

YOUR CONFIRMATION BIBLE COMPANION

What Scripture
as “God’s Love Song”
Means for You

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible Is God's Love Song

"That is why the Lord gives you his word, so that you can receive it like a love letter he has written to you, to help you realize that he is at your side." **POPE FRANCIS**

A letter from Almighty God. That's what Pope St. Gregory the Great called the Bible. Pope Leo XIII called it "a Letter, written by our heavenly Father." And more recently, Pope Francis referred to it as a love letter. In many ways the Bible is like a love letter, but it is a lyrical love letter. It is like a love song. Love songs are full of metaphors and symbols. For example, we don't really "fall" when we fall in love, but we know what it means. We don't really have butterflies in our stomach. Our hearts don't really stop, and they aren't really on fire. There isn't really a spark between us, and when we think someone is "hot" we don't mean anything about their temperature. God's love song is like this. We don't read the Bible literally, as if it were a history book or a science textbook. It isn't like that. It's more like a song where the meaning is more important than the words. And the meaning—no matter what crazy words are sometimes used—is always about God's love for us and our invitation to freely respond by loving God and one another.

The Bible is an inspired collection of writings written over a long period of time. Christians believe the Holy Spirit inspired human authors and editors to write and collect the books of the Bible. "The Bible is not a book," Bishop Barron of Los Angeles reminds us. "It is a library." There

are many books gathered together into the Bible: 46 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. Each book was written at a different time by different human authors, who were free to use different styles, genres, and languages. Since they were free, the Bible even includes their human prejudices, foibles, and sins. What holds it all together? It is all part of the same love song. It is all part of the story of God revealing more and more of Godself to us, so that we can know God. Knowing God, we fall in love with God. Falling in love, we want to show our love by doing something—serving God and one another. In other words, the love song is call-and-response. It is a wooing!

Since the Bible represents God's self-revelation over a long period of time, Christians believe that we can only understand the earlier writings once God fully revealed Godself in Christ and gave us the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives us the gifts of Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding, which we need to make sense of the love song. Origen, an early Church Father, told us that we should read all of the Bible from the perspective of the last book of the Bible. In other words, once God had revealed everything in Christ, then we can make sense of the earlier writings.

This process of slowly revealing Godself to us has a name. We call it the *pedagogy of God*. That's just a fancy term that means God was teaching us little bits at a time over the centuries. It's actually a lot like school. I used to teach seventh-grade math. The way I taught math, though, was never meant just to give my students a seventh-grade education. I was preparing them for eighth-grade math and beyond. Also, I knew they would come into my class having a good understanding of sixth-grade math. Imagine if a student arrived in my class and didn't even know how to form numbers or how to add and subtract or what an equation was? That never happened, though, because they had learned their numbers and how to count when they were very young, and then they learned about equations and arithmetic in the lower grades. By the time they reached middle school, we could begin algebra, graphing equations, and figuring out percentages and complicated word problems.

In a similar way, step by step through the centuries, God revealed more to us, preparing us ultimately for God's full revelation when God became one of us—Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh. Everything in the Bible is about Jesus, either by preparing us for him or telling us about him. In

math class, there were things you could leave behind once you moved on to the next level. Your homework looked way different in seventh grade than in first grade. There was no need to go back to that first-grade work either. You had learned it—you were ready to move on. In the same way, some things in the Old Testament involve ideas about God and religious practices that we don't follow anymore. They served their purpose back then. They prepared us for Christ.

That's not to say the Old Testament isn't important. It's still the word of God! In the early years of Christianity, a man named Marcion rejected the entire Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament. He thought that the God it talked about was a false god and not the same God that Jesus called his Father. But it is the same God! It's just that we were still learning more and more about God. And besides, the Hebrew Bible is what Jesus studied, prayed with, and taught from. To reject it would mean rejecting Jesus and rejecting our Jewish roots. Jesus was Jewish! Mary was Jewish! The Apostles were Jewish! The Church wisely used its teaching authority to reject Marcionism. To this day, the Catholic Bible includes Christian writings (New Testament) and Jewish writings (Old Testament). We consider both to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. And we honor our Jewish brothers and sisters to this day not only for the heritage they left to us, but for their ongoing faith in the God who chose to break into history and sing us a love song.

