Reading with Your Ears
How to Hear God’s Voice in the Bible

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Introduction

Welcome to Reading with Your Ears: How to Hear God’s Voice in the Bible. This guide is designed to help you recognize the voice, the heart, and the hand of God in Scripture by learning to read the Bible interactively and conversationally.

Have you ever stopped to think how amazing it is that God wants to talk to you? The creator of the universe, the Almighty God himself wants to talk to you! He loves you. He is concerned about every aspect of your life. He has something to say to you every day. And he wants to hear from you every day, too. As followers of Christ, we can all have conversations with God. We just need to learn how to listen.

The primary way to get to know God’s voice is to get to know his Word. The Bible is the starting place of your conversation with God. It’s a personal letter that reveals the deepest thoughts and feelings of its Author toward you, the one to whom it was written. God has given us the Bible as a means of knowing him and enjoying his presence. It is a catalyst for worship and prayer.

St. Ambrose said, “As in Paradise, God walks in the Holy Scriptures, seeking man.” This profound insight leads us to a question: When God finds me in his Word, what will I say to him?

The problem many of us have with the Bible is that we just don’t know how to be found in it. Our reading becomes programmed or guilt-driven, and we miss out on the life-changing power of God’s words and the joy of his friendship.

We make our commitments to read through the Bible in a year, and then fail within a few days. I know. I’ve been there . . . many times. The result is that the Bible remains a mysterious religious artifact and its power remains locked within its cover, only to be released by a select few “spiritual” people who are able to interpret its secrets. We may have a desire to read it, but our failed attempts leave us feeling defeated and hopeless, and the Bible is relegated to a dusty bookshelf. The truth is, it’s not enough to have a Bible in our homes—we must have it in our hearts.

The Problem of Time

One of the most common barriers to the devotional life is time. We just don’t seem to have enough time to read the Bible . . . and so we don’t read it at all. But that is like saying, “I don’t have time to sit down to a five course meal. Therefore, I will never eat anything.” Far too many of us are spiritually under-nourished. So how can we overcome the problem of time?

Here’s the rule I follow: Use whatever time you have, but take your time while using it. Even if you only have five minutes, use five minutes. It’s better to eat something than nothing. And I believe you will find that if you give it just five minutes, you will come away from the “meal” wanting more. The more you feed on the Word, the hungrier you
will become. Eventually, you will set more and more time aside for your conversations with God. So start with the time you have.

By applying the guidelines in this booklet over the next six weeks, my hope is that you will start a life-long conversation with God. So, let’s begin.
Key Questions about Reading the Bible

What’s unique about the Bible?
The Bible is a living book that continues to speak and write itself on the hearts of God’s redeemed people. It is God’s divine, progressive, written revelation of himself to mankind.

The central theme of the Bible is God’s redemption of humanity. Its central figure is Jesus Christ. Its central message is the supremacy of a loving God. The Bible is inerrant, infallible, and perfectly trustworthy. It is the ultimate authority and standard for Christian living.

The Bible is one book with one Author—the Holy Spirit. Yet it is also a collection of sixty-six books, written over a period of 1,500 years by over forty different writers. There are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven books in the New Testament. Neither testament can be fully understood apart from the other, as each one sheds light on the other. The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old Testament is revealed in the New.

Why do I need to read the Bible?
The Bible is the starting place of your friendship with God. Reading the Bible is reading God’s mind. It teaches us what he says and how he thinks. It reveals not just what he did, but how he does things. When we read his words, we get to know his character—not just becoming familiar with his book, but becoming friends with the Author himself. The more we get to know him, the more we become like him in thought, word, action, and character.

Just as your body cannot survive without food, your soul cannot survive without the Bible. Pastor Rick Warren refers to the Bible as “soul food.” It is spiritual food that causes spiritual health, resulting in spiritual growth. Without it, you will wither. Jesus said, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4 NIV).

The Word of God is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path, and a mirror to our soul (Psalm 119:105; James 1:23). The Bible is not so much a map as it is a compass. It keeps us on the proper heading. Just as the star led the wise men to Jesus, the Bible keeps us pointed in the right direction and lights our path toward Christlikeness.

Where should I start?
The Bible does not have to be read in sequential order, although that kind of reading can be very beneficial. You can start anywhere. God can meet you in any book, on any page, in any verse of Scripture. He is omnipresent in his Word.

The Bible says, All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV).
I suggest you take these steps to decide where to start:

- **Begin with prayer.** Ask the Lord where he wants you to go. He knows what he wants to say to you. Come to him in faith and ask him to direct you to the right book.

