

Reading Your Bible



The Journey That Will Change Your Life

by
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The Bible,

*which we call God's Word,
contains the family stories
of how God has come to our world
to help us become a new kind of community,
living the way God wants us to live.*

*It tells us what God wants to say to us:
how much God loves us and wants to be with us,
and how we are to live with one another
in the community of Jesus' friends, called the Church.
Because it is God's Word, we read or listen to it
as if God or Jesus himself is talking to us.*

*Whether at church or at home,
we quiet ourselves and listen to hear its message.*

*When we have made its message our own,
we seek to share that message with others
through our words and our lives.*

We are all missionary disciples.

1.

The Journey That Will Change Your Life

Let's face it. For most of us Catholics, the Bible is like a foreign country. We have heard fascinating stories about its people and places from others who have traveled there. We might even have met someone who, like some spiritual secret agent, has been a closet Bible reader for years without ever revealing these undisclosed excursions into Bible country. Although most of us might have secretly yearned to make this journey, for various reasons we have never made the trip ourselves.

Most Catholics faithfully recorded births, baptisms, first communions, and weddings in their family Bible, but never dreamed of actually reading it. They had been warned that there are too many dangers in traveling there on their own. "Private interpretation" was suspect and dangerous because it led directly to heresy.

Despite this, when their curiosity got the best of them, many Catholics did decide to read it. But they unwittingly assumed they should read it from cover to cover like any book, only to find it obscure, puzzling and even boring. Like so many other confused and discouraged readers, they usually quit after the first few books.

But the Bible still retained its fascination for us. We are like the great seeker St. Augustine some sixteen hundred years ago who tells of his conversion experience in his autobiographical *Confessions* (Book 8.12). Disillusioned by his superficial life-style and reluctant to enter into a deeper relationship with God, he heard the singing voice of a playing child chanting "take and read, take and read."

Assuming that this meant the Bible (which, as was the case well into the nineteenth century, was the main book that anyone would use who could read), he opened it randomly to a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans (13:13–14) that urged him to cast aside the past and begin a new relationship with God. As seekers, our intuition tells us that something good will happen when we heed the faint voices that we hear prompting us to “take and read” our Bible.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ Why am I so interested in reading the Bible?
- ◆ What do I expect to get out of it?

2.

Your Bible Journey

If the Bible is like a foreign country to us, then reading the Bible is how we make the journey there. Just as there are many travel guides and videos to acquaint us with places we would like to visit, so there are many helpful introductory books and study programs that help us to understand more about the Bible. But just as watching a National Geographic video from the comfort of our living room is never like being there in person, so likewise, no amount of second-hand knowledge about the Bible can substitute for the first-hand experience of immersing ourselves in the text by reading it ourselves.

But Bible reading is different from most of the other reading that we do. The journey into Bible country must always eventually be made in person because what we are seeking is not simply bits of information or sound bites telling us about God. We do not just want information or good ideas about God—as if the Bible were an “infomercial” selling God like some commercial product, which we can acquire with the click of a credit card.

The Bible is the guidebook for our journey to meet up with God and to better our relationship with God. Reading it demands that we take more time to pause, to examine our familiar world and to discover the gaps through which we can become aware of the mysterious divine realities that normally go unnoticed. To read the Bible from cover to cover to get a quick overview of its contents is like the whirlwind tour of Europe that gives just a surface awareness. If it’s Tuesday, this must be Paris!

How different it would be to live in Paris for weeks or months and absorb the experience of being there with Parisians! So when

we journey into Bible country, we do not want to be just tourists. We want to be sojourners—foreigners who enjoy the new region so much that they want to take up residence, become familiar with the people, their language and their customs, and perhaps then even apply for citizenship.

Making the Bible journey is a unique trip. It is not exactly a business trip, although we will profit from the journey. It is not exactly a vacation, although we will be refreshed and recharged if we go. The Bible journey is unique because it takes us to the center of our faith to meet this mysterious other whom we call God. It is not an outward journey traversing the geography of the land but an inner journey over the landscape of our mysterious relationship with God.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ Why am I so interested in using the Bible to meet up with God?

3.

