

## Introduction

Let me begin tonight by reminding you of the central approach that I apply to things of faith in my life. That faith only makes sense if you first have an experience of God. That when that experience is shared with others, across cultures and time, then it's a core experience of humankind. And that those experiences are worthy of reflection, discussion and documentation. Last week we reflected upon those experiences as they relate to God. And tonight, we're going to discuss the documentation of those experiences: the Bible.

We're going to do this in a few ways: first we're going to talk about how the inspired word of God got written down and transmitted to us today; second we'll talk about what is contained in that inspired word of God; and third, we'll talk about how to allow that content to make a difference in your life.

**So first, let's talk about how the inspired word of God got written down and transmitted to us today.**

The Bible is full of experiences. In fact, one of the striking differences between the Judeo-Christian scriptures and those of other religions is that our Bible is mostly the story of the experiences of a people, not simply the wisdom they extracted from those experiences. Abraham first hears a call from God and only then goes on his journey to a distant land. The Hebrew people first wander in the desert and only then come to a covenant with God. Paul first is blinded and knocked to the ground, and only then goes on to proclaim the good news. Each event begins with an experience of God, which was later documented by someone who was inspired by God.

What do we mean when we say someone is inspired by God?

A young boy was watching his father, a minister, write a sermon."

How do you know what to say?" he asked.

"Why, God tells me," said the minister.

At which point the boy replied: "Oh, then why do you keep crossing things out?"

See, God inspires us all in different ways. Some he's inspired to speak with fidelity the message of the faith that he reveals to them, like that struggling minister. Some he's inspired to act with fidelity the message of faith that he reveals to them, like you and me. And some he inspires to document with fidelity the message of faith that faith that he reveals to them, like the Scripture writers.

Tonight we'll talk about 3 aspects of that documentation: first, how it came about, second, what it contains, and finally, what it means in our own lives.

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## **History of the Documentation**

It may be hard to imagine initially, but the Bible did not get written down in one fell swoop, just as the experiences of God's people did not happen in one fell swoop. Instead, powerful things happened to God's people, and then they shared those experiences with others, and then they wrote those things down from a faith perspective. I mean, it should be pretty clear, that the first pieces of the Old Testament were completed before the books of the New Testament, right? Especially since there are 350 Old Testament quotations in the New Testament. But what most people don't have a good understanding of is how it all came together into a core set of books we call the Bible today.

There's a lot of detail behind all this, but simply put, certain documents about our communal experience of God had "traction" in terms of its ability to convey a core truth about God and about ourselves while others did not. The books that had "traction" kept getting referred to in Jewish and Christian services and eventually began to be seen as authoritative texts. Sometimes books that once had had traction, were dropped because over the years or across cultures, they were no longer seen to speak authoritatively to God's people. It all happened gradually in what some would call an "organic" process, and not all at once. So there isn't some special moment or meeting one can point to where one can say that the official collection was defined.

Now the book, *The DaVinci Code*, and others, make it seem like there was some great conspiracy around which books were included in the official canon and which weren't. It wasn't so simple: no one person or age defined the canon. Like most things surrounding our faith, the process of selection took covered both space and time, taking place over centuries and across cultures. By about 200 BC the core books of the Hebrew canon were solidified, and by about 150AD, the Christian canon was solidified.

By the late 300s AD, a definitive collection of both the Hebrew and Christian canons were put together by a man who lived in a cave, near Bethlehem. A hot tempered man with a sharp tongue, who preferred the solitude of the desert to the bustle of the city. But this man was not some wild eyed recluse, afraid of the world. Instead, he was a well learned scholar, who had worked diligently to perfect his Latin, his Greek, his Hebrew, even the rarely used language Babylonian language, Chaldaic. He set up a school there and used his spare time and cantankerous personality to fight a number of heresies of the day, traveling to and from Rome a number of times. But St. Jerome is not known so much for his defense of orthodoxy, as he is for the excellent translation of the Bible that he produced over decades. His knowledge of the original languages was so great, and his Latin so well crafted, that his translation of the Bible, known as the Latin Vulgate (which means the common speech of the people), stood unparalleled for 1500 years. The Vulgate allowed the common citizen to hear the Word of God in their native language.

This worked well for centuries, as long as the Roman Empire controlled a large portion of Europe, the Mideast and northern Africa. But over the years, the empire eroded and eventually came to an end. The *language* of the people, Latin, began to become to *languages* of the people, the Romance languages, and the average person's knowledge of Latin could no longer be assumed.

But the Latin Vulgate had been in use for centuries by this time and the Church didn't have a strong desire to mess with it. In fact, after centuries of use, Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible had practically become the original text in the mind of many – and if not the original, then certainly the authoritative.

So the gap gradually widened between those who could understand the Word of God, and those who couldn't. In order to overcome this gap, a number of methods were tried. Local language translations were created, but weren't done with the same care that had guided Jerome, they were hand copied and errors got introduced, and even then, this was before books were a household item, so most people were illiterate. Most widely used was the use of stained glass windows in churches which told Bible stories in pictures.

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But the desire to get to the Bible in the hands of the people continued to drive many in the Church. And in 1517 Martin Luther expressed what many held in their hearts: give us the scriptures in our own language so that we can *read* them.

