



*“When we read the Scriptures, Jesus is the centerpiece. He’s the one the photographer was trying to capture. We’re there too, in the background, and we can appreciate that and give thanks for it. But the Bible isn’t about you. It’s about him.”*

Andrew Wilson. *Unbreakable*

The Bible has a seemingly ever-present place in both society (think the top drawer of the nightstand in the average hotel room) and in the American church (whether it’s ever actually opened or not). We live in a fascinating era when, at least for those of us living in the West, the text of the Bible itself, along with incredible teachings and tools that can aid in studying the Bible, are available in formats and costs (often free!) that previous generations couldn’t have even imagined.

And yet, the availability of both the Scriptures and the many tools to engage them haven’t resulted in the kind of transformation of life and character that one would expect. To put it as kindly as possible, there are many of us who know a lot about Jesus but don’t seem to look very much like Him.

The reason for this disconnect is simple to diagnose, but much harder to correct. Simply put, we’ve missed the point of the Bible. For most of us who have either been raised in the church or spent the majority of our lives in the church, we’ve seen the Bible as a source of *information*. Really important and valuable information, of course, but information nonetheless. You’ve probably heard the clichéd statement: “The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it!” But, of course, in real life, it rarely does settle it... First of all, “the Bible said it” so “I need to interpret it,” which proves to be quite a challenge, but even more challenging is the fact that I might believe it, but can I actually do it? It turns out that the Bible was never intended to solely be a source of information, but rather a source of *transformation*. The Bible is one of the most powerful tools we have in regards to spiritual formation. It’s the formational aspect of the Scriptures that are the purpose of this Practice Guide.

The teachings in this series and the practices in this booklet will focus both on the why and the how of engaging the Scriptures. The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next six weeks and will

roughly parallel the teachings from Sunday morning. You can find the teachings at [www.yorkalliance.org/sermons-embedded](http://www.yorkalliance.org/sermons-embedded). We believe that it is impossible to gain the life of Jesus without practicing the lifestyle of Jesus, and Jesus intentionally chose to live in community. Therefore, there are both individual and communal exercises in this guidebook. If you don’t currently have a connection to a Community Group or another committed community of believers with whom to engage this material, you are strongly encouraged to get connected to one. You can get more information and sign up at [yorkalliance.org/groups](http://yorkalliance.org/groups).

This practice guide has been developed in partnership with a ministry called “Practicing the Way.” I have relied heavily on their materials in developing both this material and the series. Beyond “Practicing the Way,” I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. A few key resources that I have found especially helpful in preparing for this series and would recommend for further study: *Eat This Book* by Eugene Peterson, *Shaped by the Word* by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Unbreakable* by Andrew Wilson, and *The Drama of Scripture* by Bartholomew and Goheen.

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: Learning to Read and Trust
- Week Two: The Bible Jesus Read
- Week Three: The Bible as Alternative Story
- Week Four: Meditation on the Scriptures
- Week Five: The Spiritual Authority of the Scriptures
- Week Six: Memorizing the Scriptures

As with any practice, it’s vitally important to start where you are, not where you should be or wish you were. Therefore, be honest about where your practice regarding the Scriptures is now. If your current Scripture reading practice is non-existent, then adding a few minutes a few days a week is big step in the right direction. If you are currently engaging the Scriptures daily, then changing the way you engage them and the heart with which you engage may be the next step. Regardless, all of us come to this practice ready (hopefully!) and able to be changed by the Scriptures.

## **Week One: Learning to Read and Trust**

*"I am interested in cultivating the only kind of reading that is congruent with what is written in our Holy Scriptures, but also with all writing that is intended to change our lives and not just stuff some information into the cells of our brain... We do not read this book in order to find out how to get God into our lives. We open this book and find that page after page pulls us into participation with God on his terms."*

Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*

If we're willing to stop and think about it (and be brutally honest), many of us have some major issues with the Bible. There are times we're bored by it, confused by it, or simply can't comprehend it. In the middle of the interesting stories and powerful statements there are lots of long genealogies, lists of religious codes, and hundreds of names that seem impossible to pronounce. And that's not to mention the aspects that are harder to stomach: the seeming misogyny, genocide, and brutality that all seems to be certified by God Himself.

