



Moses Lake Alliance Church

Live The Call

Discipleship Series:

The Journey of Disciple Making

How to Study the Bible

“Making disciples of Jesus, that make disciples of Jesus, that make disciples
of Jesus...”

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Part II: 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.

2: Studying the Bible Prayerfully and Obediently

Is there a “right” way to study the Bible? We will probably all agree that studying the Bible is critical, but we may not agree on the best method of study. There is no universally accepted pattern for how Christians should interact with this book. Some approach the Bible as a textbook or rulebook that gives them direction for how to live their lives. Others gravitate toward the stories and characters in the Bible as an inspiration or model for living a godly life. Still others take a more mystical approach: let it fall open to any page and you will find some spiritual encouragement or guidance to help you through the day. And then there’s the academic approach, which carefully examines each passage of Scripture to determine precisely what the original authors intended to say.

Most of us cycle through each of these approaches and several others in our attempt to get the most out of the Bible. We know that we need the Bible, but we sometimes struggle in our quest to get the most out of our reading.

1. Describe your experience with studying the Bible. What approaches have you tried? What has been effective? What has been ineffective? What have you learned in the process?

Studying the Bible Devotionally

Before we decide on the best approach to studying the Bible, let’s not forget what the Bible is: God’s Word. It is His words to us, so we should be mindful of His authority as He conveys His purpose and will to us. When we read the Bible we are hearing the voice of God.

So how should we read a book that carries the same weight as the audible voice of God coming down from heaven? Obviously, we should read the Bible carefully, paying close attention to what exactly God is saying—a concept we will explore in the next session. In this session, we will focus on

another important point: we should read these words devotionally. In other words, we should be “devoted” to them. When God speaks to us, we should be quick to listen, eager to absorb everything He tells us. And we should enjoy the process.

Have you ever thought to simply *enjoy reading the Bible*? We often get so caught up in the busyness of our lives or the details of the biblical text that we forget that we should be thrilled. We are hearing God’s words to us!

If you want to get a feel for what it means to enjoy the Bible, then read Psalm 119. It’s basically a love letter written to God’s Word. Two things are particularly striking about this psalm: (1) The psalmist had a lot to say about God’s Word (it’s 176 verses long!), and (2) he really, really liked it. The repeated refrain is that he *delights* in God’s law, statutes, precepts, commandments, etc. At one point (vs. 131) he even said, “I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments.” That’s a serious desire!

Recall once again Peter’s exhortation to long for the Word of God as a baby longs for its mother’s milk (1 Pet. 2:2–3). If these statements reflect the attitude a Christian should have toward the Bible, then it’s safe to say that all of us are falling very short.

We should approach the Bible with the same intensity, aware of the fact that we are reading God’s words, and that His words are directed to us. God has given us the Bible to use in discipling, counseling, teaching, and encouraging the people around us (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But whatever else we do with the Bible, we cannot fail to read the Bible devotionally. As we study the Bible to teach, correct, or encourage other people, we need to let God’s truths saturate every aspect of our minds, hearts, and lifestyles.

2. What does it look like to take joy in reading the Bible? Have you ever experienced this? If so, what is it like? If not, why do you think you’ve never enjoyed the Bible?

3. Read through Psalm 119. What do you find striking, challenging, or encouraging?

Prayer and Understanding

Christians often talk about praying *and* reading their Bibles, but we don't hear much about praying *while* reading the Bible. While many Christians will acknowledge that prayer is an important part of understanding Scripture, not many of us have done a good job of actually putting this into practice.

Some believe that if we examine the biblical text closely enough—possibly even learning Hebrew and Greek—if we consult enough commentaries, and if we diagram every passage perfectly, then we can arrive at the true meaning of any biblical text. Each of these elements is important, but this mentality leaves no room for prayer, which means that there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is a mentality of complete self-reliance.

Paul's description of the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of God is worth quoting at length:

As it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:9–14)

Make sure you understand the point of that passage: you *cannot* understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit's help.

Dependence on God in our thinking is a fundamental aspect of being human—and was even before the fall. When Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, they needed God to tell them what to do. This is huge! Even before sin entered the world, people needed revelation from God in order to understand the world they were living in. Part of what it means to be human is that we depend on revelation from God in order to understand our existence. And this dependency only intensified after the fall.

