

# 12 New Testament Passages That Changed the World

Joseph Bentz



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# 1



Gutenberg Bible // Johann Gutenberg and Johann Fust // c. 1455

## Does the Bible Still Matter?

IS THE BIBLE'S RELEVANCE fading in our secular age? Or is it becoming increasingly more widespread and influential across the globe as new technologies spread it to places that have never seen it, in forms that no one could have imagined even a few decades ago?

I recently came across two articles published on the same day. The first was an interview with Kenneth A. Briggs, author of a new book about the Bible's waning influence in public life. He said that "people aren't reading [the Bible] very much, and it just doesn't show up in—as they love to say—public discourse. It doesn't really make many appearances, and it is not in the public consciousness. The Bible is off the grid in a way I've never experienced before."<sup>1</sup>

A few hours later I came across a very different story about the Bible's influence on today's culture worldwide. It reported that the YouVersion Bible app has now reached more than 250 million downloads across the globe. That's a quarter of a billion people accessing the Bible on a technology that didn't even exist a few short years ago. Of course, it's one thing to download an app, but are these people really *reading* the Bible on it? The study showed that in the year 2016 alone, users read and listened to more than 13 billion chapters, created more than a billion highlights, bookmarks, and notes, and shared verses a record 230 million times.<sup>2</sup>

Those astonishing statistics show that the Bible still exerts a powerful influence on millions—if not billions—of people. The good news is that the Bible is easier and cheaper than ever to access and read. It's as close as your nearest electronic device, and for most people, it's probably pretty close by on a bookshelf or nightstand too.

Yet Briggs's research on the Bible's diminishing visibility in certain areas of life should not be lightly dismissed. Even for Christians who revere the Bible, it's hard to deny that it is easier to think or say nice things *about* the Bible than it is to dig into it in a serious way. And, just because verses get posted (out of context) millions of times on social media and elsewhere, that doesn't mean people truly understand what they're posting. The Bible is abused as much as it is used, and large swaths of the population have only vague—and often wrong—ideas about its contents.

In one sense, even people who are hostile to the Bible cannot escape its influence. The book has simply shaped too much of life for people to completely dismiss it. Maybe you have never read a word from a Bible—yet you probably

still know what a “good Samaritan” is or what people mean when they call someone a “prodigal son.” You’ve probably heard of the Golden Rule. When you see a cross on a chain around someone’s neck, you probably know that the cross represents the device on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

Even readers who are hostile to Christianity still usually recognize which particular prayer The Lord’s Prayer refers to, and they may even be able to quote it from memory, whether they want to or not. The Last Supper may not have any significance to them as far as what they believe or how they live, but they still probably know it was the final meal Jesus had with his disciples on the night before he was executed. Their knowledge of that meal may derive more directly from Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting than from the Bible itself, but that only highlights the Bible’s wide-ranging influence across centuries and in every area of life. It is hard to think of an area of life—art, music, law, film, literature, medicine, and many others—that has not been deeply influenced by the Bible.

Wycliffe Bible Translators USA reported a few years ago that 5.8 billion people now have access to all or some of the Bible translated in their first language.<sup>3</sup> The complete Bible has been translated into 683 languages, and the New Testament has been translated into at least 1,534 languages.<sup>4</sup>

## **What Is It about This Book?**

What is it about the Bible that makes it so influential? How have certain key portions of Scripture managed to shift civilizations and transform individual lives? The purpose of my book is to celebrate and explore some of the twelve most important passages of the New Testament in order to probe why they are so powerful. This book will focus on the New Testament, and another book is planned to delve into the Old Testament.

Some readers may have only a surface knowledge of these New Testament passages, and this book may open a window into their beauty and power. Other readers may be very familiar with the passages, but perhaps overfamiliarity has caused them to grow a little cold. This book may bring them back to life or shed new light on passages readers thought they already knew.

Sometimes the most famous portions of Scripture are also the most abused or misunderstood, such as “Judge not,” or, “All things work together for the good . . .” This book will consider the passages in their original context while also showing the impact they have had on the world. The history of the Bible

shows how amazing it is that this book came together in the first place and that it went on to become the bestselling book of all time. The Holy Spirit has powerfully used these words to draw people to him across generations and cultures, and the work the Spirit is doing with this book is still not finished.

After reading the interview with Briggs about the waning influence of the Bible in public life, I got a copy of his book to see what else he had to say. His focus is on the Bible's influence in the United States rather than the world as a whole, and he identifies a number of forces that gradually eroded the Bible's importance, such as scholarship that challenged aspects of authorship and other elements of the Bible, scientific theories that offered views other than the Bible's about how the world came about, and biblical teaching that challenged America's love of individualism.