- **Review section headings for guidance.** Most Bibles break up the chapters with section headings that summarize what you are about to read. You might want to review these headings to select a book that speaks to you.

- **Don’t bite off more than you can chew.** Some books are much harder to read than others. You’ll know pretty quickly if you’re in over your head. Begin by reading what captures your interest. There is plenty of time to get into the harder books as you become more familiar with God’s voice and manner. Eventually, you will read them all. But start simple.

If you are new to Bible reading, you might choose a narrative book, like Genesis, Ruth, 1 Samuel, or one of the Gospels, or consider reading a short book from the New Testament.

**Should I skip around or read one book at a time?**

Once you have chosen a book, stay with the book all the way to its conclusion. Let God finish his train of thought.

Have you ever been quoted out of context? Your meaning can be twisted to say things you never intended to say. It’s the same with the Scriptures. It’s important to read whole books so you understand the context of key passages that otherwise might be misunderstood or misapplied.

While it is best to read a book all the way through, you may find a tugging in your heart to return to a passage again and again. Yield to it. Keep going back until you sense a freedom to move on. But every time you come back, ask the Lord what he wants you to learn. I recently spent six weeks in three chapters of the Gospel of John, reading and re-reading, pondering and questioning, wondering and discovering. With every reading, I noticed something I hadn’t seen before. And I still came away with unanswered questions.

Sometimes a passage will speak to you as though the words had been written at that very moment. I have often found that when I read a familiar passage at a different time of life, I see or hear something I didn’t catch before. As I said earlier, the Bible is a living book that continues to speak and write itself on our hearts. A.W. Tozer wrote that we should “approach our Bible with the idea that it is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is now speaking . . . God’s speaking is in the continuous present.”

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12 NIV).
How to Read Conversationally

There are many ways to read the Bible. The method I suggest in this booklet is one I’ve used for years. I have found it to be much more personal and profound than any other way of reading. I call it Conversational Reading.

The best way to get to know God is in conversation. Bible reading should become a conversation with the Word of God as you read, listen, think about, and respond to what the text says. Ask the Lord: “What are you saying to me? Is there something in the way of my understanding? What am I missing? What do you want me to do?”

Conversational Reading is active and interactive. It is reading for depth, not for distance. Unlike other methods of Bible reading, the goal is not to see how far you can go, but how deep you can go.

While reading for distance can give you an idea of the scope of the Bible, reading for depth enables you to experience the heart of the Author. When you read this way, you will spend a lot of time in just one book of the Bible before you move on to another.

The key to Conversational Reading can be summed up in two words: Slow down. Take your time. God is not in a hurry. You don’t have to be in a hurry, either. Can you imagine having a conversation with someone who is always rushing you to finish your sentence? If we wouldn’t want to be treated that way, why would we treat God that way? But that’s precisely what we do when we race our way through Scripture.

Here are the six steps to this kind of reading:

1. **Open your heart.** Begin by committing your heart and mind to God. Ask him to speak to you. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you in a fresh way for a new day. The Bible makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 that without the Holy Spirit, the things of God will not make any sense to us. So before you open the book, open your heart. Start with a moment of prayer. Let your prayer be like Samuel’s prayer in 1 Samuel 3:10, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

2. **Read it once.** Read the chapter all the way through. Don’t stop to puzzle over things. Keep reading to the end of the chapter. Don’t worry about the details at this point—focus on the big picture. In other words, get an aerial view of the neighborhood before you start going door-to-door. This will give you an overview and a context for what you are seeing and hearing. Many times your questions will be answered in the next verse or two. So, read slowly through the chapter, but don’t linger on things quite yet.

3. **Unpack it.** Now read the chapter a second time by breaking it into sections. Read conversationally, with a pen in your hand. Underline key words and phrases. Read even slower. Vocalize as you go. Ask questions. Notice verbs. Pay attention to time-related words such as “after,” “before,” “at that time,” “since,” etc. Think about the choice of words. Listen for repeated words and phrases. Look for patterns.
As you read the chapter this second time, take as much time as you need—even a few days, if necessary. Be sensitive to the nudges of the Holy Spirit. You might sense God wanting you to stop and focus on a key verse or phrase. So stop. Go back and read it again, like asking someone to repeat himself. Think about what God is saying to you.

Draw out the essence of each sentence by focusing on and underlining key phrases. Then summarize and apply the verse or phrase by restating it to yourself. For example,

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV) *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.* (Summary: The word of God is at work in you who believe. Application: If I believe, then the word of God is at work in me! Question: What evidence do I see of that work?)

