

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT READING THE BIBLE



Kevin J. Vanhoozer



introduction

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My wife, **Sylvie**, grew up in southern France. After living in the United States for almost thirty years, she still hasn't become an American citizen. It's not that she's anti-American or afraid of the civics test. She's fluent in English and appreciates the way America welcomes immigrants. She's concerned lest pledging allegiance to the United States be viewed as a betrayal of her past, her family, and her identity. You can take the girl out of France, but you can't take France out of the girl.

To what—or to *whom*—do we give our ultimate allegiance? According to the apostle Paul, Christians are “citizens of heaven.” The Bible is the story of how “strangers and aliens” become naturalized—“fellow citizens” with God’s people (EPHESIANS 2:19). It’s all about how people from many nations become a unified people set apart for God. The Bible names Israel and the church alike a “holy nation” (EXODUS 19:6; 1 PETER 2:9).

We’re going to explore the connection between reading the Bible rightly and becoming a citizen of heaven. You can’t become an American citizen simply by respecting the Constitution; you have to pass the test. In the same way, you can’t be a citizen of heaven simply by having a high view of the Bible, knowing what it says cover to cover. Citizenship happens only when people are united to Christ through faith and begin to be transformed into his image (ROMANS 8:29). As Jesus explains to his disciples, unless one is *born again* it is not possible even to see the kingdom of God (JOHN 3:3).

Citizenship, whether national or celestial, is both a privilege and a responsibility. Along with certain perks come certain duties. If “[f]or freedom Christ has set us free” (GALATIANS 5:1), what do Christians need to know in order to use their freedom for the glory of God?

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contents

one

What Scripture Is: A Word from Heaven for Citizens of Heaven5

two

What Scripture Is About: One Holy Nation, Under God 12

three

Reading Scripture: Five Lessons 21

four

Why Reading Scripture Well Matters..... 28

EDITORS: Tim Gustafson, J.R. Hudberg, Peggy Willison

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one

What Scripture Is: A Word from Heaven for Citizens of Heaven

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 THESSALONIANS 2:13)

To read the Bible well, we have to appreciate what it is. Put simply, it is God doing things with human words: laying down the law; giving directions for a flourishing life; revealing his intentions; expressing his love; explaining what he is doing in Jesus Christ. Although the Scriptures were originally written

to the ancient Israelites and the early Christians, they are also written down “for our instruction” (1 CORINTHIANS 10:11). For example, the church today is to learn from Israel’s example to respond in faith rather than unbelief. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’” (HEBREWS 3:7–8).

Think about it. Unless God speaks, we would have few ideas about what God was like. The purposes of a silent God would remain forever inscrutable. But God *has* spoken. The phrase, “Thus says the LORD,” occurs more than four hundred times in the Old Testament. The Bible depicts God’s making promises, issuing commands, teaching wisdom, and giving comfort. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets” (HEBREWS 1:1). The God of the Bible speaks *through* commissioned witnesses—the prophets and apostles. ▀

▀ *“All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 TIMOTHY 3:16). Paul here teaches that every book in the Bible results from dual authorship: **God speaks through the speech of human authors.** The human authors are conscious of speaking on behalf of another: “Thus says the LORD.” It’s a common phenomenon. For example, kings and presidents send messages by their servants the ambassadors.*

Scripture recounts where we came from, why we’re here, and where we’re going. The Bible is the story of who God is, and who we are, and who we are to each other (God to humans and humans to humans). The

Bible does not tell us everything there is to know. It tells us something better. It tells us how to know God truly and glorify him fully. It is a message from heaven intended to reveal God, call people to himself, and teach them what they need to know in order to live out their heavenly citizenship here on earth.

What God is ultimately doing in speaking, promising, commanding and so forth is *covenanting*. The Bible is the story of God's covenantal[¶] dealings, first with Israel (through Abraham, Moses, and David) then with the church, thanks to the new covenant mediated by JESUS (HEBREWS 12:24). In each case, God reaches out to bless those who trust and follow him. The covenant blessing is communion with God: dwelling as God's covenant partner, as God's spouse. Covenant partners share in God's own life—in everything he is and has, just as in a marriage. This is why the Old Testament frequently describes God as “jealous”—to underline the importance of Israel's faithfulness. Monotheism—belief in the *one* true God—is necessarily monogamous!