Fortunately for Luther, the invention of printing press about 50 years earlier brought about a revolution in thought that has not been seen since, not even by the internet. With the printing press, the scriptures could be provided to lots of people, not kept in a few university libraries and monasteries. Books were becoming available to average people who were spurred on to learn to read. Eventually, well translated Bibles were available in many people's houses.

The Catholic Church responded to this movement by encouraging translations in the local tongue, but translated from the Vulgate – which at the time was still considered one of the best translations around. By the 1800s, better researched translations began to be available in Protestant churches but not the Catholic Church. Jerome had done an admirable job, but his was a one man job done at a single point in time with limited resources. Almost 1500 years had passed and lots had been discovered that Jerome didn't have access to.

And then something happened that really changed the world of Scripture. In the late 1800's, a group of Protestant scholars began to apply what's called literary and historical criticism to the Scriptures. This had been done with the classic works of literature to get a better understanding of the author and to determine if later generations had changed the original texts. We hear about this today when people try to determine who wrote the works of William Shakespeare, but using this technique with the Scriptures was daring and radical.

These scholars suggested that the Scriptures might not be as clean cut as most had thought. Up until this point, people believed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, which is a Greek work meaning the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures. But these critics were saying that the Pentateuch contained 4 separate revisions done by people at different times – each with a different emphasis to share. They said that some of the history told in Scriptures didn't actually happen exactly like it was written. They even said that the Jews had borrowed a lot of their traditions, stories and wisdom literature from other cultures.

Were this not Scripture, it might not be so radical. For example, at this same time, we knew similar things about our American history. In terms of borrowing things from other cultures: the tune of our National Anthem is a British drinking song. In terms of things not being exactly like they were written, the stories of George Washington and the Cherry Tree and of Abraham Lincoln walking miles to return a penny, were seen more as ways to convey American values than actual historical facts.

However, when applied to the Scriptures, this was controversial stuff! These scholars were proposing ideas much more radical than those I just mentioned, and in response, many Protestants bound together to hold onto the fundamentals of their faith, insisting on the literal factuality of *everything* in the Scriptures, becoming known later as Fundamentalists.

The Catholic Church also reacted defensively to the new scholarship, insisting on its traditional views and pretty much staying out of any of the debate caused by the Scripture scholars.

But like all movements, the pendulum eventually swung from radical new propositions to a more centrist understanding. And by the 1940s, the Church began to support this new scholarship and came to a revised view of its traditional understandings. While the Church may not be fast, it tends to be right, and over time, it has become perhaps the foremost proponent of Scripture scholarship.

Now, Catholic and Protestant scripture scholars are encouraged to work together, even teaching in each other's seminaries. The world has indeed seen a radical shift to the understanding of Scriptures and their power to transform us.

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Today, the Church strongly encourages us to read the Bible on our own, to discern its meaning for our individual lives, and to engage in dialog and prayer with God through the Scriptures.

So, what is it that we now believe about the Bible? We recognize that:

- First, each book of the Bible was not written down in a single burst of divinely inspired energy, but came about in stages. First, people told stories about an important experience and began to hone in on the best way to convey the essence of the story. It was only after some time that some one actually wrote the story down, blessed by God's inspiration. In most cases, this initial writing was not the final writing. People continued to hone the written word with new insights and perspectives gained over time, using the original as the basis for expressing God's further inspiration. For example, instead of seeing the first 5 books of the Bible as written by the hand of Moses, there is evidence that 4 different schools of thought added to the Pentateuch, like 4 successive waves polishing the sand on the beach.

I don't know if any of you have ever had to give a talk more than once. I would guess that after the first time you give the talk, you wished you had said things differently, and so you change the talk before you give it again

- Second, our view of inspiration is not like the one we see in Renaissance paintings, where the scripture writers are shown with an angel guiding their hand. It would be more accurate to see those angels guiding their hearts. The scriptures are always true when they speak of things of the heart: the ultimate realities of life and of salvation. But since they were written by certain people at a certain time, they are also susceptible to the scientific and historical perspective of those people at that time. So, when it comes to scientific and historical facts, they cannot be seen as authoritative.

The same holds true for us. Which of us learned the scientific "facts" that electrons rotate around nuclei? They don't. Which of us learned that the speed of light was a universal constant? It's not.

- Third, not only were most books of the Bible compiled in stages, with a community of people editing the work of an earlier version to more fully express the truths of God, but the Bible also began to be recognized as a sort of library of books, all bound together in one spine, but written by different people at different times with different intents and different styles.

Today a number of different styles are recognized in the Bible: legends, myths, genealogies, histories, biographies, letters, poems, historical novels, sermons, prophecies, and on and on. It is important to recognize this fact, so that when we read the text, we can keep it all in context. Just like we might watch a movie and, if we know whether it's a documentary or historical fiction, immediately understand what is factual and what is adjusted to convey a larger truth, so too must we be able to read the content of the Bible and understand the context of how it means. For example, since we know the creation stories are myths (myths tell larger than life truths), we can appreciate that the two creation stories in Genesis aren't contradictory, but are complimentary ways of appreciating that we have our origin in God.

