

Pastor and author Ben Connelly shows how to recover God's original teachings in light of the story of redemption. Connelly invites Christians to see themes and teachings with new eyes—or, rather, with old eyes—on topics like confession, forgiveness, and what it means to be blessed or happy.

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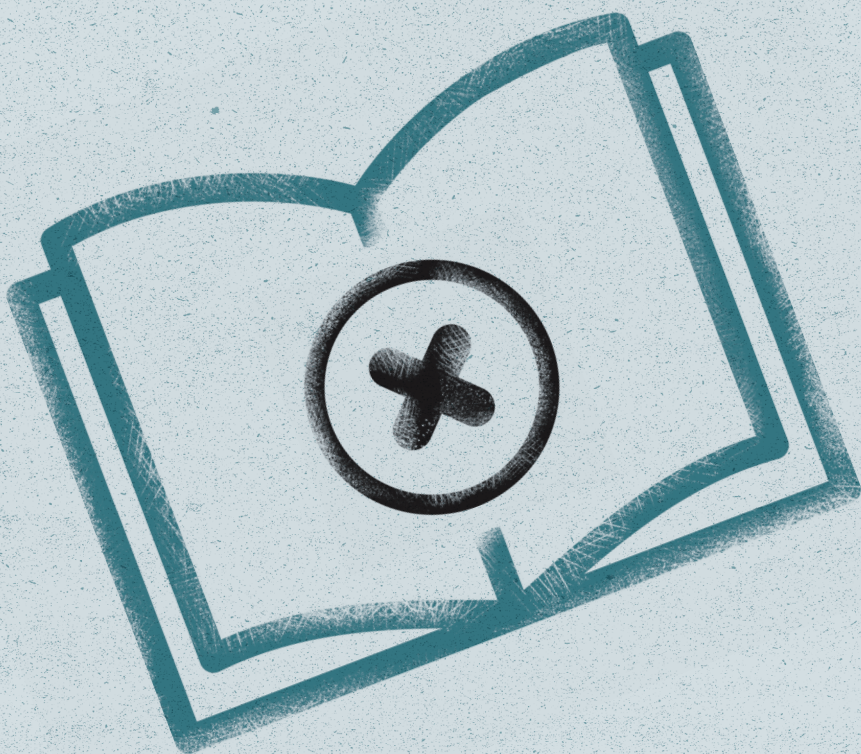
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“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”

ACTS 20:26–27

CHAPTER 1

SYMPTOMS: READING THE BIBLE, WRONG

“YOU CAN’T READ A BOOK THAT WAY!”

Charlotte, my oldest kiddo, had avoided J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series for most of her elementary years—maybe just because of the overabundance of “Harrys and Hermiones” who filled her school’s annual storybook parade. But over the summer before fourth grade, her tune changed, and she devoured all seven books and 4,100-plus pages in three months. (She’d say she also read the script of the Broadway play too, but I don’t think that counts.) This started a domino effect, and while we went slower with our two younger kids—the books get dark!—Harry and Co. became the Connellys’ constant companions over the following years.

Sometimes after that first summer, I saw Charlotte with one of the series paperbacks in hand, while the next day she had a different one. She’s a fast reader, but that seemed *really* quick. After a few times, I asked her how she was reading so quickly. “Oh,” she explained, laughing at my obvious ignorance. “I’m not reading

the whole book. I just go back and read the parts I like.” Now, as a writer, a lover of good stories, and a guy who appreciates the craft of literature, her comment birthed immediate indignation in me: “You can’t read a book that way!” That was my first, sudden thought: the series is one long but unified story, meant to be read as such. It has ups and downs, twists and turns, and heroes, each perfectly crafted and painstakingly placed by the author.

On the heels of that first thought was a second startling realization: Most followers of Jesus read the Bible the way Charlotte reads Harry Potter. We just go back and read the parts we like, or jump to verses we feel might apply to something in our lives today. We reread the stories we know, memorize a few verses that’ll be inspirational, or ignore parts that are confusing.

In things like this, we miss large and valuable parts of the Bible, even if they *are* parts we don’t like or understand. We might not ever discover new verses that “apply to my life today,” as we like to say, because we never come across them! More deeply, though, we miss the long-but-unified story with its ups and downs, twists and turns, and true hero; each perfectly inspired by God and scribed by an intentional, human author.

This chapter looks at symptoms, defining the poor lenses we approach the Bible with. We’re trying to discover why God’s people miss the heart of God’s message as we read God’s Word; why we get the Bible wrong in our everyday lives. As good spiritual ophthalmologists, we find two symptoms that lead us to the next chapter’s diagnosis. First, statistically, Christians don’t read the Bible all that much! Second, when we do read it, we do so in little bits. Chapter 2 shows how dangerous these symptoms are, but for now, as we look at each symptom, be honest: Are either of them true of you?

