



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Reading the Bible Better with George Guthrie

Season 4, Episode 3 Transcript

[00:00:01.850] - Announcer

Welcome to the Gospel For Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

Darryl Dash

We are back with another episode of the Gospel for Life podcast. If you're living listening to this podcast, you probably know the importance of reading and being shaped by God's Word. It is one of the core habits of the Christian life.

I often think about living a Psalm 1 life. Read David's psalm. There about a life that delights in and is shaped by God's word, and the result is flourishing. A kind of life that you can't get any other way.

Now, I'm also concerned that many Christians aren't reading God's word. The studies show that I think the numbers vary, but something like only one in six believers regularly opens God's Word throughout the week.

And as I've talked to believers, I realize many don't know where to start. Or maybe they've tried to read God's Word before and they've gotten stuck somewhere. We know it matters, but sometimes we're just not doing it.

That's why I'm glad today to talk to our guest about this issue. His name is Dr. George Guthrie and he's professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and he's taught God's Word all over the world. And he has a passion for equipping church leaders and lay people to read and live the Bible more effectively.

Now, I've really benefited from his previous work, [Read the Bible for Life](#) and his [Chronological Study Bible](#) as well that goes along with that. And he's just come out with a new book called A Short Guide to Reading the Bible Better.

At the end of the book, he says, "My prayer is that, as a result, you will read the Bible better, and in reading it better, you will read it consistently, and in reading it consistently, you will live it out all the days of your life, to the good of Christ's Church and to the glory of God."

George is somebody I really admire. He and his wife Pat live in Vancouver, where they're called the teaching, mentoring, hospitality, and a bit of gardening and fly fishing as well. And they have two grown children, Joshua and Anna.

George, it's so good to talk to you again.

[00:02:21.450] - George Guthrie

Oh, Darryl, it's great to see you. We have really missed seeing you and Charlene, so it's good to be on the show with you today. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:29.520] - Darryl Dash

It was really good to catch up a little bit before we hit the record button. And yeah, I'm excited to talk to you today. Well, George, I wanted to ask you about the book.

The number one predictor of a person's spiritual health is the regular practice of Bible reading. And yet, as I mentioned, a lot of Christians just aren't reading their Bibles. Why do you think that is?

[00:02:50.230] - George Guthrie

I think there are a number of reasons why we struggle with that. And we all do, don't we? I mean, it's not just laypeople. I think those of us who are in ministry, even those of us who teach the Bible, we have to really work at making those rhythms in life that nourish us, shape us. And I know for me personally, that one of the greatest obstacles to reading the Bible rhythmically is just time.

We live in a very fast paced culture. If we're a part of Western culture, we have the same 24 hours in a day that everybody else has. But we we struggle because we have various priorities. We have various kind of things pushing on our hearts, screaming for our attention. And I think that's probably the main reason that people struggle.

[00:03:46.310] - Darryl Dash

I think that's very accurate. I've heard from a lot of people, too. When you add to that the level of maybe not knowing what to do, they start reading in January and they get a little bit into it, and before long they get to Leviticus and Numbers and they're starting to feel a little bit overwhelmed.

How would you counsel somebody who maybe has tried it before but finds it difficult to understand or to persist through maybe some of the challenging parts of Scripture?

[00:04:11.350] - George Guthrie

Yeah, I think that's another reason why people struggle is if you're hitting something that is unfamiliar and you're trying to read it and settle into it, it can be very challenging.

Now, on one level, reading the Bible is somewhat intuitive, where we're dealing with human language here. And we have various forms in the Bible, like stories or poetry that feel a bit familiar. Even Paul's letters in the New Testament, we get it in terms of him writing to a church and counseling a church. But at the same time, we're dealing with a body of ancient literature and we don't have to go very long until kind of the weird factor kicks in. At points.

You mentioned Leviticus. I've said to pastors in the past, we in the ministry hold up the Bible and we say, hey, this is the basis for everything we do in church. This is the basis for everything in your life. You really need to read this on a regular basis. And good luck with Leviticus. I hope that goes well for you. What we haven't done in the church is we have not been consistent with offering people just basic help in training in how to read the Bible, how to read the different parts of the Scripture, because the tools can give us kind of a gateway into more of the heart of reading Scripture, which is really foundational.

