

Alex Goodwin

Simple Breakthroughs
to Make Scripture
Come Alive



the
Bible
Reset

As someone who grew up in the church, was raised on the Bible, and was taught to read it from cover to cover, I struggled as a kid and as an adult to get through parts of the Bible that made no sense or didn't seem relevant to me. How I wish a book like Alex Goodwin's *The Bible Reset* had come along. Whether you love reading the Bible or wish you did, *The Bible Reset* will forever change how you read the Bible. You'll be drawn into the grand story God is telling that centers on Jesus. You may even get a bit of help from Hobbits.

CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, author of *Half the Church* and *Malestrom*

The people of God have long affirmed how crucial the Bible is to understanding and living our faith. We often hear that the Bible is a remarkable gift. But honestly, it can be a strange book—ancient and sometimes hard to understand. The research is clear that people don't read it very much. Even those who try will too often struggle because they've been taught shortcuts that are untrue to what the Bible is. Alex Goodwin has set out to change this. He tells us the truth about the Bible: what it actually is and what we're supposed to do with it. He writes with clarity, grace, and humor. This book is fun and insightful, bold and necessary. If the Bible is going to make a comeback, Goodwin shows us how.

GLENN PAAUW, senior fellow at the Institute for Bible Reading

With an honest, accessible, and instructive approach, *The Bible Reset* explains that while our access to the Bible has never been easier, our understanding of *how* to engage with the Bible has

never been lower. If you feel guilty, frustrated, and dissatisfied with your level of engagement of Scripture, know that Alex offers weary Bible readers a hopeful way forward. Dig into this good book, and you'll learn to shift your perspective in order to dig deeper and engage further with the Good Book.

J.R. BRIGGS, founder of Kairos Partnerships and author of *The Sacred Overlap* and *Fail*

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The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Deborah Sáenz Gonzalez, Acquisitions Editor; John Greco, Copyeditor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Lindsey Bergsma, Designer; Sarah K. Johnson, Proofreading Coordinator

Cover design by Lindsey Bergsma

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*For Lacey—
forever my first reader,
relentless encourager,
best friend.*

Contents

PART ONE: form

- 1 | We Can Do Better 3
- 2 | Six Feet Under 13
- 3 | Digging Up the Real Bible 31

PART TWO: practices

- 4 | Read Big 47
- 5 | Read Together 61
- 6 | Discover the Bible's World 79

PART THREE: story

- 7 | The Story We Find Ourselves In 101
- 8 | The Six-Act Drama of Scripture 119
- 9 | New Creation Improv 145

Epilogue 161

Acknowledgments 165

Notes 167



PART ONE

form

We Can Do Better

What he greatly thought, he nobly dared.

HOMER

IT WAS A WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS 2016, and one of the wealthiest people in the world was stuck in traffic. Trapped on a Los Angeles highway, crawling behind the same car an inch at a time, he glared at the asphalt and tapped impatiently on his steering wheel. A world-renowned entrepreneur, he was accustomed to limitlessness. He had revolutionized entire industries, yet on this December morning he was reduced to helpless brooding in his car.

This is the twenty-first century, he must have thought, in one of the richest, most powerful cities in the world. This—this—is the best we can do? In that moment, he resolved to create a company to begin solving the problem of “soul-destroying traffic.”¹

Most of us can resonate with this feeling of frustration at something that was designed to help us but instead, at times, leaves us

THE BIBLE RESET

exasperated. The Bible is supposed to be our guide, yet we pick it up and, often, can't make it past a few paragraphs without getting distracted, bored, or confused. *Really—this is the best God could do?*

While you may not go so far as to call the Bible soul-destroying, you wouldn't be alone if your experience with this hyped-up book has been full of unmet expectations. Millions of people silently struggle with the Bible as they try their best to cultivate spiritual growth from this difficult text.

For all the glowing accolades Christians like to heap on the Bible—God-breathed, living and active, a lamp unto our feet—the actual task of reading it is really quite hard. It's not an easy book to begin with: It's an enormous book, full of smaller books with their own seemingly disjointed agendas, composed and compiled thousands of years ago and half a world away. If we manage to read it for any length of time, we encounter an abundance of strange stuff, boring stuff, and unsettling stuff. If we're honest, our thoughts can range from perturbed (*Oh great, the Philistines are attacking again*) to disturbed (*Wait, God did what to those people?*).

Nowadays, there are a few common reactions to the Bible's seemingly insurmountable challenges. One of them is to dismiss the Bible altogether. Over the last generation or two, the Good Book has been recast as the Obsolete Book, or even the Harmful Book. Some people are inclined to think, *It supports slavery. It's misogynistic. It's anti-science. Maybe it had a place in antiquity, but we've advanced beyond that now.* My generation, the millennials, is leading the charge away from the Bible and out of the church. *We'll find our sense of meaning somewhere else, thank you very much.*

Another reaction is shame. Nobody seems to be talking about how hard the Bible is, so we assume the problem must be with *us*.

