A classical painting depicting three figures in a landscape. On the left, a woman in a dark blue dress and a red shawl stands with her back to the viewer, holding a staff. In the center, a man in a white robe with a sash stands facing right. On the right, another man in a brown and gold robe stands facing left. They are positioned on a dirt path that leads towards a large, leafy tree on the left. The background shows a hazy, mountainous landscape under a cloudy sky. The overall style is reminiscent of 19th-century religious art.

Ancient & Ageless

*Understanding the Complexity while
Experiencing the Beauty of Scripture*

Caleb Brown

Ancient & Ageless
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Artwork: The Road to Emmaus by Robert Zund

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Holy Bible, book Divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine;
Mine to tell me whence I came;
Mine to teach me what I am.

Mine to chide me when I rove,
Mine to shew a Saviour's love;
Mine art thou to guide my feet;
Mine to judge, condemn, acquit.

Mine to comfort in distress,
If the Holy Spirit bless;
Mine to shew by living faith,
Man can triumph over death.

Mine to tell of joys to come,
And the rebel sinner's doom;
Holy Bible, book Divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine.

Holy Bible, Book Divine¹

Thy Word is like a garden, Lord,
With flowers bright and fair;
And every one who seeks may pluck
A lovely cluster there.
Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine;
And jewels rich and rare
Are hidden in its mighty depths
For every searcher there.

Thy Word Is Like a Garden, Lord²

God's Word is our great heritage
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant while words endure,
We keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations.

*God's Word Is Our Great Heritage*³

We have an all-sufficient Word
To make the simple wise;
Upon the heart the Spirit writes
And souls from death arise.

With such a mighty, wielded Sword,
What more could saints require
To fight the darkness of their sin,
And warn men of hell fire?

*We Have an All-Sufficient Word*⁷

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The Problem

For the Bible tells me so

A few months ago, while teaching a course on biblical literacy, each table worked together to *define the Bible in a single sentence*. While you might not be surprised, the answers were all over the place. But the most common answer was "God's Word" which makes sense; however, whenever they were asked for clarification, they said, "I don't know... *It just is.*" Nevertheless, their response was interesting to me because they were long term church goers, but they could not explain their beliefs regarding the Bible in a logical way. They believe *in* the Bible, but they could not put their faith into

words. In short, they believe the Bible is true... *because it is.*

Similar to a child singing, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,*" believers place a remarkable amount of trust in Scripture, which is understandable because it was written to "give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled."⁹ The problem, however, is how easy it can be to misunderstand the Bible. We will cover a few common misconceptions in the next chapter, but it is important to address the complexity of Scripture. While there is such a thing as the perspicuity of scripture, meaning the Bible is simple enough for *anyone* to be saved, it would be an oversight to treat the Bible like other books, allowing individual perspective to determine interpretation and application – *or lack thereof.*

Unfortunately, believers can handle the Bible the same way as acknowledging the "Terms & Conditions" on a legal document. Oftentimes, people claim to believe *everything* in Scripture without even reading the entire

book, or furthermore – understanding it. Since it is called *God's Word*, it can be tempting to agree without fully considering the matter at hand.

Although having *faith* is considered a good thing in Christian circles, it can be more dangerous than most people realize to have a *blind faith*. Due to popular sayings like, “Take a leap of faith,” it has become an honorable thing to trust God without having all the answers and rightfully so. However, trusting God does not mean we cannot seek answers; in fact, similar to an investigator finding evidence, the answers can strengthen our faith if we are willing to do the hard work to find them. Nevertheless, my goal for this book is to provide necessary research which will help you understand the *terms and conditions* that you are “accepting” when you claim to believe *in* the Bible.

Common misconceptions

Since we will spend the remainder of the book attempting to define the Bible, it seems appropriate to mention a few common ways it can be misunderstood. Nevertheless, it can be easy to dismiss the misconceptions on paper because they seem obvious to the eye; however, I would challenge you to consider the minor occasions in which you have been a victim to erroneous views of the Bible. Furthermore, the counterarguments will be explained over future chapters, so we will primarily focus on a few, perhaps familiar, misconceptions regarding Scripture.

Although most people would not say the Bible is a “Magic Book,” their actions express otherwise. We will spend an entire chapter covering the *inspiration* of Scripture because without a proper understanding, the Bible can be viewed as “golden tablets that fell from the heavens.”¹⁰ While nobody would say it, sometimes the Bible gets treated like *a magic book that we found in a field thousands of years ago, and we have no idea how we got it, but it’s definitely from God*. Again, on paper, it does not seem like a legitimate misconception; however, unless we understand how it was compiled together, we are settling with a similar theory.

Over a decade ago, there was a debate between Bill Nye and Ken Ham regarding creation which compared a secular and biblical approach to the origin of the universe. The event was a prime example of people trying to acknowledge the validity of scientific research while attempting to esteem Genesis in a logical sense. Nevertheless, there is certainly a balance as God created both *science* and *Scripture*. However, the misconception is viewing the Bible primarily as a “Science Book,” and expecting it to answer all the questions we have about

the universe, especially creation. In such a case, we are asking the Bible to do something it was never created to do because "if God is not clear about it, maybe you care about it more than him."¹¹

Especially from an outside perspective, the Bible can be seen as a "Rule Book," and honestly, it can be treated as such by believers too. When following Jesus becomes a legalistic experience, Scripture gets used as the paperwork for the arrangement. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were given the Law to help them grow and honor God in the process; therefore, oftentimes believers use similar guidelines such as the "Ten Commandments" to help children mature in a biblical manner. The problem, however, is when the *rules* become the primary message people are receiving from Scripture. Nevertheless, the Bible is filled with guidelines for living the best life possible, but it is ultimately found in Jesus.

Growing up, someone told me the B.I.B.L.E. stood for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth," which is interesting because less than a third of the Bible is

*detailed information telling how something should be done.*¹²

Nevertheless, the New Testament writers, especially, do provide practical advice on how to get the most from the human experience, yet it is not as simple as following a step-by-step program but rather learning to “walk by the Spirit.”¹³ Nevertheless, God does give direction through his Word, but it would be an oversight to believe He cares more about our actions than character, and thus the Bible must include more than *basic instructions before leaving earth* for humanity “to be like God—truly righteous and holy.”¹⁴

While there are numerous misconceptions about the Bible, we cannot possibly cover everything in this chapter; however, before moving forward, I do want to address the common viewpoint that “The Bible is Clear on Everything.” Perhaps in order to respect God, believers will pretend like everything in the Bible makes sense to them. Unfortunately, many people do not allow room for questions because God would never let His Word be unclear. However, the word *pretend* was used on purpose because such a mindset is not a reality. The Bible is extremely complex and confusing for both

laymen and scholars alike, but the Holy Spirit “shows us God’s deep secrets”¹⁵ and reveals things to us. Ultimately, Scripture does not need to be clear to be trustworthy; instead, the ambiguity allows us to get to know God better through the process.

It's complicated

Upon further reflection, my simple assignment to *define the Bible in a single sentence* was more complex than expected. While the groups were able to generate appropriate responses, their explanations included *some things* but not *all things* – meaning they provided true statements about the Bible, but they were overlooking essential elements in the process. For example, one group said, “Scripture is a love story about God and humanity.” Nevertheless, there are truthful aspects to their definition, such as God loving His creation; however, the description neglects the importance of using Scripture to “teach and counsel each other.”¹⁶ In

short, the challenge in defining the Bible is not finding enough material, but rather, including all the necessary information needed to truly describe God's Word.

While researching, my approach was to start as wide as possible and consider every detail before narrowing down to the essential characteristics. If someone is looking for a book to help them understand the Bible, they can certainly find a surplus from various perspectives. In fact, it was a challenge to decide whether to write this book because many other books have been written on the topic. However, after reading numerous books, I was left with the conviction to *define the Bible in a single sentence*.

