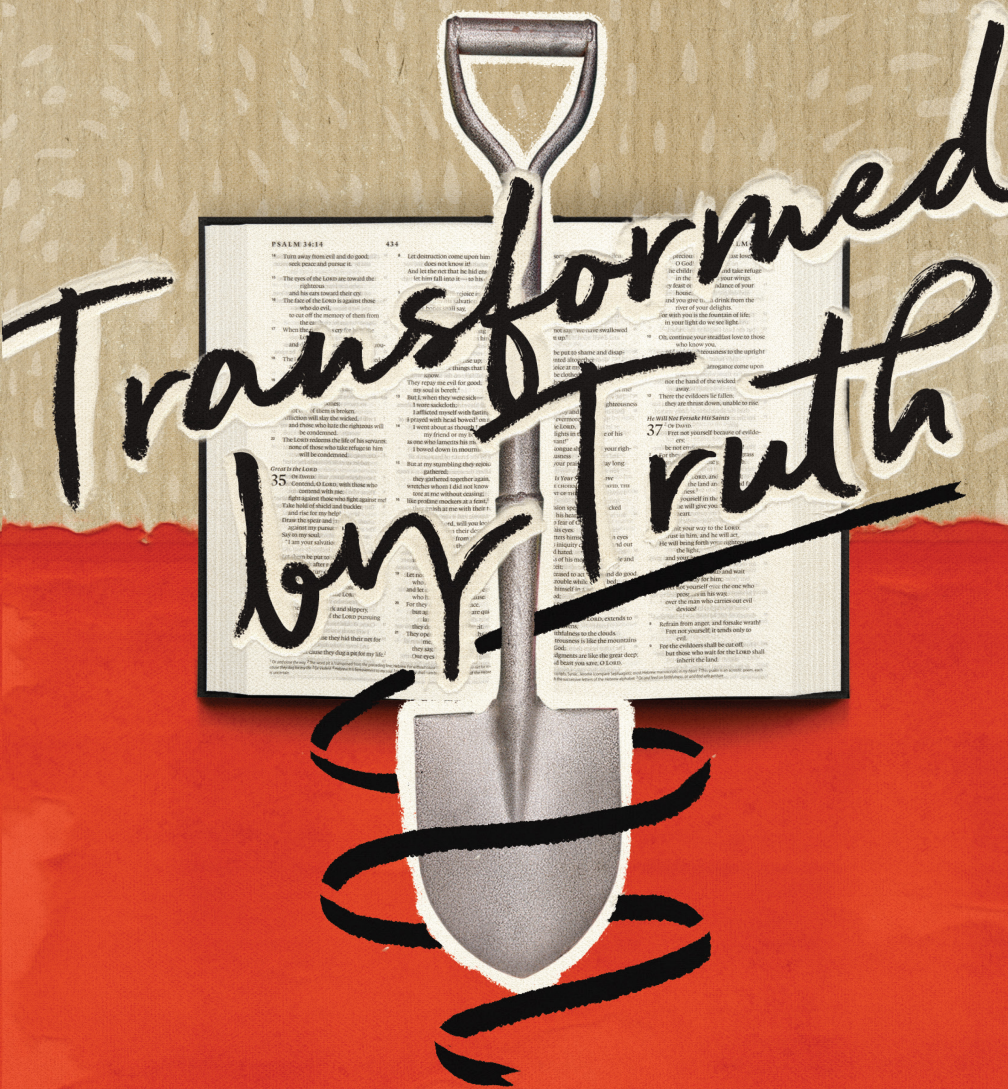


KATHERINE FORSTER



WHY AND HOW TO STUDY
THE BIBLE FOR YOURSELF AS A TEEN

“Dear teenager, you are not too young to study the Bible for yourself. It’s not too hard, too overwhelming, or too confusing. Instead, it will give you everything you need for life and godliness and the deepest joy you can imagine. That’s the message of *Transformed by Truth*—and that’s a message I’ve personally seen lived out in the life of Katherine Forster. Teens, you need to be transformed by truth. It happened to Forster, and in this book, she shares how it can happen to you too. Her writing is accessible, relatable, theological, and highly practical. She’ll change how you view the Bible and increase your love for Christ. *Transformed by Truth* is a must-read for the Christian teen.”

Jaquelle Crowe Ferris, author, *This Changes Everything: How the Gospel Transforms the Teen Years*

“Convicting, informative, and extremely practical! This book takes you through the *who, what, when, where, why, and how* of Bible study in a fun and relatable way. A valuable resource for all Christian teens (and adults!)”

