

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

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READING  
YOUR  
BIBLE

BY  
STEVE MUELLER

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FAITH ALIVE BOOKS

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## FAITH ALIVE BOOKS

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### *About the Author*

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**READING THE SCRIPTURES** makes it clear that the gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of “charity à la carte,” or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The gospel is about the kingdom of God and loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that God reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity.

—**POPE FRANCIS**  
*The Joy of the Gospel*, #180

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# *Why Read the Bible?*

Whether you recognize it or not, your decision to read the Bible always begins with some agenda. Why do you want to read the Bible and not some other book? There are thousands of books about religion, prayer, spirituality, psychology, history and so on. Why not read one of those? Answering this question for yourself is the first and most important step.

The Bible is the story of how God desired to enter into a relationship with us humans and how we responded to that invitation. It first tells the story of God's covenant relationship with the Israelites in what we call the Old Testament (an older English word meaning *covenant*). Then in the New Testament we discover the renewed covenant relationship that Jesus inaugurates. In sum, the whole Bible is about our relationship with God as members of God's covenant community. Reading and studying it invites us first to imagine the biblical world which reveals how God wants us and our world to be, and then invites us to strive to make God's dream for this world into a reality in our lives and communities now.

Reading your Bible is an invitation to enter into God's world, to encounter Jesus and his message and learn how to see beyond the surface of our ordinary lives into a mysterious world charged with God's presence and activity. It is a fantastic journey on which you will experience and explore the fascinating world of the Bible and learn about God's always surprising relationship with humanity.

Bible reading is different from most other reading you do. Reading the Bible demands that you take more time to pause and examine your familiar world to discover the mysterious divine realities that permeate our lives and normally go unnoticed.

Since reading the Bible opens up the often neglected spiritual depths of your world and of yourself, it can jump-start your personal spiritual life and help you live out your relationship to God much more consciously. As you notice how and where God is present, you become more spiritually aware and see your familiar world through the eyes of faith. Reading the Bible reveals that the surface appearances of yourself and your everyday world hide a deeper mystery that normally escapes your notice.

The Bible is also your primary handbook for learning how to live in a religious relationship with God. We need first to discover God's hidden presence and then learn how to remain in effective contact with God, which is what

religion is all about. The word *religion* comes from the Latin word meaning to “re-tie” something. Religion encompasses our efforts to re-tie ourselves to God in the kind of relationship that God wishes.

Although we often identify faith with accepting a list of beliefs or doctrines, faith is better understood as our commitment to God and to our relationship with God. The root of the word faith in Latin refers to the “bond” that establishes and sustains a relationship. This is synonymous with our sense of trust. When we trust someone, we entrust ourselves to him or her. Our care for and commitment to others in relationships always involves greater sharing. Our Bible reading recalls the long history of the many others before us who have discovered God, committed themselves to a more conscious relationship and lived accordingly. We can learn from their example.

### **Bible Reading Can Help You Change Your Priorities.**

As you begin to live a more conscious spiritual life, the effects begin to ripple out to every part of your life. By encouraging you to look seriously at your relationships with God and with others, Bible reading changes your priorities. By learning to notice God’s presence and activity, you add a spiritual component to your understanding and action—you include God! And changing your priorities will then affect how you make decisions about how to live. Making decisions does not necessarily become any easier, but you see more clearly what is at stake and become more aware of what values guide you.

### **Bible Reading Can Help You Deepen Your Family Life.**

Changing your priorities through Bible reading also helps you deepen your family life because it constantly draws your attention to the task of living out your significant relationships. Since the Bible is your guide for right relationships, it shows you where some other seekers have found God, how they were changed by that encounter, and how they found others with whom they could live in right relationship to God.

God calls us into relationships and makes demands about how we ought to live. Every relationship demands creating a community—a co-mission with the other. When lovers commit themselves to one another, their co-mission is to build a 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 Can Help You Reorient Your Work Life.**

If you can begin to see your work as a vocation rather than just a job, then

the meaning of your work changes. Since meaning comes when you connect what you are doing to something else, the meaning of your work changes when you connect it to your relationship with God and to your co-mission to create the kind of relationships with others that God desires.

## **Bible Reading Can Help You Find More Meaning in Life.**

Meaning cannot occur in isolation. Words become meaningful only when we connect them together into sentences and arrange them into ever larger paragraphs and chapters. Meaning comes through placing elements into contexts.

So the meaning of our life as a whole emerges 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 a project. For religious persons the wider context is God's reality. The Bible provides the context in which our lives can finally be understood. We are called to be in relationship with God in a community of fellow believers. Reading the Bible brings you face-to-face with God, who wants to be in a relationship. But relationships take time and effort. Your Bible journey is a lifetime journey with this divine companion. It offers a way to stop, take time with God and revitalize your relationship.