At first, my goal was to write on the *Simplicity of Scripture*, but the Holy Spirit changed my assignment because, if we are honest, the Bible is not simple – it is quite complex. Unfortunately, the Bible can be treated as something too academic for ordinary people, so it can only be understood by scholars and theologians. The problem, then, is that the vast majority of society assumes they will never read the Bible for all its worth,

and therefore, they do not even attempt to do so. Yet on the other hand, it can be tempting to downplay the magnificence of the Bible in order to wrap our minds around it, and when doing so, we do not fully experience Scripture in its fullness. Both extremes can be a hindrance in allowing the Bible to “accomplish [God’s] desire and (to) achieve the purpose for which [He] sent it.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, my aim is to provide an elaborate, single sentence definition to help you understand the complexity and experience the beauty of the Bible in a new way. Practically speaking, I want you to be able to explain your view of the Bible to a friend with confidence while experiencing a deeper transformation in your own life. To that end, we will define the Bible *as a library (2) of ancient manuscripts, (3) inspired by God (4) yet composed by humans, (5) that tells one story (6) which leads to Jesus, and (7) teaches us what to believe (8) along with how to live.* Furthermore, the next section will focus on each component as an individual chapter to provide a deeper understanding of the Word of God.

The Definition

A library

While the Bible is a book, it is *more* than a book. To put simply, it is one large book with many smaller books within it – 66 to be exact. The Bible is a collection of writings which were composed in different styles by various authors. Furthermore, it is organized by genres similar to walking through a library. If you, for example, were to browse a local library, you would find a variety of different books on the shelves. There would be a section for Fiction, Self-Help, Graphic Novels, and many other options as well. A library has various types of books available, and they are organized in a specific way... Ultimately to make it easier for the reader to find

what they are looking for and understand what they are reading.

Although you might not realize it, you will experience something similar when you open a Bible. The books are organized in a specific way to help you navigate the writings and understand what you are reading. While a trip to a bookstore might be overwhelming for a first time visitor, the better they get to know the layout, the more they will enjoy the experience. In the same way, to get the most from your Bible, it is essential to view the *book as a library*.

Styles

Within the library of Scripture, there are many different genres (Gospels, Prophets, etc.) which will be covered in the next section. However, on a bigger scale, each of the 31,102 verses in the Bible fall into three major categories known as *literary styles* which are the way an author uses language to convey their ideas. You could find many different options in your local library, but the Bible can be narrowed down to three main styles: History, Poetry, and Discourse.

When reading the Bible, we must understand each section of the library because “the Bible—a book made up of many books—contains many different styles of writing, so we must properly recognize the literary categories of each passage we read in order to understand it correctly.”¹⁸ In short, we cannot *read* each section of Scripture the same way because it was not *written* the same way. The Bible contains different literary styles which means there are different rules (or guidelines, at least) in order to read the Bible for all its worth.

44% – Narrative

If you grew up in church, it might not surprise you to discover almost half your Bible can be read as a story. In the Old Testament, there are *Bible Heroes* like Noah, Moses, and David to name a few. Then the Gospels and Acts provide stories about Jesus, Peter, and Paul, as well as many others. These characters are usually taught in church because people connect with stories. The Bible is written primarily as a narrative because, ultimately, God was telling a story.

A narrative is a text that makes its point primarily by telling a story. The easiest way to discover whether you are reading a narrative is to look for a character, setting, and plot in the passage. In Exodus, Moses “led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai” where “the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush” (Ex. 3:1-2). Moses (character) went into the wilderness (setting) and encountered God (plot).

The scholar, Ray Lubeck, says, “Narratives communicate Truths by telling stories; characters and events dominate the flow of the text.” Simply put, we can learn from narrative by focusing on the characters and their experiences. When reading narrative, it can be helpful to ask: *What does this story teach me about God? What does this story teach me about humanity?* Look for ways to connect with the characters because “stories connect us as human beings.”¹⁹ Through narrative writing, God is inviting you into His story.

33% – Poetry

A third of the Bible was written in a literary style unfamiliar to many people. Similar to a non-musical person finding an instrument, they know it is there, but they are not quite sure what to do with it. The Bible is filled with poetry; in fact, there is an entire section in the library for it. Unfortunately, many people overlook the poetic language in the Bible because it seems confusing and different from other literary styles. Honestly, biblical poetry is unique and should be treated accordingly.

Poetry is a text where normal language is modified to intensify its impact. Tim Mackie says, “A third of the Bible [poetry] is not trying to communicate content or information to you. It's rather trying to create an experience that shapes how you feel and how you think.” When reading Psalm 23, for example, it is easy to feel the emotions from David... And that's the point – to think, feel, and experience God.

Unfortunately, the average Bible reader has not been taught how to read poetic literature. Rather, the

standard method for studying the Bible focuses on the literal meaning and practical application: *What does it mean? And what are you going to do with it?* While these questions are valuable, they were designed with narrative and discourse in mind rather than poetry which “communicates Truths through figures, images, emotional language, and symmetry,” as Ray Lubeck said. Practically speaking, when reading poetry, it can be helpful to ask questions like, *What image comes to mind? And what emotions do you feel in the text?*

23% – Discourse

While discourse compiles less than a quarter of the Bible, it is one of the primary literary styles for sermons during Sunday gatherings. Discourse could be compared to a lecture, speech, essay, or TedTalk. Contrary to poetry, discourse *is* trying to communicate content or information to you. While discourse can be found in various places, their primary *shelf* in the library would be the Epistles (Letters in the New Testament) and Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels.

Discourse is a text that presents a logical sequence of ideas. Paul believed everything in Scripture “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” and discourse is a good place to look for such *teachings* in the Bible. They are filled with instructions on how to “have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). According to Ray Lubeck, “Discourse communicates its Truths by presenting ideas that are logically related.” Rather than narrative which requires the reader to connect the dots, discourse offers a more straight-forward approach to communicating information to the reader.

Genres

As discussed, every verse in the Bible is either narrative, poetry, or discourse. However, under the umbrella of *literary styles*, Scripture can be categorized into *genres* which places each book in the Bible into a specific section, similar to a library. While the Bible does not label sections as Science Fiction, Mystery, or Thriller, it was organized by specific genres to help people find their way around the library and understand the type of literature they are reading. The library of Scripture is

separated into nine primary sections: Law, History, Poetry, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets, Gospels, Church History, Paul's Epistles, and General Epistles.

20



We will talk about the narrative of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, in a future chapter; however, for now, I want to provide a general overview of the genres included in the biblical library.

The Law is found in the Old Testament and includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Written by Moses, this section is also known as the Torah or Pentateuch – the first *five* books in the Bible. To summarize, the Law describes everything from the creation of the world, to the establishment of Israel, to God rescuing them and providing guidelines for them to flourish as a nation.

The story continues with Moses' predecessor in the History (OT) section with Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. In short, various authors write about the rise and fall of the nation of Israel over roughly the next thousand years as they wait for the Messiah to save them. This *narrative* leads to a 400 year "Silent Period" between the Old Testament and

New Testament; however, the rest of the Old Testament takes place within the *narrative as poetry and discourse*.

Poetry – or Wisdom Literature – is a prime example of the organization of the Bible. Although the books were composed at different times throughout the Old Testament, they were collected together because they are a similar genre. Simply put, Job is wisdom for suffering while Psalms serve as wisdom for worship. Furthermore, Solomon wrote Proverbs as wisdom for life, Ecclesiastes as wisdom for purpose, and Song of Solomon as wisdom for romance. As a reminder, each of these books should be read with figures, images, emotional language, and symmetry in mind.

Within the History genre, there were prophets who served as God's mouthpiece or human instrument through which God declared His message to men. God used prophets to forth-tell which involved insight into the will of God and fore-tell which entailed foresight into the plan of God. Their writings can be found in the Old Testament as the Major Prophets and Minor Prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel,

Daniel are the Major Prophets and they are substantially longer than their counterparts. The Minor Prophets, sometimes called *The Twelve*, include Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Transitioning into the New Testament, the Gospels provide an account of Jesus' birth, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection from four different perspectives. Matthew focuses on teachings and bridges the gap between the OT and NT while Mark focuses on action and summarizes the ministry of Jesus. Meanwhile, Luke focuses on details and was written by a Gentile to a Gentile, and John focuses on theology and attempts to persuade the audience.

The smallest genre in the library is Church History as it holds a single book on the shelf called *Acts*. While the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' ministry, Acts continues the story and explains how Jesus' followers expanded his ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit. Simply put, the book of Acts is the origin story of the church as we know it today.

