
How to Read the Bible with the Church

DAVE BAST

Learning to read the Bible with the Church of all ages gives wisdom to our understanding and depth to our faith. There is an ancient way of reading and meditating upon the Bible that just might revolutionize the way you approach scripture in your own devotional life. Stay tuned to find out more about it.

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast; and once again with me today are Dr. Tim Brown and Dr. Todd Billings, and I want to say welcome, Todd and Tim.

TODD BILLINGS

It is good to be here, Dave.

TIM BROWN

Thank you, David; it is great to be back.

DAVE BAST

And I have really enjoyed this series of programs we have been doing on how to read the Bible; and today we want to get very practical and personal as well. How do you read the Bible? How do I read the Bible? And how did the ancient Church read the Bible, because there is a wonderful approach, I think, that can help all of us get to where the Bible wants to bring us; but before I get into that, let me just share a few things that we got from our listeners. We asked the question online: How should I read the Bible? It was interesting, a number of them started by mentioning the importance of prayer, or the Holy Spirit. I especially liked two different responses that seem opposite, but actually there is a way of reconciling them. One person said simply, backwards – read the Bible backwards, which I take to mean start with Jesus and the Gospels toward the end and then go back. Another person said, no, start at the beginning and read it from beginning to end – from Genesis to Revelation – so you learn who God is. There is something to both of those approaches, isn't there?

TODD BILLINGS

Definitely. I think that, if you use both of them, you realize that the New Testament helps us read the Old Testament and the Old Testament helps us read the New Testament. It is not just a one-way street.

TIM BROWN

Yes, it is reading the Bible purposefully.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and Todd, I know in your book: *The Word of God for the People of God*, which we have talked about in other programs, you mention specifically the importance of preparing yourself before you even read. Say a little bit more about that. How do we go about this preparation to read in such a way that God speaks to us?

TODD BILLINGS

Well, I think that there are different levels – I mean, certainly on a person level I would affirm the reader who talks about prayer and praying for the Holy Spirit, but I think we also need to be in community, and to be in communal worship; and actually, corporate worship gives us the context for interpreting scripture and

hearing God's word as the word of Christ by the Spirit to the Church. So, what we need to avoid is any sort of blank slate approach, where it is just me and God, or I am going to pretend that I don't have any beliefs or convictions and I am just going to hear what the Bible has to say. I think that is not helpful.

DAVE BAST

Or the famous old practice of Bible dousing, where you open the pages at random and point to a verse and that is God's word for you. Actually, the Puritans in New England used to practice a form of that, which is rather troubling. But, to guide this discussion, let me start with some familiar verses from the Bible's great love song to the word of God, Psalm 119; so rich; don't be put off by the fact that it is the longest chapter in the Bible because it is full of good things.

⁹How can those who are young keep their way pure? By living according to your word. ¹⁰I seek you with all my heart. Do not let me stray from your commands. ¹¹I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. ⁹⁷Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. ⁹⁸Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. ⁹⁹I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate upon your statutes. ¹⁰⁰I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. ¹⁰¹I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. ¹⁰²I have not departed from your laws. ¹⁰³How sweet are your words to my taste; sweeter than honey to my mouth. ¹⁰⁴I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore, I hate every wrong path.

TIM BROWN

Isn't that beautiful? You know, the first thing that strikes me in that is the deeply personal way in which the psalmist is speaking of the scriptures. It is as though – well, it is not *as though*, it is the fact that the psalmist is referring to a person – the living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – speaking through the word.

TODD BILLINGS

I am really struck by the verbs that are used here. I mean, sometimes when we think about the Bible as Christians, we have all these feelings of obligation come: Oh, I feel guilty because I did not read my Bible enough today, or something like that. Well, the verbs here are: to *seek*, to *delight*, to *hide* this word in your heart. This is like a feast...

DAVE BAST

Yes, savory.

TODD BILLINGS

This is something we get to look forward to...

TIM BROWN

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

You taste it.

TODD BILLINGS

It is not mainly a guilt thing if you miss out on it, it is missing out on a great banquet.

TIM BROWN

Oh, sure. Remember that story in the New Testament where Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, leaving Martha to do all the serving? Martha comes in and objects and Jesus says to her, "Martha, Martha; you are anxious about many things. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen that, and I will not take it from her." Mary had chosen to sit and luxuriate in the presence of the Word of God.