As a result of the fall, people are corrupt not only in their actions, but also in their minds (Rom. 1:21). That means we naturally stray from God morally (a concept we're all pretty familiar with), but in addition to that, our minds are tainted by sin. We no longer think the way we ought to think. This intensifies our dependence on the Spirit of God to help us see God's truth as it really is, not as we'd like it to be.

And this is exactly Paul's point: we simply cannot understand spiritual truths apart from the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit, we will look at God's revelation in nature and in the Bible and misinterpret it.

This is why prayer is absolutely essential to Bible study. It's not a symbolic gesture; it's not a formality: it is foundational to understanding the mind of God. If the Bible is God's Word, then understanding the Bible means understanding the mind of God (not fully, of course, but insofar as He has revealed His mind to us). And Paul said explicitly that the only way we can understand the mind of God is through the Spirit of God.

If our Bible study is not saturated in prayer, then we are not studying the Bible the way God intends. The Scriptures are full of the wisdom of God, and we are absolutely dependent on the Spirit to reveal that wisdom to us and establish it in our lives.

*4. In practical terms, what does it mean to study the Bible prayer-fully?
What can you do to build prayer and dependence on God into your study of
the Bible?*

Studying the Bible Obediently

Perhaps the strongest reason for saturating our Bible study in prayer is that we desperately need the Spirit to make our lives align with the truths we are studying. We don't need statistics to convince us that churchgoers tend toward hypocrisy. We all know people who are passionate about the truth but don't seem to understand the concept of practicing what they preach. What we need is the Spirit to keep us from becoming one of them.

What is the value of truth if it doesn't change us? Paul said it this way:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–2)

If you could amaze people with your ability to speak, if you understood everything and had more faith than anyone on earth, but you didn't love your neighbor as yourself, then what would be the point? This is why prayer is critical. We need Him to make us loving—to make our knowledge translate into loving action.

Too many Christians study the Word of God as if gaining knowledge is the sum total of our mission on this earth. But according to Paul, knowledge can be completely worthless and even harmful: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

If we believe that statement, then why do we have so much admiration for people who know lots of facts? Have we forgotten that knowledge is a means to a greater end? Knowledge enables us to love God and love our neighbors more fully.

If we're not putting what we know to work in our lives, then our knowledge will simply make us more arrogant. There's a terrifying irony here: *your study of the Bible could actually lead you further away from the Lord.*

The problem definitely isn't solved by studying less. Instead, we should be learning everything we can and immediately applying it. We should be begging God to give us a deeper love for Him and others so we can take the truths He reveals and put them into practice. Very often, the truths we learn will actually lead us to search for situations in which to apply them (such as caring for the poor or considering other people better than ourselves).

We can't afford to overlook this point. If you find yourself studying the Bible without applying what you're learning, then you're misusing the Bible. It's that simple—and that serious.

You may not consider yourself a biblical scholar, but think about all the things you do know about the Bible. The Bible is filled with God's commands, and you probably already know some of the things that He clearly wants you to do. Start there. Pray, obey, and begin enjoying the peace that comes from studying the Bible obediently.

5. Take a minute to think through the commands that you know God wants us all to be doing (for example, loving the people around you, forgiving others, praying, etc.). Write down a handful of these things below.

Now evaluate your life in light of these commands. If you find that the things you listed above aren't an active part of your life, then it's pretty evident that you need to change the way you study the Bible. If these things are not manifested in the way you live, then you're misusing the Bible. Putting our knowledge into practice will be a lifelong pursuit for all of us, and we rarely see dramatic, immediate results. But if you're not seeing the things you learn translating into the things you do, then something foundational is out of place.

6. Take a minute to examine your life in light of what you already know about the Bible. If you find that you haven't been applying biblical truth to your life, then what changes do you need to make to the way you study the Bible?

Studying the Bible with Faith

Something that is often overlooked when studying the Bible is the importance of faith. Once again, this goes back to the very nature of the Bible. If the Bible is indeed the very words of God, then those words carry the same authority and power as God Himself. Every promise is backed by a person—the promise is as trustworthy as the person who makes that promise. When the Bible gives us a command, that command carries all the authority of God. Likewise, when the Bible makes a promise, that promise is as trustworthy as God.