¶ *The Bible is something like a marriage proposal: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” (EXODUS 6:7). This formula reveals the Bible to be a **covenant document** whereby God pledges his loyalty to the children of Abraham. The Bible is the story of how God fulfills his solemn oath to be there for his people, forever. Both the Old and New Testaments are covenantal documents (the Latin *testamentum* means “covenant”).*

Because the Bible is God's covenantal marriage proposal, it marks out people to be distinctly his. It is the founding document of a specific group of people. So it is also like a Constitution, but not entirely. It's *like* a Constitution inasmuch as it is the founding document of a nation (Israel). It's *unlike* a Constitution because its authority comes not from "We the people" but from "the LORD your God" (EXODUS 6:7). God constitutes Israel a holy nation by speaking human words: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples" (EXODUS 19:5).

The Bible is the "collected works" of its divine author. *Just these sixty-six books* have been set apart by God to serve as the rule of his people's life and thought. The canon, which means "measuring rod" or standard, is closed. God has said everything that needs to be said about his covenant. The Bible alone is God's final say-so about himself, humanity, and Jesus Christ, the God-man.

The biblical authors themselves recognized this finality. Moses explained to Israel that God's law was fixed. "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it" (DEUTERONOMY 12:32). Likewise, Peter explained to the first Christians that Jesus was God's final answer to the problem of sin: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (ACTS 4:12).

Paul insists that there is no other gospel than the one in the apostolic writings (GALATIANS 1:6–9).

The Bible is both a collection of diverse kinds of books, written by many (human) authors over several centuries, and a unified work with a single (divine) author. All the short stories in the Bible—including favorites like Jonah and the giant fish, or David and Goliath—are part of one long story. It's the true story of the real world: from creation and fall to redemption and future consummation.

Christians believe that the Bible, God's word written, is (1) trustworthy and true; (2) sufficient for helping Christians to live out their citizenship in heaven on earth, anytime and anywhere. Let's examine these points.

1 The whole Bible is trustworthy because it is the word of a trustworthy God: “God is not man, that he should lie” (NUMBERS 23:19). The true God speaks and acts; the God who speaks and shows himself in Jesus Christ is the true God.

✎ *The Psalmist declares that “all [God’s] precepts are trustworthy” (PSALM 111:7). The apostle Paul, centuries later, agrees: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 TIMOTHY 1:15).*

God's word is true because it, more than anything else, can be relied on, come what may. Jesus put it like

this: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (MATTHEW 24:35). Human wisdom has limits; even the best scientists make mistakes. Christians trust the testimony of the apostles not because they were geniuses, but because they were witnesses commissioned by Christ and guided by his Spirit. The risen Lord himself declares of this apostolic testimony: “These words are trustworthy and true” (REVELATION 22:6). ▀

2 Everything in the Bible is true, yes, but that’s not to say that the Bible contains all the truth there is. The Bible is not a magic 8-Ball that answers every question put to it. If we look to Scripture for specific teaching about where to invest our stocks, whom to marry, how to cure cancer, or which presidential candidate to vote for, we’ll come away disappointed. God says “my word . . . shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (ISAIAH 55:11). Christians affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, yes, but sufficiency for what, exactly?

Everything depends on our understanding why God has spoken and what his word is for. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching . . . that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 TIMOTHY 3:16–17). The Bible gives us everything we need to know for our salvation and for our mission of becoming citizens of the gospel—living out God’s story. Its truth and authority pertain first and

foremost to God and the gospel. The Bible contains everything we need to know about Jesus Christ.

Reading the Bible is like wearing glasses that enable us for the first time to see the world as it really is.

Reading with the “eyeglasses of faith” enables us to see God as he is and ourselves as we are.



two

What Scripture Is About: One Holy Nation, Under God

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples. (EXODUS 19:5)

It's one thing to claim the Bible is a single story, quite another to say what unifies it. What holds this sprawling, 750,000 word, two-testament tome together? What connects the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane, the exile of Israel and the cross of Christ, the beginning (GENESIS) and the end (REVELATION)?

God's story is a tale of two cities.▀ Each city is also a kingdom, with its own *people*, *place*, and *prince*.

There is conflict, even war, between the two cities. The Bible recounts the fall of one city and the future of the other.

➤ There are **three common misconceptions** about the Bible. First, the Bible is primarily about religion—what humans do to make themselves acceptable to God. “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings” (ISAIAH 1:11). Second, the Bible is primarily about morality. It is not about being good or doing good to earn God’s favor. That way lies works, not grace. Third, and most surprisingly, the Bible is primarily about salvation. It is not a how-to book for escaping the fires of hell and going to heaven.

