

GOD SPEAKING

How to read the Bible to get to know God

Gilbert Lennox



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Acknowledgements

A Saturday lunchtime in the Swinging Sixties. A young boy charges into his house, hungry and dishevelled from kicking a football around the yard. His mum is sitting in her favourite kitchen chair, taking a break from baking to read the Psalms. Not wanting to disturb her, he continues into the family room where he knows he will find his dad, home from work for lunch. Sure enough, he's there – on his knees, his Bible open on the chair before him. The boy mumbles something incoherent, slips out of the room and waits ...

This didn't just happen once and it wasn't a charade, put on by my parents to impress us – for I was that young boy. I knew I was witnessing something real. Their faith wasn't a pretence or even a habit – it was the core of their lives. Central to it was their encounter with God through his word.

I am deeply thankful for their legacy.

I also owe more than I can express to those who took time to help me with my first steps through Scripture. To the late Professor David Gooding I owe a particular debt, especially for the long and patient hours he devoted to teaching me how to read the Bible during my undergraduate years at Queen's University Belfast. To my brother John, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, I am indebted for his outstanding example of courageous faith, his commitment to Scripture and his love, friendship, help and consistent encouragement at many points along the road.

My home church, Glenabbey, has been the best possible classroom over the past thirty-six years. I am particularly grateful to the leaders who gave me – and continue to give me – such support and understanding, encouraging me to take time to write as well as to teach. Thanks also to the many patient souls who have sat through

Acknowledgements

my teaching on the topic of personal Bible study and especially to those who have provided feedback

This is the second edition of *God Speaking*, previously published in 2003 as *Getting the Message*. I continue to be deeply grateful to the friends who encouraged and supported the writing and publication of my first attempt: Clifford, Noel, Robert and Stephen. Those who are familiar with that edition will discover that, while retaining the essential principles, I have almost entirely rewritten it. The new version is shorter, offering a fresh presentation and focusing on different books of the Bible.

A big thank you to everyone at SPCK Publishing: Philip Law, Rima Devereaux and the Production and Art teams.

I dedicated the first edition to our four children: Kristyn, Jenni, Michael and Simon. They are now twenty-three years older, each pursuing his or her own adult pathway and continuing to provide immeasurable encouragement, inspiration and joy to Heather and me. We now have nine amazing grandchildren, and I know that our children will not mind if I dedicate this second edition to them:

Eliza, Charlotte, Lucy, Grace, Joseph, Tahlia, Rory, Rosie and Bonnie! I don't expect you to read this just now. But I write it in the hope that you will read it one day. And that you will find it helpful as you, in your turn, find your place in God's big story; as you learn, live and love it well and pass it on to the next generation. Until the return of the King.

With my fondest love

Granda

How to use this book

Welcome to *God Speaking!*

This is a book about getting to know God, developing your relationship with him and equipping you to live loyally to the Lord Jesus.

It is about how to read the Bible well, making the most of the time you spend engaging with it. It is about developing your personal confidence that Scripture is indeed God's word.

It is about exploring, living and communicating hope, giving you truth to share with a confused world.

Your time is precious. So let me explain what is coming so that you can decide for yourself how best to read this book, which bits to focus on and which you might want to skip for the moment.

The **Introduction** to the book is a personal story of a conversation that changed my life and led me to take the Bible seriously. After this, the book is divided into four parts.

Part 1 is primarily to do with our motivation, goals and expectations as we read the Bible.

Chapter 1 looks at the main reason for reading the Bible.

Chapter 2 expands on this, presenting three more reasons for spending time with Scripture.

Chapter 3 examines some approaches that can lead to our missing the point.

Part 2 is where we get down to business and actually open our Bibles, using 1 Peter as our working example as I invite you to participate with me in the reading process.

How to use this book

Chapter 4 begins with a brief overview of the big story of the Bible. It also provides general information, aimed especially at those who are at the beginning of their Bible reading journey. It gives advice on *where* and *how* to start.

Chapter 5 deals with some of the major struggles we can have as we read.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on how to get more out of our reading and especially on the importance of reading with questions in mind.

Chapter 8 looks at the importance of identifying the author's purpose.

Chapter 9 sets out five steps that will help us to build a broad and balanced picture of the overall contents of 1 Peter, or indeed any other New Testament letter.

Chapter 10 gets closer to the text of 1 Peter, establishing the main units of thought and looking at the crucially important issue of thought flow.

Chapters 11 and 12 bring us even closer to the text as we narrow our focus to 1 Peter 1.

Chapter 13 considers the important question of applying God's word to our lives.

Chapter 14 provides a structure for 1 Peter as a whole and suggests a number of themes to follow as we read.

Chapter 15 concludes our exploration of how to read a New Testament letter by providing a summary of the key steps set out in Parts 1 and 2.

In **Part 3** of the book, we switch our attention to New Testament narrative, using **John's Gospel** as our working example.

Chapter 16 provides some basic information about the Gospels, followed by an introduction to reading the Gospel of John in the light of John's stated purpose.

Chapter 17 looks at themes and structure in John, building up a big picture of the book's contents.

How to use this book

Chapter 18 looks in detail at thought flow in John by examining his introduction to the Gospel.

Chapter 19 continues our examination of thought flow by considering the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Chapter 20 provides an example of how to read the signs in John, focusing on the first sign: the miracle at the wedding at Cana.

Chapter 21, our final chapter, in **Part 4**, takes a brief look at the history of Bible translations in English and provides guidance on choosing which version to use. It also provides a selection of recommended resources, including apps and websites, that are widely available and can help us.

Introduction: A personal story

Let me begin with a story. It is the story of a car journey that took place more than fifty years ago. It was a trip that saved my life and changed its direction.

It was the early seventies. I was eighteen, about to begin what is now termed a gap year between school and university. Like many of my age, I was unsure what I *wanted* to do with my life, let alone what I *ought* to do with it. But as I had time on my hands and few responsibilities, I'd been asked to drive to the beautiful seaside village of Dunfanaghy in County Donegal, stay the night in a hotel (a rare treat in those days) and the next morning after breakfast take a family friend to Belfast Airport for his flight to London. I jumped at the opportunity.