One of the church's greatest handicaps is that Christians don't study the Bible with faith. We read the Bible, but we don't act as if we believe what it says. We read about judgment for those who deny Jesus, but it doesn't change the way we reach out to the people around us. This raises the question: Do we really believe (i.e., have faith) in what God has said? Another example is when we read of God's grace. The Bible is clear that God forgives (Eph. 2:1–9, 1 John 1:9), yet many of us walk around with doubts and insecurities based upon past actions. If we studied with faith, wouldn't we live with visible peace and joy?

If we are going to study the Bible as the very words of God, then we need to believe what it says. We need to study the Bible with absolute faith. When we read that God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), then we need to believe it and live as though it were true. When we read that the Holy Spirit empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), then we need to put our complete confidence in that truth and live as people who are empowered by the very Spirit of God.

7. *In your own words, explain what it means to study the Bible with faith. Do you see this playing out in your life? How so?*

The Bible and Transformation

Often people come out of study groups saying, “That was a good Bible study.” But what do they actually mean by that? Does it mean that they learned something or felt convicted at points? Or do they say this because their lives actually changed? Good Bible study leads to transformation. It may not happen all at once, but we should be noticeably different because of our time with Scripture.

We’ve already looked briefly at Hebrews 4:12: “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.” The Bible isn’t merely an inanimate object that we study and pull information from. It has a life of its own. It acts. *It reads us*; it pierces to the deepest parts of our being and discerns our motivations. Since our God is a living God, His Word is alive, and He works through His Word to actively transform every part of our being.

James used striking imagery to highlight our need to be transformed by the Bible:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (1:22–25).

James compared the process of studying the Bible to a man looking into a mirror. Just like a mirror, the Bible has the ability to reveal to you the truth about your condition. First, he described a man who looks into the mirror, clearly sees the reflection, and then walks away without doing anything. This

person is clearly foolish, but he also perfectly represents the way most Christians study the Bible. They read their Bibles, see the truth that demands transformation, then walk away as if nothing ever happened.

James contrasted this fool with the person who looks into the mirror and does something about what he sees. This person reads the Word of God, takes what he sees at face value, and then acts on it. James is clear that this person is the one who will be blessed in what he does. There is no reward for merely hearing the truth. Bible study is incomplete and illegitimate until it turns into obedience and transforms us.

So again we have to ask the question: Why do you study the Bible? Is it because you want to be changed, or are you studying to gain knowledge?

James followed his powerful metaphor with these startling words:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Once again, he pointed out that there are going to be those who “deceive themselves.” Don't be one of them. If you think you are a religious person, but don't act on God's truth, Scripture says your “religion” is worthless. Don't kid yourself—true religion is not about what you know, it's about putting what you know about God and His Word into practice.

God has been so gracious to speak to us. His words lead to life. They set us free! So much of God's blessing comes to us as we listen to His voice and put His Word into practice. It would be a shame if we merely studied and didn't allow these words to bless us as He intended.

8. Take a minute to consider everything you've thought through in this session. What changes do you need to make in the way you study the Bible?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you a heart for His Word.

3: Studying Logically

As we said in the previous session, an academic study of Scripture does not ensure a proper interpretation. If studying the Bible were all about academics, then our best bet would be to find the most intelligent person we know, and have him or her interpret it for us.

But while it's true that rigorous study does not guarantee right results, it does not mean that hard work and a logical approach to Scripture is insignificant. Not only is it helpful, it is necessary and commanded:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

God calls you to “do your best.” Laziness is inexcusable. We are studying the very words that God chose to communicate to us, so in addition to studying prayerfully and obediently, we must study diligently. God calls us to love Him with our minds (Matt. 22:37), so it is an act of worship to use our minds to understand His thoughts, which in turn will lead us to love Him even more.

We tend to listen carefully when there are consequences for not listening. It's like misunderstanding driving directions and ending up lost and frustrated. How much more important is it to truly understand what God is telling you? As Christians, we claim to base our lives upon the teaching of the Bible. But what if we misunderstand that teaching?

The fact of the matter is that we all misunderstand certain passages of Scripture. If we all understood the Bible perfectly, we would all agree on every point of doctrine. Clearly this is not the case. There are many factors that lead us to misunderstand what the Bible is saying: our own assumptions, blindly following the views of people who have been influential in our lives, our sinful desire to do our own thing, etc. All of these factors are only intensified when we don't pay close attention to what the Bible is actually saying, rather than what we think it says.

It is good for us to keep in mind some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

Consider the Context

Every text belongs to a context. Every chapter, paragraph, sentence, and word derives meaning from its relationship to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around it. This is true in reading ordinary books, and it is certainly true in reading the Bible.