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Let me give some further examples of what I suspect might be a troubling concept. In talk on God, I shared some stories. For the experience of God in New Zealand, I tried to precisely describe the details of the physical event with an emphasis on the visual flow of colors and the audible crashing of the sea in order to set the stage for my interior response. For the history of how the perception of God changed over time, I emphasized some of the Hebrew history and ignored other parts in order to convey the general flow of God from intimate to distant. For the story of The Prodigal Son, I mentioned things not mentioned in the Bible story in order to call out things that might have been obvious for the original listener, but not for us. For the closing story of Brian and the Worm, I simply repeated a made up tale. None of these were lies. All told some aspect of the Truth. And all did so differently. But in my mind, all are true.

So how do we know what's what in the Bible? Well, the Church has official interpretations of a few Scripture passages, usually used to support its doctrines, but as for understanding the *meaning* of the text in our daily lives, that's up to us. The Scriptures are both the record of God's revelation to His people in the past, and the springboard to ongoing revelation of God in our own lives.

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## Content of the Documentation

OK, enough talk about how the Scriptures came to be, let's jump into what they contain, what they're about.

Now before I do that, let me give you a little quiz to test your knowledge of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures:

- Who was the greatest sinner in the Bible? Moses: he broke all the Ten Commandments at once
- Who was the shortest man in the bible? One of Job's friends was Bildad, from the land of Shu, known in the bible as Bildad the Shuhite
- Who was the funniest person in the Bible? Samson – he brought the house down
- Who was the greatest financier in the Bible? Noah, because when the rest of the world was in liquidation he was floating his stock.
- Who was the best tennis player in the bible? Joseph. He served in Pharaoh's courts.

Essentially, the Hebrew Scriptures are the story of the relationship between God and his people – a stormy relationship between strong willed lovers that reveals our salvation history, the covenant between God and us, and eventually, the Kingdom of God. They have a very long history of being divided into 3 sections: The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings (or “everything else”).

The Law, also called the Pentateuch or Torah, is divided into 5 books. The first, Genesis tells of a primeval history with 2 accounts of creation and the history of human sinfulness with Adam and Eve, and their son's Cain and Abel through the washing clean of the earth involving Noah, and then another downfall with the Tower of Babel. It follows this ancient history with a history of the early patriarchs or fathers of the faith: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. And it begins a basic theme in Scripture: God reveals himself in history, and works through flawed people.

The second book, Exodus, continues this history, reflecting on the Exile in Egypt and Moses' escape on Passover through the Red Sea, leading the people out into the desert where he receives the 10 commandments. This book is where the covenant between God and his people is formalized: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.” And this book has the recurrent theme that again and again, the Hebrew people fail while God holds steadfast in his love for them.

The third book is Leviticus, which is a set of the laws and customs of the people. Now, it's pretty dry reading, in fact, it's been said that many scripture students wade into their study of Scriptures with Genesis, get up to their necks with Exodus, and drown with Leviticus. It was supposedly communicated through Moses, but it was really written centuries later. But it's quite intriguing to hear about the different laws and customs, if you're in the right mood.

The book of Numbers talks about further wandering about the desert with Moses.

And in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses finally leads the people to the Promised Land. As Moses stands, looking at the Promised Land, he gives his last testament and dies. And that's the end of the Law.

The second major section of the Hebrew Scriptures is called The Prophets. It contains two subsections cleverly called the Former Prophets and Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets tells the story of some early prophets and rulers. When Moses dies, Joshua leads the people into the Promised Land. For a long time, the Promised Land was ruled by a loose confederation of tribes, each led by a charismatic military leader, or judge. This is what the book Judges tells us about. Samuel is the last of these judges and the first prophet. In 1 Samuel, Samuel anoints Saul as the first King and in 2 Samuel we get an introduction to David, considered the greatest king of the Hebrews notso much because he was an upright person, but because he was one of the few kings who truly worshipped Yahweh alone.

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1 and 2 Kings continues the story of David, his son, Solomon and the split of the kingdom into Israel and Judah on his death. It tells the story of later kings, who are routinely assassinated as successors maneuver into power. Eventually, their weakened kingdoms are taken over by Assyrians and later the Babylonians.

In fact, 2 Kings, Chapter 2, contains one of my favorite Bible verses for a reason that will be immediately obvious:

*From there Elisha went up to Bethel. While he was on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him. "Go up, baldhead," they shouted, "go up, baldhead!" The prophet turned and saw them, and he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the children to pieces.*

The moral is: don't make fun of bald people. OK, now that I've gotten that out of my system, let's continue on.

The Latter Prophets tells the stories and insights of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel who live from right before the Babylonian exile to about 400BC, long after the return to the Promised Land. These books also foretell unfaithfulness amongst the Hebrews and the penalties they will pay, or who provide consolation while in exile.

The final section of the Hebrew Scriptures is called The Writings, or all the inspired writings that don't fall in the Law or Prophets. It consists of 3 kinds of writings:

- Prophetic books, including Lamentations, which is a lament over the loss of Jerusalem and the first temple in 587. The temple was seen as indestructible, so its destruction was especially hard to bear.
- These also include an apocalyptic book called Daniel, which gives hope to sufferers during a time when the Jews were suffering persecution. It contains the first expression of life after death, talking about a resurrection of the just and unjust.
- The Writings also contain Historical Books which are reflections on past Jewish history and traditions with renewed theological insights about God.
- And finally, they contain Wisdom Literature. Wisdom literature was a form common in the Mid-East. The Psalms and Proverbs are found here along with a number of other books. The Psalms are a very important set of 150 poems, about half of which are attributed to King David, that are really prayers from the heart. They're a great place to start prayer because they're so human, filled with doubt, fear and praise of God.

