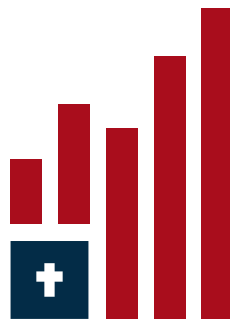


State of the Bible

USA 2022

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



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April 2022 edition

ISBN 978-1-58516-375-5

ABS item 125348

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PREFACE

BY ROBERT L. BRIGGS

American Bible Society

The first job of a leader is to define reality.

Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art*

For more than a decade now, American Bible Society has sponsored this annual survey of how Americans interact with Scripture. Year by year, we've reported on good news, bad news, and puzzling news.

Sometimes reality looks just the way we want it to, but often it doesn't. Even when we wish it were different, we need to know what reality is, so we can figure out how to respond. That's why we do this.

I think back to the first year of the *State of the Bible*. I was troubled by the finding that 10 percent of Americans had an unfavorable view of the Bible. Speaking at a major inter-church conference

about the survey, I must have sounded rather alarmist. My message went along the lines of “the sky is falling!” I’m not sure I used those words, but I might have.

“God is not surprised by the data, and God already knows what he’s going to do with it.”

The next speaker, a Dominican monk, gently corrected me. “I hear what you’re saying,” he began, “but let’s remember two things: God is not surprised by the data, and God already knows what he’s going to do with it.”

That profound wisdom has stayed with me ever since. God knows, and God is working on it.

Every year the *State of the Bible* brings a fresh perspective on the reality God already knows. Our purpose is not merely to satisfy curiosity, or to cause either panic or celebration. It’s a starting point. Where do we go from here? What is God calling us to do in response to this reality, to advance toward the future point God has in mind?

And what is that future point? We have a favorite verse painted on a wall at our American Bible Society headquarters in Philadelphia: “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14 KJV).

If the annual *State of the Bible* report is Point A on our journey, Habakkuk 2:14 is Point B. This vision propels us forward. How is God going to get from point A to point B? How can we help?

By we, I mean Christians in general, and especially churches. God’s chosen instrument to impact the world is the church. American Bible Society stands as a servant to the church. *State of the Bible* is our effort to equip the church with the data necessary to do what God calls it to do.

LOOKING FOR INDICATORS

You might be discouraged by some things you see in this report, as I was years ago in my “sky is falling” speech, but I urge you to look closely for indicators of what God is doing.

I love the story at the end of Elijah’s Mount Carmel showdown in 1 Kings 18 (GNT). In his characteristically brash fashion, the prophet has announced to the king that the three-year drought will soon break—“I hear the roar of rain approaching.”

Then Elijah asks his servant to look for clouds on the horizon. There is nothing.

Bowed low in prayer, “his head between his knees,” Elijah asks his servant to look again. Still nothing. Seven times he asks, with no sign of rain.

Until the seventh, when the servant reports, “I saw a little cloud no bigger than a man’s hand, coming up from the sea.”



ROBERT L. BRIGGS

Robert L. Briggs is the President and CEO of American Bible Society. Before taking this role, he served for more than 20 years in high-level positions within the organization, including as the Senior Vice President of the U.S. Ministry team, Vice President of the Mission Advancement team, and Vice President of Global Ministries.

Previously, Robert held leadership roles with the American Diabetes Association and co-founded Cityhill, a Christian publishing company. Internationally, he has served on multiple committees working to increase Bible access, including United Bible Societies, Forum of Bible Agencies, and Every Tribe Every Nation. Robert and his wife Susan live in Philadelphia. They have five adult children and three grandchildren.

That's what we're looking for. A tiny cloud. Some point of indication—however small—that the work of God is gaining traction, that the Bible is growing in influence and impact.

Elijah's tiny cloud turned into a torrent. The drought broke. The earth was nourished with water from above. This is the progression we as Christians hope for, the knowledge of God's glory gathering, sprinkling, raining, pouring over the earth.

Meanwhile we look for indicators, the tiny clouds taking shape. Maybe it's a younger generation that seems curious about God. Maybe it's the way people turn to Scripture when times get tough. Maybe it's the prying open of the hearts of people who aren't fully engaged with Scripture but don't reject it either. Any of these might be a trend that bends the arc of history toward the new reality of Habakkuk 2:14.

We invite you to scan the horizon with us. Let's embrace the challenges we see here and plan our responses, but let's also celebrate the indicators of hope on the horizon.



RUMBLING WITH REALITY IN 2022

BY JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

American Bible Society

*Vulnerability is not winning or losing.
It's having the courage to show up
when you can't control the outcome.¹*

Brené Brown, Ph.D.

Let's be honest, we didn't want it to be this way. We hoped that COVID-19 would be a distant memory by now. We hoped nations like Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Syria would know peace and justice instead of fear and war. We hoped.

¹ Brown, B. (2018) *Dare to lead: Brave work, tough conversations, whole hearts*. New York: Random House, pp. 19–20. Additional thanks to Dr. Brown for her use of the term “rumbling” as in wrestling or an honest confrontation: a rumble.

In January 2022, as we conducted our *State of the Bible* interviews, the COVID-19 omicron variant was surging through the South and the Midwest, again straining the capacity of healthcare systems and isolating neighbors from one another. But in the midst of the pandemic upheaval, many in the church rose to the occasion and found ways to serve others, despite the challenges.

“We are trying to help. God has put us here, so we try to do what we can do.”

In the USA, local churches and national organizations are re-imagining what it means to connect a timeless gospel with our ever-changing world. In November, *The Wall Street Journal* profiled a few of the church’s creative efforts and its struggles to balance the relational nature of Christian faith with advancing technology and challenging regulations.²

On February 24, Russian forces entered Ukraine, launching what has been called the largest ground war in Europe since World War II. From the midst of bombing, shelling, and a chaotic refugee crisis, American Bible Society received updates from our partner Bible Societies in Ukraine and the surrounding nations. Staff and volunteers were busy serving their neighbors with Bibles, biblical resources for children and other trauma victims, and other basic necessities of life. One first-person update read in part, “We all are still safe. We are trying to help. To be God’s hands, where we are. God has put us here—so we try to do what we can do.”

² Janet Adamy, “Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren’t Going Back” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 Nov 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162>

Whenever Christians face disruptions and difficulties from warfare, pandemic, heartache, and grief, we look to the Bible for wisdom, guidance, and perspective. Recently, I watched the first episode of the second season (“Thunder”) of the popular independent television series, *The Chosen*. In that episode, Jesus paraphrases to his followers the words of John 16:33 (GNT): “The world will make you suffer.” He speaks of the coming Kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom we hope for. Then he says, “in this world, bones will still break. Hearts will still break. But in the end, the light will overcome darkness.”³ As John’s Gospel puts it, “[B]e brave! I have defeated the world!”

When we face trouble, Christians recognize the truth of those words from Ukraine. “God has put us here, so we try to do what we can do.” We also realize that our efforts are not wasted—even though our strength may be small and the forces we battle may seem overwhelming—because God is at work in ways that transcend what we can see.

So how do we respond when the world is broken and tragic? We just keep showing up and trusting God with the outcome because we know that God’s Word brings freedom, healing, and help to those who seek it.

3 See [TheChosen.tv](https://www.TheChosen.tv) (37:43) for more.

LISTENING TO AMERICA

In January 2022, the *State of the Bible* research team launched our most robust study ever,⁴ focusing again on America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church. In the coming chapters, we will focus our attention on eight key themes that collectively tell the story of the Bible in America. We will release a new chapter each month, so we can give readers time to dig into the details and consider how to respond with grace and compassion. After all, God has put us here, in this moment, so let's do what we can to connect our fellow Americans with the life-changing message of the Bible.

Here's what you can expect in the coming months:

1. **The Bible in America.** In our first release, we turn our attention to key measures of Scripture Engagement in America. We'll see that COVID-19 is still influencing America's relationship with the Bible, and we'll consider how to respond to our changing cultural context.
2. **The Faith of our Mothers.** Next, we will focus on faith identity in America, and we'll see how our mothers' faith continues to influence the trajectory of our faith today.
3. **Hope and Flourishing in America.** We plan to continue our annual review of the Bible's extraordinary influence on hope and human flourishing. We'll see how Scripture engagement provides resilience in the presence of unavoidable stresses.

⁴ For details, see **Appendix 1: Methodology** on page 35.

4. **The Bible and Society.** We plan to focus on the Bible's influence on the prosocial behaviors that make good neighbors and form the backbone of thriving societies.
5. **Faith Across the Generations.** As America's youth prepare to head back to school, we'll turn our attention to faith and the Bible across the generations, giving special focus to the nation's youngest adults: Generation Z.
6. **Speaking of Faith in America.** In September, we'll report on a special focus for the 2022 study: how people talk about their faith with others and even invite their neighbors to join them in their faith.
7. **Digging In.** October will feature a deep dive into how people use the Bible, including their Bible reading habits, tools, and technologies.
8. **A Generous Life.** In November, we will explore some new questions about generosity. We'll look at the kinds of charities that Americans support, and we'll explore the role of the Bible and the church in catalyzing philanthropy in America.

Finally in December, we'll wrap up *State of the Bible: USA 2022* with a look back at our top stories and a preview of our research agenda for 2023.

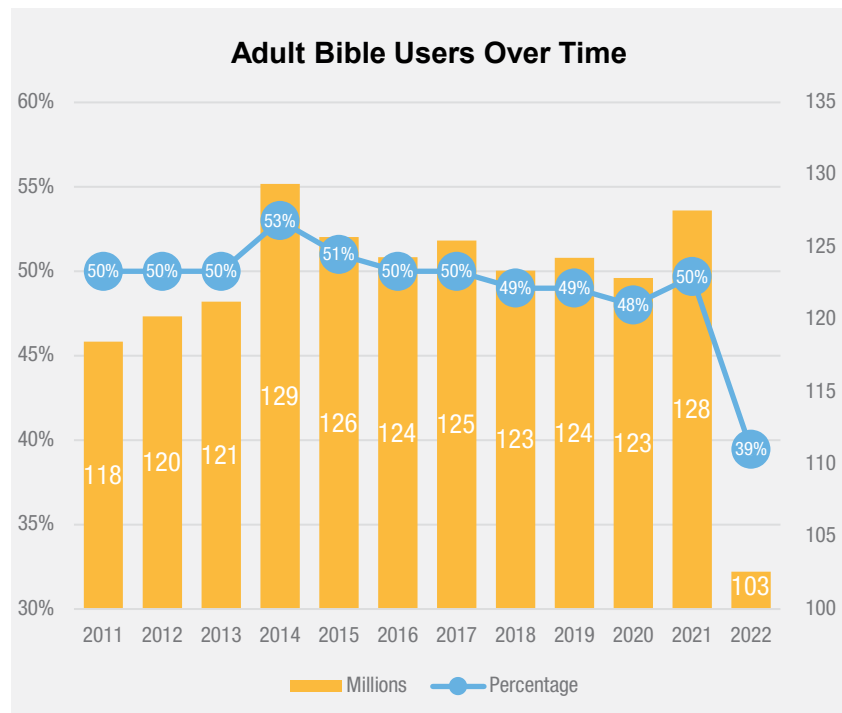
2022 IS NOT 'THE NEW NORMAL'

Before we move on to our first chapter, I'd like to take a few pages to explain why 2022 is not a normal year for *State of the Bible*. Despite our hopes for the new year, 2022 continues to be headlined by disruptions that are impacting America's relationship with the Bible in profound ways. Let me explain ...

On Valentine’s Day 2022, our research team received the final results from the *State of the Bible: USA 2022* national survey. One of our first tasks was to compute the Scripture Engagement scores for this new year, and what we discovered was startling, disheartening, and disruptive.