Maybe we're not smart enough or disciplined enough or spiritual enough to really stick with it, to buckle down and come to appreciate this book.

So we make do. In the churning ocean of our strange and difficult Bible, we cling to a life raft of carefully curated greatest hits: John 3:16; Jeremiah 29:11; Philippians 4:13; a few psalms; maybe some of our favorite stories. Or we simply step back and leave the Bible to the experts, dining exclusively on the pre-chewed version explained by our pastor or YouTube videos or devotional books.

Confused. Angry. Apathetic. If any of this sounds familiar, I think this book can help. Because here's the secret: You've been set up for failure.

From the moment you open the Bible, the odds are stacked against you. The struggle begins with the formatting, which can resemble an overcrowded textbook more than anything else. On every page, you're confronted by stark pillars of text, often surrounded by a scaffolding of even more text: cross-references, notes, callout boxes, and more. Chapter and verse numbers swarm around the small print. The sheer volume of information is immediately overwhelming and unwelcoming. The simple act of reading is exhausting on its own—a literary Ironman Triathlon.

Beyond the difficult format, another hindrance is that most Christians never actually learn what they're supposed to do with the Bible or how to approach the strange, boring, or unsettling passages they encounter. For some reason, it's just assumed that if we open this book and spend enough time in it, the magic will happen. Like Chia Pet instructions to "just add water," we're taught to "just add Bible" and our faith will grow. We'll come to know God through this book if we just try hard enough.

THE BIBLE RESET

For the first two decades of my life, the Bible was like the moon: always present but mysteriously distant. I grew up in a loving Christian home and attended a charming little church in northern Virginia. Every Sunday, we'd sit in the U-shaped balcony, singing out of our red hymnals and looking down on the rows of little old ladies in the pews, their cotton-ball hairstyles glowing in the morning light of the stained glass windows.

Before each sermon, our pastor would hold his Bible in the air and, with a good-natured grin and Southern twang, ask us to do the same: "Repeat after me. I believe the Bible. It is the Word of God. Where the Bible differs from my beliefs or my behaviors, *I can change*, through the power of the Holy Spirit."

I remember mornings spent in Sunday school, sitting in those tiny plastic chairs made for short legs and little butts while Miss Sandra and Miss Janet held up watercolor pictures and told us the story of Noah's Ark (well, the kid's version, at least). I remember countless Bible studies throughout high school and college, assembled in loose circles of futons and kitchen chairs, creeping chapter by chapter through some book of the Bible. Mostly, I remember the long, drawn-out silences after the study leader posed a question. We'd all stare at our feet or into our Bibles, feigning contemplation, hoping someone else would pipe up with a thought or an answer.

During all those years of sermons, Sunday school lessons, church programs, and Bible studies, I don't remember anyone ever explaining to me what the Bible actually *is*. Or addressing how unpleasant it was to read. Or helping me wrestle with all its weird and difficult stuff. And just to be clear, this isn't meant to be a criticism of my church or family or other ministries I've

participated in. I'm telling you this because I think my experience is typical of the way things are. In many areas of Christian discipleship, the Bible is simultaneously the primary focus and the biggest blind spot.

Playing Bible Frisbee

In 2013, I gave my first honest assessment of this book that is God's Word. I'd finished college roughly a year earlier and immediately felt a pull to escape the stifling suburbs of my hometown. The pine trees, sunny skies, and crisp mountain air of Colorado were practically screaming my name.

In my zeal for new beginnings, I packed a couple of suitcases and flew across the country without a car, house, or job lined up—and without much of a plan for how I would acquire any of them. Thankfully, God provided the car and the home without much hassle. But he prescribed a long season of waiting for the job.

After nearly six months in Colorado, I had no real job prospects. I had graduated with honors from a good business school, but that apparently wasn't enough to warrant even a phone interview for a mind-numbing, entry-level position. I was halfway across the country, thousands of miles from my family and friends, trying my best to get started on a new life but getting nowhere. Maybe this had all been a big mistake.

I needed to hear from God—a word of reassurance, encouragement, truth, guidance, *something*. So I did the only thing I could think to do. Sitting quietly on the edge of my bed, I placed my brown, leather-bound Bible on my lap and took a deep breath. With one hand gripping the spine, I closed my eyes and bent the

THE BIBLE RESET

cover back, pressing my thumb into the edge of the pages and feeling them zip out from underneath. I stopped about three-fourths of the way through. With my eyes still closed, I extended my index finger and placed it on a random spot on the page.

I opened my eyes and read the verse under my finger. “On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”² I read it again, in case I’d somehow missed the spiritual epiphany. I read the rest of the chapter in case I’d been off by a few verses. Nothing. I slammed the book shut and tossed it across my room like a Frisbee, where it landed in a heap underneath a chair. “This thing is useless.”

