

READ THE BIBLE FOR

LIFE

Listen. Understand. Respond.

GEORGE H. GUTHRIE

BiblicalTraining Press®

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The Author

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George has a passion for equipping church leaders and laypeople to read and live the Bible more effectively. To that end he has published a number of works designed to help the church better understand and apply Scripture, including *Reader's Guide to the Bible* (LifeWay, 2011), *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible* (Broadman & Holman, 2011), *Read the Bible for Life: Your Guide to Understanding and Living God's Word* (Broadman & Holman, 2011), and *CSB Day-by-Day Chronological Bible* (Holman, 2018).

Introduction

Welcome to the study of *Read the Bible for Life*. As we begin our nine-session journey together, I want to invite you to open your life to experience God's Word in a fresh way. Regular Bible reading is the most basic, helpful practice for a Christian's life. In fact, in a survey conducted by LifeWay Research, reading the Bible on a daily basis was the number one predictor of spiritual maturity among those surveyed. However, only 16 percent of people who regularly attend church read the Bible on a daily basis. Another 32 percent read it at least once a week. That means more than half do not read the Bible on a consistent basis.¹

If you have spent time reading the Bible consistently, you know it can be encouraging, nurturing, and fulfilling. The Bible is a great source of joy for those who give focused attention to it. The more time you spend in the Word, the more you will long for your time in the Word each day.

Read the Bible for Life was written to help you learn how to read the Bible more effectively, in a way that produces real fruit in your life. Over the next nine weeks we will explore the dynamics of listening, understanding, and responding to God's Word. We will examine the different types of literature found in the Bible so that we can read them in accordance with God's intention. We will consider how the various books of the Bible fit into the ongoing story of God and His people, and we will discuss ways to purposefully apply Bible reading in our everyday lives.

Here are some suggestions for gaining the most from this study.

1. This workbook provides nine weeks of daily study that will guide you to read, understand, and apply God's Word more effectively. Each day you will receive basic instruction about reading the Bible and complete exercises that allow you to practice and apply the principles you have learned. Don't think of these exercises as homework! Think of them as opportunities to meet the living God face-to-face in His Word. Don't wait until the end of the week to complete the week's lessons. Determine to spend time daily completing the lessons so that you will cultivate the habit of daily time in the Word. Setting aside time each day both to read the material and to complete the activities will help you learn how to implement the guidelines you are studying.

2. As you study, follow the three biblical timelines located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife. You will find them invaluable tools for understanding the grand story of Scripture.
3. You will benefit most if you participate in a group study of this workbook. A guide for the group experience is provided at the beginning of each week's study. For example, the group experience for week 1 is found on pages 8–9. During each group session you will discuss with your group what you have learned during the previous week as you have completed the lessons in your workbook. Then you will watch my video teaching on another aspect of Bible reading. The lessons you complete in this workbook during the following week will reinforce my video teaching. As you and your group members share insights, you will learn much about how to live God's Word.
4. Each day pray that God will transform you and your small group by His powerful Word. Pray that God will bring renewal to your church through His Word.
5. Practice what you learn from God's Word. Reading the Bible isn't a dry academic exercise. The Bible is a gift that brings joy and strength if you internalize and obey it. Don't be satisfied with head knowledge about the Bible. Apply Scripture to your life in a way that is life-changing. The Word provides life and power for your Christian journey.
6. You can supplement your study of this workbook by reading the trade book *Read the Bible for Life*. It includes enlightening conversations with well-known Bible scholars about how to read Scripture with greater understanding and purpose. You will see a number of quotations from that book throughout this workbook.
7. Supplemental articles about the Bible and Bible study are on the CD-ROM included in the Bible study kit. Additional tools are available at lifeway.com/readthe-bibleforlife.

Knowing and living God's Word is the key to living life well. It provides a powerful foundation for the Christian walk until the day we see the Lord face-to-face. Eugene Peterson has said of the Bible, "We open this book and find that page after page it takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws us into its reality, pulls us into participation with God on his terms."² That's my prayer as we work through this workbook together—that we will meet the living God in the pages of His Word and will be changed by the encounter. So join me as we learn to read the Bible for life.

WEEK I

Reading the Bible for Life

Session I Group Experience

Get Started

1. Introduce yourself and share what you hope to gain from this study.
2. Take a moment to answer the following questions. Then discuss your answers as a group.

How often have you read the Bible in the past month?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Once a day | <input type="checkbox"/> A few times a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> About once a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all | |

What is your greatest challenge in consistently reading the Bible?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time demands | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of understanding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of discipline | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling the Bible isn't relevant |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No reading plan | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: |

3. What are your expectations when you read the Bible?
4. What is your biggest frustration about your usual time in the Bible?
5. Think of a time when you read the Bible consistently. What were the circumstances that drew you to God's Word? How did it change you?

Study with Your Group

The following process is recommended to complete a group study.

1. In this introductory session you will watch video session 1. As you watch, complete the video viewer guide on page 9.
2. During the following week each person should complete the daily studies in week 1 of this workbook. These lessons will expand on the video teaching you have viewed.
3. In group session 2 you will discuss the material you have studied during week 1. Then you will watch video session 2 before completing week 2 in the workbook during the following week. Each subsequent group session follows this pattern.
4. An optional group session is provided on page 205 for groups that want to follow up on their individual study of week 9.

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the video

The number one predictor of a person's _____ is whether or not they read the Bible on a daily basis.

_____ percent of churchgoers read the Bible every day.
_____ percent say that Bible reading and study have made a significant difference in the way they live their lives.

Listen

We can't _____ what we don't hear.

Understand

We cannot _____ what we don't understand.

1. Have a readable _____.
2. Have good _____.

Respond

The goal is not just knowledge but to apply Scripture to our lives so we will make a _____.

“Apply yourself wholly to the _____.”

“Apply the Scriptures wholly to _____.”

Two Kinds of Space

1. _____ space
2. _____ space

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 1

READING THE BIBLE FOR LIFE

Most of us struggle to read the Bible consistently for two main reasons: lack of information and lack of motivation. Reading the Bible makes demands on our minds and our hearts. We need basic information to grow in the skill of reading the Bible in a way that lets us hear what God is saying to us. But we also need motivation. The Bible calls to us, giving us good reasons to read it and absorb its teachings.

We need to do more than just read the Bible. We need to read the Bible well. We need to read it so that we hear what God wants to say to us, in a way that is life-changing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German theologian who stood against Hitler, told his students, “When you read the Bible, you must think that here and now God is speaking with me.”¹ I pray as you spend time in Scripture during the coming weeks, you will hear God speak, and your life will produce the fruit of obedience to His Word.

As you complete the daily lessons this week, think about your attitude toward God’s Word. How much time do you spend with it? How much value do you place on it? Do you apply it to your life? Each day this week we will read key Scripture passages that highlight the value of God’s Word. Set aside a consistent time and place to read the Scriptures and to complete the suggested activities. Dig deep, both into your own heart and into God’s Word, as you learn what it means to read the Bible for life.

DAY 1 Why Read the Bible?

Today I invite you to begin thinking deeply about your motivation in relation to God's good Word. Most of us struggle with consistency in reading the Bible, so don't feel bad if this is the case for you. Reading the Bible is a skill and a discipline that require work and practice to develop. However, reading the Bible can become a great joy as you see God begin to change your life through consistent interaction with His Word.

As you learn to read the Bible more effectively and walk with a Christian community in which the Word is greatly valued, you will grow in consistency, understanding, and obedience to the Word. That in turn will encourage you to spend more time in the Word.

Realizing the benefits of reading the Bible, therefore, can motivate us to deeper commitment to God's Word. The Bible itself identifies those benefits in such passages as Psalm 1. Most scholars see Psalms 1–2 as the introduction to the Book of Psalms. Think of Psalms as the songbook of faith, giving the people of God, both individually and as a group, a voice to talk to God about many aspects of life. Psalm 1 lays a foundation for this experience of worship and prayer by focusing attention on God's Word as central to a relationship with Him.

Carefully read Psalm 1:1-3, thinking about each word and phrase.

*How happy is the man
who does not follow the advice of the wicked
or take the path of sinners
or join a group of mockers!
Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction,
and he meditates on it day and night.
He is like a tree planted beside streams of water
that bears its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.*

Circle the main benefits of Scripture, according to this passage. What do these word pictures mean?

Draw a box around the attitude of this person toward God's instruction. What observable evidence would indicate that someone delights in God's Word?

Underline the description of the active involvement of this person with God's Word. How might this translate into practical action today?

These verses indicate that being a person of God's Word provides the foundation for a "happy" (v. 1) or blessed life. It also leads to spiritual productivity and endurance; such a person "is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season," and "whatever he does prospers" (v. 3). But in order for our lives to look like that, we have to give a central place to the Word. We need to be immersed in it to the point that it becomes part of the way we think. Yet, as this passage reminds us, staying in the Word is not drudgery but pleasure. Does that summarize your attitude toward God's Word?

Use the words of Psalm 1:1-3 to pray about your attitude toward God's Word and about ways you want God to change your interaction with His Word. Feel free to write your prayer on a separate sheet of paper. Here are some examples of requests you could pray.

- "Lord, I don't want to have a life characterized by taking bad advice and hanging out with the wrong crowd."
- "I want to delight in Your Word. I want to learn to meditate on it consistently."

Day 2 A Passion for the Word

Yesterday we learned that a devotion to God's Word is a skill and a discipline, but it is more. We saw that Psalm 1:1-3 speaks of happiness and delight in relation to God's Word. If you love God, you love His Word. You want to know what it says because it reveals God's heart. The more you learn from the Word, the more passionate you become about reading it. Today I invite you to think about the condition of your heart in relation to God's Word. What are you really passionate about? How does God's Word rank among your passions and desires in life?

No one epitomizes a passion for God's Word like Mary Jones, a little girl who lived two centuries ago. As an 8-year-old, Mary lived in a beautiful valley on the southwest side of Cader Idris mountain in Wales. Her parents were simple, godly people who took their little girl to church and taught her Bible stories from her earliest years. These stories had to be taught from memory since the family did not own a Bible in the Welsh language. Such Bibles were very scarce, and most people could not afford them. Yet Mary loved the Word of God and longed to read it for herself. When a school opened in her area, Mary enrolled so that she could learn how to read. Then she began visiting a neighbor who owned a Bible in order to study the Bible for herself. She even memorized whole chapters of the Bible and shared them with her parents.

Next, Mary began saving money to purchase her own copy of the Bible. Over the next six years she sold eggs, gathered wood, mended clothing, and cared for younger children. Finally she had enough money to buy a Bible. The closest town where a Bible could be bought was Bala, more than 25 miles away. So very early on a spring day in 1800, Mary Jones began to walk, barefooted, to Bala. There she met Thomas Charles, a godly man who did a great deal of ministry throughout Wales. When Mr. Charles asked Mary about herself, her family, and her knowledge of the Bible, he was impressed. Moreover, he was amazed by her love for the Scriptures and her patient endurance in saving for a Bible of her own. But he sadly told the girl that all of the Welsh Bibles he had received from London in the past year had been sold months ago, except for a few that had been promised to friends who must not be disappointed. He also told her that the Bible Society in London had no plans to print more Welsh Bibles.

At this news Mary dropped into a nearby seat and began to sob. The little girl's passion for the Word moved Mr. Charles. His own voice broken with emotion, he rose from his seat and placed a gentle hand on Mary's head. "My dear child, I see you must have a Bible, as difficult as it is for me to spare you one. It is simply impossible to refuse you." So Mary Jones walked the 25 miles back home with her own copy of the Bible.

The impact of Mary's life was much more far-reaching than her little village. In 1802 Mr. Charles visited London and, moved by his experience with the girl, told Mary's story to the Religious Tract Society. From that meeting the British and Foreign Bible Society was established to spread the Scriptures around the world.²

Mary is a great example of someone who is passionate about God's Word, whose heart is receptive to God's Word, and who is productive for His kingdom. Jesus addressed these qualities in a parable that He said was foundational for hearing from God through His Word.

Stop and read Mark 4:1-20 in your Bible. Match each type of soil with the corresponding response to the Word.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Soil on the path | a. The Word is received but develops no roots. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Rocky soil | b. The Word is received and produces fruit. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Thorny soil | c. Satan prevents the Word from penetrating. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Good soil | d. Worries and desires choke the Word. |

Jesus compared the Word of God to seed that a farmer broadcasts in a field. Scattering seed in this way was not exact. In Jesus' word picture, some seed falls on the hard-packed path running beside the field. Some seed falls on rocky ground. Other seed falls in thorny soil, and still other seed falls in good soil. In verses 14-20 Jesus interpreted the parable, using the seed and soils to describe various responses to God's Word. The seed that falls on the path outside the field represents the thud of a heart hardened toward God's Word. The Word doesn't penetrate. The rocky soil speaks of a shallow response. When things get tough, that person abandons the Word. The seed in the thorns illus-

trates someone who is receptive to God's Word, but the cares and desires of life choke out the Word, and no spiritual fruit results. Finally, the good soil represents a heart that is open to God's Word, a heart that receives the Word and acts on it. The result is spiritual fruit.

Which of the following best describes the condition of your heart toward God's Word? You will be asked to share your answer with your group.

- Seed on the path: the thud of a hard-packed heart
- Seed in rocky soil: the withering of a shallow heart
- Seed in thorny soil: the congestion of a weed-choked heart
- Seed in good soil: the productivity of a receptive heart

Each of these responses relates to space, or the lack of it, in a person's life. Life space refers to blocks of time in your life. If you say about an activity, "I don't have time for that," you are saying you don't have any life space left. Heart space refers to room in your heart, your inner life, to process things deeply. It's important to identify the life-space or heart-space issues in your life in relation to God's Word. You will discuss these issues with your group this week.

Do you make regular time for God's Word? Yes No

If not, identify things you can eliminate to make room for Bible reading or other adjustments that need to be made.

Do you have enough emotional, mental, and spiritual space in your life to process God's Word deeply? Yes No

If not, pray and ask God to show you what needs to change so that you can focus on His Word.

Describe what you would like for your interaction with God's Word to look like six months from now.

Day 3

Benefits of Reading God's Word, Part I

Why is consistently reading the Bible important for a follower of Christ? The Bible is both the foundation and the fuel of a Christian's spiritual vitality. Accordingly, there are many reasons believers need to read the Bible on a consistent basis.

- We read the Bible to know the truth. We want to think clearly about what God says is true and valuable (see 2 Pet. 1:20-21).
- We read the Bible to know God in a personal relationship (see 1 Cor. 1:21; Gal. 4:8-9; 1 Tim. 4:16).
- We read the Bible to live well for God in this world. Living out His will expresses our love for Him (see John 14:23-24; Rom. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:1-8; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- We read the Bible to experience God's freedom, grace, peace, and hope (see John 8:32; Rom. 15:4; 2 Pet. 1:2).
- We read the Bible because it gives us joy (see Ps. 119:111).
- We read the Bible to grow spiritually as we reject conformity to the world and are changed by the renewing of our minds (see Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:1-2).
- We read the Bible to minister to other Christ followers and to those who have yet to respond to the gospel, experiencing God's approval for work well done (see Josh. 1:8; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16-17).
- We read the Bible to guard ourselves from sin and error (see Eph. 6:11-17; 2 Pet. 2:1-2).
- We read the Bible to be built up as a Christian community with others in the body of Christ (see Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:14-16).

