

# Reading the Bible Aloud

Exodus 24:1–8, 1 Timothy 4:12–16

Leland Ryken, retired professor of English at Wheaton College, writes of his childhood: “From earliest years I heard the King James Bible read three times daily after family meals. The KJV was the basis for my biblical education and memorization at church and Christian school. Midweek lessons on the Heidelberg Catechism during my high school years were saturated in proof texts from the KJV. The same was true of my study of Louis Berkhof’s *Manual of Christian Doctrine* in my ‘Senior Bible Course’ in high school. When I was nine years old, my Christmas gift was a King James Bible with my name inscribed on the cover and on the inside a presentation note from my parents. I used this Bible to the end of my college years.”<sup>1</sup> Ryken went on to teach English at Wheaton College for 43 years; write some 36 books on the Puritans, the Bible as literature, and Bible translation; and serve as literary stylist for the English Standard Version.

What a legacy! To grow up in a faithful Christian home and hear the Bible read three times a day after family meals, and then to grow up and remain a faithful servant of God in adult life! Ryken grew up during the forties and fifties, a time when “the Bible” was the King James Version shared by all Protestants. It is sad that the English-speaking church doesn’t have a common Bible anymore, and that does not seem likely to change anytime soon—but we can pray!

The title of my message this morning is “Reading the Bible Aloud.” I hope to encourage you to begin (or resume) this practice, whether or not you have young children in your home. It will pay great dividends in your own life and the lives of people around you. I have three points this morning: (1) God’s word is *written*; (2) God’s word is *read aloud*; (3) God’s word is *on the lips of God’s people*. First,

## 1. God’s word is written.

Our Exodus text begins: “Now He said to Moses.” The “He” is the LORD, that is, Yahweh, who has given his law to his prophet Moses in the previous chapter. He has said, “Three times you shall keep a feast *to Me* in the year” (23:14) and “Behold, *I send* an Angel before you” (23:20). Clearly it is the LORD himself who is speaking. Now that he has finished giving the basic summary of his law, a section that Moses in today’s text calls “the Book of the Covenant” (סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית) *sēpher ha-berīt*, v. 7), he instructs Moses to “*Come up* to the LORD”—that is, to the top of Mount Sinai, the place where he had forcefully spoken the Ten Commandments in the hearing of the Israelites. As we will see, this “Book of the Covenant” refers to the extended section Exodus 20:22 through the end of chapter 23 (a little over three chapters—105 verses in all). At this point I am leaning

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<sup>1</sup> Leland Ryken, “The King James Version in the Church: Past, Present, and Future” (*Ordained Servant*, Oct. 2011, [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=272](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=272))

toward beginning a short series on the Book of the Covenant before moving on to the prophet Habakkuk. Hearing a short exposition of the basic tenets of the law will be good preparation for Habakkuk. But before going through the Book of the Covenant, I want to set it in context with today's sermon.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the LORD—Yahweh—is speaking here to Moses. Yahweh is the self-existent one—the One who *is*—the only one in the entire universe whose existence is not dependent on any other person. In Paul's sermon to the men of Athens on Mars Hill he asserts, "In *him* we live, and move, and have our being." All of us "have our being" in God; it is to him that we owe our existence. Because of the influence of the theory of evolution—made possible in large part by tax-supported state universities—many people have adopted a materialistic mindset, that the physical world around us is all that there is, that there is no God, no supernatural. A successful person today may believe that he is a *self-made* man—that he has achieved success because of brains and hard work. But that is not true. God gives greater gifts to some, and this can lead people to think that their achievements in life are the result of their efforts alone. But true religion begins with humility. We must all humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt us in due time. We must recognize that pride is an impediment to knowing the truth that we are sinners with no hope of eternal life apart from the Savior, Jesus Christ. God owes his being to no one else. He alone is the self-existent one. He is the One with whom we have to do, the One before whom we will all stand at the final judgment.

In verse 4 of our text we have the short but important statement "And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD."

Christians sometimes wonder where we got our Bible. This verse gives the answer. Here is the doctrine of inspiration. The apostle Paul will later write, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). But notice carefully what is said in the text before us: "And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD." There are two parts to this statement. On the one hand the words of Scripture are "the words of the LORD," the self-existent One who takes the initiative to reveal himself to man. But at the same time these words are written by the hand of the man Moses. There is mystery here, but suffice it to say that the Word of God, the Holy Bible, was written down by human authors specially chosen by God for the task. The Bible is the word of God, but the constituent parts show the style and mode of speaking of the individual human authors. The Bible is a supernatural book. No one else beside the God of heaven could use fallible human authors to say exactly what he wanted said. The words of Moses or David or Isaiah or Matthew or Paul—fallible men—are at once their own words in their own style and vocabulary, but at the same time the Word of God. In the words of our Confession, "the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the

majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God."<sup>2</sup> What the human authors of Scripture wrote is indeed the very Word of God.

