

Guide to Biblical Literacy

How to Infuse Scripture into Daily Life and Set an Example for the Next Generation

By Jeff Cavins

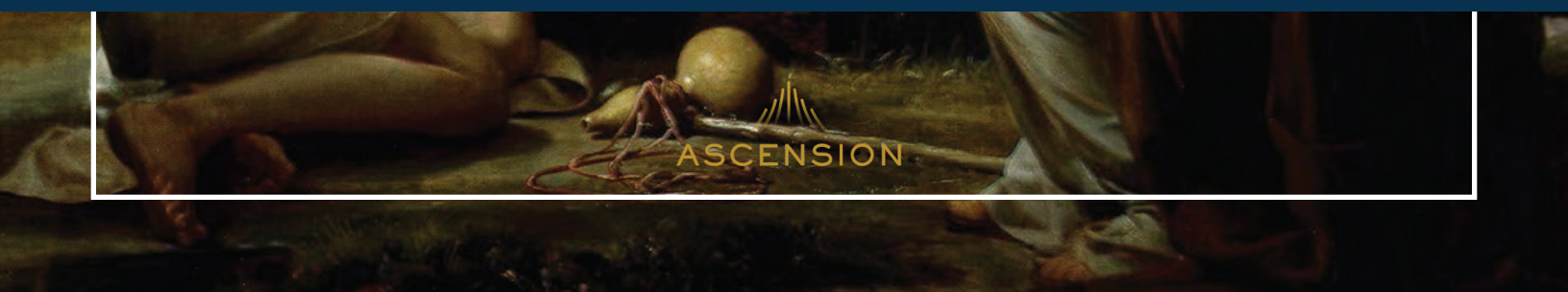


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Ascension
PO Box 1990
West Chester, PA
193801
800-376-0520
ascensionpress.com

Introduction: Understanding the Bible

> **"But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."**
> **(Luke 2:19)**

Like the Virgin Mary, let's ponder the words from Scripture. Mary knew the Incarnate Word more intimately than any other human being, having given birth to Jesus and raised him as well as any mother would her child. Yet she continuously and deeply reflected on God's Word throughout her life, reaching for full understanding.

By treasuring it in her heart, she was prepared to respond to God's will with faith and trust: **"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)[1].** The Word of God shaped the way she lived, loved, and followed the Lord.



The Annunciation (1828), Johann von Schraudolph

Mary didn't see Scripture the same way we look at it today. To her, the Old Testament was a single story, her people's story, and therefore her story that she pondered on a deeply personal level.

Do we keep the Word of God close to our hearts like Mary did? Do we look at Scripture as a single story, just like her?

As parents, guardians, and educators invested in the formation of today's children, we are shaping more than minds—we are shaping souls. That raises a vital question: Do we know Scripture well enough to pass it on to the next generation? Not simply as a collection of stories, but as the story that reveals Jesus Christ and invites each of us into his plan of salvation.

Too often, the Bible remains tied to childhood—stories once heard alongside fairy tales and bedtime books, then gradually left behind. As children grow, they begin to see Scripture as distant or irrelevant, rather than as the living Word meant for them.

But children are naturally drawn to stories. When we invite them into the greatest story ever told and reveal that they are part of it, they see that the Bible isn't something they outgrow, but something they grow into.

Many adults were never taught how to read the Bible as one unified story, instead seeing it as a collection of disconnected books or moral lessons. But the Bible is also unlike any other book. It is a library containing history, poetry, wisdom, literature, prophecy, the Gospels, and apostolic letters written across many centuries under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the story of God's love for humanity and his plan to save us through Jesus Christ.

Helping children understand this story, and their place within it, is one of the most important responsibilities entrusted to parents and educators today. If we do not teach children the Word of God, the world will shape them instead. Modern culture is loud and relentless, but God has entrusted parents and educators with the sacred responsibility of teaching and forming children in truth.