Circle the three reasons that are most pertinent to you at this time. Be ready to share them with your group. Read the Scriptures beside those reasons.

Let's look at an Old Testament passage that focuses on the importance of interacting with God's Word. Deuteronomy 6:1-12 is part of a long series of instructions God gave to the people of Israel, through Moses, to prepare them to enter the promised land.

In your Bible read Deuteronomy 6:1-12, noticing the emphasis on listening to God's Word. What is the relationship between loving God and living according to His ways?

Verses 4-9 of this passage have historically been very important to the Jewish people, making up part of the *Shema* (pronounced shuh-MAH), a Hebrew word meaning listen. God instructed the people to keep His commands in their hearts, to teach them to their children, and to talk about them constantly. He even told them to bind His words on their hands and on their foreheads and to write them on their doorposts. When we love God, we listen to His Word and obey its teachings.

Why do you think it was so important for the people to be immersed in God's teachings as they entered the land?

How can Christians today keep the Word at the forefront of our lives as we interact with the world?

It is just as important for modern-day Christians to keep God's Word in our hearts and minds as it was for the Hebrews who were facing new challenges in a pagan land. One of the most basic ways to do this is to establish a pattern for spending time in God's Word.

Read "How to Have a Quiet Time" on page 18. Do you have a designated time and place to meet regularly with God to pray and read His Word? If so, when and where?

HOW TO HAVE A QUIET TIME

1. Make a personal quiet time the top priority of your day. Select a time to spend with God that fits your schedule. You may choose to have your quiet time the first thing in the morning to avoid distractions that arise later in the day. Or you may prefer bedtime so that God's Word is the last thing on your mind before you go to sleep. No matter what time you choose, make it a time when you can be consistent, missing no more than a handful of times per month. When you miss a day, catch up the next day.
2. Select a place for your quiet time that is free of distractions. Gather materials, such as your Bible, a notebook, and a pen or pencil, in advance.
3. Develop a balanced plan of Bible reading and prayer. Pray for God's guidance during your quiet time. Follow a systematic plan to read your Bible, such as the one provided in *A Reader's Guide to the Bible*.³ Make notes of what God says to you through His Word. Pray in response to the Scriptures you have read. Use various components of prayer, such as confession, thanksgiving, praise, petition, and intercession.
4. Be persistent until you are consistent. At first strive for consistency rather than for length of time spent. Try to have a few minutes every day rather than long devotional periods every other day. Gradually add to your time with God as you grow accustomed to listening to Him and talking to Him.
5. Focus on the Person you are meeting rather than the habit. If you scheduled a meeting with the person you admire most, you would not allow anything to stand in your way. Meeting with God is even more important. He created you for fellowship with Him.⁴

If you don't have a regular quiet time, I hope your time in these daily lessons will help you establish that habit.

Today you spent time studying Deuteronomy 6:1-12.
How did God speak to you through this passage?

Ask God to help you be faithful in studying His Word
and to help you live by its truth in your daily life.

Day 4

Benefits of Reading God's Word, Part 2

Psalm 119 is rich with promises about the benefits of God's Word. At first glance the psalm seems very repetitious. The chapter is made up of short prayers on the topic of God's Word, which is also called commands or laws. The psalm is an acrostic poem, each stanza beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Within each stanza each verse begins with the same Hebrew letter.

Psalm 119 presents a combination of reflections on the benefits of God's Word, attitudes we should have toward the Word, and appeals to God about His Word. The fact that we have such an extensive psalm on the topic shows how much the psalmist valued God's Word. Reflect for a moment on the value we place on God's Word today. If I lost a sock in the dryer, it would mean very little to me. My dryer consumes a steady diet of socks! In contrast, if I lost my wedding ring, which symbolizes my relationship with my wife, that would be a much greater loss! There is a great deal of difference between a sock and a wedding ring. Is the value you place on God's Word more like the value you place on a sock or something you hold very dear? Be honest with yourself as you complete today's activities.

Read Psalm 119:1-64 in your Bible, thinking about the psalmist's reflections on the value of God's Word.

Now go back and select verses that are especially relevant for you at present. List those verses under the following categories. I have made suggestions to get you started.

Benefits of following God's Word (for example, vv. 2,9,45):

Attitudes toward God's Word (for example, vv. 5, 14, 40):

Appeals to God about the Word (for example, vv. 10, 18, 27):

As you read these verses from Psalm 119, what surprised you the most?

Maybe you were struck by the psalmist's sincere longing to understand God's Word, as expressed by His use of words like *understanding*, *teach*, and *instruction*. For example:

*I pursue the way of Your commands,
for You broaden my understanding.
Teach me, LORD, the meaning of Your statutes,
and I will always keep them.
Help me understand Your instruction,
and I will obey it
and follow it with all my heart (v. 32-34).*

Like the psalmist, do you yearn and ask God for understanding as you read or listen to the Bible? Place a mark on the line below that represents your answer.

I never think about asking for understanding.

I constantly ask God for understanding as I read.

The spiritual attitude of longing for God’s truth is cultivated. Peter wrote, “Like newborn infants, desire the pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow by it for your salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). Peter instructed us to choose to turn our hearts toward God’s Word, to choose to want it above other things. Pray that God will work this desire into you through the course of this study.

Write one verse from Psalm 119:1-64 that relates to desiring God’s Word. Memorize and meditate on the verse this week.

Now pray, using this verse as the content of your prayer.

As you study God’s Word, you need good tools that help you understand and interpret Scripture accurately. A good study Bible in an understandable translation is essential. A number of very good Bible translations are available. The chart on page 23 will help guide you to a suitable translation for your needs. A Bible dictionary is another tool that can be very helpful, providing articles on topics, books, people, places, and cultural practices in the Bible. Commentaries, handbooks, and atlases can also be very helpful. This workbook will occasionally recommend that you use particular Bible-study tools, such as a study Bible and a Bible dictionary, to complete some of the learning activities. You can find a number of good Bible-study tools at the website mywsb.com.

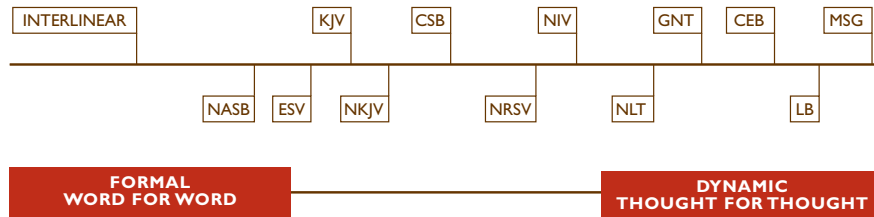
**What translation of the Bible do you prefer? Why?
Be prepared to share the answer with your group.**

Check the Bible tools you already own.

- | | | |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Study Bible | <input type="checkbox"/> Bible dictionary | <input type="checkbox"/> Bible atlas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bible handbook | <input type="checkbox"/> Commentary | <input type="checkbox"/> Concordance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bible pronunciation | <input type="checkbox"/> Bible survey | <input type="checkbox"/> Word studies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | | |

What tool would you like to add to your library next?

CHOOSING THE TRANSLATION THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU



1. Choose a translation that uses the earliest and most reliable Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. Most translations available today, with the exception of the King James Version and the New King James Version, meet these criteria.
2. Consider what kind of Bible reading you want to do. Formal-equivalence versions seek to approximate word-for-word correspondence with the Hebrew or Greek text, while functional-equivalence translations seek to capture the sense of the author's intended meaning in highly readable language. In general, formal-equivalence translations are best for deeper Bible study, and functional-equivalence translations are best for extensive reading and more readily understanding the meaning intended by the original text. Some translations attempt to strike a balance between word-for-word and thought-for-thought approaches.

Day 5 A Doer of the Word

The Bible places a great deal of emphasis not only on hearing God's Word but also on practicing it. Consider the words of James 1:22-25:

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but one who does good works—this person will be blessed in what he does.

How does James say the Word affects us as we hear and act on it?

James says we are fooling ourselves if we think merely being exposed to God's Word is sufficient for our spiritual lives. The Word was meant to change us. That's what happens when we look intently into the Word, persevere in it, and act on it.

When you read God's Word, how often do you apply it in a concrete way to your life, in a way that puts into action what you have learned?

- On a very consistent basis
- On a somewhat consistent basis
- Occasionally
- Almost never

Describe an experience in which you applied a specific Scripture to your life. How did God's truth affect the outcome of the situation? Be prepared to share the answer with your group.

If you struggle with application, you are not alone. It seems we have been trained to be vague, mushy, and general in our treatment of Scripture rather than clear and specific. Jesus never dealt in vague, idealistic generalities in His teaching but demanded very specific changes in people's lives. Consider how specific many of Jesus' instructions are in the Sermon on the Mount: "Don't be angry" (see Matt. 5:22). "Don't lust" (see Matt 5:28). "Give up your coat" (see Matt. 5:40). "Go two miles" (see Matt. 5:41). Jesus meant for people to put His words into action in very specific, tangible ways. Our problem is that we think it is enough to grasp general concepts, as if taking in the Word of God is a mental activity. Jesus, on the other hand, meant our interaction with the Word to be a life activity. Rather than saying, "I need to love people more" in a noncommittal way, we should consider, "What am I going to do today or this week to demonstrate love to a specific person?" Instead of saying, "I need to have more faith," we should identify ways we can express our faith very specifically today. Application of Scripture should be tangible, measurable, and specific. At the end of the day or the week we should be able to look back and say, "I worked that Scripture into my life in this way." This is when we begin to see life change in exciting ways.

For example, in Matthew 5:41 Jesus said if someone demands that you go a mile, go with him two miles. In first-century Palestine a Roman soldier could demand that a Jew carry his baggage for one mile. Because the Romans were an oppressive occupying force, most Jews hated them, so Jesus' call to go two miles must have seemed radical, if not crazy. The principle is to go beyond what is expected in serving others—even your enemy. Don't do as little as possible. Embody servanthood even in a difficult situation, even for your enemies. You and I could apply this passage by picking up trash in the yard of a difficult neighbor. If an oppressive boss demands that we work overtime, we could volunteer to work additional hours to help get a job done.

Read the following teachings of Jesus and write a specific way you could put each into action.

Matthew 5:16:

Matthew 5:23-24:

Matthew 5:39:

Matthew 5:44:

At the end of each week's study I will ask you to identify something you have discovered during the week to listen to, understand, and respond to God's Word more effectively.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 2

Reading the Bible in Context

Session 2 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. Psalm 1:2 describes someone who loves God's law: "His delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night." Describe to the group someone you know who is passionate about God's Word. What observable evidence expresses their delight in the Bible?
2. Which of the soils listed in the activities on pages 14–15 best describes your heart at present? Why?
3. What are the life-space and heart-space issues in your life now (p. 15)? Practically speaking, what adjustments would it take for you to give consistent, daily time (at least 15 to 20 min.) to God's Word?
4. What three key benefits of consistently reading the Bible most appeal to you (p. 16)? Why?
5. What translation of the Bible do you prefer (p. 22)? Why?
6. Where have you had your regular times of Bible reading in the past?
7. Read James 1:22-25 (see p. 24). What is one way you have applied a specific Scripture to your life? How did God's truth impact you?

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the video

Context

The circumstances that form the _____ for a passage of Scripture by which that passage of Scripture can be rightly understood

Four Kinds of Context

1. Historical

Historical events in the biblical era, either events recorded in the pages of _____ or events that form the _____ for the biblical story

2. Cultural

_____, patterns of _____, or expressions of a particular society that affect our understanding of a passage

Bible-study tools:

- Study Bible
- Bible dictionary
- Backgrounds commentary

3. Literary

How a passage _____ and/or _____ in a book, a group of books, or the Bible as a whole

4. Theological

How a topic fits in the tapestry of theological _____ in the Bible

Our _____ affects the way we read the Bible.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 2

READING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

In week 1 we laid the foundation for reading the Bible by discussing how we can listen, understand, and respond to God's Word more effectively. We evaluated our attitudes toward God's Word and read Scriptures that encouraged us to love the Word and spend time reading it. This week we will consider the importance of context in reading the Scriptures. God gave us His Word at specific times in specific places and ways. We respect God's choices and purposes in these matters when we take context seriously. Conversely, when we ignore context, we risk misunderstanding what He intended to communicate.

Context refers to the circumstances that form the setting for a passage of Scripture. When we make an effort to discover the context for a passage of Scripture, we find important clues for better understanding the meaning of that Scripture. This week we will examine five areas of context: historical, cultural, literary, theological, and personal. Growing in our ability to read Scripture passages in context involves the development of certain skills. As you read the daily lessons and complete the activities, pray that the Lord will help you grow in your ability to read His Word accurately.

DAY I

Understanding Historical Context

Most biblical books and passages have a historical backdrop of some kind. That backdrop might be communicated in the Bible book itself, or we might have to study to understand more about the historical events behind the writing of a book. Let's give it a try, using the Book of Amos. I will give you some information about the historical context of Amos, similar to what you would find in a study Bible or a Bible dictionary. Then I will guide you to draw conclusions based on what you have studied.

Amos is the first of four eighth-century B.C. prophets, who also included Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. Along with Hosea, Amos's ministry was to Israel, even though he was from Judah. He was a layman who did not consider himself a professional prophet (see Amos 7:14-15). Through words and visions Amos spoke against the superficial religious institutions of his day.

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, a village about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. He received a call from God to go north and prophesy against Samaria and the kingdom of Israel, probably around 760 B.C. We do not know how long he was actually in the north; it appears to have been a fairly short time. He provoked a great deal of opposition and anger, as illustrated by his encounter with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (see Amos 7:10-17). Apparently, he wrote his book, a summary of his prophecies, after his return to Judah. He probably wrote it with the aid of a scribe.

Amos prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah (792–740 B.C.) and Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 B.C.). This was a time of great prosperity and military success for both nations because all of their traditional enemies were weak. Samaria, the capital city of Israel, enjoyed enormous wealth, and luxuries flowed into the city.

At the same time, decades of struggle with Damascus had left the population exhausted. Many farmers were reduced to poverty. Their more affluent neighbors, and especially the aristocracy, swooped in

with loans that the poor could not repay and then reduced the debtors to slavery and seized their lands. The leaders of society believed they had no reason to fear for the future. Their city had high walls and fortified citadels, and their army was victorious everywhere. They were the chosen people of God, and they considered themselves immune from judgment.

Several key teachings make up the message of Amos.

1. God is impartial and fair, judging each nation appropriately. Neither Jew nor Gentile is exempted from divine judgment. The Gentiles are punished for moral outrages that we would now call crimes against humanity, while the Jews are judged by the demands of the Mosaic law (see Amos 1:3–2:5).
2. God despises human pride, especially when it is demonstrated through confidence in military power, wealth, and indifference toward other people (see Amos 6:1-8).
3. God is especially stern toward anyone who abuses or cheats the poor (see Amos 8:4-6).
4. God is not impressed by worship services with music and celebration if the people have unrepentant hearts (see Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-24).
5. People who are blinded by their confidence in their special status before God assume they have no reason to fear divine judgment, but they are totally misguided (see Amos 5:18-20).
6. Even after judgment, when it seems that all hope is lost (see Amos 9:1-4), God is able to bring about redemption and salvation (see Amos 9:13-15).
7. Israel's hope (and humanity's hope) is in the line of David, which God will raise up to establish His kingdom (see Amos 9:11-12). We now know this hope is fulfilled in David's descendant, Jesus Christ.¹

Carefully read Amos 5:21-24.