Ultimately reading the Bible will be personal because what you are seeking is not simply bits of information or good ideas about God. The Bible is not an "infomercial," selling God like some product you can acquire. It is more like a guidebook for your relationship with God. Reading and studying the Scriptures gives us "clues" about how God has broken into our world in the past and how we might expect God to do it again in our lives. Without the guidance of Scripture, it can be extremely difficult to detect the presence and activity of God at work in our world. The biblical texts also give us "cues" about how we are to act in response to God's mysterious presence once we have discovered it. This also makes us more familiar with God's favorite ways of entering into everyday situations to bless them.

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"What is sacred Scripture but a kind of letter from Almighty God to us? And surely, if you were resident somewhere else, and were to receive letters from an earthly emperor, you would not loiter, you would not rest, you would not sleep until you had learned what the emperor had written. Study then and daily meditate on the words of your creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God, so that you may desire more ardently the things that are eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys. May God pour into you the Spirit, the comforter. May you be filled with God's presence, and in being filled, be composed."

—POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT)

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# *The ABCs of Reading Your Bible*

Bible reading is a skill that like any other must be learned and developed through practice. Being a skillful Bible reader depends on using good methods to discover the meanings of what we read. We must not only recognize what the words **say**, but understand what they **mean** so we can apply the message to our life. Reading any text, especially an ancient one like the Bible, will always be challenging.

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“I encourage you to continue constantly in the practice of reading the divine Scriptures. And don’t let anyone make excuses like, ‘I’m too busy with politics.’ ‘I’m a businessman.’ ‘I’m a skilled worker. I must get on with my job.’ ‘I’ve got a wife.’ ‘I’m raising kids.’ ‘I’m responsible for a household.’ In other words, ‘I’m a lay person; it’s not my business to read the Bible. I’ll leave that to professional Christians like monks, nuns, priests and theology students.’ What are you saying? It’s not your business to pay attention to the Bible because you are distracted by thousands of concerns? But that’s the very reason why you need to read the Bible! The more worries you have, the more you need the Bible to keep you going!”

—ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM  
*Homily*

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## **One Bible, Many Meanings**

As people discover when they share their biblical insights with family, friends, or faith-sharing groups, the meanings we discover in the Bible seem endless. One reason for this variety is that our minds can never fully grasp the divinely revealed mysteries about God. But the Bible text does guide us and helps us discover and understand our relationship with God. It also always challenges us and calls into question who we are and how we are living.

Another reason for so many different meanings is that meanings change when contexts change. When our reading situation and our personal needs change, so will what we discover in the Bible. Sooner or later we learn that whatever we think we now know about God and about Christ is never the complete answer. Being in a relationship with another is a never-ending surprise about both the other and ourselves. So we must learn to live the Bible’s questions and let them challenge us. When what we read makes us uncomfortable, we can be sure that this is a sign from God about where we need to grow.

Reading a sacred book that we believe reveals the person and activity of God requires penetrating beyond the surface appearances to the hidden depths of reality. Since the Bible mediates between our familiar world and that of a richer spiritual world infused with God’s presence, by learning to read the Bible we learn to read our lives. So to become more skillful Bible

readers, it helps to have a handy method to go about our task of reading. One such method makes it as easy as ABC! This technique focuses on the three basic steps of our reading: **A**pproaching the text, **B**reaking open the text, and **C**onnecting the text to our life.

## **Step 1: Approaching the Text, Examining Our Assumptions**

As readers, what we get out of a text depends largely on what we bring to it. The written words are fixed on the page and so everybody reads the same words, but they often discover many different meanings. Some of this dissimilarity arises from the personal differences in knowledge and experience that readers bring to their interpretation of the text. Other differences arise from the interests that guide their reading—what they want to learn—and from the connections that they make between what they read and their lives.

Whenever we want to read the Bible, it helps to consider our personal assumptions by asking some basic questions about why we want to read the Bible and not some other book.

- What is going on in my life that points me toward the Bible?
- Why would I want to read the Bible and not some other book?
- What do I want or expect to discover from this reading?
- What questions, concerns or needs do I wish to answer?
- What do I want most to focus on now?
  - theological issues of who God is or how God acts
  - historical issues about when and where the events that are described happened
  - psychological issues about the motivations or values that prompt the choices and actions of the biblical characters
  - the application to my own life by discovering how the many different biblical characters are like me and their story is my story

As the writings of biblical scholars and spiritual writers illustrate, there is no end to what might interest us and thus focus our approach to the biblical text. Discovering the meanings of a biblical passage then moves in two stages.

## **Step 2: Breaking Open the Text, What it Says & What it Means**

First we must ask ourselves what the text **says**, and then what it **means**—a distinction we are all too familiar with from our everyday experience. The first issue focuses on the words of the text and how they fit together into a coherent communication. The second issue concerns how the words refer to realities outside of the text itself and convey a significant message.