So I wrote this book as a primer. The publisher wanted me to do something that would be for the person who's never had a class on reading the Bible, this is their first attempt to even think about it. And it's starting with the issues of the heart and then moving to very, very practical steps that will help people get into that rhythm that is needed for the deeper experience of Bible reading to really take hold. We want to move from us trying to take hold of the Bible to take hold of us. And that's more of a relational process.

[00:06:24.570] - Darryl Dash

I really appreciate that goal. I know I've talked to a lot of believers who maybe their Bible reading would be picking up a devotional and there's a verse or two and then a meditation on that. I've talked to other believers that might kind of do the open the Bible at a random spot and just read a verse or two, which might or might not work out depending where they land.

What would the goal of your book be in terms of helping somebody move beyond those approaches to maybe reading the Bible more systematically?

[00:06:55.040] - George Guthrie

Yeah, I think that we need to understand that when God spoke into the world, he spoke into the world at specific places and times and ways. But he also did it kind of with a trajectory over time. And the way I would describe that is God writing a story into this world. God is interacting with people. This is a very relational kind of dynamic that we have reflected in the Scriptures. And so we want to get drawn into a rhythm that will help us put the pieces together.

So much of reading the Bible depends on reading well in context. Just like human relationships have a vitally important context to any kind of communication that takes place. So I have a wonderful relationship with my wife, but even the best of marriage is at times we have miscommunication and things break

down. And at times the reason for that is because we heard someone say something and we didn't really get the context of what they were trying to communicate with us. And so reading and understanding in the context in which God inspired truth to be understood is a very, very important beginning place. But then putting all of those contexts together so that we begin getting the pieces of the story is just vitally important because what God's ultimately wanting to do is draw us into the story.

One of the people that I quote in the book when I'm talking about this concept of story is Will Herberg, who is kind of a public intellectual. And he said this about redemptive history:

Redemptive history is not merely a recital that we hear and understand. It is also a demand upon us, for out of it comes the voice of God. Faith is responding to the call of God ... [when we read the Bible] it is as though we sat witnessing some tremendous epic drama being performed on a vast stage, when suddenly the chief character, who is also its director, steps forward to the front of the stage, fixes his eye upon us, points his finger at us and calls out: "You, you're wanted. Come up here. Take your part!"

So as we read the Bible, we want to hear it and hear the story to the point that one day we wake up and it dawns on us, hey, we're still a part of this story that God has initiated in the world. And that really becomes a transformative experience when you start seeing that this story that happened in the persons of David and Jesus and Paul is really our story and God has put things in motion in a way that has continued to this day around the world.

[00:09:53.870] - Darryl Dash

You mentioned Rosaria Butterfield in the book and how she began to read the Bible and how she, to her surprise, got caught up in that story and it actually transformed her life. She realized the story of the Bible is bigger than herself. And yeah, I'm fascinated by that. We sort of read the Bible and we're not aware that we're about to be swept up into this grand story of which we're apart. And I love that.

[00:10:17.400] - George Guthrie

Yeah, and that really gets at kind of the foundational issue in the book. Something that I wanted to do was to make sure that this book was not kind of what I would call textbooky. I didn't want it to be kind of a dry methodological, step one, step two, step three kind of thing. There there is method in the book and I point to a lot of tools for people to use that will help them kind of get into rhythms and patterns of reading and that kind of thing. But what I actually start with is the heart, because I think that the most important tool, if you will, for Bible reading is actually the condition of our own part. And that goes back to a number of very, very important passages in Scripture.

If you think about the Shema in Deuteronomy, here Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and it goes on from there. But foundationally, you love the Lord your God from your heart and you put the word in your heart as foundational to your whole life with God and your whole experience with God.