This guide is designed to help you grow in biblical literacy—personally, within your family, and within the life of the Church—so that the children in your care may come to know and love the Word of God as Mary and the apostles did, leading them toward a real and lasting encounter with Christ.

Pray for God's guidance and Mary's intercession in discerning a realistic way in which you can commit yourself to growing in biblical literacy and to helping others, especially the children in your life, do the same.

What Is Biblical Literacy?

We all remember learning how to read and write in school, building proficiency in understanding texts. This is conventional literacy. When we open up a regular book, we often read it from beginning to end to accomplish this.

Reading the Bible is more complicated, however, because it contains seventy-three diverse books written across many centuries. Plus, it is the divine Word of God.

Biblical literacy is the ability to read, understand, and explain the story of salvation history in a meaningful way. Salvation history is the story of God's relationship with humanity throughout time, and of our participation in this drama through faith, prayer, the sacraments, and daily discipleship.

A biblically literate person views the entire Bible through the lens of the central event of salvation history: the Incarnation. St. Jerome famously quipped, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."[2] The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus portrays exactly what St. Jerome meant.



Landscape With Christ On The Road To Emmaus, A Woman Herding Cattle To The Right (1585), Hans Bol

After Jesus' resurrection, these disciples were headed away from Jerusalem, sad and unsure of the future. They encounter the risen Christ, who opens their eyes to the full meaning of Scripture: **"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27).**

It is after this encounter that they had a revelation: **"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32).** At that moment, these disciples realized that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and the key to understanding the whole of the Bible. This realization gave them the courage to return to Jerusalem.

Does your heart burn within you when you open the Scriptures?

Do you sense a growing love for him burning within your heart?

Ask the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and kindle in you

the fire of God's love, opening your eyes to his love and mercy.

Developing biblical literacy requires approaching God's Word with faith, listening for his voice, understanding what he is saying to us,[3] and responding to him with trust and obedience. The ultimate goal is more than self-fulfillment; it is to share the Gospel so everyone can discover God's mercy and the beauty of salvation.

And for parents and educators especially, the goal extends to children in our care, so that they grow up to be good, faithful people in union with God.

St. Paul asks in Romans 10:14: **"How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"** The responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and be Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:8) **"to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Revelation 14:6)** such that the light of Christ enters every area of human life[4] belongs to all of us—especially to parents and those entrusted with forming children in the Faith. If our children don't hear the Gospel, they will not know Christ.

This responsibility may seem daunting, but as St. Augustine said, we can't be afraid to teach the truth even if we don't know the right words.

"Not that these things are not by all means to be corrected, that the people may say Amen to what they clearly understand, but at the same time they are to be endured by those who have learned that the essence of speaking well consists ... in the desire of the heart."

— St. Augustine[5]



Saint Augustine in Ecstasy, Romain Looymans

Where Did the Bible Come From?

The Bible is for everyone, because everyone needs to encounter Christ.[6] For Catholics, Scripture is not optional. It is spiritual survival. In every Mass, we are fed by both the Eucharist and the Word of God. Scripture nourishes us, strengthens us, and draws us closer to Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI taught: "The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."[7] This means that the Bible is authored by God himself (the principal author) and co-authored by divinely-inspired human beings who were gifted with divine grace.

In other words, all of Scripture is divinely inspired and completely without error.[8] It is not simply an ancient document about a people long ago, but the living Word of God for all generations.

To understand salvation history fully, we must consider both the intentions of the human authors and the deeper meaning God reveals through them. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) teaches us that there are two "senses" of Scripture: literal and spiritual, which allow us to discover these intentions and interpret the Divine Word as it was meant to be read.

Catholics begin with the literal sense, which helps us understand what Scripture meant to the human author and the historical context. Then the spiritual sense, which is subdivided into three more senses, allows us to recognize how Scripture points to Christ, shapes our moral life, and directs us toward fulfillment.

By interpreting Scripture's literal sense and historical context alongside the spiritual senses, we can achieve full union with Christ.

