

Part III: How to Study the Bible

1: Why Study the Bible?

As we have said, an important part of making disciples is teaching people to obey everything Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). This means that we need to know Jesus's teaching and commands. It may seem that the first disciples had an advantage on us here. How can we teach people to follow Jesus if we haven't observed His ministry and listened to His teaching? But we are not at a disadvantage at all because God has recorded His words and the testimony of Jesus's followers in a book—the Bible.

For a Christian, nothing should seem more natural than reading the Bible. Peter, one of Jesus's first disciples, compared it to a baby's natural craving for milk: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

As a newborn depends on milk to survive and to grow, we should equally depend on the words of Scripture for our spiritual survival and growth. The words of the Bible have impacted millions of lives

over thousands of years, and God wants it to change our lives as well. If you don't already love the Bible, pray that you would.

No matter what your experience with the Bible has been, it's helpful for all of us to step back and think about what the Bible actually is. When we talk about the Bible, we sometimes use profound language without considering what we're really saying. Perhaps the strongest thing we can say about the Bible is that it is the "Word of God." But have you ever thought about what that means? That concept should blow our minds. When we talk about the Bible, we're actually talking about something that the all-powerful, all-knowing, transcendent God decided to write to us! What could be more important?

Think of how you would respond to hearing a voice from heaven speaking directly to you. We should approach the Bible with the same reverence.

If we really believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then it should be much more than a book that we are familiar with. It ought to shape every aspect of our existence. It should guide the decisions we make in life. If God is the designer and creator of this world, if He made us and placed us on this earth, and if He has taken the time to tell us who He is, who we are, and how this world operates, then what could be more important to us than the Bible?

But even after we decide that the Bible is important, we still need to learn to approach it in the right way and with the right motives. Many Christians misuse the Bible because they never ask themselves *why* they are studying it in the first place. The purpose of this session is to help you think through the nature of the Bible, why it is important to study, and how it should transform our lives.

Studying the Right Book for the Wrong Reasons

Before you go any further, ask yourself why you study the Bible. Don't be overly optimistic with this; try to assess your heart. When you pick up the Bible and begin to read it, what is motivating you? Are you driven by guilt? Do you have a desire to know God more fully? Are you looking for arguments against other perspectives? Are you looking for material for a Bible study or sermon?

- 1. Take a few minutes to examine your motivations and write down a few thoughts below.*

The fact of the matter is that most Christians study the Bible for the wrong reasons. Here we will explore three motivations for studying the Bible that we need to move beyond: guilt, status, and teaching material.

Guilt

Many people are motivated by guilt. We all know that we should be reading our Bibles—it's just one of those things that Christians are told they are supposed to do. It is often added to a list with things like church attendance, tithing, and not swearing. Nobody wants to

admit that they read the Bible out of guilt, but guilt is a powerful motivator.

Very often this guilt is connected with legalism. We create our own standard (“I must read x chapters per day”) and then hold ourselves to it, never stopping to consider that God has not placed this standard on us, we have placed it on ourselves. It doesn’t take long before we begin holding other people to that standard as well. And thus a culture of guilt is formed, a culture where “good Christians” read their Bibles because they’re afraid not to, and “bad Christians” feel guilty about not meeting their Bible-reading quota.

Status

There is a certain status or air of respect reserved for those who know their Bibles well. And rightly so. We should all aspire to know God’s Word inside and out. It should be on the tip of our tongues and deeply ingrained on our hearts and minds.

But take a minute to ask yourself why you want to know the Bible well. God is pleased when we treasure His Word, but do you really think He is pleased with your desire to appear intelligent? Does your desire to be the “go-to guy” who is never stumped really bring Him glory? What about your desire to be recognized as the best or the most spiritual person in the room?

It’s not about studying the Bible too much (as if that were possible); it’s about your motivation. Too often Christians are motivated by status when we should be motivated by a desire to know God, to be changed by His Word, and to love and serve the people around us.

Chances are, you know someone who knows the Bible inside and out. Maybe you've noticed how that person gets treated, and you want what he or she has. Competition is a great motivator, but it's the wrong reason to study the Bible. God cares more about your character than your productivity, and let's face it, studying the Bible in order to be better than someone else is ridiculous.

