

Chapter One

Why Read the Bible?

Saints and Sages on the Bible

In the history of Moses, as in the other events recorded in the Bible, we find realities that are repeated in the life of every individual. Anyone who is inwardly open and acquainted with prayer can find in the words of scripture what is needed for his or her life.

It seems to me that the decisive questions to be asked by each person are

- * What does this scripture passage mean to me?
- * What is it saying to me?
- * How is it related to my life?

We might at first say, "It doesn't have anything to do with my life." But rather than remain with such a first impression, we should look for the cause and ask, "Why is there no connection between this Bible passage and my life? What would I want the connection to be?"

In this way, even a negative first impression can be a means of contact between what the Bible says and what we experience. Often this contact does not take place immediately, but only after we have entered into a dialogue, a wrestling with the words of scripture. Only then does it begin to shed light.

Such a dialogue is a decisive help toward prayer, which springs from our center and expresses our deepest yearnings. This is the aim of spiritual guidance: To help us express ourselves in prayer as we are, in keeping with our situation and nature.

Real prayer is not child's play. Scripture teaches us that prayer is a struggle, a battle. It places us face to face with our greatest difficulties. In prayer we are trained to look at the problems of our life with an open eye and to accept them, for human beings are often afraid to confront themselves. (Cardinal Carlo M. Martini, S.J., *Through Moses to Jesus*, Ave Maria Press)

Expectations and Motivations in Reading the Bible

The main purpose of this book is to provide you with the guidance you need for developing and sustaining a Bible reading habit. To that end, I will provide you with the historical and theological background you'll need, as well as manageable directives for navigating the Bible.

The best way to start is to stop for a moment and consider your motivation and expectations in reading the Bible. This applies whether you've never read it or are the world's greatest biblical scholar. Each time we approach the Bible we should do so as if it is the first and last time.

Wrestling with the Word

What are your goals, interests, and concerns with respect to the Bible? Write them down so that you can monitor their fulfillment as you go through this book and the Bible.

I'll share a shortened rendition of my dance with the Bible, and elaborate throughout the book. I read the Bible because I need and want to. My life has an unmanageable dimension, and I require God's guidance and consolation. I don't have all the answers, and neither does the Bible, but it puts before me the questions and choices that lead me in the right direction. The Bible helps me cope, grow, and hold on to my hopes.

I *want* to read the Bible because it is an enjoyable, enlightening, and reassuring book. It excites me intellectually, aesthetically, emotionally, and spiritually. It also infuriates me at times, not so much when I don't understand it, but when it tells me that *I* have to change, and that God's ways are not mine.

There are many reasons to read the Bible. It is inspired, enjoyable, and classic literature that is relevant to life. Most of us are pressed for time, particularly with respect to discretionary activities such as reading. Reading the Bible is an efficient as well as edifying and empowering activity in that we get drama, poetry, adventure, romance, history, apocalyptic (revelations from a heavenly being), wellness, and self-help in one package.

Peak Passages

If you want to experience wellness and fulfill your potential, you came to the right place: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). The word translated as perfect more closely means "whole" in the sense of completion or fulfillment. Remember also the parable of the talents (aptly named) in Mt 25:14-30: God judges us by what we do with the talents we have.

Conversely, the Bible deplores complacency:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:15-16).

In Miniature: The Catholic Approach to the Bible

It is important that we integrate our expectations of the Bible with the Church's. Thus we will benefit from the wisdom not only of the Holy Spirit, but of our contemporaries and ancestors.

The Catholic approach to the Bible is balanced and realistic. It avoids extremes and encourages moderation, which is essential to a healthy life. From a human standpoint, the fundamental truth about the Bible is that it is about life.

The Pervasive Presence of the Bible in the Church

The culture and teachings of the Catholic Church are permeated by the Bible. The Bible is the foundation of the Mass and the Sacraments, canon law (the rules of the Church), Catholic culture (e.g., the Church's promotion of the arts has always been grounded in the Bible), and prayer life (the five most popular Catholic prayers and devotions are grounded in the Bible: the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, and the Stations of the Cross.) The Church's creeds have always been based on the Bible, from the Apostles' Creed to the Credo of the People of God promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1968.

Catholic ascetical practices, such as periodic fasting and abstinence (e.g., in Lent), are rooted in the Bible (cf. Mt 6:16-18). Catholic leisure is rooted in the Bible: Like the Israelites (1 Ch 13:8), Catholics are encouraged to celebrate at appropriate times. We are not prohibited healthy forms of recreation (e.g., dancing) as long as they are kept in moderation and good taste. Physical fitness and sports have been affirmed by Pope Paul as they were by St. Paul:

“The spiritual elevation of persons through sports is an indispensable condition for an orderly service and constructive society.” (Paul VI, March 20, 1965)

“Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” ([1] Tim 4:7-8).

The Bible Says What?

The Catholic Church integrates the Bible and life in ways we often fail to recognize. For example, when Catholics marry, it is technically not the priest who marries them. He only witnesses the marriage, along with two other persons. The couple administer the vows to each other in a one-on-one encounter like that of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, with God as their witness. The other two witnesses derive from a biblical practice designed to discourage false witness (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15).

At the other end of the spectrum, justification for marital separation and one of the causes for annulment (known as “the Pauline Privilege”) is taken directly from chapter seven of St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 7).

Despite acknowledging Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce, St. Paul recognizes the realities of life and permits a bickering couple to separate until a reconciliation is possible (what Catholics call “separation of bread and board”), while giving a Christian spouse permission to remarry when a non-Christian spouse abandons him or her. Paul’s justification: God has called us to live in peace. This peace principle is helpful in working out relationship difficulties, as little can be accomplished amid unrelenting discord.

The Bible's Relevance to Tough Times

It is unpleasant to encounter such depressing examples, particularly in the first chapter of an introductory book, but we need to know that the Bible can help us deal with even the most incomprehensible situations. It does not look at life with rose-colored glasses, but through the prism of the cross and empty tomb.

Correspondence Between the Bible, Church, and Life

I could give many other examples of the correspondence between the Bible and life in the culture of the Church. The above suffice to dispel any notions that the Bible and the Church are opposed, or that either of them is at odds with life. They are intimately related: The Bible (particularly the New Testament) came out of the Church, the Church is guided by the Bible, and the Bible is born out in a special way in the life of believers. These intersect in a natural and supernatural way that nourishes and sustains us.

As Cardinal Martini observed in the chapter's opening quotation, events and circumstances in the Bible have parallels in our lives. This book will help you recognize and respond to those parallels in accordance with the wisdom of the Church.

By also using common sense, experience, and prudence to interpret the Bible in the context of life, you will avoid naïve misinterpretations and blind alleys that occur when the Bible is divorced from life. Biblical scholars who do not sufficiently interact with common folks and the real world can become so engrossed in their abstractions and hypotheses that they miss the obvious meaning of the biblical text and make it excessively complex.