.

with it every day. You may find it especially helpful to do this with a friend or a group from your church. This kind of encouragement and accountability is helpful.

If Bible reading is a new discipline for you, especially if you are new to the way of Jesus, then you might consider beginning by reading through the Gospel of John. The reason to begin here is that John gives us such an engaging narrative of how Jesus is revealed to us as the divine Son of God, especially as Jesus enters into conversation with different kinds of people. John also gives us a compelling view of what it meant for Jesus to give himself for us on the cross and the transforming power of his resurrection.

Remember that plans and schedules are our servants, not our masters. If you miss a day, don't be discouraged and quit. If your plan is too ambitious, scale back. Take your time but keep at it. You will find your way, and the Holy Spirit will guide you and help you.

### **Help from Others**

There are a number of daily devotional tools available that have Scripture selections for each day with supplemental readings. People from all walks of life share their stories and insights as to how that day's lesson touched them or met their need. These testimonies or brief devotions can serve as the basis for meditation on Scripture and prayer. A couple of classic and well-loved examples of this are *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, *This Day with the Master* by Dennis Kinlaw, or *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* by Norman Shawchuck and Rueben P. Job.

One simple way to learn to study the Bible is in community with others in a good Sunday School class, life group, or home group. These have different names and practices in local churches, but they are meant to provide spiritual growth through Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, and accountability. Pastors are also available to guide their people in learning how to read and study the Bible. Most pastors would be excited to offer this as part of their ministry and to partner new believers with mature Christians who are willing to disciple them in this way.

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## PRAYER

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.<sup>3</sup>