Teaching Material

Sometimes our motivations get skewed when we have to study the Bible in order to lead a Bible study, preach a sermon, or just have some sort of scriptural gem to share with someone. This tends to be a much more subtle misuse of the Bible. It's not wrong to use the Bible in preparation for teaching other people. In fact, it's necessary. The problem arises when we begin to approach the Bible *only* as a source for teaching material. If you are in a role where you preach or teach to others, do you find yourself simply scanning the Bible for nuggets to share? Or do you soak in the Scriptures because of what they have to say to *you*, listening to what God wants to teach *you*, allowing the Bible to transform *you* in unexpected ways?

2. *Take a minute to think about your past experience with studying the Bible. Which of the wrong motivations listed above are you guilty of? Can you think of any others?*

Why Did God Give Us the Bible?

The best place to begin in refining our motivation for studying the Bible is to ask a simple question. Why did God give us the Bible? We're used to the thought that the Bible is God's Word. But why did He give it us? If the Bible is God's Word, why did God decide to speak to us in the first place? Until we understand what the purpose of the Bible is, we are bound to keep approaching it in ways that miss God's intention.

To Teach Us about Himself

So why did God give us the Bible? One reason that seems obvious is that He wanted to describe Himself to us. From beginning to end, God is the subject of the Scriptures. Everything in this book is God centered. Genesis begins with a God who existed alone and then spoke all things into existence. Revelation ends with this same God reigning eternally over all that He created. Every book in between reveals His character and attributes by narrating His sovereign actions throughout history.

God in heaven wants us to know certain things about Himself, and He uses the Scriptures to reveal these things. People naturally want to believe in a human-centered world, so God gave us the Bible, which shows that everything revolves around God. He is the First and the Last, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is described as "holy," which speaks to the massive disparity between God and people. It is important to God that we understand this.

It is through the Bible that we learn about God's power, justice, mercy, wrath, love, kindness, anger, faithfulness, jealousy, holiness,

compassion, etc. Because God is already described in the Bible, we are left with no room to formulate our own opinions. We should all study in order to understand God better. We search diligently to know the truth about God and to rid ourselves of any misconceptions we hold about Him.

*To Teach Us about Ourselves
and the World We Live In*

God also gave us the Bible so that we can understand the world we live in. It is a grand narrative that explains where we came from, why the world is the way it is, and where everything is headed. It explains who we are as human beings and how we should think about our existence.

Many Christians think that the Bible is helpful for answering religious questions and teaching us how to live godly lives, but it doesn't have answers for the tough questions that we face in philosophy, science, or sociology. This is not true! The Bible gives us answers to all of life's most important questions. The Bible gives us much more than "religious truths"; it accurately explains the world we live in. The God who wrote the Bible is the God who designed this world. Since this is His world, it only makes sense to view the world from His perspective and live according to His principles.

All of this means that as we study the Bible, we should be seeking to understand our God, our world, and ourselves. Rather than pursuing an emotional experience or trying to accumulate religious knowledge, we should be learning to live in the world that God made.

To Enable Us to Live Godly Lives

Another reason that God gave us the Bible is to enable us to live godly lives. Peter said that God's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). Simply put, through the knowledge of God we gain everything we need for living godly lives. Whatever motivations we may have for studying the Bible, godly living needs to be near the top of that list. We study because we want to be godly.

Paul said that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). First, Paul said that Scripture is literally "breathed out" by God. Though He used human authors to write each book of the Bible, God Himself is the ultimate source of these words. But notice the purpose statement that Paul included: "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." So why did God give us the Bible? He gave it to us *so that* we would be complete, mature people who are equipped and ready to do anything God asks us to do.

This means that as we study the Bible, we should be looking to change. Hebrews 4:12 warns us that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Though we primarily think of the Bible as something we read in order to gain knowledge, we actually have it backward. The Bible reads us—it penetrates to our core and exposes who we really are. If you ever

find yourself reading your Bible and not changing, then you can be sure that you're approaching the Bible in the wrong way. It's not about finding support for our lifestyle or way of thinking; it's about approaching the mind of God and letting Him change and redefine who we are.

