

**8 WAYS TO ENGAGE THE
BIBLE WITH OUR STUDENTS**

**HOW
WE**

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**THE
BIBLE**

MATT LAIDLAW

FOREWORD BY KARA POWELL

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A BOOK TO READ

HOW IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH THE BIBLE?

If your Instruction hadn't been my delight, I would have died because of my suffering. I will never forget your precepts.

PSALM 119:92-93

MY FIRST LOOK AT THE GOOD BOOK

“I just want to kill myself.”

I stammered through these words, choking on my own tears, while driving my friend to school. Up until a few days ago, this friend had been my girlfriend. It was a sunny day, and the morning light made it even more difficult for my swollen eyes to see through my tears.

I was seventeen years old, a senior in high school, and in the middle of making decisions about college, career, relationships, and what seemed like the rest of my life.

My girlfriend had just broken up with me.

My coach cut me from the basketball team.

Nothing seemed to be fitting together the way it seemed to for others. My breaths were short and my feet felt heavy. I didn't know who I was, who my friends were, or what I was supposed to be doing with my life. Looking back, I know I was struggling with anxiety and depression, and ideally my parents, friends, and teachers would have been better equipped to see the signs and connect me to the help I needed.

I was one of the few people in West Michigan who didn't grow up going to church and with Jesus explicitly at the forefront of every part of my life. To be clear, I was raised in a loving family with remarkable parents and an awesome younger brother. From the outside looking in, we probably

seemed like a Christian family. We just didn't ever go to church on Sunday and didn't put Jesus stickers on everything. In fact, I don't remember us ever really talking about Jesus as a family, and I had never opened a Bible.

Growing up without Jesus and the Bible had been working just fine for me. I was perfectly happy sleeping in on Sunday and watching the Detroit Lions. (Ironically, growing up as a Lions fan prepared me to understand and participate in the season of Lent later in life—they are a historically bad football team.) My family and my life still contained love and meaning.

But in this moment of honesty with my ex-girlfriend that morning, I was struggling through much more than just normal teenage angst. She was the first person I had told about my dark thoughts, and I think she could tell.

She looked at me and said, “You need Jesus. I want you to come to church with me on Sunday.”

All I heard was the invitation to go somewhere with her, which highly interested me, even if it meant going to church. She was the one who had dumped me, and I was the fool who still liked her so much I was giving her a ride to school.

The following Sunday I joined her for church. I was nervous that my clothes weren't nice enough and that I wouldn't understand the version of English these people would be speaking. I assumed there was some way that people who went to church could tell immediately if you had never been to church before, and that this moment would involve a lot of shame, judgment, and embarrassment. Taking the leap to visit a church wasn't calming my anxiety at all.

Once we arrived, I found some people I recognized from school and began to talk with them, and they seemed genuinely happy to see me. I felt embraced by the new people I met, and my anxiety began to decrease. The conversations were interrupted by musicians beginning to play, and people seemed instinctively to know it was time to stop what they were doing and find seats. After several songs that were completely unfamiliar to me but well known to everyone else, an enthusiastic man in a white shirt and black pants jumped on stage and invited us to turn to the book of Leviticus. Apparently, this was part of the Bible.

People were walking up and down the aisles passing out Bibles to anyone who needed one. I raised my hand and someone sent a book my way.

While holding my breath, I somehow was able to find the correct place in the Bible by following the page numbers and passage references projected on a large screen in the front of the room.

And for the first time in my life, at age seventeen, I cracked open this book, the Bible, and began reading.

The pastor made several jokes about the book of Leviticus being a strange place to begin a sermon, which I didn't understand until I actually started reading. If you're not familiar with Leviticus, it is filled with instructions about temple worship, ritual sacrifice, dietary laws, and other obscure guidelines for the ancient religious worship of the Israelites. I was immediately lost.