How could an ancient library of books possibly speak to the everyday realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century living? Or maybe more challenging: What might be asked of me if I took this ancient library of books seriously?

However, if we are to take seriously the call of Jesus to be His apprentices, it's evident that He was committed to the Scriptures and calls us to the same. How do we reconcile all this baggage with our desire to follow Him? The first step is an honest look at the Scriptures and our own hearts.

### **Community Practice**

This week's practice is simple: Have an honest conversation about the Scriptures and the current place they hold in your life.

- What role did the Bible play in your early church experiences and how do you think that shaped you?
- What does your current practice of Scripture reading look like right now? How did you get to that point? If you're honest, what would you like it to look like?

- What difficulties do you face when coming to the Bible? Don't just think practically (not enough time, etc.) but difficulties you have with the Bible itself.

Next, have somebody read 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 5:17-20.

- What jumps out to you in these passages?
- What are some things that Peter says are true about the Bible?
- What do these words of Jesus tell you about the way He sees the Hebrew Scriptures?
- In what ways are Peter and Jesus views of Scripture different than yours? Why might that be?

Take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week and over the next six weeks, ask one final question:

- What do you think Jesus might be inviting you into through this practice?

### **Individual Practice**

This first week's practice is simple: Determine a Bible reading "goal" for the week and commit to it. Remember: start from where you are, not where you wish you were! If you are already spending time in the Scriptures daily, consider ways that you might augment that time this week—either slowing down in your reading, journaling, or maybe reading a bit more than normal. However, if you aren't currently spending daily time in the Scriptures, consider trying to make it daily for this week—or, if you aren't regularly reading the Scriptures at all during the week, commit to a few days of reading this week.

If you don't currently have a Bible reading plan that you are working through, start with the Gospel of Mark. Mark is only 16 chapters long, so it's very reasonable to read in a week. When you come to your reading time, take a few minutes to settle and prepare your heart to hear from God through His Word. Taking a few deep breaths and then asking God to speak through prayer is a great way to begin. Then, as you read, listen for portions of the text that really stand out to you. When you come across those, ask the Holy Spirit why they are standing out. Many find that journaling thoughts is a great way to conclude your time in the Scriptures.

## **Week Two: The Bible Jesus Read**

*“And [Jesus] said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”*

Luke 24:25-27

*“Today we need an ‘Emmaus road’ experience in reverse. The disciples knew Moses and the Prophets but could not conceive how they might relate to Jesus the Christ. The modern church knows Jesus the Christ but is fast losing any grasp of Moses and the Prophets.”*

Phillip Yancey, *The Bible That Jesus Read*

There are many notable things about the life and teachings of Jesus. Among them is how deeply entrenched He was in the Hebrew Scriptures, or what we call the Old Testament. Jesus quoted the Scriptures, memorized them, meditated on them, wrestled with them, interpreted them, and most importantly, found His own identity in them. It’s hard to imagine anything having more of an impact on who Jesus was. He was known as a rabbi (teacher) of the Scriptures, and they formed the basis for how He understood who He was.

Many of us either skim through the Old Testament, or ignore it all together, but contained within are beautiful images of Jesus that help us to have a more complete picture of who Jesus is. Often Old Testament stories are interpreted through the lens of allegory (What are the giants in your life that need to be slain?) when they should be interpreted in the light of the person of Jesus (Jesus is the greater David who slays the giant of sin and death).

### **Community Practice**

For this week’s practice, discuss some of the challenges that you have with engaging different aspects of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and then consider the way that Jesus spoke about the Hebrew Scriptures.