While the story of the early church was described in Acts, the main characters such as Paul, Peter, and John wrote letters during their ministry known as *Epistles* which compile the last section in the library of Scripture. The epistles are “occasional documents” from the first century,²¹ meaning they were written by a specific *person* to a specific *place* for a specific *reason*; however, they can still be understood and put into practice for modern day audiences. At first glance, these letters can seem difficult to differentiate; however, upon further study, they are incredibly organized in their compilation. The first section, Paul’s Epistles, includes each letter Paul wrote, which are ordered from longest to shortest: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Scripture concludes with the General Epistles, which, in short, are the letters *not* written by Paul. Besides Hebrews and Revelation, each of the General Epistles are titled after their author, ordered from longest to shortest as well.

Of ancient manuscripts

As mentioned, the Bible is a book with many books; however, each book was originally an ancient manuscript – meaning it was written by hand on various materials. We will discuss *who* wrote these manuscripts later, but for now, I want to focus on *how* these manuscripts came to be collected together in the library known as Scripture. The early Christians did not simply discover a Bible with every book included; instead, through various meetings, they compiled manuscripts together into a biblical canon which “is the collection of scriptural books that God has given his corporate people.”²²

Before discussing the history and theology of the canonization process, I want to emphasize the significance. First, the canonization process helps to eliminate the “gold tablets from heaven”²³ approach where believers blindly trust in the Bible without any context of its origin. It is far too common for people to claim the Bible as “God’s Word” without a proper understanding of their own statement. Second, the canonization process helps to protect the quality of the content within the canon because nothing can be added and/or taken away. The canon is *sealed*, for lack of better terms.

For example, you would never purchase an opened can of soup from the store. Even if the manufacturer found an extra noodle that “fit” with the other material in the can, they would never reopen the can to add anything because the *seal* creates a trustworthy product. The biblical canon is similar as specific manuscripts have been compiled and sealed together for the church to have a common and trustworthy library.

History of Canonization

The early church held numerous council meetings, over the first few centuries, to maintain a collective set of doctrines for Christianity throughout the world. A common topic was deciding which manuscripts to consider inspired and include in the biblical canon. For the most part, the church was on the same page by the 4th century providing the church with a common biblical canon.

The only caveat, which is worth mentioning, is the *Apocrypha* which was eventually removed from the biblical canon within the protestant church. Martin Luther was the first to separate the Apocrypha as an intertestamental section in 1534, noting its lack of divine inspiration. However, the Apocrypha was officially removed from the King James Bible in 1885. Saint Jerome, who translated Scripture from Greek to Latin, believed the Apocrypha were not books of the canon but rather books of the church.

Besides the Apocrypha, there was minimal argument over which Old Testament books should be canonized. In fact, the Old Testament was widely accepted before the incarnation of Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus often referred to passages in the Old Testament as Scripture. For example, [Jesus said] 'everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."²⁴ In these short verses, Jesus summarizes almost the entire Old Testament *library* and affirms them as Scripture.

On the other hand, the New Testament was widely accepted by the 2nd century after being heavily debated by church leaders. It was easier to agree on the authority of some passages in the New Testament compared to others. For example, Paul compared Luke's writings to the Old Testament (1 Timothy 5:18) while Peter outright acknowledged Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16). Meanwhile, the author of Hebrews is unknown while many scholars question *which* Peter and John wrote 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John. And to some extent, James seems to contradict Paul's

Epistles. All that to say, after much praying, examining, and debating, these books were considered to be inspired by God and included in the biblical canon.

Theology of Canonization

Since you know *when* the books were canonized, I want to focus on *why* the manuscripts were considered to be inspired by God. As mentioned, the leaders of the early church held multiple meetings to discuss which books to include in the biblical canon. While it was certainly not a simple process to discern which manuscripts were inspired by God, they did have a criteria which included three primary categories: Alignment, Acceptance, and Authorship.

First, the early church was looking for *alignment* by asking, "Does it align with the rest of Scripture?" This question was a primary concern for the Apocrypha as multiple sections seem to contradict the overall theme of grace in the New Testament. The main idea was: *Does this piece fit with the rest of the puzzle?* As mentioned, the tension between James and Paul was enough to

question, but ultimately the church was able to see them align together as *works* will overflow from *grace*.

Second, *acceptance* was important in the canonization process, so the leaders asked, "Was it accepted by the early church?" Remember, the church started at Pentecost – a couple months after Jesus' death and resurrection – which means the final council meetings held to discuss the biblical canon were *hundreds* of years after the church was born in Acts. Now, while this term would be foreign to them, the council had *data* to use from the various communities regarding which manuscripts were being used in their gatherings.

Third, the leaders would debate authorship by asking, "Were the authors recognized as inspired?" As modern readers, we usually trust the writers of Scripture because *they are in the Bible*; however, they did not get there by accident or oversight. Nevertheless, what does it mean for an author to be inspired? The Old Testament was written or edited primarily by prophets who God chose as his mouthpiece. Isaiah describes his own inspiration by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord God is

upon me, because the Lord has anointed me."²⁵ On the other hand, the approach to discovering trustworthy writers in the New Testament was similar to an investigation with the primary question being, "How close were you to the resurrection?" Each New Testament writer was an eye-witness (or closely related) to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus which established them as inspired by God.

Inspired by God

Although arranged individually, the next two chapters will function as two sides to the same coin. We simply cannot understand the Bible as “inspired by God” without being “composed by humans” and vice versa. Nevertheless, I want to start the conversation by talking about the former and we will connect the dots in the next chapter with the latter. The most common reference for the inspiration of the Bible comes from Paul, who wrote, “All Scripture is breathed out by God...”²⁶ Similar translations say, “inspired by God” or “God breathed.” But the point is simple: *Everything in the Scriptures is God’s Word.*²⁷

As the saying goes, some things are easier said than done. Similarly, the inspiration of Scripture is easier *stated* than *explained*. We cannot fully understand the way God works as there will always be an element of mystery in our relationship with him; and if not, we have replaced God with our own idea of him. Nevertheless, I will not attempt to convince you that Scripture is “God breathed,” but rather, I will try to help you connect a few pieces of the mystery together.

Paul’s explanation is not the only reason believers view the Bible as inspired. If we look closely, we discover both the Old Testament and New Testament receive their authority from Jesus himself. Luke records Jesus walking with two men on the road to Emmaus, and their hearts begin burning as Jesus explains the Scripture to them. But *which* Scripture did he explain? Again, [Jesus said] “‘everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”²⁸ The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms cover the vast majority of the Old Testament. Additionally, there are various other occasions where

the Old Testament was referenced in Jesus' teachings. In short, we receive the Old Testament as Scripture because Jesus authenticated it. We can trust the Old Testament because Jesus trusted the Old Testament.

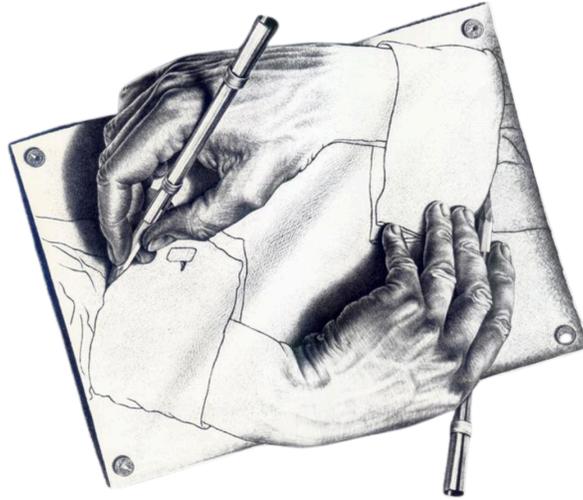
In contrast, the New Testament was not yet written while Jesus was physically on earth; therefore, he could not *authenticate* or *teach from* the New Testament in the same way as the Old Testament. Fortunately, God had a different plan in mind for the New Testament writings. Near the end of his ministry, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."²⁹ Did you catch the language? Jesus *breathed* on them. Or rather, he *inspired* them. We receive the New Testament as Scripture because Jesus authorized it.

Practically speaking, the Bible being *inspired* leads to the Bible being *authoritative*. We will discuss the authority of Scripture in greater detail in a later chapter; however, I want to consider the significance before moving forward. To believe that "God breathed" Scripture without allowing those words to have authority over

your beliefs and actions is an oxymoron. Simply put, if we believe the Bible is inspired, it must have authority over our lives.