FEWER BIBLE USERS IN 2022

First, we noticed an unprecedented drop in the percentage of Bible Users⁵ in the United States. In every study since 2018, Bible Users have accounted for between 47 and 49 percent of American adults; however, the 2022 data showed a 10-percent decrease from the



5 Bible Users are defined as those who use the Bible at least 3–4 times each year on their own, outside of a church setting. See **Appendix 2: Definitions** on page 41 for additional terms.

same time in 2021. That means **nearly 26 million Americans reduced or stopped their interaction with Scripture in the past year.**

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT DOWN 21 PERCENT

Second, our concern deepened when we looked at the Scripture engagement numbers for the United States. One in five Americans left the Scripture Engaged category in the past year (–21% or 14.7 million adults), and two in five left the Movable Middle (–44% or 28.7 million adults).⁶ Only the Bible Disengaged category grew, and at an alarming rate, up by 38% (45.2 million adults) in a single year.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SCORES DOWN AMONG BIBLE USERS

Finally, when we looked at the average Scripture Engagement score for Bible Users, we noticed something we hadn't seen before: the Scripture Engagement Scale score for Bible Users was down to $M = 96.7$, and the variability was up to $SD = 17.1$.⁷ By design, the average Scripture Engagement score for Bible Users should be near $M = 100$ with $SD = 15$ points. Typically, we have found that Bible Users score very near those marks.⁸ In 2022, though, even Bible Users saw a decrease in their overall Scripture engagement.

6 Scripture Engagement segments are fully described in **The Journey of Scripture Engagement** on page 30 and in **Appendix 2: Definitions** on page 41.

7 Throughout this ebook, M refers to the mean or average of a group of scores, and SD refers to the standard deviation, which is a measure of variability in a group of scores.

8 From 2019–2021, the average Scripture Engagement Scale score for Bible Users was 99.6, and the average standard deviation was 13.95.

DIGGING DEEPER

After discovering these three unusual patterns in the data, our team began asking a lot of questions:

- Is there something wrong with our sample?
- Did we do something wrong in our calculations?
- What is causing this volatility?

We started with considering our sample. It is certainly true that we used a different methodology to conduct our interviews in 2022. In an effort to provide the most robust and reliable data possible, we partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago to present the *State of the Bible* questions to their AmeriSpeak® panel. You can read more about that methodology in Appendix 1. Furthermore, we conducted a second, independent survey, using our traditional methods of data collection and analysis. Overall, both samples indicated that something real had changed. We were detecting a clear signal, not just noise.

Next we reviewed our calculations. We double-checked our math and ran the numbers again ... and again. We were satisfied that the math was right, but we still couldn't explain the change.

Finally, we dug in **behind the Scripture Engagement Scale scores** to the factors and items that drive it. For more on how Scripture Engagement works, see “The Journey of Scripture Engagement” on page 47.

Scripture Engagement is a composite score, comprised of three factors:

1. **Frequency:** how often people interact with the Bible.
2. **Spiritual Impact:** how the Bible influences people's relationships with God and others.
3. **Moral Centrality:** how the Bible influences people's day-to-day choices and decisions.

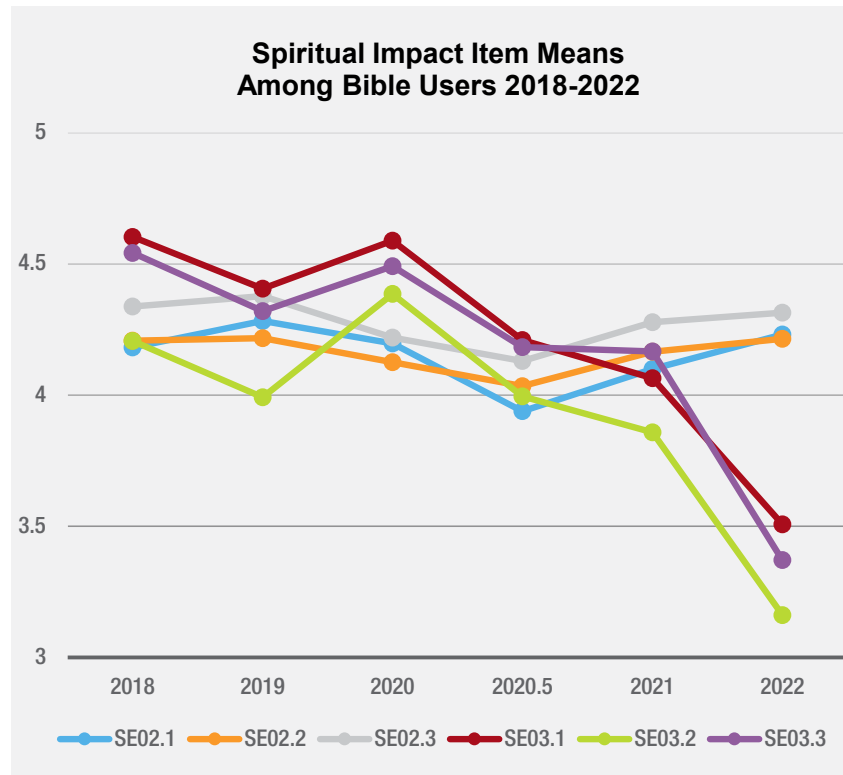
When we examined the relationship between each of these factors over time, we noticed something striking. **Beginning in 2020 and accelerating since then, Bible Users have indicated a decreased level of Spiritual Impact from the Bible.** A certain amount of variance is normal from year-to-year, but what we were seeing in the numbers was beyond the level of normal variation. So we dug deeper.

ZOOMING IN ON SPIRITUAL IMPACT

The Spiritual Impact factor is comprised of answers to six questions that fall broadly into two categories. First, we ask how using the Bible makes readers **feel connected to God** (see items SE02.1, SE02.2, and SE02.3 in the following chart). Second, we ask respondents how reading the Bible *in the past month* has **influenced their feelings and behaviors toward others.** (for example, their willingness to engage in their faith and behave generously and lovingly toward others; see items SE03.1, SE03.2, and SE03.3 in the following chart).

Our investigation centered on this second set of questions in the Spiritual Impact domain. While response patterns were similar in other parts of the Scripture Engagement Scale, in this particular arena average scores had fallen to record lows, and the variability

of responses had greatly increased. In fact, **the change in feelings and behaviors was over six times larger than the change in connection to God.** These three items were driving most of the change in Scripture Engagement among Bible Users. Why is that?



PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

I'd like to suggest two reasons that have one underlying cause.

1. Time-sensitive measurement. The first reason for the variance we're seeing in these questions is that they are designed to be sensitive to time. The preamble to the questions asks respondents to

“Think about your Bible experience in the past month ...” before responding to these questions. This design helps researchers understand how the Bible has been influencing people’s spiritual lives *recently*. This time sensitivity provides a fidelity to the Scripture Engagement Scale that isn’t always present in other measures. It is an important feature of the Scripture Engagement Scale because it focuses on the Bible’s impact *today*, rather than asking respondents to recall an ideal time when the Bible was especially impactful.

Because these questions are particularly sensitive to time, they are also affected by changes and events that impact the nation in a particular time frame. No matter how sincerely we wish they would go away, the COVID-19 pandemic, political polarization, and other disruptions are still affecting the nation. Furthermore, the omicron variant surge was hitting the Southern and Midwestern United States just as we were collecting data in mid-to-late January.⁹ These regions of the United States tend to be more Scripture engaged, as a population, than the rest of the nation.

2. Behavioral impact of the Bible. Second, these three questions ask respondents to consider how the Bible is influencing them to engage in their faith, show love to others, and live generously. There can be little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously disrupted Americans’ behaviors, including their relationships with church communities, which are the epicenter of these behaviors for most American Christians. The very idea of “church” is about

9 See <https://www.mayoclinic.org/coronavirus-covid-19/map>. See also <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/24/1075264829/with-many-areas-of-the-country-past-the-peak-of-omicron-what-comes-next>.

relationships, not isolation; however, the notion of the church as a vibrant Christian community is being reimagined and rebuilt in light of social distancing and online services. These shifts are in addition to the normal, cyclical process of contextualizing the gospel to meet the changing cultural contexts formed by each new generation and technological development.

The scores on these three behavioral questions have been falling steadily since the pandemic began. Before the pandemic, scores on these questions averaged 4.39. In June 2020, still early in the pandemic, nationwide averages fell slightly to 4.13. By January 2021, the average was down to 4.03, and in January 2022, American adults averaged only 3.35 out of six possible points.

In 2022, Americans are less likely than ever before to say that the Bible is influencing the way they live out their faith in relationship to others.

ADVOCATING FOR A LIVING FAITH

In conclusion, I'd like to move beyond analysis of the data to proposing a way the church can thoughtfully and faithfully respond. That response has three parts: recognize, respond, and relate.

Recognize. First, all of us who are leaders in the church must **recognize that we are facing a unique moment.** The data (and our personal experiences as leaders) tell us that American adults—particularly Christian adults—are struggling to live out their faith in a social context that has been upended by the pandemic. They do not

see a way to connect their faith to meaningful action through generosity, community, and relationships.

Respond. Second, we must pray for divine insight and courage to **respond with focus and creativity.** Unique moments in our culture require unique responses from the church. Ministry-as-usual is poorly fitted to turn the tide. Instead, we must lean in and show the way. This is a time for innovation, energy, and deep compassion.

Relate. Finally, we must work to **reconnect people to Christ-centered relationships and service.** The Christian faith was never designed to be lived in our heads or sequestered in our hearts. Instead, we are intended to live in vibrant Christian communities that share a missional focus. The apostle James forcefully argues that our faith must be lived out in relationship and in service to others:

[Do you] want proof that faith without deeds is useless? ... [W]e please God by what we do and not only by what we believe.... Anyone who doesn't breathe is dead, and faith that doesn't do anything is just as dead! (James 2:20, 24, 26).

God has put us here—in this moment—so we must do what we can do.



JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

Dr. John Plake is a researcher with a pastor's heart. He bridges the worlds of social science, business intelligence, and spiritual formation, helping Christian leaders understand how people grow in Christ.

Dr. Plake serves as director of Ministry Intelligence at American Bible Society and is the editor-in-chief of the *State of the Bible* series. Over 32 years of full-time ministry, John has served as a pastor, missionary, professor, and researcher.

He is an ordained minister with a Ph.D. in intercultural studies. He lives with his family in Wilmington, Delaware.

Contact him at
jplake@americanbible.org

The data show us that many Americans are struggling to connect the *teaching* of the Bible to the ways they *live out their faith* in community. Wherever American Christians have become disconnected from their communities of faith, we must help them find their way back into *meaningful relationships* and *generous service* to others.



THE BIBLE IN AMERICA

It seems everyone is talking these days. On TV news and social media. In supermarket lines and church lobbies. People express their opinions freely on all sorts of subjects. But is anyone listening?

We are.

State of the Bible is an exercise in listening at scale. This is our twelfth year of conducting a professional survey of the American people, asking them their opinions and practices relating to the Bible. We are tallying the combined responses to dozens of questions and analyzing the results. We're listening to what America is telling us.

- Do people consider the Bible God's Word? If so, what does that mean to them?
- Does the Bible shape their daily decisions? In what ways?
- How does Scripture impact their relationship with God or their spiritual growth?

- How often do they read the Bible? And how do they choose what to read?
- Do they use a printed Bible, or do they access an app or website or audio Bible?
- Why do they read the Bible, when they do?
- What frustrations or roadblocks keep them away from the Bible?
- How do people of different ages, genders, races, education, or religions respond to all these questions? Are there regional differences?
- How do those who engage with the Bible differ from those who don't?
- And what's the trend line? We ask a number of the same questions year by year, so we can track the ups and downs.

One-third of non-Bible users said they were curious about the Bible and/or Jesus.