I had known this man since childhood. He was a world-renowned scholar who taught ancient languages, literature and philosophy in Belfast. I also knew from personal experience that he was an exceptional Bible teacher.

Unusually among adult visitors to our home, he always seemed to find time to talk to me and always expressed an interest in the things that interested me: sport, wildlife; even, on one occasion, fireworks! He was a fascinating conversationalist – both his choice of topic and the way in which he approached it made it sound like the most interesting thing in the entire world, whatever it was. He even talked me into learning Latin verbs to the rhythm of riding my bicycle!

I particularly remember his questions. Not the normal, boring, factual questions about school life, but questions about what I thought and how I understood things; questions that took me to the troubled edge of my thinking and beyond. So I fully expected the

Introduction

three-hour journey to the airport to be an entertaining examination of my ignorance!

Imagine my shock when, just a few minutes into our journey, he turned to me and, in his cultured English accent, asked, ‘Well, my boy, why are you alive? What are you living for?’

Caught by surprise, I could only stumble clumsily through an answer to which I hadn’t given much thought, hoping that he would move on to other things. But he wasn’t to be deterred. Question after question came, probing my motivations. With inescapable logic, he laid out the challenges facing me as a young man, while at the same time firing my imagination with unglimped horizons of possibility. For the whole trip I was gripped. It felt like being operated on while fully awake – something I have recently experienced – but it was as enthralling an experience as my medical surgery was not!

It was well into our conversation before I realised that there was nothing random about the direction he was taking. Several times he mentioned the Apostle Paul’s advice to his young protégé, Timothy. He effectively took the part of the Apostle, ensuring that I felt, almost two thousand years later, the full impact of Paul’s words from his letters to Timothy in around AD 60.

His questions and commentary exposed the inadequacy of my thinking about the meaning of life and my place in the world. It opened me up to the implications of Christ the Saviour’s coming, he ‘who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Timothy 1:10). Here was something I could give myself to; something of which there would never be any need to be ashamed; something that would provide direction far beyond the short-term horizons that preoccupied most of my friends. Here I was, a young man not unlike Timothy, being urged to get into God’s word for myself and to love God with all my mind as well as with all my heart.

I was being challenged, too, to live this out practically: to apply at least the same level of focus to my engagement with Scripture

A personal story

as I was planning to devote to my study of French literature at university; the same passion to get to know God as I was investing in my favourite sports; the same ambition to please the Lord as I had for developing my career.

The timing of the conversation was crucial. I believe that, with his experience of countless students at the start of their careers, he understood this very well. Its length was also a factor: he bought me lunch (chicken and chips as I recall) so that we could continue to talk. And in those far-off days when airport security was minimal, I was able to listen to his counsel right up to the aircraft steps. We spoke for around six hours non-stop!

Those six hours completely changed how I thought about my life; they served as the catalyst that launched me into the amazing journey with God's word that I've been on ever since.

But don't get the wrong impression. I had crossed a line and a new journey had begun, certainly, but it took time; the transformation didn't happen overnight. I had been given a glimpse of a spiritual reality I had not experienced before. But I stumbled around for a while, trying to make sense of what I had heard.

The following year, somewhat in desperation at my lack of progress in getting to grips with the Bible, I met up with this man again during my first term at Queen's University. It was then that a way forward began to open up for me.

*I knew that **the Doc** (as we called him at the time) had his university room just a few buildings down from the Department of Modern Languages where I was studying. One day I plucked up the courage to climb the creaky and narrow staircase that led to his top-floor room and knock on his door. After exchanging greetings, I blurted out, 'Do you take people on?' Flustered, I explained how I was struggling to get into the Bible and felt in great need of guidance.*

I need not have worried. He kindly and generously took me on!

That still astonishes me as, looking back, I can appreciate how busy he was. But every Wednesday afternoon in term-time, from

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four o'clock until just before six, I had his undivided attention. He guided me patiently and wisely through parts of John's Gospel, Exodus, Hebrews and many other Scriptures. Gradually the pieces began to click into place and I learned how to read the Bible by myself. I learned that consistency and patience eventually bring the great reward of getting to know God and experiencing his voice. God also opened up opportunities for me to pass on to others what I was learning in his word – something I have been seeking to do ever since.

This is my story. It isn't yours. And you may well be thinking, 'Good for you, Gilbert. Glad it worked out. But I'm a different person. I live in a different world. And, if you want to know, the idea of doing a weekly two-hour Bible study with a university professor freaks me out!'

I get that. We don't have the same circumstances, personality, abilities or calling. So why tell my story?

- *First, to highlight my own struggles in relating personally to the Bible, even with all the benefits of a supportive Christian home and a good-quality education. If you are finding Bible reading and study very challenging, you are not alone.*
- *Second, to underline the importance of seeking help! The Christian life wasn't designed to be a solo experience. At least in part, we grow and develop as Christians through receiving from others and giving to them. Seek out those who can help you to grow.*
- *Third, to explain that I eventually found a way to engage meaningfully with the Bible. It is a way which, on the strength of many years' teaching, I know to be straightforward, a way that is accessible to those who truly desire to grow in their knowledge of God through his word. It is my goal in this short book to persuade you to join me on the journey I began more than fifty years ago and to show you how to get started.*

A personal story

In addition to my work in Northern Ireland, over the years I have had the privilege of teaching in many different countries across five continents, sharing with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures how they can study the Bible for themselves. Much of what I write in this book has been shaped by such believers, who have listened to my presentations and offered their reactions and experiences. These Christians have testified over the years to the helpful and even transformative effect of the simple ideas I share in this book.

Regardless of who you are, what your background is or where across the globe you're from, I am confident that you too can experience the word of God as it was intended to be experienced. You too can encounter the Living God and be refreshed, strengthened and empowered to live out your faith. It is my prayer for you that this book does for you what my friend did for me many years ago – that it will launch you on the thrilling and transformational journey of a lifetime.

Part I

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

1

The heart of the matter

Why bother reading the Bible?

There are, I suppose, two kinds of people who might ask this question:

- The first is the person who really can't be bothered with very much and doesn't want to be persuaded otherwise. This is obviously not you, since you are reading this!
- The second is the person who is prepared to bother once they are convinced that it really matters, not just in theory but at a deeply practical and personal level.