1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV) *Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?* (Summary: You are God’s temple; God’s Spirit lives in you. Application: I am God’s temple; his Spirit lives in me. Question: How will that impact the way I live?)

Short, simple summaries like these can build your faith and give you a strong, memorable grip on Scriptural truths. Ultimately, you want to be able to explain the entire verse or passage in your own words. It’s not enough just to know what the Bible says; you also need to know what the Bible means. If you can’t put it in your own words, then you don’t truly know what it is saying.

This is the essence of conversational reading: restating to God in your own words what you heard him say in the Scriptures. Then respond to God with your thoughts and prayers, based on the passage you just read.

Your response can take on any number of forms. You might respond with a short prayer of thanksgiving or praise. You might feel the need to confess or make a commitment to the Lord. You might pray a prayer of intercession for someone you know, or a prayer of petition for yourself. The response is up to you and should flow naturally from what God has said to you in his Word.

4. **Read it again.** Read the chapter a third time. This time focus only on the portions you underlined. This will reinforce the key points that God has brought to your attention. Be aware, though, that the next time you read this chapter, you might very well see and hear something you missed the last time you read it. Remember, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12 NIV).
The key phrase to note here is that “the word of God is living and active.” It is not static. It is dynamic. It speaks unchanging truths to our ever-changing “thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” It’s sort of like listening to the radio. The station is airing its music 24 hours a day, but we cannot hear it unless we are tuned in.

The Word of God speaks unchanging truth that we may not hear until our “thoughts and attitudes” tune us in to what God has been saying all along. Or to look at it another way, you can take aspirin all day long, but you really won’t appreciate its effect until you suffer some kind of pain that the aspirin relieves.

For instance, Isaiah 26:3 says, “You, Lord, will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is staid on you, because he trusts in you.” I committed those words to memory when I was 15 years old. I thought they were beautiful and full of promise. But they took on an entirely new depth of meaning when I faced a crisis as a 45 year old adult. I had taken the “aspirin” of Isaiah 26:3 for years, but I didn’t appreciate its power until I suffered a deep wound that it was able to relieve. And that is the wonder of the Bible. Like its Author, whose “mercies are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22-23), so the Bible has something new to say every day.

5. Move on. After you have read the chapter a third time, move on to the next chapter, repeating the same process, until you finish the book. This will likely take multiple sittings over time. Remember, you’re not in a hurry.

6. Revisit the conversation. When you reach the end of the book, go back to the beginning and read all of the underlined portions. By following this process, you will have read the book four times before moving on to your next book.

Martin Luther best summarized this reading method when he wrote;

I study my Bible as I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest might fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake each branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf.

When you approach the Bible this way, reading becomes a conversation—not just with a book, but with a Person. It’s very much like reading a letter from a close friend. You not only read his words, but you hear his tone of voice, you see the smile on his face, you feel the pain in his heart. You are no longer deciphering characters on a page. Instead, you are experiencing the character of the Author. His warmth and kindness come through the words and touch your emotions.

Some Encouragement Before You Start

Remember, the key to conversational reading is to take your time. God is not in a hurry. You might find some chapters can be done all at once, while others could take several days to complete. That’s OK. Enjoy the conversation. Mine the passage for all its worth.

A few years ago, I taught this method to a group of men in Colorado and suggested they practice together by reading Romans 12. A year later, their pastor told me the group was
still in Romans 12! They had met once a month for a full year, mining the gold from this single chapter and sharing the wealth they had discovered with each other.

Trust this process. Remember, the Holy Spirit who inspired the words when they were written is the same Holy Spirit who inspires the words when you read them. The Holy Spirit told Moses, David, Samuel, Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, the writers of the gospels, and all the other Bible writers what to say. Those are his words, and he will use his words to speak to you.

The process is simple: read, meditate, pray. Or to put it another way: listen, think, respond. This is the process of any good conversation. You listen to what the other person is saying, think about it, and then respond.

Let the conversation engage your thoughts and emotions. Ask yourself, “What do I think about this? What do I feel about this?” If you do not allow your emotions to engage, it will be a dry, intellectual exercise. So involve your whole person in the process.

You will probably find it helpful to write down your thoughts. So try keeping a journal of your Bible reading and prayer responses.

This kind of meditative reading is not about inserting your subjective opinions into the text, but drawing God’s objective truth out of the text, applying it to your life, and responding to God with prayer. By doing this, you are letting God direct the conversation. In a very real sense, you are agreeing with God in prayer.

