

Threshold to God's Word is a wonderful publication that is sure to open new doors for every reader. In a practical, pastoral, and accessible manner, Stephen Binz brings the insights of contemporary scholarship to us in understandable language and clear format. His reflections are personal, challenging, and true-to-life. This book is easy to read, yet profound in its message. Binz applies the message of Scripture to real life, and he invites his readers to deeper reflection on their own lived experience. The learning tools assist us through the threshold to new discoveries.

Most Reverend Kevin W. Vann, *Bishop of Orange, CA*

This book is a welcomed guide, bringing together both exegetical insights and the spiritual meaning of Scripture. The lists of key ideas, questions for reflection, and concluding prayers encourage the reader to ponder the deeper meanings of the text.

Laurie Brink, O.P., *Associate Professor of New Testament Studies, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago*

Stephen Binz has crafted a wonderful tool for the spiritual life, a way to understand biblical texts as alive and speaking directly to each of us, where we are. His writing is clear and understandable, and yet it is filled with rich imagery that transports the reader deeply into inner experience. This book brings living water to the thirsty soul.

Lyn Holley Doucet, *author and Director of Spiritual Formation at Our Lady of the Oaks Jesuit Retreat House, Grand Coteau, LA*

This book orients the beginner to reflect and pray their way into the Bible as a practice to make room for God's transformative power in the Scriptures. I plan to use this work as an introduction to our four-year program for The Biblical Institute.

Dr. Joan Gorski, *Coordinator of The Biblical Institute of the Diocese of Joliet*

Those who have been standing at the threshold of entering the rich world of Sacred Scripture and might have been intimidated by studying the Bible more deeply can take great joy in knowing that Stephen Binz has provided an accessible guide that will help anybody walk through the doorway to experiencing the Word of God and be changed by the process. This book, and the whole *Threshold* series, is a great gift to the church!"

Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *author and Franciscan friar of Holy Name Province*

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT *THRESHOLD BIBLE STUDY*

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THRESHOLD TO GOD'S WORD

A user-friendly guide
to Scripture study

STEPHEN J. BINZ

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Preface

few years ago, when I first began writing the Threshold Bible Study series, I was in the midst of what many call the midlife transition. It was a period of life when I was leaving behind the first half of life and moving into the second half, yet with great uncertainty about what it would bring. It was a time of anxiety, insecurity about the future, and lack of confidence in the direction my life should take.

I chose the image of the threshold because I came to realize that everyone experiences these transitions at different periods of life, these pauses at the threshold before experiencing something new. As I continued to move through this midlife transition, the threshold became a powerful symbol for me of the spiritual journey, of invitation to growth, and of richer life in Christ. Gradually, through placing myself in new experiences and facing new challenges, I crossed the threshold into the second half of life. And looking back across that threshold, I now discovered myself in a much better place, a place enriched by the wisdom of experience, the confidence of inner peace, a joy in my life's mission, and a deep love for Christ, his church, the Scriptures, and the gift of my discipleship.

Writing the various thematic books in the Threshold Bible Study series has helped me to focus on my own spiritual growth and to realize my contribution to the growth of others who read them. The series of symbols and images that form the themes of these books—the cross, the divine heart, Eucharist, the light of Advent, gifts of the Spirit, the names of Jesus, angels, resurrection, Jerusalem, the Earth, pilgrimage, and many more—have led me into a fuller life with God. Each theme has been an opportunity to discover a different aspect of God's word. Reflecting on Scripture and writing this series has been healing and life-giving. It has helped me understand myself, my faith, and the mission and ministry I have been given.

I hope that this book and the Threshold series will be equally enriching and life-giving for you. Opening the door to Christ, crossing the threshold, and entering a fuller life is God's desire for each of us. And, as you will see in this book, the experience of encountering Christ in Scripture is like crossing a threshold, moving us to fuller peace, purpose, and possibility.

The best compliment I can receive after giving a talk or writing a book is this: "You opened some important new doors for me." God continually prepares our lives to be renewed, and various people, experiences, and insights help us cross over to something new. I hope that this book provides that entryway for you, a door that you can open and enter into a new experience of God's word.

One of the people for whom I am immensely grateful is the spiritual writer Joyce Rupp. Her book *Dear Heart, Come Home: The Path of Midlife Spirituality* offered me insights to manage the midlife transition. And her later book, *Open the Door: A Journey to the True Self*, helped me reflect on the image of the threshold in more personal and spiritual ways.

This book may be used by individual readers to gain a better understanding of Scripture or by a community reading and

discussing together. It is ideal for groups who are using or preparing to use Threshold Bible Study. This book may be used to invite people to experience Bible study and to deepen the experience of those already studying Scripture on their own or with others.