Consider the simple word *ship*. We all know what the word means (and even if we didn't, we could easily find its definition in a dictionary). But *ship* means different things in different contexts. How do you decide whether *ship* is referring to a large boat or to the process of sending something? You look at the context. This isn't a complicated process, but it is absolutely essential in determining the meaning of the word.

We don't usually think about this because reading words in their context is second nature to us—it probably hasn't even occurred to you that you're thinking in terms of context right now, as you read these sentences. As you read, you are deciding what these words mean based on the words around them. When you run into an ambiguous word (like the word “read” in the last two sentences, which could be taken as past or present tense, depending on the context), you automatically choose the appropriate definition or tense based on the context.

The point of using these simple examples is to highlight an essential aspect of studying the Bible: in order to understand a particular word, verse, chapter, or book, we need to consider it in light of its context. Too often, verses are read and quoted in isolation. While this is not necessarily wrong, it greatly increases the chances of misinterpretation.

Here's a helpful way to get the point across: when studying Scripture, think apple rather than orange. Typically, when you eat an apple, you take a bite out of the whole fruit. When you eat an orange, you break it into isolated pieces and then eat the pieces individually. Whenever we read a verse, we should be mindful that we are taking a thought (a “bite”) from a larger story. Always keep in mind that every verse is connected to a chapter, a book, and the entire Bible.

One of the best things we can do to understand context is to read the Bible in its entirety. Some choose to do this every two years, others on a yearly basis, and others even more frequently. Whatever approach you take to reading the Bible, the more often you read it, the better you will understand the whole story.

1. Think about the way you tend to study the Bible. Would you say that you make an effort to seek out what the Bible is actually saying? Do you pay attention to the context? If so, how has this helped you? If not, how do you think this might change the way you read the Bible?

Know the Difference between Interpretation and Application

Maybe the most common mistake made in Bible interpretation is when people focus too much on “what this verse means *to me*.” It’s not uncommon for Bible study groups to go around the circle as each person shares an individualized interpretation. Often these interpretations are made with little study and are heavily influenced by opinion and desire. Many times, the various interpretations are incompatible with one another. In this type of setting, the focus is not on what God is saying through the Bible. Instead, each person is focused on what he or she thinks the verse means. Whether it’s clearly articulated or not, this approach reveals the assumption that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each Christian. It might mean one thing to me, but another thing to you.

I don’t want to completely disparage this approach. For one thing, many biblical passages have nuances of meaning, and you might notice something that others miss. In that sense, “going around the circle” can be a very helpful exercise. But this is not the same thing as saying that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each of us. Once we head down that road, there is no longer such a thing as “misinterpretation,” and people are free to make the Scripture say anything. It’s important to understand that the Bible means what God intends for it to mean. When we ask our children to wash the dishes, we have a clear message we want to get across, and we expect them to figure out what we mean by that statement. In the same way, God has a

message to get across, and we all need to work together in order to examine God's words and find out what He is really saying to us.

Sometimes when we talk about "what this passage means to me," we are actually talking about application, rather than interpretation. With *interpretation*, we are asking what the passage is saying and what it means. With *application*, we are applying that meaning to our specific situation. Ultimately, each passage has one meaning, but it might have many different applications.

For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, which says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The meaning is pretty easy to grasp: we need to love the people whom God has placed around us. But how do we apply that truth to our lives? One person might apply it by helping a neighbor with her yard work, and another person might apply it by listening graciously to a coworker as he shares his concerns about his family. They might each apply the same truth to their lives in different ways tomorrow.

Application depends on our specific life situations, so we may all read the same passage and walk away with different applications. *Interpretation*, on the other hand, is all about discovering what God has actually said and what He intended to communicate. We should all read the same passage and walk away with the same meaning.

2. *In your own words, why is it important to distinguish between interpretation and application?*

Find the Plain Meaning

Sometimes our personal agendas or assumptions divert us from what God is saying in a biblical passage. For example, in Luke 12:33, Jesus said, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy." We will often read a verse like that and say, "Okay, obviously God is not asking me to *literally* sell my

possessions and give to the needy. This passage must mean _____.” Really? Because it sure seems that Jesus is saying that these disciples should literally sell their possessions and give to the needy. In fact, looking at the context of Jesus’s teaching and ministry only strengthens the literal meaning of that passage. Based on the rest of the book of Luke, this is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus would call His followers to do.

