

## Sacred Scripture: What is It? And How Do I Share It with Others?

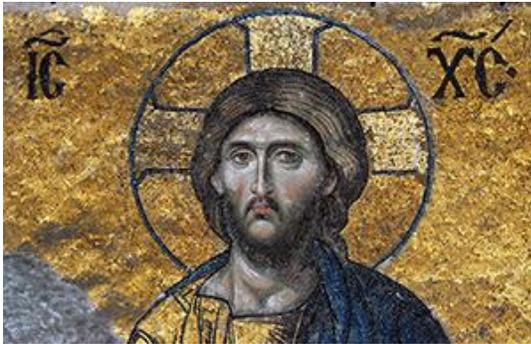
*“The word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword ...”  
(Hebrews 4:12).*

We all know what Sacred Scripture is. But have we really picked it up and read it? Or – if we were asked to lead a Bible study with teens – would we know what to do? How about leading a study with our adult leaders? This article aims to give you some knowledge and tools to help you in this essential ministry.

### Divine Revelation

To understand Sacred Scripture, we must understand some things about God - mainly, that he wants to reveal himself to us! He has been revealing himself to us since the beginning of human history. God is an incredible mystery in himself, and so, in his sheer goodness, he chose to reveal himself and his will to us! This is what we call Divine Revelation - God revealing himself to his people.

Sacred Scripture is that part of Divine Revelation that is written down for us. Sacred Scripture is the word of God, put down into writing in the language of human authors. God inspired the human authors of Sacred Scripture to write down just what he wanted and nothing more. It contains the hope and promises of God's love, consolation in times of difficulty, and the Good News of our salvation in Jesus Christ!



We call Scripture the word of God, and indeed it is!  
But do you know who also is the Word of God?  
Answer: **Jesus!**

Jesus is the fullness of God's Revelation. He is the fullness of what God wants to say about himself, for he is God himself - consubstantial (of one substance) with the Father! Jesus says of himself: “the Father

*Photo credit: Shutterstock*

and I are one” (John 10:30), and elsewhere “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When Jesus speaks, God speaks. When Jesus teaches, God teaches. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches us that “All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, 'because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ” - CCC 134. When we encounter Sacred Scripture - we are encountering Jesus, the Word of God and fullness of Divine Revelation. And indeed, then, also encountering the Father - in the power of the Holy Spirit. Reading Scripture, then, is one great act of encountering the Holy Trinity!

## **How did the Bible come about?**

*“Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours.” (2 Thessalonians 2:15)*

The Bible didn't just drop down out of Heaven the way we have it now. It developed over time.

The message of the greatness of God - in his creation of the world and his interaction with his people in Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the prophets, was passed on over time in a great oral tradition, before being eventually written down. (There were some writings about God and his people in circulation before and after Christ but were not included in the Bible.) How was the official list of the books of the Bible determined? Answer: by the decision of the early Church.

The regional Church councils of Hippo (393 A.D.) and Carthage (397 A.D.) confirmed the 46 books for the Old Testament. This would later be solemnly affirmed at the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The official list of the books of the Bible is known as the **Canon of the Bible** or Sacred Scripture. There are 27 books in the New Testament.

The word Bible comes from the Greek word “biblos”, which means *book*. Interestingly, the Bible is best considered as a library of books - each with a common theme - that of God revealing himself and his plan for us.

## **What are the Old and New Testaments?**

The Bible is divided into the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament (the longer one), contains the story of God's plan for our salvation since the earliest times - starting with the creation of the world, the Adam and Eve story, and going right up to shortly before the birth of Christ. It contains important teachings about how to live our Faith in God (for example, The Ten Commandments), prayers and wise sayings (the Psalms and Proverbs, for instance) and the account of God's relationship with his people in the historical and prophetic books. There are 46 books in the Old Testament.

The New Testament contains writings directly about Jesus and the early Church. The Four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, make up the first four books of the New Testament. The CCC teaches us that the “*Gospels* are the heart of all the Scriptures 'because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior' (*Dei Verbum* 18)” - CCC 125. After the Gospels, there are writings about the activity of the early Church, letters of Paul, Peter, and other Apostles, and finally the Book of Revelation, written by John the Apostle.