So there's the Hebrew Scriptures in 5 minutes. In general, most of the Hebrew canon (the Law and Prophets but not the Writings) was in place by the time of Jesus. We hear Jesus say things like "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets." so these canons were certainly recognized during his time.

In the years that followed the life and death of Jesus, a new set of inspired writings came about. These we know as the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures. Like the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Scriptures can be seen in 3 sections: the first 5 books, (called The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles), the letters attributed to Paul, and everything else.

Now before I do that, let me give you a little quiz to test your knowledge of the New Testament:

- Who was the highest jumper in the bible? Jesus. He cleared the temple.
  - Who was the shortest man in the bible? Since you didn't like Bildad the Shuhite, how about the soldier who slept on his watch.
  - Why did Peter deny Jesus? Jesus healed his mother-in-law.
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The Gospel form was a brand new format first introduced by Mark. Its goal is neither to tell a factual history nor a fanciful tale, but as John says: “Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. But, these are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.”

The Gospels were not written by apostles of Jesus, but by later believers some 35 to 70 years after his death. The Church calls us to remember 3 stages in the transmission of the Gospels: first, the time of Jesus’ life. Next, the period of preaching and teaching leading up to the writing of the first Gospel, as the disciples learned which stories had impact and which didn’t. And finally, the time of the writing of the Gospels, when the writers gathered all the known material and put it together in a way that addressed the needs of their community.

Mark wrote his Gospel first, between the years 65 and 75. He wrote it for a community of Gentile believers in Rome and focused in on the *actions* of Jesus rather than his words. It’s my favorite because Mark shows the apostles to be a bunch of simple oafs who just don’t get it, and I find it pretty easy to relate to them. In an example of the redaction, or editing of Bible text, Mark originally ended his Gospel with the finding of the empty tomb, and it was only later that the stories of the Jesus’ resurrection appearances were included. Can you imagine the faith required to believe when the story ends with an empty tomb? What a dramatic ending!

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were both written about 10 years later, in about 85. Both made use of a source that contained the sayings of Jesus which Mark did not have access to.

Matthew built on top of Mark, using 660 of his 661 verses, and wrote to a Jewish community in Syria. His central theme is that Jesus is the Messiah promised from of old.

Luke wrote to Greek citizens of Asia Minor (or modern day Turkey). His central theme is that Jesus is our Savior, with a special concern for the poor and outcast.

The latest Gospel was John’s, written around 90. There’s debate as to whether he wrote in Ephesus (in Turkey), Syria or Alexandria (in Egypt). His central theme is to “strengthen our faith in Jesus through reflecting on the significance of his ‘signs’ or wondrous deeds”. He also takes the story of Jesus back further than the others. Mark begins at Jesus’ baptism. Matthew and Luke begin at his birth. But John begins at the beginning of time.

Luke also wrote a sequel to his Gospel, called the Acts of the Apostles. His Gospel talks about the life of Jesus, but Acts talks about the key figures of the early church and includes a travelogue of Paul’s journeys. His Gospel sees Jesus moving from a remote village to Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism. And his sequel sees the Church moving from a remote outpost of the Roman Empire to its capital, and from there he imagines the gospel being disseminated “to the ends of the earth.”

The next major section of writings in the Christian Scriptures is the writings attributed to Paul. Paul was a very forceful proponent for the emerging Christian faith. His letters are the earliest written parts of the Christian Scriptures. Paul was a tireless and energetic apostle for the faith. He traveled extensively, and founded many communities, probably in the early 50s. He had a general approach which is evident in his writings. First off, he had a great love for the communities to which he writes. He often began with thankfulness about the community and their people. And then he focused in on the specific problems of the day in that community, but also provides a healthy long term approach. In many ways, he was a prototypical leader.

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In his letters to communities from Rome to Asia Minor, written between 55 and 65, he takes his knowledge of Judaism, combines it with an incredibly profound belief in Christ, and helps create the core theology of the Church.

- He emphasizes that salvation is for all, Gentile and Jew, in spite of many controversies to the contrary.
- He addresses immoral practices and very directly provides guidance for right action.
- He carefully balances the divinity and humanity of Christ.
- He articulates how we are justified in God's eyes.
- He comes up with great images like when he talks about different gifts but the same spirit, or compares the church to the body with Christ as the head or presents a beautiful reflection on love, which never fails.

Paul is a great preacher, writer and leader, and his letters are full of insights into the faith.

Besides the Gospels and Paul's letters, there are a handful of other letters, called the Catholic Letters because they are not written for a specific community but for the Church as a whole. The word "Catholic" means "universal." These letters were written between 80 and 100 and give examples of early baptismal rites, elaborate on the fact that Jesus saves, and emphasize our need to live in love with each other.

The final book of the Christian Scriptures is probably the most troubling, Revelation, which was written in a style called Crisis Literature that was popular from 200 BC to 200 AD. Its author is a believer named John who was exiled to an island called Patmos, a Roman penal colony. He drew on the biblical literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Daniel and Ezekiel. Like the book of Daniel, his goal is to give hope and comfort to a people suffering persecution, saying that it won't last long, and that Jesus will come. Reading or praying Revelation without a good modern Catholic commentary on the book could put your understanding at serious risk of misinterpretation.