- How do you view the Old Testament? Do you enjoy reading it? Why or why not?
- How might the Old Testament Scriptures form a modern-day apprentice of Jesus?
- What are some of the Old Testament stories that you’ve heard before or that stick in your memory? Where might Jesus be found in those stories?

Next, have somebody read John 5:30-47.

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- How does Jesus seem to view the Hebrew Scriptures?
- What do you think He means that Moses is the one who accuses the Jewish leaders?

Take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week and over the next six weeks, ask one final question:

- What do you think Jesus might be inviting you into through this practice?

### **Individual Practice**

Take some time this week to read through one of the Old Testament stories that most clearly foreshadows the coming of Jesus, found in Genesis 37-50. The story of Joseph has literally dozens of parallels with Jesus. If you read each day during the week, you could read just 2 chapters each day and finish the entire story.

As you read, keep a journal handy and write down parallels that you find. Each section has a number of ways in which Joseph’s story foreshadows the story of Jesus. After the week is over, have a conversation either with your Community Group (next week) or a Discipleship Partner, friend, etc. who is also doing this Practice Guide. Compare notes and see which parallels you each may have missed.

For those willing to do just a bit more reading, consider doing the 7-day reading plan on “YouVersion” titled “Jesus in the Old Testament.” The devotionals each point to a verse or short passage that parallels Jesus in a clear way.

## **Week Three: The Bible as Alternative Story**

*"In our culture, we have been formed in such a way that we have ears to hear and do not hear. We don't know how to hear with the deeper levels of our being, and we need to rediscover this skill. If we are going to allow the scripture to become all that God intends for it to be in our spiritual formation, perhaps our biggest problem comes in developing a mode of response to scripture that allows God to speak to us through it, clearly and transformingly, at these deeper levels of our being."*

M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Shaped by the Word*

There are many ways that all of us read the Bible: in the morning, throughout the day, as part of a devotional, with our kids at night, or listening through a Bible app while we drive. However, for most of the history of Christianity, there is a practice of Bible engagement that many of us never consider: reading large portions of the Bible out loud.

At York Alliance, we practice "Washing in the Word" a few times each year, which is a way to engage in this ancient practice. However, before the printing press and Bible apps, this would have been the standard method for engaging the Scriptures for just about everyone, and there are places in the world in which followers of Jesus still do this out of necessity. While our culture has moved away from being primarily auditory, there is still great value in listening to the Bible being read.

### **Community Practice**

We are going to engage this ancient practice in community this week. Read through the following instructions, make the necessary decisions (which passage, who is reading, who is praying, etc.), and then complete the practice together.

1. Get comfortable. You'll be reading for 20-30 minutes, so make sure that you're in a position and posture where you can be still and open to God.
2. Pick a Passage. There are many options, but there's a list below of passages/books that would be a good starting place:
  - o Ruth
  - o Psalm 119
  - o Matthew 5-7

- o John 18-21
  - o Galatians
  - o Philippians
  - o James
  - o 1 John, 2 John, & 3 John
3. Establish the Reader(s). One person can read it all, a few can split the reading, or everyone can have a chance to read as you work your way through the entire passage.
  4. Invite the Holy Spirit. Take a deep breath, settle in, and pray that the Holy Spirit will help you listen and be formed by what is read.
  5. Read the entire text straight through aloud together.
  6. Silence & Prayer. After the reading is completed, take a moment in silence. Then, have someone pray and thank God for your experience of hearing Word.

After you've experienced that practice, take a moment to read the individual practice below, and discuss the following:

- How was this different than your normal experience of reading the Bible yourself?
- As you think about the practice for this week, what ideas come to mind about how you might try it?
- What do you think Jesus might be inviting you into through this practice?

