

Why Read the Bible?

Dec. 31

We are about to flip the page, turn a corner, however you want to visualize the coming of a new year. We know what 2023 was about. Maybe it was primarily good for you. Maybe it was filled with a lot of heartache and struggle, even loss. Whatever the case, a new year is coming, and its story has yet to be written. No one can change what 2023 has been, but we can make 2024 a different story.

No, I'm not talking about a **New Year's resolution**. Most resolutions are really delusions. They have more fantasy than resolve to change. We weakly commit to huge things like losing weight, getting into shape, or even getting out of debt. Those are big. Some of that **I have control over, but some I don't**. Some people can work out and **it doesn't happen**. Some people **can't afford a gym** in the winter when they can't get outside. Some will have an **injury** that keeps them stuck on the couch. So it really isn't all about will power.

Getting out of debt, some is in your control, some isn't. You can't go back and undo those stupid decisions you made that have you snowed under. You can, however, make good decisions now, like take the Dave Ramsey financial peace course. So, it's not just as simple as will power.

We say it this way, desire...practice...habit...character. I must want something that is good, then practice it until that practice becomes second nature, then my character can change.

What I am suggesting is that you don't try to change your life and your character and the trajectory of your life in 2024. What I'm suggesting is if you have any desire to become more like Jesus and experience the "full life" he promises, then start doing something small to practice that desire. When I say small, I mean 15 minutes out of your day.

Here at Eagle Ridge, along with Mt. Haley Church of God, Meridian Church of God, and Sears Church of God, we are challenging one another to read through the Bible this year. There are 12 churches doing it; we are networking and sharing together with those 3. That takes about 15 minutes a day. That is small. Start with a godly desire and then I start small. You can read it or even listen to it. We have all kinds of resources to help you with this, including these Bibles. The reason is that we are doing it chronologically, or in the order that these events happened. I'll get to why I think this is a helpful way to do it instead of simply Genesis through Revelations.

But this isn't simply a personal thing, an activity that is between you and God. We are building everything we do regularly around this challenge. Each Sunday, starting next week, the sermon will come from the previous week's readings. And because the sermon is following this pattern our small groups, which we call Bridge Groups, will discuss that sermon as well as anything the group wants to talk about from the previous week's reading. Also, we are establishing virtual groups so that those who use the Bible App can share your thoughts and insights with one another.

Today, on New Year's Eve, we are kicking this thing off. But in order to do that, we need to talk a little bit about what the Bible is, because I don't want to assume that everyone has this background. Maybe you didn't grow up going to church. Or maybe you went a long time ago. Or you just were never told what the Bible is.

Yes, it's a book, but it's not like any other book. It is unique, powerful, and alive.

It's a story, not a textbook, rule book, or cookbook.

Textbooks are too narrow, this is an all inclusive story of God's involvement with his creation, specifically his creation that was made in his image, people. Some try to make it a science textbook or a history textbook. It's a story that talks about creation, but not in the same way that a textbook would. These people wrote what God told them in the context of their culture, not ours. And yes, it is true and historically accurate, but it is not written for that purpose, it is written to tell the story of God's involvement with his creation, primarily people. And again, written by people within the culture that they lived.

The Bible has books that are more historical, those that are poetry, gospels, which are the story of Jesus' life, some that are letters to churches and some prophetic. All of this together tells a story. But you can't read a letter to a church the same as what we call apocalyptic writing, like Daniel and Revelations. You wouldn't read a novel, the same as a love letter from your husband.

Rule books have a rule for every contingency. The Bible gives you a knowledge of how God operates through Jesus and a relationship where he helps us navigate life.

- There isn't a rule for AI or cloning. There are 10 commandments, not 10 million.

Cookbooks guarantee if you get the technique and the ingredients right, then everything will taste good. This is a messy story because of sin and brokenness

from being separated from the God who created us. That's the "name it claim it" kind of religion where **God is compelled** to do what I want him to do. We also call that the **prosperity gospel**.

It's God's story and your story. Not a random collection of stories. That's why we are doing it chronologically so you can see it as a coherent story.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Missing the forest for the trees." These are **two different perspectives** that are connected or overlapping. **If you only look at a specific tree or even a grove of trees**, you'll miss the beauty of the forest that you get from the top of a mountain. If you only look from the mountain and don't sit under the tree and look at the light coming through the leaves, you miss part of the beauty. It's a matter of differing perspectives. **Both have value and beauty, but leaving either out, one perspective alone doesn't give you an appreciation of God's glorious creation.**

That is the case with the Bible, I believe for many of us. We want sound bites that can either give us the information we need or, more likely, that gives us the encouragement we need to get through the day. Then the bible can be boiled down to what I get in the verse of the day or the two sermons I hear each month. That's the national average for people who consider themselves church members or church goers.

The forest...**How do I fit into this epic story of God's rescue of his people? Am I living the wrong story?**

The trees...**How does a specific part of the story speak to my life in a transforming way? How does it demand change and give the resources for change?**

The wide panoramic view or looking in the microscope either way...**Reading it positions you to be changed, not just gain knowledge.**

This isn't about getting smarter. It's not about knowing more and **gaining some advantage** on other people. **Knowledge isn't power transformation, change, growth is power.**

Here's what knowledge separated from transformation looks like. Paul, in a letter to a church in Corinth, says...Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that "we all have knowledge" about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. ² Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. ³ But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes. ¹
Corinthians 8:1-3

There's another wrong approach to why read the Bible. It's when it is a path to get somewhere, I want to go. In other words, it is something that I do to get God's attention, garner His good favor, and earn our way into our sins being forgiven.

