

# The Practice of Spiritually Reading the Bible

by Eugene Peterson



There's an ancient practice called *lectio divina* (or "spiritual reading") that has been used for centuries to help make the Bible "come alive" in our hearts.. Basically there are four components that make up *lectio*: reading, thinking, praying, living. Sounds easy, but it takes some practice to get into the groove.

Read.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But this probably takes the most practice. We live in a culture that places significant value on time and convenience, and this first practice is anything but speedy. To truly read the Bible, you've got to soak yourself in it.

Have you ever been to the ocean? Have you ever been in the ocean? Not just pulling up in a car, taking your shoes off, and sticking your big toe in the water. Have you ever immersed yourself in the ocean? When you do that, it's almost as if a whole new world opens up to you. You see and feel and taste and hear things that you never could have just walking along the beach -- you experience things hidden from the spectators on the beach. It's the same thing when you come to the Bible. When you immerse yourself in it, a whole new world opens up. As usual, the Bible really says it best: "Place these words on your hearts. Get them deep inside you. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder... Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning until you fall into bed at night. Inscribe them on the doorposts and gates of your cities so that you'll live a long time." (Deuteronomy 11)

First, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible, and illuminates what it means to live here -- really live, not just get across the street.

As we read, and the longer we read, we, begin to 'get it' -- we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in, and -- most of all -- the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This is new for many of us, a different sort of book -- a book that reads us even as we read it. We are used to picking up and reading books for what we can get out of them: information we can use, inspiration to energize us, instructions on how to do something or other, entertainment to while away a rainy day, wisdom that will guide us into better living. These things can and do take place when reading the Bible, but the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, God's word and world, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives.

So you can see that it's not the same thing as reading the latest issue of your favorite magazine or a Shakespearian sonnet. There's something different here -- something that the creator of the universe wants to tell you and wants you to understand about him and yourself. By jumping into the Bible, you open your eyes to God's world and see how he includes you in his story.

After reading, the next step is to really think about what the Bible is saying. This may seem obvious, but there is a difference between letting your mind wander over a few verses or chapters and trying to figure out what it means. You can read a sentence or two, quickly decide what they mean and make a mental check next to them, and then head off to the gift shop. Or, you can spend days and weeks (or even months) meditating on what a particular passage is really talking about -- turning it over in your mind, reflecting on it, soaking it in. This way of thinking about the Bible is talked about in a number of places in the Bible. Perhaps the best example can be found in Psalm 1: "You thrill to God's Word. You chew on it day and night." It's not like a meal that you gulp down before you head out the door to do what you really want to do.

You've read the text. You've spent time thinking. Now comes prayer. The kind of prayer we're talking about goes beyond merely asking for things -- although there's time for that, and God even tells us to do that often. But in the process of *lectio divina*, there's a time when you need to acknowledge what God is saying to you.

Did God reveal something new about who he is? Did he reveal something about who you are in his eyes? Is he asking you to think about someone in a different light? Talk to God about it. Ask God to show you more about what you've just read: "Help me to understand these things inside and outs so I can ponder your miracle-wonders" (Psalm 119). Don't just read through the Bible and breeze through the prayer part. Go beyond the usual "thanks for this or that, help me to be a better person" routine. Have a conversation with God. He wants to do that with you.

Don't be afraid to pray about a passage more than once -- in fact, that's a good thing. You may want to pray with a different focus at different times -- talking to God about what you're learning, thanking him for the truth in the passage, asking

God questions, asking him to show you how to make the words real in your life, asking forgiveness for what you see in yourself after reading, just listening... there are a lot of ways to go about prayer.

This is where these words begin to shape life. If you read what God has written, think about it, pray through it, but don't allow it to change you, you're missing a big point.

James puts it this way: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God – the free life! – even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action." (James 1)

The amazing thing about reading the Bible is that as you spend time with God, this reading becomes part of you. Like the way relationships with other humans change us and shape our lives, our relationship with God changes us on a much larger scale. In lectio divina, reading, thinking and praying come together within us, become part of us, and we are lived out even beyond our awareness – like the way a baseball player swings a bat or catches a ball or the way a violinist performs a concerto. Over time, soaking in God's word leads to our living out those words without even thinking about them.

So don't miss this: When you live the Word, you truly live.