

How to Read the Bible—According to the Anglican Tradition!

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I customarily speak of studying Holy Scripture as one of three points of living in harmony with God. (The other two points are prayer and Godly conversation, and most people notice that these three activities quite often go together.) What is a good general approach to studying Holy Scripture, also known as the Bible, also known as the Word of God? Our Christian tradition contains no better summary of such an approach than that contained in the collect appointed for today. The Collect of the Day, in the Anglican worship tradition we have inherited, is a prayer that sets a sort of theme for the worship service. Indeed, the very word “collect” suggests that the prayer *collects*, sums up, a certain set of prayerful intentions and gives them a clear shape. Let’s hear today’s collect again:

“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

This prayer, written long ago, is a classic of Anglican elegance in the tradition of the Book of Common Prayer. But within its majestic flow it specifies five aspects of the study of Scripture, listed in order of application:

Hear. Read. Mark. Learn. Inwardly digest.

To *hear* Scripture is the basic way to receive it. The Bible was originally orally transmitted material, or material written to be read aloud in a culture where not all people, by any means, could read. There is a sense in which hearing the sacred words of our religious tradition is hearing God himself, because we believe his inspiration lies behind those words. It reaches all the way back to the notion of a relationship with God in which we could walk and converse with him at ease, as with one another. So it will be again when God has healed and renewed the world, and so it is now, through God’s Word and sacraments, through study, prayer and Godly conversation—though, as things are, it requires special effort and the contact between us and God is imperfect (though at times it can be sharply focused and powerful). This notion of the basic conversational nature of our relationship with God is why we read scripture aloud in our worship service, and it is why we should listen as attentively as we can when that reading is going on. Some of you may have noticed that I rarely read along in the printed bulletin insert while the lessons are being read aloud; rather, I try to look at the reader or some other point of focus and not let my mind wander. That is to honor the tradition of *hearing* Scripture. And, you know, it can’t hurt sometimes to read the Bible aloud to ourselves when we’re alone, or to read it to our friends, our spouse, our children. God’s Word delights to be spoken, delights to fall upon the ear.

To *read* scripture is the basic way to encounter it in private study and prayer, and also, of course, in group study and prayer. We are fortunate to have Bibles in various translations with all sorts of annotations and study guides. Some versions are more helpful (and accurate) than others; the Church tries to supervise and give guidance in how Scripture is read—what versions are best, and so on—though in our tradition this is not a highly legalistic process. Fact is, we would do best to read Scripture in the original Biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. But alas, even I, a linguist with some training in Biblical languages, cannot read them fluently. I can often tell, though, good translations from ones that are less good. But whatever translation we use, regular reading is always recommended, perhaps using one of the various Bible reading guides available. We should aim to encounter the Word

of God in written form daily, often in connection with our daily prayers. And I should note that to *read* Holy Scripture *with intent*—to read it as God’s voice to the soul and to study it with that in mind—is in itself a form of prayer.

The verb *mark* is used in today’s collect in a rather old-fashioned sense. It does not mean to make marks in your Bible—though some have found profit in taking it that way, making notes that relate God’s word to their lives. But in the collect, to mark means to notice, to pay attention, to take seriously, as in the expressions “Mark my words!” or “Mark me well!” Old fashioned language, yes, but a good point: when we read the Bible we should give it the opportunity to grab our full attention. God’s Word should *matter* to us.

To *learn* Scripture means to let it dwell with us even when the text is not in front of our eyes. This includes good old fashioned memorization, like those Baptist kids do in their Sunday schools. But in the old days, when written copies of the Bible were rare and expensive, and in the *really* old days before writing, learning by heart was the only way to go. And just imagine—the standard system of verse numbering we use today is only about five hundred years old! But in an age of increasing literacy, the chapter and verse divisions help us learn, study and share Scripture. Even when there is no copy Bible ready to hand, it is easier to be mindful of God if we have God’s Word available to our mind. But whether we deliberately memorize it or not, a growing familiarity with the Bible and how its parts associate with one another will come as a result of regular and attentive reading. And if we need to find where something is in the Bible—something we seem to remember but cannot put in context—we can look up what we think we remember on line or in printed concordances, which are basically key word lists.

Inwardly digest—what a splendid phrase! When we digest food we incorporate it into our bodies for energy and growth, for repair and enrichment. In much the same way, the Word of God is our food, to be taken into us in such a way that our lives are empowered, improved, restored, enriched—in all ways transformed in a Godly direction. That is part of the symbolism of the Holy Eucharist, in which Christ, the Word of God himself, the Speaker of Creation, is taken into our bodies in the form of bread and wine. Scripture is nourishing and transformative because it is one of the ways in which God’s life is conveyed to us, so that, if we let it, it will make us different and better.

This is all a divine strategy for God to get close to us and make the good difference that is life itself forever. It is something we do as individuals and something we do together; it is something we do in worship and something we do in discussion groups or classes or with the Bible on our laps and a mug of coffee on the table by the lamp. But always, if we are receiving Holy Scripture as the Word of God, we *hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest* it. If it gives us indigestion, then we know we have something important to fix in our understanding of the Bible or in how we live our life.

But in any case, people do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. See—I remembered that without having to look it up. And so did Jesus, when he quoted it. Where is it found in the Bible? I’ll let you do some digging. And mark me well: you’ll find nourishment for eternal life.

The sources for my concluding reference: Matthew 4:4 or Luke 4:4. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.