When Jesus was giving the parable of the sower, that parable is really about receptivity to the word. Jesus uses the word picture of seed falling on soil. And my wife and I, just a couple of blocks from here, have a we're part of a community garden and we have a bed up there where we grow flowers and vegetables. And, you know, the, the condition of the soil is really in some ways the most important thing in a garden because the soil is able to receive the seed or the plant and to give it an environment where it really thrives and grows. And so in his parable of the sower in Mark 4, Jesus is giving a word picture there of the seed falling into a life. And yet with the first three examples, it doesn't go very well. You have hard packed soil that the seed doesn't penetrate. You have shallow soil that the seed penetrates, but the plant can't thrive. It gets burned up. You have soil that is weedy, that has weeds, and the word gets choked up by the word choked out by the weeds. It's only in the fourth kind of soil, which is receptive and prepared, that the seed thrives.

And if you think about those first three seeds, the problem is a problem of space. There was not space enough for the seed to thrive. And space in our lives is a life issue, like we said a few moments ago that we're so busy, but it really underneath is a heart issue. It's about the condition of our hearts. Are we receptive? Are we ready to really hear at a deeper level what God would want to say to us?

So I think those are the most important foundational issues. What's the condition of our heart? Where are we in our relationship with God? If I am struggling with reading the Bible on a daily basis, the first thing I do is I stop and reflect on, okay, what's going on right now inside of me? Am I distracted? Am I consumed with something that is a big issue that I'm dealing with in my life? Those kinds of questions? Because at its most fundamental level, reading the Bible is not about mastering the Bible and getting a lot of stuffed into our brains. It's really about relationship with God.

[00:14:14.530] - Darryl Dash

So I talked to a lot of people and they admit that they want to read the Bible, and yet they find maybe they start a Bible reading plan. And about two or three weeks into it, it feels like they're just checking a box every morning and their Bible reading has become routine. It's not really at that point. I mean, their hearts really aren't engaged in some ways. What advice would you give to somebody who feels like it's becoming a chore rather than a delight or something that's relational?

[00:14:40.650] - George Guthrie

Yeah, I would say several things.

One, these are very practical, but start with prayer. Start with it being relational right from the get go and pray and say, Lord, I really want to hear what you would say to me today. So start with prayer and maybe even a song or so to kind of provide an atmosphere of worship would be a good place to start.

Second thing you can do is read with a partner. Have somebody that you're kind of reading along with or a group of people so that you are able to get together and have a coffee. Or you may even want to meet over a lunch break at work and read out loud together. That can be a very meaningful kind of experience.

A third thing I would say is make sure that you're using a translation that really speaks to you, that you can understand. One of the great wealths that we have in the English speaking world is we have a number of great translations who are kind of across a spectrum of approaches to Bible translation. And I would say get one that you really do understand. Don't just use a translation because that's what was in your home that you grew up with, but maybe go to a bookstore or look up samples online. You can type any translation into a browser and just pull that up and read some samples and kind of invest in a translation that you can really understand.

And then another thing is a good study Bible is not that expensive. I mean, at times study Bible will cost what it would cost to go out for a meal with somebody. And what study Bibles do is down at the bottom of the page they give you all kinds of help with word meanings and kind of context issues. So it's like having really helpful notes built right into what you're reading.

And then the final thing I would say is if you get a plan that is workable for you, that can really help you get in the rhythm and you start anticipating and looking forward to. So on my website, georgeguthrie.com, I have a little tab that is about helps for Bible reading. And there are plans there that you can download for free. And then my day by day chronological Bible that can be bought on Amazon is something that I coach the person day by day. Just give a little paragraph on the reading for that day and it's six days a week. And reading the Bible six days a week, you can make it through the Bible in a year.

So having good tools, having friends that you're walking with, reading a translation that is helpful to you, and then keeping the perspective that this is about my relationship with God, doing it from a relational standpoint, those can be really helpful.

[00:17:45.730] - Darryl Dash

One thing I appreciate about you is you are able to teach at the seminary level, and yet I know you and Pat are involved in mentoring people. And as you talk to people, I often think of a new mother of newborn twins who's just harried and her life is full and she's exhausted and yet she wants to be in God's word. Or I think of somebody else who travels a lot. He's up in the morning, at six in the morning, and he might be flying to a different city. And what advice would you give to people who were just overwhelmed with the demands of life just to still cultivate this Bible reading habit in their lives?