What about notes, commentaries, and cross-references?
Before you consult the study notes in your Bible or a commentary book, be sure to read the entire passage and let it speak to you on its own merits. Encounter the passage without prejudice or presumption.

Study notes and commentaries are very helpful tools and I highly recommend them (and use them myself, quite often). But the negative side to them is that if consulted too early, they can limit your understanding of the passage by letting someone else think for you. You will look at the subject through their filtered lens. Bible commentaries are based on other men’s conversations with the text. God may have something else to discuss with you. Let God speak first; then hear from others. If you read the text first and ponder its message on your own, then a commentary can think with you instead of thinking for you.

The Bible is its own best commentary. It is filled with parallels and other support passages. You might choose to jot down cross references as they come to mind. To help facilitate this, get a concordance for the version you are reading and use it to look up words that remind you of other passages. Then write the references to these verses in the margin of your Bible.

At the end of this booklet, you will find a list of free on-line resources, such as electronic Bibles, concordances, and other study materials that will help you in your study. You will
also find a brief explanation and samples of the different English translations of the Bible.
Guidelines for Rewarding Reading

1. **Don’t obsess about finding something new.** In fact, if you think you have seen something in the Bible that no one else has ever seen, then it’s probably wrong. That’s why it is so important for us to share our insights with other trusted men and women of God who can help us clarify our thinking. At the same time, try to read with fresh eyes. Invite the Lord to speak to you in a new way.

2. **Read slowly.** This is an exploration, not a race.

3. **Read prayerfully.** Talk to God while you’re reading. Ask him for wisdom and understanding.

4. **Read openly.** Come to the Bible with an open heart and open ears. Approach the text with a predisposition to obey what God prompts you to do.

5. **Don’t worry about the things you don’t understand.** Move on to the things you do understand. Pray for God’s wisdom. Ask him to open your eyes and ears and heart, and then keep reading slowly until something catches your attention. You may stop at something different each time.

6. **Read at a leisurely pace all the way through the assigned passage.** Then, as time allows, go back to the beginning of the passage and read it again, slower this time. Pay attention to word choices, time elements, and verb tenses. Use a pen to underline key words that have special meaning to you. Then read the passage a third time, paying extra attention to the parts you underlined.

7. **When something catches your attention—a paragraph, verse, phrase, or even a single word—stop and think about it.** Try to find the essence of the message. Put it into your own words. What do you think God is trying to tell you in this place? What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are your thoughts and feelings? How are you responding?

8. **Keep a journal.** Use the sample journal page toward the end of this booklet to help you record your thoughts. Be sure to date your entries. Then at a future date, you can look back at what you wrote and remember what God said to you at that time in your life.
Meditating versus Memorizing

You may have noticed that I have not said anything about memorizing verses. There’s a reason for this. Many people practice the spiritual discipline of memorizing Bible verses. I would never discourage them from doing that. But while memorizing a verse may enable you to recite it, it doesn’t necessarily mean you understand it. What I am proposing is not Bible memorization, but Bible meditation.

In meditation, you fill your mind with the Word of God and focus your attention on what it says. When you meditate on Scripture, you are able to digest its meaning and apply it to your life. And by meditating, you will inevitably find that you have also memorized the verse. If you set out only to memorize, you can easily imprint data into your memory, but its meaning may escape you. In memorizing a verse, you read it until you remember the words; in meditating on a verse, you read it until you understand what it means. When you memorize a verse, you begin to own it. But when you meditate on a verse, it begins to own you.

Bible meditation engages us at our intellectual, emotional, and experiential levels all at once. It leads to a stronger and more comprehensive kind of memorization than a mere rote exercise. There’s a rather remarkable difference between reading about a kiss and experiencing a kiss. Rote memorization is like reading the instructions for a kiss. Meditation is applying what you’ve read to real life. You are more likely to remember something you have experienced than something you have only read about. As Peter Kreeft says, “If you stand in the street, you’ll get hit by a truck. If you stand in [the Bible], you’ll get kissed by God. It is God’s mistletoe.”
What Happens when Nothing Happens?

Before I answer that question, let me say this: the Bible is a spiritual book, and reading it is an act of faith. Just because you don’t think or feel that you are getting anything out of your reading, that doesn’t mean you aren’t. What’s important is that you’re feeding on the Word of God—your daily bread. It is nourishing your soul in ways you are not aware of.

There are several reasons why it might seem like nothing is happening when you read. Some passages are harder than others. You could be distracted. You could be tired. There could be sin in your life. You could be reading a passage that is not particularly interesting to you at the time. God might want you to go back to something you were reading the previous day so he can finish his thought. Or perhaps he is speaking to you, but you just aren’t aware of it.