*Fun fact: guess how many copies of the Bible are estimated to be printed each year? Answer below.*

## **Why do Protestant Bibles have less books in the Old Testament?**

There were two canons of the Old Testament in use among the Jews around the time of Jesus: the Hebrew (or Palestinian) canon and the Greek (or Alexandrian) canon. The Greek canon is also referred to as the “Septuagint”. The Greek canon, completed and in use by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.,

contained seven more books than the Hebrew canon. These books are known as the deuterocanonical books of the Bible. Deuterocanonical means “second canon” in Greek. Some refer to these books as “apocryphal”. The legitimacy of these books was disputed by some Jewish rabbis in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, A.D. The early Christian Church accepted the Greek canon, which included the deuterocanonical books, as the complete list of the inspired books of the Old Testament. Popular in Israel at the time, Jesus himself would have prayed and studied the Greek canon of scripture. This was the accepted version of the Old Testament among Christians until the time of Martin Luther (16<sup>th</sup> century), who chose to adhere to the Hebrew canon. As such, Protestant Bibles either do not contain the deuterocanonical books or list them in a separate section.

## Translations

The original language of the Bible is Greek and Hebrew. But since most of us are not Greek and Hebrew scholars - we therefore must read a translation of the Bible. Not all translations are alike! Some do a better job conveying the original text and meaning of the Bible than others. When it comes to translating the sacred text, there are two general approaches - one is to focus more on a literal translation of the text word for word (known as a literal translation); while the other is to focus more on making sure the meaning of the text is accurately conveyed (known as a dynamically equivalent translation). It's a bit tricky - because a point being made in the ancient Greek or Hebrew - might not sound right when simply translated word for word into a modern language. This is the task of translators of the Bible - to provide a faithful rendering of what the original text is saying while attempting to make a readable translation. While some less easily readable translations may be great for a deeper study especially when one is looking for a closer, more literal rendering of the ancient text.



This is a helpful Bible Translations Guide from *Catholic Answers*: <https://www.catholic.com/tract/bible-translations-guide>

Here is an approved list of translations from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): <https://www.usccb.org/offices/new-american-bible/approved-translations-bible>



In the fourth century, **St. Jerome** translated the entire Bible into Latin. His translation is known as the Latin Vulgate or the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. St. Jerome famously stated “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (CCC 133).

“St. Jerome in his study” by Marinus van Remerswale *Photo credit: ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)* <https://tinyurl.com/yvonl9gq>

## The Senses of Scripture

One important element to understanding Scripture is what is known as the senses of Scripture. One passage of Scripture often has multiple meanings. These meanings or senses are called the **literal** and the **spiritual**. The spiritual sense is further divided into the **allegorical, moral, and anagogical** (or **eschatological**). The literal refers to simply what the words convey according to “sound interpretation” (CCC 116). St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that “all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal” (*Summa Theologica* I).

The allegorical refers to the meaning of the text in Christ, or what the passage tells us about Christ. For instance, the Passover Lamb which was slain and then consumed is a sign or symbol of Christ who was slain for our sins and then consumed in the Eucharist.

The moral sense of Scripture teaches us how to live our lives.

The anagogical sense speaks of the final destiny of man in Christ, and in the fulfilled Kingdom of God.

The Catechism shares a “medieval couplet” which well summarizes the senses of scripture: “*The Letter [literal] speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith; The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny*” (CCC 118).

For more on the senses of Scripture - check out this article: <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/one-text-four-senses>

*It is estimated that over 100 million copies of the Bible are printed each year!*

## The Bible at Mass

*“He [Jesus] replied, ‘Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.’”  
(Luke 11:28)*



**The Bible is proclaimed at Mass**

*Photo credit: Ashleigh Kassoock*

We all know that the Bible is read at Mass, but it may be helpful to remind teens of this! Encourage them to be attentive to God's Word, proclaimed at Mass. For Sunday liturgies, three separate passages are read - usually one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and a selection from the Gospels. We stand when the Gospel is proclaimed - this is out of reverence and respect for the words of Christ and the accounts of his earthly mission. At a daily Mass (not a Sunday liturgy), two passages will be proclaimed - either from the Old or New Testament (depending on the time of year) and the Gospels.

## **Ways to Share Scripture with Teens**

Get your teens listening to God's word, reading it, and pondering its fruit in their lives! Below are some ideas.

### **Verse of the Week**

Perhaps have a verse of the week or month. It can be something you continually go back to in your events and groupings. Or it can provide a theme for ministry that week or that month. Teens can be invited to reflect on it and report back next week. In time, teens could select the verse of the week.

### **Sunday Mass Readings**

Reflect on the Sunday Mass readings – either all 4 (which includes the Psalm) or maybe just the Gospel. This is generally a fairly easy way to consistently break open the Word and ponder its meaning. This also connects the teens to the prayer of the universal Church - the Mass readings are the same all around the world in the Roman Catholic Church. You can find Sunday Mass readings here: <https://bible.usccb.org/>. Perhaps once a month at a gathering go over the upcoming Sunday Gospel. Reflect on it. Talk about it. What do the teens think about the passage, what do they get out of it? Listen. What is God trying to say to us?