To Facilitate a Relationship with God

God wants you to know Him, and He gave you the Scriptures so that you can. Every relationship requires communication—the loving expression of each person's thoughts, emotions, concerns, and dreams that strengthens the relationship and deepens intimacy. This is how our relationships with one another function, so why would it be any different with God? The Bible is His means of sharing His thoughts and desires with us! We are relational beings because He created us that way. He Himself exhibits pure relationship in the perfect union and love between the members of the Trinity. From the day He placed Adam in the garden, God has maintained a relationship with mankind, and communication has always been central to that relationship.

When we open the Bible, therefore, we are engaging with God's communication to us. He chose specific words to say to specific people at specific times. He chose sixty-six books to preserve for us so that we could know Him better. Though different parts of the Bible are addressed to different people, everything in the Bible is ultimately written for our benefit. If the Bible is indeed “breathed out by God”—words delivered from the mouth of God Himself—then reading the Bible is listening to the voice of God.

Every time we read the Bible we are strengthening our relationship with God—unless we approach the Bible for the wrong reasons. If we approach the Bible with humility, eagerly listening for God to speak to us, waiting to hear what God has to say rather than what we want to hear, then we are drawing closer to the one we were made to be in relationship with. True Bible study must always have intimacy with God as a primary goal.

To Exalt Jesus

God uses the Scriptures to explain how and why He has exalted Jesus to the highest place. All of the events in biblical history point to His Son. The law was given to show us our sinfulness and our need for Jesus. Old Testament priests and sacrifices point to our need for the greater high priest and ultimate sacrifice. The Gospels record the loving words and actions of the Son of God. The epistles explain how it is only through His work on the cross that we can be saved from sin and filled with the Spirit. Revelation shows how He will one day return to judge and restore the earth, and reign with His followers forever. All of this is written to exalt Jesus to the glory of God the Father. These words should move us to exalt Jesus in our everyday lives.

To Prepare Us for Our God-Given Mission

From the very beginning, God has had a mission for humanity. After God finished creating the world and everything in it, He created the first man and placed him in the garden “to work it and

keep it” (Gen. 2:15). God also gave humanity dominion over the creation. Whatever it means for people to have “dominion” over the creation, it does not mean that we have the right to destroy the creation in any way that serves our purpose. Instead, if humanity’s dominion is to look anything like God’s dominion, then our responsibility is to lovingly care for the world that God made. From the moment Adam was created by God, people have had a mission on this earth.

God chose Abraham to be the father of the nation of Israel. God blessed Abraham, promised to make him into a great nation, and said, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). When we think about the nation of Israel, we often think that God chose them so that they could be separated from the rest of the world, enjoying God’s blessings and living their lives as God’s “favorites.” But from the moment He chose Abraham, God made it clear that Abraham was to look outward with the blessings he had been given. Abraham was blessed *so that* he could be a blessing to all of the nations of the earth. Israel’s mission was to show the world who their God was.

In the New Testament, the mission of God’s people becomes even clearer. We are not on this earth merely to enjoy our own personal relationships with God. We are here to be God’s servants, His ambassadors: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

Though much of Christian thought tells us that we are the center of it all—that it’s all about you and God and nothing else really matters—the reality is that God is the center, and He has saved us so

that we can work with Him in His mission to redeem humanity and restore creation to what He originally intended it to be.

This means that when we read the Bible, we need to view it as our marching orders. Rather than coming to the Bible with our own agenda and trying to find verses that support what we'd like to do, we need to allow the Bible to shape our hopes and dreams. Every time we read the Bible, we should understand our mission a little better. Why are we on this earth in the first place? How can we take part in what God is doing in this world? These are all questions that the Bible answers—as long as we are ready to listen.

- 3. Take a minute to think through why God gave us the Bible. How should these things affect the way you think about studying the Bible?*

Approaching the Mind of God

Ultimately, when we read the Bible, we are approaching the mind of God. Every time you open the Bible, you ought to prepare yourself for an encounter with the Creator of the universe. So how do you prepare yourself for this type of encounter?

