



# Digging Deeper

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## The Tremendous Value of Listening to God's Word Read Aloud

By esv.org

### The Significance of Hearing God's Word

A week ago I was struggling to sleep. My mind was filled with so many things. I turned the light on, trying not to wake up my husband. I was too tired to read, but what I did was turn on an audio Bible of 1 Thessalonians—because I've started studying that in the last couple of weeks—and just let the words speak over me as I lay in my bed. And it brought such a sense of calm and refocus. One particular verse that stood out to me described the importance of what it means to live a godly life, "to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs," diligently working at what the Lord has given you to do (1 Thess. 4:11).

It just helped realign all of the busyness in my head and to think, Kristyn, focus on the things that you must do, the things that the Lord has called you to do. It spoke to me, it preached to me, and it was powerful in the sense that somebody was speaking it over me. In these last few weeks I've been doing so much, and this ministered to me personally and it didn't even require me to seek it out or to put forth much energy. To have God's word wash over me and comfort me—this was a significant part of my week last week.

We all love to hear a story being told. My four little girls are utterly engaged whenever I tell them a good story. They like to hear the sound of my voice telling it. My older two are starting to read for themselves, but they still want me to read to them. There's something about that experience. The Bible is full of lots of different types of literature, but there is a massive portion of it which involves the telling of a story—the first few books in the Bible and the Gospels for instance—and I think hearing it read out loud has a wonderful value and significance in the life of a person and of the whole family.

I think there's tremendous value in hearing God's word read out loud simply because for many generations it was the only way people heard it. They heard it read in the home or in church or in public spaces. There were so many generations during which people just could not read, and so it was always an audible thing. There's something very powerful about Scripture being read. I like to read, but I find that I can concentrate on it much better when I personally read it out loud or when I hear it being read to me. I love to open up the Bible and hear it being read and follow along at the same time. It helps with concentration, it helps keep you engaged in the text, and I think—in the book of Psalms for example, which has this great lyrical quality—it's hard to capture that when it's read silently and you can't actually hear it. These were songs that were to be sung by lots of people, so I think it's important to engage with the whole essence of what the Psalms were meant to be.

We live in a time where there are so many conversations, so many opinions, so many thoughts on everything, and social media has provided so many different platforms to express these conversations. It can be an awful lot of noise. The importance of making God's voice the leading voice, the biggest voice, the greatest voice for your whole life has never been more significant.

I always take any opportunity to tell young people to be utilizing and filling yourselves with the Scriptures—putting in deposit after deposit because you will need them. You don't wake up one morning as somebody well-versed in the Scriptures and as a godly man or woman of God. That does not just happen overnight. It's a life journey involving very basic things: reading and listening to the Bible, praying, being in Christian community. Those are the important things that are going to not just keep us on the right path but make us so incredibly fruitful in God's kingdom.

Understand what it means to pass on the word of God to the next generation. We are caretakers of it and are committed to reading it, seeing its fruit in our own lives, and being faithful, as Psalm 78 says, to tell "the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done."

I think an audio Bible is another resource that can speak into this particular time—the timeless word of God offered to whoever would listen to it. For moms like me or others who find it very difficult to find the time to sit and read very often, this is a way they can listen to God's word while they're folding laundry, while they're putting babies to sleep, while they're cooking dinner—it provides another way for people to be able to do that.

One of the greatest apologetics and defenses of the Christian faith is the Bible itself, how extensive it is, how it was written over such a wide span of time and geography and authorship and yet holds together in an incredible way. It is a beautiful tapestry of revelation that speaks to so much of the human experience and gives us such a rich, sweeping understanding of who God is.

God's people should take every opportunity to listen to, engage, enjoy, and be comforted and challenged by the timeless word of God—the immovable foundation that it is for everything that we do.

## What Happens When We Read The Bible Together?

By Shara Drimalla & BibleProject

Grabbing a cup of coffee and your Bible, you sink into your favorite chair and turn to a favorite psalm or the next passage assigned by a Bible reading plan. For some, especially since the Protestant Reformation and Gutenberg's printing press, this gets pitched as the ideal way to engage the Bible.

Read it by yourself, with no one else around. This is a quiet time for personal reading, just you and the text.

However, reading the Bible this way has only been an option for a few hundred years. People used to hear their Bibles read out loud, or they saw its stories displayed through paintings, icons, and other visuals in churches. The public reading of Scripture was the normal way people interacted with biblical texts from the time of Moses up through the New Testament era, and then for another 1,500 years or so until we learned how to print books.

Yes, the Bible was created long before books! Writers, compilers, and editors designed the Bible for public reading, which means the Hebrew Bible and New Testament are, together, one collection of communal literature.

Does this design say anything about how God wants us to learn? Or maybe whom God wants us to learn with? And what does that mean for our personal "quiet times" alone with the Bible?

Let's take a look.

### The First Public Reading of Scripture in the Bible

Israel experiences a great salvation event when God liberates everyone from slavery in Egypt. Almost like a whole-community baptism led by Moses, they pass through the waters safely (Exod. 14) and begin

a journey through the wilderness on the way to the land God promised them. As they begin the journey, the Amalekites attack them (Exod. 17:8-16), but God delivers them and tells Moses to write the whole story down on a scroll. Immediately, he says Moses should read it out loud to Joshua, another Israelite leader.