Each of those stories is too small, and too individualistic. Each of those stories err by centering on us, not God. To really understand the whole of Scripture, we have to remember one big thing: God is not a part of our story. It is we who are part of God’s story.

In the beginning, God decided to share his life with others, so he created a world to be the home of creatures—covenant partners—who bore his image. Adam and Eve, the first humans, were vice-regents: stewards of God’s garden, charged with ruling wisely in his place. “And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion . . . over every living thing’” (GENESIS 1:28).

In every story, the heroes have some problem or conflict to resolve. It does not take long to appear. The Serpent questioned, then denied God’s word

“Did God actually say?”—GENESIS 3:1). This led Adam and Eve to do the one thing they should not have done. Their sin was not their fondness for forbidden fruit, but their disbelief and disobedience. To trust any other word than God’s is to lose one’s grip on reality. The Bible depicts the devil as “a liar and the father of lies” (JOHN 8:44) and sinners as lost wanderers.

After Adam and Eve forsake God’s word, things go from bad to worse. Sin quickly disorders the created order. Just a few chapters later, the human race builds a tower reaching up to the heavens. The tower of Babel is a failed monument to self-centeredness. It is the exact opposite kind of place God originally set out to make. The people in that place exalt themselves, creatures, over their Creator. Babel (later Babylon) is the city of Man.

The story is far from over. God refuses to abandon his original project to create a place on earth to dwell in harmony with people. Instead, he reboots his plan. He chooses Abraham, who *believes* God (GENESIS 15:6; ROMANS 4:3; GALATIANS 3:6; JAMES 2:23), and promises to make him into “a great nation” (GENESIS 12:2).

This promise is both theme and turning point in the biblical story. Everything that follows concerns the fate of God’s covenant to dwell with the children of Abraham in the land of Canaan (GENESIS 17:4–8). The New Testament says that Abraham “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose

designer and builder is God” (HEBREWS 11:10). The promise comes with an addendum that will figure prominently later in the story: *all* people on earth will be blessed through Abraham (GENESIS 12:3).

God proves himself as good as his word when he rescues Abraham’s descendants from slavery in Egypt. The Exodus is the great saving event of the Old Testament. God frees Israel from bondage so that the people can worship God in their own land: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (EXODUS 19:6). As we’ve seen, the Bible also describes this covenant as God taking the people as his bride (JEREMIAH 2:2; REVELATION 21:2).

The rest of the Old Testament traces the history of this covenant relationship. Exodus and Leviticus provide Israel with guidelines for holy living, an essential requirement for a holy nation. Will the people live up to their responsibilities? Will they respect the law God gave them on Mount Sinai (EXODUS 20) that marked them as God’s chosen people? Or will they repeat Adam’s mistake and fail to trust and obey God’s word? Such questions provide the story’s suspense: will Israel keep her pledge to have no other gods, or will she be unfaithful? (Spoiler alert: the people turn out to be serial adulterers).

The Old Testament is the story of God’s faithfulness—and Israel’s poor citizenship. Immediately after being delivered from Egypt, they grumble against God. The result: forty years

of wilderness wandering. Act I of Israel's history ends with the people not yet in the right place (the Promised Land); not yet in right relation (obedience) to the Lord.

Act II is "Israel settled in the Promised Land." And they lived happily ever after. Well, not quite. Instead of living according to God's word—the "Book of the Covenant" (EXODUS 24:7; 2 KINGS 23:2)—the people pester Samuel for a king "that we also may be like all the nations" (1 SAMUEL 8:20). This request was a major faux pas. The whole point of being a holy nation was to be different.

God nevertheless gives them a king (David) and appoints a place (Mount Zion/Jerusalem) for his temple—the "house" symbolizing God's presence with his people. The king's responsibility was to be a model citizen who displayed wisdom by delighting in and obeying God's law (PSALM 1). Wisdom and obedience are prominent themes in the writings of David and his son Solomon.

Alas! Like Adam, the kings (with few exceptions) "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (2 KINGS 13:2). Things in Israel go from bad to worse. The Israelites become so much like the people of other nations that they join in worshiping idols. The prophets—prosecuting attorneys for God's covenant—accuse the nation of consorting with other gods. Israel had forgotten the first commandment, one of the distinguishing marks of the holy nation: "You shall have no other gods

before me” (EXODUS 20:3). Worshiping other gods was a slap in God’s face.