If you're in ministry of any kind—a church, a nonprofit, even a communications company—you already know the importance of listening. We all need to answer the questions people are asking. We need to respond to the needs they actually have, and not what we think they ought to need. Effective ministry is built on paying attention.

In that light, we hope *State of the Bible* will provide some direction for your biblical ministry. Though some of the results here are disappointing, all the findings—positive and negative—can shape our work in the future.

For instance, the survey has been tracking the use of **digital** Bible formats. Overall, people still prefer Bibles in print, but younger generations are leading the way into apps, websites, computer programs, and other digital options. These formats can potentially make it easier to interact with the Bible more frequently, and the data is beginning to show that. (A later chapter in *State of the Bible: USA 2022* will explore this more fully.)

The issue of **curiosity** also provided positive news for those in Bible ministry. The survey asked people if they were “curious about the Bible and/or Jesus.” Nearly two-thirds of people who seldom or never read the Bible (non-Bible Users) indicated some curiosity. One-third of non-Bible Users said they were “very” or “extremely” curious. How will churches and ministries respond to that curiosity?

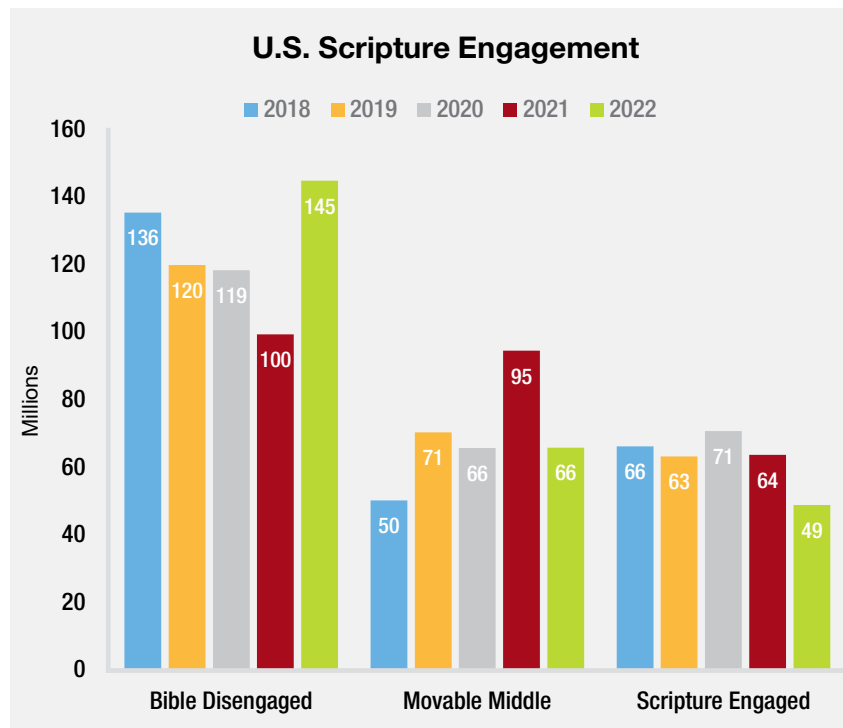
Despite those glimmers of hope, the big story of *State of the Bible: USA 2022* is a **major decrease in Scripture Engagement**.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Since 2018, we’ve employed a definition of Scripture Engagement that includes not only the frequency of Bible reading, but also measures of the spiritual impact of the Bible on the user and the moral centrality of the Bible in the user’s life. Altogether, we define Scripture Engagement as **consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people’s choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others**.

Combining these factors, we identify some people as Scripture Engaged, and others as Bible Disengaged. There's also a large group in between, which we have dubbed the Movable Middle. As people come to the Bible for the first time, they start in the Movable Middle before continuing into the Scripture Engaged category as they connect more deeply with God in the Bible. But they could also move the other way, their commitment lapsing to the point of disengagement.

In 2021 we saw continued movement *into* that middle group. We discussed extensively that 2021 was the continuation of a four-year trend toward Bible exploration. What we see now is an abrupt end to that trend. In this year's report, the Scripture Engaged category



has shrunk by one in five, and the Movable Middle has contracted by two in five. The Bible Disengaged group has seen immense growth. It's now more than twice the size of the Movable Middle.

PROFILE OF THE SCRIPTURE ENGAGED

What do we know about those who still qualify as Scripture Engaged—19 percent of American adults? Which demographic categories are the most engaged with the Bible?

- **Women** (21%) are more Scripture Engaged than men (16%). Looking at it another way, 58 percent of Scripture Engaged adults are female.
- **Elders** (77 years and older) are most likely to be Scripture Engaged (31%). Engagement drops with each younger generation.
- **African Americans** (29%) are the ethnic group most likely to be Scripture Engaged.
- **Widowed** (25%) and **Married** (24%) people are more likely to be Scripture Engaged.
- People living in **small cities** (5,000–30,000 population) are most likely to be Scripture Engaged, at 25 percent.
- Regionally, the **South** (25%) has the highest Scripture Engagement numbers.

In other notes, we found minimal differences in engagement at different **education levels**, except at the extremes. Those who have gone past college were both the most Scripture Engaged (23%) and the most Bible Disengaged (62%). Those without a high school education scored the lowest in Scripture Engagement, at 16 percent.

Income level had little effect on Scripture Engagement, except at the top. In households earning more than \$100,000 a year, Engagement was low (14%) and Disengagement high (66%).

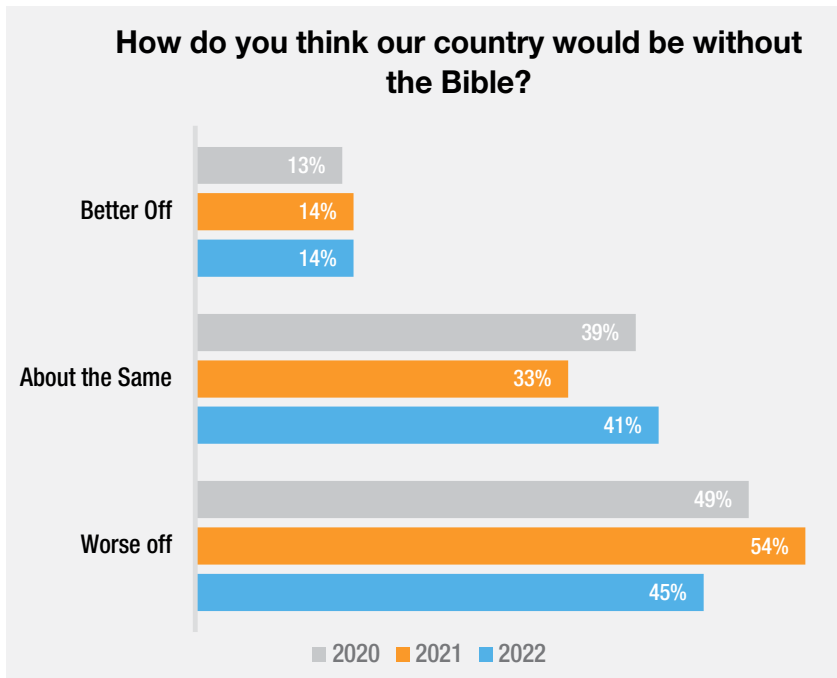
Are there children in the household? If not, Scripture Engagement was higher (20%, compared to 17% for households with kids). Those with children in the home were more likely to be in the Movable Middle (30%). One possible explanation is that parents want to read the Bible more but don't have time. (In fact, when asked, "Do you wish you used the Bible more?" those with children under 18 in the household were much more likely to say yes.)

WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THE BIBLE?

THE BIBLE'S INFLUENCE IN THE U.S.

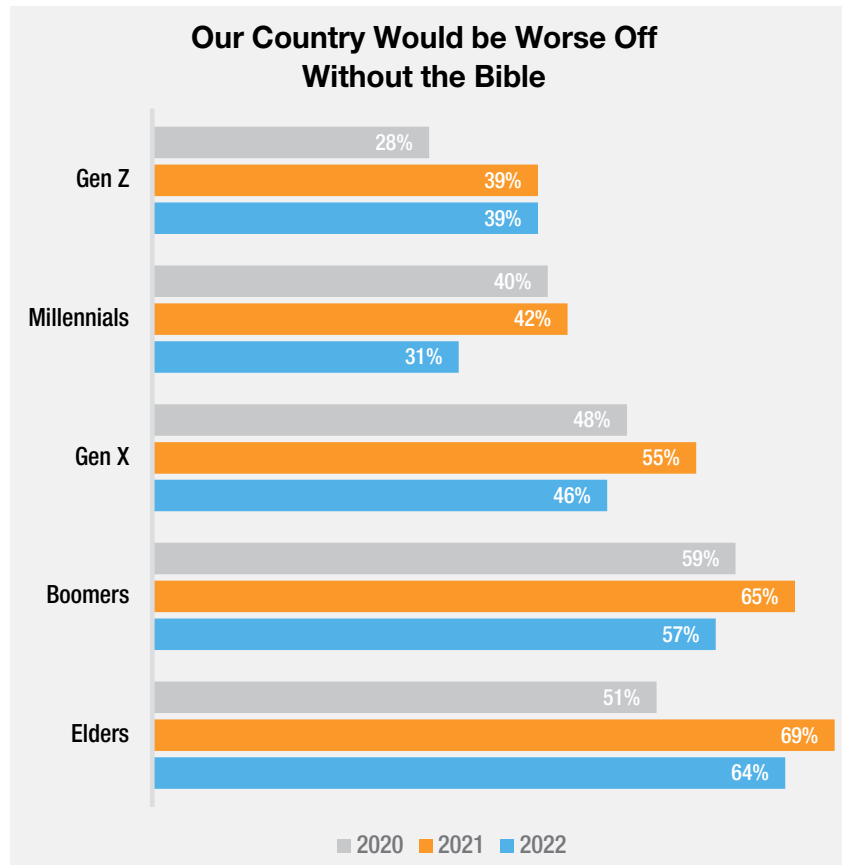
What if nobody read the Bible at all? Would the country be better off or worse off? The survey offers a mix of good and bad news. Some would find it encouraging that only one person in seven (14%) thinks the country would be better off without Bible reading. That number has held rather steady through the years.

But, while 45 percent say America would be worse off without Bible reading, that's a nine-point drop from last year. There's a corresponding increase in the number who said the country would be "about the same" (33% in 2021, but up to 41% in 2022).



In general, belief in the Bible’s positive influence rises with age. Elders (age 77 and up) are most supportive of the Bible’s influence (64%), while Millennials (ages 26–41) are least likely to say the country would be worse off without Bible-reading (31%). An exception occurs with the youngest group, Gen Z (ages 18–25), which is more positive about the Bible’s influence than Millennials.