The sermon started in Leviticus, but progressed from the front of the Bible, where Leviticus is located, all way through to what seemed like near the end of the Bible, to

the Gospel of John. Each passage we looked up would have been confusing if I were reading on my own, but the explanation provided by the pastor not only made sense of the parts of the Bible we were reading, it also intersected with my life in a way that sparked curiosity. Somehow, all these passages fit together and seemed invitational and compelling.

While my first experience at church impacted me in several significant ways, it primarily provoked a curiosity about the Bible that was unexplainable to me at the time. My ex-girlfriend who brought me to church that morning later purchased a Bible for me, and over the next several months I kept going to church on my own and reading the Bible

Most of what I was reading didn't make sense, but there was something about it that kept pulling me further and further in.

every moment I could. I started carrying it around during the day and reading it between classes and during free time at school, even staying up late at night reading.

I couldn't put it down.

After just a few months, I had read the entire New Testament several times and had begun working my way through the Old Testament. Most of what I

was reading didn't make sense, but there was something about it that kept pulling me further and further in.

The Bible was satisfying me while also leaving me wanting

more in the best possible way.

But it was doing more than satisfying me.

The Bible was saving me.

It was saving me from my despair, and pointing me to something, and someone, that offered so much more than I had ever experienced before. And all of the friends I made at church encouraged me to keep it up.

Keep reading.

Just keep reading.

Before I had a relationship with Jesus, I discovered a connection with the Bible. I have often described this season of my life as the beginning of my “personal relationship with the Bible.” And while I knew nothing about doctrine or words like inerrant, infallible, or inspired, I was falling in love with the stories and poems that portrayed the loving relationship others have had with this book throughout history.

Little did I know this relationship would shape the next twenty years of my life in ways I couldn’t have imagined.

FROM YOUTH TO YOUTH WORKER

Just under seven years after my first experience at church and my first time reading the Bible, I found myself leading

a high school ministry at a large church with over one hundred adult volunteers and many more students. The story of how I accidentally became a youth pastor is one for another day, but I was excited about working with high school students, and even more excited about sharing my love for the Bible with them.

However, I hit some massive speed bumps right out of the gate.

All of my passion and excitement about the Bible was met with discomfort, nervousness, and even some embarrassment. Most of my students had grown up in church and many went to Christian school, and yet the majority of them were admittedly completely unfamiliar with the Bible. They lacked the confidence to open it or read it on their own.

Despite attempting to remedy this during my first four years serving in youth ministry, this lack of confidence came to fruition one spring at our senior retreat. In the midst of sharing hopes and fears about the coming season of life, one of our more reserved students vulnerably shared, “I’m actually just really afraid. I’m afraid that I don’t have all of the Bible verses I need to make it through this summer and into my first semester of college. I don’t know where to find them.”

There was a sense of agreement in the room from the other students and leaders. His honesty created space for everyone else to acknowledge they had the same feelings. Aside from empathy for the fear and insecurity expressed by this student, I also experienced a sense of devastation and disappointment.

Despite four years in our high school ministry, and all my best efforts, this student believed there were verses in the Bible about how to survive your first year out of high school and he was scared he didn't know where to find them. He didn't really know what the Bible was about or what kind of content it actually contained. As a mature and intelligent eighteen-year-old who would be moving out of state to attend an academically rigorous university, he was

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essentially confessing he still needed a pastor to spoon-feed him the Bible. This student loved Jesus and loved the church and was the sort of kid every youth pastor wishes to have, yet he didn't have any idea how to read the Bible on his own.

But this isn't just the story of my students and my youth group.

According to the Sticky Faith research conducted by the Fuller Youth

Institute, at the end of high school, only 42 percent of students in youth groups said they read the Bible weekly, and only 12 percent read their Bibles daily.¹ In other words, significantly less than half of our youth group graduates are

¹ Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 143. See fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith.

reading the Bible more than once each week.