The Two Senses of Scripture: Literal & Spiritual

Scripture can be read through two senses: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The spiritual sense is subdivided into three senses—allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Together, all these senses receive the richness of Scripture in the living Tradition of the Church, creating a path to salvation.

The Literal Sense

Using exegesis (sound interpretation) to discover the intent of the human author and what the words mean in a historical, literary, cultural, and grammatical context.

All other senses are based on the literal.



The Spiritual Sense

Because the Old and the New Testaments find their unity in Jesus Christ, the Spiritual Sense shows how the realities and events in Scripture can be read as signs of salvation history.

Allegorical



People and events in the Old Testament find new meaning in the light of Christ.

Moral



Scripture guides us in how to act justly and morally in our daily lives.

Anagogical



We find the eternal reality of heaven, our true home, in Scripture.

Interpreting Scripture Through the Senses . . .



Shows us how Christ reveals and fulfills the Old Testament in the New Testament



Bridges our reading of Scripture to the Church's deposit of faith



Orients us toward salvation, and therefore communion with Christ

The Bible also requires guidance in interpretation. We see this in Acts 8, when the apostle Philip is told by an angel to travel south. It was on this journey that he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah. When Philip asked him if he understood the prophet's words, the eunuch responded, **"How can I [understand Scripture] unless some one guides me?" (Acts 8:30–31).**



Baptism of Ethiopian eunuch, Gijsbert Jansz

Perhaps you have thought this yourself, as you attempted to read from the Bible and ponder the Word of God. So who can we look to for guidance?

God made sure the Gospel would stay whole and alive by Christ commissioning the apostles to preach and hand on what they learned, witnessed, and received. They in turn appointed bishops as their successors to continue their teaching and example, creating the Magisterium. This teaching office (the bishops in communion with the pope) preserves God's people from error and confusion so that the Gospel continually guides us in faith, life, and worship.

In practice, the Church's Sacred Tradition—praying, teaching, believing, and worshiping—helps us understand Sacred Scripture more deeply, while the Holy Spirit leads us toward "all truth" through reflection, study, and the faithful preaching of clergy.

From the one **Divine Source**, the **Word of God** comes to us in two interrelated but distinct ways: **Sacred Scripture** and **Sacred Tradition**. Together, they form **one sacred deposit of faith**, which the Church, through the **Magisterium**, authentically interprets for our **salvation**.



As a member of the Body of Christ, we are urged to hold fast to what the apostles taught so that Christ's word reaches its fulfillment.[9]

The harmonious union of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium is necessary for guiding the Church so we can keep receiving and understanding the Word of God and the saving reality of Christ's Paschal mystery in an unchanging way.

The Bible is not just a text of the past that is preserved and passed on throughout time.[10] It is a living source of truth that brings us into direct contact with God. The truth that Scripture reveals is not an end in itself; it is intended to be embodied by the faithful. Pope Leo XIV encourages us to "read and interpret the sacred texts under the guidance of the same Spirit who inspired" those in the early Church.[11]

Accordingly, we should read and contemplate Scripture as a living dialogue with God. May we ponder and treasure the Word of God continually as Mary did in her heart.

The Generational Urgency of Biblical Literacy

> "Faith is the greatest gift."
> – St. John Paul II

Parents naturally worry about their children's future. Statistics are not always encouraging, as many adults leave the Church because they were never deeply grounded in Scripture and therefore never saw their integral roll in the story of salvation. Just as St. Paul warned the Christian community in Corinth: **"Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).**

While the Church is seeing conversions to the Catholic Faith in great numbers, even sincere believers can lose their footing if they are not deeply rooted in Christ and continue in faithfulness. This is why biblical literacy is urgently needed; or else our children will be deprived of what St. John Paul II declared to be the greatest gift of all: faith.

The World Is Already Forming our Children

When the Israelites reached the Promised Land after wandering the desert, they entered a foreign land and culture that did not share their beliefs or values. Parents today face a similar reality. Moses guided the Israelites in how to cope: **"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children," (Deuteronomy 6:6–7).** Parents too, can heed this advice to ensure what forms the next generation is God's Word.