### **Individual Practice**

The practice this week is pretty simple. Pick a day, possibly your Sabbath, and set aside 20-30 minutes to do the exact same thing that we just did. You can do it on your own or with someone else. You can read outside at a park, inside your house, or with friends over a meal. You can use the same passage as the one we read tonight, choose a different one from the list, or choose another one entirely. The point is simply to sit in and listen to a large chunk of Scripture at one time. After you've finished, take some time to process how the experience was for you.

## **Week Four: Meditation on the Scriptures**

*“This may be the single most important thing to know as we come to read and study and believe these Holy Scriptures: this rich, alive, personally revealing God as experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally addressing us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, at whatever age we are, in whatever state we are—me, you, us. Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.”*

Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*

Many of us have been taught to approach the Bible like a reference book: We determine our problem or question, search through the Scriptures (or the concordance), and finding our answer, we go away to apply. It’s not that the Bible doesn’t have answers to our questions—it’s just that it doesn’t always give us those answers in the way that we expect, or sometimes even want.

*Lectio Divina* is an ancient method of meeting God through the Scriptures. By approaching the Bible from a meditative posture, the apprentice of Jesus allows the Scriptures (in cooperation with the Holy Spirit) to lead into intimacy with God as they move slowly, carefully, and repeatedly through the text.

### **Community Practice**

Similar to last week, we are first going to engage this practice as a community, and then you will be encouraged to engage the practice individually during the week. The goal of *lectio divina* isn’t primarily study or gaining new knowledge or insight; the goal is meeting God through the Scriptures, hearing from Him, and growing into further intimacy with Him. The Scriptures act as a Divine guide in our relationship with God.

1. Settle into your time and place, removing distractions and preparing your mind and body.
2. Spend just a few minutes in breathing prayer and practicing the presence of Jesus.

3. Preparation/Silencio: Relax your body, clear your mind, breathe deeply, and invite Jesus to speak to you through His Word.
4. Reading/Lectio: Read the passage slowly (out loud if possible) pausing between sentences. Listen for a word or phrase that catches your attention. Repeat that word or phrase a few times silently.
5. Reflection/Meditatio: Thinking about your word, read the passage again. Ask God how this passage, and specifically this word, connects with your life.
6. Response/Oratio: Talk with God about your personal response to this word and this passage, listening if He is calling you to act in some way.
7. Rest/Contemplatio: Read the passage one more time, returning to a full posture of rest in God.
8. Resolve/Incarnatio: As you leave this encounter, resolve any specific actions that need to be carried out of this passage in daily life.
9. Close your time with gratitude to God for speaking to you through His Word. Be specific as you thank Him for speaking.

Keep in mind that the goal of this process isn’t to gain more knowledge, but to draw closer in relationship to God. Resist the temptation to study during this time, and simply draw close to Him.

Any passage will work for practicing *lectio divina*, but here are a few suggestions to give you a start: Psalm 23, Psalm 100, John 15:1-17, Romans 12, Galatians 5:13-25.

Consider these questions as a group:

- When you read the Scriptures, do you feel as though you actually meet with and connect with God? Why or why not?
- What makes *lectio divina* different than a “Bible study” or a teaching for you?

### **Individual Practice**

For the practice this week, choose at least three days during the week to practice *lectio divina*. If you have an established time when you meet with Jesus each day, you can use that time. Otherwise, consider trying a few different times of day to gauge how your heart and mind connect with the Spirit. (Maybe morning, midday, and evening, as an example.) You can use the passages above or you can choose your own.

## **Week Five: Spiritual Authority of the Bible**

*“Consider the way Jesus fights. He has the resources of heaven available, yet he fights by using the authority of the Scriptures. Not as a one-off, or as a change of tactics, but each and every time. ‘It is written... it is written... it is written...’ he repeatedly emphasizes. His position is unequivocal: ‘You’re trying to tempt me, but the Scriptures have spoken. That’s the end of the conversation.’”*

*Andrew Wilson, Unbreakable*

The Bible is a library of books that are distinct from all other ancient literature. There are times that it is best read out loud and slowly. Other times, it’s best to read large portions of Scripture to understand the larger narrative. Still other times we linger on a simple phrase, allowing it to sink deeply into our hearts.

