

## Chapter Nine

### First Steps and Next Steps



---

If you want to learn how to read blueprints, you can go online and find lots of places to begin. You can also attend seminars that will take you further. If you're really serious, you can take college courses and perhaps eventually end up with a degree in architecture. When it comes to reading the Bible, it's good to know where to begin and what some of the next steps are. This book is only the beginning.

---

Now that you've chosen your translation of the Bible and you're equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to read, study, and interpret the Scriptures, you may be wondering one more thing: where do I begin? If the Bible can indeed be compared to a library, then allow me to act as reference librarian for a moment and recommend some starting points.

#### The Old Testament

*The first twenty chapters of the book of Exodus* The Exodus story is the centerpiece of the entire Old Testament—the defining moment of the people of Israel, you might say. Besides, you can't go wrong with all of the drama and theatrics of burning bushes, deadly plagues, and parting seas.

*The book of Psalms* The Bible is intended to deepen our faith and our prayer life. What better place to begin than with an entire book of prayers? The Psalms will provide you with easy reading and profound inspiration for every mood and occasion.

---

The synod recommends the formation of small ecclesial communities where the Word of God is heard, studied, and prayed. ("Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," Synod of Bishops, October 2008, Proposition 21)

---

*The book of Proverbs* If you are looking for wisdom, this is a good place to start. Reading Proverbs is like sitting down with your grandparents to get all of the profound insights they have collected through their years of experience. Many people begin and/or end their day with a passage from Proverbs.

## **The New Testament**

*The Acts of the Apostles* Acts is a good place to start because it is the story that most closely resembles our own experience—followers of Jesus struggling to preach the gospel after his ascension into Heaven.

*The Gospel of Mark* If you want to get into the Gospels right away, begin with Mark. Mark's Gospel is the shortest and easiest to read. His "just the facts" approach allows you to cover the whole Gospel story in just a few hours, something that is highly recommended.

### **Tips for Reading and Praying the Bible**

Typically, when you read a book, you just pick it up and jump right in. Reading the Bible is different. In essence, we do not *read* the Bible, we *pray* the Bible. Once you know what passage you are going to read (keep it short; don't try to take on too much), follow these simple steps:

1. Set a prayerful mood of quiet.
2. Pray to the Holy Spirit to open up your mind and heart to the Word of God.
3. Read the passage once slowly. Look over any footnotes and commentary that will assist your understanding of the passage.
4. Go back and read the passage again, this time more slowly and prayerfully. If the passage describes a story or event, use your imagination to place yourself within the scene as a participant. Pause at phrases, words, or images that speak to you and allow them to resonate. Whereas your first read-through is for the head, this one is for the heart.
5. Be quiet. Let the Word of God continue to echo in your heart, mind, and soul.
6. Pray in your own words thanking God for the Word and asking for the grace you need to apply (interpret) it to your life.

*The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* Sit back and imagine that Paul is writing to you personally. This letter is inspirational and contains one of the most powerful and well-known Christian passages: Phil 2:5–11.

### **Lectio Divina**

One form of praying with Scripture that Catholics have used for centuries is called *lectio divina* (LECT-see-oh dih-VEE-nah), Latin for “sacred reading.” This is a way of spending time with the Word of God using a special form of reading and listening so that you can hear God “with the ear of your heart” (St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*). This form of prayer follows four steps.

1. *Lectio* (reading)—slowly and prayerfully read aloud a brief Scripture passage, repeating the passage up to three times after a silent pause between each reading. Allow a word or phrase to speak to you in a special way.
2. *Meditatio* (meditation)—silently reflect, for a few minutes, upon the word or phrase that is speaking to you. In doing so, take the word or phrase to heart and allow it to interact with your own thoughts, hopes, desires, and memories.
3. *Oratio* (prayer)—enter into a silent dialogue with God for a few minutes, speaking as one friend speaks to another and allowing yourself to be touched and changed by God’s Word.
4. *Contemplatio* (contemplation)—simply rest silently and prayerfully in God’s embrace for a few minutes. By letting go of your own words, allow the Word of God to speak to your heart in silence.

For resources on *lectio divina*, see the Annotated Bibliography for Catholic Scripture Study on page 114 of the Bible Resources section of this book.

### **This Is My Story—This Is Our Story**

The refrain to the wonderful Christian hymn “Blessed Assurance” shouts, “This is my story.” We should sing this refrain every time we pick up the Bible. Certainly, the Bible is full of stories about people who lived several thousand years ago in a land far, far away from most of us. Ultimately, however, these Bible stories are somehow the story of your life and my life and the life of the Christian community. The reason these Bible stories

are considered sacred and inspired is because, throughout the ages, they have been seen as the stories that capture and express the experience of salvation for all people for all time. In other words, the Bible is about living now and forever—it is a living Word!

As we read and pray the Bible, the ultimate act of interpretation is when we ask the question, “How is this *my* story?” Unless we take this step, the Bible will remain something impersonal and remote. When we ask this question, we open up a whole new relationship in our lives. Now, God is no longer just speaking to Moses, Abraham and Sarah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Peter, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, Martha and Mary, and Paul. When we read the Bible—Paul’s letters, Jesus’ words to the apostles—we are hearing God speaking to us.