The end of each chapter contains a list of “Keys for Unlocking the Door,” a series of “Questions for Reflection at the Threshold,” and finally a “Prayer for Crossing the Threshold.” These are only prompts that encourage the reader to continue to reflect and pray about the contents of each chapter.

These keys, questions, and prayers will be helpful both to individual readers and to groups. A group may study this book by reading a chapter each week on their own and then gathering together to discuss the keys and the questions, and then concluding with the prayer. In this way, group members will benefit from the insights of one another and encourage each other in their ongoing study of Scripture.

This book is an encouragement to respond to the invitation of Jesus Christ at the threshold. It is the beginning of a journey of exploration and discovery that lasts a lifetime. I pray that the encouragement provided in this book will move you to make reflective reading of Scripture a more regular and central part of your life as a Christian disciple.

STEPHEN J. BINZ

1 Opening the Door to Christ

THE BOOK OF REVELATION PRESENTS US WITH A MARVELOUS IMAGE OF JESUS CHRIST. It is an invitation to open the door and let him in. He is standing outside, knocking, seeking entrance.

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me.” [REV 3:20]

The divine guest is waiting at the door. He does not force his entry. He knocks and waits with patience for each of us to open the door of our life to him. His voice speaks the word of God to us, beckoning us to hear the good news that he offers. If we open the door and let him cross over the threshold, he will nourish and enrich our lives.

The risen Jesus is present in his church, in the Scriptures, in the world around us, and in people we encounter. Yet to invite him into our lives requires awareness of his knocking and at-

tentiveness to his voice. He tells us first that we must “listen.” Too often our lives are too noisy and too busy to be aware and attentive to his invitation. Any time that we can slow down our lives, stop and reflect on their meaning, be silent and think about the direction we are moving, or pause for an open and trustful conversation with a friend, we are preparing ourselves to open the door.

Jesus says that those who open the door and welcome him into their lives will eat with him. Eating and drinking in the presence of God is a frequent biblical metaphor for communion of life. Sharing in the divine life is like sharing in a banquet, “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,” as Isaiah describes it (Isa 25:6). For Christians, this nourishment is received most fully in the word and sacrament of Eucharist. “I will come into you,” Jesus says, “and eat with you, and you with me.” He offers us a communion that is both nourishing and transforming.

Opening the door to Christ requires a decision. It means making a concerted effort to unlock the bolt, to welcome him across the threshold, to open our heart to his presence, to listen to his voice, to receptively invite the good news into our lives, and to receive the fullness of life that he offers.

Inviting Christ across the Threshold

Each of us, since we are made in the image of God, is a vast treasure house. Although we could spend a lifetime of exploration, none of us will ever discover all the wonders that are inside of us. Saint Paul describes the human person as a temple. “Do you not know,” he writes, “that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16). As we invite Jesus across the threshold, we can explore the richness that God has placed within us and share in divine life.

As creatures made by God, created in the divine image, we

have a natural desire for God. There is within us a restlessness and longing for God until that desire for God is satisfied. As a temple created for God to dwell within, our deepest heart's desire is for God to live in us. For this reason, we must realize that Christ is at the door, knocking and speaking to us, beckoning us to open the door and let him in.

When we let Christ cross over the threshold, he leads us to explore the many rooms and dwelling places within ourselves. When we open doors in our interior being, we discover our own spiritual wealth. Exploring our inner dwelling places, we find wisdom we did not know we had, strength we were unaware of, goodness we have never expressed, and undiscovered gifts that we can use in service.

Because we spend most of our awake hours focusing on our external life, we spend little time or energy on our interior life. What if we regularly made time to explore our inner reality? God's temple within us is always open to us if we are willing to be still and attentive long enough to visit it. Christ is waiting at the door, ready to be let in, to lead our discovery, to speak to us and guide our journey.

After we welcome our divine guest across the threshold, he leads us to explore some places within ourselves that we would rather ignore. Areas of pain and grief are hidden within us; anger and criticism are around the corner; selfishness and apathy have their places of residence. All of these dark and unexplored rooms are waiting for the light of Christ's presence and for his healing touch. Every moment is open to possibilities of God's revelation. On our interior journey, we pass through many rooms that can deepen our self-knowledge and open us to trust God's Spirit dwelling within the temple.

When we welcome Jesus Christ across the threshold of our lives, we open ourselves to change in ways we may have never dreamed likely. We open our lives to transformation. The One

through whom we were made can enable us to become more fully our authentic selves, the persons we were created to be. Following his lead and listening to his voice, we are able to move into our own sacred space, our inner sanctuary, where we discover our heart, the source of our deepest desire.