*I hate, I despise your feasts!
I can't stand the stench
of your solemn assemblies.
Even if you offer Me
your burnt offerings and grain offerings,*

*I will not accept them;
I will have no regard
for your fellowship offerings of fattened cattle.
Take away from Me the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice flow like water,
and righteousness, like an unfailing stream.*

Amos 5:21-24 primarily deals with (check all that apply)—

- empty worship gatherings;
- meaningless offerings;
- empty worship music;
- the need for justice;
- the need for righteousness.

How does your study of the historical context help you understand this passage? You will discuss your response with your group this week.

What guidelines for living did Amos provide for the Israelites in the last two lines of this passage?

Amos attacked the emptiness of the Israelites' religious practices and their false hope that the Lord would deliver them in spite of their unjust and unrighteous ways. God told them they could not truly worship God without exercising genuine justice toward other people.

How can believers practice justice and righteousness today—

in the church?

in the community?

Part of understanding the historical context of a Scripture passage involves pinpointing where the writing occurs in the overarching story of the Bible. David Dockery has said:

We need to understand the big story from creation to the Book of Revelation and understand that God has revealed Himself not only at particular times to particular people but has done so progressively. As time went on in biblical history, God revealed more and more aspects of His plan for humanity. We see progression, for instance, in the covenants He has made with people. He made a covenant with Abraham, which was amplified in the covenant with David, and then further amplified in the new covenant promised in Jeremiah. Covenant finds fulfillment when we begin to read Matthew 1 as Matthew traces the heritage and history of Jesus back through the covenants of the Old Testament. The covenants give us a framework for understanding God's agenda in forming a people who would follow Him, and we begin to see how the pieces of the Bible fit together. This big picture keeps us from lifting passages out of context or reading something into the Bible that is not there.²

Read the Bible for Life should help you grasp the big story of Scripture. I have included three timelines located online at BiblicalTraining.org.com/readthe-bibleforlife that show how the various portions of Scripture fit into the whole.

Find “Old Testament Timeline, Part 2” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Identify the time and place of Amos's life and ministry.

If we leave out parts of the biblical story, we don't understand God's redemptive message as a whole. If we can grasp the big picture, however, then we begin to understand our place in the ongoing story of God's work in the world. Grasping the historical context of a Scripture passage helps us do that.

Day 2

Understanding Cultural Context

All cultures have values and patterns of behavior that have an effect on interaction and communication in those cultures. You and I probably shake hands when we greet or say good-bye to someone. We intuitively know how close to stand to a person when we are talking to them. These are examples of modern-day cultural characteristics.

Once when my son, Joshua, was in a Muslim country, he had a meal at the home of an imam, an Islamic leader of a mosque. While having their picture taken together after the meal, the man graciously put his arm around Joshua. Joshua reacted by putting his arm around the imam. Unfortunately, that was a cultural no-no! In that culture a younger person never puts his arm around an elder, for to do so is to claim equal status. Those present explained this to Joshua, who quickly corrected his mistake. The people present appreciated the fact that he was willing to learn and conform to their cultural pattern.

Cultural context played a distinct role in the writing of every passage of Scripture. Andreas Köstenberger defines cultural context this way: “Culture has to do with attitudes, patterns of behavior, or expressions of a particular society; and these are aspects of the ancient world that have an impact on our understanding of the Bible.”³ Examples of cultural details that would affect the way we read the Bible might include worship practices in the eighth century B.C., the beliefs and practices of a Pharisee, Paul’s teaching on head coverings (see 1 Cor. 11:4-6), first-century behavior at funerals or weddings, and food eaten by people in the Bible.

Cultural patterns like these are often evident in Scripture, and we need to be sensitive to these patterns in order to understand the meaning of the passage for the original readers and for our lives today.

Read the following passages.

*You are to rise in the presence of the elderly and honor the old.
Fear your God; I am Yahweh (Lev. 19:32).
Gray hair is a glorious crown;
it is found in the way of righteousness (Prov. 16:31).*

What cultural patterns or attitudes do these verses reflect?

Jewish culture in the Old Testament held the elderly in high regard. In the passages you read, respect for the elderly is paired with the fear of God, and gray hair is equated with righteousness. God's law instructed the Israelites to respect and honor old people. When you understand the cultural assumptions behind a biblical teaching, you can more meaningfully apply that teaching to your own culture and your own life.

How does your culture view the elderly?

Give examples of the way people in your culture might express their attitudes toward aging. For example, what might be said or done at a birthday party for a person who was turning 50?

What are the presuppositions in your culture that lead to these attitudes toward old age?

What changes do you need to make to bring your attitude in line with what God says about aging in these passages?

Be ready to discuss the previous questions in your next group session.

Let's look at another example of cultural context from the life of Jesus: "He [Jesus] said to them all, 'If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it'" (Luke 9:23-24).

For many of us today the cross is a positive symbol of religious identification. We normally see a cross on top of a church, on a necklace, or on a wall. Made of gold or silver, these crosses are almost always smooth and beautiful. But for those in Jesus' culture, the cross was not a positive symbol. Rather, it was such a symbol of horror and shame that a person might not feel comfortable even saying the word in polite company. It was a shocking word because the cross was used as a means of torture and execution for people who were not Roman citizens or for traitors against the Roman Empire. Most of the people in Jesus' audience would have seen people crucified along the roads of Palestine, and it was a horrifying sight. The purpose of crucifixion was to make the victim suffer and linger in that suffering. Although no vital organs were damaged, the nails penetrated main nerve systems. Breathing was made tortuous because the person's legs were pushed up toward his torso as his arms were spread above his head. This position forced the diaphragm to press against the victim's lungs, making it very hard to breathe. The only way to relieve pressure on the lungs was to push up with the ankles and feet, which had nails through them. Crucifixion was everyone's worst nightmare.

How does this understanding of crucifixion help you understand the force of Jesus' words in Luke 9:23-24? You will share your answer with your group.

What are the implications of Jesus' words for the way we live each day as His followers?

Spend time thinking about Jesus' suffering on the cross. Thank Him for His sacrifice and express your willingness to die to self each day.

Day 3

Understanding Literary Context

A passage in C. S. Lewis’s book *Prince Caspian*, a volume in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, says, “Well, I’ve made as big a fool of myself as ever a Dwarf did. No offence, I hope? My humble duty to your Majesties all—humble duty. And thanks for my life, my cure, my breakfast—and my lesson.”⁴ The words, which come from Trumpkin the dwarf, are found at a critical moment in the story, when Trumpkin is finally convinced that the children standing before him are indeed the children from the old stories in Narnia. But these words make little sense apart from their literary context; in fact, if you have not read these books, the passage might be understandable, but it will not be meaningful! The pages immediately before the passage, the book as a whole, and even the whole of Lewis’s wonderful *Chronicles* stories provide a backdrop for understanding this short passage.

When it comes to biblical literature, literary context refers to the way a passage fits into and functions in a book, in a group of books, or in the Bible as a whole. For example, in *Philippians* 3:2 Paul wrote, “Watch out for ‘dogs.’” Someone could pull that passage out of context and say, “Christians need to be especially wary of canines!” But that would be a misunderstanding of Paul’s exhortation. If we examine the literary context, Paul’s meaning becomes clear. In *Philippians* 2:19-30 the apostle celebrated the ministry of Timothy and Epaphroditus, good ministers who serve as examples to the church. Just following the exhortation about “dogs,” Paul continued with two other parallel statements: “Watch out for evil workers, watch out for those who mutilate the flesh” (3:2). He then pointed to himself as a good minister of Jesus, who served “by the Spirit of God” (v. 3). The context for the statement about “dogs” clearly reveals that the apostle was talking about false ministers or teachers. The use of the word *dogs* is also distinctive to Paul’s culture; Jews of the day used the word as a derogatory term for false teachers.

Let’s look at another example of literary context in the Bible. After David became the king of Israel, he captured Jerusalem, making it his capital city. He then set out to move the ark of the covenant, a chest God had given the Israelites that represented His presence among His people. David wanted to move the ark to the city of Jerusalem so that it would have a central place in the worship of the Israelites. But on the way to Jerusalem, something tragic happened.

Carefully read 2 Samuel 6:1-11. What is your initial reaction to this passage?

Why do you think God acted so forcefully in this situation?

Now read Numbers 4:1-15.

Numbers 4:1-15, from the broader literary context of the Old Testament, provides an important frame of reference for understanding the story about Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6. In Numbers 4 God gave very specific guidelines for how the ark was to be moved—guidelines of which David was not aware or to which he had not paid attention. God’s guidelines emphasized His holiness. People were not to approach God lightly. The neglect of these guidelines cost Uzzah his life. By considering the broader context of the Old Testament, we can understand the seriousness of Uzzah’s offense in 2 Samuel 6.

When we learn the full intent of this story as informed by the literary context, we are ready to apply it to our lives. The story underscores the importance of taking God’s Word seriously.

Check the statement that most closely expresses the seriousness with which you take God’s Word.

Or write your own statement.

- I consciously try to obey and apply God’s Word.
- I live by certain biblical principles but am not being diligent about applying specific Scriptures to my life.
- I read the Word but am not paying attention to what I read.
- Other:

Read Matthew 4:9 in your Bible and examine the literary context of this passage. Identify the following.

The context:

The speaker:

The person spoken to:

I once saw a church bulletin that identified this as a theme verse for the church! It's an unfortunate example of failing to understand a verse's literary context. But when you have discovered the true context of Matthew 4:9, you can learn great lessons for dealing with temptation.

What does Jesus' example in Matthew 4 teach us about standing against temptation?

When we talk about literary context, we also need to consider the type of literature we are reading in the Bible. We can easily misinterpret a Bible passage if we don't understand God's intention for that passage. David Dockery explains:

We ... need to learn to read appropriately the different kinds of literature found in the pages of the Bible. We read the Law books differently from the way we read Poetry; and we read the poetic books, like Psalms, differently from the Prophets; and we read Prophecy differently from historical narrative; we read narrative parts of Scripture differently from the Epistles in the New Testament; and we read Paul's letters differently from the book of Revelation. Understanding the different types of literature in the Bible is an acquired skill. As we read the Scriptures over and over again and get basic training (like this book!), the Bible begins to make sense.⁵

Examine the charts "Old Testament Books by Literary Type" and "New Testament Books by Literary Type" on pages 42–43. Identify at least one Bible book in which you would expect to find the following information.

Stories of Jesus' life:

Stories about Israel's kings:

Wise sayings for godly living:

Theological instruction for the early church:

Expressions of praise:

Warnings about the consequences of disobeying God:

Laws about how to relate to God and others:

We will examine more specific characteristics of biblical literary types as we proceed through this study. Gospels

OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS BY LITERARY TYPE

LAW

Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus;
Numbers; Deuteronomy

HISTORY

Joshua; Judges; Ruth; 1–2 Samuel;
1–2 Kings; 1–2 Chronicles;
Ezra; Nehemiah; Esther

POETRY AND WISDOM

Job; Psalms; Proverbs;
Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs

MAJOR PROPHETS

Isaiah; Jeremiah; Lamentations;
Ezekiel; Daniel

MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea; Joel; Amos; Obadiah; Jonah;
Micah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah;
Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi

NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS BY LITERARY TYPE
<p>HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHURCH</p> <p>Acts</p>
<p>PAUL'S TRAVEL LETTERS</p> <p>Galatians; 1–2 Thessalonians; Romans; 1–2 Corinthians</p>
<p>PAUL'S PRISON LETTERS</p> <p>Philemon; Colossians; Ephesians; Philippians</p>
<p>PAUL'S PASTORAL LETTERS</p> <p>1–2 Timothy; Titus</p>
<p>SERMON</p> <p>Hebrews</p>
<p>GENERAL LETTERS</p> <p>James; 1–2 Peter; 1–3 John; Jude</p>
<p>APOCALYPTIC</p> <p>Revelation</p>

Day 4

Understanding Theological Context

Although the word *theology* sounds a bit intimidating to some people, it simply means *a word about God*. When we talk about the theological context of a Bible passage, we are referring to the way the passage fits into the broader message of the Bible. Andreas Köstenberger defines *theological context* this way: “We are not just looking for the historical facts but also asking questions about what stories, or practices, or institutions tell us about God, or about ourselves as human beings, or the world in which we live. We also are asking about the development of those ideas over time, as God revealed truth progressively in the development of the biblical story.”⁶

Getting our theology right is very important because it basically means thinking in the right way about God, ourselves, others, and the world. We can’t live godly lives without right theology. Right thinking lays an essential foundation for right living.

In the mid-20th century Dorothy Sayers wrote the following statements about the importance of theology for worship (when she speaks of dogma or doctrine, she is talking about theology):

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as bad press. We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—dull dogma as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama. . . .

Christ, in His divine innocence, said to the woman of Samaria, “Ye worship ye know not what”—being apparently under the impression that it might be desirable, on the whole, to know what one was worshipping. He thus showed himself sadly out of touch with the twentieth-century mind, for the cry today is: “Away with the tedious complexities of dogma—let us have the simple spirit of worship; just worship, no matter of what!”

The only drawback to this demand for a generalized and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular.⁷

As we learn more about theology from the Bible—right thinking about God—we learn more about how to live for God the way He wants us to.

Let's look at the way an understanding of theological context helps us interpret a Scripture passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 in your Bible. What term did Paul use to describe Jesus in verse 7?

Writing to the Corinthians about the seriousness of sin in their midst, Paul emphasized that sin no longer had a place in their lives because Jesus had been sacrificed to eliminate their sin. In verse 7 Paul referred to Jesus as "Christ our Passover." To understand the significance of this word picture, we need to examine the meaning of Passover, an observance God initiated as He delivered His people from Egypt.

Read about the inauguration of the Passover feast in Exodus 12:1-16. What was the role of each element in God's instructions for Passover?

The Passover lamb:

The blood:

The unleavened bread:

Preparing for their departure from Egypt, the Israelites had no time to put leaven in their bread. The blood of the Passover lamb, which the Israelites placed on the doorposts of their homes, protected God's people when God passed through Egypt to strike the firstborn. From that time on, the Jews were to remember God's deliverance by celebrating the Passover meal together every year.

Now read John 19:5-18. When was Jesus crucified?

Jesus was crucified on the day of preparation: “It was the preparation day for the Passover, and it was about six in the morning. Then he [Pilate] told the Jews, ‘Here is your king!’ ” (v. 14). This probably refers to preparation for the Sabbath of Passover week, which was Saturday (see John 19:31). This means Jesus was crucified on the day the Passover meal was celebrated. The day started at sundown the previous evening since the Jews reckoned their days from sundown on one day to sundown on the following day.

Now reread 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 in light of these background passages. What did you learn from Exodus 12:1-16 and John 19:5-18 that helps you understand the passage in 1 Corinthians? Describe the way Paul used the following images.