This is what we call the human mindset. Spiritual practices that were intended to open us up to the transforming power of God become steps to getting closer to God. If you have put your trust in Jesus, stepped over the line of faith, then God is in you and, therefore, you can't get any closer. It's about making more space and relinquishing control; that is our response.

As a kid, my experience with having a "quiet time" was mostly about guilt and feeling defeated. I ruined a spiritual practice that was intended to change me into someone more like Jesus and give me a full life.

Top for inputs that create people like Jesus.

1. Confession/humility.
2. Reading the bible four days a week.
3. Fellowship in a community of believers.

American Christians or church members for the most part don't read the Bible. This is not an attempt to shame anyone. It's just a baseline. It's reality. If I pretend anything different, then I am building on a faulty foundation.

Some of us are starting into this challenge to read through the Bible with no patterns of any type of regular interaction with the Bible. No guilt, you don't need any special experience. The pattern is set out for you. And if you do this within a community of people, you will get lots of encouragement.

What could happen is that a desire finds a practice that becomes a habit, and a changed character happens.

If we are going to talk about why we read the Bible, then we are obligated to read 2 Timothy 3:14-17. ¹⁴ But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. ¹⁵ You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. 2 Timothy 3:14-17

For these people, the scriptures would have been mostly what we now call The Old Testament. Paul is saying that what they have been taught, if they are to pay attention, will lead them to Jesus as savior. This would at this time

also include some of Paul's other letters that have been passed around where he helps them see that the OT pointed to Christ and Christ came out of those pages. **First, don't toss out what you learned when you were young because you think it is no longer relevant in modern society.** Hold onto that and add to it. It's not that what you learned was wrong, it was just incomplete. It was intended to be foundational, not the complete dwelling.

Maybe you were like me, and you viewed the Bible as a bunch of disconnected stories that were all important but seemed very different. **This is the year that you get to start putting that all together.** Whatever you brought from other Christian denominations, add to that.

Look at verse ____ where it says, **"they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus."** **It is meant to lead you into a saving relationship with God through Jesus.** The only place we get the story of Jesus is the Bible and that story was lived out and then captured so that we could know that God loved us enough to send his son to save us from ourselves, even though we didn't deserve it.

Don't hear what I'm not saying. **I'm not saying that you need to be an expert in Jesus to have him save you and give you eternal life.** It might take very little of the story for you to know to fall on your sword and call out that name, **"Jesus."**

³⁹ "You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! ⁴⁰ Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life. John 5:39-40

To know that story of the Bible is to either follow Jesus or understand that and refuse choosing your own path.

There are going to be people who start into this challenge to read through the Bible and are going to realize that they are culturally Christian, but they really aren't disciples or students or followers of this Jesus who came to save them. **That's when a real life changing, vital relationship with Jesus will begin and everything will change.** All from reading the Bible.

Paul also says that the Bible is amazingly two things at once. **It is "God breathed" and useful...**

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful..." 2 Timothy 3:16a

This is where the NLT falls a little short by translating it, "inspired by God." The more literal and accurate translation is "God breathed." Why, because the word inspired, or inspiration has been watered down in our culture. **Someone could look at a sunset and feel inspired by God to propose to the absolute wrong person for them.**

What happened when God spoke or breathed words? That's what we are going to talk about next week and that is creation. God created everything by speaking it into existence with no raw materials. He spoke and his words and breath brought everything into existence out of nothing but him.

God breathed is a lot different than just inspired.

But isn't it amazing that God can speak something and then it can be useful to someone like me. That stuff should be so over my head. Words from God are useful and so amazing. Don't miss the power of that.

I've read some words from really smart people, and they weren't that useful to me. Interesting, hard to understand, overly wordy, yes. But the creator of the universe can speak to us and make it useful in the world you and I live in.

Here's the part we tend to focus on and that's the teaching part. To teach what is truth and correct errors.

It gives us clear examples, but the holy spirit gives us the ability to discern truth and error.

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable. Hebrews 4:12-13

This is what we call the Bible reading me, not me reading the Bible. It gets into my business because it is alive and powerful. It shines light into places I'd rather keep dark. That has been happening to me lately.

That's why I always read the asterisk at the bottom of the page when we describe this part of what the Bible does. "If you want to stay the way you are, unchanged, skipping along the primrose path, then please do not read the Bible." Look at the final part of 2 Timothy. It says, "God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work." This is the punch line. In the end it is about making the kingdom present for others.

This brings us back to "God breathed and useful for..." It is useful for making us useful to others.

It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it. Isaiah 55:11

If you allow God to breathe his word into you in 2024; you cannot help but be changed and become useful in accomplishing what God wants to do for

others. That's what fruit is. It's something that **comes from your life that nourishes other people**. It's going to happen. God will do that if you let him breathe into you.

Maybe you feel like 2023 was you on life support just existing. God is going to breathe into you and change all of that. Divine CPR brings you back to life as you were created to have.

Three Ways to unleash God's Word in your life:

1. Read it and/or listen to it.
2. Hear it taught on Sunday mornings.
3. Discuss and reflect with others on the journey.

Join a Bridge Group on Sunday morning or during the week.

Join a virtual Group.

Put times and places of groups on screen.

What are you afraid of? Failure? Think small, 15 minutes today.