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**“What is Scripture,
if not a letter from Almighty
God? The Lord of [humans]
and of angels, has sent
you his letters for your life's
advantage—and yet you neglect
to read them eagerly! Study them,
I beg you, and meditate daily
on the words of your creator.**

**LEARN THE HEART OF GOD
IN THE WORDS OF GOD.”**

POPE ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

Part I

THE MEANING *of the* LOVE SONG

“Catholics believe that the key that opens up and gives coherence to the many words contained in the Bible is Jesus [who is himself] the Word of God. Because God has spoken to us in Jesus the Word made flesh, we can understand and appreciate the words of the Bible. In this sense Christianity is only secondarily a religion of the book. It is primarily the religion of a person, Jesus the Word of God.” **FR. DANIEL HARRINGTON, SJ**

“St. John said: ‘I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you’ (1 John 2:14). Seeking the Lord, keeping his word, entrusting our life to him and growing in the virtues: all these things make young hearts strong. That is why you need to stay connected to Jesus, to ‘remain online’ with him, since you will not grow happy and holy by your own efforts and intelligence alone. Just as you try not to lose your connection to the internet, make sure that you stay connected to the Lord.” **POPE FRANCIS**

CHAPTER 1

Who's Singing This??

"All divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ."

HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (CCC), 134

Did you ever hear a new song that is amazing, but you don't know who the artist is? No matter how good the song is, we're usually not satisfied until we find out who sings it. It matters to us whose voices we're hearing and who's in the band. And then, once we find out, what happens next? We start listening to their other music, right? We want to know if they have other great songs. And maybe we learn more about the group by talking to our friends, reading stories, or watching videos. Suddenly, the song we liked makes even more sense. Knowing the singer and songwriter can make a big difference.

Reading the Bible is something like hearing a new song. It makes a lot more sense to us if we know the singer. In the case of the Bible, the songwriter is the Father. The singer is the Holy Spirit, whom we receive in Confirmation. And the whole song is about Jesus! In fact, everything in the Bible is a partial revelation until we get to Jesus, who is the full revelation of God. We learn that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The whole Bible exists for us to develop a loving relationship with Jesus and one another.

The Bible is like God's love song to the world. God is madly in love with all that God created. There is nothing God desires more from us than a loving relationship. But how do we love someone we don't know? In the Bible, we see God's self-revelation over time. We witness the people (Jews at first, then also Christians) getting to know God better over the

centuries. It leads up to the ultimate revelation: God, without losing anything divine, becomes “incarnate of the Virgin Mary.” This means that God became one of us. Jesus is “true God from true God” but also “like us in all things but sin.” He is the fullness of God’s self-revelation. Jesus is God in the flesh. In Jesus, we know God. In Jesus, we also know what a perfectly loving human being is. God’s love for the world is fully accepted by Jesus on behalf of all humankind, and fully reciprocated without any sin or selfishness—even to the death. This is the love song of the Bible. It is a call-and-response song. We are invited into the story.

So where should I start my reading of the Bible? Since the singer is the Holy Spirit and the song is all about Jesus, we begin by asking the Spirit for the gift of Knowledge. We want to know Jesus, and in knowing Jesus, we know God. Since the whole Bible is about Jesus, we need to know him in order to read everything correctly. “Because we are Christian, we begin with Jesus,” says catechist Catherine Maresca. Bad and even dangerous interpretations arise when we forget that the story is all about Jesus and God’s love. So pray for the gift of Knowledge, and then start reading the Bible with the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The gospels introduce us to Jesus. Mark is the shortest and the oldest. That’s a good place to begin. Once we know Jesus better, we’ll understand the whole love song so much better too.

Praying with the Bible

1 INVITE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come, O Holy Spirit, and bless me with the gift of Knowledge. I desire to know Jesus in a more personal way. I want to become friends with the Lord and to love what he loves. I want to see how all of Scripture points to him and how he taught us to respond to God's love with love. I want to know the love song. I want to know it by heart! *(Pause in silence.) (Now read the passage...)*

[Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. LUKE 24:25-27

2 TALK TO JESUS

Now, talk to Jesus as a friend, in your own words, from your heart. Express your desire to know him better, more personally. Although he knows you perfectly and loves you unconditionally, Jesus still loves to have you reveal yourself too. Share what's on your mind. Share your hopes and dreams. Share your fears and anxieties. Share your broken heart or your heart bursting with love. Jesus understands it all, for he is "like us in all things but sin." He cares deeply about even the smallest things that are on our minds and hearts.

3 GIVE GLORY TO THE FATHER

The Father did not want Jesus to suffer and die a torturous death. Sinful people wanted that. What pleased the Father was that Jesus' love was so unselfish, so perfect, that he was willing to be killed rather than stop loving. He could have used violence to prevent his own death. He chose love. That love is what saves us, for "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Give glory to the Father for sending us a Savior who showed us what perfect love looks like.

Confirmed in the Faith

QUESTIONS TO HELP US GROW STRONGER

Pick one or two questions to reflect on as you think about the meaning of your Confirmation and life in the Spirit.

- How can I unwrap the gift of Knowledge that the Holy Spirit gives in Confirmation, so that I will know God better?
- What does it mean to say that God's love song is call-and-response?
- Catholic theologians say we should read the whole Bible with a "Christological lens." This means having the same vision as Jesus. What does this mean to you personally?
- St. Jerome said, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." What do you think he meant? Do you think the opposite may be true as well, that ignorance of Christ leads to ignorance of Scripture?