In our text, Moses is an old man of about 81 years. Nurtured at the breast of a godly mother, learning the true faith from her voice, then raised by a princess in Pharaoh's palace amidst all the learning and wisdom of the Egyptians,<sup>3</sup> he was just beginning to write, and he will go on to write the first five books of the Bible—an impressive literary output. But the testimony of inspired Scripture is that he wrote “all the words *of the LORD*.” To dismiss the books of Moses as being merely one man's opinion ultimately brings the wrath of the LORD who inspired these words. The wise man, woman or child will receive the books of Moses as God's revealed truth by which every one of us will be one day judged—words which have the imprint of the divine, and words used by the Holy Spirit to bring the elect to faith.

Here, then, is God's word *written*. How we all ought to be thankful that God gave his word to his church in written form as “the more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19). Thank the Lord that the Holy Scriptures are preached in faithful churches. Thank him for copies of his word in our homes. The Word of God is a great treasure—one that we neglect to our own peril. May it not be a dead letter to any of us, but one that our hearts are drawn to day by day. The Bible is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> May it be profitable for each of us! Second, consider:

## **2. God's word is read aloud.**

We read in verse 7 that Moses “took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.’”

Again, the Book of the Covenant—Exodus 20:22 through the end of chapter 23—is Moses' first literary output. When God had thundered the Ten Commandments from heaven, the people were terrified and said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not *God* speak with us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19).

The God of heaven is a God of absolute holiness. The knowledge of the Holy is terrifying to sinful men. Remember the story about the men of Bethshemesh, who looked up from their work one day to see the ark of the covenant of the LORD, which had been captured by the Philistines, atop a cart being pulled by two mother cows that had been forcibly separated from their calves, pulling the cart straight along the highway back to Israel, *away* from their calves, lowing as they went,

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<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5, [https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_01](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01)

<sup>3</sup> Acts 7:22

<sup>4</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16

returning the precious ark to Israel? Remember how the men of Bethshemesh, in defiance of the LORD's direct command, looked into the ark and died? Remember how the men of Bethshemesh said, "Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?" (1 Sam. 6). Indeed! Who is able to stand before a God of absolute holiness? The men of Bethshemesh learned a hard lesson: that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. As with the men of Bethshemesh, when the Israelites at Sinai heard the voice of the LORD speaking his law over the mountain, they told Moses to go to God on their behalf and tell them what God had said. So Moses courageously went into the dark cloud and heard God's voice. When he came out, as we saw a moment ago, he wrote down the LORD's words. Now he reads them to the people. He took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. Here he is with the newly-written, newly-inscriptured word of God, probably written on animal skins sewn together to form a scroll. This is what is called the autograph of the word of God, the very copy written by the hand of Moses. Can you imagine the value of that manuscript if it were to be sold at auction today? The autograph no longer exists—it wore out from use centuries ago—but what we have are ancient copies that testify to the wording.

But notice that the word of God was not written down to be put into the hands of a private collector. It was not written down to be put into a library somewhere. *It was written down to be read to the covenant people.* The original would later be given to the levitical priests for safekeeping. When Israel would later have a king, the king was to make his own copy for his own use from that in possession of the priests. God intended that his people learn his truth from the mouths of preachers of the word specially chosen by God, who would read a text in the hearing of their people, explain what it meant, and apply it to the lives of the people.

It is especially noteworthy that verb translated *read* in the phrase "read [it] in the hearing of the people" is the common word meaning *to call*, a word which occurs some 880 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. (The idiom for *read* is *to call the book*, that is, to read the book.) In ancient times there was no such thing as private, silent reading. Written texts were scarce, and they were intended to be *shared*. The whole community would gather 'round to hear words so important that they were painstakingly written by hand, letter by letter, on sheets of papyrus or vellum, a fine-grained lambskin, kidskin, or calfskin prepared especially as a writing material. How many letters can be written on one animal skin? Just think of how expensive a book handwritten on animal skins would be! Ancient society did not have mass-produced paperback books. In Israel most of the writing was copies of the Word of God. People would gather in synagogues on the seventh-day Sabbath to hear the reading and preaching of the treasured Holy Scriptures. They were some of the first to hear God's Word read aloud. Did they realize what a singular blessing that was? We don't know. We know that men and women who are

born again treasure God's Holy Word. Not all the Israelites were born again, but those who were might have had some sense of how blessed they were to have the rare privilege of hearing the public reading of the inspired Scriptures.

And so it is today. Even though the cost of printed Scriptures has come way down, the God-given method of disseminating the Word is the same: churches are to prioritize the public reading and preaching of God's Holy Word. It is by the foolishness of preaching that God's people are to be brought to faith. A church that substitutes skits and movie clips and audio-visual presentations for the living preaching of the word is substituting an idol for the real deal, and cheating its people from hearing the life-giving Gospel. A church that substitutes manmade ceremonies for preaching makes the same mistake. The Bible speaks of a time when there will be a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.<sup>5</sup> There is a danger of that happening in our own time. Dear saint of God: realize what a treasure the unvarnished reading and preaching of God's holy Word is. Never forsake it for something that may seem more exciting. The reading and preaching of the Bible is the divinely-ordained method for the salvation of sinners. Treasure it! Come expectantly every week to a faithful congregation where you can find it.