Philosopher and Wikipedia founder Larry Sanger initially read the Bible, for himself and to his children, to be better educated: 'This library between two covers is ... the most influential book in the history of the world, bar none. One cannot call oneself well educated in the West if one has not read it.'¹ As his long journey of conversion to Christianity progressed, he discovered better reasons.

To the question, 'Why bother?' most Christians would probably answer, 'Because it is God's word.' That surely is reason enough. If the Bible is God's word it is by definition the most important, most authoritative word in the world. What reason could we give for not reading it?

And yet ...

Theory and reality

It is, unfortunately, possible to have a theoretical belief that the Bible is God's word but to show little evidence in daily life that this

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belief is real. It remains a theory, and our Bible remains largely unopened. Why is this?

Particularly in Western culture, there is growing opposition to the Bible. When I was at school in the 1960s, even the Christian cleric charged with teaching us Religious Education didn't believe it was God's word. At university it was much the same, except the opposition was stronger and better articulated.

In the media, it seemed that new theories were continually advanced to pick away at the foundations of faith in Scripture. More recently came the so-called Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and their vociferous legions of followers: the New Atheists, led by Richard Dawkins.

This can lead us to have doubts about the origin, transmission and accuracy of Scripture, and therefore its reliability. If this is a significant issue for you, I encourage you to seek answers, for the stakes are too high to ignore. Don't accept the assumptions of the culture around you or their slogans, which are cleverly designed to shut down honest enquiry.

I can warmly recommend Peter Williams' brilliant book, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, or my brother John's *Gunning for God*, which tackles a range of attacks on the Christian Gospel.²

Most of all, I encourage you to allow the Bible, as God's word, to speak for itself. Follow the simple process I outline in this book and see what you discover.

Others may object to what the Bible has to say, for example, in its supernaturalism, in the area of personal morality or in the exclusive claims the New Testament makes for Jesus. In private, they resent any interference with their own freedom. In public, they are embarrassed at having to defend the Bible's stance on moral issues.

The Bible says one thing; our culture says another. Whose voice do we listen to? Each of us has to face this challenge and make up our own mind.

The heart of the matter

When we open the Bible, we are engaging with God himself. And if God is God, it follows that we are not! There is something in the human heart that resents acknowledging an authority outside ourselves. To paraphrase the way German philosopher Nietzsche put it, ‘If there is a God, I couldn’t bear not to be he.’³ God’s ways are not our ways. It’s not in our nature – and certainly not in the prevailing culture – to think the way God thinks.

Jesus was so out of step with the prevailing philosophies and values of his day, as we discover when we read the Gospels, that the world ended up killing him for it. Why, then, do we think that Jesus would fit seamlessly into the values of our own day? This suggests that we are ignoring what the Gospels tell us and reinventing Jesus in our own image.

The truth is that the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges all cultures, *especially our own*. That’s the hardest thing to acknowledge. It’s easy to be critical of others yet at the same time to be victims of a huge cultural blind spot when it comes to ourselves. We avoid facing ourselves honestly and admitting the unexamined assumptions we have assimilated from the world around us.

To follow Jesus means to be loyal to him and to stand clear from the world that rejects him. Are we prepared for that?

Accepting the easy yoke

At the heart of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus issues his famous invitation: ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28). How attractive this sounds to those who are burdened by the rules of religion, as led by Pharisees ancient and modern! As someone once put it, ‘Life is one long process of getting tired.’⁴ Jesus, Son of God, King of kings, offers his rest so that we can put down our burdens of guilt and fear.

How unique is that?! Do you know of any king, president, prime minister or leader whose manifesto leads with an offer of rest as

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a pure gift? The key to receiving it is simply and solely coming to him.

But then Jesus adds, ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:29–30). ‘Take my *yoke* ... and *learn* from me ... and you will find rest.’

A yoke (nothing to do with eggs) is a mechanism used in farming to govern animals, for example when they are ploughing a field. As an instrument of government, it became a metaphor for the rule of a king or for an authoritative body of religious instruction. The teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees was referred to as a yoke. In their case, the yoke was unpleasant and damaging, but with Jesus it is very different: accepting his yoke – his teaching, his word, his government – leads to finding rest. Claiming to have come to Christ yet refusing to accept the authority of his teaching is a contradiction in terms and will certainly not lead to rest.

Being a follower of Christ, then, involves not just coming to Christ but also taking the yoke of his leadership and government in our lives. That government is expressed in his word.

It’s boring!

As a teenager, though, I did believe the Bible to be God’s word. This actually led to pressure from most of my peers in school, who openly (or privately, as I discovered in later life) mocked my faith and cast up all the latest objections, which included evolutionary theory, magic mushrooms and the so-called Passover Plot! Thankfully, help was on hand to help me work through these challenges.

In addition to this, I recognised the moral battle within me between, on the one hand, what I knew the Bible taught and, on the other, what was increasingly accessible in the so-called Swinging Sixties. To be honest, I didn’t particularly like some of what the Bible said. But I had learned enough, especially from the positive

The heart of the matter

influence of my family and some negative examples around me, to know deep down that, however attractive alternative choices might be, they would lead to spiritual death.

No, my problem wasn't that I didn't believe the Bible. My problem was that I did believe it and yet it did very little for me. I found much of it boring (the ultimate crime in the eyes of a teenager!). There was a yawning gap between what I believed about the Bible and how I experienced it, which felt like a stone in my shoe or a nagging toothache. After all, if this really was the word of God, shouldn't I expect something more dynamic than this?

What changed? This book is my personal answer to that question.

The main purpose

More importantly than a particular technique, I learned that **the main purpose in reading the Bible is to get to know God**. Realising this was the first thing that prompted change. The Bible is God's self-revelation to us. Its primary focus is not God telling us about *ourselves*, although it certainly does that too, but God telling us about *himself* so that we can get to know him.

When we read a novel, we expect to learn something about the author. When we read an opinion piece in a newspaper, a blog post or an autobiography, we expect to learn even more. But that's not what I mean by encountering God through his word. It isn't simply about getting to know more *about* him, although that is both true and important. It is about getting to know him – not as a theory but as a Person.