The Passover lamb or sacrifice:

The blood:

Leaven or yeast:

Paul clearly identified Jesus as the Passover sacrifice. As the spotless Lamb of God, He was sacrificed to atone for our sin through His blood. Because yeast was left out of unleavened bread, the Jews came to see yeast as a symbol for sin. Therefore, Paul also used the term *leaven* or *yeast* to represent sin. Because Jesus died for our sin, Paul said we honor Christ as our Passover Lamb, “not ... with the yeast of malice and evil but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (v. 8).

How does the word picture of Christ as our Passover help you understand the gospel message better?

Take a few moments and thank God that Jesus’ sacrifice for sin is your Passover.

Day 5

Understanding Your Personal Context

This week we have seen that we must consider various contexts in order to read, understand, and apply the Bible effectively: historical, cultural, literary, and theological. Each of us also has a personal context that affects the way we read and interpret the Bible. Our situations in life are vastly different from the situations of the original writers and audiences of the biblical books. This is not bad; we all have contexts in which we live. The important thing is to be aware of ways our culture, our ways of thinking, our past experiences, and even our families affect our reading of the Bible.

Try to identify specific ways the following components of your personal context might affect the way you read the Bible. You will share your thoughts with your group.

Family of origin:

Current family or roommate(s):

Religious or nonreligious background:

Educational background:

Personality:

Gifts and talents:

Where you live:

Read Psalm 32. The first five verses celebrate God's forgiveness, while verses 6-11 celebrate God's protection and instruction for life.

Given your personal context, what aspects of this psalm might be easiest for you to grasp?

Given your personal context, what aspects of this psalm might be the most difficult to grasp?

Use the words of this psalm to call out to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to direct you through His Word.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 3

Reading the Stories of the Old Testament

Session 3 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. How much would it surprise you if God said to you and your church, “I reject your worship. I reject your offerings. I don’t want any part of it!”? Why would this statement shock you?
2. How did your study in day 1 help you better understand Amos 5:21-24 (pp. 32–33)? Consider current events and discuss circumstances that need “justice [to] flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream” (Amos 5:24) in our world today.
3. How does our culture view aging and the elderly? What are the presuppositions in our culture that foster these attitudes? How are these attitudes different from the views of aging and the elderly in the Old Testament (p. 36)? What changes are needed to bring our attitudes in line with what God says about aging?
4. Read Luke 9:23-24. How does knowing something about crucifixion in the ancient world help you understand Jesus’ words (p. 37)?
5. Review your responses on pages 47–48. Which aspects of your personal context most affect the way you read the Bible?

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

The Old Testament was the _____ for Jesus and the early church.

Reasons to Read the Old Testament

1. The Old Testament is God's _____ to us.
2. The Old Testament is _____.
3. We can't make sense of the _____ without understanding the Old Testament.
4. The Old Testament has rich _____ on who God is and who we are as people.

Approximately 40 percent of the Old Testament is in _____ form.

How to Read the Old Testament Stories

1. Ask questions about the _____ of the story.
 - What kind of _____ is God?
 - What does God _____?
 - What was God's _____?
 - Who are _____?Covenant: a meaningful _____ between God and human beings
2. Notice the _____ of the story.
3. Learn from the _____.
4. See God as the main _____ of the Old Testament story.
5. The smaller stories make up a _____.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 3

READING THE STORIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

My mom's pregnancy with me was yet another crisis pregnancy for her; she had already had three miscarriages, and the doctors told her I probably wouldn't make it to full term. I was born 10 weeks early, weighing only four pounds. Only one lung worked, and they put me in an incubator for 30 days. But my mom called out to the Lord, telling Him if He would let me live, He could have me. Obviously, I lived, by God's grace, and from my preschool years I was interested in God and spiritual things.

Large in my memories from my early years looms a big, red Bible storybook. I loved it when my parents read to me the great stories of Moses, Samuel, David and Goliath, and Ezekiel. At the time I would not have been able to grasp lessons from a theology book. But I could grasp basic messages from many of the Bible's stories, and those stories formed my foundational thoughts about God.

How do you think about the stories of the Old Testament? Do you just think of them as OK for fidgety children but not really for grown-ups? Or do you see them as accounts of profound God moments, in which God has revealed truth about Himself, human beings, and the world around us? God gave us the Old Testament stories to challenge and change us. This week we will rediscover their relevance by learning how to read, understand, and apply them more effectively.

DAY I

Benefits of Studying the Old Testament

Some believers are intimidated by the Old Testament. They find it more difficult to read than the New Testament because of the length, the distant historical events, the variety of characters and peoples, the strange laws and customs, and the seemingly obscure prophecies. Yet God has spoken in every era of biblical history, and the Old Testament records much about God's activity, character, and redemptive purposes through the ages.

Today we will consider four primary reasons it is important to read and study the Old Testament Scriptures.

1. The Old Testament is God's Word to us.

Take a moment to reflect on 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

What percentage of Scripture is inspired by God?

In the verses underline the four functions of Scripture Paul identified.

According to this passage, what is the purpose of Scripture?

In these verses Paul primarily had in mind what we call the Old Testament since the New Testament had not yet been compiled. How do these verses affect your view of the Old Testament?

2. *The Old Testament is unfamiliar to many people.*

Mark the continuum to indicate your level of familiarity with the Old Testament.

I know almost nothing about the Old Testament.

I am an Old Testament expert.

Explain why you assessed your knowledge of the Old Testament the way you did.

Many Christians find the Old Testament hard to read and apply because they don't understand parts of it or consider certain sections irrelevant to their lives. Maybe you identified some of these barriers in your previous response. However, all of Scripture is inspired by God and is therefore valuable for our instruction.

3. *We can't make sense of the New Testament without an understanding of the Old Testament.* Remember that what we call the Old Testament was the Bible for Jesus and His first followers. Thus, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament often quoted and alluded to the Old Testament. Approximately 10 percent of the New Testament is made up of these quotations and allusions. That percentage amounts to almost three hundred quotations from the Old Testament and hundreds of clear allusions.

Read Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; and Jeremiah 23:1-4 in the Old Testament. These passages use the image of a shepherd in regard to leaders. How do these passages form a backdrop for John 10:11-18?

The Old Testament also provides the foundation for many key concepts and doctrines taught in the New Testament. For example, God established His covenant with His people in the Old Testament. The covenant was continued and developed in the New Testament through the coming of Jesus Christ (see Gen. 12; 2 Sam. 7:8-16; Luke 22:20; Heb. 12:24). God's redemptive plan is another theme introduced in the Old Testament and brought to fruition in the New (see Gen. 3:14-15; Acts 2:14-40). And the concept of the people of God finds its origin in the Old Testament as well (see Lev. 26:12; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). To understand the message of the New Testament, we must be familiar with the writings of the Old Testament.

4. The Old Testament provides us with a rich perspective on who God is. The Old Testament provides rich insights into God's nature and character—for example, His righteousness, justice, compassion, loving-kindness, sovereignty, and role as Savior.

Read the following Scriptures and identify what each reveals about God's nature and character.

*He judges the world with righteousness;
He executes judgment on the nations with fairness (Ps. 9:8).*

*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (Ps. 103:13).*

*I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you
(Jer. 31:3).*

Spend time praising God for the aspects of His character we see in the Old Testament.

Day 2 The Purpose and Details of the Old Testament Stories

A little less than half of the Old Testament is made up of stories. When we speak of stories in the Bible, we don't mean fiction—creative inventions that are the stuff of novels, children's books, and fairy tales. The stories of the Old Testament are historical and biographical accounts that are true. Biblical narratives are important components of God's inspired Word.

If we are going to read the Bible well, we have to learn how to read and understand its stories. If you have read the Old Testament much at all, you have probably encountered stories that are difficult to understand. But the good news is that you have read, heard, and watched stories all your life, and the skills you have gained over the years in reading and understanding stories can be put to work in reading the Old Testament. Today's study introduces foundational principles for reading and understanding the stories of the Old Testament.

Examine the chart “God’s Story” on page 57. Identify three themes you notice in the grand story of the Bible.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Look at the way these acts and scenes are depicted on the three timelines located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife.

Literary critic Harold Goddard has written, “The destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in.”¹

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain why.

GOD'S STORY

ACT I: GOD'S PLAN FOR ALL PEOPLE

Scene 1 Creation: *The God of All Life*

Scene 2 The Fall: *Rejecting God's Vision for Life*

Scene 3 The Flood: *God Judges and Makes a Covenant to Preserve Life*

ACT 2: GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE

Scene 1 The People: *God Calls a Covenant People*

Scene 2 Deliverance: *God Rescues His People*

Scene 3 Covenant and Law: *God Embraces and Instructs His People*

Scene 4 The Land: *God's Place for His People*

Scene 5 Kings and Prophets: *God Shapes a Kingdom People*

Scene 6 Kings and Prophets: *God Divides the Kingdom People*

Scene 7 Kings and Prophets: *The Southern Kingdom as God's People*

Scene 8 Exile: *God Disciplines His People*

Scene 9 Return: *God Delivers His People Again*

ACT 3: GOD'S NEW-COVENANT PEOPLE

Scene 1 Christ's Coming: *God's True King Arrives*

Scene 2 Christ's Ministry: *God's True King Manifests His Kingdom*

Scene 3 Christ's Deliverance of His People: *God's Work Through the Death, Resurrection, and Enthronement of His King*

Scene 4 Christ's Church: *God's People Advance the Kingdom*

Scene 5 Christ's Second Coming and Reign: *God's Future for the Kingdom*

The Old Testament stories were written for specific purposes. As you read them, ask yourself questions about what you are reading:

- What is the purpose of this story?
- What characteristics of God are portrayed?
- What does God value?
- What is God's agenda?

To practice answering those questions, we will look at the story of Moses, one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people.

Locate Moses on “Old Testament Timeline, Part 1” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife. Carefully read Exodus 2–3. Then answer the following questions.

What do you think is the purpose of these stories about Moses? What did you learn about him?

What kind of God is God, according to these stories? What are some of His characteristics?

What does God value, according to these stories?

What was God's agenda at this point in the Old Testament story?

It is also important to notice the details of the Old Testament stories. You can pick up on those details as you read by asking yourself who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Answer the following questions to identify details of Moses' story in Exodus 2–3.

Who are other key characters in the story besides God and Moses?

What are key turning points in the stories?

When did the story of Moses' move from Egypt take place (see Ex. 2:11)?

Where did each of the key scenes in Exodus 2–3 occur, according to the following verses?

Exodus 2:3:

Exodus 2:15:

Exodus 3:1:

Why was Moses reluctant to respond to God's call?

How did God convince Moses to follow the call?

What do these details reveal about God, His nature, and His ways?

God is weaving together the details of your life just as He did with Moses. His plan may not always be clear to you, but studying the lives of biblical characters like Moses shows you that God is working in the lives of people who seek to obey and follow Him. If you are committed to Jesus as Lord, you can be sure that God is intricately involved in your life and is working all things together for your good as He brings about His purposes for you (see Rom. 8:28).

Have you ever known that God wanted you to do something but were reluctant to do it? Yes No

If so, how did God work in your life to bring you to a point of commitment and obedience?

What did you learn about God through this experience?

Day 3

Seeing God as the Hero of the Stories

If we are not careful, we can read the Bible as a self-help book, looking primarily for what it says to or about our lives. Eugene Peterson has written, “We have short attention spans. Having been introduced to God, we soon lose interest in God and become preoccupied with ourselves.”² It’s true that the Bible is relevant to us and should be applied to our lives, but we can discover its true relevance only to the extent that we encounter God through Scripture. He is the source and the subject of every passage. Therefore, when we read the Old Testament stories, we need to focus on God as the center of these stories. He is the true hero of every story. When we read the Old Testament stories with an understanding that God is the central figure, we keep the focus on Him.

Read I Kings 18:20-40. Locate Elijah on “Old Testament Timeline, Part 2” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). List three ways God is presented as the hero of this story. You will share your answer in your group session this week.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Over and over again in the stories of the Old Testament, we see God taking the initiative to reveal Himself as the all-powerful, loving, holy, covenant-keeping God. A covenant was an agreement God established with the Israelites, first through Abraham: “I will keep My covenant between Me and you, and your future offspring throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7). When God renewed this covenant through Moses, He gave His people the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. If the people kept the law, He would be their God, and they would be His special people. The covenant between God and His people is a central theme of Scripture and provides a foundational understanding for many of the stories of the Old Testament.

God began His Ten Commandments with these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. Do

not have other gods besides Me. Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands" (Ex. 20:2-6).

How does the story you read about Elijah relate to this covenant command given by God to the Israelites hundreds of years before Elijah's time?

It is clear from Elijah's story that Israel had been unfaithful to God by indulging in the worship of the false god known as Baal. God used Elijah to call Israel to return to Him and, as the hero of this story, dramatically demonstrated His sovereign power over all the earth.

Read the story of David and Goliath in I Samuel 17. Locate David on "Old Testament Timeline, Part 2" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Write statements from verses 45-47 that make God the focus of the battle. Be prepared to share your ideas with your group.

David recognized that the battle was God's and that He would prove Himself the Victor.

In the Old Testament we see God writing a grand story through His direct interaction with His chosen people. He stands at the center of that story. How might you live differently this week if you consciously saw God at the center of your life story?

Day 4 Learning from the Characters

Another way to gain more from reading the Old Testament stories is to look very closely at the characters in those stories. The biblical characters are not always perfect (in fact, we sometimes learn from the characters what not to do), and their cultural contexts are often very different from our own. Yet God has placed their stories in His Word to teach us about Him and our relationship with Him.

Who are two of your favorite Old Testament characters? Find them on the two Old Testament timelines (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). What has each of them taught you about a relationship with God?

1.

2.

The Old Testament stories speak to us and confront us with the important issues of life while keeping the focus on God. This is largely true, as Bruce Waltke explains, because of the spiritual journeys of the biblical characters themselves.

The stories often have at their core the struggles of people to believe God, to trust Him, and I think we all face those struggles; so the stories ring true for us. Also, almost every story has a protagonist, usually the good guy, and his opposition, the antagonist, usually the bad guy. Consequently a tension in the story moves it toward a climax in which this tension between good and evil comes to a critical moment. This is true for our lives as well. The Old Testament stories are not primarily about us, but they do parallel our lives. We struggle to live by faith. Sometimes, in a climactic moment of our own stories, we find the reality of

God's presence with us in the midst of our difficulties, just as the characters in the Old Testament did. So the Old Testament stories can really speak to us in ways that we understand.³

Many dynamics we see in the Old Testament stories are familiar to most of us, since we have read, watched, or listened to stories all our lives. Good guys and bad guys, crises and climaxes, the main character's struggle to trust that the story will have a good ending—all of these elements are common to great stories such as those by Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Tolkien, Tolstoy, and Twain. Yet the biblical stories are great because they speak to our lives with unmistakable relevance. We identify with emotions like hope, despair, longing, or fear as portrayed by the characters because we experience the same emotions. So as we identify with the characters in the Old Testament, we begin to ponder, *How do I fit into God's story?*

Let's examine the lessons a couple of Old Testament characters teach us about God and our place in God's story.

Read Genesis 39. Find Joseph on "Old Testament Timeline, Part I" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). How would you describe Joseph's relationship with God through the varied experiences recorded in this chapter?