Hannah Leary, Cohost, National Bible Bee

“Christian teens are often embarrassed to admit that they’re unsure how to study the Bible—or worse, that they find the Bible boring. With relatable candor and honesty, National Bible Bee champion Katherine Forster goes toe-to-toe with many of the common threats to a teen’s biblical literacy. *Transformed by Truth* is filled with solid encouragement and practical tools for teens hoping to develop a joyful dependence on God’s word.”

Lindsey Carlson, author, *Growing in Godliness: A Teen Girl’s Guide to Maturing in Christ*

“This book will inspire you to not only begin memorizing the word of God, but also to pursue a closer relationship with the person of God.”

Michael Farris, President and CEO, Alliance Defending Freedom

TRANSFORMED BY TRUTH

KATHERINE FORSTER

*Transformed
by Truth*

WHY AND HOW TO STUDY
THE BIBLE FOR YOURSELF AS A TEEN

■ ■ CROSSWAY®

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Transformed by Truth: Why and How to Study the Bible for Yourself as a Teen

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*To my parents,
for teaching me to seek the Lord
and
to Shelby Kennedy
for her legacy*

*And we all, with unveiled face,
beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed
into the same image from one degree of glory to another.
For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

2 Corinthians 3:18

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Someone occasionally asks me, “So how did you get a book published?” I usually tell them it’s a long story. Every step of the way is evidence of God’s providence.

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Thanks to my brothers, Sam and Ben, for putting up with me and encouraging my nerdiness. (*See? I put you in my book.*)

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Finally, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, all thanks and praise. I didn't deserve to write this book, and I didn't have the strength to write this book. But you are faithful to do "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). May we always live wholeheartedly for the One who died and rose again on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:14–15).

INTRODUCTION

When I was eight, the Bible was boring.

We read it in church. We read it as a family during evening devotions. My parents even made us read it on our own in the mornings. I was more than passingly familiar with every story. And my eight-year-old self wasn't impressed.

Sure, I might pick up the book of Esther, the same way I would pick up a *Boxcar Children* novel from the library. And I read and reread the more interesting bits of Revelation (like the part about fire-breathing grasshoppers coming out of a bottomless pit). But as to the rest of it? I didn't really care.

When I was thirteen, the Bible was still boring. Now I was reading it, studying it, and even memorizing huge portions for a competition. But it was still just a chore, just something I had to do to be a good Christian, make my parents happy, win prizes, and look good in front of my church friends.

I was missing something. I didn't realize—or didn't fully comprehend—that the Bible was more than just an ancient religious document. It's more than ink on a page, more than a helpful guide to life. It's the very words of the living God.

THE COMPETITION THAT CHANGED ME

In November 2013, I was on a stage in Sevierville, Tennessee. It was the final round of the National Bible Bee Competition. I'd

been competing at the local and national level for several years, but I never thought I'd make it that far. I never expected to hear Dr. Michael Farris introduce me as a finalist, and I certainly never expected to win.

The other four finalists and I had memorized hundreds of verses and studied two books of the Bible to be on that stage. We had spent our summer and fall immersed in endless review. And finally, we had arrived. We sat to one side, waiting for our names to be called. "In fifth place . . . In fourth place . . . In third place . . ." Now just one other girl and I were left, grinning nervously at each other. "In second place . . ."

When my name wasn't called for second place, I knew. I had won first place in my division!

Winning was a huge surprise—I knew it was by God's grace alone. But something much bigger had also happened that year. Up until then, I had studied and memorized the Bible, but I was bothered by how little I loved God. I could rattle off his words, but they were just words to me. My Christian life seemed shallow, apathetic, and lacking.

That year, something changed. I had accumulated so much knowledge about God, but now it became personal. The words weren't just words anymore. God used his truth in my heart to give me a greater love for him. Before I ever stepped onto that stage, I had begun to discover that the real prize was so much bigger than a crystal trophy—it was the joy of knowing and walking with God as I met him through his word.

THE CHALLENGE WE NEED

The Bible Bee taught me to dig deeply into God's word for myself. I learned how to search out the meaning of a passage and connect it to other parts of Scripture. I encountered glorious truths about God and the gospel, and biblical principles started to inform my thinking. My relationship with God grew in ways I could never have dreamed.

Learning how to study God’s word for myself changed my life.

But I also realized something that saddened me: *few teenagers are being challenged to study and memorize God’s word seriously.* Often, the highest challenge we’re given is to read the Bible regularly. And even that’s not always the case—it’s considered normal for us to leave our Bible on the shelf for weeks on end, never even picking it up.

