



WORD

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INTRODUCTION

IT'S UP TO YOU

This book is based on a series Common Ground did in 2012 called WORD. It's a book about you and your Bible.

What helps people move forward spiritually? A recent survey of 1000 US churches done by the Willow Creek Association asked just this question: What moves not-yet-Christ-followers towards a newfound faith in Christ, or new believers to know God better, or seasoned Christ-followers to surrender their lives to His liberating leadership more and more?

This is what they found:

1) Nothing causes a person to move forward spiritually more than reading and reflecting on God's Word every day on their own, as a personal habit that they have embraced.

2) Conversely, nothing causes a person to stall or slow down their forward movement spiritually more than NOT having the consistent habit of reading and reflecting on God's Word.

Now many people, especially those who are still trying to make sense of Christ, may have a great deal of scepticism regarding the Bible – can it really be a book that was inspired and architected by God? If that is you, you're not the first to ask these questions. We are convinced that there are sound, logical reasons to believe that God has in fact "put out a book" – the Bible – written by 40 writers but inspired by God himself. You can read more about this in Appendix A.

The Bible is a book that changes lives. Stanley Baldwin writes, 'The Bible is a high explosive. But it works in strange ways and no living person can tell or know how that book, in its journey through the world, has startled the individual soul in ten thousand different places into a new life, a new world, a new belief, a new conception, a new faith.' If you are a Christ-follower, you will probably know from personal experience that this book is in fact God's word, by the way that it has changed you. My own life has been totally changed by the Bible – not just because it has given me a new way to live, but because it has so radically transformed by entire vision of life and everything important.

It is our hope to encourage you in this book to take personal responsibility for your own spiritual growth and forward movement. Spiritual leaders can provide support, encouragement and advice, but they cannot do this for you. If you're to move forward it's up to you. And it starts with a simple commitment to read, make sense of, and reflect on God's Word every day of your life, for the rest of your life.

MAKE TIME FOR GOD'S WORD:

Putting God first means putting His Word first

The year is 444 BC, the location is Jerusalem. For a few decades, Jewish people, who had been forcibly removed from their own land over a century before, had been returning from exile all over the world to the so-called Promised Land, the land of their roots. The towns neighbouring Jerusalem began to be repopulated – now there's a gathering in Jerusalem.

Let's pick up from there:

Nehemiah 8:1

1 All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

At this stage, the Jewish nation had most of what we now know as the Old Testament. But the most important part of all their books was the one they read here - 'the book of the Law of Moses,' which is called 'the Torah' and consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Of course in those days people didn't have personal Bibles - it was just impossible since every copy of the Bible was handwritten! A village was lucky if they had just one copy of the Scriptures. And it was thanks to people like Ezra – described here as a scribe – that they would have had a copy available on this day at all. Scribes devoted themselves to creating new hand-written copies of the Scriptures, word by word, letter by letter.

We would do well to remember that people like Ezra and thousands of others have made many sacrifices to get God's Word to us – what a privilege it is that we can have a copy of God's Word in our own language! We should be grateful to them and, of course, to God's Spirit who magnificently architected the entire process.

Let's read on:

Nehemiah 8:2-8

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion [...] 5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him

because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 The Levites [...] instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 They read aloud from the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

FIVE THINGS THESE PEOPLE WOULD TEACH US TO DO WITH GOD'S WORD:

1. We need an appetite for God's Word

These people had a voracious appetite – we see them (verse 1) telling Ezra to get out the Book. It wasn't a case of Ezra imposing the Book upon the people – the people had a deep spiritual hunger for the Book. How about you? Do you have an appetite for the Book?

2. We need to prioritise God's Word

These guys took out a full week to do nothing but listen to the Book being read to them. On many of the days they stood while the Word was read from daybreak till midday – that's at least 6 or 7 hours! How about you? Could you make a commitment to God's Word? A Christ-follower is someone who has decided to put God first in their lives – and this means very practically that we put God's Word first and make time for it in our lives! Said another way, the place that the Bible has in our lives is equivalent to the place God has in our lives.

Deuteronomy 17:19 says, 'The king should always keep a copy of the Word with him, and he should read it every day of his life.'

In those days the king was given this instruction because he had access to his own Bible; now that we too have our own Bible, the same is certainly expected of us. For most of the 2000 years of the church's history, only priests got to read the Bible personally. Now billions of us can read it. What a privilege – one that calls for nothing less than what was required of the king: that we read it every day of our lives.

3. We need to cut out distractions as we get into God's Word

We're told that Ezra stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. This was so that there would be no distractions – everyone would be able to see and hear him. Nowadays there are millions of distractions. If you're going to make time for God's Word you have to find a place and a time and put off all your gadgets and Facebook and emails and just focus on God's Word, no distractions.

Every year 50 million copies of the Bible are sold. In spite of this, most believers are more faithful to reading Facebook or the newspaper than reading their Bible. Isn't that tragic? It's no wonder we don't grow. We can't watch television for three hours, and read our Bible for three minutes and expect to grow.

4. We need a reverence for God's Word

We're told that as he opened the Book, the people all stood up. Then they lifted their hands in worship. Then they fell to their knees praising God. This is before anything has been read. That's reverence. This is the book that God inspired! This book captures the Words of God! In the same way we should show reverence for the Bible – not in a superstitious sense, but in a sense that says, 'This is God's book. And since God is exalted, this book is exalted.'

5. We need a deep curiosity for God's Word

We're told that the Levites worked the crowd doing their best to explain things to people, which suggests that people were asking lots and lots of questions. In the same way, as we're exposed to the Book we respond with a receptive heart and a curious, engaged mind. We ask questions. We long to understand it.

Now what happens to a person when they approach God's Word like this?

The rest of the story reveals the effect the Word had on them:

Nehemiah 8:9-12

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Then from verses 13-16 we read that they continued day after day to listen to the Word being read to them. They heard the part where God commanded the Israelite nation to celebrate the Feast of Booths in the 7th month of the year, something that the nation had not done for almost a thousand years! Since they just happened to be in the 7th month, they stopped there and then and called the whole nation to have this feast, in obedience to the Word.

Then lets pick up at verse 17...

Nehemiah 8:17-19

17 And their joy was very great. 18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

AS THEY EXPOSED THEMSELVES TO GOD'S WORD, THE SPIRIT OF GOD WORKED POWERFULLY IN THEIR LIVES

Before we look at the effect God's Word and God's Spirit had on them, let's look at the duo team: God's Word and God's Spirit. They work together! Some churches seem to say, 'We're all about the Spirit' – and these churches tend to pursue spiritual experience primarily. Other churches say, 'We're all about the Word' – and these churches tend to pursue spiritual knowledge primarily. But the truth is that God has given us BOTH his Word and his Spirit – and they work together powerfully in our lives. For example:

- 1) The Spirit architected and inspired the writing of the 66 books of the Bible – it's His great creation.
- 2) The Spirit opens our eyes to see what's in the Bible – without the Spirit we're spiritually blind to the spiritual realities the Bible affirms and describes.
- 3) The Spirit speaks and acts into our lives as we read and reflect on the Bible.

In short, they work together. If we only pursued the Word, but neglected the Spirit – we'd dry up. And if we only pursued the Spirit and neglected the Word, we'd blow up. But if we pursue both, we grow up.