There are a number of English novels on my bookshelves at home. I've enjoyed many of them, and some I've read more than once. But I didn't read any of them in the expectation of getting to know the author. Most of the authors are dead in any case.

On another level is writing that is more meaningful to me. I have notebooks written by my father when he was a young man. These

Why is it important?

may not be as polished as Dickens or the other literary greats, but they convey my dad's voice. They give me insight into the man I loved as a boy and a young man until he went to heaven.

On another level again is a collection of letters, because of their relationship to me rather than their literary qualities – the beautiful person who is now my wife of forty-eight years wrote them for me, not for a wider audience.

But the Bible is at yet another level. The Author is the living, eternal God who has revealed himself in Jesus, who sent his Son to give his life for me so that I could know him and participate in that life at the deepest imaginable level.

God desires a relationship with us that is infinitely deeper than that of Creator to creature. He invites us to trust Christ and be 'born from above' (John 3:3⁵) by God's Spirit, becoming God's children. We are in a real relationship with the Lord Jesus, sharing in his eternal life. God's desire for us as his children is that we mature into grown-up sons and daughters. He has given us his word to inform, develop and sustain this relationship.

He has also given us his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth.

Christ's promise, when he left his disciples to go back to the Father, was that he would send the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. To be ready for everything they needed to know, they would have to go through the world- and life-changing events of Christ's death, burial, resurrection and ascension.

He was careful to point out that the Holy Spirit wasn't going to *replace* him as their teacher. As Jesus explained, the Spirit 'will not speak on his own authority'; rather, 'whatever he hears he will speak'. Hears from whom? From the Lord Jesus himself: 'He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:13–15 *ESV*).

The gift of these words was full and complete, as Jude points out (Jude 3). The risen Lord remained their teacher, as he remains ours,

The heart of the matter

by his Spirit through the word that has been delivered to us. We will never know more about God than this.

The Bible is unlike any other writing in the world:

- It is unique in its **source**: it is ‘God-breathed’ (2 Timothy 3:16).
- It is unique in its **authority**: it is God’s word (Hebrews 4:12).
- It is unique in its **power**: we are ‘born again ... through the living and enduring word of God’ (1 Peter 1:23).
- It is unique in its **life**: Jesus said his words are ‘full of the Spirit and life’ (John 6:63).
- It is unique in its **reach** into our inner world:

For the word of God is alive 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. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

(Hebrews 4:12–13)

When we open the Bible, we are engaging with God – it is his word, his self-revelation to us. This is true whether we believe it or not. The Bible is more than a book. We come to it to encounter God, to grow in our personal, one-to-one relationship with him and to experience him speaking into our lives.

By *speaking*, I do not mean that we will hear an audible voice, but that we will truly and authentically encounter God. The Holy Spirit speaks, assures, convicts, reveals and pours out the love of God into our hearts.

There are times in my own life where it has been immediately obvious to me that the Spirit has taken God’s living word and burned it into my heart.

Why is it important?

Yet God does make us wait, perhaps to test whether we are serious about hearing his voice and responding to him. He asks us to be patient, to read, pray, reflect, ask questions and seek him with all our hearts – to dig for the treasure.

Part 2

HOW TO BEGIN

4

Getting started

How do we set about engaging with the Bible?

Indecision plagues so many of us because, when it comes to the Bible, we are faced with a choice of sixty-six different books. Each one is unique. So where should we start?

It depends. Our level of familiarity with the Bible will affect what we bring to our reading and therefore how we might best begin it.

If you are brand new to Christianity and to the Bible, I recommend that you start by reading the two-volume work by Luke: the Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts. And then slowly widen the scope of your reading. Allow this to develop into a habit so that you gradually gain a grasp of the overall content of Scripture. Many have committed with great personal benefit to a reading plan that covers the entire Bible in one year. There are also plans that cover the Bible in two years. (Take a look at Biblica's 'Bible in a Year: 365-day reading plan for an example of a plan that is readily available.⁶)

I had coffee with a young student and I asked him about his engagement with the Bible. He told me that, up until eighteen months ago, it was sporadic at best. However, he established a pattern of reading the Bible right through in a year, an organised and disciplined approach that had a powerful impact on his confidence and his witness as a Christian. I then enquired how he got started, and he was very happy to tell me that it was through the influence of his girlfriend! Brilliant! They are repeating the process this year, texting each other to encourage one another to keep going.

This illustrates an important principle. Not that everyone requires a girlfriend, boyfriend or spouse, but that finding others to read along with us, keeping us accountable, is very helpful.

How to begin

How to take this a step further by focusing in on one particular book of the Bible is what I am suggesting in this book. But combining the two would be the ideal approach: general reading through the Bible *plus* specific focus for at least three months on one book.

Some important things we need to know

In case you are quite new to reading the Bible, here are some facts about it that are good to know.

The Bible is revelation

It is God's revelation of himself in words. It is expressed through human authors, but it was not originated by them. The Bible isn't a compilation of human attempts to tell us about God. It is not human-made religious philosophy. It is not speculation about the meaning of life and the universe. It is God telling us about himself.

If God hadn't revealed himself in this way, we would know very little about him. It is true that we can perceive certain divine characteristics from creation, as Paul points out in Romans 1, namely God's deity and power. Moreover, within us there is the evidence of conscience, an inbuilt awareness of injustice, the instinct – common to all human beings – that propels us either to excuse ourselves or blame others. Through conscience, we can perceive that we live in a moral universe, with God as the moral governor. But beyond that, we could know little about his character or his ways. And, of course, the genius and power of creation beyond and around us, and the existence of conscience within us, are themselves part of his self-revelation. But God is a speaking God. He is the God who loves to communicate. He has spoken to us in his Son, the Lord Jesus – the eternal Word of God. And he has given us his words. This is what Paul says about them: 'All Scripture is God-breathed ...' (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Bible is a library

It is not one single book but a collection of books. The word *bible* itself indicates this, for it means 'little books'. These books were not all written down at one time, in one culture, in one language and by one person. Rather, they were written over a period of around sixteen hundred years, in different languages, in different cultural and geographical settings and by a wide variety of people from different walks of life.