This can’t be the best there is for us! We desperately need God’s words because we need God. Our Creator and Savior has spoken to us. This is how we can know him: through what he himself has said.

Shouldn’t we be pursuing the knowledge of our Maker with all that we are? We need more than a nice-looking book that sits on a shelf. We need more than a few minutes of devotional reading every morning. We need to take the time, energy, and commitment to dive into God’s word and search out the truth he has given us.

THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

Maybe the Bible is boring to you too. Or maybe you love God’s word and want to dive deeper into it but don’t know where to start. Maybe you aren’t familiar with the Bible, and you don’t see what the fuss is about.

Wherever you are, this book is for you. It’s meant to encourage you to go deeper in your knowledge of God through his word—to do something this world would say is too hard or too boring for teenagers. And it’s meant to equip you—to give you the tools you need to study the Bible for yourself.

This book has two parts. The first five chapters talk about the *why* of Bible study: why it’s important for teens, how God has revealed himself to us through his word, the great story it tells, how it tells us about God’s will for our lives, and how it helps us to obey him.

Chapters 6 through 11 talk about the *how* of Bible study. We’ll talk about very practical things such as what inductive Bible study

is, how to make it a habit, how to actually go about studying a book of the Bible, and what application really looks like.

My hope is that you'll come away from this book with a renewed vision of why Bible study is important and with the tools to pursue it on your own. Teens need serious Bible study just as much as adults. That's why this book was written: to challenge you to a higher view of God's word and a greater commitment to your walk with Christ.

A SIGNPOST, NOT A DESTINATION

Whenever my family goes on a road trip, I like to watch the signs along the interstate: "45 more miles to Orlando" or "102 miles to Atlanta." The signs tell us which direction we're going and how far away our destination is. But they're not destinations themselves. We don't really care that much about the sign—we care about the city or location to which it's directing us.

This book is like one of those signs. It's not a destination in itself. You don't need my wisdom or experience. You need God's word. This book is a signpost pointing you to that awesome truth.

My prayer is that as you read this book—and long after you finish—you'll develop the skill and habit of studying God's word. I pray that you'll grow in your knowledge of him and that your relationship with your Savior will be strengthened. I pray that the truth you absorb will penetrate every fiber of your being and transform you into the image of Christ.

PART 1

WHY?

YOU ARE NOT TOO YOUNG

When I was little, there was a song we sang all the time in Sunday school:

*Read your Bible,
pray every day—pray every day—pray every day.
Read your Bible,
pray every day,
and you'll grow—grow—grow!*

Reading the Bible is essential to our spiritual growth. Every good teacher or pastor will tell you to read your Bible regularly. Read a chapter a day, or several verses, or use a reading plan. The Bible is a book—it's God's own communication to us.

It's meant to be read.

If we're not setting aside time to read it, there's a serious problem.

However, *reading* the Bible is only the beginning.

We have to start there, but we can't stop there. The Bible is brimming with truth that requires deep, diligent study to discover. Deeper study reveals realities about God, insights into human

Why?

nature, commands, instructions, and beautiful promises that we might never have seen or understood otherwise.

Simply reading the Bible is like visiting the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee in autumn and never getting out of the car. You'll get a spectacular view. You'll enjoy the beauty of mountain ranges with their blanket of gold and crimson trees. You might even get to see rural homes and businesses with their quirky, whimsical autumn yard decorations.

But you won't enjoy hot, fried apple pies in a farm store. You won't hike up a mountain, take a picture in front of a waterfall, and get soaked trying to jump between rocks as you make your way back down a creek.

I love the Smoky Mountains, and I have great memories of driving through the towns and surrounding countryside with my family. But all my best memories are the ones where we got out of the car and went on an adventure.

In that sense, the Bible is a little bit like the mountains. You can stay where it's comfortable, content to read a little bit every day. And you will gain from the experience—make no mistake! The Holy Spirit will always work through his word to teach you more about God and make you more like him.

But you can also go deeper. You can devote the time and effort to searching for truths that lend themselves to vigorous, diligent study. You can learn more about our God and stand in awe as you see his glory more clearly in his word.

You can get out of your comfort zone and go on an adventure.

INEXHAUSTIBLE RICHES

For several years, probably the oldest person in our church was Dr. Spotts. He was a tall, kind, white-haired old man, and we joked that he was a walking Bible encyclopedia. If we had a question about the Bible, we would ask him, and he could always answer. He probably knew more about the Bible than all of us combined!