The Bible Journey: Taking Care of Business

Whether we recognize it or not, our journey into Bible territory always begins with some agenda. Like a business trip, we expect to gain something from our transactions with the people we meet. So we must ask: Why do we want to read the Bible and not some other book? There are thousands of books about religion, prayer, spirituality, psychology, history, etc. Why not read one of those? Answering this question is the first step on our journey.

As human persons, everyone's main business is self-making. Our lifetime is a journey on which we mold ourselves into who we are so that we can finally meet God. Self-making occurs in and through our relationships with the many others through whom we discover who we are and what our gifts are. Ultimately, we find our identity in relationship to God, the divine other who calls us into a special relationship. The Bible is our primary resource for discovering the personality and plan of God for us.

Like the business and economic activity that dominates so much of our everyday lives, our personal or sacred "business" also requires much time and effort. Just as a business trip has definite goals and agendas in mind, so reading the Bible ought to have some bottom line payoff for us. As the American philosopher William James liked to say, religious ideas also need some "cash value." What is the practical application or usefulness of our Bible journey for our business of self-making?

Reading the Bible can profit us in many ways. First, since it opens up the often-neglected spiritual depths of ourselves and our world, it can jump-start our personal spiritual life and help us live

out our relationship to God much more consciously. Living more consciously helps us to be more aware, to care and to share.

As we notice how and where God is present, we become more spiritually aware and see our familiar world through the eyes of faith. Reading the Bible reveals that the surface appearances of our self and our everyday world hide a deeper mystery that normally escapes our notice.

Just as the disciples discovered Jesus alive after his death, so each of us as Christians, whether we are aware of it or not, has also experienced the living presence of the risen Jesus. This living presence is the magnet that lures us onward further and further into the mystery of the God who surrounds and supports us and desires to relate to us. We recognize God's presence in the various experiences and events that whisper that our everyday material lives are not all there is. There is always "more" to reality than meets the eye! And this "more" is God.

The Bible is our primary handbook for learning how to live in a religious relationship with God. As seekers, we want to discover God's presence, and then learn how to be in effective contact with God. The word *religion* comes from the Latin word *re-ligare* meaning to re-tie something. Religion thus encompasses our efforts to re-tie ourselves to God in the kind of relationship that God wishes.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ What "payoff" do I most want from my Bible reading for myself and/or others?

4.

God's Mystery in Our History

As we become aware of God's mystery in our history, we increase the degree of care in our relationships. Although we often equate faith with accepting a list of doctrines, faith is essentially our commitment to God in a relationship. The root of the word *faith* in Latin (*fides*) points to the "bond" that establishes and sustains a relationship. This is synonymous with our basic sense of trust.

The Bible is our handbook for creating and sustaining right relationships. It shows us where God has been found by some other seekers, how they were changed by that encounter, and finally how they found others with whom they could create a community to live in right relationship to God and others.

By encouraging us to look seriously at our relationships with God and with one another, Bible reading challenges us to change our priorities. By learning to notice God's presence and activity in our world, we start shifting our priorities around to include God, who now becomes the central focus of our existence. Changing our priorities will then affect how we make decisions about how to live. Making decisions does not necessarily become easier, but we can see more clearly what is at stake and become more aware of what values ought to guide us in our choices and actions.

God calls us into relationships and makes demands about how we ought to live. Every relationship involves creating a community—a co-mission with the other. When lovers commit themselves to one another, their co-mission is to build a household and family. When believers join together, their co-mission is to create God's dream community. The Bible provides help for understanding our common goal and the cost it will take to achieve it. Bible

reading helps us deepen our family life because it constantly draws our attention to the task of living out the practical details of our significant relationships.

Bible reading also helps us to reorient our work life. If we can begin to see our work as a vocation or call rather than just a job, then the meaning of our work changes. Since meaning occurs when we connect what we are doing to something else, the meaning of our work changes when we connect it to our relationship with God and our co-mission to create the kind of relationships with others that God desires.

Bible reading can also provide help with our elusive search for “peace of mind” and “the meaning of life.” Meaning cannot occur in isolation but only comes by reference to a context. For example, words only become meaningful when we connect them together into sentences and arrange them into longer paragraphs and chapters and stories.

So the meaning of our life as a whole only occurs when we put all the pieces together and then relate it to some larger context. For some this might be their family, for others a corporation or an important project or cause. For religious persons the wider context is God’s mysterious reality. The Bible provides a larger context in which our lives can be understood. We are called to be in relationship with God in a community of fellow believers.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ Briefly describe the general story of your relationship with God (e.g., when it started consciously, its major ups and downs, where it is now, where you want it to be).