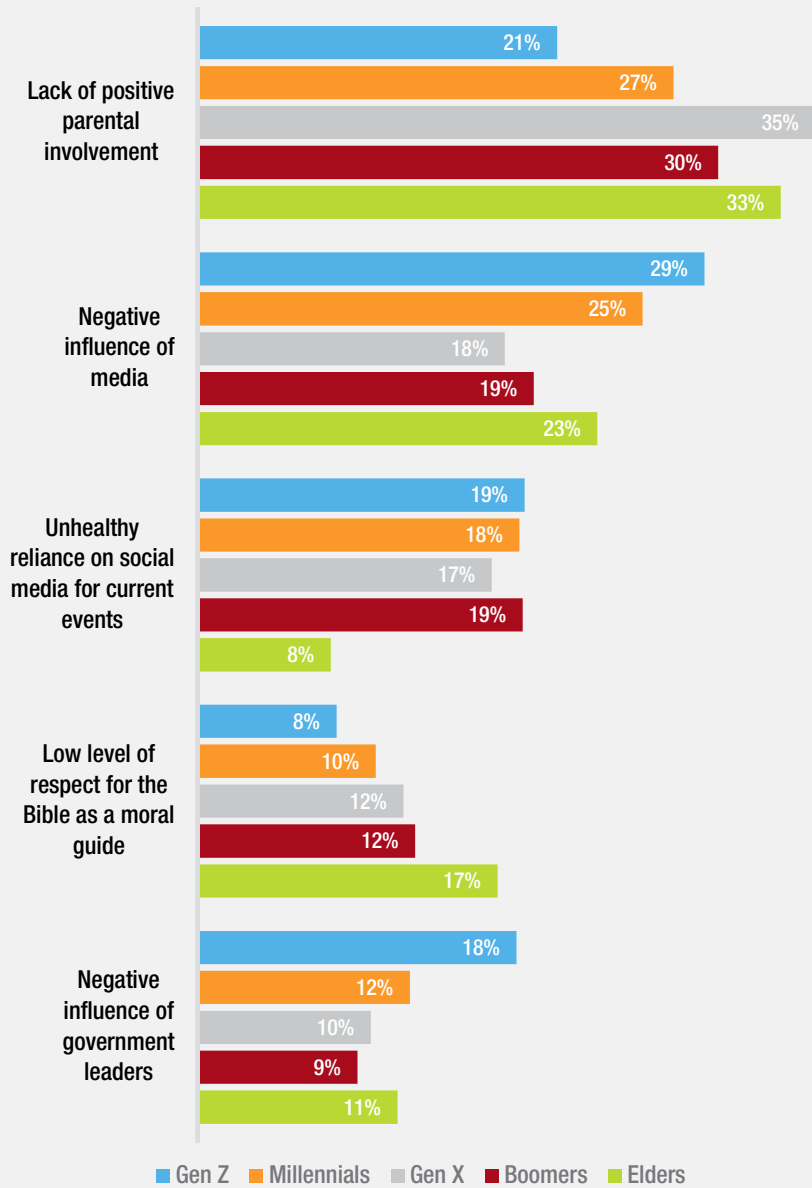
Six out of seven people (86%) agreed that the moral values of America are declining. Though younger respondents were a bit less likely to say so (Gen Z at 79%, Millennials at 80%), there was strong agreement across all generations.



But how would they explain this decline? Across all age groups, 30 percent blamed it on “lack of positive parental involvement.” It may come as no surprise that the youngest group, Gen Z, was least likely to wish for more parental involvement (21%). Their most common answer (29%) was “Negative influence of media, movies, or music.”

The main Bible-related option offered—“Low level of respect for the Bible as a guide for moral development”—showed a clear

The Cause for America's Moral Decline



“generational slide,” with 17 percent of Elders making that their top reason for America’s moral decline, sliding down to only 8 percent for Gen Z.

MEANING AND CHARACTER

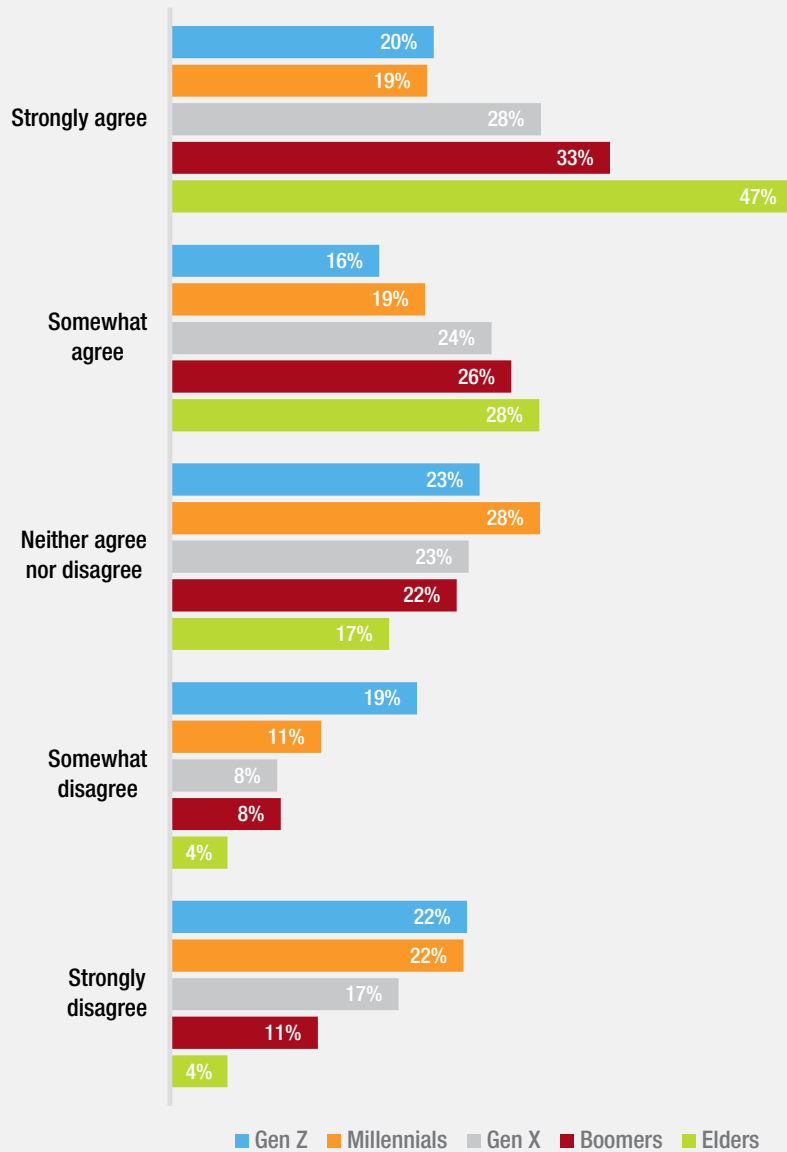
Bible reading is an important component of a child’s character development. The survey asked people their level of agreement or disagreement with that statement.

Nearly half (49%) agreed, “strongly” or “somewhat.” More than a quarter (27%) disagreed, strongly or somewhat. The rest were noncommittal.

There was a sharp generational slide from 75 percent agreement among Elders to only 36 percent agreement among Gen Z. The disagreement is even more telling. In Generation Z, at ages 18–25 the closest to childhood themselves, this statement found more disagreement (41%) than agreement (36%). Are they saying that Bible reading was not a meaningful part of their own character development?

There was no significant difference between respondents with children in the home and those without.

Bible reading is an important component of a child's character development



WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

BELIEFS

For years now, *State of the Bible* has explored people's root beliefs about what the Bible is: its origins, inspiration, and uniqueness.

Of five response options, the most popular (27%) was: *The Bible is the inspired word of God and has no errors, although some verses are meant to be symbolic rather than literal*. Last year, this answer was chosen by 29 percent. This was the most popular choice of every age group except Millennials.

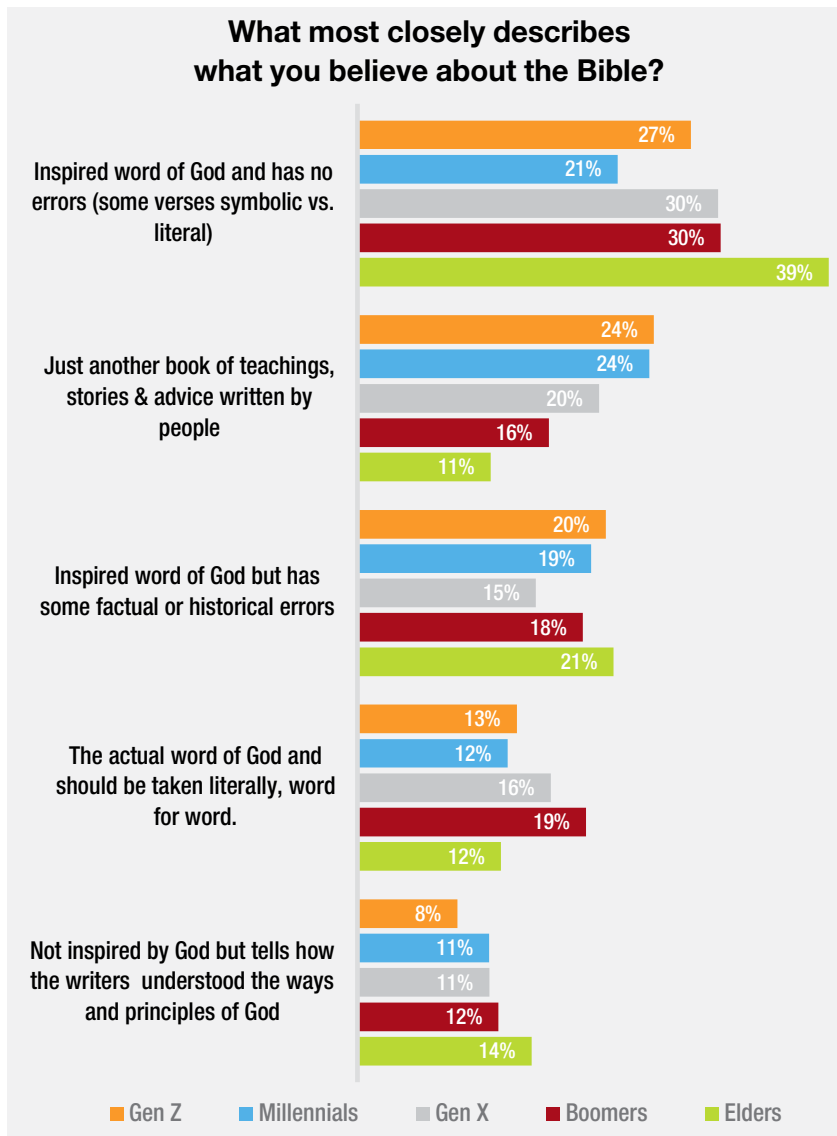
The second most chosen statement was: *The Bible is just another book of teachings written by people that contains stories and advice*. One in five people chose this (20%), up sharply from 13 percent last year. It is the favorite choice of Millennials (24%).

We saw the steepest drop in the fourth-place answer: *The Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word*. This had 15 percent agreement in this year's poll, down from 26 percent last year. The highest support for this view came not from Elders, but from Boomers (19%).

We also asked whether they agreed with this statement: *The Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths*.

About a third (33%) strongly or somewhat disagreed, apparently holding to the Bible's uniqueness. But there were more who

agreed with the statement (40%). These numbers are similar to last year's findings.