But before we all start lamenting the apparent biblical illiteracy of today's young people, it's worth saying that what also surprised me during my first season as a high school pastor was this: Despite the declared love for the Bible among most of our adult volunteers, many of them were also uncomfortable with Scripture, and felt inadequate opening and reading a Bible with students. In fact, many of my volunteers actively resisted my attempts to set them up to do this well.

They wanted our teaching to be "Bible-based," they wanted the curriculum to teach "biblical values," but when I wanted them to actually read the Bible with students, I often received blank stares. When I asked students after their small group meeting each week if they opened their Bibles together as a group, they usually replied, "No."

I don't believe that young people are uninterested in reading the Bible—they just don't know how. My experience tells me that most adults are not equipped to cultivate this interest among students. Most of the adult volunteers and students I know who aren't comfortable with opening and reading the Bible have never had someone model it, do it with them, and let them try it in the context of a relationship.

They've never been mentored or apprenticed in this area of their faith.

And they're also likely feeling somewhere between insecure and embarrassed about it. Maybe you can relate.

While every church and youth group is different, I don't think this reality was unique to the youth ministry I was

leading. Despite youth ministry's propensity to tape Bible verses on every wall, website, brochure, and T-shirt, many of us haven't created cultures in our youth ministries where Bible reading is as familiar as dodgeball and pizza.

And when opening the Bible actually seems too scary, the temptation is just to play more games and eat more snacks.

I'm not advocating that we change all of our youth gatherings into two-hour Bible studies, and I don't think that normalizing Bible reading in our youth group has to come at the expense of fun.

Nor do I think studying the Bible with young people has to mean more proof-texting

or

more forced Scripture memorization

or

more "making the Bible relevant" (as if we're the ones "making" the Bible into something)

or

more "read the Bible and it will fix all of your problems"

or

more "here are the ten verses on why you shouldn't do drugs"

or

more "if you're not reading the Bible you're not a real

Christian” sort of shaming

or

more “let me tell you what the Bible means.”

Instead, I’m talking about normalizing reading the Bible in your life and in your ministry. I’m not talking about anything other than considering that the Bible is a book worth reading, and inviting your students to immerse themselves in this book and its stories. As a seventeen-year-old senior in high school, simply being invited into a relationship with the Bible saved my life by introducing me to the God whose story it tells, and I believe this simple invitation could save the lives of others as well.

In ministry, I came to realize that one of the most important tasks I’d have as a high school pastor would be to continue to normalize Bible reading as part of my own life, as a part of our ministry culture, and hopefully as a part of the lives of our volunteers and students.

And if I had to guess, I bet you have some work to do on this, too.

Every time you’re with your students and other leaders, you have the opportunity to model the practice of reading the Bible. Every time you’re giving a talk, leading a small group, or hosting a training, you have the opportunity to apprentice individuals and your entire community toward growing their own relationship with the Bible.

Even if you’re not in charge of your youth ministry, your personal practice of reading the Bible and your willingness to apprentice others can influence a ministry culture of

Bible reading. My spiritual journey began with reading this book we call the Bible, and this is likely the most helpful starting point, or restarting point, for you and the young people with whom you've been entrusted.

“Formed by our reading of Scripture, we become better readers of Scripture. This is not because we become better skilled at applying biblical principles. The practice of reading Scripture is not about learning how to mold the biblical message to contemporary lives and modern needs. Rather, the Scriptures yearn to reshape how we comprehend our lives and identify our greatest needs. We find in Scripture who we are and what we might become, so that we come to share its assessment of our situation, encounter its promise of restoration, and hear its challenge to serve God’s good news.”

—*JOEL B. GREEN*²

² Joel B. Green, “Cultivating the Practice of Reading Scripture,” Catalyst resources, <http://www.catalystresources.org/cultivating-the-practice-of-reading-scripture/>. Emphasis added. Also see Green’s *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

SO, HOW'S YOUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIBLE?

If you're serving as a youth worker or grew up in the church, you may have experienced seasons in your life when you couldn't put the Bible down. You may have had a sense of "that's me!" when you read the story of my growing "personal relationship with the Bible." It's likely you're one of the countless people over thousands of years who just couldn't stop reading. And you read and you read and you read and you loved it.

