

## **Strengthen Your Core: Bible**

Lessons: **Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 2 Timothy 3:14-17**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%206:4-9;%202%20Timothy%203:14-17>

Dietrich Reinhart has called the Bible, “the memory of God breaking into our world.”

Perhaps better we call it: the history of God breaking into our world. Or, not even history – because history implies something that has happened in the past. How about: the Bible is a journal of God’s breaking into our world.

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We’ve been talking these last weeks about the basic beliefs of Christian faith. Here’s one way of putting what we’ve been talking about: 1) God is awesome beyond all measure and understanding, worthy of worship, and yet wants deep and intimate relationship with His people. 2) God has been trying to have that relationship with us forever, but we’re terrible at it. 3) God sent God’s self in flesh as Jesus to save us so that we could have that relationship. 4) Salvation is the initiation of that relationship. 5) Through the work of the Holy Spirit that relationship deepens and develops.

The Bible is the journal of God’s attempts to have deep, worshipful and intimate relationship with God’s people, written by people who had that relationship with God. It has become the centerpiece of our tradition because it is the single deepest, most coherent, most poetic, most layered record of the God-human relationship.

God has been breaking into our world since God created our world. The Bible is the best record of that, and of the why, and of the Way.

It is also more than a record. When the Bible is used for personal meditation and communal study, it is also God’s present and active tool for breaking into our personal worlds today.

The Bible is God’s present and active tool for breaking into our personal worlds today. The Bible is our Scripture – our holy text – because it is God speaking to us, to you, to me, to an Asofo or Bakongo warrior, to an ostracized kid wearing a long black coat listening to Cabaret Voltaire on his iPod.

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.

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 researched, nonpartisan, evenhanded and objective narrative of ancient events. It is history in the way the ancients understood history: true, and deeply personal accounts of how we got where we are.

§ And, while we all know this, I dare to say it is not a science textbook, though the description of God's creation of the world in Genesis may be even closer to the realities of the big bang than we might have imagined.

The Bible is a library shelf of books, collected, translated, and edited over time. Each book is a journaled 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. Each book is God speaking through them to us.

The Bible 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. And many of whom adored, worshiped, and were in deep relationship with God. Just as we, ourselves, embarrassing, imperfect, cruel, and promise-filled as we are, are beloved of God, and long to be in deep relationship with God.

As a result, the Bible is an ancestral document: it tells us who we are, and who we came from, and Who we belong to. The Bible is a communal library: it gives us a common language and experience as we follow the way of Jesus together.

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. We even share in conversations with other lovers of the One God, such as Jews and Muslims and others who share parts of the Bible with us.

Unlike our direct experience of God, through Jesus or through the Holy Spirit, the Bible is something we can share with another human being, and discuss together. When we do that — share in that 5000-year-old God-breaking-into-world-and-word activity that is the Bible, we come to understand God better. And more often than not, we understand ourselves better.

And, it is the most constant and available means to God's grace that we have, the one that, even when we are separated from Christian community, we may use to find community among the faithful. When prayer fails us, we may pray the Psalms. When personal worship falls far from our souls, we may read Revelation and discover the awe of worship there.

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. Are there events that will shame us if we take them seriously? Yes.

Why should we read it, study it, steep in it? Because it is, by far, our most reliable shared source for learning about Jesus and God. And because — and here's the real mystery of it — God is still speaking in it and through it.

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. It is the words of God, along with the Word of God that was with God at the beginning when God created the world (Genesis 1) and the Word of God that became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). It is a living document, because the God who speaks through it is a living God, inspiring its words and inspiring our understanding.

Through the Bible, God reaches us in words. 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.

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. We can use it to find out what it Jesus or our tradition says about some topic or person. For example, the Bible says a lot and is very consistent on the topics of greed, dishonesty, poverty, and hospitality. (Greed and dishonesty: very bad. Poverty: to be consistently battled. Hospitality: absolutely required.) It also tells us more about Jesus than any other set of documents, including the so-called "Gnostic gospels". Jesus said more than once that he was "the fulfillment of the law" – the fulfillment of this text – and it is the text he knew. Reading it helps us understand him.

We can read it poetically or playfully, for the gorgeous language and imagery. Lots of people who consider themselves agnostic or universalists turn to the Bible for their wedding readings, or read the psalms in times of distress or trouble, or pray the Lord's Prayer – Jesus' prayer – in 12-step gatherings.

I have three suggestions for how to read the Bible. Well, four, really. The first one is overarching: don't be a scientist in a lab coat, reading as if you were trying to prove something. It's not morally bad, it's just boring to read it that way. Yuck.

1) Read it over and over, preferably to someone else. For centuries, our ancestors in faith learned the Bible by having it read to them in the temple, in synagogues, and in homes. They recited the stories to their children at bedtime. They discussed verses over meals. The history of their ancestors in faith was living memory because they treated it as living memory. All those people on the other ends of the political spectrum who seem to know their Bible know their Bible because they read it and talk about it. You want to really know your Bible? Make it part of your life. Carry it with you and read it on the train or while you're waiting in line. Read it casually and constantly, and you'll start to absorb it, like moisture in the air.

2) Read the histories like histories and the rest like a mystery. From Joshua to Esther or so you're reading books that are chronicling the history of our ancestors the Hebrews and how God intervened in their lives. Those are histories: people are really trying to help us understand what happened and why it happened. The Acts of the Apostles are like that too, as are the first three Gospels to a lesser degree. When you read those (and they're fun to read), read them like you would a great biography, making sense of the events but looking for the motivations. Look for what is sometimes called the "metanarrative" – the overarching why of the story of God and God's people.

The rest of the books are more like a great mystery when you know that the answer to the whodunit is always "God". Each of them contains layers of meaning, and you uncover the layers depending upon where you are in your life and the number of times you've thought about it.

3) Enriches your soul by reading it devotionally, with others or by yourself. To read the Bible devotionally is to drink it in, and let God speak to you through it. We don't tend to do this with books, so you have to practice. Remember when you'd buy an album, and put it on the stereo, listen to it over and over again, reading the words as you went until you memorized them? Reading devotionally is more like that.

But read it. For as Paul wrote to Timothy, these are “the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that you who belong to God may be proficient and equipped for good work in God’s name.”

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.