

Introduction

Have you ever pondered the question, “Why did God leave us the Bible?” Is it just a rule book to guide the family of faith? Hardly! In many ways, the Bible is the family history of God’s people down through the ages—a record of how He and His followers got along in the adventure we call the drama of redemption. Assuming that you are in the family of God, consider this great book as your family history.

So, what are we to do with this grand and complex book whose authors span centuries and cultures so far from our own? Many of us begin by reading it, and rereading it through the days of our pilgrimage on earth. I personally try to read it through about every two years or so.

Beyond just reading, we can actually study the Bible. And the more we get in to it, the more we find out that it is the Bible that needs to study us! The study of the nature and person of God will eventually transform the student. The Benedictines have something to teach us in this regard with their practice of *lectio divan* (literally, “let the divine nature lecture you,” the result of a study of the nature of God).

This is a book about the practice of the great adventure of personal Bible study. And at the outset, we have to remind ourselves of the reason for such a pursuit: not simply intellectual knowledge, but personal holiness and transformation of life. The actual process of exploring the Bible can be a lot like getting to know the beauty of the Rocky Mountains where my family lives. One of the things I love most about living in Colorado is the chance we have to explore the beauty of our state in so many ways in all the four seasons of the year. Sometimes we take drives through small mountain passes to enjoy the brooks and canyons of the countryside. Other times it

might be single-track mountain biking, hikes, or walks through open meadows. Summer provides great times to enjoy fishing and the creative beauty of our native flowers. In the fall, the aspens' golden glow is one of the great wonders of North American beauty. Winter gives us the chance to enjoy skiing down mountain terrain through sweet-smelling evergreens. There are so many things to experience and so many ways to explore.

Bible study can be just as rewarding. The process is much the same. There is so much terrain to explore and so many ways to get there. Personal Bible study is a journey of discovery, an adventure, and an opportunity to discover and be rewarded the more you dig.

The Bible itself in the New Testament through the words of the writer Paul tells of its usefulness in the Christian life:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
—2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Bible is meant to be studied—not just read. Through the ages men and women have studied the Word of God carefully and diligently. It is the most circulated and most read book in history. Thousands of years ago Job, one of the earliest writers of the Old Testament, tells about his incredible passion for the word of God:

“I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.”
—Job 23:12, NASB

Now that is commitment! He obviously knew of the great rewards tucked away in the words spoken by God. Let's review some of the benefits of personal Bible study before we begin. This verse we just saw in 2 Timothy 3 is not exhaustive, but it does provide a good starting point. We will give you a chance to explore some more values of Bible study in chapter 1, but here is my personal list of favorites:

Personal Bible Study Benefits

- Knowledge about God
- Knowledge of God
- Spiritual insight

- Appreciation of God’s drama of redemption through history
- Personal spiritual challenge and exhortation
- Encouragement
- Guidance in decision making
- Life instruction in godliness
- Advice and guidance in raising children successfully
- Help in marriage
- Moral instruction

Let’s Get Personal and Practical

What makes this book you now hold in your hands different from other books that teach you how to study the Bible? All too often, “how-to” books on Bible study focus on the theoretical and never address how to interpret and apply what’s been taught. Conversely, some books speak of nonstop contemporary application, but they never get around to examining a biblical text. This book breaks down concepts into logical steps of understanding and action. As students of Scripture, our goal in studying the Bible is to become more like Christ—to be “doers of the Word.”

Not only does this book take a fresh approach to Bible study, but it presents a practical way of learning Scripture. Each step of the way you’ll find opportunities to practice what has just been presented—action studies to try yourself! By the time you reach the end you will have completed several Bible studies for yourself. With a little hard work, this hands-on approach will yield a lifetime of fruitful Bible study.

