

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It's the best-selling book of all time! It's available in every spoken language known to man. Most households in the US have at least one copy per person. You can read or download the whole book online for free. Everyone whom I know has one. I'm talking of course about the Bible. But here's the interesting thing – according to the American Bible Society, based on an extensive survey which they have performed every year for the last ten plus years, “while 77% of U.S. adults have a Bible, the percentage of adults who are “Bible Users” – people who read the Bible on their own outside of church at least 3-4 times per year, dropped 11 percentage points to 39% in 2022. This represents a 25 million-person decline to 103 million Bible Users since last year” (and an all-time low). That's less than 50% of people who identify as Christian in the USA. And consider for a moment the lax standard – 3-4 times per year! Astounding when you think about it. It would seem that although you can find the Bible almost everywhere, fewer and fewer people actually read it. But does it really matter?

To help answer that question today, imagine for a minute a world without the Bible – a world where all knowledge – all truth – is from limited observation, experience, and opinion. Where would that leave us? Well, what does the natural world tell us? It's hard to deny that we see complexity. For all the hours and dollars spent on research, we still know very little about just how the brain works. It's extremely complex. There is a delicate balance that we observe in nature – things like the food chain, the water cycle, the oxygen/carbon dioxide cycle. So there seems to be a power at work, there seems to be design and order, or so we observe. And then there is that thing we call our conscience. It gives me a pat on the back when I do good, a swat on the wrist when I do bad. And as you travel around the world, there are clearly very basic rights and wrongs that transcend governments and countries. So, as we observe the reality of conscience, I guess we can deduce that there are basic rights and wrongs which must come from somewhere.

But this leaves a plethora of unanswered questions. Who or what is the higher power or god? Does God care about me or love me? Is God even aware of me? Beyond the very basics like “killing is wrong” or “stealing is wrong” what is good and what is not wrong? Is there a life after this life? If so, what will happen to me when I die. And what about while I am here? Why am I here – what is my purpose? If observation of nature and conscience is all we have to go on, then humans are left to guess or speculate how they think it all works together. And in many cases, that's exactly what they have done – that's what man-made religions and philosophies are – people's best guesses as to what they observe in nature and in the conscience all works together.

Certainly they differ from one another in many ways, but in their basic form, you will find that they are the same. There is a higher power or powers, and I, the individual, must do enough to appease the higher power, then my life here will be better and I will enjoy an afterlife of some sort. Buddhism teaches that I appease the deity by divorcing myself from the material, then I enjoy Nirvana. Hindu teaches a person to treat all life well and live morally so that the gods will reincarnate you to the next highest form until at last you are part of god. Islam teaches its followers to keep the basic laws or pillars of Islam and Allah will receive you in heaven, or if you fail, do something extraordinary like die a martyr to make up for it and go right to heaven. Shinto teaches its adherents to honor their ancestors and live an honorable life so the spirits of their ancestors are pleased in the afterlife and they bring good fortune now and in your life to come. All different, but at their heart the same – it's up to you to do what you need to do to please the deity and be saved.

And then of course there are those who don't even acknowledge that nature demonstrates that there is a higher power or god. Atheism, or secular humanism, don't acknowledge a god or an afterlife, yet the message is remarkably similar to the other man-made religions: work hard, live morally, and improve this world to make it better for me and the next generation, then life will be better for you and for your children and grandchildren in the future.

Be good and good things will come now and after this life. That pretty much sums up philosophy and religion outside of Biblical Christianity. But that still leaves us with key questions that can't be answered. “Have I done enough to please the deity or to change the world for the better?” “Have I been good enough to get to the next life, or to make life better for my kids and grandkids?” And when it's atheism and secular humanism, the questions are even bigger, “Why am I here? What is my purpose?” You might write a book about these things, you might speculate, you might try to prove any of these by scientific observation, but you will always come up short, you will only be left with more questions. And your guess is as good as mine.