“FOND OF THE BIBLE” . . . WITHOUT READING IT

The Bible has been increasingly accessible to followers of Jesus, especially since the invention of the printing press. Its accessibility has increased throughout history, many editions now landing on our pocket-sized mobile devices. As literacy has also increased over history, countless of us across the world have the opportunity to access the Bible on our own terms, in our own languages, to read or listen whenever we want. However, we also have opportunities of going to the gym, declining dessert, and *not* clicking “watch next episode” when it’s pushing midnight. But do we take them?

Media researcher Amy Watson reports that in 2021, only 11 percent of the over three thousand Christians surveyed read their Bible “every day,” and 9 percent “several times a week.” While 46 percent of Christians read the Bible between “less than once a year” and “once a week,” she reports that 29 percent of respondents read their Bible “never.”¹

The Bible, Limited

Similarly, a Lifeway survey a few years before—whose tongue-in-cheek title is telling: “Americans Are Fond of the Bible, Don’t Actually Read It”—reports that, of the thousand Americans surveyed who *do* read their Bible, only “four in 10 say it’s a book worth reading over and over, while 13 percent say it’s worth reading once. Twenty-two percent prefer referencing the Bible on an as-needed basis. Five percent say the Bible is a book not worth reading at all, while 19 percent are not sure.”²

So, as we can see, the first symptom for missing the gospel

when reading the Bible is that statistically, not even many of us bona fide, self-proclaiming followers of Jesus read the Bible very often! Obviously since you've picked up this book you have some affection, or at least a curiosity, around this topic of Bible reading, and perhaps these stats surprise you. Or maybe you fit within one of those categories.

Like other cultural norms, the amount and way we engage the Bible is often shaped by our church's culture.

But to let you off the hook a bit, the blame isn't all on you. While Christian faith is personal, it is not individualistic. Every relationship with God exists in one part of the world, at one point in history, and in a church or religious culture whose expectations become the tide we naturally ride. So,

like other cultural norms—for example, what's the appropriate if unspoken dress code for your church's gatherings?—the way we engage the Bible is often shaped by our church's culture. But surely our churches form God's people to engage God's Word well and regularly, right? *Crickets* . . .

Well, maybe not. Some churches promote Bible reading plans in which all or parts of the Old or New Testaments are covered within a few years. Some have classes like Bible 101, or small groups where a Scripture passage can be discussed among peers. But a passage of Scripture is often referenced the way many churches approach the Bible: the Sermon Almighty.

I've served in local churches for more than twenty years and have crafted and delivered over a thousand sermons. I believe in the gathered church; I believe teaching is a vital and biblical aspect

of discipleship and worship; and I believe teaching can look different across churches and cultures. But I also know that no matter the tradition, churches can misinform—or mis-form—God’s people in their engagement with God’s written words.

On one hand, if the sermon is the primary way people engage the Bible during a given week, the preacher can—even if unintentionally—become the mediator between God and man. If we rely too much on a teacher’s study and explanation, we hinder people’s everyday engagement of God’s perfect Word, modeling for them instead that our imperfect words are a more nourishing aspect of their spiritual diet. (And we perpetuate this if small group discussion guides point to what teachers say on Sundays over what the Bible says every day.)

On the other hand, many churches today stand in contrast to, say, the apostle Paul’s example to the church at Ephesus. Before leaving Ephesus to continue God’s mission in another place, he claimed, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Instead of helping God’s people understand *all* of Scripture, many churches instead focus on a few parts. And I have found this to be true across church traditions.

I was baptized Catholic as a baby, and my formative years were spent in a mainline Protestant tradition. Teaching in many Roman Catholic and mainline denominations is based on a *lectionary*. These annual or multiyear cycles of Scripture passages

It would be nearly impossible to thoroughly teach through every biblical book and theme in a lifetime of Sundays. Plus, churches often avoid biblical books that are hard to teach—and there are many!

vary by denomination. But after surveying the current Roman Catholic lectionary, data scientist and practicing Catholic Stefan Avey concludes, “a Catholic who attends Mass on Sundays and Feasts (but not weekdays) would hear ~ 4% of the Old Testament (excluding Psalms) and ~ 41% of the New Testament” in a given year (emphasis in original).³

Avey’s response? “Wow—this was a shock to me! I bet if you ask around you’ll hear that many Catholics think the lectionary includes the whole Bible. To be fair, these numbers do get a bit higher if you include the complete lectionary (with weekdays). The total coverage of the Old Testament is ~14% (again excluding Psalms) and for the New Testament it is ~72%.”⁴ But only one percent of Catholics feel called to daily mass.⁵

Alternatively, in evangelical and nondenominational churches—like those I’ve attended and served most of my adult life—teaching is often based on a “sermon series,” in which a teacher or team divides up a biblical book or theme, or merely a topic they want to teach, then does a deep dive into it over a number of weeks, months, or even years. It would be nearly impossible to thoroughly teach through every biblical book and theme in a lifetime of Sundays. I can assure you that in twenty years, I’ve not taught even half the Bible. Also, in most churches, these series trend heavily toward the New Testament and even repeat some books over the years, rather than rotating through all sixty-six books of the Bible. Plus, they often avoid the books that are hard to teach—and *oh man*, there are many!