The approach of this book is different, but the basic idea is not; the inductive approach is a proven method for studying the Bible. As you practice the three steps of inductive Bible study—*observation*, *interpretation*, and *application*—you’ll begin to understand and apply God’s Word in rich and personal ways. Whether you are studying a passage, a specific topic, or an entire book of the Bible, inductive study addresses three questions:

- What do I see? (observation)
- What does it mean? (interpretation)
- How should I respond? (application)

Once you’ve worked through the chapters of this book, you can use the chapters as a reference to continue to practice the habit of personal Bible study. It is also a useful handbook for teaching others

how to study the Scriptures. For instance, if you're leading a Bible study on the Book of Ephesians, you might refer to chapter 13 on how to study epistles. Or if you want to do a personal study of one of the stories in Genesis, chapter 12 shows you what to look for in narratives. Are you a pastor or teacher giving a series of sermons on famous Bible characters? Chapter 17 on how to study a person provides important principles and guidelines to keep in mind as you prepare.

The Bible is like no other book for the Christian, yet it is sometimes the least read. We read every popular book that promises to lift up our Christian life, but forget the true source that God left for each of us. Many people fail to follow through on their Bible study desires because they get sidetracked and forget just how indispensable the possession of God's truth is. John Calvin put it well in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* when he emphasized the true value of the Bible above all other books:

No human writings, however sacredly composed, are at all capable of affecting us in a similar way. Read Demosthenes or Cicero, read Plato or Aristotle, or any other of that class. You will, I admit, feel wonderfully allured, pleased, moved, enchanted; but turn from them to the reading of the Sacred Volume, and it will so pierce your heart, so work its way into your very marrow that the comparison to that of orators and philosophers will disappear, making it manifest that in the Sacred Volume there is a truth Divine, something that makes it superior to all the gifts and graces attainable by man.¹



Your Turn

Throughout the pages of this book, you will find a Bible graphic with sections titled “*Your Turn*.” You will get a lot more out of this book if you try these exercises designed to help you put the principles of each chapter into practice. Using a spiral notebook, try the exercises provided in each chapter and you will double the usefulness of the following pages. After all, Jesus told us not just to hear His words but to do them:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.
—Matthew 7:24



See Diagram

Also throughout these pages, you will find a mouse graphic with a specific diagram number reference. The number refers to a particular page in a **free** downloadable packet, which you can obtain on the Internet. *Unlocking the Scriptures* offers the unique feature of additional resources, all in a single packet file (PDF format). Just go to www.cookministries.com/unlocking, fill out a quick questionnaire, and then download the complete file onto your personal computer. With the required software (which is also available free, elsewhere on the Web), you will be able to view and print the supplemental packet to suit your needs. The full-sized charts and graphics contained in the packet are ideal for group or personal study. It's simple and requires only a single visit and download, so be sure to take advantage of this powerful feature!

God wants us to know Him in a personal and life-changing way. He took on our nature and died in order to offer us forgiveness and restore us to Himself. He has given us His Holy Spirit so that we can always be near Him. He has equipped His church with people who can instruct us in the life of discipleship. And He has revealed Himself in His written Word. Three things, however, are necessary on our part if we are to accurately interpret this Word: *a heart willing to be submitted to Jesus Christ, the commitment of time, and a method or pattern of study*, which is provided for you here in the pages that follow. If you are hungry to know God's Word, the tools presented here can be your utensils.

So, roll up your sleeves and let's dig.

The Bible Gets Personal

Studying the message of the Bible transformed my life back when I was barely out of high school. Having grown up in the '60s, there was a lot that needed to be transformed! I was in college during the height of the protests against American involvement in Vietnam and against authority in general. I was a part of that protest—not just the revolution of idealists against political wrongdoing—but a revolution against all order and authority. In time, I lost the ability to bring order even to my own life. I was lost in the hopelessness of the drug scene and all the disillusionment that went with that time in America's history.

Then something amazing happened around the time of my nineteenth birthday. I met some unusual Christians who told me about Jesus Christ in a way I had never heard and pointed me to the Bible. They had the peace and love in their lives that I was desperately seeking. It came from their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not from the dry, empty religion I was brought up in. I remember thinking, "Here is someone I can follow—the person of Jesus Christ." People may fail me, but He never will. What happened in my life at that point was a revolution in the deepest sense of the word. These new-found friends gave me a Bible, and as I began to dig and study its pages, my life began to change. It wasn't long before I gave my life to Jesus Christ as my Savior. It was at that point that my love affair with the Bible began as it transformed my life in so many good ways.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! —2 Corinthians 5:17

The Formation and Preservation of Scripture

Of all the books ever written, the Bible is unique. It not only contains miracles, it is itself a miracle. The Bible was authored by God but written through ordinary men.