THREE WAYS THE SPIRIT USED THE WORD IN THEIR LIVES:

1. God's Spirit used God's Word to bring about conviction

Verse 9 tells us that they were brought to tears and weeping. This was because they had spent their whole lives living without the Word, and now that they read it, it became clear just how far they had fallen short of God's best for them. It can happen to us too, that when we read God's Word today it can sometimes make us feel really uncomfortable. But we should learn that this is a good discomfort – it is the discomfort of having a spiritual cancer cut out of our lives. Through His Word, God's Spirit may confront our rebellion, reveal our ignorance, expose our false belief or convict us of our wrong values. In these circumstances, the best thing to do is to submit our lives to God's Word. Instead of responding to it defensively, or antagonistically,

we let it do its liberating work in our lives. After all God is only putting his finger on those things that he in His kindness wants to set us free from.

2. God's Spirit used God's Word to bring about joy

Have you ever seen a toddler weeping, then suddenly laughing, then weeping, then laughing again? We see mixed emotions in these Jewish people – the weeping of regret and conviction followed by elation, joy and celebration. But why the joy? It is the joy of receiving the Bible as a gift from God. It is the joy of discovering who God is, what God has planned for and provided for us, what God has done accomplished for us. And as we experience God speaking to us, showing us things in the Word, we also share in that same joy.

3. See how God's Spirit used God's Word to bring about changed lives, which in turn brought even more joy

The Jews had not celebrated the Feast of Booths in almost a thousand years, but now – the moment they see it is God's Will for them – they do it. They apply it immediately to their lives. It's the same with God's Word – as we read it, it will bring up issues that are immediately applicable to our lives. It might be a truth to believe, an attitude to embrace, an example to follow, an action to carry out. As we are exposed to God's Word, we find the Holy Spirit empowering us to make these small – and sometimes big – shifts in our lives. And as we let Him go to work and change us by His Word, we experience a supernatural joy. It was Jesus who once said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:28). Do you want spiritual blessing? Then expose yourself to God's Word AND let it do its work in your life. Be ready to make the Spirit-empowered adjustments it calls for – and you will know joy heaped upon joy.

HOW YOU CAN PRACTICALLY MAKE TIME FOR GOD'S WORD

1. Get a good translation of the Bible

We recommend NIV (New International Version) for an accurate thought-for-thought translation or the ESV (English Standard Version) for accurate word-for-word translation. In Common Ground Church we preach from the NIV, but many of the leaders have ESV as their preferred personal translation.

2. Have a plan to read the Bible

Avoid the 'bounce-around' method of spontaneously flipping the Bible open each day hoping God speaks to you. It is dishonouring to treat the book like some kind of lucky dip. You've probably heard stories like the one about someone who flipped it open once to read, 'as for those agitators, they should go the whole way and emasculate themselves.' The person, a little perturbed, flipped open the Bible somewhere else and it said, 'Now, go and do likewise.' No, the best way to read the whole Bible is to choose a plan that works for you – and then stick to that plan. See Appendix B for ideas.

3. Increase your exposure to God's Word through technology

In this technological age, there are plenty of ways to use technology to access God's word.

God's Word through technology

- Read a web-based Bible: www.biblegateway.com/versions
- Download a Bible app onto your cell phone: www.youversion.com/mobile
- Listen to the Bible being read online at www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio, or buy an electronic or CD audio Bible at a Christian bookshop, or online - www.biblebible.com/NIV_audio.asp

4. Make a daily appointment with God's Word

Did you know that if you read the Bible for just 15 minutes a day, you will read through all of it once a year? If you cut out a thirty minute TV program daily, and read the Bible during that time instead, you'll read the whole Bible twice in a year. Some practical tips for Bible reading:

Make a time everyday to read it. There are some good reasons for making that time in the morning. It makes sense that if God's Word is really in first place in our lives, we ought to give Him the first part of our day. We are to seek His Kingdom first (see Matthew 6:33). Doctors tell us that the most important meal of the day is breakfast. It often determines our energy levels, alertness, and even moods for the day. Likewise, we need a "spiritual breakfast" to start our day off right. Besides, in the morning our minds are uncluttered from the day's activities. Our thoughts are fresh, we're rested, tensions have not yet come on us, and it's usually the quietest time. Be disciplined about bed-time so that you can start fresh and early in God's Word. That said, some people are simply at their very worst in the mornings. If you're truly a night owl, then rather schedule time in the evenings, but be disciplined about this. And of course special grace is given to moms of young children. The main message is, do all you can to expose yourself to God's Word some time in the day.

Form a habit of Bible-reading. Psychologists tell us that it takes six weeks to form a habit. The reason why many people are not successful in their Bible reading is that they have never made it past that six-week barrier. For Bible reading to become a habit, you must do it daily for at least six weeks. Rick Warren gives the following three points of advice (Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods: Twelve ways you can unlock God's Word):

1. Make a strong resolution. You must always start with a strong initiative. If you begin half-heartedly, you'll never make it. Make a public declaration by telling others about your decision.
2. Never allow an exception to occur until the new habit is securely rooted in your life. A habit is like a ball of twine. Every time you drop it, many strands are unwound.

So never allow the “just this once” to occur. The act of yielding weakens the will and strengthens the lack of self-control.

3. Rely on the power of God. When it is all said and done, you must realize that you are in a spiritual battle, and you can only succeed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So pray that God will strengthen you and depend on Him to help you develop this habit.

5. Persevere, there are diamonds to be discovered

Persevere as you read. For various reasons, there are many occasions on which the Bible does not appear to inspire or guide us in any obvious way. You probably know this feeling, but don't give up! Keep on inviting the Holy Spirit to help you see the wonderful things in His Word. The perseverance always pays off - it is much like digging for diamonds in diamond-rich soil. On some days you find nothing, but you don't give up, because there are still diamonds there – so just keep digging!

6. Find Jesus in the Bible

On the subject of diamonds, as you prayerfully read the Bible day after day you will find there is one Excelsior Diamond in the Scriptures – it is Jesus Christ. He is the Hero of the Bible, and there are thousands of things to discover about him. As you read of who He is, and what He said, and what He has done, the Holy Spirit will allow you to grasp the beauty and power of yet another facet in the million-facet diamond that Jesus is. For some of you, it will be your very first discovery of Him. Others will see aspects of him that you've seen before, but now with the help of the Spirit it is as though you're seeing that aspect of Him for the very first time. Such wonder. Such awe. Such joy.

MAKE SENSE OF GOD'S WORD

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ

Now that you're reading your Bible, let's turn to a story that shows just how important it is to make sense of God's Word. Much of what we'll cover in this section has been inspired by Michael Eaton's commentary on the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 24:13-24:

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

19 "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

CHRIST-FOLLOWERS WHO HAVE NO CONVICTION THAT JESUS IS ALIVE WILL EASILY BE DISCOURAGED

Here we meet two disciples who are very depressed. It is the day of Jesus' resurrection but they do not know it. They are utterly miserable and discouraged. They are disciples, and Jesus is alive! But they have not yet realised that Jesus is alive. Their discouragement shows itself in two ways. It shows itself in their appearance. Their faces are downcast. Anyone looking at them can see they are utterly depressed. It shows itself in their talking. They walk eleven kilometres, talking about the failure of all of their hopes. They 'talk and discuss' all the way.

When Jesus draws near they want to tell out the whole story to Him as well. People who are depressed either talk too little – running away and hiding themselves – or they talk too much, going over and over what has happened, but without coming to any encouraging conclusions. These men have done eleven kilometres of walking and talking but they are still discouraged!