It's also possible that you grew up in a church culture or work in an environment where, because you read and you read and you read, you don't love it like you once did. Or possibly you were never given the opportunity to love it because of the way you were taught to read it. Perhaps Scripture has been used in your life in a way that causes fear or confusion.

For some of you, reading this book may be as close as you've been to desiring to actually read the Bible. And we all can picture the faces of our students who haven't demonstrated a hunger to dive into the words of Scripture. Regardless of where you or your students are, or where you're coming from in your own relationship with the Bible, actually reading it is the necessary starting or restarting point on this journey. If you want the young people who

have been entrusted to your care to have a deep and meaningful relationship with the Bible, then that starts with you.

Have you ever had a leader or volunteer in your youth ministry who always listened to a specific rap artist or followed a certain sports team, and in a short amount of time all of the young people that person led or spent time with suddenly started listening to that rapper or following that sports team? Funny how that works, isn't it? Or, if you're a youth worker and you have a spouse or partner or kids, don't your students know about them? Don't they desire to become more familiar with them, even if it's from a distance?

Why does this happen?

It's because we can't help but share the things and the people we love with others.

If something or someone is a meaningful part of your life, others will take notice and follow.

What is influencing you will inevitably influence others.

So how is your own relationship with the Bible these days? Is it time for you to dust off that book on your nightstand and begin again?

If yes, I want to encourage you to start reading.

Keep reading.

Don't stop reading.

And if you read, eventually, they will too.

TRY THIS ... IN YOUR LIFE:

- Purchase a new Bible, preferably a translation you've never read so that familiar words and stories will seem new and fresh, and start reading!
- Find an audio version of the Bible, and make a commitment to listen whenever you're driving, exercising, washing dishes, before bed, etc., for a season.
- Find an online Bible reading plan that isn't overly ambitious, but will stretch you into new habits.
- Tell your pastor or supervisor that you want to try to cultivate a culture of Bible reading in your ministry, and that needs to start in your own life. Ask for support and accountability to make Bible reading part of your daily "work."
- Don't always read the Bible alone. Ask some friends or colleagues to join you on this journey. Meeting together to read the Bible with one another on a semi-regular basis, or reading the same Scriptures even if you're not together, will encourage you and hold you accountable.
- View reading the Bible as a relationship. There will be good days and bad days. All you can do is create opportunities and environments where you can fall in love (maybe for the second or third time).

TRY THIS ... IN YOUR MINISTRY:

- Don't assume your students and leaders have their own Bible. Ask them if they do and offer to provide one if they don't.
- Invite your team to bring their own Bible to youth group each week. Not just a mobile app version, but a paper version. Our brains encode thoughts and memories differently when we read, turn, and mark physical pages.
- Invite students to bring their own Bibles each week.
- As you teach, only list Bible verse references in your presentations and on the screen, rather than entire passages. Have plenty of extra Bibles for guests and those who forgot them and invite students and volunteers to actually turn to the verses you want to read in their Bibles, and teach them how to find them.
- Teach from your own Bible.

- As you teach and lead, share your own struggles with reading the Bible [“this was/is confusing to me,” “this is a strange story,” “I used to think this was boring,” etc.].
- Make daily Bible readings available to your students and volunteers via website/social media/apps, etc. Not all will do it, but for some, your making it available is all they need to get going.
- Explain to parents why this is important for the formation of their kids’ faith, and invite them on this journey as well.

HOW WE READ THE BIBLE:

8 Ways to Engage the Bible With Our Students

This book is for anyone who has struggled to know how to open the Bible with young people in large groups, small groups, Sunday school, mentoring relationships, or through camps and retreats. Drawing from over a dozen years of FYI's research with young people and churches, this resource focuses in on Matt's own experience reading the Bible firsthand and attempting to teach it to students as a youth pastor.

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