Yet composed by humans

Before flipping the coin and focusing on the composition of the ancient manuscripts, we must discuss the balance between the two aspects. If the *inspiration* is the Yin, the *composition* is the Yang – or vice versa. Again, the collaboration is a mystery; however, I want to offer two examples to help connect a few dots. One of the simplest way to explain *who* wrote the Bible is the following illustration:



Which hand is drawing the picture? The only possible answer is *both of them*. Similarly, if you were to ask, "Did God write the Bible or humans?" Again, the only possible answer is *both of them*. While this illustration is helpful, it does leave quite a few questions unanswered. It might even raise more new questions than it answers to begin with. Regardless, hopefully it causes you to think about the relationship between inspiration and composition. Below is another, perhaps more complex, example:



Looking at the picture, how would you answer the question: Who/What is making the music? Because without an instrument, the artist would be sitting alone – at best shredding an air guitar. Yet without a musician, the guitar would be sitting quietly on the floor. The musician and the instrument need each other to make something beautiful. In some way, God is the artist and the writers are the instruments. Nevertheless, such an example has flaws because the authors were not human typewriters and their personalities and

experience flowed through the pages. The writers “were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”³²

For many, the human role in the composition of Scripture can be a stumbling block. However, upon further research, it has become a comfort to me. Similar to buying eggs from a free-range farm, it is reassuring to know *where* we get things from. If humans were not involved in writing Scripture, the only logical option would be to view the Bible as a magical book from heaven which is far less believable than human authors being guided by the Spirit.

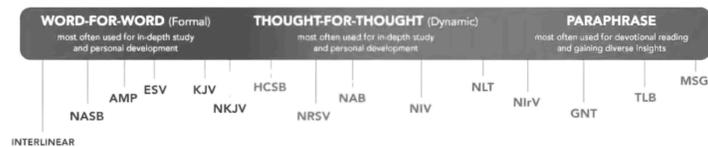
Since many view human participation as a potential for flaw in the writing, scholars will often preserve Scripture by claiming it as infallible and inerrant. First, infallibility suggests the collection of ancient manuscripts are incapable of error and absolutely trustworthy because they are inspired by God. In short, because Scripture was ordained by God, it cannot be ruined by man. Secondly, inerrant means the original writing is free from error and the authors did not misunderstand God in their interpretation.

Nevertheless, infallibility and inerrancy are simply the byproduct of viewing the Bible as *inspired by God yet composed by humans*.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with a small portion in Aramaic), but it was translated into Greek (known as the Septuagint) between the Old and New Testaments, and the New Testament was written in Greek. Nevertheless, since the original writings, the Bible has been translated thousands of times using three different methods: *Word for Word*, *Thought for Thought*, and *Paraphrase*. *Word for Word* is the best option for studying, but the language can seem formal or academic. *Thought for Thought* is the easiest to read while staying true to the text. *Paraphrase* offers a fresh perspective but should be read alongside another translation for accountability.

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Bible Translation Comparison



That tells one story

If you watch any popular movie series – from Star Wars to Toy Story – you will discover individual stories within a bigger narrative. Each movie has its own plotline; however, they piece together to form a bigger story known as a *metanarrative*. The Bible functions the same way with an overarching storyline that holds it all together. Although Scripture includes various literary styles, each section in the library works together to tell a story. Richard Foster, a spiritual writer, says, “From Genesis to Revelation, throughout human history, the Bible tells the stories of people learning to turn back to God...” And he continues by writing, “So instead of

asking why the Bible doesn't "make sense" the way we think it should, we ask, "How does the Bible tell its Story?"³⁴ Nevertheless, if we want to know *how* the Bible tells its story, we must get a better grasp of the metanarrative in Scripture.

While it can be tempting to pick a random verse in the Bible and apply it to our lives, we must read biblical books as a unified whole – not merely as isolated passages. The entire Bible connects together, so we have to read the letters from Paul with the writings of Moses in mind. Scripture, including the Old Testament and New Testament, is one story which presents God's thundering invitation, "I am with you – will you be with Me?"³⁵

Nevertheless, the characters in the story are not always *prescriptive*, meaning the Bible describes things as *they were* not as *they should have been*. Every person in Scripture is not a Bible Hero because they were real people, with real problems like us. Thus, the story of the Bible is *descriptive* of people learning to turn back to God, and we are invited into the story to learn from

them and ultimately learn about God's character along the way.

Perhaps the simplest way to understand the metanarrative of the Bible is to break the overall story into smaller sections. The Old Testament can be summarized as (1) Creation and (2) Israel while the New Testament continues the story through (3) Jesus, (4) Church, and (5) New Creation. Since many books have been written to explain the narrative of Scripture, I will attempt to scratch the surface by including the book(s) and/or chapters, a general timeline, and key moments or characters for each section.

1. Creation (Gen. 1-11)

The metanarrative starts "in the beginning" with God creating the "heavens and the earth."³⁶ Although the details of creation are debated – such as how long it *really* took to happen – the general chronological sequence of events suggests Genesis 1-11 took place from around 4000 BC to 2000 BC. The first two chapters explain how the world came into existence, including the stars, water, animals, and trees. Most importantly,

“God created human beings in his own image,” and told them to “be fruitful and multiply [and to] fill the earth and govern it.”³⁷ At first, the creation story was beautiful, but humanity quickly decided to turn away from God.

After the earth was established, Adam & Eve chose to rebel and sin entered the world. Eventually, “the people began to multiply” but God “saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth.” And ultimately, “it broke his heart.”³⁸ So God decided to “wipe [the] human race [he] created from the face of the earth... But Noah found favor with the Lord,”³⁹ so God told him to build an ark to survive the upcoming flood. Unfortunately, years later, humanity attempted to make a name for themselves by building a tower to reach heaven, so God “scattered them all over the world.”⁴⁰

2. Israel (Gen. 12-Mal.)

So far, the story is about humanity as a whole; however, in Genesis 12, the narrative focuses on a single family and the nation built through them – Israel. The Old Testament accounts for the majority of the Bible, and while it includes narrative, poetry, and discourse, it's all telling the story of God's chosen people, Israel, from approximately 2000 BC to 400 BC. At first glance, this section can seem overwhelming, but we can divide the bigger story (Israel) into four smaller parts: The Family, The Law & Land, The Kingdom, and The Exile & Rebuild.

The Family

When people read the Old Testament, they often wonder, "Why did God choose Israel?" Yet in order for us to understand the story, we have to start with a simple truth: God *chose* a person and built a *nation*. God did not choose an existing place called Israel to start the redemption process. He chose a man named Abraham, who was faithful and obedient, and promised to "make [him] into a great nation."⁴¹ In short, this "nation"

would be the lineage of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would fulfill God's promise to redeem humanity.

While the entire lineage connects to Abraham, his family served as a Patriarchy for God's people for a few generations. However, Abraham was childless until "God said to Abraham.. I will bless her [Sarah] and give you a son [Isaac] from her! Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations. Kings of nations will be among her descendants."⁴² Isaac, a miracle child, was the beginning of the descendants who would lead to Jesus "when the right time came."⁴³

Nevertheless, there was conflict between Isaac's sons, Jacob & Esau, as they battled for their father's blessing. Eventually, after wrestling with God, Jacob was blessed and told, "You will be called Israel." Similar to his own childhood, Jacob had sons who did not get along with each other. In fact, they sold their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery because they were jealous of his favor. Nevertheless, God was faithful and Joseph was "put Joseph in charge of all Egypt."⁴⁴ Years later, there was a famine in the land but Jacob's family was safe

because “it was God who sent me [Joseph] here [Egypt]”.⁴⁵

The Law & Land

The Israelites “multiplied so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, a new king took over in Egypt, and he was threatened by their growing population, so he forced the Israelites to become slaves, yet “they continued to multiply, growing more and more powerful.”⁴⁷ Overall, the Israelites were slaves for approximately 400 years; however, their freedom started developing when the Pharaoh's daughter adopted an Israelite named Moses.

Although he grew up as royalty, Moses was Hebrew by blood. Nevertheless, he was forced to watch people unfairly treat the Israelites, and eventually Moses took matters into his own hands by killing an Egyptian. Once word spread, Moses decided to run away and start over in the land of Midian. Years later, Moses would notice “a blazing fire from the middle of a

bush,"⁴⁸ and God told him to "lead my people Israel out of Egypt."⁴⁹

Eventually, the Israelites escape from Egypt and God tells them, "You will be my [God] kingdom of priests, my holy nation."⁵⁰ They were given *The Law* which acted as their "guardian" to "protect them" until they "could be made right with God through faith."⁵¹ In short, it was instructions for the Israelites to function as a nation and honor God in the process. Nevertheless, after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, "the time [had] come for [Joshua] to lead these people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River into the land [God was] giving them."⁵² After getting settled into the Promised Land, the Israelites fell into a cycle of rebelling against God, being disciplined, repenting, and being delivered.