[00:18:21.540] - George Guthrie

Yeah, I remember when we were doing the Read the Bible for Life initiative a little over a decade ago. We were doing it in our church and there was a young woman in our class who I could tell was really struggling. She wasn't really coming to the group ready to share. You could tell that she was struggling. And I talked to her after the first session that we had and just said, "Hey, what's going on?" And she told me, she said, "I just feel kind of overwhelmed because I'm not a reader and my kids get up at the crack of dawn and we're off to the races for the day." And so I encouraged her to approach it from a relational standpoint and that was really transformative for her.

But I think something else people can consider doing is tapping into audio of the daily readings. So a mom who's working around the kitchen, cleaning up the kitchen or whatever can listen for 20 minutes a day and get through the Bible in a year. And there are wonderful tools on you version, for instance, where you can listen to the Bible or you can read it yourself.

There are audio versions of the Bible out there that you can just download in whatever translation that you want. And Darryl, I'm sure you probably have examples of that that you could give people links to, but that is something that can be super helpful. That business person who's dashing off to the airport, it takes 20 minutes to drive to the airport. You can listen to the day's reading there and then when you're walking between meetings or going for a walk when you're on your business trip, listen to the audio read. And that can be a really meaningful kind of way to work the Scripture in.

I think if we, if we can make space and kind of settle into that 20 to 30 minutes a day, that can be a deeply meaningful rhythm of life. I start my days with a cup of coffee and reading my Bible, and Pat does the same and we have our tools right there and if you can block out that space. So for moms, just as an example, when you put the kids down, if you have really small kids, when you put the kids down after lunch, plan on having the first 30 minutes of that time in your Bible reading.

Then you don't have to do it first thing in the day. Maybe that's the best time for you. I would say don't try to do it late at night unless you're just a night owl and that works for you. I'm not, I don't do well with trying to have my time with the Lord at night. But do what works for you and carve out, set aside that space and then don't just try to do it randomly because that priority of space is something that then can become rhythmic, if that makes sense.

[00:21:23.210] - Darryl Dash

That's really helpful. George, I know one of the issues that I hear about a lot are where I am, I'm a pastor of a church in downtown Toronto and a lot of people aren't familiar with the Bible and they begin to read it and there's parts that offend them. They're reading Deuteronomy or Exodus and they come across a law that just seems so regressive to them. Or they get to Corinthians and they're reading about submission or head coverings and that kind of thing. And it's easy to just walk away and be offended and say that I just can't handle this.

What advice would you give to somebody who's wanting honestly to pursue a relationship with God, wanting to submit to Scripture and yet tripping over parts that might seem really difficult and offensive to today's culture?

[00:22:08.990] - George Guthrie

Boy, that's something that we really deal with here in Vancouver. Probably the most surprising thing about our move to Vancouver four and a half years ago is how many relationships with not yet Christians we simply fall into without trying. We have had more opportunities to talk to people about Christ here than we ever had back in Tennessee. I mean, it's just kind of amazing. And you do have that factor where you're

dealing with people who are not coming from a Christian background and they're trying to process this very ancient body of literature.

And so you're right, you're sharing the gospel with somebody and you come to sexuality issues or whatever and the wheels kind of come off the bus at that point because it seems so different from what people are hearing all the time. So what I would do when I'm walking with somebody in that way is helping them start with parts of Scripture that are accessible. So helping them start with parts that maybe are a bit more accessible, like the Sermon on the Mount is something that people can kind of identify with reading through different books. But from the very beginning, helping people understand that we are dealing with an ancient context that's going to seem kind of strange to us in an odd way.

A lot of the emphasis that we have in our culture on things like tolerance and love and compassion, those directly come from a Judaeo-Christian view of the world. Those are things that were handed down to us by virtue of the fact that much of western thinking and culture was dominated by the Bible for hundreds and hundreds of years. And people who are secular, modern people who've had no connection at all with the Bible don't really know that. They don't know that. That's the backdrop for the reason why they would argue for compassion or whatever.