What’s most important is that you come to the Bible in faith. Everything you do for God must be done in faith. Our thoughts and feelings can play tricks on us. Therefore, we must trust the Holy Spirit to speak through the Word of God, regardless of how we feel about our time spent in the Bible.

God does not always work on a conscious level with us. Many times, he is working deep within our hearts, in areas and in ways that we do not recognize. Sometimes something you read will come back to your memory later that day, as the Holy Spirit brings the Word to bear in a situation you face. The main thing to remember is to be faithful. Come to the Word each day with an expectation that God will speak to you.

If you don’t sense him stopping you in the text, then just keep reading faithfully . . . slowly . . . until he stops you. It might not happen today, but it will happen eventually. Regardless, you will be feasting on the Word of God, “which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV).

It’s important not to try to control the conversation. Just surrender to the Word of God. Come with an open heart, open hands, open eyes, open ears, and an open mind.
Putting it into Practice

It doesn’t do you any good to fill your head with knowledge if you live a life that is lacking in obedience. Jesus said in Matthew 7:24,26 (NIV) "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock . . . But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."

The Bible also says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says . . . Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (James 1:22; 4:17NIV)

As you read, listen for the voice of God. Look for the mind of God. Read with a heart that is predisposed to obedience. Come to the Bible unguarded. Otherwise, it’s like coming to the doctor but refusing to let him examine you—or, having been examined, refusing his regimen of treatment. Don’t say, “Lord, tell me what you want and then I’ll say yes.” Instead, say “Yes.” Then he will tell you what he wants.

Act on what God says. He is not likely to tell you anything new if you have not acted on what he has already told you. Don’t be guilty of selective obedience. God’s instructions are not options. Remember, it’s the Holy Spirit who is guiding the conversation. He turns on the lights in his timing; but once the lights are turned on, you must deal with whatever was hidden in the dark. Ask him what he wants you to do about it and then obey.

A Quick Review to Get You Started
Over the next six weeks, apply the ideas and methods I have discussed in this booklet. Here they are again:

1. Read the entire passage all the way through at a leisurely pace. Don’t consult any commentaries or look up any words or cross references at this point. Just let the text speak for itself. Read the entire passage so that God can complete his thought.

2. Go back to the beginning of the passage and read it again. This time use a pen to underline key words or phrases. Read very slowly.

3. Find a place to “pull off the road” and explore. Emphasize different words in different ways. Begin to put it into your own words. Find the essence of the verse. Read with your ears—what is God saying to you?

4. Pay attention to what you’re seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling. You might hear or see something different each time you read it. What does this passage mean in general, and how does it apply to you specifically?

5. Enhance your understanding with notes or commentaries. If you choose to do so, you’re now ready to read the study notes in your Bible or read a commentary on the passage for further insight. This is entirely optional.

6. Respond to God in prayer. Talk to God about what he is saying to you. Your prayer response can take any number of forms: thanksgiving, praise, confession, commitment, intercession for others, petition for yourself, etc.
Sample Daily Journal

- Where I stopped: the paragraph, verse, or phrase that caught my attention

- What I saw: the truth, idea, or principle that became clear

- What I heard: what God said to me as I meditated on the text

- What I thought and felt: how the text engaged my mind and emotions

- How I responded in prayer: what I said back to God

- What I am still trying to understand: questions about the passage
How to Use the Sample Journal

The best way to explain it is by showing you how I do it. Just this morning as I was preparing this material, I was reading Matthew 1 and 2. I stopped when I noticed the repeated phrases in 2:13-14 and 2:20-21. The phrases revealed a pattern in the text that tipped me off to an important principle. It’s funny how often little phrases can contain big truths. I decided to share this with you while it’s fresh on my mind, even while my thoughts are still unfolding. Here’s what I saw:

- **Where I stopped:** the paragraph, verse, or phrase that caught my attention
  
  Matthew 2:13-14, “. . . Get up . . . So he got up . . .”
  
  Matthew 2:20-21, “. . . Get up . . . So he got up . . .”

- **What I saw:** the truth, idea, or principle that became clear
  
  Joseph’s quick obedience. It reminded me of what I read in Matthew 1:24—
  
  “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded . . .” In all three instances, Joseph acted on God’s direction immediately. He was consistent in his behavior. This tells me a lot about Joseph’s character. His heart was tuned to God. He was truly a righteous and humble man who didn’t need to be told something more than once before he acted on it.