Act III of Israel’s story sees the people losing the Promised Land. Some are exiled to Assyria, others to Babylon. God judges disobedience by banishing sinners from his saving presence (namely, the Jerusalem temple). The prophets alternately berate Israel and hold out hope for a future Exodus (ISAIAH 35), a new Davidic king, a new Jerusalem, and a people with new, more obedient hearts (JEREMIAH 31:33; EZEKIEL 36:26). The Old Testament ends with God’s people still waiting for life in God’s place under God’s prince.

Jesus completes Israel’s unfinished story. The two stories are tightly interwoven. Jesus is a prophet greater than Moses, a priest greater than the Levites, a king greater than David. Jesus is both prime minister and model citizen of the kingdom of God. Not only that, Jesus is the lamb of God, greater than any other sacrifice. As God in the flesh, Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 TIMOTHY 2:5), “the mediator of a new covenant” (HEBREWS 9:15). His death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice, the one that makes God’s people holy once for all. Jesus is and does everything the Jerusalem temple was and did.

This is the gospel, the good news at the heart of Christianity: God sent his son to do what Adam, Israel, her kings, and her temple failed to do. Jesus’s death and resurrection make it possible for everything to be right before God. The risen and

exalted Christ *is* the new place to fellowship with God. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (ROMANS 8:1).

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the climax of the story, but it’s not the conclusion. The church (the followers of Jesus Christ through time and geography) takes up Jesus’s cross—and the rest of his story: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (ROMANS 6:4). The church is the “the temple of the living God” (2 CORINTHIANS 6:16) made up of “living stones” (1 PETER 2:5). The people of God form a living temple because they are the place where God now dwells. The church is the “body of Christ” (1 CORINTHIANS 12:27) because its members are united to the risen Christ through his Spirit. The church is the people of God in God’s place, ruled by the Prince of Peace (ISAIAH 9:6): the city of God.

Every local congregation is an outpost of the city of God: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (EPHESIANS 2:19–21).

The process of building up and expanding the church through the ministry of the word continues. At

present, people have divided loyalties. The city of Man is made up of sinful people in a dark place ruled by the “prince of the power of the air” (EPHESIANS 2:2). The Bible is the story of how God sent light into the world to rescue people from darkness. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (COLOSSIANS 1:13). The purpose of Christian witness and evangelism is to help people “turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (ACTS 26:18).

The Bible is a tale of two cities: two peoples in two places under two different rules. It is a life and death story of light versus darkness. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton rightly calls Satan the Prince of Darkness. Living things need light; darkness means death. The good news of the Bible is this: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (ISAIAH 9:2). John describes Jesus as “the light of the world” (JOHN 8:12). He says, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (JOHN 1:4–5).

♪ In the introductory chapter to John’s gospel, he calls Jesus **“the true light, which gives light to everyone”** (JOHN 1:9). And Jesus said of himself, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (JOHN 8:12).

The Bible ends with a picture of a holy city, the new Jerusalem, “coming down out of heaven from

God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (REVELATION 21:2). A voice rings out, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people” (REVELATION 21:3). This is the inheritance promised to the saints, citizens of the new Jerusalem. This is the Christian hope: to live forever as citizens of a holy nation in the new Jerusalem with Jesus, our crown prince.



three

Reading Scripture: Five Lessons

They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (NEHEMIAH 8:8)

Summarizing the story of the Bible is time well spent. Why? The answer to that is the most important thing to remember in reading the Bible. **Lesson #1:** Keep your eye on the ball—the big picture. Don't so fixate on the trees (particular people, things, or events) that you lose your way in the forest (the whole story).

The golden rule of reading, like real estate, is location, location, location—which is to say: context,

context, context. It's often helpful to learn about the historical and cultural background of a particular biblical author. Determining a text's historical context is often difficult. Not to worry. The *canonical* context—the place of a particular text in the bigger story—is always available.

Literacy means knowing how to read and write. Reading involves more than deciphering individual words, however. Biblical literacy means understanding not only the individual words but the flow of the overarching story. Each part of the Bible makes sense only in light of the whole. Understanding means being able to fit the parts into the larger whole to which they belong. As we have seen, the “whole” is the story of how God is forming a holy nation.

Biblical literacy requires *canon sense*. Canon sense means, first, knowing how the different parts of the Bible interconnect. Certain biblical books, like Hebrews, are particularly helpful because they provide a key to unlocking the whole. For example, Hebrews explains that all the priests, sacrifices, and kings of the Old Testament were simply placeholders pointing to the real thing: Jesus Christ.