First, write it down. Why? So you can read it out loud to other people. This practice started long ago but lives on, even to this day, through the oral retelling of the story and the communal memory it strengthens.

God leads the Israelites to Mount Sinai, where he invites them into a covenant partnership (Exod. 19-24). God gives Moses the agreements of the partnership, called the Torah (Hebrew: torah, instruction), and Moses shares the agreements verbally with the people and writes them down in their presence (Exod. 24:3-4).

The public reading of the Torah aloud becomes an Israelite practice. As an entire nation, they celebrate required weekly sabbaths and rhythmic, annual festivals where the Torah is constantly being read aloud and sung together. Men, women, children, and foreigners living as neighbors with the Israelites all gather together to listen to people read the Scriptures publicly (Deut. 31:10-13).

They listen to learn. They listen to understand. They listen to remember. They listen to be shaped by a communal experience of a common story.

The Israelites are no longer slaves in Egypt. God gives them a new identity as royal priests (Exod. 19:6). And he gives them a new story to live by. Every seven years, they remind one another of that story—where they came from, who they are, and the new future that they are called to live for.

#### The Practice Remembered and Forgotten

This practice of communal reading and hearing of Scripture is carried on throughout Israel's history. When the people finally get into the land, they do this again. Joshua gathers the people together, and they all listen to the Scriptures read aloud in order to remember where they came from and how they could continue living as part of this new story (Josh. 8:30-35).

After Joshua dies, however, we don't find any more stories of the people gathering together to hear God's word. Instead, we watch as the people forget their story. And an entire generation emerges that doesn't know their God or what he has done for them (Judg. 2:10).

Centuries later, a king named Josiah rediscovers the Scriptures (2 Kgs. 22-23). He is so excited that he calls Israel to begin this practice once again. And this sparks a renewal movement of the public reading of Scripture.

Years later, Ezra and Nehemiah gather the people together to hear the Scriptures read aloud to them. And as they listen, the people step back into their story. The Scriptures remind them of who they are and how they are to live—once again, through the public reading of Scripture (Neh. 8:8).

#### The Public Reading of Scripture in the New Testament

Reading Scripture aloud in community became a core part of Jewish life, and it still is. Every week, gathered in synagogues, Jewish women, children, and men listened as the Scriptures were read aloud (see Acts 13:15 for one example).

Jesus himself participated in this practice! He even launched his mission during the weekly reading of the Scriptures. Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and told everyone the words were about him (Luke 4:16-30).

This tradition forms the pattern for the public reading of the apostles' writing in early worship gatherings for followers of Jesus. For the Apostle Paul, this communal practice held particular significance, and he often reminded his friends to read his letters out loud to all who would listen (e.g., Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13-14).

### Learning in Community

If God intended for these stories to be read aloud in the context of multiple voices, multiple experiences of life, and multiple ethnicities and socioeconomic circumstances, what might this say about how he wants us to learn? Maybe when he says human beings "bear his image," in one sense he means that we learn about him by listening to and learning from each other. Maybe he's telling us that no single person could understand all God teaches in the Scriptures all by himself or herself. Maybe the big thing he's teaching actually has a lot to do with how we relate to others. Every human being's perspective is limited, and that is not a bad thing! It is even good—because when no one has the full understanding of everything, then everyone needs one another in order to learn. Solo Bible study is helpful and fruitful, so we should keep doing it, but if we do not also read as a community, at the very least, we miss reading the Bible as it was designed to be read. It stands to reason, then, that solo-only Bible reading often (tragically) distorts or entirely misses what God is saying.

### How Do We Increase Our Communal Reading?

One way is to simply read Scripture publicly during community gatherings, just like it was designed to be read. We can also listen to the Scripture in community by reading books from other Bible interpreters throughout history. How did early Jewish communities and followers of Jesus understand various biblical texts? By designing Scripture this way, God seems to want us to listen to him and to converse with one another about what he says. So reading and conversing with others who are listening to Scripture will be helpful. We can also read communally by reading cross-culturally from other contexts—different countries, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds—as well as different theological perspectives and traditions. In a true sense, every person is created and loved by God, so everyone is worth respecting and listening to. These are all ways to start hearing the Bible as communal literature.

### Conclusion

So what about those personal "quiet times" for solo Bible reading? Quiet, personal reading is a good thing, just like solo singing can be a good thing. But if a soloist is trying to sing music written for an entire choir, it will either sound crazy or it will ignore much of the music. Reading alone is helpful and intellectually easier, but we are likely to miss much of what God is showing. Pairing our personal reading with communal reading, even emphasizing the communal aspect, will move us toward a deeper understanding of Scripture. And yes, communal reading does mean public, out-loud reading. As people have done for thousands of years, we listen to the Scriptures and talk about what we are hearing. Public reading and hearing leads to community dialogue. Throughout the biblical story, God's people met together to remember their story and who they were through the public reading of the Scriptures. And reading the Scriptures with other followers of Jesus reminds us of the story we live in—a story that has transformed the lives of millions of people, a story transcending and integrating every time, age, gender, and culture.

This is the fourth article in our series, *The Paradigm*, which summarizes the core ideas that shape the way biblical authors intended for us to read the Bible. To dive deeper into this topic, listen to the podcast episode, "The Last Pillar: Communal Literature." For an overview of all the pillars of how to read the Bible as its authors intended, check out *The Paradigm Study Notes*.