MEANING

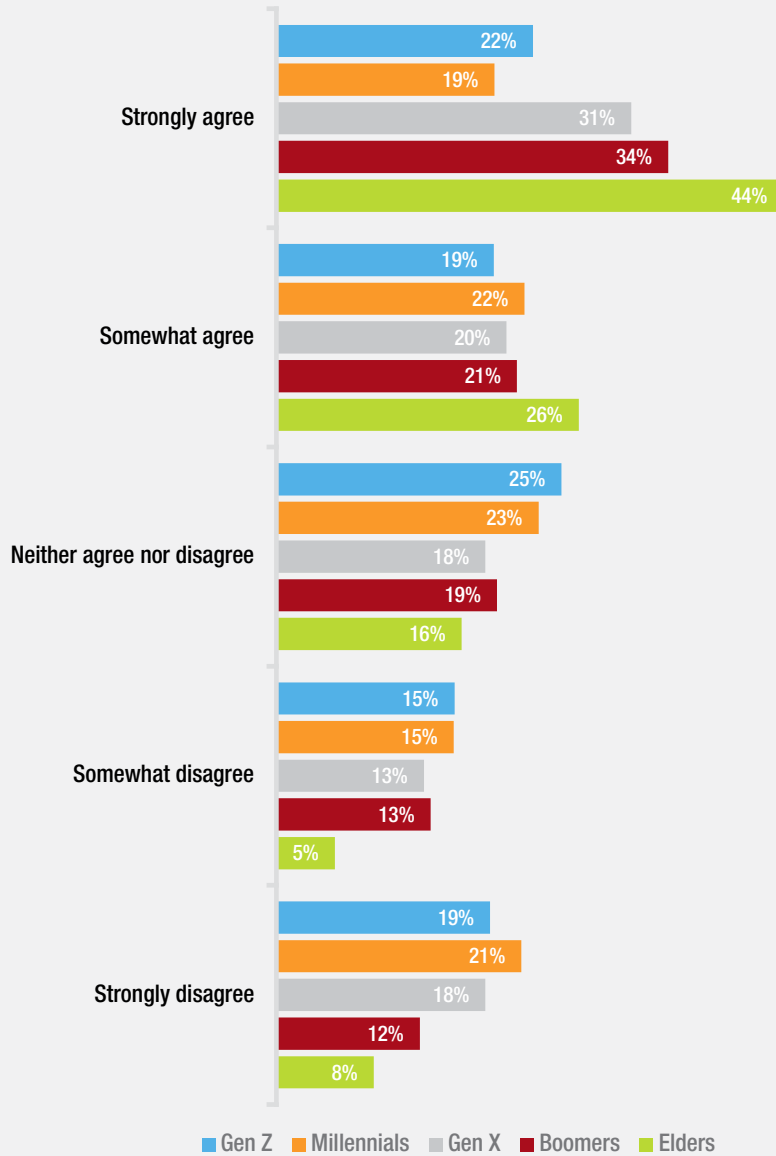
Nearly half of American adults (49%) agree with this statement: *The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life.* Fewer than one-third (31%) disagree.

The now-familiar generational slide appears again on this question, from 70 percent agreement among Elders to only 41 percent among Gen Z and Millennials. Those younger groups were also more apt to “neither agree nor disagree.”

The overall numbers show significant slippage from 2021—down five points (54% to 49%) on agreement and up six points (25% to 31%) on disagreement. The pre-pandemic 2020 poll showed 68 percent agreeing on the importance of the Bible for a meaningful life, compared to 49 percent this year—a major two-year drop-off.

The question is broad enough to spark some pondering. *What is needed for a meaningful life?* It was a tough two years, from January 2020 to January 2022. Many of the things that gave meaning to people’s lives were threatened—health, jobs, finances, patriotism, dreams for the future, even family. While many turned to the Bible to get them through, others may have become skeptical that anything, including the Bible, can anchor their search for meaning.

The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life



HOW DO PEOPLE INTERACT WITH THE BIBLE?

OWNERSHIP

American Bible Society was founded in 1816, a time when many Americans didn't have Bibles of their own. As people moved westward, and away from existing publishers, Bible distribution was an important mission.

Two centuries later, things have changed, at least within the United States. This year's *State of the Bible* indicates that more than three in four Americans (77%) are Bible owners.

But that leaves nearly one in four who don't own a Bible. Some just aren't readers. Some follow other religions. Some hold negative feelings about the Bible. But are there some who would accept a Bible if we gave them one? Are there some who would use a Bible app if we gave them a recommendation or a link?

Drilling down into the numbers, we find Bible ownership is lightest among the younger groups (Gen Z, 66%, Millennials, 67%). Bible ownership is only 65 percent among those who live in the Northeast U.S. Among residents of large cities, it's 68 percent.

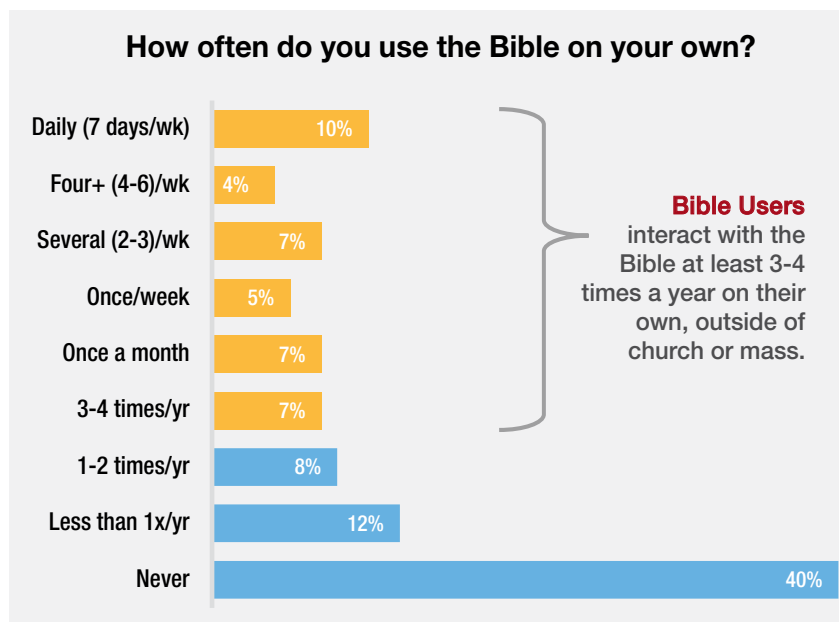
It's tempting to say that every American who wants a Bible has one, but the survey shows that, among certain groups, one in three don't. And there are other sub-populations often missed in surveys: the homeless, recent immigrants, those with limited literacy or hearing difficulties. The work of Bible distribution is not

completed. Many people still need God’s Word in languages and formats they can access.

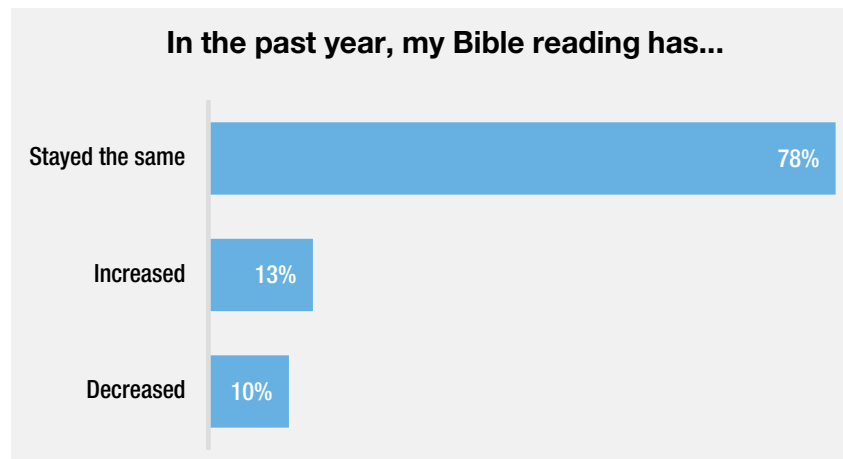
BIBLE READING

Nearly four in 10 Americans say they never read the Bible outside of church services or Mass. Another two in 10 say they read it on their own no more than twice a year. That leaves another four in 10 reading on their own at least three times a year (Bible Users). Those who read daily amount to 10 percent of all Americans.

This year’s numbers show a major shift away from personal Bible reading. In the 2021 *State of the Bible*, there were 29 percent in the “Never” group (now 40%) and 50 percent in the Bible Users collection (now 40%).



Yet when asked whether their personal Bible reading increased or decreased over the last year, more people reported an increase than a decrease. This suggests more of a drift than a protest. Across the board, people are reading the Bible less frequently than before, but apparently most of them haven't been aware of it.



How do people approach the Bible? What practices do they use in their Bible reading? The survey revealed very different patterns among the Scripture Engaged, the Bible Disengaged, and those in between, in the Movable Middle. (Read more about these categories under “Scripture Engagement Measurement” on page 33.)

When people interact with the Bible, do they do so at the same time each day? Do people follow a schedule, plan, or program when they read the Bible? Or do they follow some other practice or routine? We'll unpack this subject in more detail in chapter seven, slated for release in October.

For now, here's a preview. The Bible *Disengaged* were most likely to say they “select Bible passages depending on [their] mood at the time” (44%), compared to other Bible reading practices.

Some might argue that it's better to read through a whole book of the Bible or to follow a reading plan that covers a range of subjects. But listen to what the Bible *Disengaged* are saying. They don't read the Bible much, but when they do, they're looking for something that speaks to their mood at the time.

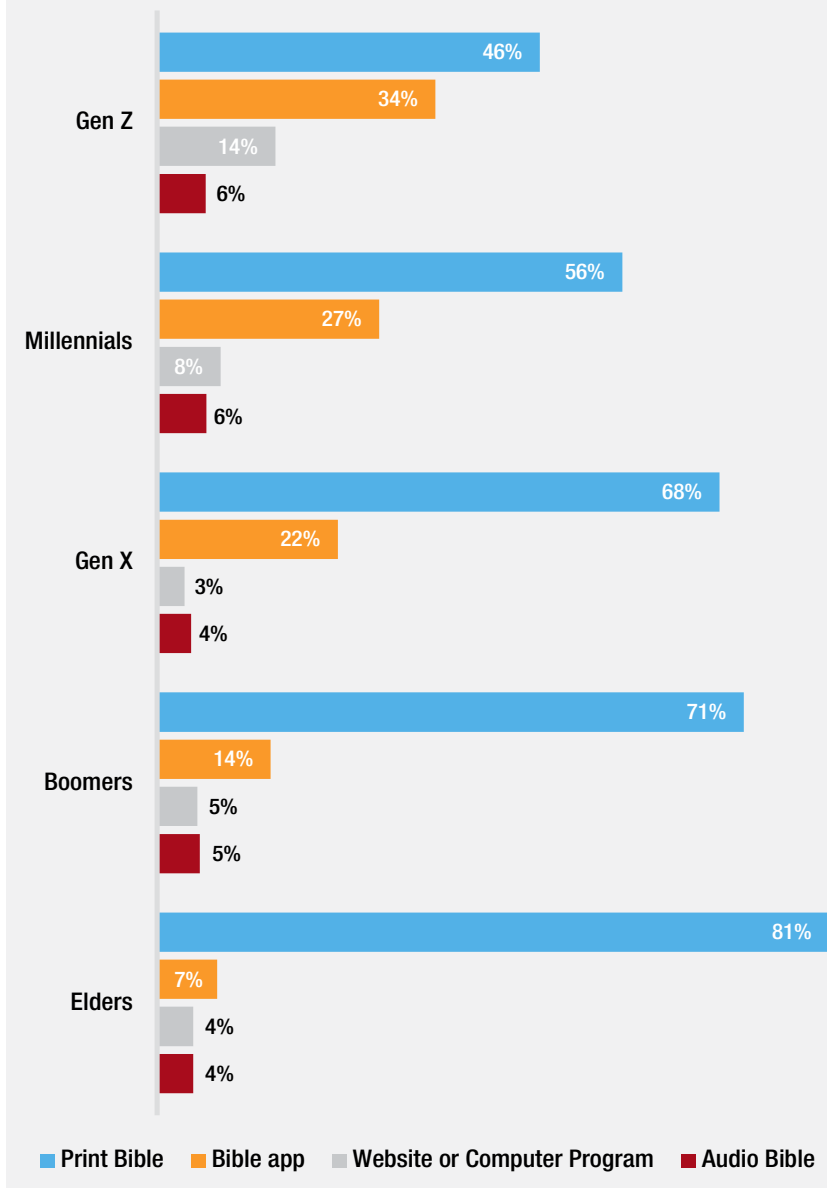
With that in mind, could churches, ministries, and publishers do more with those guides that say, “When you feel like *this*, read *this*”—and not only for the Bible readers in our churches, but for the non-Bible readers as well?