In our New Testament text Paul warns Timothy: "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. . . . Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you." The reading and preaching of Holy Scripture is what is sorely needed in our time.

God's word is *written*, God's word is *read aloud*. Finally,

### **3. God's word is on the lips of God's people.**

In Deuteronomy 6, God says, "these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." Again in Colossians 3:16 God says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

Clearly, God's word is to be in the hearts and on the lips of God's people. The saints are to be characterized by edifying, God-glorifying conversation. We should talk of the Scriptures when sit in our house, when we travel, when we go to bed at night, and when we get up in the morning. The word of Christ ought to dwell in us richly in all wisdom. We should know it so well that as we speak we are teaching and admonishing those whom God providentially brings across our path with the doctrines of heaven.

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<sup>5</sup> Amos 8:11

If God's people have pastors who are ministers of the Word, who speak *God's* words and not their own ideas, who prepare for the public reading and preaching of God's word, then our churches will be full of people who likewise have the word of God in their hearts and on their lips. Their homes will be filled with children who love God's word, who treasure what is of chief importance to their parents. What every child sorely needs, whether he knows it or not, is to hear the word of God on the lips of his own father and mother. What a rich heritage! Leland Ryken was raised in one such home. Your home could be that as well. "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."<sup>6</sup>

In Bible times there was no such thing as silent reading. The word for *read* is the word *call*. God's Word should be called out by God's people—by every saint. If you can listen to a sermon, if you can read, if God has given you a voice, then your responsibility is to use those gifts, use your voice, to speak God's word.

Learn the joy of getting up in the morning and reading the Bible aloud. "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up" (Ps. 5:3). How does the believer pray? Using the words of Scripture, turning Bible words into prayer requests. "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD." What a need there is for that! People all around us—spouses, children, parents, houseguests, neighborhood children—people of all ages and walks of life—need to hear the word of the LORD. Why keep it to yourself?

Greg Reynolds writes, "How poorly we ministers often are at reading Scripture in public. . . . The proper expression should be a heightened form of our ordinary speech—each word weighted according to its position and meaning. The King James Version is best suited to the practice of reading Scripture aloud . . . because it was produced in a golden age of orality. . . . The Authorized title says: 'appointed to be read in churches.' This certainly did not mean silent, private reading. Reading aloud . . . impresses the beauty and power of the richest language in history into your oral memory."<sup>7</sup>

All of us need this. Let's do it more!

The original 1611 King James Bible was a massive book, 17 inches in height, very thick. It was designed to be a pulpit Bible, one in every church, often chained to the pulpit to keep it from being stolen. Protestant worship included long readings from the Bible. Sermons were meant to be exposition and application of Scripture texts. If a minister today uses a Scripture text merely as a jumping-off point for a sermon consisting of his own thoughts, that is a travesty, and God's people should rise up and put it to a stop. Shame on us for allowing that to happen!

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<sup>6</sup> Ps. 16:6

<sup>7</sup> Gregory E. Reynolds, "The Power of Poetry for Reading and Enjoyment" (*Ordained Servant*, June–July, 2021, [https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=897](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=897))

What God's people need more than anything else is to hear the preaching of God's Holy Word.

Children need it especially. Consider the words of the hymn we are going to sing after this message. Consider especially the effect that God's word on the lips of God's people will have on our covenant children:

“Shine thou upon us, Lord, true light of men, today, and through the written Word thy very self display, so that from hearts which burn with gazing on thy face *thy little ones may learn* the wonders of thy grace. Breathe thou upon us, Lord, thy Spirit's living flame, so that with one accord our lips may tell thy name. Give thou the hearing ear, fix thou the wandering thought, *that those we teach may hear the great things thou hast wrought*. Speak thou for us, O Lord, in all we say of thee; according to thy Word let all our teaching be, *so that thy lambs may know their own true Shepherd's voice*, wherever he leads them go, and in his love rejoice. Live thou within us, Lord; thy mind and will be ours; be thou beloved, adored, and served with all our powers, *so that our lives may teach thy children* what thou art, and plead, by more than speech, for thee with every heart.”<sup>8</sup>

In our Exodus text “. . . Moses here speaks aloud to the people, and reminds them that God enters into covenant with him.”<sup>9</sup>

Notice as well the *blood* in our text. Our text concludes, noting that “Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.’”

This blood could not of itself wash away the guilt of sins, but it foreshadowed the blood of Christ which cleanses us from all sin. You cannot save yourself. Only the blood of Christ—his sacrificial death on the cross—can save you. Put your trust in him for your salvation.

Did you have Bible-reading parents? If so, rejoice, for you had a goodly heritage! If not, then resolve to be a Bible-reader, eagerly reading God's word aloud, sharing it with everyone you come into contact with. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> John Ellerton, “Shine Thou upon Us, Lord,” *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* hymn 195, <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/shine-thou-upon-us-lord/>

<sup>9</sup> Calvin