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
2 Peter 1:20–21

A brief look at the formation and preservation of the Bible throughout history reveals the high priority God has placed on ensuring that His revelation reaches men and women from generation to generation.

The Bible is history's greatest writing project. It was written across three continents (Asia, Europe, and Africa), over a span of 1,500 years, by men of various walks of life, kings, fishermen, poets, shepherds, philosophers, peasants, teachers, statesmen, Jews, Gentiles, even a doctor and a tax collector. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books (not including the Apocrypha) and, despite the tremendous variety of writers and the length of time represented in its pages, one central message permeates its contents: faith in Jesus Christ alone frees us from our sins.

Throughout history there have been those who loved and those who despised the Bible. From the Roman emperor Diocletian, who in A.D. 303 ordered that all Bibles be burned, down through the Middle Ages and into the persecutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Bible has survived. Not only has it survived, it has spread—with portions of it now translated into over 2,224 languages. As the inscription on the monument in Paris to the French Huguenots reads: *"Hammer away, ye hostile hands; your hammer breaks; God's anvil stands."*

The Bible is still the best-selling book around the world. Men and women from every nation and social background read and study its contents. Why? Because its Author knows the human heart and speaks to the needs of all people everywhere.

Why We Need to Study the Bible

When you take a trip to a place you've never been, you probably refer to a road map to plot a course, get a general sense of the terrain

you'll be passing through, and mark your progress along the way. As Christians, we are on a spiritual journey all our lives; we are earthly pilgrims on our way home to heaven. But since we have never been there, we must trust our sense of direction to the map of Scripture. If we let it, the Bible will guide us, redirect us when we get off the course, and lead us safely to our destination.

There are two fundamental truths that need to be understood as a backdrop to Bible study. On the one hand, there is a *spiritual dimension* to Bible study: our condition and relationship to God. On the other hand is the *natural dimension*: the educational principles that are employed in studying any piece of literature. Careful Bible study takes both aspects into consideration. Let's elaborate on these two dimensions before we go on.

Understand the natural dimension of Bible study. The Bible is a human book. By that is meant that the Bible must be studied intelligently like any other form of human communication. This workbook is designed to teach you the natural principles of Bible study—natural in the sense that they are human principles for gaining knowledge through study. But a word about spiritual principles must precede that presentation.

Understand the spiritual dimension of Bible study. The Bible is also a spiritual book. It is God's revelation, written under divine inspiration. As such, it must be understood with the Holy Spirit's illumination.

Theology can be practical and it can even be fun! There are three important theological terms to keep in mind whenever discussing the spiritual dimension of Bible study: *revelation*, *inspiration*, and *illumination*. Each of these three terms deals with a different aspect of God's communication to man. This is part of the wonder and marvel of the Christian experience—God wants to talk to us! And this is how He does it through His Word. There is a progression of this communication from God to man.

- *Revelation* deals with the content of the Bible—the message communicated. God spoke His Word through direct revelation to the authors who wrote down the words.
- *Inspiration* is the method of writing—God's means of imparting the biblical record to men. Men wrote down the revelation under the influence of divine inspiration.

- *Illumination* deals with the understanding or meaning of the inspired Word of God. Illumination is where we come in. We study the Bible and learn its meaning as the Holy Spirit teaches us through the words of Scripture. As David prayed in Psalm 119:18 (NASB), “*Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law.*”

One further word is in order as it concerns illumination. Once again we see the miracle of the Bible. Illumination can be further defined as “*the ministry of the Holy Spirit which makes clear the truth of the written revelation of the Bible.*” Unlike all other books, to understand the Bible’s meaning you must have special eyes. Jesus taught clearly that His truth was only for a select group:

*I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that
Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent
and didst reveal them to babes.*

—Matthew 11:25, NASB

Who is this select group? Who are these babes? Men, women, boys, and girls from all classes of people and every generation who come humbly to God as children to receive His truth. God illuminates His revelation through the person of the Holy Spirit to those who come to His Word with the right heart condition.

