

Real Faith for Real Life: Reading the Bible

Lesson: Psalm 1:1-3; Psalm 119:89, 93, 102-105, 111-112

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=31&search=Psalm%201:1-3;%20Psalm%20119:89,%2093,%20102-105,%20111-112>

In the country of Wales, a small team of artists, calligraphers, and technicians are doing something that has not been done in over 500 years: they are writing and illustrating the entire Bible by hand, in English. They are using quills to write. They are making the inks themselves, of ground stones and eggs and other natural substances. They are writing on vellum made of calfskin. They are gilding the pictures and the pages with the thinnest leaves of real gold, silver, and platinum. This Bible is two feet by three feet, and even at that size, it will be nearly 1100 pages long. That's 1100 pages of handwritten scripture and handpainted pictures. They began the work in 1998, and on March 8, in the year of our Lord 2000, the first words of the Saint John's Bible were written. The first words they wrote down were from the first chapter of the gospel of John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the Word was God. (John 1:1)

I wish we had projection capabilities in this Sanctuary, so that we could view together some of the completed pages of this Bible. It is extraordinary. I encourage you to look at it yourself, by visiting the website for the project, at <http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/>.

Why would anyone write and illustrate a new Bible, knowing that even with a team it will take years of their lives? In the middle ages, the only people keeping the Bible alive were the cloistered monks who copied it, one word at a time, for the obscenely rich. The monks who took on the task of copying the Bible went blind from that ministry. Why would anyone do that?

Why would anyone, and not just anyone, but thousands of anyones give their eyesight and even their lives, for a book?

In the blessing ceremony for the project, the president of Saint John's University in Minnesota, which commissioned the work, called the Bible, "the memory of God breaking into our world."

This book for which thousands have given their lives is the memory of God breaking into our world. God broke into our world through Jesus, and through the words that God gave God's people in our scripture. God shattered the vale that separates the eternal from the temporal, the holy from the mundane. God broke through our imaginings and became our reality first in these words, and then in the God-made flesh that the gospelwriter John called the Word – Jesus, our Christ.

But the Bible is more than just a memory. A memory is nothing more than the capture of a moment long past. This text does not simply capture the past; it does not simply recount one extraordinary happening 2000 years ago, or many extraordinary happenings hundreds of years before that. It is not merely the record of God's once having spoken to God's people.

The Bible is also God's present tool for breaking into our personal worlds. This text gives God a tangible, meaningful way into our personal worlds. Our scripture is God speaking to us, to you, to me, to a peasant in China, to a queen in the Netherlands. I hesitate to describe the Bible using nouns, using words that make it sound like a thing. The Bible is not really a thing, though you can hold it in your hands. The Bible is more like a verb. The Bible is a living creating teaching inspiring praying singing world-breaking-into.

Polls suggest that 92% of the households in the United States, Christian, Jewish, or otherwise, contain at least one Bible. How many of you own at least one Bible? How many of you know where it is? I brought one with me today. This one, wrapped in newspaper, was my grandmother's Bible. I don't know when it

was printed, but the last copyright is 1901. It has a bookmark in it from Malden Bank in Massachusetts; my grandmother did not live in Massachusetts after she was married, around 1920, so it's pretty old. It has some underlining in it, mostly in the Psalms. How many of you have a Bible like this, passed down from someone else to you?

The same polls that tell us that 92% of American households own a Bible also tell us that 45% of Americans had read their Bibles within the last week. How many of you have read your Bibles this week? How did you happen to read it? Were you preparing for today's lesson? Was it in one of the Real Faith classes?

Reading the Bible is the third of the six marks of discipleship, along with praying, worshipping, serving, relating or connectedness, and giving or generosity. Mike Foss, the author of *Real Faith for Real Life* gives these an acronym: PWR SRG, because centering your life in these practices gives you a spiritual power surge. So we've been working on them together, and will continue beyond these six weeks, because these are the center of following in the way of Jesus. Reading the Bible — the R of PoWeR — shapes your soul, and gives God a way into your world.

If we take that "92% of American households own a Bible" statistic as accurate, and the "45% read some Bible in the last week" as accurate, then one or another statistic also holds. That is, 47% of Americans did not read any Bible in the last week. Maybe the other 47% of Americans have already read the Bible, cover to cover, and are done with it. Maybe they received a copy as a gift, like a crocheted toilet paper cover, and have put it away until the next time the giver comes over for dinner. Maybe the 47% who own a Bible but weren't reading it just weren't reading it at the time they were polled: they were behind in their reading or something.

Maybe we don't really understand that these are living words, as contemporary as a just-updated blog, or a Reuters news release. Yet how many of us take the time to read this book that is both record and means of God's breaking into our world? How many of us read it with others? With our children? And how many of our children will read it, and share it with theirs?

How many of us will love it so much that we want to spend years writing it all down again, with our bare hands?

I think that one of the reasons that we don't read it, and don't read it with others, is we have a deep misunderstanding of what kind of book the Bible is.

- § It is not a novel, designed to be read from cover to cover, written to entertain and entice.
- § The Bible is not a dictionary or an encyclopedia: a simple listing of information.
- § The Bible is not a fortune-telling system: you cannot simply ask it a question and then open it to find the answer.
- § It is neither a cookbook nor a repair manual: for the most part, it does not lay out the steps to make something, nor is it intended to be opened at random.
- § It is not a modern history book: you cannot read it expecting a carefully vetted, evenhanded and objective narrative of ancient events. Even the history in it is not history the way you and I about history: no one collected various accounts, tested them against archival documents, and then wrote in order to be both objective and inoffensive.

