

Bible Introductions

At the Community of Taizé in France, one of the main spiritual practices of the community are the daily “Bible Introductions” following morning prayer. Each week, Taizé welcomes thousands of young people from all around the world for week-long retreats and life in community. Rather than calling the daily scripture engagement “Bible study” or “lessons” or “teaching” they are called “Bible Introductions” and the Brothers of Taizé don’t assume that anyone coming has ever encountered the stories of the Bible before. They are presented clearly and plainly, in the native language of the young people (often translated by other young people), and become the fuel for discussion—no experience necessary. For those who have long experience with the Bible, the invitation is to read the stories again as if for the first time—to listen to the stories, and the stories of the people you are reading with, and to listen for the voice of God speaking through them. The stories of Jesus are often the most compelling. Most are seemingly simple, and yet have a depth that can open us up in unexpected ways.

What is your experience with the Bible? Is it familiar or foreign to you?

Journaling

Journaling has a long tradition as a Christian spiritual practice. St. Therese of Lisieux, Thomas à Kempis, Madeleine L’Engle, Dag Hammarskjöld, Søren Kierkegaard, John Wesley, and Henri Nouwen are all well-known Christian Journal keepers. Unlike a diary where one records the day-to-day details of one’s life, a journal is instead a tool for reflection, discernment, and prayer. If you imagine your life as a crowded dance floor or a field during an athletic event, it’s sometimes hard to pay much attention to what is going on beyond what’s immediately in front of you. Journaling practice is a way to “go up to the balcony” or “up to the booth” where your higher vantage point and relaxed environment allows you to gain some much needed perspective, to see the whole dance or game with all its various parts, and to get a sense of what would help make things move in the most helpful way. In the book “Journaling As a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God Through Attentive Writing,” Helen Cepero writes: “One of the best gifts of a journal is that it gives you a place to show up. As you write, you may discover where you actually are.” Many journal-keepers report that they often don’t know what they are thinking or feeling until after they have written it down, when suddenly it becomes clear. Journals can be a way to reflect, to work out challenging situations, to be in dialogue with yourself and to be in dialoged with God.

Do you keep a journal (or have you in the past)? What did you gain from that experience?

Practice: Bible Introduction and Journaling

Find a comfortable and quiet place where you can spend some time journaling without interruption. Slowly read the “reflect” section of the journal worksheet. After reading, spend a few moments in silence. Then read the journal prompt, and spend a few more minutes in silence. When you are ready to write, begin to journal. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, just write what comes to you. Try to be open to listen to your own inner voice and to the voice of God.

Come Alive: Journaling Session 1

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from John 1:29-39):

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' ... The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

John the Baptist recognized something in Jesus: that Jesus was called to be a leader among his people, and even more than that. When John talks about Jesus, he uses symbolic language ("the Lamb of God") which the people of that day would have understood to mean that this person has been chosen by God and has an important role to play. While they recognized Jesus as a teacher (rabbi), the others didn't quite get it. And no wonder, John was being really confusing (after me but is ahead of me because he's before me—what??) But because of what John saw and shared, they were curious about Jesus, and followed him to see what all the fuss was about. All based on something John "saw" and shared.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when someone "saw" something in you (a gift, a talent, a capacity, etc.) and told you, or others, about it. Maybe its something you didn't see in yourself, maybe it confirmed something you already knew. What was it like? What did they see in you? How did they talk about it? What was the reaction of others?

Come Alive: Journaling Session 1

Come Alive: Journaling Session 2

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Matthew 4:18-22):

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

In the time of Jesus it was not unusual for gifted students to be invited by a teacher (a rabbi) to come and study with them. These elite few would become the rabbi’s “disciples” and would follow the rabbi from place to place, not only learning what the rabbi knows, but also learning to live as the rabbi lives and teach as the rabbi teaches. The young people Jesus calls, however, are not the best of the best—but instead are young people who have been passed over by the other rabbis, have given up on higher education, and have started working for the family business. Many of these students were fishermen, which was hard work with long hours in that time and offered little reward. However, Jesus recognized something in these young people, and calls them to a new vocation—to join with him in gathering people rather than fish. They immediately leave their old lives behind to go a new way, something their families probably didn’t understand fully. But through following Jesus, entirely new possibilities opened up for them that shaped the rest of their lives.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you felt called to go a different way than what others had planned for you, what you had planned for yourself, or what is considered “normal” in society or your family. What made you go in that direction? How did it feel? How did others react? What was the end result?

Come Alive: Journaling Session 2

Come Alive: Journaling Session 3

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Mark 4:35-41):

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Without our modern weather prediction systems, traveling by boat in Jesus' day was very dangerous. Storms arose out of nowhere, and threatened to drown even experienced boaters. As a storm rages all around them, Jesus' disciples are terrified, and yet Jesus doesn't even seem to notice their struggle. At least he could have woken up and been freaked out with them! But Jesus, their wise teacher, seems to know deep down that things will turn out OK in the end—and still he does his thing to help calm the disciples' nerves. Jesus and his disciples experience many other "storms" in their time together as this story unfolds, with danger and uncertainty all around them. There are many times when the disciples were very afraid, and yet, through it all, Jesus travels right beside them.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you felt overwhelmed by the circumstances of your life. What was your "storm"? Were you afraid? Who was with you? How did you make it through?