Standing at the Threshold

A threshold can be described as a state of transition—the movement from the secure to the unknown, from the routine to the surprise, from a narrow viewpoint to a wider vision. The threshold always offers opportunities for personal transformation, and indeed it is at the threshold that most of the real learning in life occurs.

There are moments in life when a door opens in our consciousness to make something clearer than it was before, leading us from a previous way of understanding to a new way of seeing life. Sometimes an external event creates this threshold opportunity. At other times it is established by more of an internal shift, a graced moment for which we can only be grateful.

Sometimes the door opens for just a moment, sometimes forever. These threshold opportunities can be short-lived, or they can be life-changing. The quality of the experience depends on what we do at the threshold. Whether or not personal change and transformation occurs depends on whether or not we accept and welcome the opportunity at the threshold.

Anthropologists and psychologists explore these threshold states, often called “liminal” states, from the Latin word for threshold, which is *limen*. Rites of passages are often described as liminal experiences, leading from one stage of life to another, enabling new perspectives. Jungian psychologists describe self-realization as a movement through liminal space and time, from disorientation to integration. The difficult phase of liminality serves the purpose of making a person whole, giving one a

deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and relatedness.

The Catholic Church uses this terminology to refer to the periodic *ad limina* visit to Rome required of every bishop, literally to the threshold of the apostles, Peter and Paul, to pray at their tombs as a sign of unity and apostolicity. The author Richard Rohr writes about suffering as a liminal experience—those painful life experiences when we are not in control, in which our ego can be transcended and we can learn something genuinely new and life-changing.

The threshold opportunity is a sacred space and a graced time. In the Bible, Jacob experienced a threshold moment in his dream, in which he encountered God between heaven and earth. In that fearful encounter, Jacob received a new understanding of his life in relationship to God (Gen 28:12–19). Isaiah received his threshold opportunity in the temple of Jerusalem, in which he experienced God's ineffable holiness and accepted the call to be sent by God as a prophet (Isa 6:1–8). Jonah experienced his liminal time in the belly of the great fish. Fearful and out of control, Jonah could only pray and surrender to God's will for him to go to Nineveh.

The threshold is often an uncomfortable place, full of fear, a time of testing. Jesus experienced such a time when he was driven into the wilderness before his public ministry. Reflecting on the book of Deuteronomy and tempted by demonic powers, he grew to better understand his divine mission and submitted his life to the Father's will. The season of Lent should be a threshold experience for catechumens and all believers—a period of spiritual disciplines, of fasting and prayer, a transition and time of growth—leading to a new and deeper experience of the paschal mystery.

In order to see the doorway and experience the threshold opportunity, we need to break out of our routine patterns that keep our lives predictable and secure. Experiences like

retreats, periods of fasting, and pilgrimages can break us out of the ordinary, present us with occasions of discomfort or disorientation, and open to us the threshold. Worship can lead us corporately into the threshold moment. Through ritual, Scripture, prayer, music, and sacrifice, we are brought to the threshold experience, and then sent back transformed into the world to serve.

Bible Study at the Threshold

The study of Scripture can be a threshold opportunity when we truly encounter God in the sacred texts. This is accomplished not by ordinary reading, but through reading Scripture as the word of God. This kind of reflective reading requires a deep listening and confidence that God has placed his own Spirit in the inspired texts. When the Scriptures are read with this intention and expectation, the biblical page can become a threshold, a place where we can truly meet our God.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he expressed gratitude to God for his readers because they accepted the good news of Jesus Christ not as a "human word" but rather as "God's word."

We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. [1 THESS 2:13]

Paul makes it clear that the gospel he proclaims is not his own thoughts or an interesting piece of human wisdom. Paul considered himself and his missionary companions only as instruments to preach and spread God's word. Once this word has been communicated by Paul to his hearers, the divine word

has its own power to enter into the lives of those who accept it. When the word of God is welcomed into the lives of believers, it is “at work” within them, transforming their lives with the message of salvation. This reception of the believer, which is faith, is the key that opens the door to God’s word.

What gives meaning to the world and purpose to the lives of Christian believers is the word of God. God has spoken the divine word in the history of salvation and revealed the divine self to us. In the face of everything else in which we are tempted to place our hopes—like material possessions, physical pleasures, and worldly power—the word of God is eternal. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:8). While all else withers and fades, proving to be momentary and fleeting, God’s word endures forever.