There are also times that we need to put on our reading glasses and study. We study the Bible because Jesus was a student and teacher of the Bible Himself, and He lived as if the Bible was authoritative. So we do well to think about what it means and how it applies to us today.

### **Community Practice**

If you have the ability as a group, consider watching “The Bible Project” videos “What is the Bible?” and “The Story of the Bible.” These give a great overview of what the Bible is and how we study it in its broader context. <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/what-is-bible/> and <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-story-of-the-bible/>

Take some time to discuss the following questions as a group:

- What has your experience been in studying the Bible?
- (If you watched the videos) What stood out to you in these videos? How might that impact the way that you study the Bible?
- What are some barriers that you experience when you try to study the Bible?
- How do you tend to relate to authority? Is there any area of life that you struggle to trust the Bible as authoritative?

Next, have somebody read Matthew 4:1-11.

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- How do you tend to respond to temptation and how does that differ from the way that Jesus responds?
- Why do you think these temptations might have been significant to Jesus? In what ways might they be significant to you?

Take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week ask one final question:

- What form of Bible study are you hoping to try to this week?
- How does studying the Bible strike you: boring, exciting, tedious, scary, etc.?
- What do you think Jesus might be inviting you into through this practice?

### **Individual Practice**

The practice for this week is simple: spend some time studying the Bible. Below there are a few different approaches for Bible study which don’t require special tools. Of course, there are additional study methods you might use with study bibles, commentaries, and other reference materials. Some are exercises for a specific passage, while others could be applied to any passage in the Bible.

Translation Study: Biblical writers did not write their narratives, poems, and letters in English. Instead, the Bible has been translated from other ancient languages. Reading multiple translations of a given passage can help us gain a broader understanding of that passage. For this study approach, pick a passage (1-5 chapters) and read it in three different translations. For example, try the NIV, ESV, and NLT translations. While you read the passage, take notes and write down any differences that you notice.

Summary Exercise: When reading the Bible, it’s easy to get lost in the weeds. For this reason, it can be helpful to stop and summarize what we’ve read. Read through one of the following passages and along the way, stop at the end of each chapter (or if you really want to dive in, each



paragraph) and write down your summary of what you read in one or two sentences.

- 1 Thessalonians
- James
- 1 John
- Matthew 5-7
- Ephesians

Context Exercise: The key to understanding almost any passage of the Bible is to understand it in context. Below there are a few commonly misunderstood Bible passages. Pick a passage and spend some time reading the verses immediately before and after this passage. Then, ask the following questions: 1) What might this passage seem to mean when only read on its own? 2) How do the verses before and after this passage influence its meaning?

- Philippians 4:13
- Matthew 18:20
- Jeremiah 29:11
- Romans 8:28

Theme Tracing: To read the Bible as not only scripture, but as literature, we must pay attention to its themes. Biblical authors use repetition of words, images, and ideas to develop themes and illustrate their point. For this exercise, spend a few days reading one of the following passages and take notes on any repeated words, phrases, images, or ideas you notice:

- John 1-6
- 1 John
- 1 Thessalonians
- Ephesians

Take some time to journal your thoughts and be sure to share them with a Discipleship Partner or your Community Group.

## **Week Six: Memorizing the Bible**

*“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”*

*Psalm 119:9-11*

In the digital world we inhabit, the memorization of Scripture is a lost art. Many in the time of Jesus would have had just about all of what we call the Old Testament memorized, but for many of us, considering the ease of Google and fact that we can always open the Bible app on our phone, we have few (if any) passages of Scripture committed to memory.

While the skill of memorization takes some time to develop, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't do it! Memorizing Scripture can enrich our prayer life, lead us into life in the Kingdom, and help us to recognize the voice of God.