5.

Bible Reading: Gateway to a Renewed Relationship

Our Bible journey is also a getaway from our normal everyday routines. Like when on a vacation, we want to stop the busyness of business to relax, reflect, and recharge our batteries. Reading the Bible renews our spiritual life by bringing us face to face with God who wants to be in relationship with us. And, as we all know so well, relationships take time and effort. Our Bible journey ought not to be just a one-night stand but rather a lifetime journey with this divine companion. We need times just to stop, take some quality time with God and revitalize our relationship.

But discovering God's presence is never an easy task. We learn to recognize and become more knowledgeable of the spiritual realm through our reflection upon the biblical story. The Bible gives us clues about how God has chosen to be present and how God has been found throughout history.

By discovering the meanings of the biblical story, we can find ways to connect that story with the story of our lives. These meanings are not simply discovered through intellectual knowledge, but also through our prayerful relationship with God. Prayer is our everyday attempt to live in relationship with the God who calls us, to whom we have committed ourselves in faith and to whom we are daily responding with our lives.

Through our Bible journey, we have the opportunity to refresh our vision of what our world is like, rethink our values, and change our behavior because of our relationship with God. Our desire is not just for theology—faith seeking understanding—but for spirituality—faith seeking embodiment. The Bible is the door-

way that leads us from our ordinary, material, external world to a spiritual, extraordinary, inner one. God stands at this door and invites, but we have to decide to step across the threshold and enter into this new world that is filled with God's mysterious presence and actions.

Our Bible journey will be an opportunity to discover this new Bible world—to see new sights and meet new people. We will gain new perspectives that will help us to see our old familiar world in a brand new way. We will meet new people who will challenge us to relate to them. We will discover new customs and patterns of behavior that we must adopt if we want to be on good terms with our hosts. We never know what might happen if we decide to make the trip. Bible country is full of surprises!

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ Identify one or two things that you most want to change in your relationship with God or Jesus. Explain why.

6.

Discovering New Worlds

One of the best things about going on a trip is that we visit new places and see new sights. The Bible reading journey involves both movement into and then through a new world, along with reflections about the significance of what we are seeing. As we travel around in this new world we need to comment on and discuss the meaning of what is happening to us. Meaning comes by connecting what is happening on the trip to our self and our everyday life.

Travel always helps us to see ourselves and our culture in a new way because we step out of our ordinary perspective. To enter into a new world invites us to reposition ourselves. Seeing the world through the eyes of a different culture lets us notice more clearly our own culture. This new standpoint furnishes a new perspective that produces “culture-shock” when we return home. Until we get re-acclimated, we view our own culture through the foreign perspective that we experienced while traveling.

The biblical journey introduces us to a world that puts God at the center. In this biblical world, God’s presence is the central organizing factor around which everything else revolves. Discovering God’s mysterious presence and learning how the different biblical people responded to it gives us models and helpful examples to use for our own relationship with God.

Just as traveling to a foreign country, where life is organized differently, reveals that there is no single way to put together all the pieces of human life, so reading the Bible shows us that there are many different responses to God’s presence in our lives. Relating to God offers a dizzying variety of options. Like skinning the proverbial cat, there is more than one way to relate to God.

Our Bible journey also invites us to step out of our familiar perspective. Whether our ordinary life includes God in it or not, by traveling to Bible country we always run the risk of changing our life because we are invited to adopt a new standpoint and perspective that puts God at the center of our world. God's presence and purpose for entering into relationship with us are the main coordinates that orient everything in this world. Through our Bible reading, we are invited to reorient our ordinary lives along the coordinates of meaning and purpose that we discover in the biblical world.

The biblical standpoint and perspective produce a “culture-shock” that challenges our familiar understanding of the way things ought to be and our priorities for everyday living. This demands changes in our behavior if we are going to live according to this new learning. Bible reading keeps alive the dangerous notion that there is a hidden reality beyond the world of appearances. And that reality is God!

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ What is the most surprising thing you learned about God or Jesus that then caused you to change your thinking or behavior? Describe the results.

7.