### **Meaning of the Documentation**

So, we've talked about how the Bible came together and what it contains, but why should we care? What difference does that all make? The biggest risk in learning or reading *about* the Bible is that we may never actually *read* it. If you're like me, you might know that studying and praying the Scriptures is a great thing, but you never quite get around to it. There are a number of reasons for this. For me, it's all about trying to balance my time. I get up as early as my body will allow me. I head off to work. I race home to be with my wife and kids. I go to sleep. In the midst of all that I know there are a lot of things I should do, but I don't. I don't know how many of us have joined health clubs or bought a treadmill with the perspective that if I pay hard earned cash for something, that will motivate me to use it. But we don't. We find all sorts of excuses for not exercising, or those excuses find us. I've read that those people who exercise first thing in the morning are more likely to stay the course than those who do so later in the day; because later in the day there are all sorts of things that can come up and cause us to choose other things to do. I see a lot of parallels with praying the Scripture. We might say "well, I go to mass every day and I hear the Scriptures there." Or "I already pray at night time." Or any number of other things. Those are nice *things*, but they're not nice *excuses*. The Scriptures are a wonderful source of God's revelation to us and we make a mistake not to use them.

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There's a story of a CCD school teacher who asked her class if anyone knew what was in the Bible. One young boy replied: "A letter from Grandma, my mom's recipe for angel food cake, and some Kleenex." My sense is that that describes most of our Bibles.

So, first off, buy yourself a Bible that you can feel comfortable marking up and crinkling the pages. So often we respect our Bibles so much that we're afraid to do much to them. Do yourself a favor, skip going out to dinner one night or a CD and use the money to buy a bible that you don't mind marking up, even if it's hard bound!

There's another story of a priest, a rabbi and a scripture student who were all in a boat out in the middle of a lake.

The priest says, "I'm thirsty. I think I'll go to shore and get something to drink." So he steps out of the boat walks across the water to shore, gets a soda, walks back across the water, and gets back in the boat.

The rabbi says, "I'm thirsty, too. I think I'll go to shore and get something to drink." So he steps out of the boat walks across the water to shore, gets a soda, walks back across the water, and gets back in the boat.

The scripture student thinks to himself "That's pretty cool! I think I'll try it." So he says, "I'm thirsty, too. I'm going to go to shore and get something to drink." So, he steps out of the boat and immediately sinks down into the water getting all soaked.

Then the priest said to the rabbi, "Do you think we should have told him where the stepping stones were?"

I'd like to share with you a two stepping stones, or approaches, to scripture study in order to help you avoid getting over your head in studying the Scriptures.

There are a number of ways to study and, more importantly, pray the Scriptures. Let's try out my two favorites. The first is to enter into a kind of dialog with the Scripture. Here's how it works.

- 1 Read a passage of the Bible once. It would be great if you could do it out loud, because remember, the stories were basically transcriptions of orally transmitted stories.
- 2 Write down any thoughts you might have. If the reading is a psalm, write down a couple lines about what the meaning of the psalm might be. If it's some history, write down the names of people or events you might not know. If it's a parable, imagine that you're one of the original listeners and write down some questions or discontinuities it might cause for you and try to answer them as best as you can by yourself.
- 3 Read about the passage in a commentary. There are lots of good ones out there. Find out more about the passage than might have first met your eye and seek answers to your questions if you can.
- 4 Read the section again, listening for how your deeper understanding changes your experience.
- 5 Stick with that deeper understanding and let it challenge or affirm you – let it marinate your heart. But don't close shop as soon as you are done with the second reading, otherwise you'll grow learned in the Scriptures, but not wise.

Let's use this approach to look at a parable that Jesus told.

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.” And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’

So, now the fun work begins, and it really can be fun. I deliberately picked a passage which doesn’t get much air time. It’s only found in the Gospel of Luke and as a result, you’ll only hear it at mass once every 3 years. But it really sticks in my craw. What the heck is Jesus talking about.

This sounds like the story of a lazy manager working remotely, whose rich absentee landowner boss comes by unexpectedly after someone rats on the manager. The manager’s books are out of order, the boss calls him on it, and then fires him without allowing him to get a word in edgewise to defend himself. The manager, either in order to get even with his boss, or to bribe the debtors (whose hospitality he’ll soon have to call on his unemployed future) – or maybe even both – cuts everyone’s debts and the boss ends up complying with it. In the end, the manager is commended for his shrewd and seemingly underhanded actions.

So after my first reading of this parable, I had a number of questions which I wrote down:

- Why is a mischievous servant being praised for the very thing he was fired for: not collecting enough revenue?
- Why does the rich man allow the people to get away with only paying half?
- Why is unscrupulous and underhanded behavior rewarded?
- What does that whole serving God and money thing have to do with the story?

So the next step is to read up on the passage, and you’ll soon find out that most scholars believe the original story is a lot shorter than it appears. Most chop it off before any of the platitudes about trustworthiness and wealth, seeing them as later additions that came to be appended with the story as related sayings in the Church meant to help shed some additional meaning on it all.