The fact that Jesus called His disciples to sell some possessions at that moment in history does not necessarily mean that every Christian has to sell every possession at all times, but the point is that our own agendas can keep us from even considering such a thing. If Jesus called His disciples to sell some of their stuff and use that money to meet the needs of the poor, shouldn’t we be open to His calling us to do the same thing today?

We need to learn to take Scripture at face value. While some sections of the Bible are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), so much of the Bible is easily understood. When we read that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8), we will have to carefully study the verse and its context to decide what it means to be “in the flesh,” but the plain meaning of the verse is clear: God does not want us to be in the flesh.

Other passages are more difficult. What happens when we read one of the many portions of the Old Testament that seem so distant?

In Exodus 17, for example, Israel goes to war against Amalek. As Joshua lead the army in battle, Moses sat on top of a hill and kept his hands raised in the air. The Bible says, “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed” (Ex. 17:11). This is a fascinating account, but how do we interpret it? We will probably all agree that the verse isn’t telling us to go sit on a hilltop and hold our hands in the air. Should we be seeking a spiritual meaning that lies beneath the surface, then? Maybe the verse means that we must keep our hands and our hearts pointed toward heaven if we are going to defeat our spiritual enemies. While that may be true, there is no indication that this is what God is telling us through this passage.

If we are going to take this verse at face value, we will read it as a description of the unusual way in which God used Moses to lead Israel to victory in a historical battle over the Amalekites. Through that story we can gain insight

into the power of God and His ability to save His people, but those insights do not change the clear meaning of what God recorded in Exodus 17. It might seem more “spiritual” to try to find some deeper meaning behind the text, but what could be more spiritual than simply taking God at His word?

The Bible is a fascinating book. It is the communication of the Creator of the universe to His people. God wrote the Bible using human language, in words that we understand and use every day. He chose to communicate through a book, and He obviously has the ability to communicate His message clearly.

If we say that we shouldn’t take God’s words at face value, that we need to discover some sort of hidden meaning beneath the plain meaning of the words of Scripture, then we are saying that God is using human language in a way that is different from the way human beings use language. But we have absolutely no indication that this is the case. To the contrary, when God spoke to human beings in the Bible, they understood Him and acted according to the plain meaning of His words. When God told Israel to build a tabernacle, they didn’t perform some sort of dance as a spiritual interpretation of His words. Instead, they took His words at face value and created a tabernacle in accordance with the plain meaning of God’s words. Our approach to Scripture should be the same.

3. In your own words, why is it important to look for the plain meaning of each passage rather than seeking out a deeper meaning?

4. Would you say that your study of the Bible is focused on finding the plain meaning of each passage? Why or why not?

Take the Bible Literally

There is an old statement that is worth repeating here: if the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense. We need to be careful with this, because we are still left to determine when the literal sense actually makes sense. But it makes an important point: we should look for the plain meaning of the words of Scripture. When we examine each word, verse, chapter, and book, we need to allow the context to suggest whether that verse should be taken as a literal statement, a rhetorical question, a figure of speech, etc.

Accepting the Bible as literal truth does not mean that we interpret every passage literally. When we read the Bible, we find many places where the author uses metaphors, parables, poems, prophecies, and other literary devices. For example, when Jesus said, “I am the door” (John 10:9), He was using a metaphor. We understand that He was not claiming to be made of wood and attached to a doorframe. Jesus was conveying literal truth, but using a figure of speech to do so.

But notice that this is not using any sort of strange spiritual or allegorical interpretation. We are following the normal usage of human language, which allows for metaphor, imagery, and other rhetorical devices. So when we say that we need to take the Bible literally, we need to be careful to understand what we’re really saying. What we mean is that we will take the Scriptures at face value, and when the context suggests that the author is using a figure of speech or some sort of poetic or prophetic imagery, then we will follow the normal rules of human language and interpret the passage accordingly.

Don’t misunderstand—this isn’t always a simple task. As an illustration, consider the fact that whole camps have formed over which portions of the book of Revelation should be read literally and which should be read figuratively. We will often disagree over which specific passages are speaking literally and which ones are using rhetorical devices. This means that we need to be gracious as we discuss the Bible. There is room for discussion and exploration—in fact, it glorifies God when we humbly and patiently examine the Bible together. The point is simply this: take God’s words at face value and do what He tells you to do.

