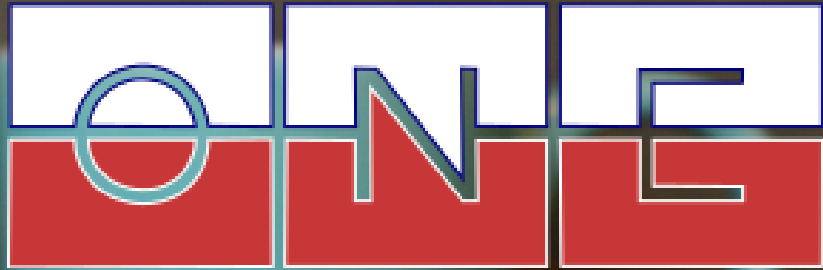


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How to Read the Bible

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St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church

I am sure everyone has received a gift or two over the course of a lifetime. Many gifts are sweet, make us smile, or can make us cry. Some gifts, like the gift of faith or the gift of life given to us through Jesus' resurrection, are remarkable reminders of God's goodness and grace. Gifts such as faith should be embraced and most of all nourished. The Bible provides a wondrous platform for us to do just that. But how do we read and understand the Bible?

As a "cradle" Catholic, I have not taken many courses on how to understand the Bible. I have, however, attended Bible studies, and the cool thing I've noticed is there seems to be more people of all denominations meeting to read, pray, and discuss the Bible. For me, in addition to Bible studies and books

about the Bible, attending church on Sunday is a great opportunity to hear readings from the Old and New Testaments. As a music director, I read the readings before the Sunday service and plan music accordingly. As a cantor and accompanist, I sometimes attend several services on the weekend at different churches. I love hearing each pastor help me "see" within the readings what I may or may not have seen before.

Now, to be sure, there are a lot more readings in the Bible than I can hear proclaimed at church on a Sunday, but to be able to hear them proclaimed gives me a different perspective than when I read them on my own or in a study group. But that really doesn't answer the question, "How do I read and understand the Bible?" I think to read and understand the Bible, a person must do just that -

read. Make time to read. And pray. I would not recommend saying to one's self, "I think I'll read the Bible now." No way a person in today's world could sit down and read the 66 books in the Bible in one sitting. And I definitely do not proclaim that I have the answers for everyone.

For me personally, reading the Bible is a true time to reflect and pray, and most importantly, to ask Jesus to journey with me as I read. I usually start by clearing my mind and praying the Our Father. Then I recite the words from Jeremiah 29:13:

"You will seek Me and find Me if you seek Me with all your heart."

Will I ever understand the Bible in its entirety? No. Some things are not meant to be fully understood, but rather, give us time to think and pray about the wondrous presence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.



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Reading the Very Words of God

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Greetings in the Name of the Holy Word of God!

It's been quite a year, hasn't it? Confined first by 'sheltering in place' and then confined in a mask, it's not what I would have prescribed for this year of '20/20 Vision!' I confess that I watch too much cable TV news and put too much energy in social media, although, as a pastor, it is important for me to see what is going on in the community and world beyond so that I can offer a bit of hope, and hopefully a bit of wisdom in these troubled times.

Hope and wisdom. Where might a simple guy like me get an understanding of hope and wisdom to share with a community and world beyond? The answer for me is not generally found in the pontification of self-proclaimed prophets on cable TV news or the internet. I have found that I can find hope and wisdom by prayerfully reading the Word of God, the Holy Bible.

Make no doubt about it, these are troubled times, but there were 'troubled times' throughout the history of God's people. I look back thousands of years ago at King David, who went through his own 'troubled times.' He was a flawed leader in some respects, but in one respect, he was flawless, for he had a firm and abiding faith in and heart for God; an everyday faith and love of God that saw him through the best of times and his most difficult days. In Psalm 19:7-10, he writes,

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb."

Of course, the law and decrees to which he refers are the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. Other prophetic and holy writings, including writings about his own life, would come later. But troubled times would continue to plague God's people, and a pandemic of apostasy would proliferate the palace and priests of God's people. Prophets would be raised by God and then stoned by God's people. Finally, God sent God's own Son, as the embodiment of the 'Word of God.' No longer would there simply be the written word of God, for

'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Jeremiah 31:31; 33).