Come Alive: Journaling Session 3

Come Alive: Journaling Session 4

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Matthew 10:1-14):

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

Jesus had gathered together a diverse group of followers (recognize the names of the fishermen from a few weeks ago?) They had been traveling with Jesus all over the countryside and learning from him as he preached good news, fed the poor, healed the sick, and brought liberation to many in need. Now Jesus has recognized that it’s time for them to strike out on their own, to apply what they had learned with him in other places, and to experience their own gifts and strengths. He sends them only with no stuff—knowing that the gifts and strengths they possess will be enough for them to have an impact on the people and situations they will encounter.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you used one of your gifts or strengths to have a positive impact on a situation. Maybe you faced a challenge you were able to overcome. Maybe you were able to help someone in need. Maybe your particular contribution helped a group move forward. Describe the situation you were facing, the strength or gift you engaged, and how it all went.

Come Alive: Journaling Session 4

Come Alive: Journaling Session 5

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Matthew 14:13-21):

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The “this” that Jesus hears about is the death of his cousin, John known as “the Baptist” who was a prophetic preacher with a large following of people. Jesus also had a large following, and even when he needs some time to himself, they follow after him—looking for wisdom and healing. As evening comes, Jesus and the disciples have a bit of a problem—a hungry crowd looking to them for dinner. Though the disciples were sure there wasn't enough food to go around, Jesus takes what they have and shares it. It turns out there was enough for everyone, and in fact, there was more left over than they started with.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you faced a situation that seemed impossible, but found a way through. Maybe it was a time when you didn't have what you needed to solve a problem. Maybe it was a time when you didn't think you were good enough. Maybe it was a time when you realized that alone you couldn't do it, but with others you could.

Come Alive: Journaling Session 5

Come Alive: Journaling Session 6

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from John 13:1-20):

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. And during supper Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!'

After Jesus had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

Jesus' followers were always arguing among themselves about which one was the greatest disciple. Some were even so bold as to ask to be Jesus' "right hand guys" when he rose to power. But Jesus understood God's power to be very different from the power that operates in the world most of the time. Because God cares about the poor, sick, and outcasts—to be close to God looks less like kingly authority, and more like humble service. So Jesus demonstrates to his followers how he hopes they will live together. This looks less like politicians scrambling for power over one another, and more like sharing power among one another. And so he challenges their understanding of authority by serving—washing their feet, which was the job of the lowest slave—and inviting them to serve one another.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you did an act of service for someone that had a powerful impact on them (or on you). Or perhaps you want to write about a time someone did an act of service for you. What was done and what difference did it make in your life or in someone else's life?

Come Alive: Journaling Session 6

Come Alive: Journaling Session 7

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Matthew 26:20-29):

When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Jesus' "last supper" is one of the more famous stories in the New Testament, and is familiar to Christians as the origins of the practice of communion. It's a story that takes place in the ordinary life of Jesus and his friends, gathering as they regularly did to eat together. It's a story about betrayal—Judas leaves the table to betray Jesus to the authorities who arrest him, and later kill him. But it's also a story of forgiveness, where Jesus declares forgiveness for all those who are gathered (including Judas), and forgiveness for all who will share in this meal throughout the centuries that follow. Life lived together with others isn't always great, it involves joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, betrayal and forgiveness. So too are our lives a mixture of all of these things.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time when you were betrayed, or where you betrayed someone you cared about. Was there forgiveness? If so, how did it transform the relationship? If not, would forgiveness have made a difference?

Come Alive: Journaling Session 7

Come Alive: Journaling Session 8

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from John 18:1-27):

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.' This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.' Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

Although the betrayal of Jesus was set up at the "last supper," the betrayal happens in a garden, where Judas brought the authorities to arrest Jesus. The authorities were armed and ready for battle, and so were some of Jesus' disciples. When Peter draws his sword and picks a fight, Jesus stops him. He allows the authorities to arrest him rather than engage in violence—which very likely would have led to the death of all Jesus' followers, and perhaps even started an armed rebellion. Some Bible teachers even think that's what Judas was trying to do—not get Jesus arrested but put him in a situation where violence was the only way out so a revolution could happen. But the Way of Jesus isn't violent resistance, but non-violent resistance. And because it didn't resort to violence, in the long run the violence of the authorities were no match for its power.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about when you witnessed, or participated in, someone trying to use violence to solve a problem in a way that wasn't helpful. Or, write about a time when a non-violent approach was a more powerful way to address whatever was going on.

Come Alive: Journaling Session 8

Come Alive: Journaling Session 9

Step 1: Reflect

Read this story from the life of Jesus (from Mark 15:22-41):

Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

For the followers of Jesus, his crucifixion was not only a horrible way for their friend to die, but was a huge disappointment for those who thought Jesus was going to make something important happen. But instead he ends up humiliated, and executed like a common criminal. Why would anyone want to follow such a loser? But the cross of Jesus shows us that God's ways are not our ways—and the very moment when all seems lost is often the moment when God is about to do a new thing. Though things looked (and were!) hopeless, three days later God raises Jesus from the dead, revealing that God can transform even the worst situation into something hopeful.

Step 2: Write

On the back of this page, write about a time in your life when it seemed like all hope was lost, but something surprising happened that turned the situation around. Or perhaps just gave a glimmer of hope in a situation that remained extremely hard.

Come Alive: Journaling Session 9