A few years ago, just after Dr. Spotts's death, our pastor said something that has stuck with me ever since. He had asked Dr. Spotts why he kept studying the Bible, even though he seemed to know everything about it. Dr. Spotts had answered, "There's still so much I don't know!"

When you grow up in Sunday school and know all the stories—from David and Goliath to the gory tales in Judges and all the acts of the apostles—it's very tempting to think you know everything there is to know about the Bible. In fact, I used to think that if I studied and memorized too much, I would get to a point where there was nothing left to learn. I actually thought I could somehow "arrive," and the rest of my Christian life would be boring because I would already know it all! But as I started studying in more depth, I quickly realized my mistake. There's more in the Bible than entire lifetimes of study put together could begin to comprehend.

The psalmist said, "My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for *their number is past my knowledge*" (Ps. 71:15). God is infinite—there's no end to him or to what we can learn about him. If we could ever fully understand him, he wouldn't be God.

We think we know so much—but what if that's just because we've only scratched the surface?

The Bible is like a gold mine: it's full of rich truth to comfort, convict, and bring us joy in God, and we can never exhaust those riches. The more we learn, the more there will be to learn. The deeper we dig, the more we'll see what unexplored depths lie beneath.

We can't be content to live on the surface when so many riches lie below. Yes, there are treasures up here, plain to see. But why would we stay here if we have the opportunity for so much more? Yes, it takes work. You're going to encounter difficulties along with outright opposition from the devil, the world around you, and the sin inside yourself. But what you'll discover is worth it.

Why?

OUR PURPOSE: TO KNOW GOD

Chances are, you haven't been challenged to intensive Bible study before. You might think this is only for leaders and teachers—your pastors, seminary professors, and the authors who write books for other Christians to read.

But Bible study is not just an academic pursuit, and it's not something that's only important for certain Christians. It's the pursuit of something that's fundamental to all our lives: the knowledge of God.

God gave us the Bible so we could know him—not just know about him, but have a relationship with him. Jesus Christ himself came so that we could know God (1 John 5:20). This is our purpose and our greatest joy.

As J. I. Packer wrote, “What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God.”¹ The Bible isn't just another piece of literature. Neither is it a magic book. It's God's words to us about himself. It's the way he has given us to know him.

And it isn't just for adults. “How can a *young man* keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” (Ps. 119:9). The Bible is for you. It's for me. It's for teens and little children as well as for adults. God has spoken to us—young men and women—just as surely as he has spoken to our parents and grandparents and pastors and little siblings.

If he has spoken to us, shouldn't we listen? If our Creator has told us about himself, shouldn't we learn everything we can about what he's said?

Thus says the LORD: “Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not a

rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on earth. For in these things I delight,” declares the LORD. (Jer. 9:23–24)

We have the awesome gift of the knowledge of God—and the awesome responsibility to pursue that knowledge in his word. That’s what inductive Bible study (what we’ll be discussing in this book) is about. It isn’t some mysterious practice reserved for seminarians. It’s the discipline and method of knowing and understanding what God has said to us. And it’s for you and me.

WE’RE NOT TOO YOUNG

This kind of serious study is antithetical to our society’s expectations for teens. On one hand, pop culture defines “teenagerhood” as a sacred space for having fun and letting important, serious things wait until later. The music industry praises the culture of drinking, getting high, and forgetting about consequences. Movies consistently depict teens as shallow, rebellious, and obsessed with romance (while also somehow wiser than the adults around them).

On the other hand, the teen years are often defined by achievement. They’re presented as the opportunity to accomplish and pursue everything from good grades to sports trophies. While achievement is a good thing, we often make it an idol. It’s easy to spend all our time and energy chasing grades, scholarships, awards, money, or success.

This is what the world tells us: that because we’re young, we don’t have the time, ability, or need for something as serious, rigorous, and demanding as personal Bible study. It tells us that sort of thing isn’t important until we’re older. It tells us either that now is the time to have fun and not worry about that stuff, or that now is the time to chase every other kind of achievement.

Why?

What the world doesn't tell you is that "right now" is exactly when Bible study is important. We can't wait until we're older. These teen years are formative. They're the foundation for who we're going to be for the rest of our lives. We have a choice. We can waste these years—or we can use them for God's glory, drawing closer to him and preparing for what lies ahead.