What character traits did Joseph possess that gave him stability in life, in spite of many challenges?

What guidelines for living can we learn from the life of Joseph? You will share your ideas in your group session.

Like many other Old Testament characters, David embodied both positive and negative characteristics.

Read 1 Samuel 26:6-25. What godly characteristics did David exhibit in this story?

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-12:13. What negative characteristics did David exhibit in this story?

David is one of the great characters of the Old Testament. He was a man of deep conviction and love for the Lord. Scripture calls him a man after God's own heart (see 1 Sam. 13:14). Yet his moments of weakness cost him much spiritually. What are three key lessons for your life that you learn from David? Be prepared to share your ideas with your group.

1.

2.

3.

Spend time in prayer, asking God to make you someone who, like Joseph and David, has a heart for Him.

Day 5 Many Smaller Stories, One Grand Story

Begin the lesson today by thinking about the story of your life.

What is one of the most significant events in your life?

When did this event take place?

What led to this event?

How has this event affected you?

Be prepared to share your experience in your group session this week.

This event has played an important role in the development of your life. It is a smaller story in the grand story of your life. In a similar way, the Old Testament is made up of many stories, but they fit together in a grand story God has written on history.

Look at the Old Testament timelines (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Are you familiar with these events? On the continuum below, place a mark to indicate the degree to which you understand how the stories of the Old Testament fit together to make up a grand story.

I do not understand
the big picture at all.

I grasp the big
picture perfectly.

The smaller stories of the Old Testament have a distinct purpose. They describe historical events and real people in particular times and places. Their purpose is to show how God worked in history to create a people for Himself.

For example, we learned earlier this week that God's covenant with His people is a primary theme throughout Scripture. The stories of the Old Testament reinforce the covenant relationship between God and His people, and this is the glue that ties the whole Bible together. If we understand that the Bible is all about a relationship with God, we will more readily recognize one of the main purposes of the Old Testament stories.

Read Judges 1:1-7.

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, "Who will be the first to fight for us against the Canaanites?" The LORD answered, "Judah is to go. I have handed the land over to him." Judah said to his brother Simeon, "Come with me to my territory, and let us fight against the Canaanites. I will also go with you to your territory." So Simeon went with him. When Judah attacked, the LORD handed the Canaanites and Perizzites over to them. They struck down 10,000 men in Bezek. They found Adoni-bezek in Bezek, fought against him, and struck down the Canaanites and Perizzites. When Adoni-bezek fled, they pursued him, seized him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. God has repaid me for what I have done." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

What do you think is the purpose of this story?

As the Israelites moved in to conquer Canaan, they took the town of Bezek and cut off the thumbs and big toes of the king, Adoni-bezek. If we interpret this story in isolation, we might think it communicates the idea of justice because of Adoni-bezek's words "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut

off used to pick up scraps under my table. God has repaid me for what I have done” (v. 7). But that’s not the point of the story. Bruce Waltke explains:

This passage must be read in light of Deuteronomy 7 and the terms of the covenant. In Deuteronomy 7:2 the covenant instructions give specific directions for how to deal with the people of the land of Canaan: “And when the LORD your God delivers them over to you and you defeat them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy.”

The Israelites were supposed to exterminate completely the evil incarnated in Canaanite society. So this passage in Judges 1 is not about justice; it is about Israel’s failure to deal carefully with God’s instructions under the covenant, and it sets the tone for Judges, which is a book about the utter failure of God’s people.

In other words, the way they dealt with this Canaanite king marks the beginning of the decline of Israel. Unless you understand the covenant of Deuteronomy 7, you really will misinterpret the story about Adoni-bezek.⁴

As you read the stories of the Old Testament, look for big-picture themes, such as God’s covenant, His redemptive plan, and His relationship with His people. Let’s look at another Old Testament story and try to identify its place in the grand story.

Find Rebekah on “Old Testament Timeline, Part I” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Read the story of the stolen blessing in Genesis 27:1-40. What surprised you about Rebekah’s behavior?

The blessing was greatly desired in the Jewish culture of that time. More than just hopeful words spoken over a person, it was seen as a powerful force in bringing about the good things spoken by the father. God was recognized as the source of the blessing, so the father, in essence, was calling on God to bless the son. To be blessed by God was considered essential to a successful life. Yet there seems to be another motive behind Rebekah’s prodding of Jacob to steal the blessing.

Read Genesis 25:19-26. How do God's words to Rebekah help you understand her motives in encouraging Jacob to steal the blessing?

Now read Genesis 49:1-28, Jacob's words over his sons as he is about to die. How does the story of the stolen blessing fit into the larger picture of the Old Testament?

After Jacob received the blessing in Genesis 25, he went on to have sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel, the nation God had promised to Abraham (see Gen. 12:2). Thus, the earlier story played a crucial role in God's plan to create a people for Himself.

Can you identify an event in your life that didn't make sense at the time but later proved to be an important part of your life story?

Our reading of the Old Testament stories is incomplete without determining where we fit into the picture. As we read, God calls us to enter His ongoing story of redemption and to fulfill our role in that story. God's plan has always been to be in a covenant relationship with His people, on whom He would lavish His blessing and love. You are an important part of that ongoing story.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 4

Reading the Law and the Prophets

Session 4 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. What is your favorite nonbiblical story? Your favorite Bible story? What qualities of these stories impact you?
2. Listed below are reasons for studying the Old Testament. Discuss which reason is most pertinent to you.
 - The Old Testament is God's Word to us.
 - The Old Testament is unfamiliar to many people.
 - We can't make sense of the New Testament without an understanding of the Old Testament.
 - The Old Testament provides us with a rich perspective on who God is.
3. What parts of the Old Testament are most familiar to you? Least familiar?
4. How does seeing God as the hero in Elijah's story change your perspective on this story (p. 60)? What about David and Goliath's story (p. 61)?
5. What lessons do we learn from Joseph's story (p. 63)? What positive and negative lessons do we learn from David's story (p. 64)?
6. Identify one of the most significant events in your life. How has God used this event in the larger story of your life and your relationship with Him (p. 65)?
7. How did you mark the scale on page 65 to indicate how well you grasp the Old Testament's grand story?

You will find it helpful to become familiar with the chart "God's Story" on page 57 before viewing this session.

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

How to Read the Law

Where does the law fit in the _____? How does it relate to God's _____?

Acts 1: God's plan for all people

Act 2: God's _____ people

The law teaches a covenant people how to live _____ for God.

The law provides a means of _____ when they fail.

How do we as Christians read the law?

1. Are there direct _____ that are emphasized in the New Testament?
2. Has the New Testament shown the law to be no longer directly _____?
3. What are the _____ behind this law that reflect God's values?

How to Read the Prophets

Where do the Prophets fit into the story? How do they relate to the covenant?

1. A call to covenant _____
2. _____ is coming if you don't respond.
3. _____ of a future

How do we as Christians read the Prophets?

1. What does it mean to love God with covenant _____?
2. What are my _____?
3. Address injustice and lack of concern for the _____.
4. God still calls us to _____.
5. What is God's _____ vision for the future?

Close with Prayer

Week 4

READING THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

We can't understand the grand story of the Bible unless we understand how the various parts work, and some of these parts are much more familiar to us than others are. If you have spent time reading the Bible, you are probably somewhat familiar with the psalms, the teachings of Jesus, and portions of Paul's writings. But like many people, you may not be familiar with the sections of the Old Testament known as the Law—much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—and the Prophets. Many well-intentioned people set out to read the Bible from start to finish, only to get bogged down in the hundreds of laws God gave the Hebrew people. Although God gave these laws to teach His people how to walk in a close relationship with Him, they can seem incomprehensible to readers today unless we learn how to read them according to God's intended purpose. In the same way, the complex historical references and puzzling pronouncements of the Prophets can be confusing to modern readers as well. This week we will try to understand how the Law and the Prophets fit into the big picture of the Bible and to clarify their relevance for our lives today.

DAY I How the Law Fits

into the Story

Much of the content of the first five books of the Old Testament is made up of laws God gave to the people of Israel. In fact, more than six hundred commands are found in this part of the Bible. Some of these laws seem reasonable to us, while others seem strange.

Place a check mark beside the laws you recognize as being from the Old Testament.

- “Make tassels on the four corners of the outer garment you wear.”
- “You must not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock.”
- “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
- “You are not to ... put tattoo marks on yourselves.”
- “You must not ... put on a garment made of two kinds of material.”
- “Remember the Sabbath day.”
- “Do not steal.”
- “A woman is not to wear male clothing.”
- “You must not eat their meat [speaking of pigs].”

Actually, all of these commands are found in the Old Testament. Underline the laws you have not kept perfectly. Now circle the ones you think are still in force today. Explain why you think God still expects us to abide by these laws.

As strange as some of these laws seem to us today, they are nonetheless part of God's Word. God included these laws in His inspired Word for our instruction and blessing so that we could understand more about Him and His ways. The laws teach us a great deal about God's heart and His purposes in the world. They also anticipate how God would eventually answer humanity's most pressing need—the need for redemption. J. G. Millar explains:

Much of the theological framework needed to understand the significance of Jesus' coming, life and death was put in place by Moses in his writing, and perhaps above all in Deuteronomy. For it is here that the theology of blessing and curse which lies at the heart of Jesus' sin-bearing work is first articulated. It is here that the hopelessness of humanity trapped in sin, even when chosen by God, is exposed. It is here that the prospect of a divine intervention so radical that it changes people at the very core of their being first appears.¹

Before we can answer the question of how relevant the law is for believers today, we have to understand how the law fits into the grand story of the Old Testament. As recorded in Exodus 19, God gave the law to the Israelites three months after they had left Egypt. As the people camped in the wilderness, God called Moses up to Mount Sinai and gave him the law that would prepare the Israelites to enter the promised land. The law provided principles and commands for the way a covenant people should live for their covenant God. God's words in Exodus 19:4-6 summarize His covenant with His people:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.

Find God's meeting with the Israelites at Sinai on "Old Testament Timeline, Part 1" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife).

Read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. How do they relate to the covenant? Be prepared to share the answer with your group.

Many of the laws God gave the people related to the way they were to live for God among the pagan people of the land they would possess. For instance, when God instructed, “You are to keep My statutes. You must not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock, sow your fields with two kinds of seed, or put on a garment made of two kinds of material” (Lev. 19:19), He was giving the Israelites a picture of separation. Such laws would constantly remind them that God expected them to remain separate from the pagan practices of the people around them. He expects the same of us today.

Read I Corinthians 5:9-11.

I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. I did not mean the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters; otherwise you would have to leave the world. But now I am writing you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer, who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.

How can we live out a holy separation from the practices of the world?

Throughout the Old Testament Israel was unfaithful to its covenant promises and, consequently, incurred God’s judgment. Finally, God promised to establish a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Look, the days are coming”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke even though I had married them”—the LORD’s declaration. “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the LORD’s declaration. “I will put My teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of

them”—this is the LORD’s declaration. “For I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.”

This covenant was fulfilled through Jesus Christ. His death on the cross ushered in the new covenant and brought the old covenant to an end.

Read Hebrews 12:18-24.

You have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. (Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, for they could not bear what was commanded: And if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned! The appearance was so terrifying that Moses said, I am terrified and trembling.) Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels in festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to God who is the Judge of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, to Jesus (mediator of a new covenant), and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel.

How does the first half of this passage describe the giving of the law on Mount Sinai?

Thrilling Moving Terrifying

Verses 18-21 describe the fear associated with the giving of the law by a holy God. The old covenant demanded absolute obedience to the law for people to be right with God. In contrast, verses 22-24 use beautiful, picturesque language to describe a relationship with God under the new covenant. Jesus, the “mediator of a new covenant” (v. 24), accomplished what the old covenant could not. Through His blood we have the forgiveness of sins and therefore direct access to God. Christ fulfilled the promises and purposes of the Old Testament covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. “[Christ] is the seed of Abraham who would bless all the nations; He is the goal of the Mosaic law; He is the King who sits forever on David’s throne.”² Reading the Old Testament laws in light of God’s eternal covenant brings greater understanding to the grand story of redemption.

Day 2

How the Law Is Relevant Today

One question people have about the Old Testament law concerns its relevance for today. Yesterday we learned that Christians are no longer under the old covenant God established with the Israelites on Mount Sinai. Does this mean the Old Testament law is no longer relevant for followers of Jesus? Danny Hays states that the Old Testament law is still applicable to Christians today:

Most certainly it is, if we follow the lead of the authors of the New Testament. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul tells us that “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” (NIV). Without a doubt Paul is including the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in his phrase “all Scripture.” Remember that the Old Testament was Paul’s Bible, and the first five books of the Old Testament were understood to be foundational for the rest of the Scriptures. So Paul seems to be stressing their relevance for us. These books that contain the Old Testament law (Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy) are a critical part of God’s revelation to us, and—as reaffirmed by Paul—they continue to reveal God to us, teach us about God’s character, help us to understand the life and death of Jesus better, and also provide us with guidance in righteous living.³

In other words, the Old Testament law is still God’s Word to us, even though we relate to that law differently than the Israelites did, who were living under the old covenant. Believers in Christ are no longer under the Mosaic covenant. Although the books of the law are still Scripture—God’s infallible Word to us—they are no longer law for us. Therefore, we should read and apply the Old Testament law not as legally binding but as embodying principles we should glean and obey. What do the laws teach us about God? What do they teach us about human nature? What guidelines do we find that can help us live for the Lord in the world today?

To sort out how we should relate to specific Old Testament laws, we need to ask the following questions.

- Is this Old Testament command directly emphasized in the New Testament?
- Has the New Testament shown this Old Testament law to be no longer applicable?
- What are the principles behind this law that reflect God's values? What does this law teach me about loving God or loving others?

Let's apply these questions to several Old Testament laws. Read Leviticus 19:1-10. Which parts of the passage do you think might be reemphasized in the New Testament?

Which parts of the passage has the New Testament shown to be no longer applicable to Christians? (For a clue read Heb. 10:5-18.)

Look again at Leviticus 19:9-10. This command is not repeated in the New Testament, but the principles here communicate important ways to love others, especially the poor. Most believers today are not farmers, and modern farming methods would make it very difficult to follow this command because many crops are not grown for humans to eat, and poor people might have a difficult time getting to the fields outside their communities. Yet the principle could be fulfilled in different ways today.

How would you express the main principle communicated by Leviticus 19:9-10?

How might Christians fulfill that principle today? You will be asked to share your ideas in this week's group session.

Now read Leviticus 19:11-22. Which portions of these Old Testament commands do you think might be directly emphasized in the New Testament?

Do you know whether the New Testament has shown any of these Old Testament laws to be no longer applicable? Which ones?

List two ways these laws reflect God's values. For example, God values honesty.

- 1.
- 2.

Ask God to show you ways to practice the principles behind these laws.

Verse 18 is an example of an Old Testament law that is repeated in the New Testament, so we know it still applies to believers under the new covenant. Jesus taught in Matthew 22:39, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

You probably identified Leviticus 19:21-22 as laws that no longer apply to those under the new covenant. Animal sacrifices are no longer required because Christ has paid the price for sin. However, you probably recognized that confession and repentance would still be required to be restored to a right relationship with God.

