



Keeping the Bible Fresh

5 recommendations for seeing past your experience in order to have a fresh experience of scripture.

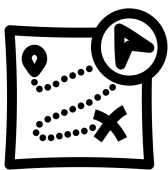
Very often, the main obstacle to a fresh experience of the Bible is our own past experience. People with very little experience often feel intimidated, or confused, like they don't know their way around. People who grew up on the Bible often end up jaded, feeling like they already know all the stories and their meaning. In either case, our past experience limits what God wants to do with this ancient text that is living and active. These 5 recommendations can help restore a sense of vibrancy in your experience of scripture.



1. GET INTENTIONAL

This one is mainly for the inexperienced, but can be an important reminder for anyone. Learning the Bible is just like any body of knowledge. The more time you spend with it, the more comfortable and familiar you'll become. The more familiar, the less insecure you'll feel. So, set aside regular time to read and reflect on scripture. I read a little most every night before I got to bed. Pick a time that works for you, but have a regular time--ideally daily--if you can.

In this regular time, don't read randomly. Don't play "Bible roulette." Read with an intentional plan. Start by reading through the Gospels. Then read through the whole New Testament. If you're an average reader, and you only take 15 minutes a day, you'll read through the entire New Testament in about six weeks. With 15 minutes a day, you can have a basic working knowledge of the Bible in about 8-12 months. Every other good thing that comes from scripture starts here. Spend regular and intentional time in the Bible. Oh, and if you're an old hand with the Bible, don't skimp on this just because you think you already know it all. Regular reflection on scripture is one of the chief ways the Holy Spirit shapes our minds and hearts. So, this applies to you too.



2. GET THE BIG PICTURE

It's easy to feel lost in the Bible, or even to misread and misunderstand it, if you don't know the overarching picture. The Bible is not a single book. You can't read it like a Harry Potter novel. The Bible is more like a giant puzzle, where the different books fit together into a larger picture. Getting that larger picture in mind goes a long way to help you understand what you're reading.

I have a very specific recommendation for you here, and it's going to sound weird. But trust me—I've been making this recommendation for years, and I've seen it pay off over and over again. Read *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, by Sally Lloyd Jones. (<https://amzn.to/2Djims2>)

I know this sounds crazy. You're an adult! Well, unlike most children's Bibles, this one is beautifully and movingly written. It goes through the Bible in chronological order. It highlights all the key moments,

but more importantly, it shows how Jesus is connected to the whole thing. It will give you a clear mental picture not only of the narrative trajectory of the Bible but also of the Bible's most important theme. It will give you a mental map that will allow you to make sense of the verses and stories you hear.



3. GO DEEPER INTO HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

One of the biggest reasons people struggle with reading the Bible is that they try to treat it like other books they are familiar with, but the Bible isn't a book. It's not a novel. It's not a biography. It's not a religious encyclopedia. The Bible is a library.

Imagine going to your public library deciding that you were going to start at one end of the shelves, and read straight through every book--from cover to cover--all the way to the other end of the shelves. Imagine how difficult and discouraging that would be. But that's exactly what you're doing when you commit to reading the Bible from cover to cover. The Bible is a library of 66 books, written by different people, over the course of 4000 years, in different cultures, in 3 different ancient languages, and in different literary genres. There are letters, biographies, histories, poetry, songs, legal codes and coded prophetic writings. If you try to read all of these in the same way, you will be disregarding the intent of both the original human authors as well as the Holy Spirit who inspired these various writings.

There are many ways you can come to understand the background, culture, and literary forms of scripture, but here's an easy recommendation to get you started. Read *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, by Gordon Fee. (<https://amzn.to/2OgmCes>) It's easy to read and accessible, and it will give you a clear understanding of the nature of the Bible, how to read the different kinds of writing in the Bible, and an introduction to some of the culture and background that's so important in order to understand it. This is stuff that Jesus and his contemporaries understood intimately. If we want to understand the Bible better, this has got to be part of our process.



4. LOOK THROUGH THE BIBLE RATHER THAN AT IT.

This one is primarily for people who find themselves too familiar with the Bible, feeling like they already know all the stories and what they mean, but it can be helpful to anyone. I grew up in a church community where Bible knowledge was really important. We invested a lot of time and effort to learn. There are some real

advantages to my background. But there's one huge disadvantage. Seeing the Bible as a source of information changes your focus.

Think of it like this: I wear glasses so I can see. When I'm wearing my glasses I can do two things. I can focus on my glasses, or I can look through my glasses. But I can't do both at the same time. When I'm focused on my glasses, I can see them in detail. I see their imperfections, scratches, dirt. I can see how they are put together. But I can't see you. The only way I can see you is to look through my glasses. When I do this, the frames become fuzzy and indistinct to me, but you become clear.

Some of us have learned to look *AT* the Bible, focusing on the Bible itself. But the Bible isn't God. As important as the Bible is, God is separate from the Bible. God is separate from our interpretations of the Bible. God speaks through the words of Scripture, but the Bible is just a tool in God's hands. If you see the Bible exclusively as a source of doctrine, or authority, or security, or a reference manual that you can quote chapter and verse, then you are primarily looking *AT* the Bible. There is a time for that, but the Bible's primary purpose in your life is not to be a religious reference manual. The Bible's purpose is to lead you into relationship with God. It is a lens you look *THROUGH*, to something even more important than the words on the page.