Canon sense also means knowing where we, the readers, fit into the story: “You are here.” The church at Thessalonica got ahead of itself; they thought they were already living in the last times. Paul had to write them a couple letters (1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS) explaining they were only at the *beginning* of the end.

The end—Jesus’s second coming; the return of the king—was still to come.

Biblical literacy also means knowing how to read different kinds of literature. And this is the second most important thing to remember. **Lesson #2:** Identify, and then respect, *what kind* of text you’re reading. There are many kinds of maps in the biblical atlas. Each map has its own key and legend. So, read history as history, poetry as poetry, law as law, and so forth.

Some readers try to make the text do something for which it’s not equipped. Such readers should listen to C. S. Lewis: “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is to be used.”

Take the story of Jesus. It is neither myth nor fable (2 PETER 1:16). A myth conveys a timeless truth, whether the events reported happened or not. A fable conveys a moral truth. To read the Gospels as if they were myths or fables would be to assign them the wrong kind of truth. What matters in the story of Jesus, and the history of Israel, is what happened. God has spoken; God has acted. He has made himself known; he has set the captives free. *The Bible is about what God has done, is doing, and will do to make a people his covenant partner.*

Not everything in the Bible is straightforward history. Jesus taught by telling parables, and these are *not* to be read historically. The point of these short stories is to challenge their listeners’ conventional

pictures of the kingdom of God. The way Jesus prefaces the story provides the clue to right reading. In Mark 4:26[■] Jesus lets us know what the kingdom of God is like by using a series of comparisons. He says, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.” Jesus uses the language of analogy to teach his larger point.

▶ **Mark** elaborates on Jesus’s approach to teaching: “With many such parables he spoke the word to them He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything” (MARK 4:33–34).

The Gospels themselves, though historical, function like the parables in challenging the readers’ prevailing assumptions about God. No one in the first century was expecting God to fulfill his promise to establish an everlasting kingdom through the crucifixion of an innocent man. And this brings us to the third thing to remember.

Lesson #3: Every *portion* of the Bible is directly or indirectly about Jesus. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (LUKE 24:27).

What frames each biblical book is the overarching story of God’s words and deeds. And everything—beginning, middle, and end—comes together in the Word made flesh. Jesus is the Word who was with God and was God, the one “for whom and by whom all things exist” (HEBREWS 2:10). Jesus is the hub

around which the various textual spokes of the Bible turn. If the Bible is a set of maps leading to the city of God, then Jesus is the orienting North Star.

Lesson #4: You and I are not the first people to read the Bible. Jesus promised his disciples that he would send them the Holy Spirit: “he will guide you into all the truth” (JOHN 16:13). We believe he has done just that over the centuries and across cultures.

Illumined by the Spirit, the early church formulated a “Rule of Faith”²¹ summarizing what every Christian should know: core knowledge of the gospel. The Rule states what virtually all Christians say they have heard in Scripture. Though the Rule does not have an independent authority, readers today do well to consult it. If nothing else, it serves as a precious guardrail against stubborn heretics who insist on reading the Bible in their own idiosyncratic ways.

²¹ *In the second century AD, the church father Irenaeus described the **Rule of Faith** as comprising belief in “one God, the Father Almighty” who created all things. This faith also affirms Jesus as the Son of God who appeared in human form to provide for our salvation by his death, resurrection, and ascension. The Rule of Faith esteems the vital work of the Holy Spirit, and anticipates the return of Christ to “raise anew all flesh of the whole human race.”*

There is one last thing to remember without which the other four lessons will prove worthless. **Lesson #5:** Reading rightly requires us to be hearers *and* doers

of God's word. "Doing" involves more than obeying commandments. There is more in God's word than law. God's word is primarily God's story. It is therefore God's *story* that we must do.

Doing God's story means accepting it as the true story of the world, and of our lives. The apostle Paul provides a great example: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (GALATIANS 2:20). Paul here reads the truth of his own life in light of the story of Jesus. The good news is that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 CORINTHIANS 5:19).

Doing God's story means *participating* in it. The Bible's story is a play, and readers must play their parts. Paul accepted the gospel as true, and sought to live it out: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17). We join God's story when God's Spirit unites us to God's Son, enabling us to walk according to the Spirit, as "children of light" (EPHESIANS 5:8)—and thus to become what C. S. Lewis calls "little Christs."