Meeting New and Fascinating People

Another great advantage of traveling is meeting new and fascinating people. The Bible is full of travelers like ourselves. Journeying into Bible country brings us face to face with a whole array of strange and mysterious people who help us with our own search to discover God's presence and to respond to it.

Meeting new people is always risky. We never know what their effect on us will be. This confrontation with another can confirm and comfort us, confront and challenge us, or surprise and renew us. Journeying to Bible country can confirm our cherished beliefs and behaviors or challenge us to adopt a fresh vision and different values because of whom we meet along the way.

Meeting new people always puts us on the alert for new ways of communicating and relating to others. Each biblical character shows us a unique response to God's presence that express his or her relationship to God. Communities also take on distinctive traits as they embody God's dream for the right kind of human community.

Of course the most fascinating personality of all is God. The Bible portrays God in all the mysterious complexity of a real person. God is always the main character throughout the biblical story. Through God's actions and words we discover who God is and how God likes to act in relation to us. The Bible preserves the memory of God's growing relationship to us as those chosen to be God's own people.

Through reading the Bible we become familiar with God's personality and what God expects in relationships with us. The main story of the Bible is God's desire to have a people who will

exemplify the way to live in right relationship. First with Adam and Eve, then with Noah, then the Israelite family of Abraham, and finally with the Jesus group of Christians, God seeks a community that will be willing to follow God's own guidelines and be the sign and model of God's loving presence among us.

For us Christians who have not usually read the Gospels, one modern author describes his reading the Gospels as an adult as "meeting Jesus again for the first time!" Whatever we might know about Jesus comes alive as we read his words and consider his actions. We discover his agenda for creating and maintaining the right relationship with God and with one another. No one can encounter Jesus through the Gospels and remain untouched by this new experience. Jesus never loses his fascination and mystery as God's revelation in human form.

Bible reading always brings us out of our comfort zone into a strange and unfamiliar world where no matter how much we think we already know about the God of the Bible or about Jesus, we are constantly surprised when we begin to meet them anew in the pages of the Bible.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ Which biblical person that you know about helps you relate to God? Explain why this person is a model for you.

8.

What Are You Really Seeking?

We are mistaken, though, if we think that God will be found in the pages of a book. The Bible does not give us God. Rather, it shows us where God has been found by some other seekers, how they were changed by that encounter and how they attempted to find ways to live with others in relationship to the God they discovered.

The meaning of the Bible comes from its relation to our lives. Like any book, the story, characters and themes take on increased significance when we decide that they mean more than what we find between the covers of the book. When some connection is made to our life, then we understand and are transformed by what we have experienced through our reading.

This connection of the Bible book with our lives is the touchstone of its meaning. For this reason, our Bible reading journey does not just inform but transforms. When we read, we move beyond simply amassing scraps of information to being changed and shaped by the meanings we discover.

Reading the Bible is a fantastic voyage to the center of our faith, where we meet the God who has created us, sustains us and invites us into an ever more mysterious relationship modeled on the person of Jesus of Nazareth that prepares us for our ultimate destiny—meeting God face to face. Our encounter with God through our reading will constantly orient us, disorient us and re-orient us to God and to those around us in endlessly fascinating ways as we discover God present in our midst for the renewal of relationships and for our personal transformation.

So the journey of Bible reading, like every journey, will be a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, fun and fear. The unknown

stirs up anxieties in all of us because we do not know what we might confront and whether we will be able to handle what does come. But every so often our curiosity gets the better of us and we venture out to experience something new on the journey that will change our lives.

Journal Reflection or Discussion Starter

- ◆ What is your greatest anxiety or fear that arises when you think of reading the Bible?
- ◆ What does this tell you about your ideas about the Bible? about yourself?

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO READING THE BIBLE SERIES

by Steve Mueller

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Steve Mueller, PhD, author of the five books in *The Catechist's Guide to Reading the Bible Series* published by Faith Alive Books, has taught Philosophy, Theology, Scripture and Catholic Studies. He helped develop and taught for many years in the renowned Denver Catholic Biblical School for adult scripture study and was formerly the editor-in-chief of the monthly periodical for Eucharistic spirituality *Living with Christ* and a managing editor for Morehouse Education Resources for lectionary-based catechesis and sacramental preparation. He is the current editor for *Words of Grace: Daily Reflections & Prayers for Catholics* for All Saints Press (www.AllSaintsPress.com).

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