Let's keep reading:

Luke 24:25-26:

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

THE REMEDY TO DISCOURAGEMENT IS TO DISCOVER FROM GOD'S WORD THAT JESUS IS ALIVE!

Jesus helps them out of their distress and discouragement. First of all, He rebukes them. How foolish they are. How slow and sluggish to read and grasp hold of God's Word. We must notice that Jesus does not say, 'But I am Jesus! Here I am. I am alive!' He talks to them about the resurrection in the Scriptures. If they had been more eager and attentive to their Old Testament Scriptures they would not be so discouraged. The Old Testament is full of descriptions of a suffering Messiah who subsequently would be crowned with glory and honour. If they had paid more attention to the Scriptures they would not have been so surprised about the death of Jesus, and they would not have been so sceptical about the women who were telling them that Jesus was alive. Their problem was slowness of heart. They did not have sufficient spiritual eagerness to search the Scriptures looking for the truth of God.

Let's keep reading...

27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

THE MEGATHEME OF THE BIBLE IS JESUS CHRIST

Jesus began with Moses, and then He went on to the prophets, and to the rest of the Scriptures. He went through the entire Old Testament showing that these Scriptures were all about Him. What a Bible study that was! (We know that "all the scriptures" must mean the Old Testament, since the New Testament hadn't been written yet.)

If you're new to the Bible, you will discover it takes months and years to get a good grasp of the Bible. There are so many hundreds of themes that weave their way through the book, but you will eventually discover what these disciples learnt in just a few hours: the Bible's megatheme is Jesus himself. Here's an analogy. Imagine a 66-piece puzzle. Imagine the picture on that puzzle is a person standing against a beautiful backdrop. If you counted them, only 27 of the pieces make up the person himself. The other 39 pieces serve as the beautiful backdrop against which the person stands.

Now you understand the Bible. This is what you find as you study the 66 books of the Bible. The New Testament – consisting of 27 books – clearly portrays Christ. These books were written after Christ's coming. The four gospels, of which Luke is one, are biographies of his life (mainly age 30-33), his ministry, his teachings, his death and resurrection. Then the book of Acts tells of the immediate impact the message of Jesus had upon the world in the explosion of churches across the Roman Empire. The rest of the New Testament records letters written by the apostles to these churches – letters that helped them make sense of the difference Christ makes in their lives.

Obviously they could not mention the name of Jesus. They tell the history of God's dealings with the ancient nation of Israel, descending from Abraham – it is a seven-stage history (see Appendix C). In a nutshell, these books prepare the world for Jesus' arrival. Without this backdrop, Jesus would make very little sense. He would have no context. One way of saying this is, 'The New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.' You can only make full sense of the Old Testament by seeing how it points towards and anticipates Jesus.

This is most obvious in the close on 200 prophecies about the Messiah. There's so much about him there – his life, his ministry, his sufferings, his resurrection, his deity. 'Hang on', you might say, 'what about the other parts of the Old Testament, say the book of Leviticus which speaks of the sacrificial system in the temple? He's no where to be seen there!' The answer: he's on every page: he's the innocent sacrifice. He's the high priest. He's the showbread. He's the lampstand. He's the doorway to the Most Holy Place.

'But hang on', you might say, 'what about the law given by Moses and all the wisdom for living given by Solomon? That's pure ethics. Jesus is nowhere to be seen.' The answer: he's on every page. He is the only one who ever perfectly fulfilled the law and the wisdom, truly loving God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and loving his neighbour as himself. The law will crush you without Christ. But Christ has perfectly fulfilled it on your behalf. And because of his substitution for you, you can be accepted on the basis of his record.

'Still, hang on', you might say, 'what about all the great figures, all the great events in the Old Testament? He's nowhere to be seen there.' The answer: he's on every page: he's the true and better prophet. He's the true and better king. He's the true and better deliverer. Every prophet, king and deliverer points to him. Many of us thought the Bible was a book of heroes. It's not. Every Bible hero points to the Ultimate hero... Jesus.

But what about the 39 books in the Old Testament that were written before Jesus came?

Abel is not the real hero. Jesus is the true and better Abel, innocently slain, whose blood now cries out for our acquittal, not our condemnation.

Abraham is not the real hero. Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void “not knowing wither he went” to create a new people of God.

Joseph is not the real hero. Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the King, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

David is not the real hero. Jesus is the true and better David, the good King whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

Esther is not the real hero. Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn’t just risk losing an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people.

‘The Bible is not a book of heroes – it’s a book of God redeeming failures.’

In fact, a sense of failure marks the entire mood of the Old Testament. God had a great plan for Israel, that they would bless the whole world; that they would live constantly in his will, in full obedience to him, in his blessing. But the tragedy of the entire Old Testament is that the ancient nation of Israel fails to live up to God’s expectations for it again and again and again. They fail to be a blessing to others – each book presents one disappointment after another, until the Old Testament ends with a profound sense of ‘Is that it?’ Can’t you see – the Bible is not a book of heroes – it’s a book of God redeeming failures. It’s a book of Just One True Hero – Christ himself. Christ is the fulfilment of the nation Israel. He is the One who lives blessed by his Father – who is a blessing to the entire world. All the promises culminate in him.

Now let’s read on...

Luke 24:28-32:

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. 29 But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

ONLY ONCE WE BELIEVE WHAT GOD'S WORD SAYS ABOUT JESUS WE BEGIN TO EXPERIENCE JESUS POWERFULLY

'Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.' – Hebrews 11:6

What an amazing story! The whole time they did not recognize Jesus! Even while Jesus taught them about himself through the scriptures! It was only after they believed God's Word about Jesus that they powerfully experienced Jesus at the communion table.

As Jesus repeats what He had done at the Lord's Supper three days earlier, immediately their eyes are opened and they realise that He is indeed alive from the dead. But notice the order: Only once they had seen the resurrection in the Scriptures, was Jesus is ready to show them in another way that He is indeed alive. This is the way it will be with us. God wants us to believe His Scriptures. Jesus is indeed alive. Once we have come to see by sheer faith that Jesus is alive, then there will be other ways in which we experience His resurrection power.

We must notice exactly what the disciples said: 'Did not our hearts burn within us when He opened to us the Scriptures?' What made their hearts 'burn' was not the moment when they realised they were talking to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Their hearts were burning even before that time. Their hearts started burning when they saw the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ in the pages of the Old Testament. They experienced Jesus in the Scriptures before they realised to whom they were talking.

We shall (most likely!) never meet in this life with Jesus in His physical resurrection body. Not just yet. He has ascended into heaven, and though we will meet Him in that way – it will only happen after this life. For now, we have to meet with Jesus in the way that the Emmaus Road disciples first met with Him. They saw through the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is alive. Then Jesus did something that confirmed their faith. They had to have faith in the Scriptures first; then their faith was confirmed. That is the way it will be with us. Through the witness of the Scriptures we know that Jesus is alive. In response to the Scripture, we talk to Him as the living, resurrected Saviour. And he talks to us by the Holy Spirit and our hearts burn within us.

To those who pray, 'Jesus, first let me see, then I will believe' he responds with 'First believe, then I'll let you see.' The way to the rich experience of Christ is to believe what the Bible says about Jesus. Hebrews 11:6 puts it like this: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.' Expose yourself to God's Word – so you know what it is you're being asked to believe about Jesus. You can do this by going to church Sundays. And you can do it by reading the Bible for yourself – read the gospel of John, then Ephesians, then Acts to start.