The Kingdom

Around 1000 BC, the Israelites wanted a king "to judge [them] like all the other nations [had]."⁵³ Although God rescued them from Egypt, "They [did not] want [him] to be their king any longer."⁵⁴ So they were warned against

the danger, but ultimately given a king, Saul, to lead them; however, he was not faithful to God and desired to build his own kingdom. Thus, leaving the Israelites at odds with God once again.

Nevertheless, in God's sovereignty, he "removed Saul and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart. He will do everything I want him to do.'"⁵⁵ David established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and prepared for the temple to be built as a place of worship. He "reigned over all Israel and did what was just and right for all his people."⁵⁶ In the library of Scripture, many psalms are attributed to David who was a great poet and worshipper. Nevertheless, greater than all other accomplishments, God told David his "throne will be secure forever"⁵⁷ because the Messiah, Jesus, would be "born into King David's family line."⁵⁸

Because of David's faithfulness, God blessed his child, Solomon, and decided to "make his kingdom strong."⁵⁹ Furthermore, God chose Solomon to be "the one who will build a house—a temple—for my name."⁶⁰ During

his reign, Solomon asked God for wisdom to govern the people of Israel, and God filled him with “a wise and understanding heart such as no one else has had or ever will have!”⁶¹ Similar to David, he wrote poetry and has become known for Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Unfortunately, Solomon turned away from God, who told him, “Since you have not kept my covenant and have disobeyed my decrees, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants.”⁶² However, to keep his promise to David, God said, “I will not do this while you are still alive. I will take the kingdom away from your son. And even so, I will not take away the entire kingdom; I will let him be king of one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, my chosen city.”⁶³

The Exile & Rebuild

With a divided kingdom, Israel fell into exile because “they worshiped other gods. They sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them safely out of Egypt and had rescued them from the power of

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.”⁶⁴ When Babylon took over Jerusalem, they “burned down the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, “Again and again the Lord had sent his prophets and seers to warn both Israel and Judah... But the Israelites would not listen. They were as stubborn as their ancestors who had refused to believe in the Lord their God.”⁶⁶

Eventually, roughly 500 years before Jesus, God appointed a new king in Babylon to liberate “any of you who are his people [to] go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem.”⁶⁷ While some Israelites returned to Jerusalem, the Old Testament ends, seemingly, without connecting to the New Testament as there was a “Silent Period” (400-years) when the nation of Israel did not hear from God, ultimately leading to the birth of the Messiah. Therefore, the Israelites waited for “a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”⁶⁸

3. Jesus (Matt.-Acts 1)

After waiting 400 years in silence, God sent his Son, Jesus, "when the right time came."⁶⁹ Centuries before, the Old Testament writers prophesied about a future when "a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the King did not come as the Israelites expected, but rather, "he gave up his divine privileges [and] he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being."⁷¹ Jesus came to be with humanity, humbly and gently, as a child in a manger. Although Scripture does give many details about Jesus' childhood, we know he "grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people."⁷²

During his ministry, Jesus' main message was to "repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."⁷³ According to Dallas Willard, "The Kingdom of God is God reigning. It is present wherever what God wants done is done. It is the range of God's effective will."⁷⁴ Jesus was introducing a new reality of

life *with* God which would be available through his death and resurrection. Simply put, "The message that God's kingdom has come near sums up everything Jesus said and did."⁷⁵

In order to help people experience the Kingdom of God, Jesus "traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness."⁷⁶ Jesus used three primary methods: He *announced* so people would hear about the Kingdom, he *taught* so they could understand the Kingdom, and he *healed* to give a taste of what's to come in the Kingdom.

In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy, "Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said."⁷⁷ Through Jesus' death, God reconciled humanity back to him. And through his resurrection, we were rescued from sin and death. In short, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ."⁷⁸

After the resurrection, Jesus lived on earth for 40 days to prove his existence and prepare his followers for their upcoming mission to “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [and teaching] these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you.”⁷⁹

4. Church (Acts-Jude)

Jesus told the disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁸⁰ Even though they would no longer be accompanied by God in the flesh, the disciples would receive the Spirit of God to work *in* them and *through* them. On the day of Pentecost, shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, “all the believers were meeting together in one place.... And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, the believers formed a new community and “devoted

themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals, and to prayer."⁸²

Once the early community of Jewish believers started growing, God appeared to a zealous man named Paul "to appoint [him] as a servant and witness."⁸³ Although the Israelites were God's chosen people, Jesus died for everyone; therefore, God told Paul, "I am sending you to the Gentiles"⁸⁴ because he wanted the non-Jews to be "grafted in"⁸⁵ to the family of God. Ultimately, in order to spread the gospel, "The same God who worked through Peter as the apostle to the Jews also worked through [Paul] as the apostle to the Gentiles."⁸⁶ The story of the early church, in the book of Acts, ends with Paul going on three missionary journeys around the Roman Empire and "boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ."⁸⁷

5. New Creation (Revelation)

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells a story. However, the final section of the metanarrative, *New Creation*, has yet to happen as it was prophesy about the future. In the Bible, the story ends with Paul in Rome,

but realistically, humanity has been living in the *Church* era for nearly 2,000 years. Unfortunately, believers have divided themselves over various interpretations of Revelation for centuries, yet many can agree that Jesus “will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him.”⁸⁸

Furthermore, when Jesus returns, there will be “a new heaven and a new earth.”⁸⁹ Again, the details are debated, but every believer can look forward to God being “among his people [because] he will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.”⁹⁰ Ultimately, the story ends with “no more death or sorrow or crying or pain [as God is] making everything new!”⁹¹

Which leads to Jesus

By simply reading the *story* of Scripture, you could most likely piece together that everything leads to Jesus. Even amongst the various literary styles, Jesus *seems* to be the main character in the narrative. Therefore, we could probably keep moving forward without leaving noticeable oversight; however, upon further reflection, I want to emphasize Jesus' central role in the story as "everything was created through him and for him [since] he existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together."⁹²

In some ways, this chapter is a follow-up to the previous chapter to help you see how every part of the metanarrative leads to Jesus. The Old Testament, simply put, was the *anticipation* of Jesus. There are specific prophecies which clearly predict the coming Messiah; however, the other sections prepare humanity to understand their need for a savior. The Old Testament stories give the reader a glimpse into the character of God which was ultimately made visible in the person of Jesus. Furthermore, "Grace does not spring up like a surprise jack-in-the-box in the New Testament. God's people were prepared for millennia to understand and receive the grace of Christ."⁹³

Comparatively, it is certainly easier to *see* Jesus in the New Testament because he "became human and made his home among us."⁹⁴ Practically speaking, the disciples walked with him and the crowds saw him "in a real body."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, within the New Testament, each section connects to Jesus in a unique way. The Gospels record his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection which serves as the *manifestation* of Jesus. Until this point, Israel was waiting for the Messiah, but

upon Jesus' birth, they praised God, singing, "I have seen your salvation [who would be] a light to reveal God to the nations."⁹⁶

Meanwhile, after "completing the work [the Father] gave [the Son] to do,"⁹⁷ Jesus commissioned his followers, and they served as his *proclamation* to the world. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his followers to "be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁹⁸ Thus, Jesus' statement became a mission statement for the church moving forward. In short, Acts answers the question, "What happened *after* Jesus was killed, buried, and resurrected?"

The book of Acts is filled with stories of the apostles spreading the gospel, and while they were on their missionary journeys, they wrote letters to function as the *explanation* of Jesus for various churches. Although each Epistles is unique, the authors were comforting the disturbed churches, and disturbing the comfortable churches. In short, they were reminded, "as Christ was

raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives."⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the story will end with the *consummation* of Jesus. He "existed in the beginning with God,"¹⁰⁰ and ultimately, "he will reign forever and ever."¹⁰¹ From Genesis to Revelation, the entire Bible points to Jesus.