My Bible Journal

A SPACE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTIONS



"So we come to know Christ and this knowledge becomes the main source of a firm understanding of the truth of all sacred Scripture." ST. BONAVENTURE

"The parts of Scripture are like tiles of a mosaic and should together form an image of the King." ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

CHAPTER 2

What Does It Mean??

"[The Lord] has hidden in his word all treasures, so that each of us may find a richness in what he or she contemplates." ST. EPHREM

"Christ frees us from the slavery of the letter..."

CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER (FUTURE POPE BENEDICT XVI)

Have you ever heard a new song and immediately looked up the lyrics to try to figure out what it means? According to LyricFind, this happened a lot with the crossover song "Old Town Road." But the lyrics only get us part way there, right? Once we know for sure what the words are, we begin to dig deeper. We watch the music video for more clues. Perhaps we look up interviews with the singers and songwriters. We really want to know what it means. We talk to our friends. We look online. We want to know the meaning of the symbols, metaphors, and figures of speech. We're beginning to interpret the song. The metaphors in the song mix with the experiences in our life and the information we gathered to generate a meaning.

Scripture is very much like this. Catholics do not read the Bible literally. We don't believe God spoke and some ancient person transcribed it, as if it were Divine Dictation. We don't think that the words alone are enough to hear what God is saying. We go deeper. We want to know the meaning. We expect to find symbolism, metaphors, and imagery of all sorts. We expect to have to do some thinking. Faith and reason work together after all.

Because Scripture is far more than just the literal text, the Bible is infinitely rich in meaning. This is what St. Ephrem was talking about in the quote above. Scripture is like a good song that reveals more and more depth and meaning the more you contemplate it. And, like a good song, it will have new meanings at different stages of life.

Why is this? Because God is speaking—present tense! If it were just the words on the page that mattered, that would be like saying God spoke—past tense—and we're lucky somebody wrote it down. Catholics don't believe that. We believe that it is a living word (see Hebrews 4:12). As the late, brilliant Scripture scholar Fr. Daniel Harrington, SJ, wrote, "The 'word of God' is not identical with the text of the Bible. For me, it refers to the whole process of encountering God in and through the Scriptures." He says, "In the encounter between the reader and the text, the 'word of God' comes alive" (*How Can I find God?*). This is why Pope Benedict reminded us of St. Jerome's words: "The Bible is the means 'by which God speaks daily to believers.'" In other words, in the Bible we don't encounter a dead text, but we encounter the living God!

A song comes alive in the encounter too. It's why no two people hear the same song the same way. When we leave behind the literalism that treats Scripture as dead words on a page, we open up to the encounter in which God speaks a living, personal word. Instead of getting stuck on the text, which gets us stuck in the past, we move into the realm of meaning, which is relevant today. What gift of the Holy Spirit helps us to do this? The gift of Understanding!

Praying with the Bible

1 INVITE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come, O Holy Spirit, and grant me the gift of Understanding, so that I may find riches in contemplating the Scriptures with all the metaphors and meaning hidden in them. Help me to hear the living word speaking to me today. (*Pause in silence.*) (*Now read the passage...*)

The disciples approached him and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.'" MATTHEW 13:10-13

2 TALK TO JESUS

Now, talk to Jesus as a friend, in your own words, from your heart. Share with him what confuses you and what you don't understand. Like the disciples, don't be afraid to ask Jesus questions. Ask him to help you to understand the deeper meaning of the Bible.

3 GIVE GLORY TO THE FATHER

Jesus said the difference between those who understood the parables and those who did not was "knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." The Church teaches us that this knowledge is first and foremost knowledge of a person, Jesus Christ. The disciples really knew Jesus, and so they understood the "mysteries." The crowds only knew *about* Jesus. It's like having a teacher who knows your name but doesn't really bother to get to know the real you. We shouldn't be like that teacher with other people or with Jesus. Make a decision to get to know Jesus better, more personally. The more we know him, the more we love him. The more we love him, the

more we want to be like him. The more we are like him, the more the Father is glorified because we have chosen the Way of perfect love!

Confirmed in the Faith

QUESTIONS TO HELP US GROW STRONGER

Pick one or two questions to reflect on as you think about the meaning of your Confirmation and life in the Spirit.

- Do I really know Jesus, or do I only know *about* Jesus?
- Do I love Jesus and want to become more like him?
- When I read the Bible, do I listen for the living word of God speaking to the Church today through the Holy Spirit, or do I take every word on the page literally?
- Am I willing to open the gift of Understanding that the Holy Spirit gives in Confirmation so that my reading of Scripture draws me closer to Christ?

My Bible Journal

A SPACE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTIONS



"If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, 'open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures.'" CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (CCC) 108

"Indeed, to arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and docilely accept that light, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who 'is love' (1 Jn 4:8, 16)." POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II