Moses with the Tablets of the Law, Claude Vignon

Modern culture has its own message. Through phones, peers, streaming platforms, social media, and advertising, children are constantly being taught what to value and how to see themselves. The message is often clear (or distorted): truth is flexible, pleasure comes first, identity is self-made, and God is optional.

But St. John Paul II taught something very different: "The future of humanity passes by way of the family."[12] The renewal of culture begins in the home, starting with habitually consuming the Word of God to guard ourselves and our families against falling away and to ensure we grow in faith.

If we do not teach our children the Word of God, the world will teach them something else.

Children Need the Story of Salvation

Children need more than theological rules and regulations that are seemingly abstract. They are captivated by stories, and the Bible tells the greatest story ever told.

When children understand salvation history, they begin interpreting life through God's truth instead of through the godless lens that our modern culture forces upon us. They begin to ask the deepest questions of the human heart—Who is God? Why do we suffer? Why did Jesus die for us? Who am I?—and see the answers through Scripture. They begin to believe their true identity: "**See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1).**



Jesus blesses the little children (1875), Sandberg

But many Catholics today don't know the Bible confidently enough to teach it to children, let alone teach it as an engaging story with them as an active participant.

A good place to start is to see the Bible as a unified story where the Old Testament is unveiled in the New, and the New Testament is prefigured in the Old. The whole of Scripture attains its full meaning through the Incarnation and Christ's life, Passion, Death, and Resurrection, revealing the divine mysteries more clearly.

Reflect on your own understanding of the Bible and pray for wisdom and clarity to see it for what it is: the story of our salvation.

Children also need to understand that the Bible is different from other stories like fairy tales or fables because it is the living Word of God. Stories like David and Goliath or Noah's Ark are not simply moral lessons or bedtime stories, but rather, along with all of Scripture, should be read as a personal, living dialogue with God.

When children understand the Bible as an exciting adventure with God speaking personally to them, they are cultivated like rich soil so the Word of God can take root and grow, preparing them to recognize temptation, confusion, counterfeit happiness, and spiritual warfare.

Children should also learn that the story of salvation is their family story. Through Baptism, they belong to the Body of Christ. The story of the Church, the saints, and Scripture is their inheritance. As part of the Body of Christ, we have the obligation to learn, share, and celebrate our story.

Parents Are the First Witnesses of Faith

Biblical literacy must begin at the earliest school age so that the Word of God can truly take root within us, ensuring as much time as possible to fall in love with Jesus Christ before facing the secular world.

What better way to cultivate biblical literacy in our children than to be a witness of faith yourself? Children quickly recognize whether faith is genuine. If the Bible sits unopened on a shelf, children notice. But when they see parents praying with Scripture, discussing the Gospel, forgiving others, and speaking truth with love, then faith becomes real and credible.

Pope Paul VI once said, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers."[13] Parents do not need theology degrees to lead their children in faith and cultivate the Word of God within them. What matters most is consistency, humility, perseverance, and a genuine love for God's Word.

Pray that you read Scripture through the lens of faith, hope, and charity so that it falls on good soil and bears fruit in your life. And also pray that you can be a witness to the children in your life so they can see the beautiful fruit that the Word of God produces.

Jesus teaches us in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15) that just hearing or reading the Word does not guarantee that the truth will take hold of us and produce an abundance of fruit. The Word must fall on fertile soil and be cultivated in a way that produces a deep faith.

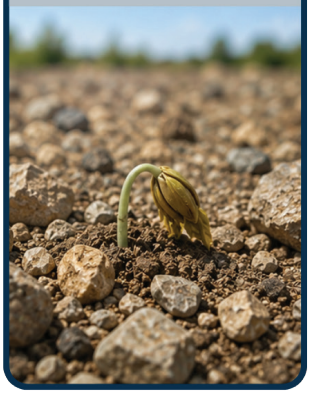
The Parable of the Sower

A seed, representing the Word of God, can fall on different types of soil, reflecting our different responses to it. When we hear the Word of God, it is up to us to determine how we receive it and allow it to take root within us.

