





Introduction




Do you remember the first time you picked up a book and couldn't put it down? For me it was C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. For my kids it's been *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. For some, like me and my children, this happened in childhood. For others, it wasn't until much later in school, or even adulthood, when they picked up a book that captivated them for hours on end and launched their careers as readers.

What about you? Can you recall the first time you were so drawn into a story that everything around you seemed to recede into the background, and the characters of the book in your hands—and their challenges, opportunities, and dangers—became, at least for a little while, the most important thing to you?



With some books, of course, it's for more than a little while. Some books don't simply absorb you; they change you, altering the way you think and feel about some particular issue or even about life in general. Have you read a book like that? What was its name? How old were you when you read it? What about it so moved you that you remember it all these months or years later? Books, really good books, are powerful.



In the years leading up to the Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was that kind of book. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 19th-century bestseller vividly depicted the cruelty of slavery and changed the way many Americans thought about African Americans and slavery. When Abraham Lincoln met Beecher he remarked, "So here's the little lady that started such a big war!" While not all great books have such dramatic consequences, really good books leave a mark upon their readers, changing them—and sometimes their generation—forever.

My guess is that you've had encounters with these kinds of books. That you've been not just touched but moved, drawn into the pages of a book so fully that you left your encounter changed. Maybe that's one reason why you're holding this book in your hands—you're a reader; you love books and know their power.

I'd also guess, though, that the Bible has *not* been one of those books for you. Go ahead, be honest. I know it's a little embarrassing to admit. After all, the Bible is supposed to be *the* Book. And, truth be told, it has been an incredibly popular and powerful book for centuries. (In fact, the only book that outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 19th century was the Bible, and even today more copies are sold each year than any other book, even *Harry Potter*!) More importantly, though, many people testify how their lives have been transformed by reading the Bible.

Reading the “good book”

Still, not many of us would describe the Bible as a book “I just couldn't put down.” I don't know how often I've asked students of all ages—in classes I've taught at seminary, churches, and summer camps—how many have tried to read the Bible through from beginning to end. Each time, a large number of hands go up in the air. When I ask how many actually have completed this project, however, very few hands remain. So let's face it: the Bible is challenging, even difficult reading, with strange names and customs on almost every page. It's filled with all kinds of literature we don't often encounter anywhere else. Within the pages of the Bible you'll find everything ranging from poetry to genealogies and parables to legal codes. Perhaps for this reason, many of us have had as many frustrating experiences with reading the Bible as we've had fruitful ones.

So most of us find ourselves in a dilemma about the “good book.”

We know we should read the Bible, and maybe even have tried, but somehow we don't find ourselves pulled into its pages the way we have been by other books.

We want to read and enjoy the Bible, and are attracted to the promise that it might change our lives for the better, but haven't found this to be the case. Which is maybe another part of the reason you're considering reading this book—you, like countless other persons of varying degrees of faith or church

experience, want very much to get a whole lot more out of reading the Bible than you have so far.

If this is the case, I've got good news for you: the Bible *is* an amazing book, difficult and complicated to be sure, but still amazing. There's a reason people have been reading and rereading it for thousands of years, and I've written this book to help you make sense of Scripture and join their number.

Making Sense of Scripture, I should be clear, is not a book *on* the Bible, in the sense that it attempts to give you the major plot line of the Bible or to cover all the individual books or parts within it. (There are very good books of that nature, and I've listed several at the end of the book.) Rather, it is a book *about* the Bible, explaining enough of the Bible's history and nature to make it more accessible to you. Even more, *Making Sense of Scripture* is a book on *how to read the Bible* in the first place, and I hope and intend that it will give you confidence to explore the actual content and claims of the Bible on your own or in study with others.

Toward that end, I use the conversations in the book to:

1. Present information about the Bible and the world it came out of;
2. Explain some of its more confusing elements; and
3. Set the Bible in its proper historical and literary contexts.

By doing these things, I hope to make reading the Bible a far more satisfying experience for you.

