

PASTOR GUIDE

THE BIBLE YEAR

*A Journey Through Scripture
in 365 Days*



MAGREY R. DEVEGA

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*To Kathy Farmer, Tom Boomersbine,
Tom Dozeman, and A.K.M. Adam,
for instilling in me a love for reading
and studying the Bible;*

*To the faithful disciples of
Hyde Park United Methodist Church
who make God's love real every day;*

To Grace and Madelyn

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CHAPTER 1

Reading the Whole Bible Together Overcoming Fear and Frustration

CONNECTION

The Bible Year emerged from a year-long commitment in a single congregation to read the whole Bible together in a year. In 2017, the church I serve, Hyde Park United Methodist in Tampa, Florida, began a long-term, strategic planning process. We surveyed the congregation, spoke to people in the community, and most of all, listened to the Holy Spirit as we discerned together God's future for the church.

What emerged was a clear sense that God was calling us to deepen our discipleship, widen our reach to people around us, and unite together in common purpose, while using adaptive and creative means to do so.

One of the clearest areas for growth was in *connection*. People wanted to be more connected to God and to each other, and specifically grow deeper in their understanding of the Bible. Our church had had a long history of faithful small group ministries. Hundreds of people had taken *Disciple Bible Study*, *Covenant Bible Study*, and other long-term studies over the past thirty years. Dozens of new short-term small groups were offered each year. But still, a large percentage of our congregation still felt largely unfamiliar with

the Bible, despite our weekly encouragement to read it, study it together, and apply it.

It is not that people did not want to. Quite the opposite. Our congregational surveys suggested that people were identifying their desire for deeper connection to God and each other with a desire to read and understand the Bible.

So, when our vision plan was adopted in 2018, one of the first actions we took was to look for some way to bridge that gap, some way to link a reading of the Bible with a deepened sense of connection among the congregation.

And the idea for reading the whole Bible together was born.

We called it The Bible Project 2020. Our staff and lay team spent all of 2019 developing the unique resources and leadership infrastructure that would allow us to undertake the most ambitious biblical journey many of us had ever taken.

We would read the Bible, cover to cover, from January to December.

We slated 2020 as our year of reading the Bible together. We would cast the vision to the whole congregation and encourage every person to be involved through individual reading, small group participation, and weekly worship. We would make the case for why reading the Bible as a congregation in a year would be a powerful, transformative experience and help them develop daily practices that they would carry with them for the rest of their lives. I'll share with you how we cast the vision for this project in the next chapter.

We would develop an array of resources to help strengthen people along the way, including a weekly podcast featuring biblical scholars from around the country, a daily devotional, an online study group, and, most importantly, weekly small groups. We would align all our discipleship ministries for all ages to go through the Bible together, including our children and youth who would follow their own separate but parallel track. I'll share with you all the resources at your disposal that are part of *The Bible Year* in chapter 3.

Reading the Whole Bible Together

Then there was weekly worship. Our clergy would preach through the Bible, all fifty-two weeks, while still observing the liturgical seasons and high holy days. I'll share with you how we structured the readings to coincide with those seasons in chapter 4, along with other options you might consider.

All along the way, we would dive into the toughest questions that people would ask about the Bible, not ignoring the tough readings, but addressing them with curiosity and faithfulness. I'll share with you in chapter 5 how you might help your congregation think through the dry and unsettling parts of the Bible.

A PROFOUND IMPACT

We began the journey on January 1, 2020, not knowing how our world would be turned upside down by a global pandemic. But God had an amazing sense of timing. As our church campuses shut down and our worship services and programs shifted to a whole new virtual world of digital platforms, we all sensed the prospect of growing increasingly isolated and disconnected from each other, and from our normal rhythms and routines.

Instead, reading the Bible together had the opposite effect. It was a unifying force over the arc of the whole unsettling year. The weekly small groups became a lifeline of connection for people of all ages, who often looked forward to their video calls as a reliable source for camaraderie and companionship.

Most remarkable of all, we found time and again that the biblical passages we were studying at the time came to us at just the right moment.

- Our displacement from the worship spaces of the church cast new light on our readings of the Babylonian Exile;
- The divisions between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms gave us new understanding in the political and ideological divisions afflicting our country;

- The prophetic texts gave us timely words to speak with humility and justice into the racial reckoning we were going through as a country;
- And as we entered the fall of 2020 acknowledging the hurt, suffering, and brokenness of our world, the Gospel readings began on Labor Day weekend, and the familiar stories of Jesus gave us new and deeper insights into the power and love of God.

When December 31, 2020, arrived, people were effusive in describing the impact the journey had on them.

If you had asked me years ago about the prospects of this church reading the Bible cover to cover together in a year, and aligning our ministries around making that happen, I would have responded with great skepticism. Too much fear. Too much frustration. Too much that could go wrong. But now, I can't imagine having gone through 2020 in any other way. It helped us not only survive, but thrive, during a global pandemic.

And it can be the same for your congregation, whatever you may experience in the year ahead. It can help you grow closer to God, to one another, and to the power of the Bible.

FEAR AND FRUSTRATION

Let's admit up front that the idea of leading a congregation in a yearlong reading of the Bible, cover to cover, is daunting, if not downright scary. We can more readily come up with reasons *not* to do it, rather than reasons for it. All those reasons are understandable, many of which we will address in the upcoming pages.

It's not that we don't believe in the power of the Bible, or in the importance of reading it, applying it, and living it. After all, you would likely not be in the position you're in, let alone picking up this book, if you did not hold those convictions in some way. We preach and teach from the Bible, encourage people to be in a small group to study it, and call people to spend

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time in it every day. We turn to it for words of comfort, draw courage from it to proclaim words of justice, and ground our congregations in its authority.