The Path
rejects the Word of God outright



The Rocks
receive it with joy, but fall away



The Thorns
hear it but it is choked by worldly pleasures



The Good Soil
fully embraces it, allowing it to bear fruit



Because we encounter Christ in his Word, there is a significant connection between contemplating that Word and the growth of our faith in him. If we do not contemplate the Word consistently, then our faith will likely not bear fruit.

Similarly, if we do not have faith, then we will not understand salvation history through the lens of Jesus Christ. This underscores the urgency in investing our time and energy in biblical literacy if we are to obtain faith and be witnesses to it.

Moreover, it is when we understand both the content and unity of Scripture that the divine mysteries become clear and we truly encounter Christ.[14]

Scripture Is Not Optional, It Is Necessary

> "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . "
> (Psalm 63:1)

In Psalm 63:1, David expresses a longing for God as he wanders through a physical and spiritual wilderness. Many people today also long for God in much the same way. Deep engagement with Scripture helps us recognize God's voice from the distractions in our lives, guiding us out of the spiritual desert onto the path of salvation.

The biblical authors used many metaphors to reflect the Word of God in Scripture so we could better understand its power. For example, God's Word becomes: a light for our path to evoke hope and joy (Psalm 119:105), snow and rain that nourish the earth (Isaiah 55:10–11), food so gratifying it is sweeter than honey (Psalm 119:103), and a sword that reveals all that is in our hearts (Hebrews 4:12).

"O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is."
(Psalm 63:1-2)



King David Playing the Harp (1622), Gerard van Honthorst

To be counted among Christ's sheep, we must recognize his voice, receive it unreservedly, then respond to it with faith (John 10:4).

Fortunately, many available resources, such as *The Bible in a Year®* podcast and *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible*, nourish those who hunger and thirst by engaging with Scripture in deep and meaningful ways.

To grow in relationship with the Lord requires knowing who God is, which we learn from Scripture. God gifted us with his Word because he wants us to come to know him intimately and love him. But God is radically distinct from his creation,[15] making human language incapable of capturing the fullness of the mystery of his essence (CCC 42). The "divine treasures" contained in Scripture "totally transcend the understanding of the human mind."[16] Nevertheless, this should not deter us.

As David engaged in a lifelong pursuit of God's heart, may we also long for a living relationship with God. God promised salvation to all those who call on him, and he is close to those who are after his heart, like David (Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13). Do not be afraid to pour out your heart to God with complete honesty, just as David always did.

Does your soul thirst for God like David's did? Ask God to increase your love for him and help you to feel the power of his complete love. What promise can you make to faithfully seek God more and more?

Cultivating Biblical Literacy

Many parents and educators want to pass on biblical literacy to the next generation but feel unprepared. The good news is, it is never too late to start. Like the Beroean people in Acts 17:11 who were new to the Gospel, we can't be afraid to dive right in and begin reading Scripture daily: **". . . for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."**

You're probably wondering: How do I get started on developing biblical literacy for myself so that I can share it with the children in my life?

To begin, identify what you already know about the story of salvation history. God, in his infinite mercy and love, seeks to restore his relationship with humanity over and over again. We return that love by pursuing him unceasingly and being an active participant in the story so that the seed of the Word may flourish and continually transform our hearts.

The following eight-step guide will help you on your biblical literacy journey. These steps are designed to support any schedule, family life dynamic, and comfort-level with Scripture, ensuring that anyone who completes this plan will encounter Jesus deeply and understand the Bible as their story, just like Mary.