Reading the Very Words of God (Continued)

So how do we mere mortals read the Bible, the Holy Word of God? I could go into a lot of technical theological telemetries, but really, reading the Bible isn't all that difficult. After all, *'the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul'* and *"the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.'*

So here is my suggestion regarding how to read the Bible: turn off the TV, log off the computer, and then go to a quiet place and simply ask God to write on your heart as you read his Word. (You might begin by opening the Bible to Psalm 1 and

read the first three verses,

"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.")

Then pray this prayer: "Lord, thank you for your Holy Message that you're writing on my heart. Now, what do you want to do through me?" and quietly wait for God's response. It

may come immediately or later. It may come in the form of a thought or of a person who needs God's help or an opportunity to share God's love. But it will come... and I suspect if you have the courage to act on it in a Godly way, you will...

"be more desired than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb."

I pray you will do so as you 'shelter in God' and that the mask that you wear might give life and light, and finally, that the hope and wisdom of which I have written might draw you even closer to God.

Reading Through the Lens of Humility

Brandon Nimz
Unite Ministries

Reading the Bible is important for believers as part of our growth, but how we read scripture is possibly even more important. Though it is not inherently harmful to simply pick up the Bible and start reading, I believe it is critical that we first pray and ask God to help us listen to Him and learn from Him as we read.

There is a vast difference between reading scripture solely through the lens of our own mind, seeking to understand all there is to know about God through our own research, effort, and insights, as opposed to reading the Bible with an open mind—asking God to teach us about Himself and our own selves as we read.

I find that true

understanding has only been given to me when I've come at it from a place of humility, recognizing my own shortfalls and asking God to help me. This puts Him in charge of my understanding, as He should be. When I've come at scripture through my own intellect, apart from God, it may lead me to lots of study on cultural context, historical translations, and other important elements, but I will ultimately only

Reading Through the Lens of Humility (Continued)

change my own understanding myself, and I may even lead myself to false understandings due to my own pride and lack of connection to the one who lived through these things and can give me the best explanation.

A simple example of this difference is the way I used to read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as opposed to how I read it now. When I was younger, my readings of scripture were usually my own intellectual ventures to try to understand God and truth better. I often read to consider ideas about theological questions that I considered very important, and my own intellectual understanding was my guide. The Sermon on the Mount seemed like Jesus was teaching in a very scattershot manner—jumping to different areas of theology like He didn't have the attention to stay in one place. The little titles in my Bible (that don't appear in the original Greek) such as 'Jesus teaches about anger' or 'Jesus teaches about divorce' further aided

this perception of mine. When I read back then, each separate topic would get its own study, centered on tiny little word shifts and phrases in each sentence. God still taught me through some of my studies in that time, but I also built up my own pride in my understanding in unhealthy ways that made it harder for me to hear His voice—especially when it didn't match the image of Him I was creating as I studied.

Much later in life, after God had humbled me in several ways, I re-read the Sermon on the Mount, and I was astounded. The whole thing was one clear message—very simple and starting in the Beatitudes and ending as He healed a leper on His way down from the mountain, which would have illustrated His message to those who may have been confused by what He meant. This message demonstrated the difference between the

narrow road that leads to life and the broad road that leads to destruction. It didn't seek to reach out into different theological areas of discourse; it was actually using many different illustrations of parts of spiritual life to show the difference between living to the minimum letter of the law versus seeking to live out the true spirit of the law. This and other new understandings about The Sermon on the Mount came from the Holy Spirit changing my perspective over time and from Him opening up my ears so that I could finally, truly, hear. This active process of the Holy Spirit is really the critical element that makes the difference between people with good intentions trying to learn about God but being limited by their own egos and perspectives, and believers interacting with God and learning about Him as He reveals Himself to us over time in our lives and through scripture.



THE SCRIPTURES TEACH US THE BEST WAY OF LIVING, THE NOBLEST WAY OF SUFFERING AND THE MOST COMFORTABLE WAY OF DYING. - JOHN FLAVEL