Some scholars chop the parable off at verse 7, with verse 8a being an original comment about it by Jesus (the Master) as he told the story – commending the manager for his shrewdness in crisis, intending to tell the listeners of the urgency to act in our lives, and our need to act shrewdly in that crisis. Some scholars chop the parable off at 8a, so that commendation comes from the rich man, praising the manager the way a mafia don might do, laughing about how the manager got even with him – a begrudging acknowledgement of excellence in selfishness, from one selfish person to another.

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Either way, he's commended. I know that if I did something like that, or if the media ever caught wind of someone doing something like that, there would be hell to pay.

Now, just to add to the confusion, there are a few scholars who see Jesus' original remarks as not just verse 8a, but also verse 9. In this case, verse 9 is seen as a sarcastic comment from Jesus saying something like "go ahead, use the things of this world to buy friends in this world. You'll see how far this will get you in the end."

So we have 3 possible viewpoints. In all three views, this is a parable about a couple of shrewd ingrates who try to get their way in the world, in the end, screwing each other over. As we listen, then, we find ourselves drawn to either side with the rich man in getting rid of the manager, or we side with the manager in getting even with the rich man. The rich man is forced to accept the manager's actions due to the fact that he was his appointed agent in dealing with the debtors, and his word is legally binding unless the rich man wants to go through the hassle of taking the whole thing to court. In the end, we see that they're both scoundrels, and that we're no better since we sided with one or the other.

So let's quickly review what each view holds, and I want you to pick one view to focus in on for our second reading.

In view 1, the story ends at verse 7, with Jesus' original comment being verse 8a. Jesus' comments that the manager showed shrewdness in crisis, using the bad hand he was dealt to bet on and prepare a brighter future for himself, just like we're called to act with urgency in our present situation regardless of the hand we're holding.

In view 2, the story ends at verse 8a. The rich man is kind of forced to admit that the manager showed shrewdness in crisis even though the rich man got screwed over. A selfish person is forced to admire the selfish actions of another, because the things of this world should be used to affect the things of this world.

And in view 3, the story ends at verse 7, with Jesus' original comments being verses 8 and 9. Jesus sarcastically commends the manager, but says "we'll see how far that will get him in things that really count."

The rest of the items are probably added on by Luke because this seems like a convenient place to throw in a couple more sayings of Jesus about the things of this world.

So, now I want you to pick one of the 3 views and listen to the parable again. I'll raise my hand at the chop off points, so that you know where you're choice ends.

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.”

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; ❶

for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ❷

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ❸

Now in real life, you would sit with this second reading for a while to let it marinate your heart.

So that’s a pretty detailed look at the first approach to studying the scriptures. A second approach that requires less work, focusing on prayer more so than study, is called *Lectio Divina*, or “prayerful reading.” Its goal is to seek union, not knowledge with a thirst for transformation, not information. In this approach, pick a passage and read it slowly, again out loud if possible. Read it so slowly that you think about every word. You might want to even savor the words. You might want to repeat words or passages, letting them soak in for effect by just sitting with them.

Picking a passage can be tough. There are a number of resources to help with this. The first is the listing of the daily and readings in your bulletin. By studying and praying the readings before you go to mass, you can appreciate them more when you listen to them in the community. Another approach is to subscribe to some periodical that might go through different sections and provide commentary. Still another, which was very fruitful for me is to listen to an audio version of the Bible. I have to thank a person by the name of Michael Grady who suggested this to me. This allows you to hear God’s word as it was meant to be heard: audibly, and it was something I could do in about 4 months of commuting to and from work. And a final approach is to join a Scripture study group, which is a great approach for a number of reasons. First, they can be the jolt to get you to “exercise” regularly because others are relying on you to join them. Second, they pre-select the readings to be studied. Third, they provide the background materials to better appreciate the readings. And fourth, by sharing in community, you’ll realize that you really do know a lot more about Scriptures than you ever believed you do.

And if you are truly open to the Scriptures, you’ll open your heart to them, so that even if your mind struggles to understand each passage, your heart will not, but will find prayer over each reading a chance to grow more deeply in the mystery of our relationship with God. And if you do so, maybe you will be able to have an experience like the following one of St. Peter.

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You see, one day Jesus and Peter were walking along and came upon an injured man along the side of the road and his daughter on the other side of the road, obviously the victims of foul play. Peter ran to the two but was rebuked by Jesus, who said “Leave the sick to take care of themselves for we are about our Father’s business.”

Jesus continued on his way and Peter scratched his head this way and that, and this way and that.

Later that day, Jesus and Peter came across a similar scene, with father and daughter lying along the side of the road. Peter made as if to walk right by when Jesus rebuked him, saying “A heart absorbed in oneself is a heart absorbed by the devil.”

Jesus attended to the pair and Peter scratched his head this way and that, and this way and that.

And, after 3 years of following Jesus, that’s how St. Peter went bald.

As you can see, I’m following right in Peter’s tracks. According to Mark, Peter struggled long and hard to figure out what Jesus was about, but never really “got it.” Nonetheless, Jesus chose Peter to lead his church because his heart was in the right place. My prayer for you is that you’ll allow yourself to be a follower like Peter – not that I want you to go bald, but I do pray that you will let the Word of God challenge you at every turn. And that while your mind may never quite figure it out, I pray that your heart will come to know God’s plan for you in a deep, intimate and enduring way.