So, two themes exist between our personal engagement with Scripture and the way churches commonly form God’s people to engage God’s words: our Bible reading is limited in general, and

it's limited with regard to the portions and likely genres within the Bible we read. This first symptom of missing the gospel in the Bible might be one of "quantity": we don't read the Bible much.

DON'T READ THE BIBLE IN THESE "LITTLE BITS"

But there's a "quality" issue at play too. Even if we do read the Bible, many of us don't know how to read it well. In *The Drama of Scripture*, Craig Bartholomew and Mike Goheen summarize this second symptom, and the danger thereof:

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author's intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever *other* story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular Western world. If as believers we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thoughts and actions, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture but the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!⁶

None of these "bits" are the right key to unlock the door to the depth of God's message; none is the right lens for reading

the Bible. And the authors' ominous charge is that "a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshipers." Let's see what they mean.

Figuring God Out: "Theological Bits"

Theology is the study of God. And the Bible *is* theological: God often reveals Himself through His written words. The Bible *does* tell us about God; through it we can grow in our knowledge of God, His character and attributes, His work and ways. But while the Bible is theological, it is not primarily a *theology* book. Studies of anything are removed from the thing being studied, while the Bible means to draw us closer to God. Studies are also head-focused, but while the Bible informs our heads, it also ignites our hearts and inspires our hands. As English New Testament scholar N. T. Wright puts it,

The long story of God's plan to put things right, starting with Abraham, climaxing in Jesus and the Spirit, and looking ahead to the new heavens and new earth, isn't the story of guilty humans being forgiven so they could go to heaven, but of idolatrous (and yes, therefore guilty) humans being rescued in order to be worshippers and workers in God's restoration movement, God's kingdom-project.⁷

Finally, studies focus on knowing *about* something, while through the Bible God invites us to move beyond merely knowing *about* Him, to truly, deeply knowing Him.

Some Christians read the Bible hoping to know more about God, or we read the Bible to figure God out. We're thus frustrated when God's unfathomable depths are not fully explained, when

His mysteries remain mysterious, when stories seem illogical, and even when Jesus' words to one audience seem to contradict His words to another audience. The Bible teaches us about God, but also does so much more.

Changing Our Behavior: "Moral Bits"

Every culture loves morality tales. From Aesop's fables to Mother Goose to Walt Disney, we look for lessons at a story's end. And we like that Jesus spoke in parables. But some Christians read the Bible in a way that reduces it to a tutorial. It's much more than that.

Morality tales most often lead to pithy lessons, which are about some behavior change. "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," for example, teaches us to stop lying. That echoes a biblical value, but the Bible's texts about truth-telling are about a heart change more than behavioral change; they're about increasingly reflecting God, who is truth, by the power of His Spirit. "The Tortoise and the Hare" tells us to never give up and to not be lazy, *Finding Nemo* reminds us to "just keep swimming," and so forth. Morality tales tell us if we just do or stop doing something, life is better. That's not always true of life in Christ: indeed, nearly every New Testament book says that in doing good for Jesus, we'll suffer. That's not a fun morality tale!

And as we'll see in the next chapter, we often can't make the change we see in the Bible's verses, commands, or stories. We're left feeling guilty and discouraged, and we either give up or "fake it." Neither of these trails lead to happy endings; neither path is God's heart for His people.

Disregarding the Past: “Historical Bits”

If the Bible is merely history, we get to pick and choose which pieces apply to our lives. Biblical events *are* historical of course: they happened in very real cultures, to very real people, by the power of a very real God. Technology, dating, and archaeology increasingly corroborate the events of the Bible, putting them squarely in the course of human history. And as we’ll see in chapter 3, we need to recover the original culture in which various events happened, since original context helps us more rightly understand God’s message.

But the Bible is more than a history book. History is human-focused, and thus imperfect; it is fallible and changes over time. The Bible is God-focused and perfect; its original form was inspired by God and, while contextualization is necessary, its principles are unchanging. If the Bible is merely a historical record, we can choose parts we don’t like, attribute them to long-outdated ethics of an ancient society, and live as if the authority behind the command no longer exists. But Jesus’ followers believe that God, who inspired the Bible and surpasses human history, is alive, and that His word is as poignant and applicable today as when each biblical book was penned.