The public education system also is not inclined to promote biblical literacy. Taking the Bible seriously means believing in the supernatural and in God's revelation rather than believing only in science or materialism, and where in the curriculum does the supernatural fit? Public schools and universities may allow for study of the Bible as a literary document or a work that has influenced Western civilization, but these educational institutions do not embrace it as a sacred text.<sup>5</sup>

Even when people do believe the Bible, how seriously do they take it? Briggs says many churches have downplayed the Bible in their worship services as congregations have become less familiar with it, which only feeds biblical illiteracy. And even though the nation is awash in Bibles—the Gideons alone have distributed more than two billion of them since 1908, and American homes own an average of four or five Bibles each—fewer people are actually reading it, just as they are reading fewer long books on any topic. Briggs quotes Philip Towner, head of the American Bible Society's research institute, who said, "It's not the age of Bible reading anymore; it's the age of Bible buying."<sup>6</sup> That is certainly a bleak picture, but is it the entire picture?

### **Imagine This**

Imagine a scenario in which all those billions of Bibles were suddenly taken away from everyone and destroyed. No more Bibles on paper, no Bible apps, no tens of thousands of editions in a few thousand languages. This limitless selection of Bible editions is replaced by one edition—but there is a catch. Only churches, not individuals, will be issued this new edition, and each

church will receive no more than one, and that one will be only for ministers to use. Oh, and there is one other catch: the edition will be translated only into an obscure language that few people know.

Do you think that would spell doom for the Bible's influence in public and private life? Keeping the Bible out of people's hands and letting them hear it read in church only, in a language most of them won't know, may sound like the perfect way to snuff out the book altogether, but for most of the history of Christianity, up until the last five hundred years or so, that was mainly the way everyday Christians experienced it.

Let's say you're a rank-and-file Christian layperson in the year 1300 somewhere in England. You almost certainly would not have your own copy of the Bible. Why? For one thing, each copy of the Bible would have to be copied and produced by hand. The Bible is a *long* book, so such copies would be both expensive and rare. Not that it would do you much good to have a copy even if you could obtain one because the translation would be in Latin, a language you probably would not know. Only a relatively small number of men—and they would almost certainly be men—would know that language.

As if the Latin and the lack of literacy among most of the population and the scarcity of books were not enough obstacles to overcome, the church didn't want you reading the Bible on your own anyway. The Bible was not for individual use. Better to let the church present it to you, they thought, and interpret it for you, than to risk what might happen if this powerful book were placed into the hands of individual readers.

Did those confining circumstances prevent Christians from knowing and believing in the Bible? No. As Bible historian Lori Anne Ferrell puts it, "Lively participants in a scripture-saturated culture, the vast majority of medieval folk were both illiterate *and* deeply familiar with Holy Writ."<sup>7</sup> How is that possible? Ferrell explains that these laypeople would have heard the Latin Vulgate Bible spoken aloud in their churches their whole lives. The repetition of the Latin phrases "would have coalesced into a composite language, comprehensible to audiences destined never to read nor to write Latin, transforming what should have been gibberish into the practice of piety. As a vernacular religious treatise from 1375 stated, even 'when not understood, the power of God's word still avails.'"<sup>8</sup>

*The power of God's word still avails.* In other words, in spite of all the barriers to biblical understanding, the Bible not only survived in that era, but its words and message also sank deeply into people's souls. The Holy Spirit brought



Scripture to life even in people who were mostly illiterate and hearing God's Word in a strange language.

## **Experiencing the Bible in Community**

The work of the Holy Spirit in keeping Scripture alive during the pre-printing press, pre-Reformation, pre-King James Version era of Christianity gives me hope for our day. Experiencing the Bible then was a communal event. People gathered in churches to hear the Word. They also created art that portrayed biblical scenes. They listened to sermons in their own language that expounded on Scripture.

Another method that emerged to bring the Bible into people's awareness during the medieval period were mystery plays that depicted Bible stories. These cycles of plays were performed on moving stages that rolled through town as people waited for the next one to come to them. Entire towns got involved in these performances, as either performers or spectators. They brought the Bible to life for people who could not read it. As Ferrell describes it, "The audience staked out places along the streets; the plays came to them, one after another, unfolding in unrelenting narrative sequence. A full biblical cycle could comprise as many as twenty-four plays, from the Fall of Lucifer to the Last Judgment, and could last many hours—or up to three days."<sup>9</sup> These plays were performed during festivals such as the Feast of Corpus Christi, when people took off work and mixed their Bible dramas with celebration and drinking and rowdiness. The plays were not always accurate in the details of Scripture, and they represented not only biblical narrative but also the theological bents of the playwrights who crafted them. But as a whole, they are an example of one of the ways Christians of that era learned, studied, and even performed the Bible in community.