A REVELATION OF THE SCRIPTURES AND JESUS IS LIFE-CHANGING INDEED!

Luke 24:33-35:

33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together 34 and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." 35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

What a difference there is between the beginning and the end of this story: They begin with a slow heart. They end up with a burning heart. They begin with scepticism concerning the reports they have had from the women. They return full of faith and a declaration: 'It is true! The Lord has risen!' They begin with depression and end with joy. They had walked from the place where they had heard about the women seeing Jesus, and they were full of depression all the way. Now they return full of faith and joy. They walked eleven kilometres with depressed faces. They go back eleven kilometres all the way to Jerusalem, radiant with joy.

They have met with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. But remember they met with the risen Jesus first in the Scriptures. Their hearts started burning within them as Jesus read the Scriptures to them. And so it is with us! If you want to know Jesus, then get to know him in the Scriptures.

READ AND EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES IN RELIANCE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

These disciples had Jesus himself physically with them showing them himself in the Scriptures. Though we would not have the exact same experience, we do have the privilege of having Jesus himself – not physically present, but present nonetheless by his Holy Spirit – with us as we read the Scriptures. That's why the best way to read and study the Bible is prayerfully, in reliance on the Spirit, while keeping company with Jesus himself.

On this note, here are four suggestions as you come to God's Word:

1) Remind yourself that – as wonderful as the Bible is – it points to something even greater and more wonderful than itself, a relationship with Jesus Christ. After all, as much as we love and honour the Bible, we do not worship it – no, we worship its Author. The great gift of God is not just his Word but Himself.

2) Before you read or study God's Word, pray. Invite His presence. Praise His wonderfulness. Reaffirm your love for and trust in Him. Ask Him to speak to you through his Word, and to open the Scriptures to you, like He once did for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

3) While you read or study God's Word, pray. So for example, as you read about Jesus walking with the two disciples, pray: 'Oh Jesus, I want You to walk with me today. I want to know what it is to have You by my side.' And as you read of Jesus opening the Scriptures to them, pray: 'Jesus, I want to know You opening the Scriptures to me.' And as you read of the disciple's hearts burning, and their faces radiant with joy, pray: 'Oh God, deepen my faith, and fill me with joy by Your Spirit.'

4) After you read or study God's Word, pray. Close the book – and lift your sights to heaven. Speak to Him about what it is He has said to you in His Word. Let your reading of the Bible flow into reverence for its author, God Himself. Let the study of the Bible flow into singing to its Megatheme, Jesus Himself. Let your reflection on the Bible flow into a deeper reliance on its Inspirer, the Holy Spirit.

Be sure to put your faith in the God of the Bible: Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is the author of the Bible. The Spirit is the inspirer of the Bible. Jesus, the Son, is the megatheme and hero of the Bible. If you haven't done that, you could do it now – in a simple prayer of faith:

'God, I believe you are real. Jesus, I believe that what the Bible says about you – being the crucified, resurrected Saviour and Lord – is true. I ask for and receive your forgiveness. Holy Spirit, come and live in me now.'

Once you have put your faith in the God of the Bible, give yourself to know Him more and more deeply. And of course, the major way you can do this is, as we discussed in the previous chapter, to Make Time for God's Word. But also – as we've seen God showing in Luke 24 - do your best to Make Sense of God's Word. And do this, 1) in prayerful reliance on the Spirit and 2) with thoughtful engagement, using the tools we've given you here.

MAKE A MEAL OF GOD'S WORD

OUR DAILY BREAD

We've discussed making time for God's word, and making sure we understand what we read, but where do we go from there? Well there is one big thing missing – it is not enough just to read the Bible, and to understand it. One must also feed on it, draw some kind of spiritual nourishment and “flavour” from it. In this chapter we'll learn some lessons from Exodus 16 about just that.

'Exodus' means 'exit' and it tells the story of how God took the Israelite people out of Egypt to make them into a nation for Himself. God used Moses to lead His people out of Egypt in 1300 BC, into the desert in what turned out to be a 40-year journey to the Promised Land! How did they survive in the desert all that time? Every morning God would pour out a bread-like substance called 'Manna' (which means 'What is it?') on the ground, giving a simple instruction to the people: Gather and eat.

Exodus 16:16-22:

16 This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Each one had gathered just as much as they needed.

19 Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." 20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

21 Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. 22 On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much.

31: The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

35: The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.

Isn't this a fascinating system of God's provision? Day after day, day after day, God provided, almost every morning, something which came to be called 'manna' which means 'what is this?' It was a mysterious, nutrient-rich, sweet, bread-like substance that needed to be picked up off the ground before it disappeared. Manna sustained them for the journey – a journey that lasted a full forty years!

We see here a picture of God's willingness to provide wherever He guides us, which is a wonderful promise. But there is another meaning the Bible gives to this day by day miracle of provision, which we see in Deuteronomy 8:3: 'He ... fed you on manna so that you might know that man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from God's mouth.' There's a symbol in what God was doing with the Israelites. Their feeding on the daily manna from heaven to find physical strength for the journey represents something even more important: We must feed on God's Word every day so we can find spiritual strength for the journey we're on. Said another way, God's Word does for our souls what bread does for our body: it sustains and nourishes us. And we need to take it in, absorb it, metabolize it – in short, MAKE A MEAL OF IT. Jesus certainly applied this verse to himself; he quoted it while being tempted in his own desert.

WHAT TO DO WITH GOD'S WORD

If we look at the verses about manna from this point of view, we can learn how to handle God's word.

1. We need to take responsibility for our own spiritual nutrition

'Each one is to gather as much as they need' (v15). Everyone needs to feed on God's Word for themselves. We must not rely on other people to feed us God's Word. We must take responsibility for our own spiritual nourishment. As wonderful as Sunday messages are, they are just not enough to thrive on spiritually. You need to feed on God's word every day. If you'll permit a simple illustration, imagine trying to survive on one fantastic Sunday lunch a week. It's just not enough! By the next morning, you're already starved, right? Think of Sunday messages as a community feast, a kind of nutritional and joy booster for the week – now think of your own times in God's Word every day as the bread and butter that sustains your spiritual life.

2. We need to feed on God's word every day

'No one is to keep any of it until morning' (v19). We need to take in God's Word every day. We cannot be nourished today by yesterday's revelation. Yesterday's breakfast doesn't help much today, does it? On this note, many people ask 'How long should my time for God's Word be?' The answer: 'Take as long as it takes for you to get what you need to enter your day spiritually satisfied and strong.' That might be ten minutes, or it might be much longer.

3. We should – generally speaking – start our day in God's Word

'Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away' (v21). Although it is not a rule, it is generally wise to feed on God's Word first thing every day, before the heat of the day's demands makes it impossible to focus on God's Word meaningfully.

4. We should sometimes spend extended time in God's Word

'On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much' (v22). Some breakfasts are grab and run, but the best breakfasts are long and leisurely multi-dish delights. In the same way, most of our times in God's Word will be under a real time constraint, but we need to look for those times when we can spend long and leisurely time in God's Word feasting to our hearts content. In some stages of our lives we could do this most days, but in all stages of life – if we plan for it diligently – we can have these times in God's Word at least once a week.

