

DBS: Dusty Bible Syndrome and How to Overcome It

William C. Mills

When I entered parish ministry I wanted to teach a Bible study. For several weeks I announced the Bible study in the Sunday bulletin and waited for some response. About ten people wanted to join so we decided to meet on Wednesday evenings. Our group met regularly and we started and ended our evenings with prayer and of course plenty of cookies and coffee.

As a new pastor fresh out of seminary I was curious as to their level of Bible knowledge. One evening I decided to take a poll which was not very scientific! I asked my class close their eyes and answer the questions by raising or lowering their hands. First I asked if they read the Bible at least once per week. About five hands went up. This stirred my curiosity because I was left wondering about the other five people who didn't raise their hands! Then I inquired, "How many of you read the Bible at least four days a week?" Only two hands went up. Finally I asked, "How many of you read the Bible every day?" and only one hand went up. Now, ten years later, I ask the same questions of parishioners and also students in the college level Bible courses that I teach. I have found the statistics to be very similar; most people read the Bible very infrequently, and some not at all. They suffer from a terrible disease called DBS, otherwise known as Dusty Bible Syndrome!

I admit that I once suffered from DBS. My parents were not active readers. Dad read *Readers Digest* and *Sports Illustrated* and mom read the *Ladies Home Journal* and

the Sunday newspaper, but I don't recall either of them buying books or going to the library to check out books for themselves.

However we did have a fine, black leather *King James Version* of the Bible on our coffee table which sat nicely on a stack of mom's magazines. I remember one day in particular, we were cleaning the house before our evening company arrived. Mom was vacuuming and I was dusting the tables and furniture. I picked up the Bible, wiped off the dust, and returned it back to its place on the coffee table. I remember touching the old leather binding which was barely worn, the pages so neat and crisp with a thin red ribbon bookmark hanging down elegantly. I opened it up and saw my mother's name inscribed in the front cover. The Bible was a gift from her mother, my grandmother. Well, apparently mom didn't read it much, because it looked good as new!

Having DBS is not fatal, there is hope: just pick up the Bible and start reading. Most people think that the Bible is boring, but actually the stories rival those of a good movie or television show. You will find stories about war, love, adultery, incest, murder, mystery, trickery, the rise to power and the humiliation of defeat, of marriage and betrayal, and of heroes and villains. There are stories of kings and queens, princes and paupers, of prophets and sages. The Bible contains some of the most beautiful poetry imaginable and many of the phrases and words have found their way into our contemporary culture. Many of us have heard or used the terms, "doubting Thomas" or "the writing is on the wall" or have heard a funeral sermon based on Psalm 23.

However it is quite easy to begin reading the Bible and get confused. Have you tried to pronounce difficult names like Methuselah or Nebuchednezzar? You might read about Babylon and scratch your head because you have no idea where Babylon is located

on a map. You might have a hard time keeping different people straight like the Hittites, Amorites, Jesubites, and Assyrians. You might get confused when reading the Book of Genesis and realize that there are two creation stories rather than one or that the New Testament contains two accounts of Jesus' birth and four accounts of the resurrection. So many questions and confusions cause people to close the Bible and never open it again.

The Bible is like reading any literature, you need some guidance and direction to help you along the way. After a while you will be fine on your own but in the beginning you need some assistance. No one expects a college student to master the teachings of the great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, or Sophocles without some help. The same idea applies to reading and studying Bible.

My advice is to participate in several beginning level Bible studies in your local parish. A Bible study is a good way to learn more about the Bible and to meet other parishioners and share fellowship. There are different ways to read and study the Bible. Some groups choose to read one book at a time such as the Book of Genesis or the gospel of Mark. The group will read and study one chapter per week. Other groups may choose to study a particular theme or subject such as women in the Bible or look at the theme of forgiveness or love in the New Testament. I recently heard of a parish that has decided to read the entire Bible over the course of a year and have been encouraging parishioners to keep a spiritual journal as a way to record their thoughts and feelings about the particular scripture passages. Each week the parishioners read the scripture selections and share their journal entries with one another. What a great way to learn and to foster community at the same time!

There are many resources either online or in print that can help you with your Bible studies. First and foremost is a good Bible dictionary. A Bible dictionary is like a regular dictionary which provides definitions of words. In this case a Bible dictionary provides definitions of words that we will encounter, words such as the meaning of the words Joppa or King Hezekiah. You might also need a Bible commentary. A Bible commentary is a collection of short explanations of Scripture passages so that you will better understand the meaning of the text. Some Bible commentaries cover individual books of the Bible such as a commentary on the Book of Jonah or on the Psalms while others include every book of the Bible. Finally you might find a Bible atlas helpful. A Bible atlas usually includes maps, charts, graphs, and lists of important Biblical persons. It is helpful for example to know the topography of Ancient Israel and see that Jesus had to walk down from Jerusalem to Jericho since the city of Jerusalem is located on a high elevation. Many Bible atlases also include pictures of key Biblical sites so that you will get a better idea of the lay of the land.

Choosing a Bible translation that you like can sometimes be difficult. There are so many Bible translations available it really boggles the mind! Many people were brought up reading the King James Version which was published in 1611. However since then many more English translations have followed. I personally use several Bible translations when preparing my sermons or for preparing Bible studies, Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, or the Jerusalem Bible. Recently a new English language version has appeared called The Message. This particular version is helpful because it “translates” the Biblical text into everyday common words and phrases and it reads very much like a story. Before spending a lot of

money on multiple copies of the Bible borrow a few from your friends or from the local library and try them out. Your local parish might have several translations available for you to use too.

One of the major problems that people encounter is that they open up their Bible and start reading. After a few verses they get confused and then put the Bible down never to open it again. I always suggest to people that they begin with a short book of the Bible like one of the prophets like Amos or Jonah which are about six chapters long. I also recommend the Book of Psalms as a place to start since the Psalms contain a vast array of human emotions and feelings: love, loss, anger, anxiety, doubt, faith; emotions which we all have. I also recommend that people read the short introduction to that particular book of the Bible that they are reading. Usually the Bible translators include some overviews or outlines so that the reader will have a better understanding of what they are about to read.

Once you feel more comfortable reading and studying the Bible you might want to take a more advanced route. Throughout the year many local colleges and universities host guest speakers, and some may be speaking on a Biblical subject. Some monasteries and retreat centers also host day-long or weekend retreats on entire books of the Bible or Bible themes. Furthermore, you might be able to find an online community or blog devoted to Bible study. If you don't have time to read the Bible or cannot attend a lecture, take advantage of an audio version of the Bible, many of which can be found as downloads online or in CD format at your local bookstore. You can listen to the Bible while driving to work, while walking the dog, or while doing housework. There are

endless ways that you can learn more about the Word of God, you just need to be proactive and intentional about fighting against this pernicious disease called DBS.

The Bible is more than dead letters on a piece of paper but the living and vibrant Word of God that inspires, encourages, sustains, and builds up. As pastor I find myself again and again turning to the Bible for inspiration and hope and I hope that you will too.