When you read the Old Testament law, don't get lost in legal requirements that don't apply to Christians. Recognize it as valuable revelation about God and His character. Then identify and obey the principles reflected in the law, as explained and refined in the New Testament revelation of Jesus.

Day 3

How the Prophets Fit into the Story

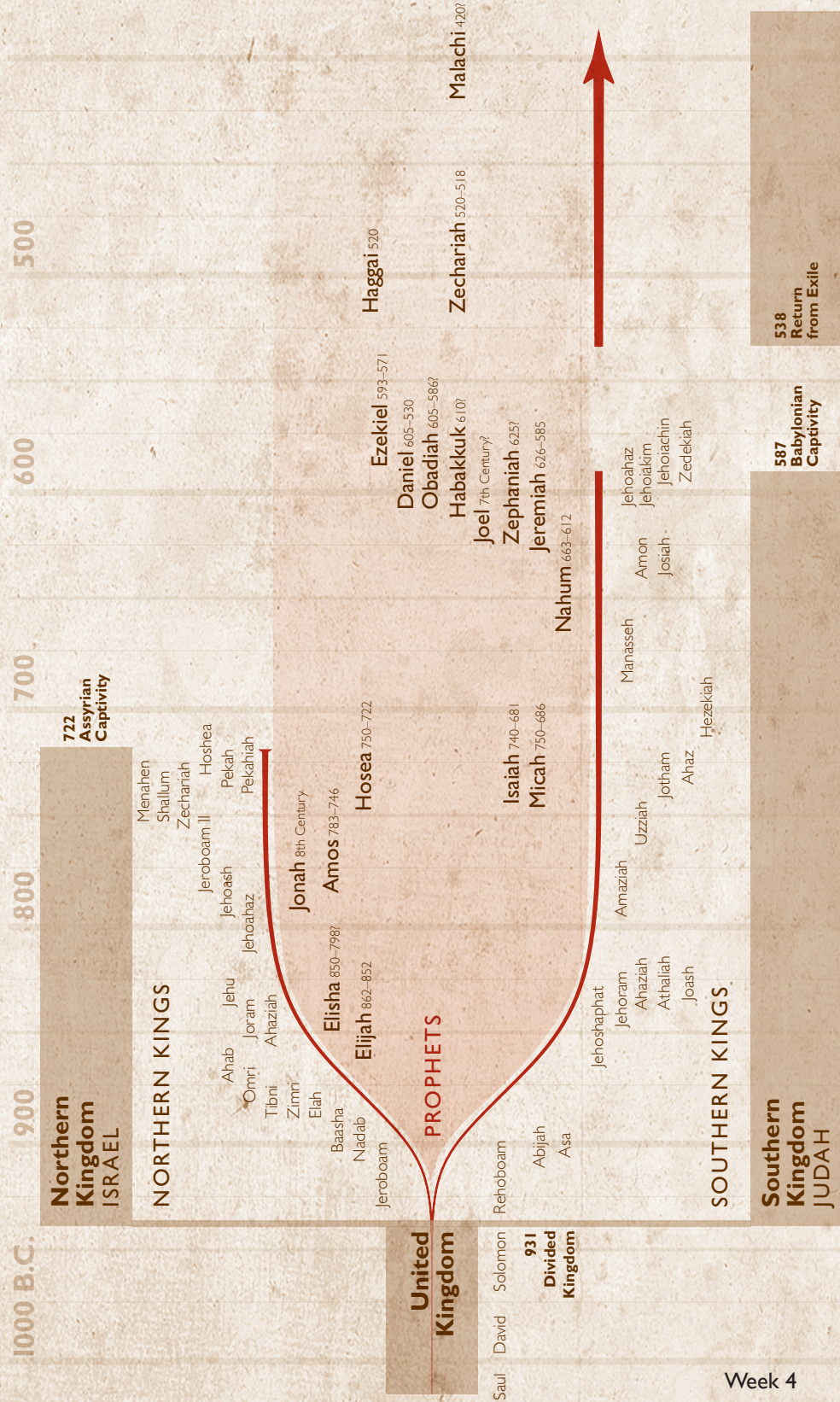
What comes to mind when you read the word *prophet*? People commonly use the term to refer to someone who can predict the future. My students might ask me, “Who do you think is going to win the ball game this weekend?” and I might respond, “Well, I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but . . .” and then make a prediction. Although prophecies about the future play a vitally important role in the Bible, the prophets were much more than spiritual forecasters, and we need to understand their roles in Jewish history and society in order to read them well. Their literature is as varied as it is voluminous, as heartbreakingly beautiful as it is confounding at points.

We can begin to get oriented to the Old Testament prophetic books with the numbers 4, 12, and 4. There are 4 prophetic books called the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They are called the Major Prophets because they are longer. The Minor Prophets are 12 shorter prophetic books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These 16 prophetic books were written over a period of about 3½ centuries (between 800 and 400 B.C.) in 4 distinct phases of the history of God’s people:

1. The eighth-century prophets: Jonah, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Amos
2. The rise of the Babylonian Empire: Jeremiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Joel, and Habakkuk
3. The exile: Ezekiel and Daniel
4. After the exile: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

The chart “Timeline of Old Testament Kings and Prophets” on page 81 shows where the prophets fit into Old Testament history.

Timeline of Old Testament Kings and Prophets⁴



As we read an Old Testament Prophet, we need to have at least a basic understanding of how the book fits into the historical development of the Old Testament era. The best way to do this is to use a study Bible or a Bible dictionary.

In a study Bible or a Bible dictionary, read an introductory article on the Book of Habakkuk. When and where did Habakkuk minister?

Identify one theme of Habakkuk's writing.

Habakkuk, a prophet from about 630–605 B.C. in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, was greatly disturbed by the nation's wickedness. God revealed that He would soon use the Babylonians to bring judgment on Judah, destroying Jerusalem and devastating the land. They would carry the Israelites into exile hundreds of miles away, where they would stay for 70 years. It was perhaps the darkest phase of Israel's history. In Habakkuk the prophet carried on a dialogue with God, asking how God could use an evil nation like the Babylonians to punish His covenant people.

Read Habakkuk's response to God's revelation of His impending judgment.

*I heard, and I trembled within;
my lips quivered at the sound.
Rottenness entered my bones;
I trembled where I stood.
Now I must quietly wait for the day of distress
to come against the people invading us.
Though the fig tree does not bud
and there is no fruit on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will triumph in Yahweh;
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!*

*Yahweh my Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like those of a deer
and enables me to walk on mountain heights! (Hab. 3:16-19).*

Put brackets around the parts of the passage that are clearer because you learned about the historical situation behind the book.

The passage speaks of utter devastation. How would you describe Habakkuk's emotions and choices in the face of his circumstances?

Emotions:

Choices:

What is a challenging circumstance in your life at present?

How might you follow Habakkuk's example in approaching this circumstance? Be prepared to share your ideas with your group.

You can see that historical context is vitally important for understanding the message of the prophets. We have to ask questions like: Who was the king at the time? Was the prophet writing in the Northern Kingdom of Israel or the Southern Kingdom of Judah? Were the people following or disobeying God? What was the social situation at the time? Answers to these questions help us make sense of the prophet's message. Again, a study Bible or a Bible dictionary can help you discover this information.

The prophets sometimes used drama or poetic language to communicate their messages.

Read the following verses and summarize the message communicated by the drama of Ezekiel and by the poetry of Hosea.

Ezekiel 5:1-17:

Hosea 6:1-3:

What role did predicting the future play in the work of a prophet? Gary Smith explains:

We can think of the prophets as preachers of their day, addressing issues of their day, who sometimes pointed to what God would do in the future as a part of their message. Much of the prophetic literature does not involve prediction of the future, but prediction plays an important role in motivating the people to take seriously the prophet's message from God. At times the prophet might be looking just a few years into the future, as when the prophet Amos says in effect, "God is sending the Assyrians to bring judgment on you!" At the same time God sometimes uses the prophet to pull back the curtain on events far in the future, indicating God's greater plans for the world.⁵

Read Isaiah 53:5:

*He was pierced because of our transgressions,
crushed because of our iniquities;
punishment for our peace was on Him,
and we are healed by His wounds.*

What future event was Isaiah predicting?

Although the prophets often predicted the future, they also confronted the people of their day with strong messages from God that taught the people how to live for God in the world. Those messages hold strong clues about ways we can apply the prophecies to our lives today. That will be the subject of our study tomorrow.

Day 4

How the Prophets Are Relevant Today, Part I

How should we as Christians read the Old Testament prophets? In our study yesterday we learned that we need to understand the historical situation of each prophet. Today and tomorrow we will think about key aspects of the prophets' messages. The prophets had three main themes:

1. The call for God's people to be faithful to the covenant, in part by the way they carried out justice and concern for the poor and disadvantaged
2. The promise of judgment if repentance was not forthcoming
3. Hope for the future, often expressed in terms of a remnant who would be saved or supported

Speaking of the first of these themes, Gary Smith explains that covenant is perhaps the central theme in the prophets.

To understand the glue that holds the prophets together, we have to go back to the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and focus on the covenants God made with His people. In the Pentateuch God made foundational covenants with the Israelites, first with Abraham, the father of the nation, and then with the whole nation after Moses had led them out of Egypt. He would be their God and live among them, and they were to follow the instructions for how to live under the covenant, living as a blessing to the nations. In addition God promised to give them the land of Canaan. This covenant relationship was based on God's love for them and their love for God, which was expressed by obedience to God's law.⁶

When God established covenants with His people, He said, "I will be your God, and you will be My people" (Jer. 7:23; also see Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 6:6-7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 4:20; Jer. 11:4; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 36:28). We saw earlier this week that through the law God instructed His people how to live by the covenants. Unfortunately, much of the Old Testament is a history of God's people failing to live according to God's covenant

commands. God called the prophets to warn the people of their obligation to obey God's law and of the consequences if they did not obey.

The prophets also emphasized social justice, proclaiming that God values the poor and defenseless. For God's people, righteousness must be incarnated in the ways we care for "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40). Too often the Israelites thought because they were religious, God's chosen people, they didn't have to be righteous.

Find Hosea on "Old Testament Timeline, Part 2" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Read Hosea 1 and check the prophetic themes represented.

- Covenant faithfulness or unfaithfulness
- Coming judgment
- Hope for a remnant
- Social justice

Hosea was written in the eighth century B.C., a time of great prosperity in the Northern Kingdom of Israel but also a time of great unfaithfulness to the Lord. The themes of covenant, judgment, and the hope of a remnant are all found in Hosea 1.

The prophetic themes we have studied offer keys to applying the prophecies to our lives today.

What are ways you express faithfulness to God in your covenant relationship with Him? Be prepared to share your thoughts with your group.

Read Amos 4:1-5. Which of the main themes of the prophets does this passage best illustrate?

The mixture of wealth, empty religion, and lack of concern for the poor signaled that judgment was coming. How might these dynamics parallel situations today?

On the continuum below, mark how religious you consider yourself to be.

I am not religious at all.

I am extremely religious.

On the continuum below, place a mark to indicate your concern for the poor and those who are treated unjustly.

I am not concerned about the poor or injustice.

I am very concerned about the poor and show this by my actions.

You will share your responses with your group this week.

The prophets also spoke about a righteous remnant that God would save in spite of the coming judgment. A faithful few would continue to follow the ways of the Lord. Even as the prophets pronounced God's judgment on the wicked, they prophesied the salvation of the righteous. This theme shows that in the grand story of redemptive history, God refused to give up on the vision of building a nation for Himself that would embody righteousness and be a light to the nations.

The words of the prophets were painful for the original hearers, and they can be just as painful for us today! Yet they are essential reminders of God's absolute moral standards and of the righteousness He demands of His people.

Day 5

How the Prophets Are Relevant Today, Part 2

In some ways the prophets of the Old Testament reveal much about the grand drama playing out on the world stage, especially as it relates to God's agenda for His people and our tendency as human beings to reject God's agenda. We see in the prophets God's persistent compassion in seeking us, even in the midst of our rebellion and our need for repentance. In addition, we clearly see the consequences of rejecting God's ways and His vision for a glorious future for His people. Today we will focus on the way the messages of the prophets relate to these two dynamics—God's vision for life as it confronts our often stubborn will.

When our children were small, it became apparent that our desires for our children often came into conflict with their wants and whims. Their choices at times caused them pain or caused others pain, and they needed to learn to live by the standards we had set for our family, based on God's Word. At times they could be terribly selfish (just like their parents), disrespectful to an adult, or ugly toward another child. Because they had to learn how to respect others, at times they faced the painful consequences of their actions. Yet all of the consequences they experienced—some natural consequences and others we imposed on them—functioned to train our children, to bring them to a healthy place in which they had good relationships with others.

Similarly, the prophets constantly appealed to the Israelites based on their covenant relationship with God. They pointed out ways the people were violating that relationship as they rejected God's commands given in the law. They called the Israelites to repent, turn from their sin, and return to God and His ways. They also warned of coming judgment if repentance was not forthcoming. The God of the prophets is not vindictive, but He is holy and does not equivocate on His standards for His people. He is a loving God who demands that His way of life be followed for His glory and for the good of His people.

The prophets give us a God-oriented view of life, pointing out many reasons God's ways should be followed.

Read Isaiah 45:18-25. Which verses from this passage portray God in the following ways?

The Creator of all things:

The Author of truth:

The Savior:

The Lord of the universe:

Isaiah 45:23 reads,

*By Myself I have sworn;
Truth has gone from My mouth,
a word that will not be revoked:
Every knee will bow to Me,
every tongue will swear allegiance.*

In the New Testament this passage is echoed in Philippians 2:10-11:

*Every knee should bow—
of those who are in heaven and on earth
and under the earth—
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Underline the words in these two passages that parallel each other.

What was Paul communicating about Jesus by using the words of Isaiah 45:23?

The prophets powerfully present the drama of God's redemptive work in history. When you learn to trace His hand in the prophetic writings, you can see the grand scope of God's plan for His people. And by applying the teachings of

the prophets, you recognize that God has a vision for your life that is coming to fruition as He works out His truth, salvation, and lordship through the person of Jesus Christ.

Are you basing your life on God's truth? Are you being disobedient like the Hebrews in the Old Testament? Or are you committed to your covenant relationship with God and to His lordship? Pray about these matters now.

Repent means to turn from a pattern of life in which you are not following God's ways and to turn to God and commit yourself to living in obedience to His commands.

Read Isaiah 55. Write some of the things God teaches you about repentance through this passage.

Is there any sin in your life you need to repent of?

Follow the pattern described in Isaiah 55:

- **Come to God. Seek and listen to Him.**
- **Turn away from and abandon patterns of life that are not from Him.**
- **Turn to God's Word for direction in how you should live.**
- **Receive God's joy and peace.**

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 5

Reading the Psalms

Session 5 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. As a group, name the Ten Commandments in order without looking in your Bibles. After you have named them, check your responses in Exodus 20:1-17.
2. Read Exodus 19:4-6. What is the relationship between the covenant God made with His people and the Ten Commandments (p. 74)?
3. What is the principle behind Leviticus 19:9-10? How can we live out that principle today (p. 78)?
4. When asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus responded with what we know as the Great Commandment: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:36-40). What are some practical ways we might live out loving God with all our hearts? Loving our neighbors as ourselves (see Lev. 19:18)?
5. Recall your study of Habakkuk (pp. 82–83). How do you generally respond to God in the challenging circumstances of your life?
6. Does covenant faithfulness to God look any different to Christians today than in the Old Testament (p. 86)? If so, how?
7. Discuss where you fall on the scales of how religious you are and your concern for the poor and those treated unjustly (p. 87).

