

Introduction

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”
—MATTHEW 24:35

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord of hosts.”—JEREMIAH 15:16

“The Bible as a book stands alone. There never was, nor ever will be, another like it. As there is but one sun to enlighten the world naturally, so there is but one Book to enlighten the world spiritually. May that Book become to each of us the man of our counsel, the guide of our journey, and our support and comfort in life and in death.”—A. GALLOWAY



The Bible Challenge has been a gift to me from the first day that I stumbled upon it. Friends and colleagues furnished virtually every helpful idea along the way. God worked through the network of clergy and scholars that I had developed over the years. All along the way, God whispered thoughts into my head and heart that allowed this ministry to be born and to grow rapidly.

The ministry was born of my own spiritual longing to draw closer to God through reconnecting with all of God’s Word found in the Bible. Like a good Anglican, I was well-acquainted with the Daily Lectionary. I was so well acquainted that at times it seemed as if I had forgotten that we have a Bible full of many lessons that are never read in church and never read by many clergy or lay persons.

What captured me was not how reading all of the Bible could transform others’ lives, but how it quickly transformed my own. For years, I focused my spiritual journey on reading the mystics and the great spiritual writers across the centuries. I was well-versed in Franciscan, Benedictine, Celtic, and Anglican spirituality. I sometimes found the Bible boring. When I read it in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin I discovered a powerfully heady adventure, but one that did little to touch my heart or change my life, ministry, preaching, or behavior.

Then through an episode that I recount in this book, God brought me back to the Bible—the foundational book of our faith—in a new way. I found it incredibly stimulating and refreshing. It was like switching from watered down coffee to drinking espresso. I had been reading the words of people who were inspired by the Bible, but less and less of the Bible itself. It was as though I was living through others, who wrote about what it was like to go fishing, raise a family, play sports, read interesting books, and take vacations without ever doing any of these things on

my own. Suddenly, I was back re-engaging Scripture in a disciplined daily practice. It felt great. Just as suddenly, people started to notice a difference in my sermons and in my behavior, attitudes, communications, and demeanor. I was more joyful, upbeat, content, and appreciative of others. I felt far more connected to God, grateful for life, patient, kind, and able to exercise more self-control. My life and my ministry still held much room for improvement, but there was an excitement and passion present that had been missing, as well as much less restlessness in my life.

As I started to invite others to walk alongside me on this journey of reading the Bible in a year, I was astonished at how many were interested in doing so. It was something that they had on their bucket lists, but almost none of them was going to do unless someone nudged them, showed them a simple way to do it over the course of a year, gave them some support, and helped to hold them accountable. Within a few weeks, over one hundred-eighty members of my church and more than ninety friends from outside our membership had accepted the challenge to read the entire Bible in a year. Our church is three hundred and sixteen years old. We had never before had ninety people from outside of our church agree to do something with us for a year in the three centuries that we have been together. We probably have never had one hundred-eighty people in our parish agree to do something for a full year either, other than worship. We live in an age where people are searching for challenges and measureable achievements that they can strive toward. And this was a challenge.

One by one, we started to hear positive reports from people who were participating in what I dubbed *The Bible Challenge*. People started to come alive spiritually. Many said that it was the most significant spiritual experience that they had ever had in their life. Friends spoke to friends and family about it. Entire book clubs decided to do it. Word of mouth spread. Participants found that the time they spent each day quietly reading the Bible became their sanctuary. It was like a mini-Sabbath that centered them and prepared them for the rest of the day. Instead of waiting for Sunday to have a spiritual moment, they were starting to have these moments every day. This alone was transformative. Participants began coming to church spiritually alive instead of expecting a one hour worship service to make up for having done nothing all week, or in many cases over two or three weeks, to grow closer to God.

As we saw our church being transformed spiritually, God whispered in my ear to share *The Bible Challenge* with others. I mentioned it to a few colleagues and shared handouts that I had created to help members of my church get started. I designed additional materials to help clergy lead their parishes in participating in *The Bible Challenge*. I then spoke to a few bishops, who courageously encouraged their whole dioceses to join them in reading the entire Bible or the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs in a year, or one of the gospels during Lent. Every individual, church, school, and diocese was free to tailor *The Bible Challenge* to suit their life or community. Soon, these churches, bishops, and dioceses were telling others.

Within three years, over twenty-five hundred churches and more than two hundred and fifty thousand people in over forty countries were participating in The Bible Challenge. Those were just the faith communities that we were fairly certain were participating. Rarely a week passes when we do not hear about another church or diocese that has been taking part. Today, more than forty-five bishops are leading their entire dioceses in The Bible Challenge.