But actually *read* it? Cover to cover? As a whole congregation?

There are reasons few congregations ever attempt to do this together. What if the congregation doesn't want to do it? What if everyone loses interest partway through? What if we as preachers and lay leaders grow weary of it? And then there are the really deep questions. What if, after reading through the Bible, people have a *worse* opinion of the Bible? Or worse still: What if people have their faith shaken, instead of strengthened?

I would summarize all those reasons with two words: *fear* and *frustration*.

The fear comes from the parts of the Bible that we think we understand, which suggests ideas about God and the faith that are hard to believe. What do we do with the images of God that are unsettling? Or the violence that people commit in the name of God? Or the prospect of losing our faith when we cannot reconcile these stories with our modern experience?

The frustration comes from the parts of the Bible that we do not understand, and therefore find it hard to believe or appreciate. What do we do with the parts of the Bible that seem antiquated and archaic? Or that just don't make any sense to us when we read them? What do we do with the strange-sounding laws and the obscure prophetic oracles? What do we do with the hard-to-pronounce names and places? What do we do with the seemingly endless pages of dry references, censuses and genealogies, and detailed instructions that will feel like walking through a wilderness? Again, do we risk the prospect of losing our faith when we cannot reconcile these strange stories with our modern ears?

It is not that we don't believe in the power of the Bible, or the reasons for reading it. But fear and frustration are major factors that would lead us to pick and choose what we read, at our own pace, leaving aside the hard questions we feel like we alone are asking.

So, with those two significant barriers in mind, why spend a whole year reading the Bible in its entirety? How can *The Bible Year* show us how to overcome those fears and alleviate those frustrations?

1. *The Bible Year* encourages us to read the Bible together.

I know people who have tried to read the Bible cover to cover on their own, and it often elicits far more questions about their own faith than if they were to read the Bible in conversation with others. Reading these texts as a congregation, especially in the context of small groups, can allow for a safe, supportive forum to pose the kinds of questions that people would otherwise wrestle with on their own. Often, it is the mere freedom and permission to ask these questions aloud of others that can itself encourage people who would otherwise struggle with the faith. Most importantly, reading the Bible together can elicit novel insights from the diversity of voices around the room, unlocking new, life-giving ways to look at a text.

2. *The Bible Year* encourages us to read the Bible in its entirety.

Imagine reading a novel by skipping around randomly from page to page, out of order. Imagine reading a textbook in which you begin in the middle, without reading the basic concepts at the beginning. Imagine trying to fully understand a book by relying only on the quotes that others tell you. The Bible is best read in its entirety, from a literary and theological perspective. Understanding the grand narrative of God's self-revealing, self-giving love for humanity is the critical connective tissue that allows us to not get too bogged down on the fearsome, frustrating parts of the Bible.

3. *The Bible Year* reminds us to take the Bible seriously, without having to take all of it literally.

My favorite metaphor to explain this concept comes from my friend and clergy colleague Jim Harnish, who thinks about the Bible in terms of the Sunday newspaper. When we thumb through the different sections and pages of the Sunday paper, we know that we are to read its various sections differently. We read the front-page headlines differently from the way we

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read the editorials and op-ed section. One we view through the lens of verifiable historical record, the other we view as persuasion pieces. We read the movie reviews differently from the sports box scores, differently from the obituaries, differently from the comics and classified ads.

Reading through the Bible together shows us the breadth and diversity of its literary genres. Along the way, we can ask critical questions about how to understand the Torah differently from the way we understand Kings and Chronicles, which are different still from the Wisdom Literature, the prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and the apocalyptic literature of Daniel and Revelation.

The resources of *The Bible Year* contain a robust collection of insights from biblical preachers and experts from around the country. You will want to include the weekly videos as part of your congregation's journey. The podcasts developed by our church are also available from Hyde Park UMC, titled "The Bible Project 2020," and feature reflections on the weekly texts from a variety of biblical scholars.

4. *The Bible Year* helps us read the Bible *hopefully*.

As a preacher, you will have numerous opportunities throughout the year to address the potentially troublesome parts of the Bible in your sermons and other weekly reflections. It may be the most concentrated and direct chance you will have to answer these hard questions with answers that are both helpful and hopeful.

In chapter 5, I offer a few different ways that you might think about the dry and disconcerting parts of Scripture, particularly the Torah and the Prophets, and the images of violence throughout the Old Testament. You can offer the congregation different ways to see those texts that elicit gratitude and hope, rather than fear and frustration.

5. *The Bible Year* helps us read the Bible *regularly*.

Most importantly, reading the Bible every day can help people in your congregation develop the spiritual "muscle memory" to make daily devotions

a regular part of their life, even after *The Bible Year* concludes. Many of the small groups in our church that read through the Bible together decided to continue meeting into the following year. People could reread texts in the future that used to give them difficulty, seeing them with fresh understanding and new applications.

And the impact goes beyond the discipline of just Scripture reading. People in our congregation discovered passions and interests in themselves that led to service in and through our faith community. Having seen the benefit of solidarity and spiritual companionship, they became more generous in their financial giving, recognizing how their generosity contributes to transformative life change. And the reach of *The Bible Year* extended far beyond the church, through our podcasts, online services, virtual small group, and most importantly, through word-of-mouth invitation to people who joined us along the way.

The Bible Year is a powerful, meaningful journey through the greatest book of all time. Reading it together will help people in your congregation overcome their fear and frustration and will transform their lives.

Welcome to the journey!