### **Community Practice**

The goal of this practice is to have each person in the group commit to a goal and a method for memorization this week. Begin with the following questions:

- Describe your current experience with Bible memorization. Would you say that you have a lot of Scripture memorized? A little? None at all?
- When you think about meditating on and memorizing Scripture, what thoughts and emotions come to you?
- Is there a method that you've used in the past to memorize something that you could share with the group?

Next, have somebody read Psalm 119:9-16

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- How could memorizing Scripture lead to not sinning?
- What are some of the verbs the Psalmist uses in this passage? How might those actions help me with memorization?



Take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week ask one final question:

- What method of memorization are you hoping to try to this week?
- Is there a verse or passage that you immediately think you'd like to try to memorize?
- What do you think Jesus might be inviting you into through this practice?

Spend a few minutes praying for each other, asking God to help you make time and press into the Practice, remembering that the devil attacks that which God is after most. If we are in Christ, we have the mind of Christ, which is constantly being renewed and transformed, so as followers of Jesus, we want to be actively engaging our minds in ways that are worshipful and intentional.

### **Individual Practice**

As you think about memorization, if you haven't done much of this in the past, you can start with shorter passages you may already be familiar with (e.g John 3:16, Proverbs 3:5-6, or Psalm 23). If you've memorized individual verses in the past, this would be a great opportunity to work on a longer passage that is meaningful to you (John 15, Galatians 5, or Romans 12).

Below are some methods that can help with the process of memorization. If you learn best when you do something with your hands, it can be helpful to knit, shuffle a deck of cards, squeeze a stress ball, etc. while you quote.

- Index Card: Write the verse(s) on one side of an index card and the verse reference on the other side. Carry the card around with you so you can work on memorizing in your free time.
- Record Yourself: Try recording yourself on your phone reading the verse(s). Listen back to the recording while you're driving, working out, cleaning your house, grocery shopping, etc.
- Make It Visible: Tape the verse(s) to the bathroom mirror or to your car dashboard and work on it as you go about your day. You can also put it as your desktop or phone background.
- Repetitive Writing: Transcribe the verse(s) by hand. Rewrite the verse(s) over and over or use hand-lettering or other creative illustrations or pictures as way of putting it in your mind.

### **Epilogue: The Road Forward**

*"We cannot truthfully say that we are followers of Jesus if we neglect or refuse to obey what the Bible tells us, or if we use it in self-serving ways that are not what God originally intended. God speaks to us in the Bible. At the very least it is rude not to listen to someone else when they speak. When that someone else is the all-powerful God over all space and time in the entire cosmos, it is utterly foolish not to listen. When that someone is the most perfect lover ever, indeed the one who created love itself, and who further both proclaims and demonstrates his love for us in his Word, it is absurd to not listen. But to claim to follow him while refusing to listen to what he is saying is delusional. Loving God necessarily means obeying his word. (1 John 5:3)"*

*Ray Lubeck, Read the Bible for a Change*

As we wrap up this study, the calendar is turning to the month of December and soon it will be the new year. Coming with the new year is often a series of desires and resolutions about new and different ways that we hope to live in the coming year. Having now engaged in some practice with the Scriptures, there is a great opportunity coming to step into a new way of reading the Bible this coming year.

Engaging the Scriptures is best done through intentionality. For some, that will mean stepping into a Bible reading plan that will take you through the Bible in a year. There are many examples, but at York Alliance, we recommend a plan that was developed by The Bible Project, which you can find on our website (yorkalliance.org). Click the Spiritual Formation link, scroll down and click "Resources for Practices," and then click "Read the Bible."

For others, that will mean taking time to read, meditate, imagine, and journal through shorter passages. If that resonates with you, again, go to our website, click the Spiritual Formation link, scroll down and click "Resources for Practices," and then click "Meditation & Journaling."

There are hundreds of additional reading plans online and in the YouVersion app. The point is not *which* one, but to *choose* one and engage it. Choose and plan and immerse yourself in the Bible this year!