What is at stake? Episcopalians are the best educated among the twenty-two thousand Christian groups and denominations in the United States, but when you ask about biblical literacy we drop to almost dead last. For years, we have joked about being the Christians who do not know our Bible. Yet it is no joke. During the past few years, I have been astonished by one story after another illustrating the lack of biblical knowledge in the Episcopal Church. We pride ourselves on reading a lot of Scripture in church each Sunday, but 90 percent of what we hear is forgotten within seventy-two hours. Less than 5 percent of Episcopalians attend a regular Bible study. The rest merely hear the Bible read in church, or in some cases read it on their own. Anglicanism today, however, does not have a strong tradition of private devotional reading of the Bible. While we are extremely well-educated on the whole, there is an enormous gap between our knowledge about science, math, history, literature, economics, politics, and culture and our understanding of the Bible.

I recently attended a conference of Episcopal leaders from across the country. One of my colleagues shared a shocking but true story. He had been recruited from one of the denomination's largest churches to lead a vital Midwestern parish. They chose well. He is a dynamic young priest who is passionate about serving God and building a strong Episcopal church. Early into his first year of ministry, several men in the church asked him to start a men's Bible study. "You get 12 men together and I'll be there," he told them. They recruited other men, and he joined them. At the start of the first meeting, the head of the search committee, who had spent over a year working together to identify their new Rector and offer his name to the Vestry for consideration as their next spiritual leader, raised his hand. "Before we get started, I have a question," he said, holding out his Bible. "Where in this book do I find the New Testament?" His new rector was speechless. The question was serious. Here was a very committed Episcopalian who had been identified by his parish as an outstanding leader with excellent judgment and a great commitment to his church, who had been charged with overseeing the search process to identify their new rector, and he was biblically illiterate.

At one of the most prestigious Episcopal churches on the East Coast, the head of the Altar Guild went to the lectern to mark the Bible for the morning's worship service. She turned to a fellow member of the Altar Guild and asked, "Fran, where do I find Paul's Letter to the Romans? I need to mark the Bible for the service this morning." Her Altar Guild colleague responded, "You must be the only person in our church who is not doing The Bible Challenge." Indeed, over two hundred and

fifty members of their church had committed to reading the entire Bible in a year. It was transforming the parish, yet this very significant leader of the church was biblically illiterate.

After hearing one story after another like these, I have been stunned by how biblically illiterate we Episcopalians are and how our clergy, myself included, have spent much of our ministries answering questions that people are not asking. In our sermons, lectures, and classes, we are often building a theological and biblical skyscraper that soars towards heaven. The only problem is that the first ten floors are missing. Well-known church leaders and those sitting in our pews, along with others who do not come to church, do not know where to find the New Testament in the Bible. We need to reclaim our own story and the book that is at the center of our common life. We need to rediscover a simple and prayerful way of reading the Bible and helping our members and those who come to us to develop a daily spiritual practice. The *Reveal Study* by the Willow Creek Community Association notes that the Bible is the single best spiritual tool for developing strong Christian lives, but it is the very thing that we neglect to use effectively to help our members and those who are seekers around us connect more closely with God. In fact, many priests and bishops have succumbed to a false belief that our people could not and should not read the Bible on their own without a priest being in the room to guide them and explain what the Bible is saying.

In my church we now carry out more than sixty-five different ministries. Other churches may offer more or far less, but in most Episcopal churches it is very hard to tell what is most important to the parish. All things seem equal. Worship; walking the labyrinth; taking a study course; serving as an usher, acolyte, receptionist or chalice bearer; sorting clothes at a rummage sale; serving food at a homeless shelter; and teaching Sunday school are all viewed as equally important. In most of our churches, the strongest emphasis is put on worship. We say that worship is at the heart of all that we do, which is theologically correct, but it leaves us with significant problems. First, the average Episcopalian now worships only once a month. You cannot achieve success in anything if you do it just once a month. Dieting, studying a foreign language, learning to play an instrument, or trying to give up smoking will never work if you do it one day a month. Second, studies used by the American Bible Society reveal that even if we get large numbers of people to worship with us, there is no measureable moral difference in their behavior from the lives of those who never worship in church. What a shocking revelation.

The American Bible Society notes that people who engage Scripture four times or more a week, however, have measurably higher moral behavior. There is something about engaging God's Word regularly that creates a spiritual athlete who is much closer to God and more effective at living a godly life and sharing Christ with others. Since around 1950 the average Sunday attendance in Episcopal churches has been dropping. I am not sure that this will turn around anytime soon.

On the other hand, many of our churches are seeing more of our people throughout the week and over the weekend taking part in a myriad of different activities and ministries. Hence, while we may have fewer Sunday worshipers, many churches are connecting with more people and having them benefit from their participation in programs as they serve others through a wide array of opportunities.

