

Slower yet clearer


Reading the Bible in jail

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Slow Bible reading

I work as a chaplain in the Elkhart County Jail and Work Release. Before the shutdowns of March 2020, I spent a good amount of my time reading the Bible with the inmates. We gathered around the fixed tables in the middle of the noisy, common area in each ward. I was a strange Korean man with broken English and no experience behind bars. What we held in common was the Bibles provided by the jail ministry.

I named our times together “slow Bible reading” (SBR), inspired by Ellen Davis. She writes that one of the most significant benefits of reading



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the Bible in Hebrew and Greek is learning to read it *slowly*.¹ That’s not only true with Greek and Hebrew. The Bible reads surprisingly differently in our native language too when we read it slower, paying more attention to the text, even reading the glowing white spaces between the words and the lines in the Bible. (Sometimes these white spaces seem to me like the cloud of God’s presence that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness or the cloud of Jesus’s transfiguration—re-


vealing and hiding at the same time the dazzling glory of God’s presence.)

We always started the SBR with silent prayer, seeking the help of the Holy Spirit. Since we read in the common space of the ward, we were surrounded by other inmates going about their business without interest in the Bible. The wards were filled with the noises of TV, conversations,

1 Ellen F. Davis, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

people walking around, and sometimes conflicts between inmates. I often felt uncomfortable and awkward in that time of silent prayer. However, together we were able to be aware of those all too familiar noises, and even in the midst of the noises, we could make an effort together to seek the presence and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I noticed that a time of silence helped us all feel calmer as we began our study.

Each week we read ten to fifteen verses out loud slowly, going around the circle and reading two to four verses each. Then we meditated for two to four minutes in silence on the verses, searching for any word or line that struck us. After the silence, we shared in “popcorn style,” each as they felt led saying which verse they liked or what struck them in the reading and why.



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This sharing time was precious because it was not so much a theological or analytical discussion, but rather it became a time to share about our lives, pains, struggles, and joys. We shared very personally. Some talked about their addictions or relationship difficulties with their family members. Some shared the deep sorrow when they could not see

the face of their loved ones on their birthdays. Our lives and experiences were connected to and interacted with the verses we read.

Reading Paul slowly

Galatians 5 was particularly powerful to read together. Paul writes of freedom, contrasting two competing desires: the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. Paul vividly illustrates the stark differences between the chains of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. He describes how we all struggle and suffer in the midst of the spiritual warfare between the two warring desires. Galatians 5 opened the door for us to share our own weaknesses and strengths and to pray for one another, sharing about which spiritual fruits and fleshly chains we experience in our own lives.

When we talked about self-control (Gal. 5:23), I shared my concern about having gained weight through the pandemic.² They responded shar-

² Here I am sharing my personal story and not suggesting that weight gain or loss is necessarily indicative of the presence or absence of the fruit of self-control.

ing about their own weight gain and loss during long periods of time in the jail. Many had experienced exercising and losing weight, so they gave me helpful tips for my plan to lose weight. After that, they checked in on

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my plan every time we met for SBR, with plentiful teasing. We helped one another apply the Scripture by holding one another accountable and encouraging one another, also with a bit of teasing and chuckling about one another in love.

When we finished reading Titus, one inmate thanked me, saying he had never read Titus seriously before, but through SBR he had learned about the critical significance of good works in Christian faith. His comment was sweet to my ears because I often see inmates

quarreling with each other over differences of their Christian doctrines. Doctrines are important. I get it. Actually, I am very inquisitive about Christian doctrines. However, being belligerent with various Christian doctrines, especially in the jail atmosphere, cannot help their lives at all. Does Christian doctrine become a source of hatred rather than love and service? Titus taught this inmate the significance of good works. He began to consider how the believers in the jail could help each other, strengthen each other, and do good work through volunteering, even complete some chores in the wards for other inmates, rather than only continuing to yell and insist on whatever doctrines they held.