Of course, information about the Bible and its world and writers is only one part of the key to getting more from your reading. The other part is to make some sense of all the claims people make about the Bible. For whatever else the Bible does, it certainly arouses people's passions. Some claim it is the Word of God and that it is literally, factually true in every respect. Some believe it is true, but that it does not offer—and maybe never intended to offer—a historically or scientifically accurate account of the world. Still others believe the Bible is great literature and should be treated as such—that is, read as the sacred scriptures of one of the world's great religions, but as nothing more. To help you read the Bible successfully, I also use the conversations in the book to develop a theological framework that will enable you to:

1. Understand and take stock of the varied claims about the Bible; and
2. Come to your own judgments about what the Bible is and what you can expect from reading it.

Point of view

Here, though, I must be completely candid: there is no unbiased or completely objective reading of the Bible.

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Everyone reads from a point of view. I'll have more to say about that later, but for now, whether we like it or not, we need to admit that we won't ever be able to prove all the claims we make about the Bible. This is as true for the person who claims the Bible is God's "inerrant" Word as it is for the person who doesn't. Think about it. How would one prove—or disprove—such a claim in the first place? We may certainly have all kinds of good reasons for our beliefs. Even so, what we believe about the Bible and how it might affect us remains a matter of faith and conviction, not dispassionate fact. And this is as true for me as it is for you.

For this reason, throughout the book I will try to present different opinions about the Bible with some measure of objectivity, but it is important to remember that, at the end of the day, I will more often than not end up favoring one opinion over another. And while I will try to show you my rationale for the judgments I make, where I end up is as much a matter of conviction, belief, and faith as it is reason or intellect.

So keep that in mind: you are not getting an unbiased opinion on the matter (as if there is one out there!), but rather are receiving a point of view offered in the hope that it will shape and sharpen your own point of view so that you will read the Bible with more confidence and pleasure. Through this book, I hope to help you come to a better understanding of your own beliefs about the Bible by being in conversation with the beliefs and convictions, as well as the knowledge and insights, of the faith tradition I represent.

Bring your questions!

In the spirit of openness just mentioned, I should confess one of the major convictions behind this book. It's a conviction that not only influences both the content and shape of the book, but may also help you decide whether you want to

keep reading. *I believe asking questions is essential to the life of faith.* Questions are not the mark of an inadequate faith but instead the mark of the kind of curious, searching, seeking faith that you find all over the pages of Scripture. If you are looking for all the answers, or hoping to find a view of Scripture as God's divine answer book, then this probably isn't the book for you. But if you believe, with me, that the Christian life should take seriously both our heads and our hearts, our doubts and our faith, and involves as many questions as it does answers, then I invite you to read on.

Because of the importance I place on questions, you'll notice immediately that the book revolves around them. Each chapter is structured around what I think are central questions about the Bible. The ongoing conversations within each chapter are fueled by many more questions. I rely on questions to advance the goal of this book for two reasons:

- Questions are, I think, the engine of all great conversations. The give and take of asking and trying to answer questions that matter to us helps us make sense of the world, and so why not also the Bible?
- Questions have the gift of nurturing curiosity in a way that flat statements and simple claims do not.

Rather than start with conclusions, I am inviting you to come along with me to engage the major questions about the Bible that people of good conscience and abundant curiosity often ask.

These questions don't come out of the blue. Not only have I regularly had my own share of questions about the Bible, but for quite some time when I've been out and about teaching on these things, I've asked folks about their experience of reading the Bible and invited them to name their deepest questions. What you see before you is the result of those years of dialogue. Some of the questions are combinations of related questions and concerns. Others are almost verbatim questions that were posed to me by a perceptive conversation partner.

I hope these questions get at some of your questions, and if you have others not touched upon here, please let me know. I've arranged these questions in an order that makes narrative sense to me and that I hope will guide you through some of the major facets of the Bible in a reasonably organized way. But if you see a question further down the book that grabs your attention more than the one I've put first, by all means feel free to jump ahead.

No experience needed

You may be wondering if you need to be familiar with the Bible to get something out of reading this book. The simple answer is no. But even if you are very familiar with it, I think you will discover lots of new questions and insights. Maybe you've heard the Bible read in church, or maybe you've read it in a high school literature class. Maybe you've studied the Bible for years, or maybe you haven't picked one up in decades. Maybe you know the Bible better than any other book you own, or maybe you heard the stories long ago but don't remember them very well. And—who knows?—maybe you're just wondering why people continue to make a big fuss over such an old book and want in on the action. No matter where you are, no matter how much or how little experience you have, I think you will find in this book engaging questions addressed in an honest and accessible way.