### **Brief Bible Reading and Sharing**

Real simple: pick out three or four separate passages that you'd like teens to read. The passages can have a common theme or message; or just passages you like. Ask teens to look up the passages in advance (this also gives them experience looking up passages). Then just go around and have them read the passages when you call on them, reflecting on the passages with them. Asking them to share what the passage may be saying to them. Share with the teens a message that you are trying to convey with the passages.

### **Bible Studies**

You can create your own studies centered around particular themes from Scripture. Perhaps make a study around three instances in the Bible related to water, light, or the miracles of Jesus. Or, maybe create a study around occasions where followers of the Lord were called to trust in a significant way. (Perhaps Moses wandering through the desert, David with the slingshot, then Mary as a young teen being given the sacred news of her pregnancy). Then, meet once/week for three weeks to go over the passages. Reflect on the passages. What are the verses saying? What are they saying to you? To the teens? Pray together.

Perhaps look through the Gospel of Mark and create a study revolving around the miracles of Christ. Or just read through one of the Gospels together (maybe start with Mark – it's the shortest 😊!)

Tie themes of Sacred Scripture together. Find three Psalms or verses of three Psalms that speak on a certain theme: trust, hope, contrition. Perhaps conclude the study with a Psalm of praise or adoration.

Psalm 63 reminds us of the greatness of God and our longing for him. Psalm 139 reassures us that God knows us and our deepest need. Psalm 23 is the famous Good Shepherd passage telling us of the providential care of God. Psalm 51 is the prayer of a repentant heart, while calling to mind the mercy of God.

A study can be made, like any of the above, over three or more instances in Scripture, and you could read and discuss over three or more separate gatherings.

What is mentioned above about Bible studies can be applied to adults. Perhaps do a Bible study once/year with your adult volunteers? Maybe ask them to come up with what the study will be about.

Five Bible studies based on the theme of fire can be found in the Encounter Sacred Scripture: <https://www.arlingtondiocese.org/youth-ministry/encounters/encounter-sacred-scripture/>.

As you know, there are many **Bible studies** out there – below are some good ones:

*A Quick Journey Through the Bible*

<https://ascensionpress.com/collections/unlocking-the-mystery>,

*Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*

<https://ascensionpress.com/collections/jesus-way-truth-and-life>

*A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*

<https://ascensionpress.com/collections/a-biblical-walk-through-the-mass>

Here's a good article that can assist you in opening up God's word with teens: "Ten Questions to Ask Yourself When Leading a Teen Bible Study"

<https://media.ascensionpress.com/2019/02/14/10-questions-ask-leading-teen-bible-study/>.

### **Study Bibles:**

There are also great Bibles to assist you in studying God's word – check out these listed below:

- *The Didache Bible* with commentaries based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church (published by Midwest Theological Forum)
- *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch (published by Ignatius Press)
- *The Word on Fire Bible* (published by Word on Fire)
- *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible* (published by Ascension Press)

## The Liturgy of the Hours

Prayed by individuals or assemblies - the Liturgy of the Hours is the daily, Scripture-focused prayer of the Church. It is celebrated, in a way - to sanctify the hours of the day. The Psalms make up the majority of the Scripture passages that are read and prayed in the Liturgy of the Hours, while other selections from the Old and New Testaments are also part of this prayer. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours with teens is a great way to expose them to Scripture and the traditional Scripture-Liturgical prayer of the universal Church.

## Going Deeper: Lectio Divina

Any time we read Scripture prayerfully and try to listen to God speaking through it and discern what we can get out of the passage – we are doing a kind of *lectio divina*. Lectio divina is a centuries-old method of praying with God's word is Lectio Divina. Lectio divina literally means a divine reading. It is a prayerful reading of Scripture - a reading of Scripture in which we delve deeply into the meaning of the word, while meditating on the passage, in docility to the Holy Spirit, under whose direction the text was written.

This may be something to do with your teens when you feel they are ready for a deeper reading of Scripture.

To begin this “divine reading,” select a passage that is 1-10 verses long - perhaps it is an instance in the life of Christ, or an episode from the Old Testament. It is helpful to take a few deep breaths, calm yourself, repeat the name of Jesus, and invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit.



There are four general stages of lectio divina.

1. **Lectio** (read) - read the passage 1-3 times. Focus on a word or phrase.
2. **Meditatio** (meditate) - seek understanding, engage thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. Allow the Holy Spirit to give meaning to the text. Perhaps reflect on: why does this word or phrase stand out? What is the *truth* of this passage.
3. **Oratio** (pray) - enter into dialogue with God. Share your thoughts with him; seek to understand his will.
4. **Contemplatio** (contemplate) - spend time in silent prayer, fixed on Christ himself.

Lectio divina affords us an opportunity to “Be still, and know that I am God,” as Psalm 46 teaches us. St. John of the Cross tells us “seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation.”

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