What the world doesn't tell you is that if you spend all your teen years merely chasing fun or achievement, you'll come up empty. You'll dive into the waves, looking for the treasure you're certain is there. You'll grab it and hold on tight, but, when you surface, all you'll find is a handful of broken shells.

Having fun and seeking success aren't wrong; these things are good gifts from God. But if that's all we pursue during this season, we'll find we're chasing emptiness, and we'll enter adulthood seriously ill-equipped to handle the challenges life will throw at us. We must aim higher.

And here's the thing: we already work hard. We work hard to do well in school, get that college acceptance letter, be an entrepreneur, make that goal, or to get to the next level on that video game. So why do we think we shouldn't have to work hard at what is more important than any of those things—our relationship with the God who created us?

Author and teacher Jen Wilkin writes,

Students understand that what is important is worth our time and effort to attain. They regularly invest long hours, not just in their schoolwork, but in their sports team, music lessons, dance classes, or jobs. . . . What if we asked them to learn to rightly divide the Word with all the discipline they would apply to learning calculus or the violin or gymnastics?²

What if we asked that of ourselves?

We're so used to thinking about the Bible as just an addition to our already-busy lives of study and work. But it should be the center of our lives, the most important subject we study. We need to be willing to set aside time and mental energy for it. Our relationship with God should take priority—and when it does, everything else will fall into its proper place.

BUT WHAT IF I MESS UP?

For a long time, I was scared to study the Bible on my own. I was only a teenager. I didn't have seminary training like my pastor. I didn't have many years of experience like my parents. What if I got something wrong?

Maybe you feel that way too. Maybe you're afraid of messing something up or not understanding. Here's the thing, though: God didn't set age limits on the Bible. He didn't write Philippians for high schoolers and Genesis for elementary kids, Ephesians for adults and Deuteronomy for seminary professors. His revelation is for teens too. All of the Bible is for all of us.

Yes, some parts of the Bible are harder to understand (we've all scratched our heads reading Revelation). But the Bible isn't something you can only comprehend once you've taken seminary classes or once you turn thirty. There aren't hidden meanings you can only understand once you've been initiated into a special club.

Learning more about the Bible through classes or special training certainly helps. I'm very glad my pastors have been to seminary! Experience and maturity are important too. We need to value all these things in our parents and older Christians. But you don't have to wait to have them before you can start to understand the Bible for yourself.

This isn't because we're naturally so smart or spiritual—as humans, we're weak and inadequate. We'll meet great opposition and difficulty along the way. If we had to do this on our own, we would be right to be scared!

Why?

But we aren't on our own in our quest to understand God's word. He hasn't left us to try and figure it out by ourselves. He *wants* us to know him. That should give us great confidence!

He has promised us help. James 1:5 says that if we need wisdom, we should just ask—and if we ask in faith, God will answer and give it to us. Wisdom is essential to Bible study, and God has promised it freely!

He has also given us the Holy Spirit. This is an amazing gift—God himself lives inside us! The Holy Spirit—the author of Scripture—works in our hearts to help us understand and apply his word.

He has also given us help from other people. Older and more experienced Christians often have insight that can help us understand what we're studying. If you're blessed with godly parents, go to them first with questions. You also probably have access to pastors or mature men and women in your church who can answer questions and help you think through difficult truths.

Often we can find assistance in commentaries and sermons as well. A good commentary or sermon is the result of intense Bible study and a great depth of knowledge of the Bible, and they can be wonderful tools. (We'll discuss commentaries and other tools more in chapter 10.)

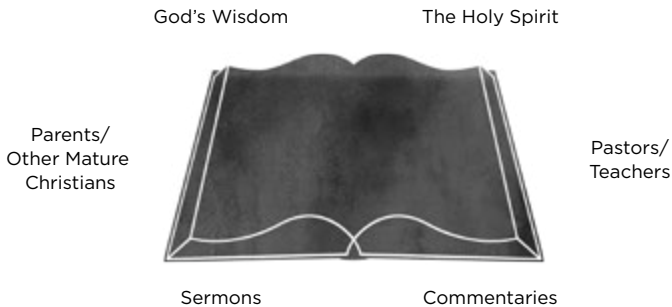


Illustration 1.1: Study Helps

EXPERIENCE IT YOURSELF

This brings up a point you may already be wondering. Why do we even need to study the Bible for ourselves? If there are so many books and sermons and commentaries, can't we just use those? These books were written by people who really know what they're talking about. Won't you learn more from them than you will on your own? Well, let me share an illustration.