DAVE BAST

Of the Word, yes, exactly. And one other thing that struck me in just reading those verses is the connection between that enjoyment – that savoring – that love for the word of God – and his behavior then as a result. It leads to the way he walks. It results in not choosing one kind of path and definitely committing himself to another kind of path; so, it is the farthest thing possible from sort of ivory tower, speculative, it is just about my thoughts. It translates directly into his way of life.

TODD BILLINGS

It is not reading for ancient history. It is not reading for information. It is reading to be formed as a child of God, and as we know from Jesus, that should always lead us to love of God and love of neighbor, which is very practical and very concrete.

TIM BROWN

And it ought to be said that that kind of reading comes only with great practice and great affection. It is not as though you just pick it up and start reading and all of those things happen to you.

DAVE BAST

Okay, very good; and thanks for that transition, because that is exactly what I want to zero in on. I know that you both have paid a lot of attention in your own life and practice to this kind of reading; and it is a form of reading the Bible that we get from the ancient Church. It is called *lectio divina* – a little Latin for our listeners – and we will unpack that after this break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, joined today by Todd Billings and Tim Brown.

TIM BROWN

David, I would like to pick up on something you ended with a moment ago; this ancient form of reading called: *Lectio divina*. Some people refer to it as: *Lexio divina*; I am a little more comfortable doing it that way; but it is a four-fold reading of the Bible, and it is a very fine way to read it. *Lectio* literally means reading, and *divina* divine reading. It is the divine reading of the divine word.

DAVE BAST

And this is really for personal use. We said earlier in the first segment that we need to read the Bible along with the community – with the Church; but we also do need this personal devotional appropriation of God's word.

TIM BROWN

Oh, absolutely so! So, there are four parts. Let me just rehearse them. *Lectio* is reading. The second part is *meditatio* – you can hear it: to meditate – to think deeply and complexly about a single thing in a passage. The third form of *lectio divina* is *oratio*, which is to pray the text. The Bible is a marvelous resource to offer the word of God back to God; and then the last section of that is *contemplatio*, which may sound like *medatatio*, but it is really a little different...

DAVE BAST

Contemplate; we get that word from that.

TIM BROWN

And an even more fundamental root: a template, and a template is a pattern for us; so the scriptures then become a pattern for our activity in life.

DAVE BAST

Okay; let's talk about these one at a time, and I will abandon my classical Latin class from way back when and say it the way the Church does: *Lexio* or *reading*. How do you approach just simply sitting down and reading the Bible?

TIM BROWN

Well, first of all, I always begin by praying. Send your Holy Spirit upon us, Lord, because the Spirit is required to illuminate this word... but I simply...

DAVE BAST

Or Psalm 119, again: Oh, Lord, open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from your law.

TIM BROWN

Exactly so; so I begin to read a Gospel or a psalm – any portion of scripture – and I try to read a whole section rather than just a verse or two; an entire story or an entire chapter.

DAVE BAST

Do you follow a Bible reading plan, ever? Todd, what about you, as you approach the reading? Do you do it systematically?

TODD BILLINGS

I have used a number of different approaches, but usually I will read something from the Old Testament as a whole, something from the Psalms, and something from the New Testament. The Psalms are my bread and butter for praying, and so...

TIM BROWN

Yes, mine as well.

TODD BILLINGS

And so I read from the Psalms and meditate on the Psalms every night before going to bed; and it is the Church's prayer book and it is also my own personal prayer book.

DAVE BAST

So it is good to read fairly extensively, not just a handful of verses. Actually, we have two different ways we try to help people read: ReFrame Media and Words of Hope each publish a daily devotional...

TODD BILLINGS

Oh, wonderful.

DAVE BAST

Which is just a few verses with some helpful background, but Words of Hope also publishes *Through the Bible in a Year*, which will get you from Genesis to Revelation in 365 days; so, either way is okay.

TIM BROWN

Yes; I think the point is you want, in your regular diet, the sweep of the story – what God is doing from creation through fall to redemption in Jesus – and then, smaller sections that you can dive into – immerse yourself in.

DAVE BAST

Do you think you need to always use a study Bible for example with notes, with footnotes; or do you need to have a background commentary or something like that? Can ordinary Christians just sort of wade through two or three chapters?