Take a minute to look up the following verses and think about the attitudes with which you approach the Bible. These Scripture texts reveal some of the heart conditions that are necessary for meaningful Bible study. Look up each verse and briefly summarize the attitude expressed.



YOUR TURN: Heart Condition in Bible Study

Psalm 119:18

1 Corinthians 2:6–16

Hebrews 11:1–2, 6

James 1:22–25

When we study the Bible, we can approach it with childlike trust and dependence (Jesus said in Mark 10:13–15 that this is a necessity), knowing that our Heavenly Father desires to reveal His truths to us.

As we've just seen, the benefits of Bible study can be a major factor in motivation for staying with the task. Over the years, your motivation will determine to a great extent your devotion to the Scriptures. The benefit of reading the Bible, contrasted to the mass of other literature that flows past our eyes, is hard to compare. Perhaps the words of C. I. Scofield, master Bible teacher of the early twentieth century, are most appropriate:

I gave much of my earlier life to the study of Homer and Shakespeare, and while my understanding undoubtedly profited by that study, and I found keen intellectual delight in it, these books held no rebuke for my sins, nor any power to lift me above them, but, when I came to the Bible and received Him, concerning whom, after all, the whole Book is written, I entered into peace, joy, and power. The Bible led me to Jesus and Jesus transformed my life.¹

The Goal of Bible Study

People study the Bible for all kinds of reasons. When I was a missionary in Europe, my study of Scripture was the fodder for my ministry. Now as the director of a mission agency, it nurtures my soul for my leadership role. As teachings of the Bible change me, I can be an agent of change—since all genuine ministry flows out of what we are and not what we do. But first and foremost, I study the Bible to know God more deeply and then serve Him more genuinely.

Personal Bible study requires effort. Like mining for gold or precious gems, the harder and more thoroughly we dig and sift through the material, the more treasures we find. Just as there is no better way to train for a marathon than to regularly run long distances (in rain as well as sunshine), there is just no substitute for hard work in Bible study. Paul lived out this perspective and encouraged others to be like him. He said, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24).



YOUR TURN: Benefits of Personal Bible Study

Before you go on to chapter 2, take some time to look up these passages and jot down the rewards of Bible study that the Bible claims for itself:

Joshua 1:8

Psalm 119:9, 11

Psalm 119:105

Matthew 4:1–11

John 15:5–7

2 Timothy 3:16–17

1 John 5:13

What Is Inductive Bible Study?

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night with terrible pains in your abdomen. Earlier that evening, at a friend's home, you had a meal that didn't quite agree with you. You suspect that you have a mild case of food poisoning, but you can't be certain without more facts. The next morning you visit your family doctor and tell her, "Doctor, I'm sure it's food poisoning." The physician, familiar with the process of discovering medical truth, begins to study your case by observing all the characteristics of your body, in light of the symptoms you've described. Only after she has all the facts (blood test, X ray, physical examination) and has carefully studied the results does she draw a conclusion. In this case, she concludes that you have appendicitis, not food poisoning. You need surgery. The doctor used an inductive approach to diagnose your ailment.

The word *inductive* describes reasoning that proceeds from basic facts to conclusions. We will use the inductive approach to study Scripture. Therefore, we won't state our conclusions about the meaning of a passage or book until carefully examining the facts.

The Three Steps of Inductive Bible Study

The inductive approach involves three steps: observe, interpret, apply. To illustrate how these three steps work together, let's go back to the example of you and the doctor.

When the doctor examined you, she followed certain steps to understand your condition. She first observed everything she could about your symptoms and behavior. She took your temperature, poked at your abdomen, and performed tests. She then interpreted her findings, concluding that you had appendicitis. Finally, she applied her conclusion by prescribing surgery, medication, and rest. These three steps answer the three key questions of Bible study:

The Three Questions of Bible Study

What do I see? (observation)

What does it mean? (interpretation)

How should I respond? (application)

Observation asks, "What do I see?" Observation is simply the gathering of all the facts of who, what, where, and when. Careful examination of the facts is the foundation upon which we build accurate interpretation and application of Scripture. The more time spent looking at the text itself, reading and rereading it, the more fruitful our study will be. Chapters 4 through 6 explain and demonstrate the principles of effective observation, pointing out specifically what questions to ask and what information to look for.