What is this thing, then, this collection of pages that most of us own and few of us read?

The Bible is a library shelf of books, collected, translated, and edited over time. Each book is a pool of faithful living, inviting you to come swim. Each book is a reflection written through the eyes of one or more lovers of God. Each book is a love letter to God, and a love letter from God to God's people. Each book is human beings trying to share their experience of God, and it is God speaking through them to us.

It is also our family scrapbook, containing pictures and poems and songs and stories of our family in faith, some of whom embarrass us, some of whom delight us, some of whom inspire us, but all of whom were beloved of God.

Just as we, ourselves, embarrassing, imperfect, cruel, and promise-filled as we are, are beloved of God.

When we swim in the world-breaking-into word that is the Bible, we come to understand God better. And more often than not, we understand ourselves better.

It is also the one shared conversation in which all Christians participate. When we read Scripture, when we discuss it with our families or our small groups or our prayer triads, we join in a conversation with billions of people over 2,000 years, never mind the even older conversation with Jews and Muslims and others who share parts of the Bible with us.

Most important, it is God's way of reaching us through words we might hope to understand. We don't listen to burning bushes. We don't recognize saviors when we see them. We miss miracles, and underestimate the power of prayer. So God gave us words, in songs and prayers, and proverbs and histories and stories and one actual straight-up love song, so that we might know God, and each other, better.

Are there things in it we won't like? Yes. Does it contain stories about unpleasant people who still make good? Yes. Do bad things happen to innocent people? Yes. Are there lists and lists of genealogies that bore us because we don't know who most of the people are? Yes. When I was young, my grandmother tried to tell me about all her relatives, most of whom I'd never met or even heard from. And I was bored silly, and didn't remember a thing. But now, from time to time I come across one of their names, and wrack my brain trying to remember what I knew. Because they are me, and their lives made my life.

The Bible is an ancestral document: it tells us who we are, and who we came from, and Who we belong to. Why should we read it, study it, steep in it? Because it is our most reliable source for learning about Jesus and God. Because we cannot learn about our God, or our spiritual selves, very well without it.

The Bible is a communal library: it gives us a common language and experience as we follow the way of Jesus together. The Bible is, by its nature, our grandmother's book, whether our grandmothers left it for us or not.

And, besides being an ancestral document and a communal library, the Bible is a devotional well: it opens our souls to the God within us, and slakes our thirst for the eternal. As followers of the way of Jesus, we should read it because Jesus did. And we should read it because it is the word of God, along with the word of God that created the world (Gen. 1) and the Word of God that became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

So. How should we read the Bible, given that it is not an encyclopedia, a cookbook, a novel, a history, or a fortune-telling mechanism?

We can read it for information, to find out what it literally says about some topic or person: greed (a lot), marriage (even more), the Holy Spirit (some), baseball (nothing). We can read it poetically or playfully, for the gorgeous language and imagery.

But the way that enriches our souls is to read it devotionally, with others or by ourselves, which means steeping in it like a pool of life, and engaging it in a conversation with our souls.

I want to teach you a little about a practice called *lectio divina*, which just means divine reading. It is based on the idea that reading the Bible is really a divine encounter — a holy conversation between your soul, your experience, and God. It might be better called “divine listening” because the task is to read not with your eyes, but with the ears of your heart. To practice devotional reading, you try to shut off your own “I like this; I don’t like that” voice and turn on the part of your soul that is listening for God’s voice. It is a slow practice, designed to shape you, and not just fill your brain with sound bites only good for trivial pursuits.

We’re going to practice it with one of today’s lessons. So open your Bible to Psalm 119. The Psalms are roughly in the middle of the Bible. Turn to the 119th Psalm, and find verse 105.

To read the Bible devotionally, first, we listen to the word of God in the words of the text. We linger over it, and read it a number of times: once to hear it; once to see Christ in it. Then we meditate on it, recognizing how it relates to our experience. Then we pray on it, asking God to reveal what God would have us learn from it, how God would shape us with it, how God is trying to use it to break into our world.

Psalm 119, verses 105 through 109. I’ll read it with you. Let it sink in. (pause)

Now close your eyes. Listen for Christ in the verses. (*Ken to read the verses.*) (pause)

Meditate: how does this verse reflect on your experience, or vice versa? Reflect on a time in your life when you’ve walked in darkness ... and then seen the light. Or when you’ve been afflicted, and in pain. Or when you have held your life in your own hands. (pause)

Prayer: What is Christ calling you to do in this verse? Or, how is Christ calling you to be?

There will be times in your life when you feel stranded, or lost. You will feel abandoned, or orphaned. You will feel as though you walk in darkness. That’s real life. For your real life faith, find the light. Begin to swim in the words of God, to steep in their flavor, in their story of unearned love. Pass them along to your children, and your friends. For God’s word is a lamp unto your feet, and a light in the darkness. It is your firmest, most tangible connection to God, and to other followers on the way of Christ.

Let us pray: Holy Jesus, who is the living Word, and is the enfleshment of these words and of the eternal God, break through to us in the reading of your Scripture — both the Scripture that you cherished and the Scripture that tells us about you. Make us long to wallow in the verses, to swim in the pool of the holy text. Find us through these words, and may we find our way to you. We ask this in your name, and all your people say, *Amen*.