I ask you – isn't that what we are seeing? A multitude in our society craving identity but coming up with more questions than answers. A generation going through motions of doing the things mom and dad or grandma and grandpa did but with no real reason or understanding of why, chasing promise after promise of what will bring happiness and fulfillment – education, paycheck, achievement in the classroom or on the field, a new power, a new right, a new sexual identity, etc. But promise after promise after promise falls flat, leaving bewildered, disenchanting, bitter, dejected and unmotivated people. People missing the thing right in front of their noses: a place where answers abound, a place where

questions about God, life, purpose, sexuality, identity, meaning, morality, and life after death are all answered in detail. Where is that place? John puts it this way: **John 20:30-31** <sup>30</sup> **Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.** <sup>31</sup> **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

What's the "these are written?" It's the words of the Bible, the words that share the history of God and humanity and the universe. The words that tell us how we got here – God created us. The words that explain how the world got the way it is with problems and hardship and tragedy – Adam and Eve's fall into sin. These words tell us what God did about it – he promised to send someone to undo the problem, to forgive sin, to make it possible for humans when they exit this world to go to a better place. These words share a God who is aware, who does care. These are the words that tell us to be patient, that this isn't our permanent home, that a better heaven is coming. These words share that tragedy and hardship and difficulty affect even those who do trust in God, but that he will use them to carry out his plan. These words share that our purpose now is to point people to that loving, forgiving God who has provided a better future for those who follow him. These words make it clear that we will never be able to obey God perfectly and that we will not make this world into a utopia, but that Jesus did obey God perfectly and will take us after this life to the perfect and only utopia – heaven. This is the only place where we come away with certainty instead of questions. These words **are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

Do you know what else God says about these words? They change hearts from unbelief to faith: **Romans 10:17** **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."** They strengthen our faith, **2 Timothy 3:15** and **how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.** And these words empower us to live as God desires, **2 Timothy 3:16-17** **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

So, I pose the question again: the Bible, does it matter? Absolutely it does. It is the key, the instruction manual, the roadmap to life and in its words lie the power of God to change hearts, lives, and eternities. But only 50% of those calling themselves Christians read it at home even 3-4 times per year. OK, I've got to pose the question, don't I? How about us? When's the last time you picked up your Bible at home and read? When's the last time you were making a difficult life decision and you grabbed the Bible and read in order to help you with it? When's the last time you were enduring a tough time and you grabbed your Bible and read in order to help you through it? When's the last time that you read the Bible with your children? I can't read any of your hearts, but I'm guessing we'd be right around the average. Which means many of us are missing out – missing out on blessings God wants us to have. See, this isn't like a parent saying to a child, "You need to clean your room," this is more serious than that. What if your child or a loved one stopped eating or wasn't eating enough? Serious stuff. You'd offer them food, you'd verbalize, "You've got to eat!" Why? If they don't start eating enough, it's going to wreck their body – maybe cost their lives.

The Bible is food for our souls. If we're not eating regularly, it's going to harm us. Boy, this really does matter, this is so important. You and I need to be reading our Bibles. Do you know what the number one reason people list for not doing it is? Guess? I'm busy. And that's been the most common answer on the survey I mentioned earlier. But you know what? That's actually changing. The same group that did this survey saw a change. Last year for the first time in the history of the survey, those 30 years old and under answered, "I don't know where to start" more often than, "I'm too busy!" Do you see the progression – we went from a generation or two of "I learned it when I was a kid and know enough of it" "I don't read it often but still believe it" to "I don't even know where to start!" They never did learn it. But you know what? My intent in sharing this isn't to depress you or to browbeat, I hope you see that there is opportunity here. For most of us – we just need to make the time. But for the growing number who don't know where to start, there are some awesome resources to help. I'd like to share a few. In the Narthex we put trifold flyers out every week – they are a guide with short commentary to help you read through the Bible in three years. You can find resources on our synod's website [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net) and our website [flcfdl.org](http://flcfdl.org). There are daily Bibles that organize readings to get you through the Bible in one year or three years. And don't forget your Catechism. That isn't a textbook for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders – I hope you realize that. The Catechism serves as a topical index for the Bible. Wrestling with questions of money management? Grab your catechism and look up stewardship. Wrestling with questions about marriage and sexuality? Grab your catechism and go to the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment and read all the passages listed there. Questions about communion or Baptism or how a person comes to faith? Same thing! It's a practical resource to help us use the Bible to make life decisions. There are so many resources to help us get started – just grab one and start using it and here's what you will find – your faith will grow, you will be more confident that Jesus really loves you, forgives you, and is the way to heaven. You will have greater strength to face death. Does that matter to you? You will gain a richer understanding of your purpose and identity. Practical information for life – relationships, work, marriage, citizenship, parenting, money management, and much more. Do these things matter to you? Then the Bible matters too! Use it, read it, study it, share it with your kids. It will make a difference! God guarantees it. AMEN.