It should go without saying that we ought to approach God with humility. We know that we ought to be humble with other people and with God, but we don't usually think of being humble with the

Bible. We make this mistake because we don't think about what it is that we're doing when we read our Bibles. Reading your Bible with humility means that you're assuming the role of a student. Too often we search the Bible to find agreement with the views we already hold. This is backward. Instead, we need to recognize that we know nothing.

We don't have the answers—that's why we're reading the Bible.

Approaching the Bible with humility means that we're laying aside our agendas and looking for what God will teach us. Every time you find yourself struggling to accept something the Bible says, you've found an area of your life that needs to be brought into submission to Christ. Unfortunately, we often waste these opportunities by finding ways to explain away what the Bible is saying to us.

And that's the real test—when you find that your beliefs or lifestyle don't match the Bible, do you assume that the Bible is wrong? Every time we find ourselves disagreeing with God, we can be certain that we are the ones who need to change. God didn't give us the Bible to help us feel better about the way we do things; He wrote the Bible to tell us what He wants us to be and do. Until we begin reading the Bible in order to draw close to God and do what He says, we are completely missing the point.

4. *How do you tend to respond to the Bible's teaching? Would you say that you approach it humbly with a desire to change? How do you need to adjust your approach to studying the Bible?*

Right Motivation Makes All the Difference

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul talked about food offered to idols. The pagan religions at that time would offer meat to their idols. After the ceremony, they would take the meat (obviously the idols didn't eat it) and sell it in the marketplace at a reduced price. Understandably, some Christians who had converted from paganism had a problem with eating this meat because they felt as if they were participating in idolatry by doing so. Other Christians rightly understood that these idols were nothing, and they could eat that meat with a clear conscience.

The problem came, however, when these Christians began to use their knowledge to push their brothers and sisters to act against their consciences. In addressing that issue, Paul said these profound words: "Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul's warning serves as a great case in point for what happens when we study the Bible with the wrong motives. When we study the Bible in order to gain more knowledge, to look more intelligent, to prove a point to someone else, or to convince other people that they should think and act just as we do, then we are studying the Bible with wrong motives. And what is the fruit of this type of study? We become "puffed up." Ironically—tragically—the act of studying the Bible has produced some of the most arrogant people this world has ever seen. Chances are, you know one or two of these people.

5. *Rather than thinking about all of the arrogant people you know, take a minute to consider whether or not your efforts in studying*

the Bible have simply puffed you up. How has studying the Bible changed you? Are you more arrogant, argumentative, or judgmental? Write down a few thoughts below:

Clearly, this is not the way God wants us to study the Bible. Instead, reading God's Word should lead us to become more like God. As Paul said, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. When we come to the Bible without an agenda, looking for the ways in which God wants to teach us and change us, then we will walk away more like the people that God desires us to be.

Remember Peter's exhortation: "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Pet. 2:1–2). We should set aside every ungodly desire and inclination and simply long to be fed and nourished by the Word of God. It's a very simple concept that brings life-changing results. Imagine how different you would be if you aligned your thinking and lifestyle with the Bible. Rather than becoming arrogant, you would love God more; you would be in tune with your God-given mission; you would see people not as means to your own ends but as valuable creations of God, and you would find ways to love and serve the people around you.

6. *Take a minute to meditate on 1 Peter 2:1–2. What would your life look like if you desired the Word as Peter described?*

Before You Move On

To sum it all up, the right way to approach the Bible is to first let go of everything that we want and expect, and to let God tell us exactly what to think and what to do. Of course, this is contrary to our natural tendencies, so we need God to work in our hearts to remove our poor motivations and give us a pure longing for His Word. In the next sessions, we will talk about methods for studying the Bible carefully. But before you develop skills in studying the Bible, it's absolutely essential that you work through your motivation for studying in the first place. Unless your heart is right, you will misuse the Bible, no matter how skilled you are at studying it carefully.

7. *Close this session by praying. Ask God to purify your heart with regard to Scripture. Ask Him to produce in you a longing for the pure milk of the Word.*