The Bible library is very varied

The books in the Bible are not of one type or genre. There is history, poetry, letters, prophecy, legal writing, a collection of wise sayings and a unique form of biography, called Gospel.

The Bible tells one big story

Each individual book contributes in a unique way to this big story, which can be set out in six major steps as follows, with the related books of the Bible in parenthesis:

- 1 **Creation:** the origin, nature and purpose of human life within the universe (Genesis 1 – 2).
- 2 **Fall:** the coming of sin and death, the cleansing of earth through a flood and the promise of a divine solution through one who is to come (Genesis 3 – 11).
- 3 **Preparation:** for the coming of Messiah through the choice of Abraham and the emergence and training of the Hebrew nation (Genesis 12 to Malachi).
- 4 **Incarnation:** the coming of Messiah, his life, death and resurrection (the Gospels).
- 5 **Pentecost:** the coming of the Spirit and the age of the Church (Acts and the New Testament letters).
- 6 **Consummation:** the return of the true King to judge and rule: the creation of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation).

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Getting to know this big story will help us to grasp the significance of the Bible's individual parts and to see how it fits together into a unified whole.

The Bible has a striking thematic unity

This unity is to be expected since, although the Bible has many human authors, it has one Source: God himself.

Yet it is still a remarkable fact that when we consider big and controversial issues such as human nature, sexual expression, the afterlife or how a person can be made right with God, we find that the Bible speaks to these in a unified way. Indeed, no single part of the Bible tells us all there is to know on any major issue but, as we piece together, for example, what Genesis, the Psalms, Hebrews and 2 Peter teach about the origin of the universe, we find a single voice emerging.

God has given us books

One major takeaway is this: God has chosen to reveal himself in books.

He could, of course, have revealed himself differently, for example through a series of wise sayings or philosophical statements. He could even have provided a neatly packaged and organised theological system, properly indexed so that we could look up any topic and discover what God says about it! But he hasn't done this. Instead, he has given us a fascinating variety of individual books. In many of them, the principal method of communication is real history and personal story. Others offer us poetry, or direct teaching from Christ's apostles.

God is by definition the supreme teacher in the universe. So the fact that he has chosen to reveal himself in *individual books* is surely more than a hint at how we should read them. That is, God intends us to read his revelation in the way he chose to express it, by

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considering the Bible one book at a time. This conclusion is central to the approach to reading the Bible that I am now going to set out.

Getting started

Back to the question with which I started this chapter: where should we start? Here's the advice I received and which I have been recommending to others ever since.

- First, select one book from the Bible that you can read through in one sitting.
- Second, choose a time when you will not be distracted and a place that is comfortable for you.
- Third, read the chosen book from beginning to end.

Let's unpack these three things.

1. The choice of book

Each book of the Bible is God-breathed and is profitable in its own unique way. There are no bad choices to be made! But perhaps there are some choices that are wiser than others. This depends on your level of knowledge of the Bible, your experience as a believer and your stage of life.

I've already suggested that, if you are completely new to the Christian faith, you should start by reading a New Testament Gospel, such as Luke, which focuses on the life of Christ. Of course, in some ways this goes against my own advice, which is to choose a book you can read through in one sitting, as the Gospels are quite long. But for someone new to Christianity, the importance of getting to know the Lord Jesus outweighs other considerations. If it is too daunting to read a Gospel right through at one sitting, I suggest you read it three or four chapters at a time. That way, you should be able to read through one Gospel in a week or so.

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When you have finished, read through the same Gospel again and again over the following weeks, until you have read it right through four or five times. This will give you a picture of the Gospel as a whole book, the details of which will begin to stick in your mind. It will also build your confidence: even though you will be aware that while there is so much more that you don't know, you now know something! You might decide then that you want to spend longer thinking through the Gospel before moving on. If so, Part 3 of this book focuses on how to read a Gospel, using the Gospel according to John as our example.

When I took my life-changing car journey, I was not a new Christian. I already had a good knowledge of the basic content of the Gospels and many other parts of the Bible, thanks largely to the encouragement of my parents. What I needed – and what you may need if your situation is similar – was to learn how to take my reading further, how to spend time in the text to discover what the Spirit was saying and to encounter the Lord himself. At my mentor's suggestion, I decided to commit to camping out in one of the New Testament letters for the rest of the year. He suggested I chose one of the shorter letters, one that I could easily read in one sitting and then read again.

Some of the letters are quite long: for example, Romans, Hebrews and the two Corinthians letters. I chose 1 Timothy, since at the time I was a young man, not unlike Timothy to whom Paul wrote the letter. It has six short chapters. I committed to reading it right through at least twice a day until, as an American friend once expressed it to me, 'my fingerprints were all over it'. The benefits of this were soon apparent. (I will go into more detail about this in chapter 6.)

For the purposes of this guide, I have chosen 1 Peter as the book we will focus on together. There are a number of reasons for this choice.

First, it is a letter: a type of writing that is familiar and accessible to most of us, even if usually these days in the form of emails.

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Second, 1 Peter is one of the shorter letters, with only five chapters. This means it can more easily be read in one sitting than, for example, the Gospel according to Luke. At an average reading speed, it takes roughly sixteen minutes to read 1 Peter. But let me emphasise this: time is not the issue. *Read slowly*. Don't be in a rush. Take all the time you need, so that every sentence has impact and every detail is noticed.

Third, the content of 1 Peter is, I think, generally more accessible than that of some of the other letters. Its relevance to our lives as Christian believers, not just in the first century but also in the twenty-first, is not too difficult to see.

Fourth, 1 Peter is a very helpful test case for illustrating many of the core principles of personal engagement with Scripture and is therefore ideal for the purposes of this book.

2. Making time

Each of us has all the time there is, twenty-four hours in a day.

Do you find yourself wishing that there were eight days in the week or three more hours in the day? It's not going to happen. We have all the time there is. It is how we choose to use our time that matters.

We all have a matrix of responsibilities, priorities, needs and wants to manage within the limitations of those twenty-four hours. It is rarely an easy puzzle to solve. Daily work (both paid and unpaid) makes its own demands. Depending on how old we are, what stage of life we are at and what responsibilities we have – for example, in raising children or caring for loved ones – our days tend to be packed. How can we find the right balance? Just when we think we have it worked out, events happen, circumstances change and we have to work it out again!