TIM BROWN

I think both are very fine; and you do, in fact, need both. Wisdom and insight and background are very helpful things; but I would not overdo that, because the word of God itself is self-revealing, and I want to have time to luxuriate in the word and let it speak to me, even if I don't completely understand what is being said.

TODD BILLINGS

I would agree with that. I remember recently I was leading a class of middle schoolers through a Bible study, and some of the students would actually go right away to reading the study Bible notes rather than reading the text itself because the text itself is harder to understand. I mean, I am glad that the study Bible notes are there for difficult passages, but we do need to keep in mind that it is the Bible that is inspired, not the study Bible notes.

DAVE BAST

Not the study notes, that is right. Okay, so *lectio*, then *meditatio*.

TIM BROWN

Which is this focused, careful reflection on a given passage; and I like to say to my students, I want to meditate until I have it memorized. Then I know I have achieved a certain level of meditation.

DAVE BAST

Okay, we will reserve that idea of memorizing for the end of the program; but this whole thing... I mean, how do you meditate, really, on the scripture?

TODD BILLINGS

I think that this is a point where you really deeply embody the fact that the Bible is not information, but it is given for our transformation, for us to chew on, for us to go over again and again, because God uses this as an instrument to transform us. I have a story of how that took place in a particular way in that a year ago today I was in the hospital with a very serious case of pneumonia. I was breathing about 40 breaths a minute, so just sort of gasping for air; and when you are in that state like that, you cannot think consecutive thoughts. Most of what your mind is thinking about is how can I get enough air? How can I breathe? You are focused on breathing. I remember a moment when a pastor from my church came in and he did not talk a lot. He came in and he read from the psalms, and one of the wonderful things about the psalms is that it has these lines which are so wonderful to meditate on. For example, from Psalm 108: For great is your love higher than the heavens. That is not very long at all, but in that moment, I could not think anything longer than that; and I found myself...

DAVE BAST

Great is your love... Great is your love...

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly. So I found myself when I would breathe in and breathe out and breathe in and breathe out, that I needed the word of God to be on my lips in order to experience God's word and God's presence...

TIM BROWN

That is wonderful, Todd.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it makes me think of a story from Bunyan's testimony about his own conversion – John Bunyan. He was struggling with doubt and fear, and he heard a sermon on the text from the Song of Solomon: You are my love. And those words, he said, just over and over: You are my love... you are my love... That is

meditating on the word of God.

TODD BILLINGS

And it changes you.

TIM BROWN

My wife, Nancy, and I have nine grandchildren, and one of our granddaughters has this remarkable practice. When she really wants you to hear her, she will take her little hands and lay them on your cheek, and when she does it, my heart melts, and all I want to do is listen to her. I want that kind of attentiveness when I read the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Okay, so that is meditatio. I love that image. The next thing, then, is prayer.

TIM BROWN

Oratio. Praying the Bible, and the greatest resource we have in the Bible for praying is the scriptures themselves.

DAVE BAST

And we have already mentioned especially the book of Psalms.

TIM BROWN

Yes; and the supreme example of that is our Lord himself, who on the cross cried out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Which is the beginning of Psalm 22. Jesus prayed the Psalter.

DAVE BAST

As he was dying.

TIM BROWN

Exactly.

TODD BILLINGS

And one of the things about prayer in that sense is that in the psalms we have every possible type of human emotion, whether it is a moment of despair and of crying out, or of joy and gladness and thanksgiving.

TIM BROWN

Oh, exactly.

TODD BILLINGS

And so, God has provided this for us.

DAVE BAST

Years ago somebody gave me a little devotional called *Drawing Near*. It is really a great tool. I just rediscovered it. I had laid it aside for years, and it has pages and pages and pages of short prayers drawn from all over the scriptures; a lot of them – most of them probably, from Psalms, but not only Psalms. You can turn so much of the Bible into prayer. Paul's letters almost always begin in the first chapter with a prayer, and many later on as well. So, just praying the words of the Bible back to God... what a great school to learn how to pray.

TIM BROWN

Yes; I am a little embarrassed to say this, but I prayed at a public event just a few days ago, and when I returned to the table, a person complimented me on my beautiful prayer, and they said, "How did you do

that?” Well, I actually just recited back a psalm to them in the prayer.

DAVE BAST

You got credit.