So I would say to people I want to walk with you as a friend and we're going to try to hear and understand this together. But but we're not going to superimpose our modern sensibilities on these ancient stories and texts because that's in some ways that's not fair. We can have kind of what, what CS. Lewis called a chronological snobbery thinking that of course we're the epitome of the ages. We see everything completely clearly. But to say to the person this is literature that has endured for 3000 years from its inception, its beginning and we want to hear it and try to understand what the people at that time were hearing and how they were grappling with things.

So for instance, when you do it on those terms, issues like the treatment of women, slavery in the ancient world, when you go back to the original context, the Bible was actually very progressive for its day. I mean, just one example, the story of creation starts off at the beginning where it says that God created human beings, male and female, and created them in his image. There's no other piece of ancient Near Eastern literature that has a woman and man side by side in terms of status except for that creation story that we have there at the beginning of Genesis. So from the very beginning of the Bible, women are exalted into a position of co created heirs of the world and that kind of stuff is there.

But sometimes you have to process through the context of what is going on. And then we do have come to places where the Bible does push back against our culture at points and we have to settle in enough to really hear what it's saying and why it's saying the things that it's saying.

[00:26:23.610] - Darryl Dash

That's really helpful. It really strikes me that we have a role within our churches of modeling and teaching how to do this. And I was thinking when I grew up, we really approached the Bible from the perspective many times of individual stories rather than the story, right? So learning about Moses or Daniel or whatever, but not really connecting it to the big picture. But one of the things that really helped me is to

see a pastor handle the word of God accurately. And that taught me how to handle the word of God accurately. So speak to pastors for a minute. How can we, or even church leaders, how can we help our people develop really good Bible reading habits to read and be shaped by Scripture?

[00:27:06.310] - George Guthrie

Boy, that is a great question. I think one of the most important dynamics in terms of what we were just talking about with getting people into a pattern of reading the text of Scripture is that they be embraced in a community and it really becomes a community process and dynamic that we're reading the Bible together. We're trying to hear this together.

One of the things that I loved when we did the Read the Bible for Life initiative was that there were whole churches that pushed the pause button in a sense and took a year to read through the Bible together. And then the pastor was preaching a passage from the reading of the past week. And the church kind of had a culminating worship service every week that was kind of centered around a passage from the reading for the previous week. So you had people reading individually or in their families. They were getting together in small group to talk about it. And then they were coming and hearing a sermon from that part of the Scripture. And even in some places I heard that there were two or three churches in the same town doing that at the same time.

[00:28:19.180] - George Guthrie

And neighbors were kind of talking across the fence, you know, about Esther or Nehemiah or some other part of the Scriptures. So I think if you can as pastors, create experiences that are community experiences of reading through the Scriptures together and discussing them.

Of course, we have Bible studies that do that. We used to have what we called Sunday school where whole churches were kind of going through the same passages and stuff like that. But I think what happened was somewhere around the time of the mid to late 80s, maybe early 90s, we started having a much more fragmented approach to all this, where kind of every person did what was right in their own eyes. In terms of one class was doing a marriage class, and another class was doing a finances class, and another class was studying Romans and another class was doing something else. I think we need to give our churches an opportunity to read through the story of Scripture together every now and then and making that a community process.

I think probably the most important dynamic is that a pastor model the love and embracing of God's words in a way that they're actually kind of living out hearing the Word themselves in front of the congregation. I would just say to pastors, be very open about what God is teaching you. Be very open even about the things that God is confronting you about, because what you're doing is you're modeling how, how do we live a life that is walking with God in a way that we are really receptive to what God would say to us. And I say in the book, and I mean this with all my heart, there is no more important dynamic in life than that we hear what God would say to us on a regular basis through His Word. The word is the lifeline. It is the link that tells us what God is like, what he expects of us in the world, how he wants us to be his people. And so the more that we as pastors can live that out in a humble way before people, the better. It's just going

to help. But that will help draw them into community and probably will do more than most other things we could describe in terms of methodology.

[00:30:52.510] - Darryl Dash

This is a book that not only is helpful and accessible, but makes me want to read God's Word. It's a book that I think a pastor could buy a whole box of them and hand them out to everybody in the church. So I really hope it's used widely and thank you for reading the book.