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

Guidelines for Reading the Psalms

1. Understand the various _____ of the psalms.

Three ways psalms help us:

- They give _____ to my thoughts and prayers.
- They help me _____ on God and on life.
- They form my _____ about God and life.

2. Embrace the _____ of the psalms.

What truth or _____ is being described through this word picture?

3. Understand the _____.

Parallelism: a line that is _____ in some way

4. Use the psalms in prayer to express a range of _____ and life _____.

Three Ways to Use Psalms in Your Prayer Life

1. Worship
2. _____
3. _____

Close with Prayer

Video sessions available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 5

READING THE PSALMS

My wife and I got engaged on the River Walk, a beautiful, romantic walkway beside the San Antonio River in San Antonio, Texas. I had told Pat I would never tell her, “I love you” until I was ready to back up the words with the commitment of my life to her in marriage. So while on a trip to visit her family, I asked her to marry me in one of the most romantic places in the country. How did I do it? As we were walking, I told Pat I wanted to share a song with her. We found a piano in a quiet area of a hotel lobby, and I sang a song to her that I had written. The first words out of my mouth were “Lovely lady, I love you.” Right then she knew this was a proposal, and she said yes, one of the greatest expressions of God's grace in my life.

Songs are important for our lives. We sing songs to celebrate events, like birthdays and Christmas. We sing songs to remember the past. We sing songs to express joy and hardship in life. Songs might express our love for someone or our frustration with a person who has hurt us. In the same way, the songs of the Old Testament, called psalms, are varied. David wrote roughly half of them, and the rest were written by various other individuals. God gave us the psalms to help us reflect on and express our feelings about various aspects of life and our relationship with Him. This week we will discover the variety of subjects addressed in the psalms, learn how to interpret the poetic language of the psalms, and use the psalms to express our deepest thoughts and feelings to God.

DAY I

Understanding the Functions of the Psalms, Part I

If you examine “Old Testament Timeline, Part 2,” located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife, you will notice that the life of David coincides with the writing of the Book of Psalms. David wrote 73 of the psalms. The others were written over one thousand years of Jewish history between the time of Moses and the period after the exile in Babylon (587–538 B.C.). The Book of Psalms, the Bible’s hymnbook, is still used today by Jews and Christians. Some psalms are corporate, expressing worship or remembering God’s intervention in history, while others are personal, expressing a variety of emotions and crying out to God for help in difficulty. All of the psalms focus on God, His greatness and power, and His love for and faithfulness to His people.

One of the main things the psalms do for us is to give expression to our thoughts and prayers. David Howard, a prominent evangelical scholar on the psalms, explains why many Christians love the psalms so much:

The psalms express human emotions in a way that is readily understood by people. Human nature hasn’t really changed over the past three millennia. You can read some of the Bible stories, or more obscure parts of the Bible, and the words seem foreign to us in the twenty-first century. But the psalms don’t seem foreign at all. For instance, when David speaks about people hating him without a cause, about feeling sick, or about despair in the face of other life challenges, we can identify with those experiences. ...

[In our relationship with God, the psalms] really express the whole range of our emotions from the highest highs of joy and thanksgiving to the lowest lows of depression and anger and everything in between. Sometimes in class I draw a line across the blackboard with a plus sign on one end and a minus sign on the other. I suggest we could plot the mood of every psalm somewhere along that line, from negative to positive. I think that’s part of what gives the psalms their universal appeal.

Another thing that is unique about the psalms is that they are the main place in Scripture where we find primarily human words to God or human words *about* God, instead of God’s words to us. These are human words praising God, or lamenting some event or situation, or even questioning God in a reverent way. So the psalms draw us in because we recognize in them our own experiences and feelings, and they, in a sense, express for us those feelings about God or to God.¹

What is your favorite psalm? Why?

Check any emotions you are experiencing now.

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Love | <input type="checkbox"/> Joy | <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear | <input type="checkbox"/> Trust |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disgust | <input type="checkbox"/> Anticipation | <input type="checkbox"/> Surprise |

What life circumstances are prompting these emotions in you?

It would not be unusual if you were experiencing several of these emotions. The psalms can help you process your emotions and talk to God about them in prayer, as well as the situations that are causing these emotions.

All emotions are not necessarily good, but God knows we are experiencing them. He created us with the capacity to feel all of these emotions. For instance, we can experience an unrighteous, self-centered anger, and we need to repent of that. Yet the psalms at times reveal righteous anger—toward injustice, for instance. The psalms can help us express such anger appropriately.

Read each passage and match it with the emotion expressed by the psalmist.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Love | a. "The fool says in his heart, 'God does not exist.' They are corrupt; they do vile deeds" (Ps. 14:1). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Joy | b. "Trust in the LORD and do what is good; dwell in the land and live securely" (Ps. 37:3). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Sadness | c. "My heart shudders within me; terrors of death sweep over me" (Ps. 55:4). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Anger | d. "Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous ones; praise from the upright is beautiful" (Ps. 33:1). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Fear | e. "I love the LORD because He has heard my appeal for mercy" (Ps. 116:1). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Trust | f. "I lift my eyes toward the mountains. Where will my help come from?" (Ps. 121:1). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Disgust | g. "God, knock the teeth out of their mouths" (Ps. 58:6). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Anticipation | h. "My tears have been my food day and night" (Ps. 42:3). |

Select one of the previous passages that best expresses one of the emotions you are experiencing now. Read the entire psalm in which that verse is found and turn it into a prayer about your feelings and the circumstances that are producing those feelings. Write your prayer here.

Day 2

Understanding the Functions of the Psalms, Part 2

Yesterday we observed that the psalms give expression to the wide variety of emotions we experience in life. Today we will look at two other ways the psalms can play important roles in our relationship with God.

The psalms help us reflect on God and life. They teach us about God's character, His mighty acts in history, and the things He values. They also help us reflect on various aspects of life, constructing tracks on which our thoughts can run to God. That's why the psalms are such powerful aids in prayer. When we see our own experiences and emotions reflected in the psalms, we identify with their authors, and we can use their words to talk to God about these matters.

Read Psalm 103:1-14. Circle the parts of the psalm that describe God's character qualities, what He is like. You will share your discoveries with your group this week.

*My soul, praise Yahweh,
and all that is within me, praise His holy name.
My soul, praise the LORD,
and do not forget all His benefits.
He forgives all your sin;
He heals all your diseases.
He redeems your life from the Pit;
He crowns you with faithful love and compassion.
He satisfies you with goodness;
your youth is renewed like the eagle.
The LORD executes acts of righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.
He revealed His ways to Moses,
His deeds to the people of Israel.
The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and rich in faithful love.
He will not always accuse us
or be angry forever.
He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve*

*or repaid us according to our offenses.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is His faithful love
toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has He removed
our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He knows what we are made of,
remembering that we are dust.*

What is the theme of this psalm?

The theme of Psalm 103 is forgiveness, but it also teaches us a great deal about God's character.

Examine the types of psalms as categorized on the chart on page 100. What type of psalm is Psalm 103?

When we read a psalm, we need to ask ourselves what the purpose of the psalm is. Although today we often use psalms in private devotions, it is important to recognize that most psalms were written for a corporate context, to be quoted or sung in large-group settings as expressions of praise and thanks to God. Those psalms might begin with a note that says, "For the choirmaster, with stringed instruments." This provided instructions for the public use of these psalms. The congregation came to the temple in Jerusalem and sang them. Maybe the priest or choirmaster led in an antiphonal way—the voices of two groups or of an individual and a group echoing back and forth.

Look at Psalm 136 in your Bible. What line is repeated throughout the psalm?

TYPES OF PSALMS²

INSTRUCTION

Psalms 1; 5; 7; 15; 17; 50; 73; 94; 101

HISTORY

Psalms 78; 105–106; 136

PRAISE

Psalms 93; 103; 106; 111–113; 115–117; 135; 146–150

CONFESSION

Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143

PETITION

Psalms 86; 123

THANKSGIVING

Psalms 16; 18

MESSIANIC

Psalms 2; 20–24; 41; 68; 118

NATURE

Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 65; 104

PILGRIMAGE TO THE TEMPLE

Psalms 120–134

DELIVERANCE FROM ENEMIES

Psalms 32; 52; 58–59; 69; 83; 109; 137; 140

LAMENT

Psalms 5; 13; 22; 26; 28; 31; 38–39; 42; 51–52;
54–56; 59–60; 64; 69–70; 86; 109; 140–141; 143

In Psalm 136 the choirleader would lead, and the people would respond by repeating the line “His love is eternal.”

Even psalms that were written to express personal thoughts or emotions to God were also used in corporate worship, much as we use hymns or choruses today. The writers expressed personal worship to God, but the song was used to minister to a larger group of God’s people. So even today the psalms function to guide our praise and worship in personal devotions as well as in corporate contexts.

When we understand the purpose of a psalm and what it teaches us about God, we are ready to ask ourselves how we should respond. If the psalm describes who God is, we can praise God with the psalmist. If it declares what God has done, we can thank God for similar things He has done in our lives. If it recounts a story about what God has done among His people, we can celebrate that story as a backdrop to our lives today.

Read Psalm 105 in your Bible. Check what you understand to be the purposes of this psalm (check all that apply).

- Describes who God is
- Declares what God has done
- Recounts a story

What would be an appropriate response you could make to this psalm?

Psalm 105 reviews Israel’s history and tells what God did for His people. A believer today would respond by identifying ways God has worked in his or her life to bring salvation and by praising God for what He has done.

We have noted that the psalms eloquently express praise and thanksgiving for who God is and the wonderful things He has done. Another type of psalm addresses the other side of life, honestly crying out to God about how difficult life is. Psalms of lament depict the psalmist’s struggle with trouble, sickness, or persecution. These psalms provide avenues for us to approach God in times of stress and sadness.

Read Psalm 13. Underline words the psalmist used to reveal his distress.

*LORD, how long will You forget me? Forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
How long will I store up anxious concerns within me,
agony in my mind every day?
How long will my enemy dominate me?
Consider me and answer, LORD my God.
Restore brightness to my eyes;
otherwise, I will sleep in death.
My enemy will say, "I have triumphed over him,"
and my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I have trusted in Your faithful love;
my heart will rejoice in Your deliverance.
I will sing to the LORD because He has treated me generously.*

What is the cause of the psalmist's trouble?

Circle the lines expressing his trust and hope in God.

The psalmist was depressed because of oppression by his enemies. Yet it is clear that he had had a vibrant relationship with God in the past. Recalling God's "faithful love" (v. 5), he was filled with fresh hope. That's one of the wonderful features of lament psalms. They honestly express the psalmist's feelings but then move to confessions of faith about God, God's character, and the hope the psalmist had in Him. These psalms encourage us to be honest about how hard life can be but also to hope in God.

Are you going through a hard time? Yes No
Have you poured out your heart to God? Using Psalm 13 as a model, tell God what is on your heart and profess your hope in His love and faithfulness.

No matter what you are going through in life, the psalms give you a variety of tools for reflecting on who He is, for recognizing what He has done, and for responding to Him from the depths of your heart.

Day 3

Embracing the Figurative Language of the Psalms

Most cultures have idioms and figurative language (word pictures) used in poetry or even everyday speech to describe something by using a familiar image. Someone might say, “He’s as nervous as a cat in a rocking-chair factory” rather than just saying, “He’s jittery.” Efficiency might be described by saying, “You can kill two birds with one stone” or overextending oneself by saying, “You bit off more than you can chew.” A boring person might be called “a stick in the mud” or “a stuffed shirt.” Or if it is raining very hard, we could say, “It’s raining cats and dogs.”

The poets of the Old Testament were masters at using word pictures, and to grasp their message, we need to understand their use of figurative language. The psalms often express strong emotions, and the psalmists’ use of graphic word pictures enabled them to convey those emotions effectively. For example, in Psalm 69 David wrote:

*Save me, God,
for the water has risen to my neck.
I have sunk in deep mud, and there is no footing;
I have come into deep waters,
and a flood sweeps over me (vv. 1-2).*

David wasn’t describing a near-drowning experience in the Jordan River. The waters are a metaphor, a word picture, for the way David felt in the middle of distressing circumstances. As you study today’s lesson, take time to absorb the beautiful language of the psalms. Meditate deeply on what the author was trying to communicate and how those emotions or experiences might parallel your life.

Let’s analyze the use of figurative language in a psalm. Psalm 23 is one of the most loved parts of the Bible, but have you ever taken time to think about exactly what David described through the word pictures?

Read Psalm 23 slowly and carefully. Underline as many word pictures as you can.

*The LORD is my shepherd;
there is nothing I lack.
He lets me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He renews my life;
He leads me along the right paths
for His name's sake.
Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
as long as I live.*

Match the word pictures below with the experiences being described. There may be more than one word picture that describes an experience.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ___ 1. Shepherd | a. God gives me rest. |
| ___ 2. Lie down in green pastures | b. Danger |
| ___ 3. Leads me beside quiet waters | c. God protects me. |
| ___ 4. Leads me along the right paths | d. God provides for me. |
| ___ 5. Darkest valley | e. God takes responsibility for me. |
| ___ 6. Your rod and your staff | f. God guides me in life. |

How do you think the word pictures in this psalm contribute to the psalmist's message?

The figurative language in this psalm expresses a depth of intimacy and trust between the writer and God. That explains why this poem is so often used as a prayer. Donald S. Whitney points out how Psalm 23 can be used to enhance our prayer lives.

Think for a minute about Psalm 23, and let's allow it to prompt us to pray in certain ways. We read the first line: "The LORD is my shepherd." We can pause and think about the idea of shepherding. I might pray, "Lord, You really are a good Shepherd for Your people, providing for us and protecting us. Lord, I thank You that You are my shepherd. You've guided me throughout my life, but Lord, would You shepherd me, lead me, in this decision I have to make today? Do I take that job change or not?"

Then I might go on to the next part of the verse, "There is nothing I lack." "And, Good Shepherd, we have needs in our family right now. I don't know how I am going to pay all of our bills this month, but I know You have more resources than I can imagine. Please help me. And, Lord, shepherd my children today; meet all their needs. Please provide for my daughter. Meet her emotional needs. She has been wanting a heart-friend, who loves You. Help my son in school; he struggles with discipline. Train him to be a disciplined man. And Lord, I think about Nancy, our pastor's wife, who has cancer. Lord, she needs healing. Please provide healing for her. Give the doctors the wisdom and skill they need to treat her well."

As we pray our way through the passage, all kinds of needs come to mind, needs in our own lives and in the lives of others. Using a passage in this way both helps us to meditate on the Word ore deeply and prompts us to pray in specific, biblically grounded ways.³

Identify several needs in your life.

Using the words of Psalm 23, talk to God about these needs. In this week's group session you will be asked to discuss ways you applied Psalm 23 to needs in your life.

