

What I'd like to say to President Trump about the Bible

I'd tell him a secret I learned from Eugene Peterson.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue



President Donald Trump holds a Bible as he visits the outside of St. John's Church across Lafayette Park from the White House on June 1. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

During a 2016 radio interview, then candidate Donald Trump was asked if he had a favorite Bible verse that impacted his thinking and character. “An eye for an eye,” he said quickly, in reference to Exodus 21:24. “If you look at what’s happening to our country, how people are taking advantage of us, we have to be firm and have to be very strong.” Never mind that most Jewish scholars don’t believe this verse teaches the pure retribution Trump suggested. His interpretation of “an eye for an eye” has proved fundamental to his self-understanding.

Fast-forward four years, through assorted compliments to various authoritarian leaders around the world, and on June 1, 2020, Trump delivered a Rose Garden address. “I am your president of law and order,” he told a nation reeling from days of protest and unrest over the police killing of George Floyd. Within minutes of

announcing that the military would “dominate the streets,” his attorney general ordered flash grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets to clear peaceful protesters and clergy from the street in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church across from the White House.

Protesters had no idea this sudden assault on their lives was to clear the way for a presidential photo op in front of the church. The bizarre scene featured the president holding a Bible with an awkwardness that will be remembered for a long time.

The scene reminded me of a person holding someone else’s baby without any prior experience to help them know exactly how. Hold the Bible face forward and away from your body. Lift it high above your right shoulder. Flip it upside down (not recommended for newborns). Show off the lettering on the binding. The choreography resembled *Antiques Roadshow*, when an heirloom porcelain vase is displayed for different camera angles. Except *heirloom* isn’t quite the right word here. When a reporter asked, “Is that *your* Bible?” Trump replied, “It’s a Bible.” Rarely in recent years has truth been spoken so clearly.

Here’s my fantasy: If I could coach Donald Trump, and he was willing to listen—the first being an offer, the second a fanciful dream—I’d tell him a secret I learned from Eugene Peterson. To *know* the Bible, said Peterson, is less about me reading it and more about having it read me. In having it read me, I essentially consent to letting it splay my heart wide open, sometimes exposing uncomfortable truths about my life like self-righteousness, self-importance, and a bunch of other *self* words.

For this reading exercise to occur, of course, I have to actually open the Bible, which if done regularly enough becomes an act of love. According to Peterson, loving scripture becomes “loving the one who speaks the words enough to want to get them right.” Getting those words right is what many of us spend our lives working on. I’m still at the project—I’d confess that plainly during my Oval Office coaching session.

My encouragement to Donald Trump, given his shameless use of a Bible to justify a police crackdown, would be for him to actually open a Bible up. Open it so often that it starts to read your life. Watch how it exposes uncomfortable truths. You’re going to want to get the words right, of course. But start with Jesus’ words about “an eye for an eye” (Matt. 5:38), and go from there.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Bible reads us."