

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Education

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

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Allison Gray

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Contents

Series Preface	7
Introduction	9
Chapter One	
Meet Your Teacher: God	17
Chapter Two	
This Classroom Is Big Enough for All of Us	33
Chapter Three	
Beyond the Three Rs: Learning from Experience	45
Chapter Four	
No Pain, No Gain?: Learning from Suffering	57
Chapter Five	
Changing our Minds: Transformative Knowledge	71
Chapter Six	
Friends, Enemies, Classmates: Learning with Others	84
Chapter Seven	
Reading is FUNdamental: The Good Book	97
Afterword	112
Notes.....	117

Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about EDUCATION.”

Introduction

My best friend Nicole is a professor of criminology, so her home bookshelves are full of studies about how the FBI profiles serial killers and textbooks of sociological theory and complex statistics. But all these books from her professional life are lined up next to a massive personal collection of memoirs and studies about World War II. She has gathered autobiographical accounts from US military personnel who served in the European and Pacific theaters, and hefty tomes of analysis by military historians. The packed bookshelves are the result of her passionate and self-directed education.

Nicole tends to take a deep dive into any topic that sparks her interest. One spring, she decided she wanted to learn more about the war and those who served, to find out about her grandfathers' experiences. She and her mom have since traveled to France to visit important battle sites. For Christmas she gave several of her friends airborne clickers, or "Crickets," that soldiers used to signal to each other in the trenches. The Crickets helped soldiers stay connected, and she thought they were a good symbol for her own long-distance friendships.

This kind of passion for learning and the way Nicole lets new knowledge shape her life and her relationships is something that goes beyond any classroom. For Nicole, education is holistic, transformative, and a source of great

joy. While not all of us experience every aspect of our education this way—I myself remember nights of crying over calculus homework—the Bible’s portraits of education, educators, and students suggest that lifelong learning is something that can enrich our lives and bring us deep satisfaction.

The Bible: A Story of Education

Reflections on the positive effects of education are everywhere in the Bible. The author of Proverbs reminds the reader to “Incline your ear and hear my words, / and apply your mind to my teaching; / for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, / if all of them are ready on your lips” (Proverbs 22:17–18). The one who listens will access a storehouse of practical wisdom. Other biblical accounts demonstrate that education goes beyond the ability to simply recall helpful teachings. When Jesus prays for his disciples, he connects education with the emotional bonds of friendship: “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these [disciples] know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25–26). The relationship between Jesus and his dearest friends taught them how to love and be loved by God. Even the natural world can become a school for those with open eyes. The New Testament letter writer Paul teaches the Romans that “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal

power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20). Opportunities for learning are everywhere.

Most striking of all, education pervades the language biblical authors use to describe the Bible itself. Jewish authors who refer to the text as God’s Torah capture its teaching potential; the Hebrew word means not only “law” but more broadly “instruction.” The author of Revelation proclaims that the practice of reading it is beneficial, saying, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (Revelation 1:3). Again and again the Bible exhorts us, “Learn from the Bible!” The whole biblical story, beginning to end, is a living record of God’s self-revelation and of the people who learn how to respond to God’s loving call to enter into relationship.

In finding that education is embedded in the very fabric of the biblical texts, we also discover that it encompasses things we with our modern ideas of school and professional training might not immediately expect. People learn in the family, from their friends and enemies, directly from God, and by asking difficult questions. Most importantly the Bible holds up education through stories, stories about awe-inspiring moments when God revealed God’s self to the people, stories about admirable figures who modeled good character and virtuous behavior, even stories of terrible pain, failure, and suffering that contain valuable lessons. Furthermore, the practical impact of gaining knowledge or learning a skill is kept in mind. So how does this education take place?

Encounter, Transformation, Application

My research into what the Bible has to say about education reveals a remarkably consistent kind of educational narrative, suggesting that we human beings have a shared experience of learning. That narrative is centered around an ongoing process with three interlocking phases: encounter, transformation, and application.

Biblical figures like Paul, Jonah, Job, and Jesus model what it looks like to learn from experiences of encounter, both positive and negative. Their experiences are much like ours: we meet a new person who has a perspective different from our own, we hear an engrossing story that makes us think, or we run up against a challenging life experience that pushes us outside our comfort zone. Such an encounter can make us stop short, or it can drive us to ask tough questions and probe more deeply into new spaces.