I know something about this, given that at one time we had four children under the age of six, and for many years I was faced with the task of running a school department with many extracurricular

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activities, as well as helping to establish a new church. So I am sympathetic to the challenge. Given these competing demands, how can we find the time to engage with Scripture?

I think it is important to say first of all that our daily work is not the enemy here – it is certainly not an impediment to getting to know God. On the contrary, our work is one of the key contexts in which we get to know God, who himself is a worker and maintains the entire universe. Daily work, whether paid or unpaid, is the school in which God places us so that he can refine our faith, develop our character, test us and help us to grow in loyalty to him. Stealing time from our employer in order to read the Bible is not a godly characteristic! So finding time to read Scripture may require getting up earlier, setting aside a couple of hours one evening a week, reducing time spent on entertainment or learning to say no to other opportunities. Howard Hendricks from Dallas Theological Seminary said, in a talk I listened to around the time I was beginning to take the Bible seriously, ‘Say no to something every day. Just to keep you in the habit.’

In addition to saying no to things, there are practical ways of making more of the time we are given, even in the midst of our working day. I used to make it a habit to carry a pocket New Testament to read in the gaps during the day, such as coffee breaks, waiting in the car for one of the children to appear after sports or music practice, waiting my turn at the dentist and so on. In these days of smartphones it is even easier always to have a Bible with us. (Of course, it is also much easier to spend the gaps catching up on social media instead!)

So when you are given the gift of unexpected time, make the most of it. Another idea is to use the time twice by listening to an audio recording of the Bible when driving or doing mechanical activities such as household chores.

Family is something else that we shouldn’t see as an impediment to getting to know God. Caring well for our family honours God

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and is another arena in which we can grow to know our heavenly Father, whose family is extensive and who cares for every member! When our children were very young, we simply didn't have the same amount of time as we had when we were first married. But we were also careful not fall into the temptation of allowing the children to take over all our waking hours when we weren't at work. We had to learn to make time for other things – both for each other and to grow our relationship with the Lord.

In addition to the demands of daily work and domestic responsibilities, our lives tend to fill up with other activities. Some of these are necessary, some are unnecessary (but often enjoyable) and some fall somewhere in between. In a crisis we may, it is true, temporarily set aside our plans and re-order our priorities, but generally the way we use our time reflects what we value.

Time is limited. We can't do it all and we can't have it all, despite what the media tells us. Life is full of choices, and we can't be in two places at once. Every time we say yes to something, we say no to a hundred other things. If we are going to carve out time for Scripture, other things will have to be sacrificed.

I've already referred to the temptation to use up all the gaps in our day on social media. According to the Statista website, in 2025 the average daily social media usage of users worldwide amounted to 141 minutes per day.⁷ Digital distraction is a significant adversary! Another temptation is binge-watching TV series. Isn't there always a friend who tells you that there is yet another must-see series, even as you try to play catch up on the three series you have already started? Doom-scrolling on X (formerly Twitter) is another favourite pastime which really does none of us any favours. And then there is TikTok! With its endless stream of short video clips designed to capture our attention, it aims to keep us in a constant state of excitement. This creates a constant craving for more while at the same time reducing our tolerance of anything that seems even remotely boring, slashing our concentration level.

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What if, even just from Monday to Thursday, you were to spend the hour before bedtime simply reading – the Bible, a good book, a classic novel? That would add up to an extra 208 hours of reading in a year. You could do a lot in that time.

Don't make the mistake of waiting until you have your life sorted before you decide to make the time. That will never happen. Rather than being about what we do when we have everything sorted, life consists of the actual sorting! At the age of seventy-two, I am still facing the daily puzzle of balancing competing priorities and dealing with sudden changes in circumstances.

One way of being more objective (and honest!) about your time management is to keep a diary of your use of time for one week. Divide your waking day into fifteen-minute segments and note down how you spend each one. The results might surprise you. Then again, they might not!

How much time should we set aside for reading God's word? That will vary from person to person, and will also depend on what you hope to accomplish. There is no formula, no especially spiritual amount of time. Even a few minutes spent in thoughtful Bible reading is beneficial. So don't waste energy beating yourself up about the time you can't spend in Scripture. Make the most of the time you can spend!

But since you need to start somewhere, I suggest setting aside fifteen to twenty minutes a day for focused engagement with Scripture. Once you have got used to this discipline, there is a good chance it will develop into thirty or forty minutes or more, at least on a few days each week.

I remember once being inspired to make road running part of my exercise routine. The first day I ran about a mile. I was in my thirties and that was easy! The next day I ran seven miles. For a few days I could hardly walk. I never did any more road running. Start small and grow.

We are all different. Think about what helps you psychologically

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and works for you in terms of environment and conditions, rather than what might work for someone else. Are you the type of person who requires total quiet and solitude? Or does it help you to be in a public space? Do you concentrate best while listening to music? Is early morning the best time? Have you a favourite chair, table or place outside where you do your best thinking?

If your ideal context isn't available, then just be creative and make the best of what you have. Perhaps, like John Wesley's mother, you simply need to throw your apron over your head so that everyone around you knows to leave you alone for twenty minutes! As with other things in life, if we wait for ideal circumstances we may wait a long time.

I have already mentioned spiritual war – we as Christians are each involved in it individually. We must expect one of the major battles in this war to be over our need to carve out time with God, because cultivating our relationship with the Lord lies at the heart of our life and witness. Our enemy will employ every tactic he knows to keep us from fellowship with God, worship of God and service of God. God has promised that we will find him if we seek him with all our hearts. But let's not be surprised that we often have to fight, and fight hard, to maintain the reality of God's presence in our daily lives.

3. Read the text

Choosing which book to read is not that difficult, and I've made it easier by choosing for you! Finding a place to read undisturbed may be trickier and you might have to settle for something less than ideal. But actually getting down to reading the text is fundamentally what this is all about, and that brings other challenges.

Each of us has a different relationship to the printed page (or to words on a screen). Some of us love to read; others not so much. Over the years, many have come up to me after I've taught on the topic of personal engagement with Scripture to tell me, 'I'm not a reader.'