And teaches us what to believe

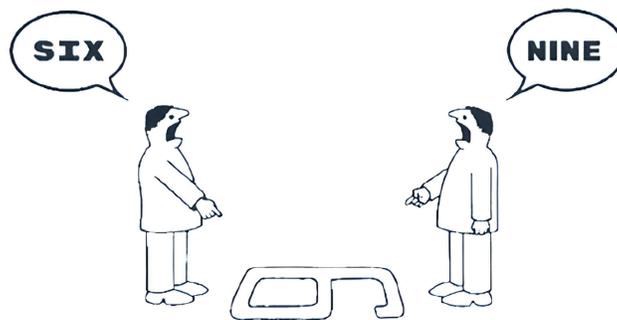
At this point, we know the Bible is a *library* with multiple literary styles and genres. It is filled with *ancient manuscripts* which were canonized and verified as *inspired by God* because the authors were carried along by the Spirit. Furthermore, each page was *composed by humans* and collected together to *tell one story* about God and humanity which ultimately *leads to Jesus* who is the nucleus of the entire book. Nevertheless, it is impossible to understand the Bible without comprehending how it changes our lives because “to be a biblical Christian is not to have high views about the Bible. It is to seek and know and live the life that is depicted in the Bible.”¹⁰²

As we attempt to define Scripture, the final two parts work together in harmony. Similar to the chapters on inspiration and composition, one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, I will explain how they work together before clarifying each segment in greater detail. According to Paul, Scripture is useful “to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives.”¹⁰³ First, the apostle emphasizes the benefit of using Scripture to analyze the things we believe about the world, humanity, and God. He continues to declare it “corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.”¹⁰⁴ Second, Paul suggests actions, not exclusively beliefs, should be changed by the words in the Bible because “faith is dead without good works.”¹⁰⁵

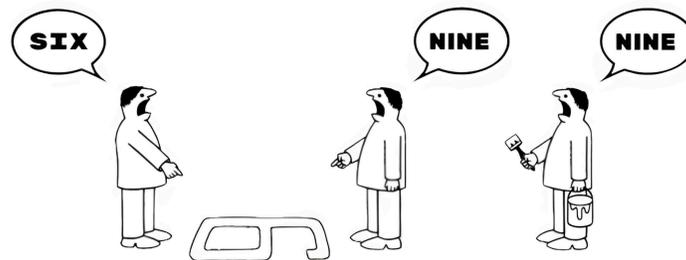
To paraphrase, your doctrine matters as a follower of Jesus. While “doctrine” sounds like a theological word, it is simply *a set of beliefs* – usually about God. Although it might not be intentional, everyone holds some form of doctrine or principles that guide their actions and understanding of the world. So the question everyone must ask themselves is – *Where do you find your truth?*

Before answering the question, we must further explore two different options: *absolute truth* and *relative truth*. In short, relative truth is dependent on the individual, situation, or cultural context which varies from person to person. For example, "It is cold outside" or "Chocolate is the best ice cream flavor."

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On the other hand, absolute truth refers to something universally true for everyone, regardless of context or perspective. For example, " $2+2=4$ " or "Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States".



Relative truth changes depending on your opinion; however, absolute truth should *change your opinion*. So again, “Where do you find your truth? Your *absolute truth*?” There is a growing interest in postmodernism or allowing each person to have their *own* truth because they do not believe in a universally valid truth that applies to everyone. Nevertheless, even when it seems counter cultural, believers must seek “the way, and *the truth*, and the life.”¹⁰⁸

Fortunately, “the very essence of [God’s] words is truth,”¹⁰⁹ which he has given us through Scripture. Therefore, every follower of Jesus should confirm their doctrine is rooted in God’s Word because “anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with

both the Father and the Son.”¹¹⁰ For believers, the Bible serves as authoritative – or absolute truth – with Jesus at the center.

In order to truly accept Scripture as authoritative, one must have a proper interpretation of the text at hand, so I will provide a method for studying the Bible to ensure sound doctrine in a later chapter. Nevertheless, many church websites provide a *Doctrinal Statement* which includes their interpretation on essential topics such as God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Salvation, Bible, Church, etc.

Although it might not be public, many organizations (and people) have *Closed Handed Issues* and *Open Handed Issues*,¹¹¹ meaning they are willing to be flexible on how to interpret certain Scripture compared to others while still viewing the Bible as their *absolute truth*. Such an approach can be healthy since the Church has disagreed on various topics for centuries and ultimately caused division within Christianity. Thus, perhaps a healthy response to controversial issues would be: “In essential beliefs, we have unity. In non-essential beliefs, we have freedom. And in all our beliefs, we show respect.”¹¹²

Along with how to live

While the Bible should be the anchor for sound doctrine, it must also be the inspiration for Christlike behavior. The chapter on your actions was not positioned last due to importance, but rather, because everything covered thus far should be put into practice and overflow into your conduct. As Jesus' brother said, "Do not just listen to God's word. You must do what it says."¹¹³ In short, understanding the different literary styles in the Bible is wonderful as long as you are becoming more loving, joyful, and peaceful in the process.

Ultimately, your actions demonstrate what you truly believe about God. The spiritual writer, Dallas Willard, once said, "Belief is when your whole being is set to act as if something is so."¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, Scripture tells us what to believe *and* how to live accordingly. The question a person must ask is, *Do you really believe Jesus wants to "give [you] a rich and satisfying life?"*¹¹⁵ Because if we choose to follow him, his "word is a lamp to guide [our] feet and a light for [our] path."¹¹⁶ Yet we have to trust him as he reveals his plan to us, one step at a time.

Furthermore, your conduct should be a representation of Scripture because *your* words are the closest thing to the Bible some people will ever hear. Even when society seems far from God, Jesus' disciples are told to be "the salt of the earth"¹¹⁷ because their actions, "bring out the God-flavors of this earth."¹¹⁸ According to Jesus, "People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, as salt was used to preserve food in the ancient world, perhaps believers are called to protect and proclaim the Word of God.

Although the Bible is filled with guidance on how to be the light of the world, there are many instructions on how believers should treat *each other* as well. There are over fifty “one another” commands in the New Testament which describe a biblical basis for community. For example, loving, honoring, greeting, welcoming, forgiving, comforting, encouraging, teaching, and serving *one another*.¹²⁰ In many cases, Christians are known for their beliefs; however, according to Jesus, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are [His] disciples.”¹²¹

Nevertheless, this section on behavior was not intended to be an *afterthought*, but rather, the *aftermath* of living in God’s Word. In this book, we simply cannot explain every command in the Bible for living a Godly life; however I want to encourage you to allow Scripture to work “itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.”¹²² As you understand the complexity and experience the beauty of the Bible, it should naturally transform your actions in the process.

The Response

The mode & methods

Although the Bible is *a library of ancient manuscripts*, it was not collected together to be treated as an exhibit in a museum. Scripture was intended to be opened and experienced, not treasured from afar. Therefore, people have been trying to figure out how to read the Bible for centuries. In fact, with minimal research, one could find thousands of books, sermons, classes, and articles on such topics. Thus, while this book concentrated on the “what” more than the “how,” it is necessary to provide a proper *response* to understanding of the Bible.

While specific techniques and acronyms for reading the Bible can be extremely beneficial, we must begin by acknowledging “there is a Living Author waiting to meet us.”¹²³ The Bible does not simply allow us to learn *about* God; instead, it opens a door for us to truly *know* Him. When we step into the library of Scripture, it is not a one-sided endeavor, but rather, “it is a dialogue of human spirit and Holy Spirit.”¹²⁴ To view the Bible as *inspired by God*, means we are reading for transformation – not information alone.