5. We should learn to enjoy the spiritual taste of God's Word.

'It tasted like wafers made with honey' (v31). Feeding on God's Word, though it requires some effort, often proves to be very pleasurable. 'Your word tastes like honey to my mouth' said the writer of Psalm 119 (verse 103). Job says something similar: 'I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread' (Job 23:12). George Muller, a famous Christian leader in the past who started many orphanages, used to say that the number one task of the Christ-follower is to get his soul happy in God every day – and this included, in his mind at least, starting the day with time in God's Word, making a meal of it. He said: 'It is common for us to give up the reading of the Bible and daily prayer when our enjoyment is gone; as if it were of no use to read the Scriptures when we do not enjoy them, and as if it were no use to pray when we have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that in order to enjoy the Word, we ought to continue to read it, and the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. The less we read the Word of God, the less we desire to read it, and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray.'

HOW TO MAKE A MEAL OF GOD'S WORD

Here is a simple method to make a meal of God's Word: it's called V.I.P.

V stands for verse. I stands for insight. P stands for Prayer.

Verse – select a single Scripture Verse.

Perhaps as you develop experience in prayerfully reading the Bible, you will be able to feed on several verses, or perhaps a longer passage. But to start with perhaps select a single verse out of all that you've just read, or if you want, even a single phrase in that verse. Ask yourself, 'As I read, was there a verse that seemed to stand out to me – either in relevance to my life, or in its own simplicity or profundity or power?' Or perhaps you will feel the Spirit drawing your attention to this verse, as though He is using an invisible highlighter. This is the most important step – choosing or focusing in on a single verse.

For example, imagine you had been reading Matthew 4, where Jesus is being tempted by Satan. And imagine that, after reading it, you select verse 4 where Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 to the devil 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of the God' (Matthew 4:4).

Once you identify a verse, the next thing to do it is to read it aloud slowly – either as an audible whisper, but better yet loud and proud. Do you know when people first started reading the Bible silently, just in their own thoughts? Only in the 4th Century! Before that, it never seemed to enter into people’s minds that reading was to be a silent matter. Why is this? Because words come to life more when you can hear them than when you only see them. Try reading out Matthew 4:4 silently to yourself. Now try reading it out loud. Do you feel the difference? Words take on new power when they’re heard – even if it is your own voice - not just seen.

Insight – reflect on the verse until you have some insight into it.

In order to draw strength from food, you need to chew on it. You can’t swallow a piece of bread whole. In the same way, to draw spiritual strength from a Scripture, you must chew on it for a while.

In 2 Timothy 2:7, Paul writes, ‘Reflect on what I am saying, and the Lord will give you insight into it.’ That’s the goal of reflection – not just information, but insight. God wants to give you deeper insight into His word, but according to this verse you will need to apply your mind to it. Insight doesn’t come to the distracted mind, or the disengaged mind, or the lazy mind. And you will need to humbly and prayerfully ask God to speak to you through it.

Reflection is much like chewing. Here are four ideas that might come in handy:

- 1). **Read it repeatedly and slowly to yourself.** Before you swallow meat, you’re meant to chew close on 40 times. Well, if you’re going to draw out energy from this verse, you might need to read it again and again and again, each repetition releasing something into your mind and heart and spirit.
- 2). **Ask questions of the verse:** Does it contain a promise to believe? Or a truth to affirm? Or an insight to glean? Or a warning to heed? Or a command to obey? Or an example to follow? What light does this verse throw on your understanding of God and Christ?
- 3). **Perhaps, if you have time, do a short study on this verse.** If you have a study Bible, what commentary is there on this verse? Try some of the websites in mentioned previously.
- 4). **Most importantly,** consider any ways the Holy Spirit might be applying this verse uniquely to your own life.

You could even do that right now. Here’s Matthew 4:4 again:

‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of the God’

For the next two minutes, read it again and again to yourself. Play. Rewind. Play. Rewind. Play. And as you do, listen for any insight the Lord may give you.

See the present tense of God's Word? It speaks of 'every word that proceeds,' not 'proceeded' (past tense) or 'will proceed' (future tense) – but 'proceeds' (present tense). Every day God is speaking words to us – words we need to listen for.

TWO MORE PRACTISES, AND A PRINCIPLE

Practise 1: Keep a spiritual journal

Though this may not work for everyone, journaling will help the vast majority of us to deepen our experience of God's Word. A journal tracks a journey. And a spiritual journal tracks a spiritual journey – a journey of listening to God in his Word.

Another benefit of journaling is that it forces you to clarify what God is specifically saying to you – as well as your response to it.

If you're new to keeping a spiritual journal, why don't you start with something like this:

1. Write the date at the top of a page.
2. Write a big 'V' (which stands for Verse). Next to it write the selected verse for the day.
3. Write a big 'I' (which stands for Insight). As you reflect on the particular verse, what insight did God give you? Write it down.
4. Write a big 'P' (which stands for Prayer). In response to the Verse and the Insight, write down your simple, heart-felt prayer.

Keep it simple. It's so powerful if you do it every day! And what a valuable resource this becomes – at the end of a year you can read through it, and you will see just how much God has been saying to you and doing in you!

Practice 2: memorise the selected verse

There are three great benefits to memorizing Scripture:

Firstly, memorising Scripture means we can feed on God's Word any time anywhere. Did you know that Jesus, as a boy, like all Jewish boys, would have memorised all of the first five books of the Bible and much of the rest of the Old Testament? Throughout his life and ministry, these Scriptures were his food. He carried his Bible around with him, not on his phone or in the form of a book, but in his head. This way he could feed on God's Word all day long. In the same way, the Bible tells us, 'Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Colossians 3:16). Memorising the Bible makes this possible.

One of the best ways to do this is to memorise your selected verse, and then intentionally go over it in your mind throughout the day - as you're in the traffic going to work, as you're having a break for tea, as you're waiting for someone to answer the phone, etc. Each time you'll draw closer to God, and slowly but surely renew your mind with that verse. In fact even if - on a crazy day - you only managed to get five minutes in God's Word at the start of the day, you could write down or memorise a verse or phrase, and then 'feed' on that the whole day long.

Secondly, memorising Scripture makes it easier for God to speak to us and through us. Jesus told us that one of the things the Holy Spirit will do is to 'remind us of the things he has previously said to us' (John 14:26). Ask any person who has memorised Scripture and they will tell you of times - as they were praying, or as they were having a spiritual conversation with someone, or as they were trying to make a decision, or sometimes out the blue while they were day-dreaming - when suddenly a Scripture memorised long ago pops into their mind. What a joy that is!

Thirdly, memorising Scripture helps us withstand temptation. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert, he quoted Scripture from memory to withstand the temptation. In fact he quotes three Scriptures, all from the early chapters of Deuteronomy. You can't help but think that he had probably been going through that section of Scripture in his mind while he was in the desert. Psalms 119:11 says, 'I have hidden your word in my heart so that I might not sin against you.' So you see that when temptations come, if we have memorised Scripture, we will have Scripture to recall and re-affirm in our lives. Ephesians 6:17 says, 'Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.' It's as though memorised Scripture arms us in spiritual warfare, and as we recall and re-affirm it, we're freshly strengthened in the face of temptation.

Your capacity to remember is a God-given gift. You may think you have a poor memory, but the truth is you have millions of ideas, facts, truths and figures stored away. You remember what is important to you. And if God's Word is important to you, you will take the time to remember it. On that note, how about giving yourself a minute or two to memorise Matthew 4:4 right now? Here it is again:

'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of the God'

A principle: Start each day start feeding on the written Word, but then learn to move beyond it to feeding on the Living Word, Christ himself.