This divine self-communication, God’s eternal word, is expressed definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his first letter, Peter echoes and expands the words of Isaiah: “The word of the Lord endures forever. That word is the good news that was announced to you” (1 Pet 1:25). This word of God has been entrusted to the church, which then hands it on through the apostles and its apostolic tradition. The mission of the church is to proclaim the word of God to the world.

This understanding that Scripture is God’s self-revelation and divinely inspired means that we hear, read, experience, and share it with others as the word of God. When we carefully listen to this word, reflect on its message, and respond in faith to God’s presence there, we truly encounter God in the sacred text. This is how believers have read the Scriptures through the ages. Although we can read the biblical books as merely a human word, as a collection of ancient literature, when we read these texts as the word of God, we can truly encounter our God there and be transformed in that encounter.

Reading the Bible as the Book of Christ

God communicates divine truth, love, desire for unity with humankind, and indeed God's very self through the Bible. The good news found in Scripture is called the word of God because it is God's self-revelation to us. At the same time, Jesus himself is called the Word of God because he is the fullest expression of God's self-revelation to humanity. God communicates truth, love, and God's very self through Jesus. Through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God became flesh; and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the word of God became Scripture.

Before Christ came into the world, this word expressed itself in many different ways, multiplied throughout the Scriptures of Israel. God communicated the message of salvation in various and partial ways through the voices of many prophets and inspired writers. But when the fullness of time came, the Word returned to its original unity: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Now God speaks to us through Christ:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things. [HEBREWS 1:1-2]

The many words became the one Word, the living Word to which every other word bears witness. God's Word is now not only audible but visible and tangible, now not only spoken but incarnate and living.

Christ, the Word made flesh, has traditionally been called the *Verbum abbreviatum*, the "abbreviated Word." In Christ, the many parts of the Bible are harmonized and unified. John of the Cross put it succinctly in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: "In giving us his Son, Who is his only Word, God has said

everything to us at once, in one simple stroke, in this single word—and he has nothing more to say.”¹

Evoking the opening words of Scripture, “In the beginning” (Gen 1:1), John’s gospel begins its account of God’s new creation by stating, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). John goes on to declare that this Word was “with God” and indeed “the Word was God.” And it was through this Word that all things came into being. The divine Word is God’s reaching out, seeking to share divine being, sharing eternal love with creation.

God’s word began to be known first through creation, then through the Torah and prophets of Israel, and finally through Jesus Christ. As God’s self-expression, “the Word” encompasses Jesus’ entire ministry, showing that all his words and works flow from his eternal existence and God’s self-manifestation in salvation history. As John’s prologue proclaims, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). This incarnation, John shows, is on a scale with the creation of the world. In this new creation, the incarnate Word gives to humanity the power to become children of God, to be reborn, to share intimately in God’s life.

The same word of God that became flesh is also given to us through the sacred text of God’s people. For this reason, the mystery of Jesus Christ is the center and focus of the whole Christian Bible. He is the key that opens up the full meaning of all parts of Scripture. The Bible is, above all else, the book of Christ.

Jesus himself taught his disciples to see the rich continuity of God’s plan of salvation and to appreciate how all of Israel’s history pointed to his coming. These teachings came to a climactic moment when the risen Lord appeared to his disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

For Christians, the death and resurrection of the Lord sheds new light on the Old Testament texts and enriches them with new meaning. Only together do the Old and New Testaments express God's full revelation. As Saint Augustine said, "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New."² We can come to understand the Old Testament fully only when we see it as a mother who bears the New Testament in her womb and gives birth to it.

Of course we can read and interpret the texts of the Old Testament as the literature of Israel and appreciate their value in and of themselves. We can be grateful for these books in their Jewish context and learn from them. Likewise, we can read the New Testament alone, and understand it as the story of Jesus and the early church. But for the Christian believer, the two testaments must be read in light of one another because they form one book in which the mystery of Christ is the focal center.

Because we are believers and because the Holy Spirit works within us, we can see Christ whenever we read a page of sacred Scripture. As Hugh of St. Victor says so beautifully from the twelfth century,

*All sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ; because all sacred Scripture speaks of Christ, and all sacred Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.*³

In the whole Bible, in all of its parts, we can experience an encounter with God in Christ. Colossians says, "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...All things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:15–16). He is the reason for all reality and the destination of history, the Alpha and Omega.

Meditating on Scripture, then, is not so much a matter of interpreting a book as of seeking Someone. It is not primarily

an intellectual exercise, but a devoted and passionate search, an enthusiastic and joyful discovery. The meaning we find in Scripture is not impersonal truth but ultimately the person of Jesus Christ.