Imagine you're at a party, which is taking place at a house on the beach. It's evening, the sun is going down—and it's freezing cold. A few of your friends decide to go down to the water's edge and watch the last of the sunset. Now you have a choice: you can either stay inside the warm house and eat cookies, or you can go out in the cold and watch the sun sink into the ocean in a blaze of color.

If you stay inside you'll be warm, and your friends could probably tell you about it—they could tell you how beautiful it was, about the seagulls crying in the air, and how boats were silhouetted against the sun. They could even show you pictures! But if you go outside and brave the cold, you can experience it for yourself in a way no picture or description could ever match.

Bible study is a little bit like that. We can have other people tell us about the Bible—and we'll learn a lot. I'm not trying to discount books or commentaries at all. These have great value in our spiritual lives. And I'm certainly not suggesting you stop listening to your pastor's sermons! However, if you *only* ever listen to what other people tell you, you'll never experience it on your own.

Studying the Bible allows you to discover the truth for yourself. It's the active process of exploring, rather than the passive process of listening. And as you labor to search out and understand it, you'll find you own that truth. It will become a part of you.

Someone else can tell you how great God's love is—but it will probably impact you a lot more when you study 1 John 4 and learn about how God sent his only begotten Son to give us life.

Why?

You'll stand in awe as you dig into the meaning of words like "propitiation," meditate on Christ's sacrifice, and ponder how it displays true love.

Discovering these things for yourself is more difficult, but it brings so much joy.

IT WILL BE HARD

I'm not going to try to convince you to study your Bible by telling you it doesn't take too much work, or it doesn't take a lot of time. It does. It does take time, and it does take effort.

The question, then, becomes, "Is it worth it?" That's the question you have to answer for yourself, in your own life. Is studying the Bible—is knowing your Savior—as important as school? As sports or your social media feed or Netflix or a hobby? Can you make Bible study a priority? Of course we'll say it's important, but do we live out that belief from day to day in our choices about how we use our time and energy?

You won't always feel like studying the Bible. It won't always feel enjoyable, and sometimes you'll struggle to prioritize it. But is it important enough to push through boredom, early-morning grogginess, or the temptation to do something more fun?

You will probably be frustrated as you're learning. It may feel alien, unnatural, to study the Bible with methods like what you might use in literature class. Bible study is a skill, and just like any other skill, it takes time to learn.

In addition, the world, the devil, and your own sinful flesh all want to keep you from studying the Bible. You will face opposition, whether it's doubt, fear, busyness, or even the temptation of pride at what you're learning.

It's going to be hard. And if we try to do this on our own, we're going to fail. Only God's strength is sufficient. We are inadequate, but his power is perfected in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). We'll need to come to him again and again, confessing our sin and

weakness and pleading for his strength to overcome every opposition to our study of his word.

This may be the hardest—and the most important—thing you ever do. Persevere, my friend, in his strength! You will find it is more than worth it.

QUESTIONS

1. What problems do you see with our culture's expectations for teenagers? What are you doing to combat those expectations?
2. How are you currently engaging with God's word? What do you want to change or do differently?
3. Why is studying the Bible for yourself important? Is there anything that makes you reluctant to begin?

STUDYING GOD'S WORD AS A TEENAGER CHANGED MY LIFE . . .

And it can change yours, too.

The Bible is more than just an ancient religious document. It's a book filled with the actual words of the living God, meant to be read often and studied deeply that we might experience its life-changing power.

If you're a teen who's tired of low expectations and weightless platitudes, this book will help you dig into the Bible and make the time you spend reading count for eternity. Katherine Forster walks you through three simple practices that changed how she reads Scripture—observation, interpretation, and application—so you too can begin to understand what God has said in his word and discover how God's truth can literally transform you from the inside out.

"Forster will change how you view the Bible and increase your love for Christ. This is a must-read for the Christian teen."

JAUELLE CROWE FERRIS, author, *This Changes Everything*

"*Transformed by Truth* is filled with solid encouragement and practical tools for teens hoping to develop a joyful dependence on God's word."

LINDSEY CARLSON, author, *Growing in Godliness: A Teen Girl's Guide to Maturing in Christ*

"This book will inspire you to not only begin memorizing the word of God, but also to pursue a closer relationship with the person of God."

MICHAEL FARRIS, President and CEO, Alliance Defending Freedom

KATHERINE FORSTER is a teenager who serves as lead writer and managing editor for TheRebellion.com, an online platform that reaches hundreds of thousands of Christian teens, parents, and youth workers. She is a spotlight member of the Young Writers Workshop and a National Bible Bee champion.

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