To read the Bible rightly ultimately requires that we read our lives in its light, for it is the one true story of God, the world, and ourselves. Just as we are to have no other gods, and no other gospels, so we are to have no other stories before Scripture. As the Protestant Reformers insisted, "Scripture alone" (*sola Scriptura*) means that the Bible is the Christians' singular and supreme authority for faith and life. Seek ye first

the story of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Biblical authority means being “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (JAMES 1:22). To read the Bible rightly—to hear and do God’s word—means continuing its story.



four

Why Reading Scripture Well Matters

All Scripture is profitable . . . for training in righteousness. (2 TIMOTHY 3:16)

Why does reading the Bible rightly matter? Jesus makes clear what matters most to him is his Great Commission: “Make disciples of all nations” (MATTHEW 28:19). A disciple is a follower. Christians are followers of Jesus. To follow Jesus, we must follow the biblical story that describes his way, truth, and life. We make disciples by teaching people how to read, follow, and enter into the biblical story.

Simply reading books about dieting will not help you lose weight. Simply having a high view of the Constitution doesn't make you a good citizen. And simply admiring Jesus does not make you a follower. Jesus wants not only hearers or readers but *doers*. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (MATTHEW 7:24). *Reading* God's word without *following* it is like building a house on the sand. "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (7:27).

All Scripture is useful for training disciples in righteousness—for being right with God and doing what is right. Both discipleship and heavenly citizenship depend on reading the Bible rightly. We follow Jesus and therefore become disciples by inhabiting his story. To "inhabit" Jesus's story means living *in* it in order to live it *out*. When we enter into the biblical story, we learn how the kingdom of heaven has come to earth, in Jesus. To understand the Bible means grasping that *Jesus now reigns*, not simply in the story of the Bible, but in and over the physical world. To be a disciple is to practice the presence of the kingdom that is in heaven here on earth.

Reading the Bible well is one way disciples practice the presence of Jesus as Lord. The Bible is profitable for training Christians to become the kind of people who understand the big picture: what God is doing

in the world, in Christ, through the Spirit, to renew creation. To live out Jesus's story in the story of our own lives is to learn how to live out on earth our citizenship in heaven.

John Calvin puts it beautifully: "Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit." Readers are the pupils. What they are learning is wisdom—how to live in the world, along the grain of the Creator's intentions, to the glory of God. Readers and doers never graduate from Scripture, but they do learn how to embody the mind of Christ in their daily lives.

All the Bible's stories, commands, poems, exhortations, teachings, and visions of the future have the same final purpose: to tell the story of the mighty acts of God that culminate in Christ, and so shape the people of God into citizens who represent well their holy nation and king. The Bible is the disciple's curriculum for wise living. It provides everything one needs to know to "put on" Christ (ROMANS 13:14; GALATIANS 3:27), the Word and wisdom of God made flesh (JOHN 1:14).

The gospel forms sinners into saints, and saints into members of the body of Christ. Local churches represent the one body of Christ that stretches over time and space. A church is a local assembly set apart for worshiping and witnessing to God. Reading the Bible forms congregations whose life together announces, celebrates, and displays the lordship of Jesus Christ. When local churches live out their role

in the biblical story, they become living parables of the kingdom of God.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus did what Adam and Israel could not. Jesus has established the kingdom of heaven on earth. In Christ, there is a holy nation. Paul asks the local church at Philippi to do just one thing: “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel” (PHILIPPIANS 1:27). The verb Paul uses here is built on the word *polis*, meaning “city.” We can translate it “live as citizens.” To live out our gospel citizenship, we first need to know what the gospel is. Then we need to conform our lives to gospel truth. The Spirit empowers believers to walk in the truth of God’s word, as “children of light” (EPHESIANS 5:8).

To understand the gospel, we need to know the big story of Scripture. We’ve seen that it’s all about what God does to form a people to be a holy nation of kings and priests, vice regents who do God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

Nothing is as important as learning to read the Bible rightly, because nothing is as important as knowing the God whose story it is and becoming players in it, citizens of his gospel. The church exists to make disciples, and this means teaching them what every person needs to know in order to be competent and responsible citizens—not of ancient Athens, but of the (heavenly) eternal Jerusalem.

Both the story of Scripture and its right reading have everything to do with forming people into

citizens of the gospel—people whom the Spirit is conforming to the mature new humanity that is in Christ. May all Bible readers become competent citizens of the gospel—disciples who in their own time and place know how to follow the words of their master and king, becoming increasingly more like him in the process.



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