BIBLE FORMATS

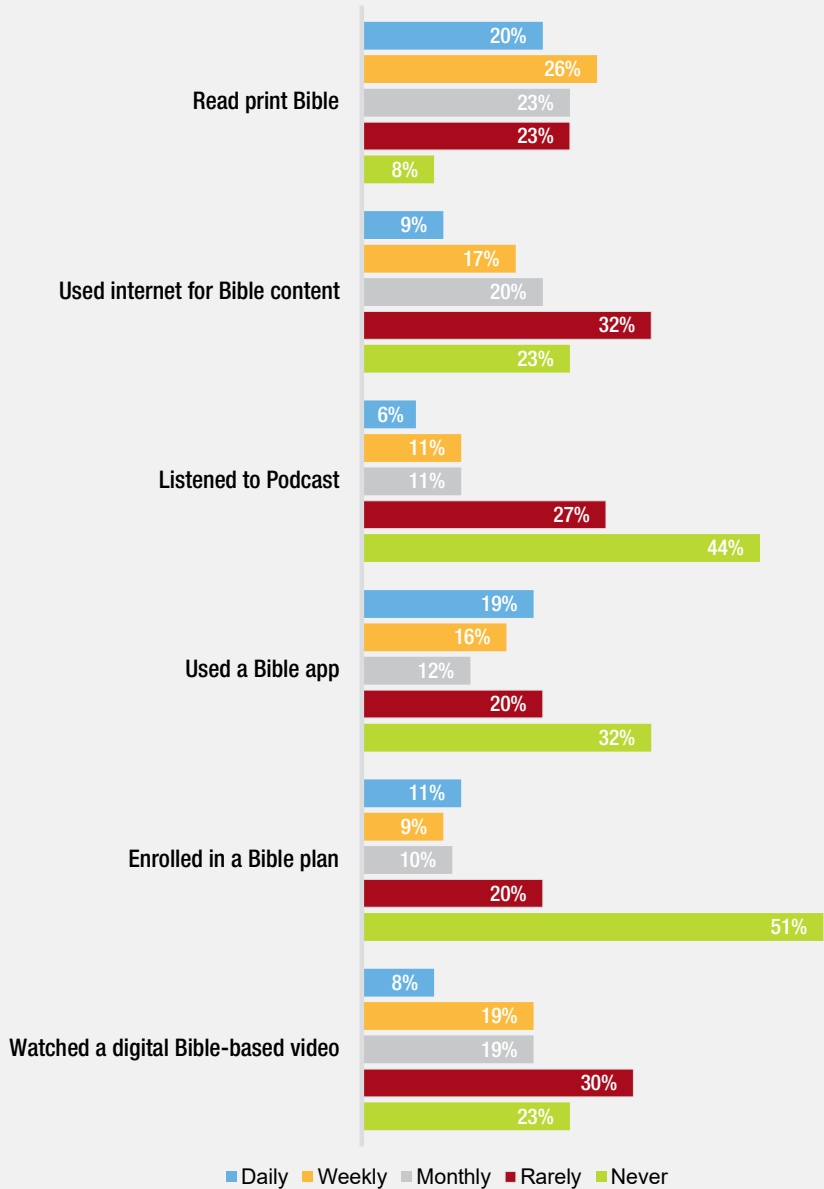
The youngest Bible Users in this poll, ages 18 to 25, would rather interact with the Bible digitally (apps, websites, computer programs, and audio recordings combining for 54% preference) than in print (46%). All other age groups prefer to use a printed Bible—even Millennials (56% for print). Overall, nearly two-thirds of Bible Users prefer print formats.

Of course, many use both print and digital resources. Only 23 percent of Bible Users said they *never* use a computer Bible program and 32 percent never use a Bible app. So these digital formats are becoming significant parts of the Bible-reading terrain, taking a place alongside printed Bibles. In addition, digital formats may actually

Preferred Bible Format by Generation



Frequency of Bible Use by Medium



increase the frequency of Bible interaction. Of those who do use Bible apps, about 30 percent do so *daily*. As people—and especially young people—rely on their phones throughout each day, could Bible apps lead the way to more consistent Scripture engagement?

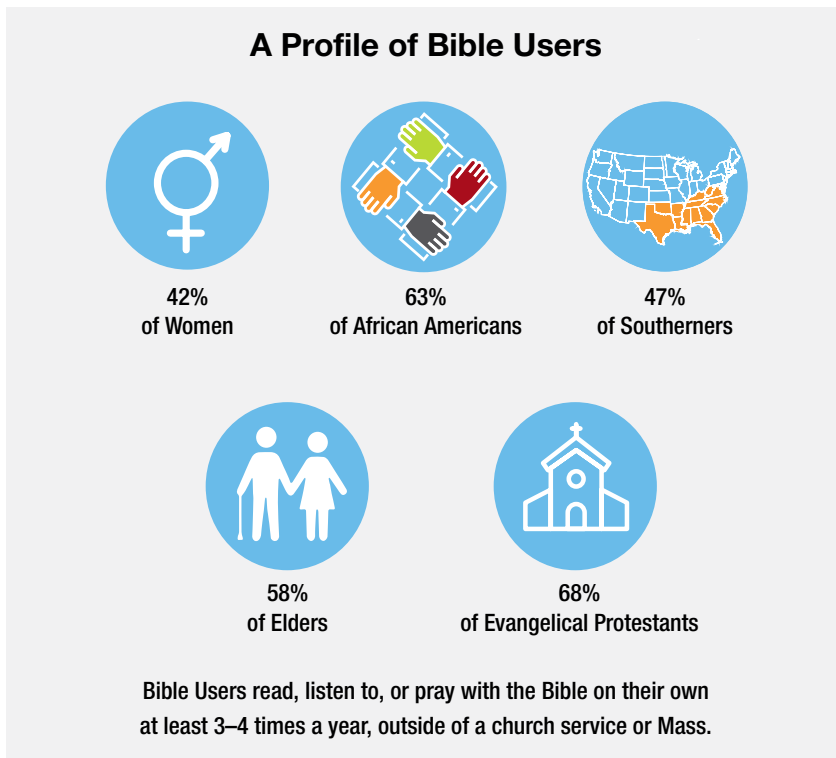
BIBLE USERS

State of the Bible defines Bible Users as people who read the Bible at least three or four times a year, apart from church services. This is different from Scripture Engagement, which we profiled earlier in this chapter. In the previous eleven years of the survey, the proportion of Americans who were Bible Users ran from 48 percent to 53 percent, with most years showing 50 percent. This year saw a precipitous decline, to 40 percent. We're scrambling to investigate the causes of this decrease, but we also want to learn what we can about these people. As always, we want to understand them—not just how often they turn to Scripture, but why and how.

WHO READS THE BIBLE?

- **Women** (42%) are slightly more likely to be Bible Users than men (37%).
- **African Americans** (63%) far more likely to be Bible Users than other ethnic groups.
- **The South** (47%) and Midwest (44%) have a greater percentage of Bible Users than other regions of the U.S.
- **Elders** (those 77 and older) are most likely to be Bible Users (58%) of any generation. **Boomers** (ages 57–76) are next, at 47 percent.

- Those who identify as **Evangelical Protestants** far exceed the national average in Bible use (68%), as do those in **Historically Black Protestant** denominations (66%). **Mainline Protestants** follow with 57 percent Bible Users.



MOTIVATIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS

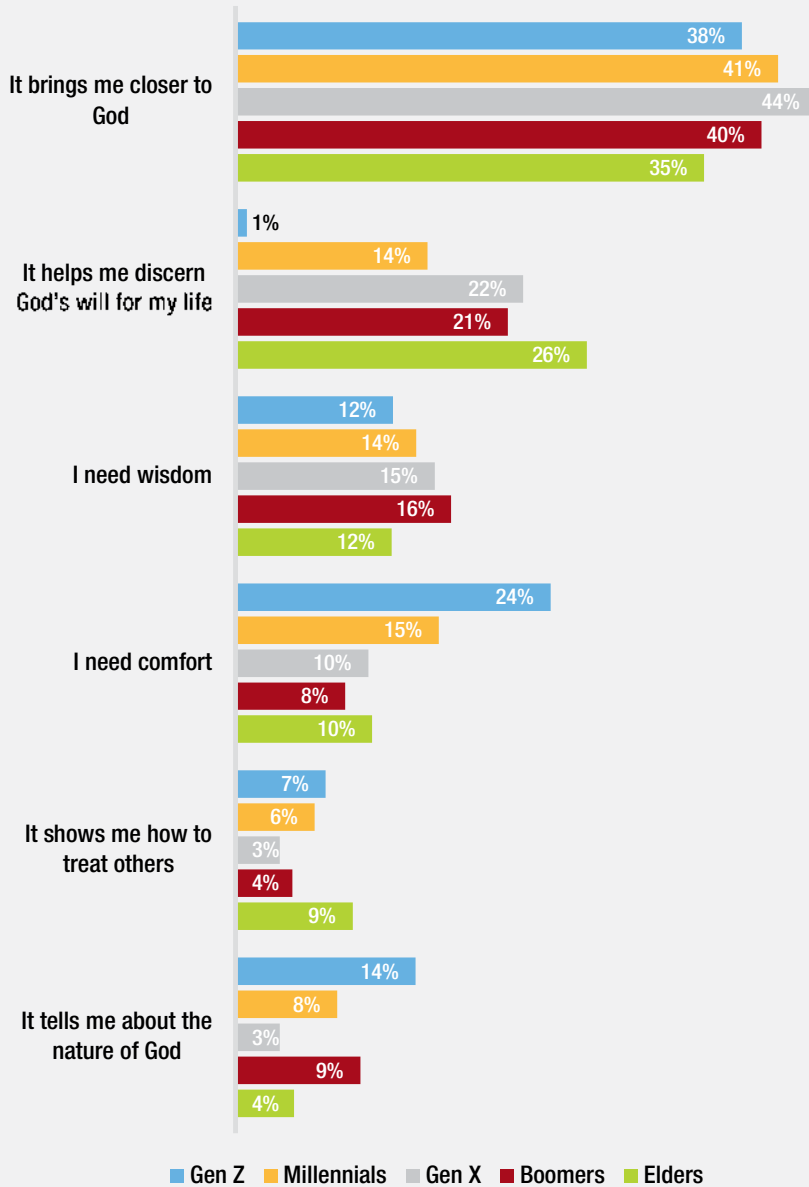
Why do people read the Bible? When Bible Users identified their main motivation, across all generations and ethnicities the same answer came up: “*It brings me closer to God.*” Four in ten of the respondents (41%) chose this.

Last year the second-place motivation was comfort, but that response dropped a few points this year. *Discerning God’s will* was most important for 18 percent of Bible Users—but decidedly not for the youngest ones. Only 1 percent of Gen Z Bible Users gave that reason. In that age group, the second most chosen reason was “*I need comfort.*”

Consider the timing. When this survey was taken, in January 2022, we were nearing the end of the pandemic’s second year. In the thick of it, a year earlier, people needed comfort and assurance that God still cared. But as people attempted to rebuild their lives after nearly two years of struggle, perhaps it became more important to know God’s leading and tap into divine wisdom. People will always draw close to God in the Scriptures, but maybe this is a time for direction more than comfort.

Except for Gen Z. Are they still reeling from the massive disruption of education and career-launching? Is that why they need comfort from the Bible right now, more than older Bible Users do? (Chapter 3, scheduled for release in June, will explore even more issues of well-being and flourishing.)