Eventually I picked up my Bible again, and although I had to acknowledge the flimsiness of my point-and-pray technique, my larger questions remained. If the Bible is so important, why is it such a struggle to read? Why do I so often end up confused, frustrated, and bored?

A few weeks later, one of my friends handed me a Bible that looked different and read differently than any Bible I’d ever seen. There were no numbers anywhere, no notes, no features of any kind. Nothing but the Bible text. “You’ve got a marketing degree, right?” she said. “Figure out how to get this into as many hands as possible.” I started reading it and became engrossed. The stories flowed together like they never had before. I actually lost track of time reading the Bible.

Then she introduced me to Glenn Paauw, the guy who had created and published this strange edition of the Scriptures. Turns out he worked for a Bible publisher in town, where he’d been researching and experimenting with Bible engagement for over twenty years, and this new Bible was one of the results of his work. He was

looking to fill a position in a new Bible-engagement department, and he ended up hiring me.

During my second day at my new job, Glenn came into my office (well, my cube) with a stack of a dozen books under his arm. “Anytime you’re not working on a project,” he said, “I want you to make your way through these books. Come talk to me whenever you have any questions.” He left the stack on my desk, and I cocked my head to scan the titles: *The Drama of Scripture*, *The Bible Made Impossible*, *The Lost World of Scripture*, *After Chapters and Verses*, *The New Testament and the People of God*, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, and so on.

That day became a turning point. In the weeks and months of reading and conversation that followed, I discovered that the mental and practical framework I’d constructed for the Bible was, in fact, a shanty house. No wonder it was so difficult to read. No wonder I had such a hard time connecting with it. No wonder I was so frustrated! As I began to learn what the Bible actually is and what we’re supposed to do with it, the words on its pages started lighting up those parts of myself that had previously lain dormant: curiosity and imagination.

In 2016, Paauw, a couple of other colleagues from the Bible-publishing industry, and I formed the Institute for Bible Reading, a nonprofit ministry dedicated to inviting people into God’s transformative story by changing the way they read the Bible. We created a game-changing new Bible-reading platform called Immerse (which I’ll tell you more about later).

I’m writing this book because I think my journey can also be your journey. It’s a journey of recovering what we’ve lost, remembering what we’ve forgotten, and discovering what we never

THE BIBLE RESET

learned. It's a journey that will have us removing the barriers that make the Bible seem like a difficult and frustrating book. Along the way, we'll open the wardrobe doors to an enchanted world ripe for exploration and discovery.

This book is divided into three parts that build upon one another. First, we'll take a hard look at the physical form of our Bibles. Why does this ancient library of stories, songs, letters, and other types of literature look so much like a phone book? What does a reference-manual Bible tell us we're supposed to do with it? And what would happen if we reverse engineered the Bible into something that was actually readable?

Second, once we have a more readable Bible, we'll be able to recover lost Bible-engagement habits: reading whole books from beginning to end, reading and discussing Scripture in community, receiving the Bible's literature on its own terms, and understanding the basics of cultural context. Without needing to become Bible scholars (but with a commitment to ongoing learning), we'll develop some foundational habits and practices for reading well.

Finally, once we're equipped with the right tools and essential practices, we'll get acquainted with the Bible's lifeblood: its story. Yes, the Bible is full of truth, wisdom, encouragement, guidance, and correction. But all those vital elements are contained within the Bible's story, the V6 turbo engine roaring inside, giving the whole thing life and power. It's a roller-coaster saga, full of laboring progress and huge setbacks, pandemic brokenness and glimmers of light. Shining at the center of it all is Jesus, God's living Word and clearest revelation. He is the key to understanding and interpreting the entire story.

Perhaps most exciting, the Bible's story is not one we observe from a distance, hoping to pick out bits and pieces for personal application. Instead, we'll discover that it's an unfinished drama. God has given us an invitation to join him in his cosmic restoration project, and it can completely redefine our lives if we choose to accept it. We don't simply read the Bible to understand and learn; we read it to live.

My wife went to college at Loyola Marymount University in the heart of Los Angeles, just a few minutes away from the LAX airport. One day after I returned from a work trip to LA, I was ranting about how much time we had wasted sitting in traffic. I asked her, "How on earth did you put up with that for four years?" She shrugged. "You just learn to deal with it. You factor it in to your travel and figure out ways to pass the time. I usually called my mom."

Over the years, I've come to realize just how crummy of a hand the average Christian has been dealt with the Bible. Thankfully, we don't have to accept the status quo and "learn to deal with" the circumstances we've inherited. Unlike the billionaire referenced earlier, we don't need to build a tunnel-carving machine and innovate a Bibleless alternative. Instead, as C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road."³

The Bible can still speak to us today, and not in the minimalistic, cherry-picked ways we've been settling for. It can capture our hearts and captivate our minds. It can transform our communities by reorienting us around the epic story we've been adopted into. All this is possible. We just have to retrace our steps and find the right road.