Furthermore, your approach to reading the Bible will influence your experience. The problem with learning *how* to read the Bible is falling into the illusion of control in the process. Instead, “perhaps the ‘how’ is not so much a body of information, a technique, a method, or a model as it is a mode of being in relationship with God that we bring to the scripture in our spiritual formation.”¹²⁵ If we view reading Scripture as means of grace, it changes the expectations and experience. When we read the Bible, we are choosing to “place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.”¹²⁶

In order to read the Bible in all its glory, one must be willing to submit to the text, and ultimately, the *Living Author* behind the words. Unfortunately, we have been conditioned to desire, and even seek, control in most learning environments. Whether intentional or unintentional, we usually process information while wondering, "What can the material do for *me*, the reader?" According to M. Robert Mulholland, "You are the 'victim' of a lifelong, educationally enhanced learning mode that establishes you as the controlling power (reader) who seeks to master a body of information (text) that can be used by you (technique, method, model) to advance your own purposes," which, as he continues to explain, "is detrimental to the role of scripture in spiritual formation."¹²⁷

Within the *mode* of being in relationship with God, there are two primary *methods* for reading Scripture – *informational* and *formational*. Ultimately, "The informational aspect relates primarily (though not exclusively) to our minds. It must be balanced with the formational aspect, which relates primarily (though not exclusively) to our hearts."¹²⁸ Thus, we will focus on

the difference between the two options, practically speaking, in the following chapters; however, to provide a basic understanding, M. Robert Mullholand explains:

Difference #1:

- Information: Concerned with quantity of reading
- Formation: Concerned with quality of reading

Difference #2:

- Information: Reading is linear
- Formation: Reading is in depth

Difference #3:

- Information: Seek to master the text
- Formation: Allow the text to master you

Difference #4:

- Information: Analytical, critical, judgmental approach
- Formation: Humble, detached, receptive, loving approach

Difference #5:

- Information: Problem-solving mentality
- Formation: Openness to mystery¹²⁹

Get your head in the game

Since we have compared the two primary methods – information and formation – on a theoretical level, I want to focus on putting the different approaches into practice by explaining how to *study* and *meditate*. In order to read God’s Word with our mind, we must learn appropriate strategies for studying the Bible. While there will never be a perfect technique, there are certainly some options which serve the reader better than others. Therefore, I want to provide a four-step process from Ray Lubeck in his masterpiece, *Reading the Bible for a Change*.

1. Seeing: What does it say?

Especially for someone familiar with classic Bible stories, it can be tempting to bring assumptions to table while reading Scripture. However, when a person believes they already know the passage, they are hindering themselves from experiencing the Bible as “alive and powerful.”¹³⁰ Furthermore, it can be easy to *make* a specific verse fit your agenda through poor interpretation if we never seek the original purpose. In the first step, “We look for what he is talking about rather than those things we want to see.”¹³¹ Nevertheless, we must have humility to “see” what the author intended in a passage because it will require putting God over our own agenda. Before interpreting or applying a verse, we simply ask, “What does it say?”

2. Understanding: What does it mean?

The second step is usually the most difficult because it concentrates on the interpretation of the text. As mentioned earlier, attempting to “understand” the Bible will oftentimes cause people to become discouraged because it is too complicated, or they will alter the meaning so they can wrap their mind around it.

Nevertheless, it *is* possible to discover the intended meaning without a doctoral degree, and we must seek to do so because “a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers.”¹³² Therefore, to understand a passage, it is beneficial to focus on *The Three T’s*.

Target: Aim for the original intent.

While it might be tempting to open a commentary or search the internet for answers, that is *not* where you should start the process. You can “aim” with simple questions we have covered thus far in the book. First, *Who was the author/audience?* Viewing the Bible as a library will help you remember who wrote which book and their reason for writing it. For example, Paul’s Epistles are before the General Epistles and Moses wrote the Law. Second, *What part of the story is it?* While reading the Bible or listening to a sermon, use the metanarrative to find yourself on the map. For example, when the Israelites were exiled in Daniel, that’s before Jesus but after the exodus with Moses. Third, *What section of the library is it?* As discussed, the Bible is organized with multiple genres; therefore, when

someone mentions the story of David and Goliath, which is found in 1 Samuel, it is clear we are standing in the History aisle of the library. Fourth, *What is the writing style?* In some ways, this is the easiest question to answer because it is limited to three options; however, it will determine your approach to the passage. In short, Narrative *informs*, Poetry *invites*, and Discourse *instructs*.

Translations: Compare multiple versions.

While each person will have their preferred translation, it is critical to compare and contrast various options to get a fuller picture of the meaning behind the text. As mentioned earlier, there are three primary categories for translations: Word-for-Word, Thought-for-Thought, and Paraphrase. Perhaps the simplest approach would be to select a translation from each group and compare with each other. For example, it has been helpful for me to read ESV, NIV, NLT, and MSG together.

Tools: Use various resources.

Although you might not have bookshelves filled with biblical commentaries and theological writings, the

internet is filled with various resources to help you understand the Bible. However, “turning to what commentaries say is never a substitute for your own study.”¹³³ I would highly recommend asking the *target* questions and reading multiple *translations* before using *tools*. Furthermore, although the internet has millions of resources, it can be difficult to know where to start – or who to trust. Therefore, I want to provide a few websites to deepen your understanding of Scripture.

- BibleGateway.com – Read multiple translations and compare them side-by-side
- BlueLetterBible.org – Discover various commentaries and word studies
- BibleProject.com – Watch animations and dive deep into podcasts
- EnduringWord.com – Work through a passage, verse-by-verse with application
- GotQuestions.org – Find the answers the random questions about the Bible

3. Connecting: How does it relate?

The third step is what Ray Lubeck refers to as “the missing link of Bible study.”¹³⁴ It is common for readers to go straight from interpreting to applying without making the necessary connections. In other words, what truths is it teaching? Fortunately, there are four primary questions to help the reader link the verses together, and ultimately, experience the fullness of every passage.

First, *How does the author relate to the reader through the text?* You can look for little details such as individual circumstance, personal struggle, and relation to the cross. Second, *How does the reader relate to other readers?* While there is certainly a place for studying the Bible on your own, we cannot overlook the importance of reading Scripture together because “as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”¹³⁵ Third, *How does this text relate to its context?* It’s been said, “There are three rules to studying the Bible: Context, context, and context.” In short, we must discover how the specific verse relates to the surrounding verses because it is very dangerous to isolate Scripture. Fourth, *How does this text*

relate to the whole Bible? Viewing the Bible as a library that tells one story, discover how it all fits together.

4. Responding: So what?

As we read Scripture, it is intended to overflow into our actions. However, “one of the shortcomings of focusing on ‘applying’ the Bible is that it tends to create an expectation that the Bible’s main (or sole) purpose is to reform my actions.”¹³⁶ For example, reading Narrative can teach the reader about God’s character, and therefore, the *takeaway* might simply be a clearer view of Him. Furthermore, the *response* to Poetry could be experiencing God’s presence and allowing His Word to linger in your thoughts. Nevertheless, there are definitely occasions when the appropriate application is to put the verse(s) directly into practice in our lives. But ultimately, the question we must ask ourselves when reading *any* passage is simply – *So what?*

From the bottom of your heart

Although reading with the mind, or studying, is the most popular way to utilize Scripture in modern-day Evangelicalism, there is another avenue to meet with the *Living Author* through His Word. Unfortunately, the other side of the coin has been overlooked for generations in various Protestant circles. Nevertheless, while studying focuses on the mind, the ancient practice of meditation allows a person to read with their heart. The spiritual writer, Richard Foster, says, "Distinct from other ways of approaching the Bible, the ancient Christian practice of Lectio Divina is the primary mode of reading the Bible for transformation."¹³⁷

“Lectio Divina” is latin for *Divine Reading*, and quite frankly, it has changed my own relationship with Scripture. It is more popular in contemplative traditions; however, many Christians could benefit from a practical way to “ruthlessly eliminate hurry from [their] life.”¹³⁸ Ultimately, meditating on God’s Word is simply a way to slow down and experience His presence.

Traditionally, *Lectio Divina* observes a four-step process which will be slightly adapted for modern readers and explained in a practical sense to read with *formation* in mind. Nevertheless, the practice of meditating on Scripture can be accomplished individually with a journal or read aloud in a corporate setting.

1. Reading: What does it say?

Without attempting to interpret or apply the passage, meditation begins with simply reading the verse(s). We become familiar with the Scripture and “let it soak in”¹³⁹ as we read the words. If possible, it can be helpful to use a different translation than usual to hear (or read) the passage from a fresh perspective. The goal, in the

first step, is slowing down and becoming comfortable with the text – it's *that* simple.

2. Reflecting: What sticks out to you?

While reading the passage again, look for something that God might be trying to show you. Pay attention to whatever comes to your mind – words, phrases, or images. Nevertheless, do your best to “remain open to receiving a meaning rather than assigning one.”¹⁴⁰ Allow God to control the experience and listen for His voice. In short, take a few deep breaths and focus on the “word” at hand.

3. Responding: What do you want to say to God?

Up until this point, Lectio has required *listening* rather than *speaking*. However, step three is the chance to respond to God. It could be telling Him about the word that stood out and asking for the reason it was prompted in your mind. Perhaps it is as simple as asking, “Why did *this* stand out to me?” Your response could vary in multiple ways: offering thanks, asking forgiveness, or simply talking with God about the specific word, phrase, or image.