Reasons for Bible Use by Generation



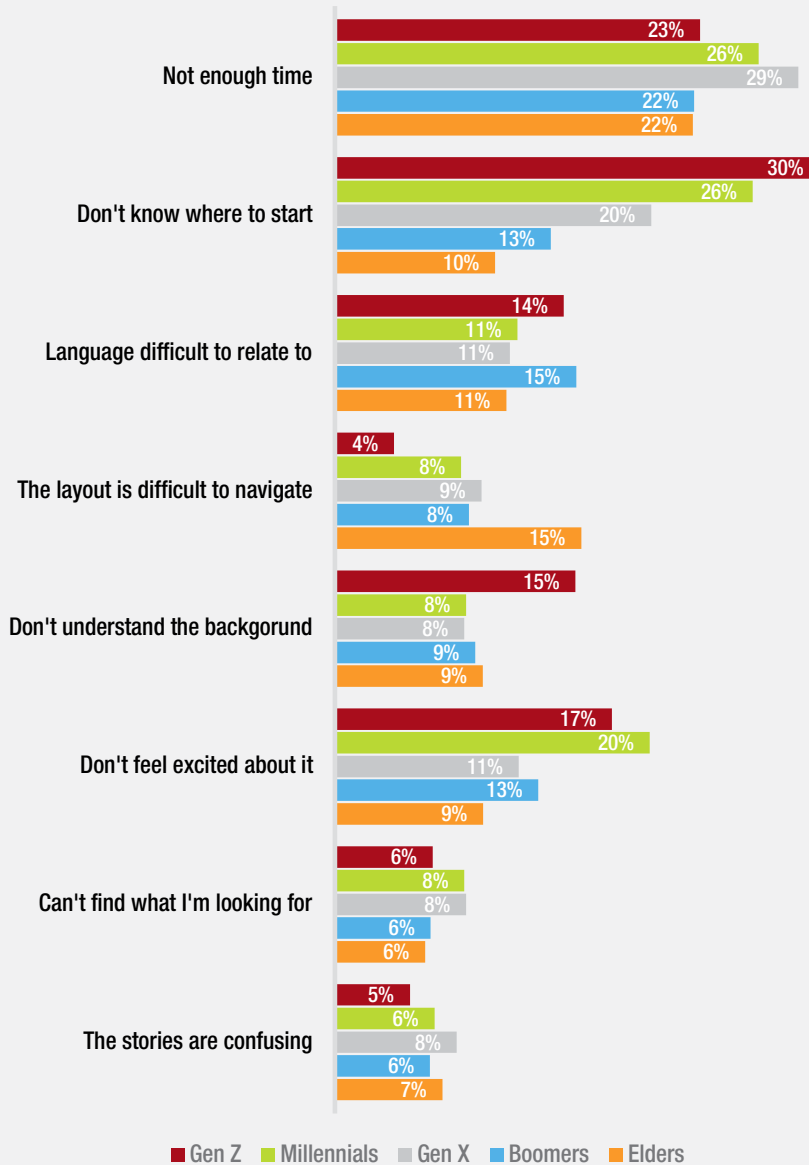
While the Bible Motivation question examines what drives people *to* the Scriptures, the next question gives insight on what keeps them away. When Bible Users were asked to choose their two greatest frustrations with regard to Bible reading, more than one-fourth of them indicated no frustrations, but nearly the same number said, “I never seem to have enough time.” This complaint was common among all age groups (22 to 29%). But a top answer for Gen Z (30%) and Millennials (26%) was “I don’t know where to start.”

Not knowing where to start is also a significant hurdle for the Movable Middle (23%) and the Bible Disengaged (22%), with 24 percent of the latter group admitting, “I don’t feel excited about using [the Bible].”

Other answers were available: difficulty with the language; not understanding Bible history; and finding the layout difficult to navigate. Some chose these responses, but not nearly at the level of “I don’t know where to start.”

Might this provide a strategy for Bible ministry, especially with young adults—Bible reading plans and simple formats to get started in regular Bible reading?

Frustrations About Using the Bible



WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE BIBLE IN 2022?

In a word, the current *State of the Bible* is “under-engaged.” Perhaps the Bible has been neglected or simply taken for granted as people dealt with the challenges of reassembling their lives after a disruptive pandemic. A significant number of people say they “never seem to have enough time” to read the Bible. But we also find that attitudes are changing. This year, more people say that America would stay “about the same” if no one read the Bible.

This news provides a challenge for everyone involved in Bible ministry. There is a great deal of curiosity about the Bible. Will we answer it? Perhaps digital formats will spur greater engagement. Will we create and promote effective resources? Will we be able to communicate the value of the Scriptures to a population that has been disrupted and distracted?

NOW THIS

TIPS, HIGHLIGHTS, INSIGHTS, AND SUGGESTIONS

- **Listening has never been more important.**
Consider ways to ask your congregation and community about their own practices, motivations, and frustrations regarding the Bible—and see what you can do to help.
- **Is the Bible an important component of a child’s character development?**
Churches have long operated on the assumption that people believed it was. Young adults might drift away from the church, but they’d come back when they had kids. These data question that assumption. We will need to make a strong case for the positive ways the Bible shapes character.
- **Show people—especially those under age 25—how to start reading Scripture.**
Consider [*the Start Here resource*](#) from American Bible Society.
- **Create or curate mood-based resources**
to meet non-Bible Users at their point of need. (But get beyond proof-texts; offer pertinent stories and chapters.)

THE JOURNEY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

According to data from *State of the Bible: USA 2022*, over half of U. S. adults (56%) have no meaningful relationship with the Bible, while 44 percent have started a journey of Scripture engagement.

Twelve years of research have uncovered some important milestones that mark a journey with God's Word. From the data, let's consider why many Americans have such different experiences with the Bible.

The Journey of Scripture Engagement ...

1. ... OFTEN STARTS AT HOME

For Americans who use the Bible, at least 73 percent were introduced to it as children. Of those who don't use the Bible, more than half (55%) come from homes with little or no Bible engagement.

2. ... IS A CHOICE

Regardless of their family traditions, though, adults must *choose* to begin or continue a journey of Scripture engagement by interacting with the Bible—by reading it, listening to it, or even watching it.¹ More than one in four Americans (27%) who have started a journey with the Bible have chosen a new faith tradition in adulthood.

A proliferation of Bible technologies is expanding how Americans access Scripture, but the journey begins with the *choice* to pick up a printed Bible, open a Bible app, play an audio Bible, or search for the Bible's perspective on an issue.

3. ... IS SPARKED BY DISRUPTION

For most people who choose to (re)engage with the Bible in adulthood, their exploration of the Bible begins with disruptions they're facing in their own lives. Some disruptions

¹ See [this article](#) in *Christianity Today* on the completion of the American Sign Language Bible.

are positive: a new relationship, new child, or new opportunity. And some disruptions are negative: a broken relationship, grief, trauma, or addiction.

4. ... FOCUSES ON A QUESTION

Whatever the disruption is, it creates a question in the potential Bible user's mind, "Does the Bible have help for my issue?" So they dig in.

Initial Bible exploration among adults is almost never about knowing the Bible as literature, as history, or as theology. Instead, Bible users begin their journey on their own terms, seeking answers to their own questions. It's all about "me."

5. ... AWAKENS THE SPIRIT

Once an individual or group chooses to interact with the Bible, several things begin to change. Interacting with the Bible lights something up on the *inside* of people.

First, many Bible users find timeless wisdom that addresses the issue they are facing. They find the answers they were looking for.

Next, they often wonder, "Does the Bible have more to offer than I had imagined before?" And their curious exploration of Scripture broadens.

Then, users begin to discover that using the Bible brings them a sense of connection to God, curiosity to know God better, and an awareness of how much they need God in their life. They feel God's care for their own suffering, and that encourages them to engage more deeply in their faith journey.

This spiritual impact of the Bible is the fuel that propels seekers on their journey with God. In fact, if Bible explorers don't sense a connection with God through Scripture, they will not sustain their journey. They'll quit. It's just that simple.

The good news is that millions of Americans don't quit. They keep engaging, more consistently and more deeply with God's Word. They find themselves becoming more generous with their time, energy, and resources, and their behavior toward others becomes more loving and selfless.

6. ... LEADS TO JESUS

At some point in this journey—earlier for some and later for others—Bible users realize that the story of Scripture is more than just wisdom for their day, it is God's Story. The Bible confronts people with Jesus and provokes a decision. What will you do with Jesus?

More than eight out of ten Bible explorers² (82%) say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their lives today. By the time they are consistently engaging with God’s Word, that number jumps to over 96 percent.

7. ... GUIDES DAILY CHOICES

For those who continue their journey, we find more frequent Bible reading, longer periods of exploring Scripture, and an increased interest in the Bible *on its own terms*. But one of the most striking characteristics of individuals on this part of the journey is that they begin to allow the Bible to guide their choices in daily life.

To be sure, Americans value independence and freedom. We hold tightly to our freedom of choice, freedom of conscience, freedom of practically everything. The most Scripture-engaged Americans, however, are more willing than others to freely choose to be guided by biblical principles, even when that might be countercultural or inconvenient. They allow the Bible to exert a great deal of influence on how they spend their money, the entertainment they choose, the decisions they make at work or school, and the choices they make at the ballot box.

What some may see as limiting, Bible engagers find freeing, liberating, and empowering.

8. ... LEADS TO FLOURISHING

And these Bible engagers may have a point. According to Harvard University’s Human Flourishing Index, those who have progressed furthest on their journey of Scripture engagement are also the most holistically healthy and hopeful. They have a sense of purpose, are satisfied with their life, have close relationships, solid mental and physical health, and have a sense of character and virtue. The journey of Scripture engagement leads to flourishing.

In summary, the journey of Scripture engagement ...

1. Often starts at home
2. Is a choice
3. Is sparked by disruption
4. Focuses on a question
5. Awakens the spirit
6. Leads to Jesus
7. Guides daily choices
8. Leads to flourishing

2 Here “Bible explorers” refers to individuals in the Movable Middle. See “Scripture Engagement Measurement” on page 33 or **Appendix 2: Definitions** on page 41 for details.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT MEASUREMENT

This journey is grounded on a carefully operationalized definition of Scripture engagement:

Scripture engagement is measured as consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

In order to pinpoint an individual's current position on the journey of Scripture Engagement, the *State of the Bible* research team has developed a 14-item questionnaire called the **Scripture Engagement Scale**. It considers three domains or factors:

1. **Frequency:** how often a respondent uses the Bible on their own and as a part of a large church service.
2. **Impact:** the Bible's influence on a user's relationships with God and others.
3. **Centrality:** the Bible's influence on a user's choices and decisions.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT SEGMENTS

In 2022, most of our reporting is based on a simplified, three-part Scripture Engagement segmentation that uses the following categories:

1. **Scripture Engaged:** Scripture Engaged people are those who have a score of 100 or higher according to their results of this survey. The Bible impacts their daily lives, helps guide their relationships with God and others, and they regularly read/listen to/engage with the Bible.
2. **Movable Middle:** Formerly the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories, these individuals score between 70 and 99. These people range from those who sporadically interact with the Bible on the low end, to those who periodically open the Bible as a source of spiritual insight and wisdom. This group of people can easily shift to being more Bible-engaged, or they can give up and become less Bible-engaged because the Bible's influence has not taken root in their lives.
3. **Bible Disengaged:** Anyone who scores less than 70 is considered Bible Disengaged. Those who fit this category interact infrequently with the Bible, and it has minimal influence in their lives. Bible Disengaged people rarely seek out the Bible, and tend to encounter it through others, rather than by choice.



METHODOLOGY

In 2022, the *State of the Bible* research team at American Bible Society collaborated with NORC at the University of Chicago to design and field a nationally representative survey of American adults on topics related to the Bible, faith, and the church. The study was conducted in English and was presented both online and via telephone to NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel, using a 15-minute questionnaire. The study produced 2,598 responses from a representative sample of adults 18 and older within all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected from January 10–28, 2022. The margin of error for a sample of this size is ± 2.51 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

QUALITY AT A GLANCE

Following are key survey quality indicators, excerpted from a report card prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago in compliance with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative. The full report is available upon request by emailing pr@americanbible.org.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

- **Study Population:** General Population Age 18+
- **Sample Units:** 8,618
- **Completed Units:** 2,598
- **Margin of Error:** $\pm 2.51\%$
- **Average Design Effect:** 1.71
- **Survey Field Period:** January 10–28, 2022
- **Median Duration:** 15 minutes

PANEL OUTCOMES

- **Weighted Household Recruitment Rate:**¹ 17.1%
- **Weighted Household Retention Rate:** 75.6%

SURVEY OUTCOMES

- **Survey Completion Rate:**² 30.1%
- **Weighted Cumulative Response Rate:**³ 3.9%

THE AMERISPEAK® PANEL

Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected U.S.