8-Step Guide to Biblical Literacy

1 Make a goal and a promise.

Set a realistic goal for yourself and make a promise to commit. There are three kinds of goals that can support your growth:

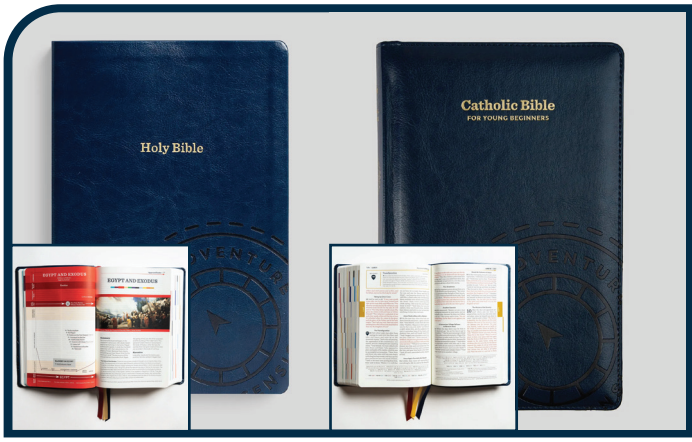
- **Quantifiable, Bible-reading goal:** Articulate how much, or which parts, of the Bible you aim to read each day, week, or month.
- **Learning goal:** Define what you aim to understand about the story of salvation history.
- **Transformational goal:** Ask what part of your life would you transform.

2 Establish a schedule.

Choose the best time of day for you to commit at least twenty minutes. Add it to your calendar(s) and set regular reminders. After the first few days, revisit the time you have set aside and consider if it is effective.

3 Keep Scripture easily accessible.

Ensure your Bible is an approved Catholic translation (e.g., RSV-2CE or NABRE). Have a copy of the *Catechism* available because one serves as a reference for the other. Lastly, allow the Bible to be visible to the whole family, rather than hidden.



The Great Adventure Catholic Bible series for K–8 learners aligns with its adult counterpart, *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible* using matching verses and paragraph numbers to help children and their families grow in biblical literacy together.

4 Keep a journal.

Track your thoughts, reactions, and questions. Make a point to find answers and to meditate on them for deeper understanding. Reflect on your journal entries to discover how God is speaking to you.

Ask God for purity of conscience and inspiration, and to teach you, like Mary of Bethany, to sit at his feet and discern his word.

5 Structure your reading.

Use reading plans or online studies to guide you; even the most devout can benefit from a helping hand.

The Bible Timeline®: The Story of Salvation study program provides a chronological overview of the Bible to help you understand the unity of Scripture and God's plan for our salvation. Created by Jeff Cavins, he and other presenters guide participants through fourteen key narrative books, using the color-coded Bible Timeline® system to place the major people, events, and covenants of salvation history within twelve historical periods.

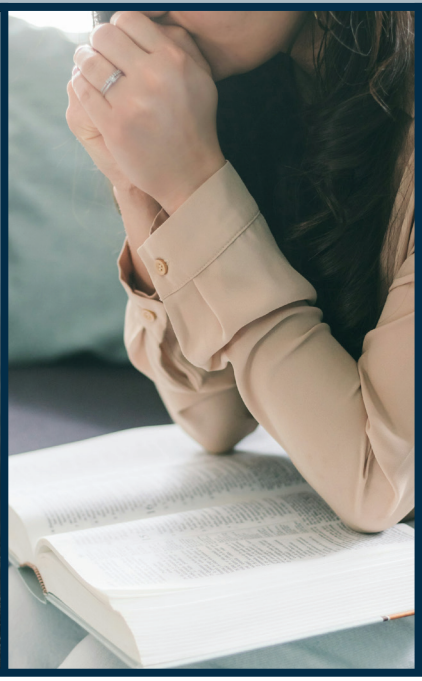
Learn More

5 Balance study with prayer.

Make prayer an integral part of your study so you can better understand the story of salvation and enter into dialogue with God. There is no wrong way to pray, but getting started can be a challenge with busy schedules. There are many prayer guides that can help you learn how to build a beautiful prayer life.