We started off looking at the manna that fell from the sky and it's deeper meaning in Deuteronomy 8:3, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' But Jesus himself gives a second even deeper meaning to the mysterious manna.

In John 6, Jesus compares himself to the manna from heaven. He says, 'The bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world' (John 6:33). Jesus came from heaven. His coming was completely miraculous. Jesus also said, 'I am the bread of life. The person who comes to me will never hunger' (John 6:35).

Christ keeps us alive spiritually. In the same way that the Israelites lived daily on manna, we are to 'live' daily on Jesus. As we trust in and rely on Jesus he will nourish, satisfy and sustain us.

And Christ is more than enough for us! Especially in times of need! In the same way that 'on the sixth day, they gathered twice as much' (v22), so there will be times when we need a double portion of Christ's grace. Christ will also give us unusual portions of his strength, peace and wisdom when we need it. Christ is enough to satisfy and sustain us. Our job is to nourish ourselves on Him and His grace every day.

And Christ never goes stale. In the same way that the Israelites gathered manna daily, and could not keep yesterday's manna for today, so we need a fresh revelation of Christ every day. Later Jewish legend has it that one only had to desire a certain dish, and no sooner had he thought of it, then the manna had the flavour of the dish desired. The same food had a different taste to everyone who partook of it, according to his age; to the little children, it tasted like milk, to the strong youths like bread, to the old men like honey, to the sick like barley steeped in oil and honey. In the same way, Christ will nourish us in fresh and different ways. We will never grow tired of his grace, his presence, his strength and his character. Every different situation - and every time we spend alone with God's Word and in prayer - will give opportunity for a fresh taste of Christ himself.

And Christ is waiting for us to come and get him. His part is to satisfy, strengthen and sustain us; our part is to reflect on his Word, turn to him, trust in him, focus on him, surrender to him, pray to him, and rely on His Spirit, every day.

Christ alone can satisfy. Blaise Pascale famously said, 'In every person there is a God-shaped vacuum, and God alone can fill that vacuum.' This is another way of saying there is a spiritual craving in every heart, and we tend to try to satisfy this craving with the things of this world - food, sex, pleasure, money, fame, power - but these are like sweets to a starving man. They deliver a short thrill, but leave you emptier than before. To such a person Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life. The person who comes to me will never hunger' (John 6:35). Until you place your faith in Him, you will never find what it is you're looking for!

APPENDIX A

WHO REALLY WROTE THE BIBLE?

The Bible is an assorted collection of ancient writings. Christians believe there is something special about these works because God orchestrated their formation. Of course, ordinary people like you and me wrote the various poems and letters and historical accounts that became books of the Bible. But somehow God inspired these writings, unlike any other works of literature, so that they provide us with a unique and accurate picture of life, history, reality, and God himself.

This raises a question—if so much is riding on this collection of books, how do we know we have the “right” books? What if God inspired someone, but their book didn’t make the cut? Or what if we got the wrong books and, consequently, our whole view of God is wrong?

Fortunately, there’s ample historical documentation about the formation of the Bible that can be of great help as we tackle these challenging questions.

To begin with, little debate exist about the Old Testament. Early in their history, the Jewish people began to collect writings that were important to their history and faith. These included the Ten Commandments and the Law, originally given by God to Moses; historical documents that traced God’s relationship with humanity and Israel; poems, songs, and wisdom literature that Israel used for worship and character formation; and the messages of great prophets whom God called to guide and correct the people.

By the time of Jesus, most Jews considered this collection of works authoritative. This Hebrew Bible included thirty-nine different books (the same books Christians call the Old Testament, though in different order) and described events from the creation of the world until roughly 400 B.C.

Various other Jewish books, later called the Apocrypha, were written between 400 B.C. and the time of Jesus, but Jews did not consider them as part of the authoritative canon. Jesus himself only quoted from Old Testament books and never referenced the apocryphal writings. There remain some Christians today (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church) that include the Apocrypha in their Bibles, but neither Jews nor early Christians believed in their authority and we should follow their lead.

The development of the New Testament took place over the first few centuries of the early church. Shortly after Jesus’ death, writings began to appear from a growing group of both Jews and non-Jews who believed he was not only Israel’s messiah, but also a savior for the world.

First, there were letters between these early Christians, mostly from a preacher named Paul to his converts. But as the movement grew and the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were told over and over, some individuals accepted the responsibility to accurately record the great events that had unfolded around them. Thus, what emerged from the first century A.D. was an assortment of writings that included “gospel” accounts of Jesus’ life, teachings, and climactic death and resurrection; letters from church leaders to specific individuals or churches regarding specific issues; and apocalyptic writings that describe God’s cosmic plans for history and humanity.

More writings appeared in the centuries that followed, and on some occasions church leaders were faced with decisions regarding which books should be considered biblical. Consensus developed, and in A.D. 367 the respected church leader Athanasius published a universal list of twentyseven accepted New Testament books, the same books in our Bibles today.

As this decision-making process unfolded, several important criteria guided early church leaders. It's important to understand, however, that these criteria did not appear as a checklist by which bishops "voted" books in or out. Rather, they gradually emerged as Christian communities elevated certain texts as having significant and lasting value for the Christian faith.

There were three primary criteria for evaluating a work.

1) Apostolic authorship. It was important that a work be authored by or associated with an apostolic witness—one of those first generations of people who had actually seen the risen Jesus.

This excluded documents that were written much later, as useful as they may be. Second and third century Christians understood that these first apostles could best convey the truth about Jesus' life and its significance.

2) Widespread usage and acceptance. The early church grew quickly and broadly. As a result, Christians of different backgrounds, nationalities, and even schools of thought developed. But when a text maintained or gained universal usage and acceptance among the vast majority of diverse groups, this attested to its authenticity.

3) Conformity to the rule of faith. Perhaps the most significant factor regarding the value of a document was its consistency (or lack of) with the general beliefs and practices recognized in early churches. Therefore, writings with especially questionable theology or practices dissimilar to those passed down from the apostles were intensely scrutinized.

In light of these considerations, the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John, were universally acknowledged as biblical by the end of the second century. Only Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation faced more scrutiny, but were eventually accepted. Together with the Old Testament, this is the Bible Christians read today.

Ultimately, we believe that God guided the process of the Bible's formation. And while God can reveal himself to humans in many different ways, the Bible remains of chief significance for the church and all who seek him. It is not only an anchor for faith, but also an epic narrative that tells of creation, brokenness, redemption, and hope. And like the ancient Hebrews, early disciples, and Christians of the past 2000 years, in the word of God we can begin to find our place in the story.

APPENDIX B: SUGGESTED BIBLE READING PLANS

SUGGESTED BIBLE READING PLANS

Option 1: Do a Bible plan that only covers select Scripture.

- If you're new to the Bible, start with John, then Ephesians, then Acts. Also, go through the IGNITE booklet - a 31 day journey into the Bible for new believers – freely available at the Involvement Desk on Sundays.
- Consider working through a study guide on a specific topic or book of the Bible – some good authors include XXX? – but be careful of letting a guide speak louder than the Scripture itself.
- Perhaps read the 100 most essential chapters in the Bible - www.youversion.com/reading-plans/the-essential-100
- Over and above your own Bible reading, read the Jesus Storybook Bible to your kids – it's the best kids Bible there is where every story whispers Jesus' name.