- **What I heard:** what God said to me as I meditated on the text
  
  I sense the Holy Spirit asking me a question: How would I respond if I were in Joseph’s place? Would I act so quickly or would I look for some kind of sign to confirm God’s order? That’s the application to my life: how quickly do I obey what God tells me to do? Granted, I have never been visited by an angel (at least as far as I know). Even so, how quickly do I respond to what God tells me in his Word, or in a weekend sermon, or when he whispers into my heart? Perhaps if I were more quick to obey in the little things he says to me, God might clue me in on even bigger things. Do I “get up” like Joseph did, or do I just roll over and put it off till some other time?

- **What I thought and felt:** how the text engaged my mind and emotions
  
  I feel challenged by Joseph’s courage. And the more I think about him, the more I admire him. I also feel hopeful. We really don’t know much about Joseph. The lack of background we are given about him tells me that he was just an ordinary guy who feared the Lord. There’s nothing in the text to suggest that he had reached some level of super spirituality. We don’t know what led him to this place in his life, or why God chose to use him of all people, except for the fact that he was a descendant of Abraham and David—but there were probably others with the same pedigree.

  No, I think he was just a regular guy—righteous, God-fearing, but regular. The reason it gives me hope is that once again, I see God using ordinary people to do extraordinary things.
Or perhaps Joseph really is extraordinary, but not in the way we would expect. We don’t read that he had extraordinary wealth or leadership skills or success. But he does seem to have an extraordinary ability to obey God immediately. His ears are tuned into God’s “frequency,” and his heart seems to be pre-disposed to obey without question. I guess that is pretty extraordinary. I wonder what life-lessons forged those qualities into his character.

This reminds me of a song I heard several years ago. The chorus was this prayer:

*Lord, I want to be a man that you would write about*
*Oh, a thousand years from now that they could read about*
*Your servant of choice*
*In whom you found favor*
*A man who heard your voice*

Joseph was that kind of man. I want to be that kind of man, too.

- **How I responded in prayer: what I said back to God**
  Father, I want to be like Joseph—a man you can trust to obey you immediately. That’s the kind of person you worked through in this chapter. I want to be the kind of person you can work through today. Help me not to fear anything but you. Help me not to be selective in my obedience.

- **What I am still trying to understand: questions about the passage**
  What did Joseph go through in his early life that made him the man he was? How did he learn to obey? Of course I will never know, but even so, it makes me wonder if I am missing opportunities to develop that kind of ear to hear, and heart to understand, and humility to obey so readily.
Tips for Small Group Use

If you are going through this exercise with your small group, follow this simple three-step process:

1. Select a book the entire group will read, and agree on a reading schedule. It can be a chapter a day or a chapter a week. It’s up to your group to decide.

2. Use the sample journal page each day in your private reading.

3. When your group comes together, ask each other these questions:
   - Where was your most meaningful stop in your reading this week?
   - What did you see in the text?
   - What did you hear God saying to you through it?
   - What did you think and feel?
   - How did you respond?
   - What questions do you still have?
Suggested Reading Plan through Matthew

This is just a recommended reading plan. It will get you through the first fifteen chapters of Matthew. You will spend more time in some chapters than in others. That’s OK. Some have more places to stop than others. Some days you will read an entire chapter. Other days, you might read just a few verses. Either way, apply the principles you are learning as you read. Take your time, explore the text, and discover the riches that await you.

### Week 1
- **Day 1:** 1:1-25
- **Day 2:** 2:1-23
- **Day 3:** 3:1-17
- **Day 4:** 3:1-12
- **Day 5:** 3:13-17
- **Day 6:** 4:1-25
- **Day 7:** 4:1-11

### Week 2
- **Day 8:** 4:12-25
- **Day 9:** 5:1-48
- **Day 10:** 5:1-12
- **Day 11:** 5:13-16
- **Day 12:** 5:17-48
- **Day 13:** 6:1-12
- **Day 14:** 6:1-34
- **Day 15:** 6:9-16

### Week 3
- **Day 16:** 6:16-24
- **Day 17:** 6:25-34
- **Day 18:** 7:1-29

### Week 4
- **Day 19:** 7:1-14
- **Day 20:** 7:15-29
- **Day 21:** 8:1-34

### Week 5
- **Day 22:** 8:1-17
- **Day 23:** 8:18-34
- **Day 24:** 9:1-38
- **Day 25:** 9:1-8
- **Day 26:** 9:9-17
- **Day 27:** 9:18-34
- **Day 28:** 9:35-10:42