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Some mean this in the sense that they can't read. An official Survey of Adult Skills in Ireland found that around 18% of Irish people aged sixteen to sixty-five are either at or below Level 1 on the established literacy scale, which consists of five levels.⁸ This means more than half a million adults in my native land struggle with reading a leaflet, a bus timetable or the instructions on a medicine packet. It is a significant problem, and many churches and community groups offer adult literacy classes to seek to meet the need.

However, in the contexts in which people have told me, 'I'm not a reader,' they mostly don't mean that they *can't* read. They mean either that reading is not something they enjoy doing or that it doesn't come particularly easily to them, or both. Many have told me that the last time they read a book right through from beginning to end was at school, and for some that was primary school. They couldn't wait to leave books behind. For them, anything longer than a smartphone text, a tweet, a short email or the headlines in a newspaper constitutes a challenge. How much more, then, the sixty-six books and the thousand-plus pages of the Bible!

The good news is that you *are* reading this! This is a fair indication that, while reading may not be your favourite activity, it *is* something you can do. The issue is unlikely to be the ability to read, but rather that you don't find the activity particularly easy or enjoyable.

Is it possible to overcome this discomfort and cultivate an increasingly positive desire to read? I believe it is, and I hope that, if this is a particular struggle you have, this book will help you to overcome it.

There are many things in life that we may have no great desire to do, but we learn to do them anyway because we realise they are important. So don't let lack of desire or enjoyment put you off. Indeed, often when we discipline ourselves to do something, whether we like doing it or not, we eventually have the experience

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of discipline changing into delight and duty into joy, as we begin to reap the rewards.

I struggled to read some of the texts prescribed for English classes in school. In some cases, it was because I wasn't ready to find them interesting, and I've read them since with great enjoyment. In other cases, I'm obviously still not ready! But there is one type of reading I never found a chore to read: letters from my future wife.

Might it make a difference to your motivation if you were to read the Bible as if it were a **love letter** from God to you personally? Because that is precisely what it is. Every sentence, every word, comes from the mind of the One who loves you and desires a deepening relationship with you. He has given you his word in order to share his thinking, his plans and his purposes with you so that you can come to know him more deeply. In this word he speaks, and in this word you encounter the living God.

It's not a perfect analogy, for the Bible is more than a love letter. But it isn't *less* than a love letter either. Learning to approach the Bible as I would a love letter greatly increased my own motivation to read it and my responsiveness to the Lord as I read.

Read the text. Don't start by reading commentaries, notes or study guides. They have their place, but not yet. During my years as a teacher, I had the opportunity to teach French literature. I frequently encountered students who prepared for their literature examination by reading the relevant *Critical Guide* and not by reading the actual novel or play for themselves! That approach can work for the student, as they will appear to know the text and might even gain a pass mark in the exam. But to approach literature in this way is to miss the point and power of it. Nothing can replace personal engagement with the text. And to take that approach to the Bible – to focus primarily on what others have said about the text – is to miss the whole point of Scripture, which is to encounter God personally through his word.

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So *read the text*. In fact, why not do that now, even if you know 1 Peter well? Choose a place that is comfortable for you and where you will have the fewest distractions for the next twenty minutes.

And read 1 Peter from start to finish.

6

More than a book but not less than a book

There are some approaches to reading the Bible that we would never use when reading anything else. Perhaps the most popular is to take a few verses from a Bible book, not necessarily from its opening chapter, read them and then try to work out what they mean and how they apply to our lives.

How well, do you think, would that approach work if you were reading a novel or a poem, or even a letter from the Inland Revenue? And yet this approach to Scripture appears to be widespread.

The Bible is more than a book, but it isn't less than a book! It isn't some magical text in which we can simply stick our finger at random and expect God to speak to us!

No one would dream of approaching a love letter that way. Imagine reading just the greeting or the greeting plus the first sentence, then stopping to do some linguistic research on the words 'my darling' or a check on when in history such greetings became popular in romantic correspondence! Who does that? I certainly don't. We just read the letter. And when we are finished, we read it again and again, partly in case we have missed something, but mostly just for joy.

Would you start reading a new novel at chapter 3 or start watching a new film from halfway through? I doubt it. Would you open a letter or a play at random, put your finger on the text, read out the sentence and then try to work out what it means? Of course not.

The Bible is not a magic text! It is *more* than a book, but it is not *less* than a book!

More than a book but not less than a book

Imagine you are in a church gathering in the province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) when one of the leaders announces that they have received a letter from Peter. Imagine the excited hush as the opening words are read out:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:
Grace and peace be yours in abundance.
(1 Peter 1:1-2)

Then imagine your reaction if the reader were to stop after the introduction, saying, 'That's all for today, folks. I'll read the next couple of sentences next week.'

Wouldn't you feel disappointed and cheated? Wouldn't you want to hear a bit more?

One book at a time

God is by definition the greatest teacher in the universe. If the greatest teacher has chosen to reveal himself in individual books, it follows that the best way of engaging with his revelation is to read it in the way he has caused it to be written: one book at a time.

This was the first lesson I needed to learn when it came to engaging with Scripture.

It is such an obvious point when you think about it. Yet it appears many people don't. I certainly didn't until my mentor spelled it out to me one day in his study: 'Choose one book of the Bible. Start with a short book; one of the letters would be good. Then read it right through. Then read it again. And again.'

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‘How many times do you suggest?’

‘Twelve times.’

I gulped. Twelve times! I could see the point of one complete reading, even two or three. But twelve!

‘Don’t write any notes,’ he added. ‘Not yet. And don’t read any commentaries on the book. Just read the book itself right through twelve times. Then come back and we will talk about it.’

I knew him well enough to trust him and to know that he wasn’t insulting my intelligence. So I did what he told me. And the difference it made to my experience of Scripture was remarkable. The exact number of readings isn’t significant; the point is to begin to become truly familiar with the book’s contents.

This is the particular challenge he put to me: ‘Read it, reread it and read it again to the point where, if I phone you up at three o’clock on Tuesday morning and ask you what Paul writes in 1 Timothy chapter 4, you can tell me without having to think about it.’ Most people can’t think very well when suddenly stirred from sleep, let alone at three in the morning!