Option 2: Read the whole Bible, one book at a time.

- The cover-to-cover plan. Just read it straight through from Genesis to Revelations. The problem with this is that only two thirds through will you read the name of Jesus. A better approach is...
- The mixed-up plan by Michael Eaton, one of the world's top Bible teachers. Michael recommends this order: Genesis, Matthew, Joshua, Romans, Isaiah, Proverbs, Hebrews, Psalms 1-18, Hosea, Psalms 19-25, Joel, Psalms 26-33, 1 Corinthians, Jeremiah, James, Psalms 34-39, Exodus, John, Judges, Song of Songs, Psalms 40-47, Ruth, 1 Peter, Lamentations, Psalms 48-55, Ecclesiastes, 2 Peter, Psalms 56-64, 2 Corinthians, Esther, Daniel, Psalms 65-70, 1 John, Psalms 71-77, Mark, Ezra, 2 John, Psalms 78-81, Leviticus, 3 John, Jude, Psalms 82-89, 1 Samuel, Galatians, Nehemiah, Psalms 90-104, Ephesians, Psalms 105-108, Luke, Philippians, Ezekiel, 1 Chronicles, Colossians, Psalms 109-118, Numbers, 2 Samuel, 1 Thessalonians, Job, Amos, Psalm 119, 2 Thessalonians, Obadiah, 1 Kings, Jonah, Psalms 120-132, 1 Timothy, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Psalms 133-141, Deuteronomy, Acts, 2 Kings, 2 Timothy, Zephaniah, Haggai, Titus, Zechariah, Malachi, Philemon, 2 Chronicles, Psalms 142-150, Revelation

Option 3: Read the whole Bible, more than one book at a time.

- Perhaps use the Three Bookmarks plan. To start put three bookmark in your Bible: one at Genesis, one at Psalms, one at Matthew. Then read a chapter from each bookmark every day.
- Or the Mcheyne plan, which gives four chapters a day from different parts of the Bible so that for every one time you go through the Old Testament you go through the New Testament and Psalms twice. Either download a chart at static.crossway.org/excerpts/1581348150.1.pdf or go to a web-based guide at www.youversion.com/reading-plans/mcheyne-one-year-reading-plan.

APPENDIX C: 7 HISTORICAL STAGES OF OT

Box 3: The 7 Historical Stages of the Old Testament.

The only way to understand the 39 books in the Old Testament is to find out which of the 7 stages of the history of the ancient Jewish people they were about.

Stage One: Humanity is created but falls in sin (pre 2000BC)

- Genesis 1-11 tells the story.
- Starts with the creation of the world and humanity and culture (1-2). Followed by the fall of the world and humanity and culture (3-11).
- Key people: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah

Stage Two: The Jewish people come into being (2000-1700BC)

- Genesis 12-50 tells the story.
- The story focuses in on the fathers of the Jews, called 'the Patriarchs'. It tells how they came to be, and how they ended up in Egypt.
- God, through Abraham and his descendants, forms for himself a family of people through which he will bless the whole world.
- Key people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph

Stage Three: The Exodus and the long journey to the Promised Land (1480-1400BC)

- Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy tell the story.
- Through Moses, God powerfully delivers the Jews from slavery in Egypt and then gives them the Law and worship system, which would guide them as a people.
- Because of their disobedience, they spend 40 years in the desert before being allowed to enter the Promised Land.
- Key person: Moses

Stage Four: Settlement in the Promised Land (1400-1050BC)

- Joshua and Judges tell the story. The book of Ruth was written at this time.
- The Jews finally conquer the Promised Land although they have no king and are only a bunch of 12 loosely connected tribes at this stage.
- At first they are obedient, but begin to drift from God.
- Key people: Joshua, Deborah, Ruth, Gideon, Samson

Stage Five: The Jews become a powerful political nation under a king (1050-930BC)

- 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1-11 and 1 Chronicles tell the story. At this point the poetic books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and most of Psalms) are written.
- Through Samuel, God anoints first Saul (who fails as king) and then David (who succeeds as king). Solomon succeeds his father David. The kingdom of Israel reaches its high point under him.
- Key people: Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon

Stage Six: The Jewish kingdom divides in two (930BC). Ultimately both kingdoms are overthrown and taken into captivity, first the North (722BC), then the South (587BC)

- 1 Kings 12-22, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell the story. Esther tells a story of the Jews experiencing threat in exile during this time.
- This split of the nation of the Jews into two parts creates some confusion for Bible readers because we need to know whether the Northern or Southern kingdom is being spoken about. The Northern kingdom (consisting of ten of the 12 tribes) is called Israel or Ephraim, with Samaria as the capital. The Southern one (two tribes) is called Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital.
- The period spans 19 kings of Israel, and 20 kings of Judah. All 19 kings of Israel are corrupt, while eight of the kings of Judah turn to God. During this time God sends prophets to both the North and the South. In the North the prophetic word is rejected. In the South, at times it is accepted. The prophecies are loaded with warnings of judgment. If they will not turn to God, they can expect to experience destruction at the hands of powerful tyrant nations. If they repent, God will spare them. Sadly, they don't meaningfully return to God.
- Many of the prophets who speak for God also write down their message at this time.

Most of the 17 Prophetic Books in the Old Testament are these messages:

- Isaiah (740-700BC) – Southern kingdom prophet
 - Jeremiah (627-580BC) – Southern kingdom prophet
 - Lamentations (586BC) – Jeremiah weeps for the destroyed Jerusalem
 - Ezekiel (590-570BC) – prophet in exile in foreign land
 - Daniel (605-530BC) – government official / prophet in exile in foreign land
 - Hosea (745BC) – Northern kingdom prophet
 - Amos (760BC) – Northern kingdom prophet
 - Obadiah (500BC) – prophet of doom to neighbouring people, Edom
 - Jonah (770BC) – prophet sent to save Ninevah, capital of Assyria
 - Micah (740-690BC) – contemporary of Isaiah in the Southern kingdom
 - Nahum (590-570BC) – prophet celebrating the fall of the Assyrians
 - Habakkuk (630BC) – Southern prophet of doom toward the cruel Babylonians
 - Zephaniah (627BC) – Southern kingdom prophet
- Sadly, the Northern kingdom, judged by God for its persistent rebellion, falls to the Assyrians in 722BC. It goes into exile and never recovers - lacking all faith-conviction, it is entirely assimilated into Assyria. The Southern kingdom, also judged by God for its persistent rebellion, falls to the Babylonians 130 years later (587BC). Jerusalem is destroyed. The people go into exile (only the poor are left behind) but hold onto their distinctive faith in God – in the hope of returning...

Stage Seven: Some of the Southern kingdom exiles begin to return to rebuild Jerusalem (539-410BC)

- Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story. The prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, Joel and Malachi are written at this time.
- Following the conquering of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian, many Jews from Babylon return to Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem is completed and dedicated in 516 BC. There is then a 'silence' of Scripture – nothing is written for the 410 years before Christ comes.
- Key people: Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai

APPENDIX D: 10 QUESTIONS TO UNDERSTAND A VERSE

BOX 4: 10 QUESTIONS TO MAKE SENSE OF A VERSE.