The downside is that we appear to be producing a highly biblically illiterate Christian, whose faith is inarticulate and whose commitment to a daily spiritual practice is almost nil. This will eventually undermine our denomination and close many churches. It is hard after all to build a strong church with biblically illiterate Christians. What we have seen is that The Bible Challenge changes lives. Studies by the American Bible Society note that if a person reads Scripture each day for twenty-one days, there is an 80 percent chance that they will read the Bible regularly for the rest of their lives. They will glean far more from our Sunday worship, follow the sermon more closely, be looking to have the preacher preach rather than merely explain the passage that was read, and become a more committed, articulate, and contagious Christian. They become more generous, loving, patient, kind, joyful, and forgiving.

We urge everyone to think of The Bible Challenge as a five year ministry. You cannot change the spiritual DNA of a faith community in a year. You may make great strides, but one year is almost never sufficient time to transform an organization or community. In every case, you will have early adopters who will jump aboard and try something new. But there will be lots who think, "This is the Rector's new pet project. I'm not going to do this." After hearing others speak about their positive experiences, however, many of these people can be won over and encouraged to join The Bible Challenge.

People who are not strong readers or who have very limited time to read can participate by reading just the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs in a year or take on one of the Fifty Day Bible Challenges which we offer. There is room for everyone to participate in one way or another. If a rector of a parish or a bishop of a diocese or a head of a school decides to dedicate five years of continuous focus to offering The Bible Challenge, then he or she can play an instrumental role in transforming the spiritual DNA of their faith community from a very low to a very high level of biblical literacy. The church will come alive in the process, lives will be transformed and countless beautiful loving actions will take place.

Lastly, there is a global component to this endeavor. Anglicans have experienced extreme conflict over the past decade or longer regarding issues that the Bible addresses and our cultures cause us to view quite differently. Good people on both sides of controversial issues have cited compelling biblical reasons for their strongly held views. In many cases, people who have not read the entire Bible in their lifetime or who rarely read it at all are speaking on behalf of God and God's will without having much acquaintanceship with the Scriptures. We will never read the Bible in

one uniform way. One of the beauties of Christianity is that each reader brings a different lens, history, set of experiences, and personality type to reading God's Word. We therefore discover different things and have much to teach and learn from one another. But if we all agreed on something, it might hold us together and give us a common bond to share.

What if we all could agree that prayerful reading of the Bible, as if it were a love letter written from God to each one of us, was vital to our spiritual lives? What if we could all agree not to use the Bible as ammunition for controversial debates, but as a guide for holy living? What if we could all commit to put a regular engagement with the Bible at the heart of our common life? What if each time we gathered, we read a portion of Scripture and offered prayers for one another?

Perhaps it is a fantasy, but I think not. I believe that there is an incredible spiritual hunger in the world today, perhaps as much as the world has ever known. The longing to know God and to experience God's love has never been stronger. We Anglicans have a glorious form of worship. We are held together by The Book of Common Prayer, which is one of the great treasures of Christianity. We also have a very reasonable and wise way of engaging Scripture. Many of us nurture a daily spiritual conversation with God that has its roots sunk deeply in Benedictine spirituality. I am more bullish than ever on the future of Anglicanism, especially if we reconnect as a faith tradition in a profound way with the book that is the spiritual foundation of all that we do.

In his book *Opening the Bible*, Roger Ferlo tells the story about how a generous parishioner at his church in Greenwich Village in New York City offered to purchase Bibles for the entire church and place them in the church pews. It was a very well-meaning idea. Ferlo notes that many people liked the idea of having Bibles handy: some, he suspects, never noticed their presence, but a number of people felt quite uneasy about having them in the pews because it reminded them of raucous tent revivals and evangelical preachers whooping up the crowd—not that any of them had ever attended a tent revival; they had an image in their minds, and it was not the image that they wanted to see their Episcopal church imitate. The truth is that most Episcopalians and many mainline Christians are afraid of the Bible. It is a great book to have a well-dressed lay person or a clergyman read aloud from a distance to us at worship, but God forbid that we be asked to pick it up and read it for ourselves or discuss it with others

Yet, as Ferlo notes, that English Reformation began with a clarion call and ringing endorsement of every believer's right to read the Bible freely and openly. The church struggled for over two centuries to allow the Bible to be translated into English and then to make this translation available to Christians in every church. Before his death, Henry VIII ordered a copy of the Bible to be placed in every church throughout England. It was chained to a post inside the church, where it could not be removed and where people in the village or surrounding

community or city could come and read through it in English at their leisure. It was a pioneering move.

Henry VIII's Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, led a spiritual revolution following Henry's death. Cranmer substantially increased the amount of Scripture to be read aloud during public worship. Churchgoers went from hearing snippets of the Bible to hearing almost the entire Bible read aloud in church over the course of a year. No passages or verses were omitted. The entire New Testament and most of the Old Testament were read in a year, far different from today's Daily Lectionary or the Revised Common Lectionary. Cranmer wrote magnificent homilies, including one on the Bible, to be read in every church across England. The Book of Common Prayer, which he authored, is saturated with Scripture. Some 70 percent of the book came directly from the Bible.

