
The Bible and Bengay

Have you ever read the Bible straight through from Genesis to Revelation? I have. I was ten. My parents dumped me at my grandmother's house in Birmingham while they went off for what seemed to be an eternity to do who knows what without me. This wasn't the grandmother in Miami with the beach and all the cousins. No, this was the Methodist grandmother living alone in Vestavia Hills. She had a long ranch house with a garage on one end and one of those living rooms no one ever sat in on the other. In the den, she had a collection of Depression glass that rattled no matter where you stepped in the house.

It wasn't all bad at Grandmother's house. She and I loved to make lemon cake and go to Baskin-Robins, and she took a lot of naps, so I had plenty of free time to chip away at Super Mario on my Game Boy. But when she wasn't cooking or napping, she would call me into her Bengay scented bed, and we would read the Bible. I say we read it cover to cover, but she did let us pass over the genealogies, and I'm guessing she skipped a few parts here and there because it would have been an impossible feat otherwise.

You now know everything from that experience that I can remember. I couldn't tell you much at all other than the fact that a powered down TV screen looks really dark when your grandmother is reading the Bible to you.

When my parents called, I complained. When they finally came to pick me up, I complained. Pretty much every time that little "vacation" comes up, I still complain. It's nothing against God, the Bible, or my grandmother; I was just very busy at ten years old and this exercise was not fun.

There's no way I sat there quietly and obediently. I'm sure I was a terror, endlessly whining and bargaining. She was probably having just as miserable of a time as I was. Still, we read. After her morning nap, after her midday nap, after her dinner nap, and right before bed, we read. Sometimes I got to read, but the King James Bible is a real tongue twister, so I wasn't much good. Mostly, tiny little Grandmother did the heavy lifting.

Perhaps you can tell that I don't look back fondly on this time. All these years later, I'm still not a fan of forced scripture reading or the smell of Bengay, but I finally appreciate what I think my grandmother was trying to do. Undoubtedly, her faith ran deep. Nothing kept her from church on Sunday. Nothing kept her from her prayers. Nothing kept her from her Bible. Nothing kept her from instilling a sense of spiritual discipline in her unassuming, doomed-to-be-a-priest little granddaughter. She showed me that, whether we like it or not, being a Christian sometimes means doing work you'd rather not do.

As we trudged through the Good Book, she didn't explain the theology, she didn't punish me for being a little jerk, she let me doze off from time to time, and she just kept reading.

Sometimes our faith is so fun, and it brings great joy, laughter, and awestricken moments. But plenty of other times, our faith is subtle, uneventful, and maybe even dull. It's the commitment that we make on behalf of our family to get up, dressed, and out the door early on Sunday morning for church. It's the promise we make to a friend to say prayers for her family. It's a few minutes with scripture instead of scrolling. While we come back to life around the Cathedral this fall, we're so excited for the big days that pepper our calendars but remember that it's also the time between the naps and the lemon cakes that we sit with God and work away at our faith, exciting or not.