### Week 6
- **Day 29:** 9:35-10:42
- **Day 30:** 11:1-30
- **Day 31:** 12:1-50
- **Day 32:** 12:1-50
- **Day 33:** 13:1-58
- **Day 34:** 13:1-23
- **Day 35:** 13:24-30, 36-43

### Week 7
- **Day 36:** 13:44-48
- **Day 37:** 14:1-36
- **Day 38:** 14:1-21
- **Day 39:** 14:22-36
- **Day 40:** 15:1-39
- **Day 41:** 15:1-20
- **Day 42:** 15:21-39

**Week 7**
You’re on your own. Keep reading until you finish Matthew. Take all the time you need. Then choose another book, and enjoy the conversation.
Which Bible is Right for Me?

With the great variety of Bibles to choose from, which Bible is right for you? What is the difference between the NIV, the NLT, and the NKJV, and what do those initials stand for, anyway? Which one is the most accurate? Are they re-writing the Bible? Isn’t there something wrong with that?

These are questions people commonly ask when choosing a Bible. Hopefully, this pamphlet will answer those questions and help you decide which Bible is right for you.

First, we’ll talk about translations: what are their differences; are some better than others? Then we’ll look at three categories of Bibles: straight text, Study Bibles, and Application Bibles.

So if you’re wondering which Bible is right for you, read on, and set your mind at ease . . .

The Gift of Translations
Bible translations fall into three basic categories: Word-for-Word, Thought-for-Thought, and Paraphrase. Their styles can vary from the highly formal and poetic King James language to the street-level informality of the Message Paraphrase. Even so, almost every translation is put together by large teams of biblical scholars who work from the oldest and best known texts available.

WORD-FOR-WORD
Word-for-word translations exchange one word in the original language for its English equivalent while strictly following the original mechanics, form, and structure of each sentence. The goal is to change as little as possible. The result is a translation that looks and feels very close to the original, but at times sounds different from the way people talk or write today. Word-for-word Bibles are well suited for detailed study and more in depth reading.

King James Version (KJV)
This translation was first published in 1611 and has since become the best selling book in history. It’s a very precise translation, but it’s also very traditional, sounding more like Shakespeare than modern English. It’s a translation of historical importance and traditional beauty, but is also very challenging to read.

New King James Version (NKJV)
This translation was made in 1982 to update the language and spelling of the King James so that words like “thee”, “thou”, and “ye” are no longer used. The detail and precision of the King James was preserved, but the style may still be challenging for some to read.
New American Standard Bible (NASB)
This is one of the most accurate translations for detailed study. Colleges and seminaries frequently recommend this translation for their students. It’s fairly challenging in some places because it holds so tightly to original texts. While many people use it for regular reading, most use it more often for study.

THOUGHT-FOR-THOUGHT
Thought-for-thought translations also work at the level of individual words, but preference is given to the basic thought or idea that the author is intending to communicate. The goal is to make it easier to read. Where a word-for-word translation can be choppy and challenging, the thought-for-thought translation slightly rephrases and better articulates the passage for readers. The result is an accurate translation that flows well, is easy to read, and sounds more modern and lively. These translations are the best choice for general reading and most studies. It is important to note that some thought-for-thought translations, like the New Living Translation, lean more towards communicating the general thought, while others like the New International Version stay closer to communicating the specific word.

New International Version (NIV)
The NIV is the best selling and most widely used Bible translation today. It’s a good balanced translation because it’s both precise like a word for word translation and easy to read like a thought-for-thought translation. For this reason the NIV is popular for both general study and regular reading.

New Living Translation (NLT)
The NLT allows for more creativity in translating from the original text than most other translations. Its very modern language and style helps to clarify the meaning of passages more, in a new way that’s designed to catch the reader’s attention.

PARAPHRASE
Paraphrased Bibles are a relatively new type of translation. The goal is to make the Bible easier to understand. The translator looks at the original text, translates it into English, but also rewrites it into his own words and style. In a paraphrase, precise words and immediate thoughts are not as important as communicating the general meaning of the passage. The result is a Bible that is easy to read because it uses simple, common language and the author does a lot of the interpretation for us. Paraphrases are best for seeing familiar passages in a new light, or learning how to share God’s Word in your own words. A paraphrase makes a good second Bible, or can be especially helpful for new believers or people who struggle with understanding the Bible. However, it is not a good choice for in-depth study and it could be difficult to use in most small groups.