I also learned more from Titus through SBR with the inmates. Though I had studied Titus before, I could taste it better and deeper through SBR. Our study even led me to preach in my congregation, and I joyfully shared how much I had learned from reading this Scripture in the jail with the inmates. Among the most precious verses to us were Titus 3:3–8 (NRSV):

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and re-

newal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. (Emphases added.)

Titus beautifully describes the rock and basis of our salvation and the purpose and goal of our salvation. By God's grace, by the blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, we are justified so that we may devote ourselves to good works, to shine the light of God to this world. Since the passage emphasizes the significance of good works, I am confident to call Titus "the Pauline Mennonite Epistle."

Humbling ourselves together

There were challenging moments too. One inmate was an African American with a stately stature. We became close enough to share our concerns freely since he had been enthusiastic in SBR every time. But one day, as we were sharing our prayer concerns, he told me a bit defiantly, "Sungbin, but you do not know *at all* how hard our life here in the jail is, right?" It was blunt and disorienting. His words stung. Yet, I thank God that I was somehow ready to respond to that comment because I had been thinking a lot about the differences and similarities between the inmates and myself.

Yes, they are in jail, while I am a free man. They suffer with many issues in the jail as well as with relationships with their family members, while I enjoy my life outside the jail with my family. They struggle with a variety of addictions, while I have no issues with drugs or alcohol. However, these contrasts by no means indicate that there are no parallels between life in the jail and life out of the jail. The more I work in the jail, the more I see some critical similarities between the two.

When my supervisor, Rebecca Slough, asked me about my thoughts on my internship in the jail, the word that came to my mind regarding my jail ministry was *limitedness*. As a foreign student living on a visa in United States, with broken English and a different skin color, and with a different theological orientation and identity, I was suffering with the limitedness in my life in the United States and in seminary. As I reflected on my own limitations, I began to see a different kind of limitedness in the lives of the

inmates. Even though our limitations were not the same, we could sense some similarities between them. I will never forget that the inmates in the jail were the people who welcomed me most in North America. I felt more welcomed by the inmates than anyone outside the jail.

These realizations helped me respond to that inmate who pointed out my ignorance of the pains in the jail. I tried to explain my pains,

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my limitedness, and my own struggles as a foreigner, as an Asian, as a person who speaks broken English. I shared with him my own addictions, sinfulness, and pain. I did not try to convince him but simply shared the pain in my own life. In the end, I said to him, “You do not know about these pains at all either, right? But still we make good and meaningful efforts together to help each other even with all different kinds of pains

and struggling without underestimating the other’s pains and struggling. I believe it’s worth it.” Thankfully, the inmate nodded and agreed that he had no idea about my pains also and agreed that making an effort to help each other even without fully understanding each other’s pains and sufferings is worth it. I was relieved.

I know it still might sound crude and even inappropriate comparing my pain to that of the inmates. But the point is that we as humans all have issues, pains, and struggles from our different kinds of limitedness. Therefore, humbly acknowledging that human limitedness—making an effort to help each other in our common faith in Jesus Christ, is so necessary—and it works more than we think. Reading the Bible slowly together, we learned together not only about God and the Bible but also about the people in SBR and their joys and pains. We could help one another, pray for one another, teach one another, laugh together, and learn from one another more about the good news and the hope that the Bible teaches.

As we read the Bible, prayed together as sinners before God, and acknowledged our needs to be forgiven by the blood of the Lamb, SBR bound us together in Christ, tearing down the wall between the jail and the outside world. In reading the Bible slowly, we found God who alone can forgive, teach, and accept the humble sinner—each of us—who needs to be forgiven, taught, and accepted.

About the author

Sungbin Kim is the chaplain at the Work Release in Goshen, an assistant chaplain in the Elkhart County Jail, and a worship coordinator at Yellow Creek Mennonite Church (LMC). Previously, he was a Presbyterian pastor in South Korea. Sungbin holds a Bachelor of Theology and Master of Divinity from Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary in Seoul, South Korea, and a Master of Divinity from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, where he lives with his wife, Shinae, and their son, Seungju.