Although I am grateful that I now have numerous biblical translations in my own language to choose from, I am also thankful that the Bible has never needed ideal conditions in order to thrive. And, while today my most common way of interacting with Scripture is reading a Bible on my own (plus encountering it in smaller segments in sermons and Sunday school classes), reading it on my own was not how I first learned it. My first encounters with Scripture remind me more of a medieval Christian's experience than that of a twenty-first-century believer. I was a child, brought to Sunday school classes

and Vacation Bible Schools. I couldn't simply sit down and read the Bible on my own. It was too long and complex.

Instead, I first heard the stories told by loving, patient Sunday school teachers, who brought the stories to life in colorful books, flannel graph displays, coloring books, and songs. Through those lessons I learned about Jesus healing the sick, Paul encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus, Noah building his ark, Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, and many other stories. In Vacation Bible School we made little crafts out of paper towel rolls, bars of soap, paint, crayons, egg cartons, and popsicle sticks to help us envision the stories in concrete ways. All these methods were fun, but looking back, I can see that the Holy Spirit was also using all this singing and painting and storytelling and creating to prepare me to understand the Bible and to know Jesus. When I was ready, I approached the Bible the old-fashioned way: I started to read it.

Even then, I didn't simply start from the beginning and read it straight through. Instead, my community of fellow Christians guided me toward key passages first. In fourth grade we memorized John 3:16, 1 John 1:9, and other important verses. As a teenager I was involved in Bible quizzing, where we learned and memorized large portions of New Testament books and made a friendly competition out of it. Later I did read the whole Bible for myself, took biblical literature and theology courses, and learned from Bible scholars and other Christian writers. Through all of this I had advantages the medieval Christians did not, but like them, my encounters with the Bible—even the reading I did “on my own”—was guided by my faith community.

I picked the medieval era as an example of a time when the Bible thrived in spite of unfavorable conditions, but I could have chosen almost any era of Christian history. Each had its own challenges. Although the medieval Bible audience struggled with illiteracy, church control, translation problems, printing problems, and so on, at least those periods had an actual text of the Bible to work with. Before that, it was amazing that the Bible as we now know it came together at all. If you travel back in time about a thousand years before the situation that existed in the year 1300, in what condition would you find the Bible and its readers at that point?

Ferrell describes a disorganized and far-flung group of Christians, some facing persecution from the Roman Empire, who had widely varying ideas of what Scripture even *was*: “Some assemblies used nothing but the Greek version

of the Hebrew Bible; some believed in nothing but the Gospels and rejected the Jewish scriptures of a common past; still others revered writings that told stories of Jesus that challenged doctrines espoused by church leaders, who issued directives from places safely far away: Rome, Milan, Jerusalem.”<sup>10</sup> Over the course of generations to come, the canon of Scripture was finally formed (though even now there are different versions of it), but centuries more would pass before most Christians would hold their own copies of the Bible and read it in their own language.

## **Drowning in Bibles**

Christians of earlier eras had to be creative to experience Scripture, and some cultures throughout the world still struggle with laws against the Bible or other barriers that keep people from it. But in the United States and many other nations, the only problem is deciding which of the endless versions and styles of the Bible to choose from. A quick online search led me to such versions as the Life Application Study Bible, The Message, The Woman’s Bible, Inspire Bible NLT: The Bible for Creative Journaling (with wide margins and line drawings in some margins for coloring and journaling), the ESV Global Study Bible, the Teen Life Application Study Bible NLT, the NIV Gift Bible (in pink or chocolate color), The Action Bible, The Story Bible (for new believers, with boring parts left out and stories emphasized), the NIV Boys Bible, The Everyday Life Bible, the NIV Bible for Teen Girls, the Every Man’s Bible NLT, the Deluxe Explorer Edition, and many others.

Each demographic—children, women, men, and teenagers—has multiple Bible options to select from. There are also large-print Bibles, tiny Bibles, pocket Bibles, leather-bound editions, embossed Bibles, red-letter editions (with Jesus’s words in red), and many other choices. If that is not enough, you can find plenty of Bible accessories, such as a highlighter kit, a wide variety of decorative covers, Bible stands, Bible verse cell phone cases, Bible jewelry, and a Bible Taboo board game.

It’s easy to make fun of many of these products, and sometimes the mockery is deserved. This profusion of Bible products also shows that, among other things, the Bible is a commodity to market and sell. There are plenty of examples of commercial exploitation of Scripture. On the other hand, all these versions and supplies also show the intense interest people have not only in possessing this book but also, perhaps, in making sense of it and mak-

ing it part of one's life. The Bible is a daunting book, so maybe products like highlighter kits and decorative covers and devotional aids help make it more approachable for some readers.