5. Do you have a tendency to interpret the Bible allegorically or figuratively? If so, why do you think you tend to do this?

Study the Grammatical Context

As we have seen, God used human language to write the Bible. He led human authors to use human words and human grammar in order to record His truth. So it only makes sense to pay attention to the grammar of the Bible. This doesn't mean that you need to be a grammatical expert to read the Bible (though God does give these people to the church to guide the rest of us), but we should pay attention to how the words in the Bible are being used.

The biblical authors often pay very close attention to grammar. To give one example, Paul made a significant theological point based on the use of a singular noun (rather than a plural) in Genesis 12:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16)

This doesn't mean that we will always find interpretive gems by examining the grammar, but when we come to difficult passages, we will want to ask questions like the following:

- Who is doing the action here? (Find the subject)
- What action is the actor performing? (Find the verb)
- How are the actor and the action described? (Find the adjectives and adverbs)
- Who or what is being acted upon? (Find the direct and indirect objects)

Most of the time, we do this sort of analysis automatically, without even thinking about what we're doing. (You just did it with the previous sentence, and now you're doing it again.) But when you encounter a passage that seems difficult, try breaking it down and examining what is really going on with each sentence. God's words are worth evaluating at this level.

Study the Historical Context

The historical setting of a passage will often shed light on what the passage means. Sometimes this will require outside resources, like a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary. But many times the historical insights can be found in the Bible itself. For example, much of the Old Testament consists of detailed historical accounts. And many New Testament books give historical insights—particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Consider just one example of how the historical setting can help us understand the Bible. Walk into any Christian bookstore and you will find decorative knick-knacks bearing Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” People love it because they interpret it as God saying He will keep us from harm and bless us. But is that really what Jeremiah intended to communicate to us?

If we look at the historical context, we find that Jeremiah was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had gone into captivity as punishment for their lack of faithfulness to God. Jeremiah told them that they would be in captivity for seventy years, so they should settle in and seek to bless Babylon while they were there. And then comes Jeremiah 29:11. God promised that He did indeed have a plan for His people, and He would restore them to the land of Israel after their days of exile were over.

The historical context reveals that Jeremiah 29:11 is not a blank-check promise from God that nothing bad will ever happen to any of us today. We have much to learn from God’s provision for Israel in the midst of their exile and punishment. We can even make observations about God’s compassion in this story and trust that this same compassionate God will care for us today. But we would be misusing Scripture if we assumed that those words could be directly applied to every circumstance as a promise of prosperity. The historical context does not always affect the meaning of a passage, but we must always consider who the biblical authors were addressing and why.

6. In your own words, explain why paying attention to the grammatical and historical context is important. How should these concepts shape your study of the Bible?

Let Go of Your Baggage

As important as it is to pay attention to the context of the passages we read, the greatest danger in biblical interpretation comes from our own “baggage.” For example, many Americans assume that Jesus is a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed capitalist who bleeds red, white, and blue. But that is simply not the case. We often assume that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and fulfilled because that’s the message we get from everyone around us. But again, that’s not the case. Read the Bible carefully and you’ll see that God doesn’t necessarily want those things for us, at least not in the way our culture defines and pursues them.

Life experiences can also taint the way we read the Bible. Those abandoned or abused by their fathers may struggle more to understand what the Bible says about our loving heavenly Father. Those who were raised with few rules and weak parents may have a hard time seeing the power and sovereignty of God. Our experiences have an impact on our desires, which in turn affect our interpretations.

When we read the Bible, we need to do everything we can to avoid making assumptions about what the Bible is saying. We need to let it speak for itself. We are all tainted by the commitments and assumptions of our culture. We also have been heavily affected by our life experiences, but the more we let go of our baggage and ask God to speak directly to us through His Word, the more we will find God’s truth transforming our minds and actions, and the better we will understand the mind of God.

7. What would it mean for you to read the Bible with an awareness of your own baggage and a willingness to get rid of those assumptions?

A Note on Application

Accurately interpreting the Bible is not the final step. The purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is obedience and fellowship with God. If we interpret Scripture perfectly, yet fail to live in accordance with what we read, we are fooling ourselves (James 1:22). God has given us the precious gift of the Bible so that we will be transformed by its truth, becoming more like Him and growing in our love for Him.

8. In light of what you have thought through in this session, how do you need to change your approach to reading and studying the Bible?