TIM BROWN

I got credit, but I didn't deserve it; but the point is, I prayed the psalm.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and then there is this last step of *contemplatio* – template building. Say a little bit more about that, Tim.

TIM BROWN

It is obedience. You read the scripture with a view toward acting on it. Jesus said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” The purposes of the scripture involve our faithful response to them.

DAVE BAST

So really, the English word *contemplate*, or contemplative – the adjective form – is a little bit misleading because it makes us think of sitting there cross-legged and sort of letting our thoughts drift off.

TIM BROWN

Yes, this whole reading method is often referred to as a Benedictine practice from St. Benedict, and among the Benedictine readers of scripture, there was a tradition where *contemplatio* meant an even deeper kind of meditation. They would refer to it as “sleeping in Jesus,” but there is another tradition that I think actually is stronger, and that is this act of obedience.

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, Tim; I think that is a really good point about how scripture should lead us to obedience and to action; but I think there is also something about this final step where we should be open to perhaps more of this, “sleeping in Jesus,” moment, or something where we realize that our life is before God in a very deep and significant way, and the most significant thing that we can do is to act in love and worship of this God. I mean, sometimes I find that silent prayer, even when I stop all of my prayer requests and just sit and soak in God's word, it can be life transforming in a different way than: Oh, now I have a list of things to do.

DAVE BAST

To do, right. So would it be fair, Todd, to say maybe this is the step where we end by active listening?

TODD BILLINGS

Yes, that would be what I would say...

DAVE BAST

You talking to me, Lord? You talking to me?

TODD BILLINGS

Sometimes God wants to do something through us that certainly leads to our action, but it is not just an immediate “to-do” list. We need to give ourselves space to meditate and think and pray: God, how is this word reframing how I view my world?

DAVE BAST

Maybe the work that we need to do on a given day is interior work; we need to work a little bit on our own heart and mind.

Well, there is one last thing I want to pick up on before we leave this very practical program about how to read the Bible, and that is the idea of memorizing scripture. Tim, you mentioned it earlier, and I want to pursue that with you, but first a brief pause.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Todd Billings today and Tim Brown, and we have just a few minutes left in the program, but I did not want to leave this subject of how to read the Bible in a very practical way without pursuing a little bit, Tim, your idea on scripture memorization; and that is something most of us have not done since Sunday school, maybe; but I know you have a strong commitment to this as being very important and practical in the Christian life. Just say a little bit more about that.

TIM BROWN

Well, fundamentally, memorizing scripture is an act of obedience. In the Old Testament confession of faith, the Shema Israel, we are told specifically: Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. So, the fundamental place where the word of God is to be stored is not a book or a library, but the human heart, which then shows up again in acts of obedience and deep faith.

DAVE BAST

Well, the psalmist says it, too. We read this from Psalm 119: Your word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against you.

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, that means we internalize it, but we have to memorize it then, right?

TIM BROWN

Oh, absolutely. So, I love something that Dallas Willard writes about memorization: Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all of the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization because it is a fundamental way of filling our minds with what it needs.

DAVE BAST

You know, you can do it kind of informally, too. I was struck by your story, Todd, about when you were really in a desperate situation in the hospital and unable to even think. Those phrases, those words, could come back from scripture and sustain you.

TODD BILLINGS

Definitely; so I give the example of my pastor reading from the psalms and some of those things latched on, but I found as I would go through those long days where all I could think about was how do I breathe, I would have various scripture passages come to mind; but I could not really think through anything more than seven or eight words. That is a particular example of in a desperate situation where God's word hidden in your heart comes forth; but there are all sorts of everyday circumstances where you face a temptation or you face a challenge in your life, and your memory clicks, and God's word comes to you in a powerful way in that moment...

DAVE BAST

But it has to be there for that to be able to happen.

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And Tim, you know this as well as I from pastoral experience; boy, there is nothing like when you are old and when you are really at the end, and a pastor comes and reads and it all comes back to you; or a hymn – you know, those words that you memorized.

TIM BROWN

I remember so vividly being at the bedside of a man who was dying of Alzheimer's. He had not spoken to his family in years, really, and I prayed with him and I closed with the Lord's Prayer, and he began to recite it with me. It was a great joy to his family and deeply moving to me.

DAVE BAST

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think and suggest topics for future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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