Many Christians lament the fact that we no longer live in one of the Bible-saturated eras of days gone by, when scriptural references and stories were as well known to people as stories about celebrities or the Super Bowl or other pop culture phenomena. However, for every statistic or anecdote that indicates the Bible's influence is waning, I seem to run across just as many examples of Scripture reaching people in ways never before possible throughout history. Some of this is thanks to new technology, like the YouVersion Bible app mentioned earlier. Social media platforms of all kinds have also spread Bible verses and Bible studies and Bible commentaries around the globe. On Twitter alone, more than 40 million tweets about Bible verses went out in a single year. About half of those were sent out by bot accounts that do nothing but pump out Bible verses nonstop.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible is also being translated into new languages in ways that were not possible in earlier eras. One difficulty with Bible translation has been that some cultures do not have a written alphabet. Translators would therefore have to create an alphabet and a written language and then teach it to the speakers of that language before the Bible could be translated. A new software called Render is being developed that will skip the written translation and instead translate the Bible orally. A translator who knows the local language and also a nearby major language into which the Bible has already been translated can record a new, spoken translation. Robin Green, project manager at Faith Comes by Hearing, said, "Render means that some languages that might have fallen through the cracks will get Scripture."<sup>12</sup>

Even as new technology brings the Bible to life on tiny screens around the world, another Bible publisher is moving in the opposite direction, finding ways to enhance a more traditional way of approaching the Bible in book form. Crossway, which publishes the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, has created a six-volume edition that emphasizes the beauty of the physical book itself and that tries to make the reading experience more inviting. Because the Bible is so long, publishers have struggled to print it in ways that make it easily readable. Cramping it into one volume often leads to smaller print, cramped lines, and flimsy paper. Many readers may not give much thought to such issues, but in the long run, those problems can push people

away from Scripture just because the reading process itself becomes such a strain. Readers might feel compelled to put the book down even if they don't consciously identify *why* they feel that way.

The editors of the six-volume set counter those reading difficulties with careful attention to every detail of the reading experience. Breaking the Bible into six volumes allows them to use thicker paper, which makes the text on the page cleaner, sharper, and brighter. Pages are less cluttered and look more like a high-quality hardcover novel. Covers come in cloth or leather and feel good in your hands. The binding of each volume makes the book easy to hold open, with the pages not flipping back as you read. In a video created to describe the details of the new edition, one of the editors explains that the intent was to “create a Bible with such beauty and quality and excellence that honors and reflects the beauty of the content that’s within.”<sup>13</sup>

The Bible sets are expensive and won't be practical for every reader, but I love the idea of creating a version of the Bible that can draw readers in, slow them down, and encourage them to become immersed in the text the same way many of us do with a new book by a favorite author. In fact, I am in favor of any move that brings people into closer contact with Scripture. We live in a world that is drowning in Bibles, both online and on paper, but ironically, the book has become easier than ever to ignore. If we're not ignoring it, we are often mistreating it. We proof-text verses to serve our purposes rather than allowing the words to change us. We use verses the way we use memes on social media—a saying or two here or there to represent our feeling at the moment. If that's all the Bible is to us, then we are even worse off than people centuries ago, who didn't have their own copies of the Bible but who still took it seriously enough to learn it through whatever means were available to them.

No matter how familiar you may think you are with the Bible, familiarity is no guarantee that the Bible will stay alive within you. The following chapters will shine a fresh light on some of the most influential portions of the New Testament. How have these words changed the world? Why are they so powerful? What significance can they have in our lives today? My hope and prayer is that your understanding of Scripture will be deepened—or even shaken up—as much as my own has been as I have examined the vast influence of these passages. I hope that, by the time you reach the end of this book, you will love and appreciate the Bible more than you ever have before. May the power of God's Word still avail!

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## Notes

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## Digging Deeper

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1. This chapter presents evidence that the influence of the Bible is diminishing in our day, and it presents other evidence that the Bible's reach and influence are increasing. What evidence on either side of this question did you find most worrisome, and what did you find most hopeful?
2. Reflect on your own experience with the Bible. How significant a role does it play in your life, if any? What role would you like it to play in the future?
3. This chapter sheds light on various ways that people throughout history have experienced the Bible—through plays, in church communities, in sermons, in art, and other ways. In addition to reading the Bible for yourself, can you think of any other ways you have experienced it that have been particularly memorable or meaningful?
4. This chapter shows many obstacles that threatened to keep the Bible from readers over the centuries, including illiteracy, church control, language barriers, technological limitations, and other barriers. What forces do you see that counteracted those difficulties and allowed the Bible to become perhaps the most influential book of all time?
5. What do you envision for the future of the Bible? Do you believe new technologies and new ways of presenting the Bible will increase its readership? Will apathy or hostility counteract those advances? Will the Holy Spirit continue to cause God's Word to avail in spite of everything?

*Go to <https://www.thefoundrypublishing.com/12NT/LeaderGuide> for a free downloadable leader's guide that includes more questions for reflection as well as activities for use in a small group setting.*