4. Resting: What does God want to say to you?

After responding to God, the final step does not require you to “do” anything except rest with Him and become aware of His presence with you. Focus on *being* with God rather than *doing* anything for Him. Although it might feel uncomfortable, sitting in silence allows you to hear a “gentle whisper”¹⁴¹ from God. Furthermore, it ensures the Holy Spirit gets the last word rather than you.

Conclusion

If you were sitting in a classroom with other believers, and you were asked to *define the Bible in a single sentence...* What would you say? Do you have sufficient language to explain your views regarding God's Word? More importantly, if a friend were to ask you, "Why do you believe the Bible?" Could you give a reasonable answer? Or do you view Scripture as God's Word because.... *It just is?*

Ideally, this book provided an elaborate, single sentence definition to help you understand the complexity and experience the beauty of the Bible. Practically speaking,

my hope is for you to be able to explain your view of the Bible to a friend with confidence while experiencing a deeper transformation in your own life.

After exploring the need to understand Scripture, we defined the Bible *as a library (2) of ancient manuscripts, (3) inspired by God (4) yet composed by humans, (5) that tells one story (6) which leads to Jesus, and (7) teaches us what to believe (8) along with how to live.*

Furthermore, having a greater understanding of the Bible will allow a person to experience God *in* the text. When a person views Scripture as a dialogue, they can read with the *mind* by studying as well as the *heart* through meditation. Regardless of your specific definition of the Bible, it is important to remember there is a *Living Author* who wants to meet you there.

Are you ready to experience God through Scripture?

Endnotes

1. John Burton, Sr.
2. Edwin Hodder
3. Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig
4. Christopher Wordsworth
5. H. W. Baker
6. Psalm 119:9–16
7. Kenneth Puls
8. William Cooper
9. Romans 15:4
10. Tim Mackie
11. Mark Moore
12. Oxford English Dictionary
13. Galatians 5:16
14. Ephesians 4:24
15. 1 Corinthians 2:10
16. Colossians 3:16
17. Isaiah 55:11
18. Ray Lubeck
19. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/stories-connect-us-202107212550>
20. The Library of Scripture
21. Gordon Fee
22. Michael J. Kruger
23. Tim Mackie
24. Luke 24:44–45
25. Isaiah 61:1
26. 2 Timothy 3:16–17
27. CEV
28. Luke 24:44–45
29. John 20:21–22
30. M.C. Escher: Drawing Hands
31. Musician/Guitar
32. 2 Peter 1:20–21
33. Bible Translation Comparison
34. Foster, Life with God
35. Foster, Life with God
36. Genesis 1:1
37. Gen 1:27–28
38. Gen 6:1–6
39. Gen 6:7–8
40. Gen 11:8
41. Gen 12:2
42. Gen 17:15–16
43. Galatians 4:4

44. Gen 41:43
45. Gen 45:8
46. Ex. 1:7
47. Ex. 1:20
48. Ex. 3:2
49. Ex. 3:10
50. Exodus 19:6
51. Galatians 3:24
52. Joshua 1:2
53. 1 Samuel 8:5
54. 1 Samuel 8:7
55. Acts 13:22
56. 1 Chronicles 18:14
57. 2 Samuel 7:16
58. Romans 1:3
59. 2 Samuel 7:12
60. 2 Samuel 7:12
61. 1 Kings 3:12
62. 1 Kings 11:11
63. 1 Kings 11:12-13
64. 2 Kings 17:7
65. 2 Kings 25:9
66. 2 Kings 17:13-14
67. Ezra 1:2-3
68. Mark 1:1-3
69. Galatians 4:4
70. Isaiah 9:6
71. Philippians 2:7
72. Luke 2:52
73. Matthew 4:17
74. Dallas Willard, Divine Conspiracy
75. Vang & Carter, Telling God's Story
76. Matthew 9:35
77. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4
78. Romans 3:22
79. Matthew 28:19-20
80. Acts 1:8
81. Acts 2:1-2
82. Acts 2:42
83. Acts 26:12
84. Acts 26:17
85. Romans 11:18
86. Galatians 2:8
87. Acts 28:31
88. Hebrews 9:28
89. Revelation 21:1
90. Revelation 21:3
91. Revelation 21:5

92. Colossians 1:17
93. Bryan Chapell
94. John 1:14
95. 1 John 4:2
96. Luke 2:30-32
97. John 17:4
98. Acts 1:8
99. Romans 6:4
100. John 1:2
101. Revelation 11:15
102. Dallas Willard
103. 2 Timothy 3:16
104. 2 Timothy 3:16
105. James 2:26
106. Relative Truth
107. Absolute Truth
108. John 14:6
109. Psalm 119:160
110. 2 John 1:9
111. Christian Academy School System
112. Lifepoint
113. James 1:22
114. Dallas Willard, Renovation of the Heart
115. John 10:10
116. Psalm 119:105
117. Matthew 5:13
118. Matthew 5:13, MSG
119. Matthew 4:4
120. <https://www.watermark.org/blog/the-one-anothers-of-scripture>
121. John 13:35
122. Ephesians 4:23-24
123. Richard Foster, Life with God
124. Richard Foster, Life with God
125. M Robert Mulholland, Shaped by the Word
126. Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline
127. M Robert Mulholland, Shaped by the Word
128. M Robert Mulholland, Shaped by the Word
129. M Robert Mulholland, Shaped by the Word
130. Hebrews 4:12
131. Ray Lubeck, Reading the Bible for a Change
132. Gordon Fee
133. Ray Lubeck, Reading the Bible for a Change
134. Ray Lubeck, Reading the Bible for a Change
135. Proverbs 27:17
136. Ray Lubeck
137. Richard Foster, Life with God
138. Dallas Willard
139. Alex Jones, Hallow

140. <https://www.contemplative.org/contemplative-practice/lectio-divina/>
141. 1 Kings 19:12

Appendix

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Psalm 46:1-3 (NLT).

What does it say?

*God is our refuge and strength,
always ready to help in times of trouble.
So we will not fear when earthquakes come
and the mountains crumble into the sea.
Let the oceans roar and foam.
Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Matt. 11:28-30 (MSG).

What does it say?

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Psalm 3:1-4 (NLT)

What does it say?

*O Lord, I have so many enemies;
so many are against me.
So many are saying,
“God will never rescue him!”
But you, O Lord, are a shield around me;
you are my glory, the one who holds my head high.
I cried out to the Lord,
and he answered me from his holy mountain.*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Mark 4:37-41 (MSG).

What does it say?

A huge storm came up. Waves poured into the boat, threatening to sink it. And Jesus was in the stern, head on a pillow, sleeping! They roused him, saying, "Teacher, is it nothing to you that we're going down?" Awake now, he told the wind to pipe down and said to the sea, "Quiet! Settle down!" The wind ran out of breath; the sea became smooth as glass. Jesus reprimanded the disciples: "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?" They were in absolute awe, staggered. "Who is this, anyway?" they asked. "Wind and sea at his beck and call!"

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Psalm 19:1-4 (NLT)

What does it say?

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God.
The skies display his craftsmanship.
Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.
They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.
Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,
and their words to all the world.
God has made a home in the heavens for the sun.*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Exodus 3:2-4 (MSG).

What does it say?

The angel of God appeared to [Moses] in flames of fire blazing out of the middle of a bush. He looked. The bush was blazing away but it didn't burn up. Moses said, "What's going on here? I can't believe this! Amazing! Why doesn't the bush burn up?" God saw that he had stopped to look. God called to him from out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He said, "Yes? I'm right here!"

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Psalm 23:1-3 (ESV)

What does it say?

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Luke 11:2-4 (NLT).

What does it say?

*Father, may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
Give us each day the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation.*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Psalm 40:1-3 (NLT).

What does it say?

*I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.
He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the Lord.*

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?

Lectio Divina

Step 1 – Read: You are going to read Luke 12:29-32 (MSG).

What does it say?

What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out.

Step 2 – Reflect: You are going to reread the passage and reflect on a specific word or phrase.

What sticks out to you?

Step 3 – Respond: You are going to respond to God about the specific passage.

What do you want to say to God?

Step 4 – Rest: You are going to rest in silence with God.

What does God want to say to you?