While most mainline Christians stand at some distance from the Bible, the majority of them truly want to know and learn from their Bible. The key is that clergy must help the laity to read it for themselves and stop standing as intermediaries between the Bible and the people. People in our church pews need help, advice, and guidance in reading the Bible. If we can provide that effectively, we will always have a job and play an important role in developing a thriving faith community. If we try to monopolize the Bible as the Church's book, of which the clergy are the indispensable experts needed to help others comprehend it, then we will silently and slowly kill our churches and leave our people stunted like small children in their spiritual growth.

Reading Scripture on our own can be challenging, confusing, disappointing, and sometimes a downright alienating experience when we arrive at bewildering passages without the guidance of a trained reader of the Bible to assist us. Together, however, we can learn how to read it prayerfully and find enormous joy and spiritual benefits from doing so each day. That is what The Bible Challenge and this book attempt to do. I close this introduction with some thoughts shared by a few of the participants in The Bible Challenge:

My own Bible reading has been nothing short of profound. I am humbled and amazed at just how much this is speaking to me. Each day if I accomplish nothing else, I manage to get my reading done. It has become as vital to me as drinking water. And I am continually amazed at the grace that intercedes each and every time. Alright, I confess that parts of the Old Testament have been wrought with sacrifice that does not resonate with me! But still the word speaks to my living day and the glory is everywhere! If my enthusiasm continues (which I hope and pray it will) I cannot wait to get to the end and do it again. Why oh why did I not do this earlier!—JAN

While I spent eight months to finish reading the Bible from creation to Revelation. It is only a start! It was a difficult, enjoyable and challenging experience. . . . I

did most of my reading and listening in the still of the night and often wondered at the genius of the authors of the King James Version and how they were inspired. While I had frequent contact with the Bible in the past, particularly during the time of my service as Rector's Warden at St. Thomas and as a lay reader of the Episcopal Church in Haiti, my absorption was in fits and starts. Now, in a sense, I have put it all together. Yet there is no such thing as finishing with the Bible. It is a trip through eternity. Is it also a reminder of ourselves.—HENRY

I am moving along, slightly ahead of plan. . . . This is one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I have let go of trying to remember and understand all the different facts and thoughts. There is no final exam upon completion. Rather, I try to be in the moment and appreciate the words as I move forward. It may sound trite, but I am feeling like a much more complete human being, I truly appreciate the fulfilling feeling that reading the Bible is providing me. My favorite time is getting up first on Saturday and Sunday and sitting with my cup of coffee and Bible. I almost get disappointed when my family starts to stir and it is time to put my reading down and begin the day's activities. This is a summer I will always cherish, for many reasons.—TRICIA

This year I tried for the second time to participate in the Bible challenge. I have succeeded without missing a day since January first—a discipline I am thrilled to have accomplished. I am leaving for Istanbul and the Greek isles and my Bible was the first thing I packed. Currently, I am reading Corinthians and it is hard to believe I will be where Paul wrote his famous letters.—PAM

Each morning I begin with some quiet time reading God's Word, and it has made a great deal of difference in my life. It provides a strong spiritual start to each day and keeps me centered throughout the day. I had to get up at 6:00 a.m. yesterday to get my Bible reading in, and it kept me centered through a long day of conferences until about 14 hours later.—CHIP

I have been reading it on my Nook, the NIV Study Bible version. That makes it easier to travel with and find myself able to read it on the train and even the subway up in NYC. . . . It also forces me to read it more like a story—and while you can skim paragraphs when it was getting a bit tedious with the “rules” and family lineages, you can't skim whole pages at a time and you really can't “look ahead.” I have found reading the Bible interesting and clearly I had never seen many of the passages in the normal Sunday readings, so I have found it worthwhile. I appreciate your support.—STEVE

I love reading the Bible. It is moving. I always say “No!!” when we have to go to bed (when the Bible story is over). We do gratitude journals after we read the Bible. I like writing about what I am grateful for.—TEDDY, AGE 7

Reading the 'entire Bible' has always been on my 'bucket list'. As a life-long, Canadian Anglican, I have been somewhat ashamed that I've never taken the time to read the cornerstone of our faith. So far, I'm a third of the way through. The plan established by the Bible Challenge is a smart one in that every day, a section of the Old Testament, Psalms, and New Testament are read vs. a 'cover-to-cover' approach. I choose to read before going to bed and it's become a little habit now for months. Thank you Bible Challenge for getting me started on a long, anticipated goal!—DEBBIE