The Message (MSG)
The Message paraphrase, written by biblical scholar Eugene Peterson, is one of the most current, creative, and understandable Bible paraphrases available. His writing style is enjoyable to read, easy to understand, and makes the most basic of biblical ideas accessible to everyone.
Categories of Bibles

There are three primary categories of Bibles to choose from: straight text, Study Bibles, and Application Bibles.

Because the 66 books of the Bible were written by 40 different authors over a span of nearly 2,000 years and in cultures very different from our own – there’s a good chance there are whole sections, ideas, and words that we won’t understand! Not only do we ask “What does this mean?” but we also ask “How does this apply to my life today?” Meaning in the Bible is universal – but significance is something that varies from person to person.

Translators and publishers address the unique characteristics of the Bible and our personal needs as readers by putting together special versions of specific translations. Theses versions are intended to help us discover the meaning of a passage and find its significance in our personal lives. Alongside the translated Bible text, theses versions will include a wide assortment of extra material such as: historical notes, definitions of words or terms, maps or diagrams, expert commentary, book introductions, or anything else that would be an aid for understanding. Some versions also include suggestions for life application and ways to connect with the meaning on a practical level. Still others include content that is geared specifically toward men, women, students, new believers, etc.

STRAIGHT TEXT

Straight text Bibles are simply the Bible text with little or no additional notes or commentary in the margins. Some readers find margin notes distract them from their flow of reading.

STUDY BIBLES

Study Bibles, such as the NIV Study Bible, focus on what we can learn about God, his people, and the Scriptures themselves. They do this by delving into the text and revealing nuances of meaning implied by the original languages, or by adding notes that clarify and amplify the text itself.

APPLICATION BIBLES

Application Bibles (also called Devotional Bibles) focus on the application of biblical concepts or precepts to our daily lives. Application notes use story, analogy, and questions to shed new light on various passages of Scripture.

Which Bible is Right for You?

As the years go by, most people pick up a couple of different Bibles and use them for different purposes. You might have one you travel with, or one you use at small group, or one at your desk that you highlight, underline, and write in. But ultimately, the best Bible for you or a friend is going to be whichever translation will be read on a regular basis and whatever type has information that will be helpful and encouraging. Think about where and how the Bible is going to be read most. Look through a few different versions and compare a couple of passages. In the end, don’t think about “Which Bible should I get?” but ask yourself “Which Bible do I really want to read?”
Here’s a quick comparison of styles to choose from. The text is Matthew 5:13-16.

**King James Version (KJV)**

13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. 14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. 15 Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

**New King James Version (NKJV)**

13 You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven.”

**New American Standard Bible (NASB)**

13 “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lambstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

**New International Version (NIV)**

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

**New Living Translation (NLT)**

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled as worthless. 14 You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”

**The Message (MSG)**

13 “Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. 14-16 Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”
Resources for In-Depth Study

http://www.biblegateway.com
The searchable online bible. Bible Gateway is a tool for quickly reading and researching scripture online, all in the language or translation of your choice! It provides advanced searching capabilities, which allow readers to find and compare particular passages in scripture based on keywords, phrases, or scripture reference. Also includes the Intervarsity Press commentary for the New Testament.

http://bibleresources.bible.com
This website is another online tool for reading and researching scripture. It also includes several articles on the subjects of: Quick Scripture Links, Understand and Study the Bible, and Information about the Bible.

The Rick Warren Bible Library
Whether at home, at the office or on-the-go, now everyone can have access to one of the most comprehensive collections of Bible-study resources anywhere with the Rick Warren Bible Library. It includes: • 20 Bible translations • 45 reference works • 9 commentaries • 3 dictionaries • 3 handbooks • 3 photo and Bible atlases • Plus much more! The product also includes Rick Warren's Pastoral Helps consisting of more than 2,300 action verbs, more than 240 category words for outlining sermons, four indexes to The Purpose Driven Church book, an encyclopedia of more than 15,000 illustrations, and three complete works by Pastor Rick, including Answers to Life's Difficult Questions, The Power to Change Your Life, and Personal Bible Study Methods.

Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods
This easy-to-understand book shows you how to study the Bible Rick Warren’s way. It gives you not just one, but twelve methods for exploring the riches of God’s Word. At least one of them is exactly what you’re looking for—an approach that’s right for you, right where you’re at. Simple step-by-step instructions guide you through the how-tos of the following methods: • Devotional • Chapter Summary • Character Quality • Thematic • Biographical • Topical • Word Study • Book Background • Book Survey • Chapter Analysis • Book Synthesis • Verse Analysis. Rick Warren’s Bible Study Methods will help you develop a customized approach to studying, understanding, and applying the Bible.