Those who are open to an educational encounter in the Bible often enter another phase, a period of transformation. The psalmist sings gratefully about learning and its holistic benefits: “I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; / in the night also my heart instructs me. / I keep the LORD always before me; / because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. / Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; / my body also rests secure” (Psalm 16:7–9). His education in the form of advice and internal wisdom refreshes his heart, soul, and body, going well beyond a mental exercise. We might be reminded of how quiet time to reflect on new discoveries or challenging events allows us to distill key lessons from what we have experienced.

Often transformation takes place in the company of others, and the Bible reflects this truth, too. The New Testament Letter to the Ephesians talks about how learning has given Christ-believers a new way of life, for “you were taught to put away your former way of life, . . . and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self” (Ephesians 4:22–23).

Perhaps most importantly, biblical stories show God’s people taking their new knowledge and applying it to improve the lives of others. Many students and teachers today share the biblical idea that we can use our learning to build up others. The Marianist order which founded the university where I teach asserts that “educators who ultimately seek wisdom, who impart knowledge for the sake of love and who teach students to love freedom for the sake of service, sow seeds that will bear fruit for generations, and prepare the ground in which a culture of life, peace and love can flourish.”¹

The Marianists take their inspiration in part from St. Paul, who identified teaching as a spiritual gift, because it benefits the wider community: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:7–8). All those who learn and teach, in their beautiful diversity, contribute to our mutual growth.

In biblical stories, application leads back around to encounter, when people together share their stories and generate new questions. As a library of stories about educa-

tion, the Bible both asks big questions and points us in the direction of possible answers, challenging us to set off on an educational journey.

Learning Outcomes

Like any good conversation about education, this one begins with a set of learning outcomes and a series of questions we'll answer on our journey through the Bible.

We will begin from a consideration of the teachers and students in biblical texts. If the Bible is an educational resource, it makes sense to start chapter 1 with the biblical profiles of God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, in *Meet Your Teacher: God*. In chapter 2, we will examine who gets to learn and what kinds of experiences or situations might become obstacles in a person's education. As the chapter title, *This Classroom Is Big Enough for All of Us*, suggests, the biblical texts seem to agree that every person deserves access to an education. But what does that mean for our lives today?

Chapter 3, *Beyond the Three Rs: Learning from Experience*, allows us to dig into the mechanics of education, especially the practical wisdom that we develop through lived experience. A particular question about what we can learn from painful experiences follows in chapter 4, *No Pain, No Gain?: Learning from Suffering*. We'll pay special attention to what the biblical authors say about whether or not suffering is necessary for learning.

Some of our most profound educational experiences, those pieces of knowledge and moments of learning that reshape our sense of self or give us new purpose, are the focus of chapter 5, *Changing our Minds: Transformative Knowledge*. Looking to biblical examples of those who allowed themselves to be transformed, we'll think about personal transformation and the ripple effects learning has in one's community.

You may remember friends from your school days with great fondness, because who we learn with matters quite a lot for whether or not our learning sticks. In chapter 6, we'll think about learning communities. *Friends, Enemies, Classmates: Learning with Others* examines how the Bible addresses the support (and the friction!) that accompanies learning alongside others.

Chapter 7 wraps up our study with a conversation about why *Reading is FUNdamental: The Good Book and the different kinds of texts that can be found in the Bible itself*. This chapter proposes that the Bible can become a friend and companion on your transformative educational journey.

For Reflection:

- Think back on your own lifetime of formal and informal education. What are the highlights of your own educational journey? What kinds of teachers have inspired you, and how?

- What are some of the things you most value learning? When have you struggled to learn or apply a “life lesson”?
- Take time to reflect on the lessons you’ve learned that have transformed your way of being in the world. What do you still hope to learn?

Chapter One

Meet Your Teacher: God

My mom became a teacher later in life, beginning her classroom career after the four of us kids were all in school. We probably should have seen it coming. She often created coloring or math worksheets for us to do on summer mornings, she loved to ask probing questions about books we were reading, and she was the master of providing supplies and tips for any art project. It is so obviously her calling to be in the classroom, and she excels at making learning fun for her first graders. With the help of a goofy puppet named Mr. Wizard, who appears in her yearly school photo, my mom also provides encouragement, acceptance, and important lessons about empathy. She meets each child as a whole person who is ready to learn important academic skills and even more important skills for building positive relationships. The joy she finds in teaching spills over into a joyful learning experience for students.

It isn't too much of a stretch to compare her to Mr. Rogers, that loving educator so many of us know from the long-running PBS television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (or the 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*). From 1968 to 2001, Fred Rogers appeared on TV to engage in imaginative play, to address social