[00:31:09.670] - George Guthrie

Well, let me just say this, that you can get this just one book at a time from Amazon, but you can go to LifeWay.com, B&H Publishers are part of the bigger LifeWay brand, I guess. And if you go to LifeWay.com and search for this book, *A Short Guide to Reading the Bible Better*, it will give you options. And one of the options is to buy the book in bulk. So I think on Amazon it's \$14 something, and yet I believe, if I'm remembering correctly, you can get the volumes for \$7 and something if you buy them 20 or more, and then it kind of prorates it out. If you buy ten or more, I think it's nine something maybe. But my point is that the publisher actually wanted me to write this book in a way that they could be sold in bulk to churches, so this could be handed out to just people in the pew, new Christians, so that it would be a beginning place for how to read the Bible.

[00:32:15.850] - Darryl Dash

In the book, you say there is no important task in life than hearing from God and trusting Him on the basis of his word. I mean, that quite literally, no more important task. And if that's true I believe it is, then I can't think of a more timely book. So I really appreciate you writing it. George, I wanted to ask you a couple of personal questions as we wrap up, if that's okay.

[00:32:35.350] - George Guthrie

Sure.

[00:32:35.910] - Darryl Dash

What is God teaching you lately?

[00:32:38.850] - George Guthrie

Oh my goodness. Wow. So much. I mean, there are just a lot of things going on that I think the Lord is doing. And working at Regent College, where I'm a professor, and in our family, I would say that the main thing that I'm wanting to learn. I hope the Lord is teaching me this, but one of the main things that I'm wanting to learn is to settle into those rhythms of life in the Spirit, to be a person who is filled with the Spirit, who is really sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit. In just my daily interactions with people, I think in my life I generally have tended to be very project oriented and task oriented, and I still am. I have my checklist downstairs and I'm checking things off today. But I want to be the kind of person where when

the Spirit is prompting me and I'm in conversation with the person that I'm all there, that I'm really tuned in, really listening to what the Spirit would say that I need to do in ministering or what I need to say in ministering to this person. So that would be the biggest thing that I'm wanting to learn.

I'm a slow learner sometimes, but that would be one of the biggest things and would appreciate people praying for me that way. That I would be a person who is walking with the Lord in a way that I'm filled with the spirit that my gifts are being energized and I'm not just kind of doing things out of my frantic to do list.

[00:34:18.450] - Darryl Dash

I can relate to you there big time. What's encouraging you lately?

[00:34:25.250] - George Guthrie

I think one of the things that's encouraging me greatly is we have a lot of 20 something, 30 somethings coming through the college. And I just continue to see people who are successful in the world, or maybe they're struggling in the world, but they really, really are keen on figuring out what it means to integrate their faith with the other things that they're doing in life. And therefore they are serious about trying to read the Bible well and effectively. We live in a day that is fraught with all kinds of conflict and challenges and political polarization, all of these kind of things. And yet it is encouraging to me that I see communities of people who are really pressing into Scripture at a deep level and trying to hear, how do we live faithfully as believers in a world like ours? How do we do that? And they're taking it very seriously and they're really trying to study in a way that they're growing and not just kind of reinforcing their own presuppositions about culture or whatever. So I think that's wonderfully encouraging. I do have a chance to teach, speak to people in different parts of the world every now and then and to experience the body of Christ from around the world.

And to see God building up his church is a very, very exciting thing. To see that the Spirit working, even the Spirit pouring out the miraculous at places in the world like Israel, western China. It's just tremendously encouraging. And so I'm thankful to be in a place where I can kind of bear witness to what I see happening around me.

[00:36:21.130] - Darryl Dash

Well, George, I'm grateful for you and Pat and your ministry and friendship, and I'm also grateful for this book. I think it's going to be a real gift to the church. I pray that God uses it to encourage a movement of Bible reading within the body. So thank you for writing it.

[00:36:35.160] - George Guthrie

Well, thank you so much, Darryl. Really appreciate you having me on today. Great to see you.

[00:36:38.780] - Darryl Dash

Good to see you as well.