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## **Hebrew Scriptures**

### Law

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

### Prophets

- Former Prophets
  - Joshua
  - Judges
  - 1 Samuel
  - 2 Samuel
  - 1 Kings
  - 2 Kings
- Latter Prophets
  - Hosea
  - Joel
  - Amos
  - Obadiah
  - Jonah
  - Micah
  - Nahum
  - Habakkuk
  - Zephaniah
  - Haggai
  - Zechariah
  - Malachi

### Writings

- Prophetic Books
  - Lamentations
  - Daniel
  - Baruch
- Later Historical Books
  - Ruth
  - 1 & 2 Chronicles
  - Ezra
  - Nehemiah
  - Tobit
  - Judith
  - Esther
  - 1&2 Maccabees
- Wisdom Literature
  - Job
  - Psalms
  - Proverbs
  - Ecclesiastes
  - Song of Songs
  - Wisdom
  - Sirach

## **New Testament**

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### Gospels and Acts

- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John
- Acts

### Pauline Epistles

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Ephesians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon
- Hebrews

### Catholic Epistles and Revelation

- James
  - 1 Peter
  - 2 Peter
  - 1 John
  - 2 John
  - 3 John
  - Jude
  - Revelation
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## Luke 16:1-13

- 1 Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.
  - 2 So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’
  - 3 Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.
  - 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’
  - 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’
  - 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’
  - 7 Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’
  - 8 (a) And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;  
(b) for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.
  - 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.
  - 10 ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.
  - 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?
  - 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?
  - 13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’
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# Appendices (some information on the following pages taken from the work of Jerome Kodell, O.S.B)

## Some good Bibles

- *The Catholic Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1990) Contains the New American Bible text and 600 pages of study materials besides the standard NAB notes. Reading guides for every biblical book.
- *The Catholic Bible: Personal Study Edition* (Oxford University Press, 1995) Slightly more introductory in nature than the Catholic Study Bible. Some format, but also includes questions for personal reflection.
- *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Doubleday) Contains short introductory articles to the biblical books, with extensive footnotes and cross references.
- *The Catholic Youth Bible* (St. Mary's Press, 2000) The New Revised Standard Version translation with lots of explanatory material, briefly stated, accompanying the biblical text. Not only high school students but many adults would find it helpful.

Here's some highlights of the three different translations mentioned above:

- New American Bible (NAB). This translation is the most popular among American Catholics in the post Vatican II era. It is often the translation used in mass (along with the Jerusalem Bible). It uses a good blend of literal translation and "dynamic" translation (get to the meaning without getting bogged down in literary exactness). It is literal enough to reflect the style of the original languages (especially the Hebrew) but generally free enough in the expression to be readable and understandable.
  - New Jerusalem Bible (JB). This was the first complete Bible in easy-reading English for Catholics after Vatican II. Its excellent notes made this Bible a great source of instruction. A new edition appeared in 1985.
  - New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). It has the reputation among English translations of being the closest in wording to the original languages. It is a favorite for Scripture classes in seminaries and universities. It makes new decisions in passages where masculine pronouns were used in the RSV. It also removed any remaining archaisms, like *thee*, *thou*, and *behold*.
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## Approaches to Individual Bible Study and Prayer

For a Gospel passage:

- 1 Simply read through the passage straight through
- 2 Read the passage again slowly, marking down anything that needs special attention or any questions that come to mind.
- 3 Answer the questions as well as you can by looking at the context of the passage in the particular Gospel. The cross references in your Bible will be a great help here.
- 4 Seek additional information and insights from a Bible commentary or other Bible study aid.
- 5 Listen for the particular personal message God offers you in this story.

For a psalm

- 1 Read the psalm through
- 2 Summarize the meaning of the psalm in one or two sentences.
- 3 Study the psalm with the help of footnotes, commentary or other aids.
- 4 Relate thoughts in the psalm to central themes of Hebrew faith, such as salvation, creation, exodus, covenant, messiah, king, sin, longing for God.
- 5 Seek a Christian meaning.
- 6 Relate thoughts in the psalm to themes of Christian salvation, such as new creation, new exodus, new covenant.
- 7 Compose a prayer using the phraseology of the psalm and reflecting personal faith. Be creative. You could use this approach for a number of different styles of biblical literature.
- 8 Read the psalm straight through again, prayerfully, enjoying the new resonance as a result of your study.

### *Lectio Divina*

This ancient approach towards reading the Bible asks you to take it slow.

- 1 Pick a passage from Scripture
  - 2 If it is unfamiliar to you, read it through at normal speed first. If you can read it out loud, so much the better.
  - 3 Now read it through slowly, savoring each word or passage. Pause and reread passages if you feel so inclined. You may want to stop at a word or passage and make that the focus of your prayer. There's no rule that you need to complete the passage.
  - 4 If you do complete reading the passage, savor it as a whole once you are done reading it.
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## Aids for Private Bible Study

\*\*John F. Craghan, C.S.S.R., *Psalms for All Seasons* (Liturgical Press). Shows how the Psalms may be used according to the various moods and needs of life.

*Credence Cassettes*. A lengthy catalog of taped lectures on themes, sections, and individual books by prominent Scripture scholars.