Interpretation asks, "What does it mean?" Drawing conclusions based on your study of the facts is the process of interpretation. During this stage we seek to understand the meaning that the author had in mind when he wrote the text. Chapters 7 and 8 present the fundamental principles for making sound interpretations.

Application asks, "How should I respond?" Application is the goal of Bible study. It is not enough for us to understand (interpret) Scripture; God wants us to be changed by it. The Scriptures were given *"for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work"* (2 Tim. 3:16–17, NRSV). In this final step of the inductive process, we move from the original context to our contemporary one, seeking to know how our interpretation can affect our attitudes and behavior.

In the first two stages, observation and interpretation, we study the text. In application, the text studies us. Chapters 9 and 10 provide guidelines for applying Scripture to our lives so that we may be more like Christ.

Part 1 of this workbook covers the nuts and bolts of how to study the Bible inductively, with many opportunities for practice. Part 2 takes this information and experience and tailors it to meet various Bible study goals you may have. The same three steps are used, but particular attention is given to how the different types of literature found in the Bible (like poetry, prophecy, and narrative) each require special consideration when studying them. Just as we don't read the newspaper the same way we read a poem, the parables in the Gospels require different considerations than the narrative sections.

You may want to understand the meaning of an entire book of the Bible, do a detailed study of a small portion of Scripture (perhaps a single paragraph of an epistle), or see what the Bible as a whole says concerning a given topic. You use the same method of observation, interpretation, and application for all three of these kinds of studies, while bearing in mind the particular genre or literature type you are studying.

Taking Time to Study Scripture

Perhaps the most common reason Christians have a shallow experience with the Word of God is that they spend too little time in the Bible. The result? A loss of spiritual nourishment. Like altitude sickness from too little oxygen, many of us grow spiritually anemic from lack of sufficient Scripture in our lives. Not only are we missing out on our God-intended spiritual nutrients, we are missing great spiritual wealth that our heavenly Father would love to bestow on us. Jim Downing in his excellent book *Meditation* illustrates with a fable our need to gather up spiritual treasure while we have the opportunity.

An Oriental fable tells of three horsemen who were traveling through the desert at night. Unexpectedly they were confronted by a mysterious person. The stranger told them that they would soon cross the dry bed of a stream.

“When you arrive there,” he declared, “get off your horses and fill your pockets and saddlebags from the river bed. At sunrise examine the stones you have picked up. You will be both glad and sorry.”

As the man predicted, the travelers came to a dry streambed. In a spirit of adventure they put a few of the many stones they found scattered about into their pockets. At sunrise the next day, they examined the pebbles they picked up. To their great astonishment they found the stones had been transformed into diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones. Regarding the statement of the stranger in the desert, they understood what he meant—they were glad for the pebbles they had picked up but sorry they hadn’t taken more.¹

There is no end to the wealth of wisdom in the Bible. Discovering the riches of God's truth throughout our lives is the primary reason for using a book like this. By the time you reach the end, you will know and have practiced the three-step approach of inductive Bible study so that you can use this approach for personal study of any Scripture.

To introduce the inductive method of Bible study, let's begin with a little self-examination.



YOUR TURN: Jonah 1:1–17

Read Jonah 1:1–17 several times. After carefully thinking about what you have read, answer the four questions that follow. If you cannot answer a question, go on to the next one. This exercise is meant to help you gauge your knowledge of Bible study methods. You are not actually studying the passage at this point, but rather explaining how you would study it. Don't be discouraged if you draw a blank. By the end of our journey you should know which questions to ask and when to ask them—as well as what study tools to use to find answers to your questions.

Question 1: What would you do first to study this passage?

Question 2: Having taken that first step, what would be your next steps in studying this passage? List the steps you would go through to come to a clearer understanding of this passage.

Question 3: If you were studying Ephesians 1 instead of Jonah 1 what (if any) differences might you make in your method of study? List those differences.

Question 4: Survey your current ideas about Bible study. In your opinion, what are the most important principles for sound Bible study? Try to list five principles.