



KAT'OIKON EKKΛHΣΙΑ
Family as
Church

by Melissa Tsongranis

For many of us, there is nothing better than curling up with a book and getting lost in it. We all love a good book—but how about the Good Book? How often do we curl up with the Bible and lose ourselves in the stories and teachings of our Lord? At bedtime, do our children beg us to read the parable of the Good Samaritan for the hundredth time? The Bible has lessons that will direct us in every application of life. It is the story of God's tremendous love for us and it calls for us to immerse ourselves deep into its pages.

Making the Bible an important part of our families' lives is critical. Our families should read the Bible together, as well as individually. This time we spend reading together should help lay the foundation for personal Bible study by giving our children the tools they need to read as they grow. By making this a regular practice, they will learn that familiarity with the Bible is necessary for growth as Orthodox Christians.

Shift your Mind

Reading the Bible isn't like reading anything else—we don't read through it and then stack it on a shelf along with the latest John Grisham novel. The Bible is something we should be constantly reading and integrating into our life. There are two important things that we must keep in mind as we begin to read the Bible.

First, reading the Bible is less about accumulating rote knowledge and more about developing a relationship. For example, when we read a textbook for a class, we go through it taking notes and commit to memory certain concepts. When we finish the text, there is a certain amount of knowledge that we have gained. When we read the Bible, however, we enter into a relationship. Think about a new relationship; the more time we spend with the person, the more we learn and the more we begin to understand them. As a result, we learn more about ourselves through this dynamic, healthy, and loving relationship. The Bible reveals God's relationship with mankind. The more we read, the more we understand, and the more we learn about ourselves.

The next thing we must keep in mind is that God is mysterious—so great and so loving that we can't possibly ever comprehend His essence. So, as we read the Bible, we must be mindful that what we have understood has merely scratched the surface of what is there. Years ago, I decided to read the Bible cover to cover. I started with Genesis and I unfortunately got stuck there. I got so caught up with wanting to fully understand all aspects of the book that I dissected it, resulting in two pages of questions I had for my spiritual father. As I bombarded him with questions, he lovingly reminded me that I should not be reading this like an investigative reporter, but rather as a humble

Family Ministry

Reading the Bible

servant, grateful that my Master is allowing me access to know Him better. Questioning and getting proper answers leads to growth, but God's wisdom infinitely surpasses our limited understanding, and we must accept that there are certain things in the Bible that will remain mystifying to us. However, each time we read more is revealed, drawing us closer and closer to God's Heavenly Kingdom. As we become more familiar with its teachings, we see it bear tangible fruit in our lives through our actions.

Getting Started

Once we have come to terms with the difference of reading the Bible from that of our average New York Times Best Seller, we are ready to get started. It becomes quite apparent that there are many Bibles to choose from—perhaps too many. Thomas Nelson Publishers recently published the new Orthodox Study Bible which contains the complete Old and New Testaments. This version has commentary and footnotes from noted Orthodox theologians and can be an excellent resource as you begin to read the Bible. If your children are young, consider investing in a children's Bible to increase both their attention and comprehension. Two excellent children's Bibles are the Children's Bible Reader (published by American Bible Society) and The Bible for Young People by Zoe Kanavas (published by Narthex Press). Another helpful resource in finding the appropriate text for different age levels can be the Antiochian Gospel Program which can be viewed at www.antiochian.org/node/1448. This program takes the text from the Sunday Gospel reading and writes it for different developmental levels of understanding along with age-appropriate questions.

The next issue to deal with as we decide to get started is what to read. There is so much in the Bible—where do we start and how often do we read? In the Old Testament, God establishes His covenant with Israel, taking us from the story of Creation through the prophetic writings. The New Testament shares Jesus' life and teachings (in the Gospels), how we can live as Christians (in the Epistles), and ends with the prophecy of the Book of Revelation. The Church does have readings that are prescribed for each day which can be a helpful place to begin your studies. These readings are available at the Online Chapel of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America www.onlinechapel.goarch.org. It can be particularly edifying to look ahead at the Sunday Gospel and Epistle readings and read them as a family in preparation for the Liturgy. Whatever you decide, start slowly, and build on your practice from there.