- 1 The weighted AAPOR RR III for the AmeriSpeak panel recruitment corresponding to the recruitment cohorts sampled for the study. A recruited household is a household where at least one adult successfully completed the recruitment survey and joined the panel.
- 2 The percent of eligible sample members who completed the survey interview.
- 3 The overall survey response rate that accounts for survey outcomes in all response stages including panel recruitment rate, panel retention rate, and survey completion rate. It is weighted to account for the sample design and differential inclusion probabilities of sample members.

households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by U.S. mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face).

The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with PO Box addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations.

For more information, email AmeriSpeak-BD@norc.org or visit AmeriSpeak.norc.org.

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and

nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge. Please visit www.norc.org for more information.

INDEPENDENT VALIDATION

Due to recent societal disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the *State of the Bible* research team conducted an identical and independent survey of the U.S. population in January 2022, using the non-probability sampling and post hoc weighting techniques detailed in previous *State of the Bible* research projects. Upon comparison, the research team determined that both methodologies resulted in substantially equivalent results. We chose to report only on the AmeriSpeak® survey, due to its probability-based sampling methodology and compliance with AAPOR standards of practice.



DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are used in this and other *State of the Bible* reports to group respondents by demographics, beliefs, and practices.

Bible Skeptic: Individuals who believe the Bible is just another book written by people that contains stories and advice.

Bible User: Individuals who read, listen to, or pray with the Bible on their own at least 3–4 times a year, outside of a church service or church event.

Correlation: In statistics, the strength of a linear relationship between two variables is often expressed in terms of a numerical value preceded by the italicized letter *r*. In this volume, correlations are only reported when they are statistically significant ($p < .05$) and when the correlation coefficient (*r*) is 0.2 or greater. Following are general rules of thumb for interpreting the qualitative magnitude of a correlation:

- Very Weak: ($r = 0.00 - 0.19$)
- Weak: ($r = 0.20 - 0.39$)
- Moderate: ($r = 0.40 - 0.59$)
- Strong: ($r = 0.60 - 0.79$)
- Very Strong: ($r = 0.80 - 1.00$)

Churched: Individuals who have attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.

Division: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into nine geographic divisions, which are groupings of multiple states. These divisions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Generations:

- **Generation Z (1997–2012):** Ages 10 to 25 in 2021. This study includes adults (18–25) in Generation Z.
- **Millennials (1981–1996):** Ages 26 to 41 in 2021.
- **Generation X (1965–1980):** Ages 42 to 57 in 2021.
- **Baby Boomers (1946–1964):** Ages 58 to 76 in 2021.
- **Elders (1928–1945):** Ages 77 to 94 in 2021. This study considers any respondent 76 years old or older to be in the Elders generation.

No faith/Other faith: Individuals who do not consider themselves Christian (including atheists, agnostics, and other faiths); Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are also included, even if they describe themselves as Christian.

Non-Christian: Individuals who consider themselves to be anything other than Christians.

Non-Practicing Christian: Self-identified Christians who are not Practicing Christians as defined below.

Practicing Christian: Individuals who meet all three of the following criteria:

- Identify as either Protestant or Catholic
- Attend a religious service at least once a month
- Say their faith is very important in their lives

Pathway of Scripture Engagement: American Bible Society's theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. See *Pathway of Scripture Engagement* on page 47 for further detail.

Region: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into four geographic regions, which are groupings of multiple divisions. These regions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Scripture engaged: Anyone who scores 100 or higher on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

Scripture unengaged: Anyone who scores below 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

Scripture Engagement Scale: Based on responses to 14 survey items about the frequency of Bible use and the impact and centrality its message, this scale provides a high-fidelity, numerical measure of holistic Scripture engagement among U.S. Bible Users. The Scripture Engagement Scale is centered on 100, meaning that approximately one half of U.S. Bible Users score above 100, and the other half score below 100. The scale's standard deviation is 15.

Scripture Engagement Segments, Full: The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can be described using the following five segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores.

1. **Bible Centered:** Score = 115 or higher.
2. **Bible Engaged:** Score = 100–114.
3. **Bible Friendly:** Score = 85–99.
4. **Bible Neutral:** Score = 70–84.
5. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70.

Scripture Engagement Segments, Simplified: The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can be described, using the following three segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores.

1. **Scripture Engaged:** Score = 100 or higher. Includes both the Bible Centered and the Bible Engaged.
2. **Movable Middle:** Score = 70–99. Includes both the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories.
3. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70. Same as Bible Disengaged in the Full Scripture Engagement segmentation.

Self-Identified Religion: Respondents are asked, “do you consider yourself any of the following religious faiths?” Their response is their self-identified religion, regardless of their current involvement with any religious organization.

Trauma Impact: Respondents who have experienced at least one traumatic event are asked, “Does the trauma you experienced or witnessed still affect you today? *Select one.*” Response options are:

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Trauma Incidence: Respondents are asked, “Have you ever experienced physical, psychological, or emotional trauma? That is, extreme violence, abuse, or a near-death experience that produces a response of intense fear, helplessness, or horror? *Check all that apply.*” Response options are:

- You personally experienced a trauma
- You witnessed a trauma involving an immediate family member
- You witnessed a trauma involving someone other than a family member
- None of these apply to me

Respondents who select *any option except* “none of these apply to me” are counted as having experienced trauma.

Trauma Severity: Respondents who experience the impact of trauma at least “sometimes” are asked, “Please rate the **severity** of the trauma effects you are experiencing on the scale below.” The numerical response scale has a range of 1–10 with the following qualitative anchors:

- 0 = None
- 5 = Moderate
- 10 = Overwhelming

Unchurched: Individuals who have not attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.



PATHWAY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement (PSE) is American Bible Society's theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. The PSE is the foundation of our empirical research, which shows that consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

PURPOSE OF THE PATHWAY

The PSE marks out a set of waypoints along a journey of spiritual formation. When the Bible is made available through translation and distribution, pilgrims may enter the Pathway and begin their journey toward reconciliation with God and others.

The journey along the Pathway brings its own benefits, including wisdom for daily living, increased awareness of God’s presence and voice, and generosity of spirit and action. However, what makes the Pathway uniquely valuable is its destination: spiritual health and vitality marked by deeply rooted love for God and healthy relationships with others, particularly those in the community of faith.

The PSE is like a ladder with ten rungs. Users might climb one rung at a time or even skip a rung. They may climb slowly or quickly. It’s even possible to climb part of the way up the ladder and then retreat a few steps. As users climb the ladder, their perspective changes with altitude and as distant objects draw nearer. Still, the most important thing about a ladder is that it’s leaning against the right building. Similarly, the most important thing about Scripture Engagement is that it is leaning against the building of holistic spiritual vitality marked by love for God and others. According to Jesus, loving God and others are the two great commandments for all his followers (Matthew 22:37–39).

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement



What is Scripture Engagement?

Scripture engagement is consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

- External Milestone
- Internal Milestone

PROGRESS ALONG THE PATHWAY

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement is also like an old-school map that marks out a journey from beginning to end. The PSE is for anyone who has access to the Bible in their own language because the Bible is the primary vehicle that carries people toward spiritual health.

The PSE shows the landscape and key waypoints, but it doesn't do two important things. First, it doesn't have a YOU ARE HERE marker. Second, it doesn't measure progress toward spiritual vitality. For those tasks, we use the Scripture Engagement Survey to locate an individual on the Scripture Engagement Scale (SES).

The SES is designed to plot an individual's current location on the Pathway and—with repeated measurement—their progress (growth) toward spiritual health. Using a brief survey, individuals and groups can be located on the Pathway¹ and matched to transformative, Bible-based ministry interventions that catalyze movement toward spiritual health.

By translating the Pathway's basic map into an accurate GPS, the Scripture Engagement Scale can guide individuals to the next step in their spiritual journey. It can also help ministry leaders design and deploy discipleship tools that are appropriate to people at every stage of the spiritual formation journey.

¹ Based on our research, a score of 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale corresponds approximately to step 6 on the Pathway of Scripture Engagement.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since 2011, American Bible Society has sponsored the annual *State of the Bible* research study in an effort to listen carefully to America's voice regarding the Bible, faith, and the church. Today, the science of listening is a main focus of the Ministry Intelligence team at American Bible Society.

This ebook is the effort of a small army of gifted individuals who combine their skills and perspectives to produce what you hold in your hand or view on your screen. In this twelfth consecutive year of the *State of the Bible*, we pause to express our gratitude to those who have contributed most to this work.

Robert Briggs, president and CEO of American Bible Society, has been a consistent champion of *State of the Bible* and of data-informed ministry, overall. He understands that the future of America is connected to our nation's access to and engagement with the Bible, and he regularly urges all of us at American Bible Society to serve the church with the highest quality data and

insights we can mine. We are especially grateful for his contribution to this year's Preface.

American Bible Society's Ministry Intelligence Team is led by Dr. John Plake, who joined the *State of the Bible* research team for the 2018 study. Since that time, Dr. Plake has helped to expand American Bible Society's research capabilities, making it possible for us to lead the *State of the Bible* research and produce this report. Dr. Plake serves as the editor-in-chief of this report and oversees the ongoing *State of the Bible* series.

Dr. Jeff Fulks serves as senior manager of research and evaluation on the Ministry Intelligence Team, where he brings deep insight into the world of behavioral science research and serves as the lead analyst for the *State of the Bible* research. He skillfully incorporates research-proven measures into our work, and he performs countless statistical tests to uncover the story behind the numbers.

This year we are (re)joined by Randy Petersen, a writer and proprietor of Petersen Creative Enterprises. Randy served for nearly four years as American Bible Society's Director of Scripture Engagement Content. During his tenure at ABS, Randy helped the team write about research and data. He has a gift for parsimony: bringing clarity to complexity without sacrificing truth. Randy serves as *State of the Bible's* managing editor and lead writer.

Matt Steinruck of Big Picture Studio handles data visualizations, graphic design, and typesetting. He is also a former member of the American Bible Society team, and we are grateful for his ability to bring data to life through informative charts and attractive designs.

Laura Chan is American Bible Society's senior manager of advocacy and engagement. She has the twin gifts of curiosity and intellect that make her an invaluable member of the *State of the Bible* team. Laura pushes the team to ask relevant questions that can serve the church with actionable insights.

Peter Edman is our quality assurance lead, helping all of us produce a more consistent, high-quality report. Hannah Plake has volunteered her services again this year to provide copy and style editing, resulting in a more readable, consistent product for everyone.

Finally, Heather Douglass and our gifted partners at Pinkston help us connect this research with the broader stories in America and the interests of key media outlets.

STATE OF THE BIBLE USA 2022

In 2011, American Bible Society launched a landmark annual study of the state of the Bible in America. This report marks twelve years of listening and learning how *consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships*.

As 2022 began, Americans hoped for an end to the turmoil that has disrupted our lives since 2020. This report tells the story of ongoing struggles and new opportunities for the Bible. Here are a few highlights:

1. Scripture engagement among American adults fell by 21 percent from 64 million to only 49 million.
2. COVID-19 continues to influence the way Americans practice their faith and connect with others.
3. Scripture engagement brings strength and flourishing to Americans of all ages and generations.
4. Millions of Americans want to talk about their faith with friends, coworkers, and family.

This is the story of millions of Americans and their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives on the Bible, faith, and the church.



Insights