Welcoming the Word of Life

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a parable in which he compares his disciples to servants waiting for their master's return. Jesus teaches his followers to wait for him with expectation, so that they will open the door for him when he knocks.

Be like those who are waiting for their master to return...so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. [LUKE 12:36]

When we welcome the word of God into our lives, we open the door for Christ and invite him to cross over the threshold. Because the inspired Scriptures express God's living word, we receive the word of life through our open door, our listening ear, our receptive heart.

When we learn to read the Bible as this kind of invitation, we can expect God to reveal divine presence, marvelous wisdom, and God's sacred way as we study the Scriptures. Reading with this expectation means truly listening, knowing that God's way may be different from our own. It means learning how to read the Bible in a way that doesn't require that we have all the answers, but that requires us to stay present to the text as it makes us present to the divine mystery.

Reading Scripture with this expectation requires us to cultivate a deepening desire for God. Yet, at the same time, we realize that our longing for God is a result of God's deep desire for us. God's grace creates this yearning within us. It is this desire for God that creates the listening ear, the receptive heart, the open-

ing door that is so necessary to hear God's word in Scripture. When we desire God and are ready for this encounter, God's word will invite us into a deeper presence and relationship.



KEYS FOR UNLOCKING THE DOOR

- 🔑 Jesus knocks and patiently waits for us to open the door of our lives to him.
- 🔑 Our deepest heart's desire, since we were made by God and for God, is for God to live in us.
- 🔑 The threshold offers a grace-filled opportunity to encounter God.
- 🔑 The biblical text can be a threshold for us when we welcome the word of God with faith.
- 🔑 For Christians, Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture and the key that opens up its full meaning.
- 🔑 The meaning we find in Scripture is not just impersonal or intellectual truth, but ultimately the person of Jesus Christ.
- 🔑 Our desire for God creates the listening ear and the receptive heart that are necessary to hear God's word.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AT THE THRESHOLD

- What kind of door is Christ standing behind? A thick bronze door, a screen door, a transparent etched-glass door, a revolving door...?

- What message have I placed on the doormat? Welcome, do not disturb, mi casa es su casa, wipe your feet, no trespassing, enter at your own risk...?
- How do I hear Christ knocking? Gentle tapping, loud rapping, persistent striking, strong banging, steady knocking...?
- How can I prepare myself to welcome my divine guest?
- What might I discover inside myself if Christ would lead me on an inner journey?
- In what sense is sacred Scripture the one book of Christ?
- What can I do to more deeply and personally experience the Bible as the word of God?



PRAYER FOR CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

*Lord Jesus, I hear you knocking on the door of my life.
Help me believe in you and deepen my desire for you.
Teach me how to listen, to open my ear and my heart to
the transforming word of God. I welcome you across
the threshold to explore with me the riches of your word,
the potential within me, and the hope that you give to me.*



KEYS FOR UNLOCKING THE DOOR

-  God's word not only communicates ideas but it also creates change and bears fruit.
-  The Scriptures lead to liturgy, where the word of God is made effective through sacramental worship.
-  The sacred books of ancient Israel and the early church were written to be proclaimed in the temple, synagogue, and Christian worship.
-  The worship of the early church expressed the transforming power of Christ through unity between word and sacrament.
-  The sacramental rite enacts within the believing assembly the deepest sense of the proclaimed word. As Augustine said, a sacrament is "a visible word."
-  When our lives are transformed through Scripture, we cannot help but communicate the good news of Jesus through the words and deeds of our witness.
-  The open-ended Scriptures invite us to continue the mission that God began in ancient Israel and the early church, opening the doors of salvation to people everywhere.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AT THE THRESHOLD

- What does the instruction of James, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers,” mean to me?
- What are some of the ways in which the life of ancient Israel demonstrated the unity of Scripture and liturgy?
- What is the primary criterion for selecting certain books to be included in the church’s canon of sacred Scripture?
- In what ways does the church today give honor to the nourishing presence of Christ in both the word proclaimed from the ambo and the sacrament offered at the altar?
- In what ways does the experience of an individual in the practice of *lectio divina* parallel the experience of the worshiping assembly in eucharistic worship?
- How do I know that the word of God is having an effect in my life?
- In what ways has the open door and the threshold become an invitation to me through the pages of this books?



PRAYER FOR CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Saving God, throughout the history of salvation you have been opening the doors of faith, inviting people to stop fearing, to trust in you, to live freely, and to hope in the future. Help us to listen to your word and to witness to your word, so that we may be true disciples of Jesus and share the gospel with all.