1. **The question of heart attitude.** Am I hungry and willing to hear what God would want to say to me through this verse? If we have the wrong attitude, we'll miss the meaning of the Bible. We're all in danger of putting our defences up as we come to God's Word. Replace pride with humility, dispassion with expectancy, self-reliance with prayerful dependence on the Spirit.
2. **The question of the author's intent.** What was the original author trying to say to his readers? After all, it cannot mean now what it did not mean then, and though there can be many applications of a verse, there is only one correct meaning - a meaning not meant to elude us, because it was originally written to mean something.
3. **The question of literature type.** What type of literature is the book in which this verse is found? Is it historical, narrative, law code, poetry, prophetic, parable, epistle or apocalyptic? In the same way you wouldn't read a love poem like you'd read a textbook, so be careful to not interpret figurative parts of the Bible in an overly literal way.
4. **The question of thought flow.** What's its logical context? After all, the books of the bible each have a structure, flow and sections; they are not just a mass of unrelated verses. What do the verses or chapters before and after say that might throw light on this verse? After all a 'text' taken out 'context' is a 'con'.
5. **The question of historical context.** Is there anything in the history and culture of that time that throws light on this verse? If an Old Testament verse, which of the Seven Historical Stages does this verse exist in? - see Appendix C to make sense of this.
6. **The question of other Scripture.** What does the rest of Scripture say about the topic of this verse? If this verse is difficult to understand, what do clearer verses say on the subject? After all, Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. If there are several possible meanings, all those meanings that contradict other Scripture must be eliminated.
7. **The question of Christ.** What light does this verse throw on God and Christ? After all, Scripture is primarily about God and his Son Jesus Christ, the hero of the Bible. If this is an Old Testament verse in what ways (if any) does this verse point to Christ as its fulfilment?
8. **The question of other sources:** 1) Credible commentaries: How do studied theologians interpret this verse? 2) Other translations: How other translations translate this verse often reveals nuances to the original text that one translation may miss – type the verse reference in the search bar at www.bible.cc/john/3-16.htm. 3) The original Greek/Hebrew: For this, type the verse reference in the search bar at www.biblos.com/john/3-16.htm.

9. **The question of application.** Is there a promise to believe, a truth to affirm, an insight to glean, a warning to heed, a command to obey, or an example to follow? (But be careful of the hundreds of laws from Moses (Exodus through Deuteronomy) - they are not for Christians, who are under the much higher law of Christ. Also be cautious of examples – just because the Bible describes someone doing something does not mean it endorses it – e.g. polygamy)..

10. **The question of the Spirit's nudging.** Having understood the meaning of the verse, how might the Holy Spirit be leading me specifically as an individual and us as a community to apply the meaning of this verse to my life/our lives?

APPENDIX E:

Overview of the 39 Old Testament books.

BIBLE BOOK (UNDERLINED IF LIKELY TO CONFUSE BEGINNER)	TYPE OF LITERATURE	MAIN THEME	KEY WORD	KEY VERSE	WHICH OF THE 7 HISTORICAL STAGES? REFERS TO BOX 3
Genesis	Books of Moses: Beginnings	God chooses one nation to bless all nations	Beginnings	1:1	One (1-11), Two (12-50)
Exodus	Books of Moses: Law	Deliverance from Egypt	Redemption	6:6	Three
Leviticus	Books of Moses: Law	Approaching a Holy God	Holiness	20:7	Three
Numbers	Books of Moses: Law	Unbelief and disobedience	Wanderings	20:12	Three
Deuteronomy	Books of Moses: Law	Do not forget	Covenant	10:12	Three
Joshua	History	Entering the Promised Land	Conquest	11:23	Four
Judges	History	In the Promised Land without a king	Forget	21:25	Four
Ruth	History	Godliness illustrated	Kinsman Redeemer	1:16	Four
1 Samuel	History	Israel's first kings	Rejection	15:22	Five
2 Samuel	History	Israel's first kings	David	7:13	Five
1 Kings	History	Israel divides into two northern and southern kingdoms	Division	11:11	Five (1-11), Six (12-22)

Nehemiah	History	Rebuilding the Jerusalem walls	Rebuild	6:15	Seven
Esther	History	Jews under threat while in exile	Providence	4:14	Seven
Job	Poetry / History	Suffering man, loving God	Sovereign	13:15	Five
Psalms	Poetry / Song	Hymn book of the Jews	Worship	145:21	Five, Six, Seven
Proverbs	Poetry/ Wisdom	To give moral instruction	Wisdom	1:7	Five
Ecclesiastes	Poetry/ Philosophy	Search for the meaning of life	Meaninglessness	12:13	Five
Song of songs	Poetry /Romance	A love song	Love	8:7	Five
Isaiah	Prophecy	Salvation comes from God	Salvation	40:1	Five
Jeremiah	Prophecy	God's patience and holiness	Obey	31:33	Five (1-24), Six (25-52)
Lamentations	Prophecy	Mourning over Jerusalem's destruction	Weep	3:22-23	Six
Ezekiel	Prophecy	Condemnation and consolation	Restoration	36:26	Six
Daniel	Prophecy	Encouraging exiled Jews	God's plan	2:20	Six
Hosea	Prophecy	God's love for Israel	Return	4:6	Six
Joel	Prophecy	God's judgment	Spirit	2:29	Seven
Amos	Prophecy	Social justice	Judgment	3:2	Six

Zechariah	Prophecy	Future blessings for Israel	Vision	9:9	Seven
Malachi	Prophecy	An appeal to backsliders	Return	3:7	

Source for some of table: 'The Bible made easy' (Paternoster Publishing)

Overview of the 39 New Testament books.

BIBLE BOOK (UNDERLINED IF LIKELY TO CONFUSE BEGINNER)	TYPE OF LITERATURE	MAIN THEME	KEY WORD	KEY VERSE
Matthew	Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection	Words and deeds of Jesus	King	28:18
Mark	Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection	Jesus' mission	Servant	10:45
Luke	Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection	Jesus in detail	Son of Man	19:10
John	Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection	Believe in Jesus	Son of God	3:16
Acts	The story of the spread of the early church	The power of the Spirit and gospel	Mission	1:8
Romans	Paul's letter to a church	God's gift of righteousness	Salvation	1:17
1 Corinthians	Paul's letter to a church	Freedom from compromise	Transformation	1:30
2 Corinthians	Paul's letter to a church	Jesus' death on a cross	Reconciliation	5:21
Galatians	Paul's letter to a church	Freedom from legalism	Liberty	5:1
Ephesians	Paul's letter to a church	Living in unity	Grace	2:8

1 Timothy	Paul's letter to a person	Advice for Christian leaders	Instruction	4:13
2 Timothy	Paul's letter to a person	More advice for Christian leaders	Endure	2:3
Titus	Paul's letter to a person	Advice to a Christian leader	Teach	2:10
Philemon	Paul's letter to a person	Personal reconciliation	Forgiveness	17
Hebrews	Letter to a church	The superiority of Christ	Better	4:14
James	James' letter to a church	Life-changing faith	Active faith	1:22
1 Peter	Peter's letter to a church	Enemies from without – persecution	Endure	4:12
2 Peter	Peter's letter to a church	Enemies from within – false teachers	Be alert	3:8,17
1 John	John's letter to a church	Authentic spirituality	Fellowship	4:8
2 John	John's letter to a church	Beware of false teachers	Watch out	10
3 John	John's letter to a person	Fellowship with Christians	Faithful	8
Jude	Jude's letter to a church	Beware of false teaching	Contend	20
Revelation	John's 7 prophetic letters to churches, and visions from God.	Things that will take place	The Throne	3:20