With all worthy things, we need to begin with prayer. Make sure to begin all Bible study by asking God for enlightenment in studying His word.

Shine within our hearts, loving Master, the pure light of Your divine knowledge, and open the eyes of my mind that I may understand Your teachings. Instill in us also reverence for Your blessed commandments, so that having conquered sinful desires I may pursue a spiritual way of life thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You.

— Prayer for Enlightenment

Read and Discuss

Once a passage is read, discuss it as a



family. Discussing the passage reinforces our understanding and helps us to apply the lessons to our lives. The Bible has many riches for us but there will also be numerous questions that will arise in its study. As mentioned before, you are not expected to have all the answers but turn to your parish priest for any questions and guidance you may need. As you discuss ask the following questions:

What happened in this story/passage? (Allow children to retell the story in their own words to check for understanding.)

What do you think this means to our life? (Allow children to discuss how a certain passage will impact them as they live a Christian life?)

Explore

Take time as a family to get to know your Bible and learn more about how to use it with the following activities:

Page through your Bible and learn how it is laid out. Do a search for certain passages and let your children learn how to look them up. Have fun and make a game out of it!

Get a concordance and use it to look up passages about different topics: truth, love, family, or whatever interests your family at that particular moment. If you don't have a concordance handy, use Bible Gateway www.biblegateway.com for a Bible search.

Look at the four Gospels and compare and contrast similar stories in each account. Discuss how each reveals something different about Jesus' life.

Attend parish sponsored Bible study classes and send your children to your church school program and/or other youth programs. In doing this, you will all have the opportunity to study the scripture with you peers and bring home your learning to share.

When you love someone, you want to know all about them. The more you learn, the deeper your connection grows. One of the most important ways we come to know God is through study of the His Word.

The more we read the Bible, the greater our understanding of God and His divine plan for our lives becomes. As we prayerfully study the scripture, the words will take hold and dwell in our hearts bringing us peace and joy. May your family discover the true treasures that come from curling up and getting lost in the greatest book ever written—the Holy Bible.

Melissa Tsongranis is the Resource Coordinator for the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (www.familyaschurch.com). She has worked extensively with very young children and their families for the past 14 years. She can be reached at mtsongranis@goarch.org

From the Fathers

To search the scriptures is a work most fair and profitable for souls. For just as the tree planted by the channels of waters, so also the soul watered by the scriptures is enriched and gives fruit in its season... If we read once or twice and do not understand what we read, let us not grow weary, but let us persist, let us talk much, let us inquire... Let us draw from the fountain of the perennial garden and from the most pure waters springing unto life eternal.

St. John Damascene

FAMILY ACTIVITY CORNER

Preparing for Pentecost

This year, we celebrate Pentecost on Sunday, June 15. As a family, prepare for the celebration of this Great Feast by using the suggestions below:

Pray Together

Begin your preparation by learning the following Apolytikion of Pentecost: *Blessed are You, O Christ our God, who made fishermen all-wise, sending down upon them the Holy Spirit, and through them netting the world. O Loving One, Glory to You.*

Read and Discuss Together

Next read the following Epistle and Gospel reading for the feast: *Epistle: Acts 2:1-11 and Gospel: John 7:37-52, 8:12*

Following your reading, discuss the passages and what they mean to our lives today. Write down a few of the questions that arise and seek out their answers by consulting with your parish priest. As a family, discuss how you can become "fishers of men" (as indicated in the Apolytikion) working as contemporary apostles.

To Do Together

Create a mural illustrating the scene from Acts. Imagine the scene and draw the vivid images—the strong wind and the tongues of fire which ignited the apostles in undertaking the evangelization of the world.

This activity was adapted from the Family Gospel Program from the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Further Gospel lessons for other Sunday can be found at www.familyaschurch.org/fi-familynight.asp

The articles on this page are provided by the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. For further information, visit www.familyaschurch.org or call (845) 424-8175