He never did phone me at 3 a.m. But he took every opportunity to find out both what I was reading and how well I was paying attention!

Personal impact

It wasn’t long before I began to notice the benefits of this repeated reading.

First, I was able to go into discussions about 1 Timothy with confidence. Not that I understood it all – far from it. But at least I was aware of the basic contents.

Second, I also knew the basic order in which the content was arranged: how the book began, how it ended and what lay in between.

Third, I was now aware of some of the key concepts and themes, especially because I had picked up on the writer’s use of repetition.

More than a book but not less than a book

Fourth, new questions were beginning to take shape in my mind, questions that were raised by the text itself. I was beginning to allow the Holy Spirit to set the agenda, to raise the questions and topics he wanted to raise, rather than going to the text seeking answers to my own problems.

And that led to a fifth benefit. I began to see the power of God's word at work, shaping my values, deepening my knowledge and appreciation of the Lord, and equipping me for service. In many conversations the relevance of what I had read was obvious and surprising (to me), and I felt prompted to ask questions that often led to deeper conversations. I was beginning to have something more to offer than personal opinion or spiritual clichés. A whole new experience of God's word shaping my daily life was unfolding.

The Bible is more than a book, but it is not less than a book.

I have passed on this simple advice about reading the Bible one book at a time and the same book many times to thousands of people through the years. For many it has been transformative.

Read the Bible as God revealed it to us: in individual books. Read each book as a whole, for it is a whole. Read it again and again. Set aside all commentaries, guides, Bible study methods and online sermons and read the text until you are very familiar with its content. Don't be in a rush to interpret it, and especially not to apply it to your life. First get to know the facts of the text. The impact this will make upon your life may surprise you.

Group impact

As we finish this chapter, let's imagine the difference this approach might make not just at an individual level, but at a group level.

Perhaps you've had an experience like the following. (If not, happy are you!)

A group of Christians decide that they are going to study a

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book of the Bible together. Let's say they agree on 1 John. All are encouraged to read it in advance of the next meeting.

The evening arrives and it becomes quickly apparent that some members of the group have forgotten to read 1 John. Others have skim-read it so that they can scarcely remember anything it says, especially as four days have passed since then. Others just read the opening chapter in a rush ten minutes before leaving the house in the hope that the group won't get any further than that on the night.

The discussion itself is predictably dull. The question, 'What struck you from the first verse?', is tossed out by the group leader in the hope that someone will pick it up. Eventually someone attempts an answer, which in turn emboldens others to have a go. The leader is excited: people are actually sharing! When the contributions on verse 1 dry up, a similar question is asked of verse 2. No one appears to have noticed – or had the courage to point out – that the contributors actually contradicted each other. After all, at least people were participating! Isn't that the point?

And so it goes on, a snail-like, methodical sharing of ignorance through verse after verse until the leader wraps up by raising the question of how the book can be applied. After further head-scratching, all agree that Christians should study more, pray more, witness more and generally be nicer people. And then, mercifully, it is time for coffee, when the real conversation can begin.

That is to treat the Bible as less than a book. And certainly as less than it is: God's word.

What if the group were to structure their approach like this instead?

Week 1: read 1 John right through together, praying over its content and asking the Holy Spirit to speak through it.

Week 2: repeat.

On the days between each gathering, each member of the group reads through 1 John at least once daily, reflecting on and praying through its content.

More than a book but not less than a book

By the third week, there will be a group of people so familiar with the content of 1 John that they can repeat the highlights in the correct order. They will be familiar with the tone of the letter, its key themes, repeated ideas and more complex passages. So now, when they begin to look at any paragraph, they are in a much stronger position to grasp its meaning in the context of the whole. In addition, group members will have shared how the Spirit has spoken to them through their personal reading of the text of 1 John.

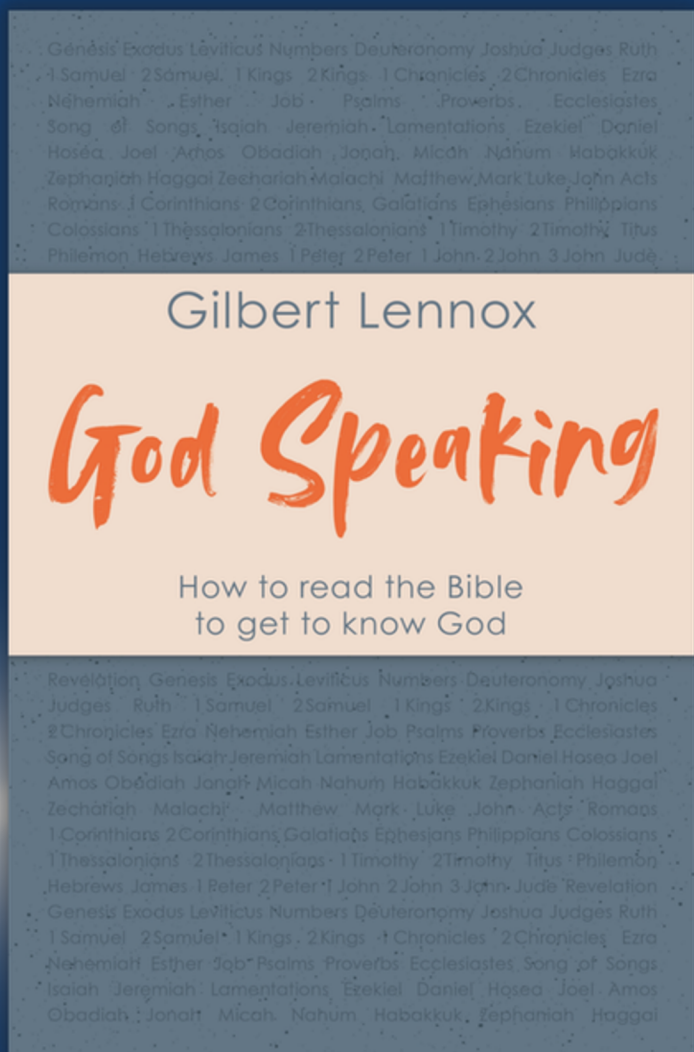
Truly, the Bible is more than a book! But it is not less than a book.

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