Lectio divina, a four-part path of reading, meditating, prayer, and contemplation, is a great way to infuse prayer into Scripture study.






7 Apply Scripture daily.

As you read Scripture daily, what verses resonate with you and why? Display the verse or passage in a place you will often see. Each time you see it, pause to prayerfully recite it and make an intentional effort to apply its message in some way that day.

8 Invite others into your journey.

If we are to be disciples of Christ, we need to know how to proclaim the Gospel—the good news of God's love and mercy. One way to start doing this is to invite someone into your biblical literacy journey, especially your children.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that parents have the duty of educating their children in the Faith at an early age (CCC 2226). In turn, we can learn much about the Faith from our own children (CCC 2227). This learning from each other extends to guardians, educators, and any adult invested in the next generation.

As you commence on this journey, open your heart to learning with and from others, including children, as you grow together in biblical literacy.

> **"The family that prays together, stays together."**
>
> **— St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa)[17]**

Conclusion

God wants us to become closer to him and know him more deeply throughout our lives. Therefore, biblical literacy is not merely about learning the contents of the Bible, as important as this is, but it is about pursuing God's heart like David. It is about pondering and treasuring the Word like Mary, allowing it to take root in our lives.

Growth in biblical literacy goes hand in hand with growth in faith—we cannot have faith without hearing and immersing ourselves in God's Word. Likewise, we cannot develop biblical literacy without faith in Christ.

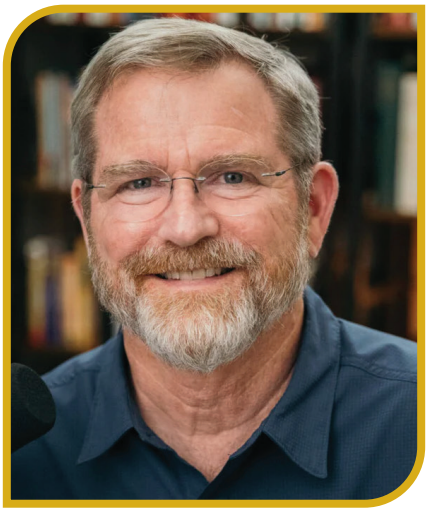
One day, our children will hear voices telling them that truth is relative, faith is irrational, morality is outdated, and God is unnecessary. Parents, educators, grandparents, and guardians have the privilege of showing them otherwise, not only through words, but through witness.

There is hope.

God has given families more resources and opportunities for faith formation than ever before. By opening Scripture in our homes, discussing it often, praying with it daily, and living it faithfully, we can help raise a generation that wants to learn, love, and live the Catholic Faith.

The Bible is not simply a book we read. It is the story we live.

Jeff Cavins



Author, Presenter, Host, Speaker, Apologist

Jeff Cavins is one of the most effective and engaging speakers in the Church today. Few can communicate their love for Jesus Christ with as much zeal, clarity, and enthusiasm as Jeff Cavins.

After twelve years as a Protestant pastor, Jeff returned to the Catholic Church under the guidance of Bishop Paul Dudley. His conversion story, one of the best known and most inspiring stories of its kind, is chronicled in the best-selling book, *My Life on the Rock*. After his conversion, Jeff received an MA in Theology from the Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Jeff has dedicated much of his life to developing *The Bible Timeline®: The Story of Salvation*, a practical, interactive program that helps people read the "big picture" of God's plan of salvation in Sacred Scripture and understand its meaning for their lives. As the foundational element of The Great Adventure Learning System, the Bible Timeline has revolutionized Catholic Bible Study for hundreds of thousands of Catholics.

Endnotes:

1 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible–Second Catholic Edition (Ignatius Edition) © 2006 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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5 Augustine of Hippo, *On Instructing the Unlearned, Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen, On the Advantage of Believing, and The Enchiridion to Laurentius, or Concerning Faith, Hope and Charity*, (Parker & Co., 1885), 20.

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8 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 10, 21, 24, vatican.va.

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