Ideally, we'd take up the questions in this book together in your living room or around my kitchen table. But since that isn't possible, I've tried to imagine how a conversation like this might go, and I've written the book in this way. You'll notice several things about this decision almost immediately. First, the tone throughout the book is pretty conversational, even informal. The examples I use are from everyday life, and the parts of Scripture I reference are pretty common.

Second, because I wanted this book to be a conversation, there are no footnotes. It's not that I don't like footnotes—we can learn a lot from other writers on these subjects, and I certainly have—but I think that in this case it will help just to talk these things through rather than reference other works. After reading this book, you may indeed be eager for more study, and I will provide a list of further resources at the end to help you get going. But for now, it's just us hashing these matters out together.

Third, there is room at the end of each chapter for you to jot down your own insights and questions. Feel free to write down the various things about the Bible and faith that occur to you, as well as note the ongoing or new questions you have. For that matter, feel free to mark up the book as much as you like. By taking note of what we're learning and still wondering about, we learn even more. This is your book now, so go to town.

High hopes and a warning

I have high hopes for this book. Or, to put it more clearly, I have two particularly high hopes for what you will get out of this book:

First, I hope that after reading this book you will understand enough about the Bible to help you penetrate through the years and cultures that separate us from it. I hope you will be absorbed by the Bible's stories in a way that will touch and move you, and maybe even transform the way you look at yourself, the world, and God.

Second, I hope that you will discover that you can bring both your mind and your heart to the enterprise of reading the Bible. I hope you will feel free to think, wonder, question, and even express doubt as we discuss issues and explore the claims the Bible makes. And I hope and pray that through all the thinking, wondering, questioning, and doubting, you might also find the capacity to hear God speaking a word to you.

As you can probably tell, I believe the Bible is a powerful book. More than that, I believe that through the Bible, God continues to speak to women and men today, and by speaking to them not only helps them make sense of their lives but also contribute to the well-being of their neighbor and the world.

I also believe that the God of Scripture invites us to engage the Bible with both our intellect and faith.

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Too many views of the Bible seem to invite us to check our brains at the door, while others demand the same of our faith. But I don't think it has to be that way, and I've written this book to offer an alternative to the choices currently available.

One last thing before we get started. . . . I should offer you a warning, not unlike those offered by the Surgeon General: reading the Bible can be hazardous, not only to your health, but also to your wealth, reputation, and even your very life. Seriously. Over the centuries people who have read the Bible have been led

to do things beyond their imaginations. Examples are too numerous and wide-ranging to name in detail, but a few possibilities come immediately to mind:

- making peace with someone who had formerly been an enemy;
- giving away one's wealth or security for the sake of another;
- leaving the comforts of home to reach out to others;
- changing careers to respond more fully to a sense of God's call;
- staying in one's career to do the same; or
- putting one's reputation, and even life, on the line by taking a stand for justice.

Sometimes these actions are quite dramatic. Other times they are fairly common, even everyday, but in each case they represent the actions of someone who has been marked, even changed, by reading the book of faith.

Before you begin

Okay, you've been warned. So now it's time to get going. But first, I want to suggest something. Before we start the conversation, take just a moment or two to think about your own thoughts and feelings about the Bible. Remember all the different claims I mentioned that people make about the Bible? Well, where do you find yourself in the mix? What kind of book do you think the Bible is? Is it sacred or secular, inspired or interesting? Does it reveal God's will for you and the world, offer a record of ancient history, or offer timeless wisdom and inspiration? Has your experience of reading the Bible been positive or negative, illuminating or confusing? You'll get more from your reading of this book, I think, if you briefly take stock of where you are at the outset of our journey together. So take just a couple of minutes. You can write some notes right here in the margins or in the space provided below.

Once you've done this, we're ready to get started. The Bible really is an amazing book. I'm very glad you've decided to venture into it one more time, and I'm grateful that you've invited me to come along.



Insights and Questions



- How would I describe the Bible?
- What has been my experience with the Bible?