Gillian Crow, *Grains of Salt and Rays of Light: Reflections on St. Matthew's Gospel* (Alba House). Points the reader toward the application of Matthew's Gospel to everyday life in the modern world.

\*\**God's Word Today*. A monthly magazine which provides a daily guide for reading the Bible, focusing on one book or theme each month.

Joseph A. Grassi, *The Spiritual Message of the New Testament* (Alba House Communications). Thirty four audio cassettes in nine volumes cover all the books of the New Testament.

Marilyn Gustin, *Discovering the Spirit of the Gospels* (Ligouri)

Daniel Harrington, S.J., *How to Read the Gospels* (New City Press, 1996)

*Journeys into...* (St. Anthony Messenger Press). One volume for each Gospel. Workbooks providing tools for digging into the Gospels, exploring their meaning, and considering their application to one's life.

Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., *The Catholic Bible Study Handbook: A Popular Introduction to Studying Scripture* (Charis). A great introduction to Scripture. Very readable and unintimidating. Most of this list of books is directly copied from it.

Oscar Lukefahr, C.M. *A Catholic Guide to the Bible* (Ligouri, revised edition), book with workbook

George Martin, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God: Practical Approaches and Attitudes* (Servant Books, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1999). This book is an excellent first introduction to studying and praying the Bible. The author is noted for his skill in presenting sound knowledge in clear language.

Rea McDonnell, S.S.N.D., *When God Comes Close: A Journey through Scripture* (Pauline Books and Media)

Richard T.A. Murphy, O.P., *Introduction to the Prophets of Israel* (Pauline Books and Media)

Mary Reed Newland, *A Popular Guide through the Old Testament* (St. Mary's Press, 1999)

Kevin O'Sullivan, *Living Parables* (Franciscan Press). Shows the spiritual application of some 30 Gospel parables to our times.

William Peatman, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Mark's Story of Jesus* (Liturgical Press). Helps the reader share the wonder and thrill of the first disciples in meeting Jesus.

Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, *Formed in the Word* (Sheed and Ward). An aid for pondering the challenges of Scripture for life today.

Karl A. Schultz, *The Bible for Dummies* (IDG Books)

\**Share the Word* (Paulist Catholic Evangelization Center). A magazine providing background and reflections on the daily lectionary readings at mass. The material aims to help readers grow in their relationship with Christ through Scripture and become evangelizing disciples. An introductory 1 year subscription (7 issues) is \$15.00.

*Spiritual Commentaries* (New City Press). A series of book length commentaries on books and groups of books in the Bible by notes scholars, written at an introductory level to help readers grasp the messages of the biblical texts.

\*\**The Word Among Us*. A magazine of meditations and prayer starters based on the daily lectionary readings, with other articles on spiritual themes, personal testimonies, and book reviews. 11 issues a year at \$20.00 per year.

\*Can also be used for group study

\*\*Especially helpful for prayer

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## Aids for Praying the Bible

Charlene Altemose, M.S.C., *What You Should Know about the Word of the Lord* (Ligouri). Explains how we can encounter Jesus more deeply through the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass.

Christopher Aridas, *Surroundings: A Thematic Guide for Daily Scripture Prayer* (Doubleday Image). Fr. Aridas presents 52 themes and 365 related biblical excerpts for daily prayer.

Raymond E. Brown, *A Retreat With John the Evangelist* (St. Anthony Messenger Press). A noted biblical scholar creates an imaginary retreat under the guidance of the author of John's Gospel.

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Saint Mary's Press, 1993). How to connect the Psalms with daily life experiences.

*Christian Prayer* (Catholic Book Publishing, 1999). One volume edition of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Gerald Darring, *To Love and Serve* (Sheed and Ward). Meditations on the Sunday Scripture readings.

*Daybreaks: Daily Reflections on the Readings* (Ligouri). A quarterly publication providing daily reflections and prayer starters from the lectionary readings, including the responsorial psalms.

Thelma Hall, R.C., *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (Paulist Press, 1988). A guide to the slow, meditative, receptive mode of reading Scripture that developed in the early centuries of the Church.

Mariano Magrassi, O.S.B., *Praying the Bible* (Liturgical Press). Draws together the wisdom of medieval and monastic traditions of mediation on Scripture.

Mary Marrocco, *The Good News is Love* (St. Mary's Press). Fifteen Scripture passages, with reflections, as a spur to conversation with God.

Alec McCowen, *St. Mark's Gospel* (Video, 1977). Kick back and enjoy an impressively entertaining reading of the Gospel of Mark. You'll never believe how entertaining the straight text is! Provides an opportunity for some great insights.

Anthony Mottola, translator, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Doubleday Image, 1964). Influential classic by the founder of the Jesuits.

David E. Rosage, *Speak Lord, Your Servant is Listening: A Daily Guide to Scriptural Prayer* (Servant Books). In this popular prayer guide, Fr. Rosage has arranged short biblical passages, accompanied by brief comments, for each day of the year.

Wilfrid Stinissen, *Nourished by the Word: Reading the Bible Contemplatively* (Ligouri). Examines various ways of praying from Scripture.

Page McKean Zyromski, *Pray the Bible* (St. Anthony Messenger Press). Takes the reader step by step through a wide variety of approaches to praying with Scripture.

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