How do we make this happen? How do we make the Bible stories our own? We need to follow two simple steps:

1. First and foremost, we must ask what the text is actually saying and to whom it was originally addressed. Before applying the Bible to our own lives, it can be beneficial to understand the lives of the people who are involved in the story.
2. Second, once we have made an effort to understand the original intent of the author and the experience of the original audience, we must ask “How is this story about me?” and “How is this story about the community of faith?”

When we do this, we realize that

- The Exodus event was not just about the journey of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land; it is the story of our own personal journey from the slavery of sin to the freedom we find in the place where we encounter God.
- The story of Jonah and the large fish is not just about a cowardly man turned prophet; it is the story of what happens to us whenever we try to run from the will of God—we find that God cannot be outrun.
- The stories of Jesus healing the blind, deaf, paralyzed, and unclean are not just tales of wonder from long ago; they are stories of how Jesus has the power to heal us when we cannot

see, when our ears are closed, when we are stained by sin, and when we are paralyzed by fear, greed, or anger. The song "Amazing Grace" personalizes the experience by proclaiming, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."



Copyright © Doug Hall, 1991. Used by Permission.

"I'm interested in relating our Bible study to topics of current concern, like gas mileage."

- The story of Jesus appearing to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is no longer just a mysterious story of two disciples who could not recognize Jesus; it becomes the story of how we seem to be unable to recognize the risen Christ in our midst until we listen to his Word and break bread. In fact, this story contains a clue as to how we must insert ourselves into Scripture stories. Only one of the two disciples in the story is named: Cleopas. The other disciple remains unnamed. The author of this story seems to have done this on purpose in order to entice each one of us to insert ourselves into the story. We are the other disciple. We are often directionless. We have experienced pain and loss. We are unable to recognize the presence of Jesus even though he walks with us. It is through the reading and study of Scripture that we, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, develop a desire to gather around the table and break bread. When we do this, our eyes are opened and we recognize the presence of the risen Lord in our midst.

In brief, the story of the woman at the well is the story of how we thirst. The story of the man born blind is the story of how we need to see with Jesus' eyes. The story of the raising of Lazarus is the story of how each of us is dead, wrapped up, and buried, and in need of being called forth to new life. The story of the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus is the

story of how we come to be born again only by dying to our old selves. The story of Pentecost is the story of how we are gifted and sent forth by the Spirit to proclaim this Good News to others.

### **Now Is the Acceptable Time**

During one of my Bible presentations to a group of Catholic young adults, one participant admitted that she had only recently begun to learn about the Bible by attending Scripture study. She was excited about the new knowledge and nourishment that she was receiving. I asked her if she was attending this Scripture study at a Catholic church or a Protestant church. She turned red and sheepishly admitted that she was attending a Protestant Bible study. Not wanting to discourage her in any way or proliferate any form of anti-Protestant suspicion, I affirmed her zeal. I commented that while I would prefer that she attend a Catholic Bible study, if none were being offered, it was good that she was being nourished by the Word of God from our Protestant brothers and sisters. Before I could move on, another participant strongly objected, not out of any distrust of Protestants, but out of a sense of shame that no Catholic churches in the area were offering Bible study. He said, "If there are no Bible studies in any of the area Catholic churches, then, by God, we had better start one . . . now!" During the break, I observed as several participants surrounded the pastor eagerly offering to help set up a Bible study program for the parish. (See the Bible Resources, page 104, for suggestions on how to do this.)

I couldn't agree more with the young man's comments. The time has come for Catholics to take ownership of the Bible. To loosely quote St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, "NOW is the acceptable time!" (6:2). As St. Jerome once said, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*Dei Verbum*, 25). The Second Vatican Council



Copyright © Doug Hall, 1991. Used by Permission.

stated firmly that “Access to Sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 131). The time has come for us Catholics to embrace, with enthusiastic zeal and profound openness, the gift of God’s Word given to us in holy Scripture. When it comes to our approach to the Bible, we should heed the words of Deuteronomy: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (6:6–9). Or, to put it in a form more familiar to Catholics (as we sign our forehead, lips, and breast before the Gospel each week at Mass): “May the Word of God be in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts.”



A pastor who was coordinating Bible study was giving the group an assignment for the next session. “Next week,” he said, “we are going to explore the virtues of truth and honesty. In preparation for our session, I want you all to read the seventeenth chapter of Mark.” The following week, at the beginning of the Bible study, the pastor said, “Now then, all of you who have prepared for the lesson by reading the seventeenth chapter of Mark, please step to the front of the room.” About half the group rose and came forward. “The rest of you may leave,” said the pastor, “these folks are the ones I obviously need to talk to about truth and honesty. There is no seventeenth chapter in the Gospel of Mark.”

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What does it mean that every Bible story is somehow your story?
- Have you had any experience with Bible study? If so, describe it. If not, would you consider participating in a Catholic Bible study? Why or why not?
- How might your relationship to the Bible change as a result of reading this book?
- What will you do to deepen your knowledge of the Bible? What is the next best step for you?