When you come to the Bible—every time you open it—start with a prayer asking God to help you see through the Bible to what matters. God's goal is not for you to become a Bible knowledge expert. God's goal is for you to become relationally connected, like the grape is connected to the vine.



5. GET A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORDS

This is another recommendation for people with lots of experience with the Bible. (If you have a favorite version, this might be for you!) But this can still be helpful to anyone. If you've heard and read the verses so many times, your mind can complete the verse as you go, you run a risk. Your familiarity with scripture is a gift. It allows God to bring passages to mind. But, along with that mental "auto-complete," come years of hearing sermons explaining the meaning or moral of the text. All of that can make it difficult to hear the text in a fresh way. The Holy Spirit may want to teach you something new, but you might miss it because you "already know the answers."

The best way to jar yourself out of this state is to read the Bible again in a different version. Pick a version that's much different from the one you're used to. Don't worry if your new version is the best translation. That's not the issue for this use. Your problem is not having an accurate translation; your problem is being so familiar that you can't really even hear the words anymore.

For example, when the Message Bible came out it was a revolution for my spiritual journey. The Message is a paraphrase. It's not the best study Bible. It doesn't get every Greek word right. But reading the Message forced me to re-hear scripture. Sometimes it broke open meaning that had been obscured for me. Sometimes it sent me back to other versions, to verify if Eugene Peterson, who did the paraphrase, was really was on track. In every case, this helped me hear the text in a fresh way. You can get this freshness by reading *any* translation other than your most familiar one. But, here are some recommended versions that can really help you get out of your rut:

- **The Message.** A paraphrase by Eugene Peterson who was a careful Biblical languages scholar, and pastor. (<https://amzn.to/2SJJPHV>)
- **The Kingdom New Testament.** A recent translation by N.T. Wright, one of the most well-known and influential NT scholars. Wright is a world-class Greek scholar, and one of the leading experts on Paul, so this translation can be very helpful in untangling complicated Pauline passages. (<https://amzn.to/2Qbdwj3>)
- **The NET Bible (New English Translation).** A new translation done by a team of excellent Biblical language scholars. The cool thing about this one is that in the web version, it includes extensive translator notes so you can see why the translators chose the rendering they did, as well as the ability to instantly compare the verse to other translations, and see the original Greek and Hebrew behind the passage. An incredible study tool. (Book: <https://amzn.to/2RyioiS> Website: <https://netbible.org/bible>)
- **The Complete Jewish Bible.** Jesus and all the early Christians were Jewish. All the writers of the New Testament, with the possible exception of Acts and Luke were Jewish. The "Christian origin story" emerges from the Jewish story. This translation is translated in a way that highlights the Jewish origins of the text. A great translation to help you deepen in your understanding of the connections between Judaism, the Old Testament, and the New. (<https://amzn.to/2SHVB5f>)
- **The Contemporary English Version.** A clear and simple translation, that feels easy to read like a paraphrase, but that is based more directly on the original language texts. (<https://amzn.to/2JzZNjq>)

More Resources for a Better Relationship With Scripture

Here's a selection of other resources that may help you troubleshoot your own obstacles, or find a Bible that is a good match for your needs.

SERIES: YOU NEED A GOOD BIBLE

This three-part series is all about Bible versions. Which ones are trustworthy and how to decide that for yourself. How to find a Bible that is the right fit for you.

- **Part 1: You need a GOOD Bible.** <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/good-bible-1/>
- **Part 2: Untangling Versions.** <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/good-bible-2-versions/>
- **Part 3: The Best Bible for You.** <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/good-bible-3-choose/>

SERIES: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO THE BIBLE

This series is all about how to deal with different obstacles we have that keep us from getting comfortable with the Bible. Bible versions.

- **Maybe you need to ignore the rules in the Bible.** What to do when the Bible has been presented as an unending list of rules. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/rules-in-the-bible/>
- **Is the Bible Human or Divine?** What to do when your struggle with the Bible is all the obvious evidence of humanity in its pages. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/bible-human-or-divine/>
- **Has familiarity with the Bible left you jaded?** What to do when you know too much, and you find yourself bored with the Bible. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/bored-with-the-bible/>
- **Are you wandering around the Bible confused?** What to do when you don't know your way around the Bible. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/new-to-the-bible/>
- **Why reading the Bible straight through is usually a bad idea.** Why you keep getting bogged down in the Old Testament. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/reading-bible-genres/>
- **When the Bible's been used to bash, clobber or hurt you.** What to do when you have a painful experience with the Bible. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/bible-bash-clobber/>
- **Not everything in the Bible is Biblical!** What to do when people are using the Bible to justify things that clearly don't represent Jesus. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/not-biblical/>
- **Did Jesus treat the Bible like we do?** How to see the Bible more like Jesus and less like people who use it to justify themselves. <http://www.marcalanschelske.com/how-jesus-saw-the-bible/>

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