Feeling Good: “Devotional Bits”

A “devotion” in many Christian circles is a proactive time to focus, often on a short but powerful resource that gives inspiration for anything from a single moment to a season or lifetime. Numerous books and websites exist under the category of “devotional.” These can be good, and the Bible *does* contain powerful verses and inspirational stories, but the Bible is not just a “devotion.”

A devotional reading of the Bible commonly focuses on building oneself up; we look to the Bible for inspiration, often some form of “you’re great; you can do it.” On one hand, this puts all the effort on the reader to do whatever “it” is, which is the opposite of the biblical message.

My friend and Dallas pastor Kendrick Banks jokes that this way of reading the Bible is “perfect for perpetuating our problematic individualistic church culture. This form of misapplying verses is only as effective as pinning any positivity quote to the wall or seeking a fortune cookie for moral encouragement.” On the other hand, “you can do it” might simply be a false sentiment. Some days are hard. We might fail at something we’re trying to do. Reading the Bible to make ourselves feel good about ourselves can feel cathartic for a moment, but it’s not what God intended for His people or His words. It might even cause us to doubt God if we realize we *can’t* do what we interpret the Bible to say we *can* do. So, while the Bible *does* speak to our hearts and hands, its message is not primarily an emotional boost to get us over some proverbial hump.

A Rule Book or a Quick Fix

While the previous categories expand on Bartholomew and Goheen’s quote, the most common definition I’ve heard of the Bible is “a list of rules.” Of course, the Bible does include God’s commands. Some of us try to follow out of sheer obedience; sometimes our obedience is earnest and sometimes it’s out of guilt or fear of God’s punishment; other times it’s rote and dry. Sometimes we understand the words we read, though often they seem distant or confusing. Many simply seem impossible. And

often, as with New Year's resolutions, our resolve only lasts so long. God did not give us the Bible merely as a rule book!

There are good reasons for finding certain Scriptures at certain times. But if that's all we know to do, we miss the unity of the whole Bible. Or, we see the words on the page but miss the truly good news they carry.

Finally, some read the Bible seeking a guaranteed fix to something that's off in our lives. God does offer a solution, but we love claiming the Bible's promises as our own, even if they're out of context and apply zero percent to our situation. We might print verses out, post them on our bathroom mirror or steering wheel, and commit them to memory. Sometimes, the passages come to mind and help us; other times, they feel condemning. We may think God let us down when He doesn't keep the out-of-context promise we claimed as our own.

HOW DO YOU READ THE BIBLE?

There are other wrong lenses to read the Bible through. Pastor and author Dane Ortlund notes several; for instance, the "gold mine approach." This is when we occasionally come upon a "nugget of inspiration." He also describes the "magic eight-ball approach," when we read the Bible as a road map for major decisions.⁸ Some people go to the Bible seeking contradictions, trying to disprove it, or finding reasons not to obey. Others tackle it like a textbook, to be dissected and analyzed. And so forth. These miss the point as well.

But while each common lens above is unique and nuanced, an underlying thread connects all of them: these approaches to

the Bible focus on the *words* of the text but miss the true *Word*. Jesus is the very *Word* of God (John 1:1). He's the embodiment of each truth in the Bible, the perfection that each imperfect hero of every Bible story points to, and the ultimate fulfillment of every command and promise. His gospel is the key to reading the Bible rightly. That's the diagnosis we'll find in the next chapter, based on a shocking lack of quality and quantity in our Bible reading.

Charlotte still sometimes only rereads the parts of Harry Potter she likes, and I'm fine with that. Of course, there are good reasons for finding certain Scriptures at certain times, and it's helpful for churches, groups, households, and individuals to dive deeply into specific texts; these can help us know and dwell with God in the Bible's intricately described commands and stories. But if that's all we know to do, we miss the unity of the whole Bible. Or, we see the words on the page but miss the truly good news they carry.

In other words, we read the Bible but miss the gospel.

The question remains regarding this chapter's symptoms: Which are true of you? How do you read the Bible? What lens, or lenses, do you see God's Word through? Perhaps you have only ever read the Bible through one of those "little bits" lenses, or a combination. Perhaps you have never thought there might be a different approach to God's Word. But there is, and that is what we will explore in the next chapter.

To Think About and Discuss

1. What has been your view of the Bible and its importance?
How was that view formed?
2. How often do you read your Bible, and what is your primary motive for reading it?
3. Which “little bits” category best describes your posture when you read the Bible: Do you hope to figure God out, change your behavior, learn historic facts, feel better about yourself, or learn rules to follow? Or something else entirely?
4. What do you think might be the danger of the “little bits” categories in this chapter? How do you think they miss God’s intention?
5. In what ways do you think the gospel—the good news of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and reign—should shape our reading of the whole Bible?
6. In what ways do you think you need to trust the gospel and rest in God’s grace toward you, even as you start this journey and perhaps change how you read the Bible?

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