Day 4 The Poetic Language of the Psalms

Yesterday we started looking at the figurative language used in the psalms. Today we will consider other ways the psalmists used poetic language. We will start by examining the picturesque language used in a beautiful psalm of lament.

Read Psalm 42:1-8.

*As a deer longs for streams of water,
so I long for You, God.
I thirst for God, the living God.
When can I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while all day long people say to me,
“Where is your God?”
I remember this as I pour out my heart:
how I walked with many,
leading the festive procession to the house of God,
with joyful and thankful shouts.
Why am I so depressed?
Why this turmoil within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will still praise Him,
my Savior and my God.
I am deeply depressed;
therefore I remember You from the land of Jordan
and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep in the roar of Your waterfalls;
all Your breakers and Your billows have swept over me.
The LORD will send His faithful love by day;
His song will be with me in the night—
a prayer to the God of my life.*

Underline the parts of the psalm that seem to be more literal, where the author used straightforward language to describe an experience.

Now circle the psalmist's uses of figurative language in this psalm. Write what the word picture describes in the space to the right of the psalm. For instance, to the right of the first line, which speaks about the deer, you could write *desperate longing*.

Psalm 42 begins with a picture of a desperately thirsty deer trying to find water. There are streams in the Holy Land, but they dry up when there is not enough water. So the deer in this word picture seems to have encountered a time of drought, and this picture sets the tone for the psalm, which describes longing for God in a difficult time.

What word pictures from this psalm do you most closely identify with at this point in your life? Be ready to share with your group this week.

Take a moment to pray the parts of this psalm that are most relevant to you.

Another literary device used in the poetic literature of the Old Testament is called parallelism. In parallelism two lines of Hebrew poetry are closely related, the second either repeating something approximate to the first line, contrasting with it, or adding new information. Here are three types of parallelism:

1. Synonymous parallelism repeats the same or a similar idea in the second line for emphasis.
2. Contrasting parallelism states a contrast to the first line to make opposite points stand out clearly.
3. Progressive parallelism adds a new idea to the first line to give more information.

Read the following verses from Psalm 32. Below each verse write which type of parallelism you think is being used.

“How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!” (v. 1).

“I acknowledged my sin to You and did not conceal my iniquity” (v. 5).

“I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You took away the guilt of my sin” (v. 5).

“You protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance” (v. 7).

“Many pains come to the wicked, but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him” (v. 10).

“Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (v. 11).

How do you think parallelism enhances the meanings of these verses?

Whether repeating an idea for emphasis, expressing a contrast, or providing new information, parallelism adds meaning to a poetic passage.

Choose and meditate on one or more of the verses from Psalm 1. Pray, based on the verses you have chosen.

Day 5 Using the Psalms in Prayer

We have seen that there are many different kinds of psalms—historical, thanksgiving, praise, confession, and lament, to name a few. Today we want to consider ways we can use psalms of petition and psalms of worship in prayer.

A psalm of petition calls out to God, asking Him for something. Read Psalm 123.

*I lift my eyes to You,
the One enthroned in heaven.
Like a servant's eyes on His master's hand,
like a servant girl's eyes on her mistress's hand,
so our eyes are on the LORD our God
until He shows us favor.
Show us favor, LORD, show us favor,
for we've had more than enough contempt.
We've had more than enough
scorn from the arrogant
and contempt from the proud.*

Circle the uses of figurative language in the psalm.
To the right of the psalm, write what these word pictures represent.

Place brackets around instances of parallelism.
What kind of parallelism is it?

What is the main thing the psalmist was asking God for?

The Hebrew word translated as *favor* can mean *to show compassion* or *be gracious toward*. What is an area of your life in which you need God's favor?

Using the words and images of Psalm 123, pray and ask God to show you favor.

Many psalms focus our attention on the greatness of God and invite us to worship Him.

Read Psalm 93 in your Bible. Identify the main reasons the psalmist praised God.

Now turn this psalm into your own prayer of praise to God. Read the psalm to Him and try putting parts of the psalm into your own words.

I hope this week has shown you some ways you can use the psalms to better understand who God is and, like the Hebrew poets of old, to express to God your greatest need, pain, and joy. Like no other Bible book, Psalms gives voice to every cry of the human heart.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 6

Reading the Stories of the New Testament

Session 6 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. What is your favorite song? What roles do songs play in our lives?
2. Look at the list of emotions expressed by the psalms on page 97. Have you recently experienced similar emotions? How do you feel about freely expressing your emotions to God as the psalmists did?
3. Review the characteristics of God you identified on pages 98–99. Which qualities most surprised you?
4. In Psalm 23 David described ways God is the Good Shepherd. How have you experienced God as the Good Shepherd in your own life (p. 105)?
5. Psalm 42 uses figurative language to express word pictures. With what word pictures from this psalm do you most identify at this time in your life (p. 107)? What words in the psalm best express your current spiritual state?

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

Sixty percent of the New Testament is in _____ form.

Keys to Reading the New Testament Stories

1. Understand the _____ of the story.

Bible-study tools:

- Study Bible
- Bible dictionary
- Backgrounds commentary
- Bible _____

2. Understand how the story books of the New Testament _____.

3. The Gospel writers arranged their stories to emphasize certain _____.

4. What does this story tell me about _____?

5. Read the crucifixion and resurrection as the _____ of the story.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 6

READING THE STORIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Approximately 60 percent of the New Testament is presented in story form, and the bulk of the stories are found in the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. There may be a number of reasons God chose to communicate so much of His Word in stories. Stories are interesting, they can deal with life's complexities in an engaging manner, we can identify with the characters in a story, and stories can evoke strong emotions. In addition, stories are much easier to remember than many forms of teaching.

But when we approach the stories of the New Testament, those of us who have been in church for a while might have at least two major barriers to overcome:

1. Our unfamiliarity with the cultural context in which the New Testament stories were communicated
2. Our overfamiliarity with many New Testament stories

This week we will learn how to read the New Testament stories more meaningfully, in a way that is life-changing. Most of us already know how stories work. We need to employ that knowledge and experience to engage the stories of the Gospels and Acts in a fresh way.

DAY 1

We Need the Cultural Context

When I was in university in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I had a wonderful sociology professor named Eldon Byrd. Mr. Byrd was an outstanding teacher who often shared personal stories to illustrate certain points. One day he told us a story from his days as a chaplain in the armed forces. As a fellow chaplain came to his table to sit down, Mr. Byrd got up to leave. As he was standing, his eyes locked onto the cross hanging on a chain around the man's neck. Suddenly, Mr. Byrd sat back down. The point Mr. Byrd was making had to do with race, and the cultural backdrop of the moment is what makes this story powerful. You see, Eldon Byrd was raised in the Deep South in the 1930s and 1940s. He was taught that white people do not eat with black people. He grew up in a home where African Americans came to the back door, never to the front. At the moment the story took place, a young Eldon Byrd had never eaten at a table with a black man, and the chaplain who was joining him at the table was black. Yet when he saw the cross hanging from the man's neck, God confronted Mr. Byrd in that moment, saying in essence, "Eldon, this aspect of your culture is badly out of line with the cross. The ground is level around the cross. Sit down." And he did.

Table fellowship was an important aspect of Jesus' culture as well.

**Carefully read Matthew 9:9-13 three or four times.
Use several different translations if you wish.**

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" So he got up and followed Him. While He was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came as guests to eat with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when He heard this, He said, "Those who are well don't need a doctor, but the sick do. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Locate the time of Jesus' ministry on "New Testament Timeline" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). What are the dates?

Why do you think the Pharisees were so offended by Jesus' actions?

What did Jesus mean by His words "I desire mercy and not sacrifice"?

To understand this story, we have to understand aspects of the culture of the time. We can learn about biblical culture by consulting a study Bible or a backgrounds commentary. For instance, the New Living Translation Study Bible has an article at this point in Matthew's Gospel titled "Eating Together." Part of the article reads:

Eating meals together was a religious matter among the Pharisees and other observant Jews. Righteous Jews enacted many regulations to prevent themselves from being ceremonially defiled at meals. It was not done so much to exclude others as to show commitment to the law.

Most Jews lived by the food laws most of the time. Jesus did so, too. But he regularly, purposefully, and offensively ate with those who were ritually unclean or whose commitment to the law was inferior. Sharing a meal with another indicated both covenantal and social equality (cp. [Matt.] 26:26-29; 2 [Kings] 25:27-30). The Pharisees, believing that separation from such sinners was a necessity for righteousness, were offended by Jesus' sharing meals with such people ([Matt.] 9:10; 11:19; 21:28-32; Luke 7:41-50; 15:1-2; 19:1-10).

Jesus' sharing meals with sinful people enacted God's grace—he extended God's love and forgiveness, welcoming open participation in a new society.¹

Write two aspects of Matthew 9:9-13 that became clearer to you as a result of better understanding the cultural background.

1.

2.

When you have gained a better understanding of a story by discovering pertinent facts about the cultural context, you can apply that story to your own culture.

In what ways can modern religious people put up barriers between themselves and those who do not follow Christ? Be prepared to share your ideas with your group.

What are creative ways you can express God's grace, extending love and forgiveness to people around you who are not religious?

How might you apply Matthew 9:9-13 specifically to your life and church situation this week?

Day 2 How the Stories Work

Most stories follow a certain pattern and utilize certain elements to convey a message. Today we want to consider how the Gospel stories work to tell the story of Jesus and what He accomplished for us. Although they all tell the story of Jesus, each has different emphases, themes, and storytelling techniques.

Examine the chart “A Comparison of the Four Gospels” on page 119 and notice the different emphases and audiences. What did you discover on the chart that is new information for you?

Darrell Bock explains that when we approach the four Gospels in the New Testament, we need to be sensitive to how each one works.

Three of the gospels work the same way, and one of them works a different way. The three that work the same way are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, often called the Synoptic Gospels (*synoptic* means “to see together”). The one that does its own thing is John. Now, in the history of the church, the problem has been that we naturally gravitate to the Gospel of John because John does all the heavy theological lifting for us. From the beginning of his Gospel, Jesus’ identity is presented with twenty-twenty vision. John tells the story from the perspective of heaven down. ... So John starts the prologue with, ... “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” ...

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus from what I call the “earth up,” allowing the reader to discover who Jesus is as the story unfolds. ... Gradually we grasp the fact that Jesus is different from any other person who has ever lived, and this is how Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus. They gradually unfold His identity. Like John, they know who Jesus is, but many of their first readers don’t, and they are leading them to a deeper understanding of Jesus.²

A Comparison of the Four Gospels³

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
DATES	Early 60s	Late 50s	Mid-60s	c. 85
PORTRAITS OF JESUS	Promised Messiah	Obedient Servant	Perfect Man	Divine Son of God
CULTURES OF ORIGINAL READERS	Jewish Christians	Gentiles	Gentiles	Jews and Gentiles
WRITING STYLE	Teaching	Fast-moving action	Well researched, detailed	Theological
OUTSTANDING SECTIONS	Sermons	Miracles	Parables	Doctrines
PROMINENT IDEAS	Law Jesus the great Teacher Kingdom Discipleship Jesus' return	Power Kingdom Jesus' power Discipleship	Grace Care for disadvantaged Work of Spirit Healing Prayer Gospel for all	Glory Seven signs and discourses Seven "I am" statements Relationship between Son and Father

This is the reason Christians often become frustrated when reading the Synoptic Gospels. Because we already know who Jesus is, we can't understand why the disciples and other characters seemed clueless about Jesus' identity. When we realize that Matthew, Mark, and Luke's purpose was to progressively unfold the truth to their readers, we can approach our reading with a fresh sense of discovery about who Jesus is. And because these Gospels gradually lead readers to discover who Jesus is, they can be ideal tools for introducing unbelievers to Him in a natural way.

Let's look at an example of the way one Gospel writer gradually revealed Jesus' identity.

Read Mark 8:31-33.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and rise after three days. He was openly talking about this. So Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and looking at His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan, because you're not thinking about God's concerns, but man's!"

This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus predicted His own death. The word *teach* (v. 31) indicates that Jesus was instructing the disciples about what must happen to Him as the Messiah.

List the four things Jesus said would happen to Him.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Why do you think Peter reacted the way he did?

Peter had never considered that Jesus would die soon. In fact, he thought the Messiah would be triumphant in His mission, setting up an earthly kingdom, overthrowing the Romans, and accomplishing great things for God. He probably envisioned serving under Jesus' leadership for years to come. Also, Peter never would have thought an individual could be resurrected before the end of the world, since Jews of the day believed everyone would be resurrected together at the end of time.

How would you have felt if you had been in Peter's shoes when Jesus said the words in verses 31-32?

Why did Jesus call Peter "Satan" and say, "You're not thinking about God's concerns, but man's!"?

What do you think Peter discovered about Jesus through this experience?

Pretend for a moment that you don't know how the story ends. What can you discover about Jesus from this passage?

The disciples were in a process of discovery, and Mark presented his stories in a way that took his readers through the same process. When we understand how the stories work, modern-day readers can enter that process as well.

Day 3

How the Stories Are Arranged for Emphasis

If you have ever watched the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, you know the story begins near the end, with people from the town praying for George Bailey on the day of his big crisis. Chronologically, the story then goes back to the beginning as a senior angel tells the wingless angel Clarence the story of George's life.

Why do you think Frank Capra, the producer of the movie, started the story this way?

Capra probably arranged the story this way to build tension from the beginning. He first underlined the crisis that would come at the end of the movie so that viewers would remain engaged as they watched George Bailey's life unfold in stages, systematically moving toward the big moment they already know is coming. That is effective storytelling, and it is one reason this yuletide everyman story is so popular.

The stories of the New Testament are also arranged in particular ways for emphasis. The authors of the Gospels had limited space to tell the very big, vitally important story of Jesus. Although they generally followed the story step-by-step from Jesus' preexistence (in John), to His birth and early years (in Matthew and Luke), through the 3½ years of His ministry (in all four Gospels), their main goal was not to present things in exact chronological order but to organize their material in a way that would have the greatest impact. The writers structured their books to highlight the significance of Jesus' teaching, miracles, and Kingdom purpose.

For example, notice in the chart on page 119 that Mark's purpose was to depict Jesus as Servant. Therefore, Mark recorded Jesus' ministry actions to reveal His identity, including accounts of His healings, miracles, instruction of His disciples, and responses to the Pharisees. Then, after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ in Mark 8:27-30, Mark began to show Jesus as the Servant Messiah who would sacrifice His life: "The Son of Man did not come to be

served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). From Jesus’ announcement of His upcoming death to His trial and crucifixion, the stories Mark recorded in the second half of the book point to Jesus’ identity as the Suffering Servant.

The Gospel writers presented their messages not only through the way they organized their material but also through their choices of what material to include. The goal of the Gospels was to proclaim the main parts of Jesus’ life and ministry, clearly leading to the crisis of the cross and the climax of the resurrection. All of these events are squarely grounded in history, but the various Gospel writers present them in various formats for emphasis. For instance, sometimes one Gospel writer included material that another Gospel writer chose to leave out. These examples show us what the writer, under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, wished to emphasize.

Read John 11:1-44, a story included only in John’s Gospel. Look at the chart on page 119. What was Jesus’ identity as presented in the Book of John?

How does this story demonstrate John’s purpose?

John’s purpose was to show Jesus as the divine Son of God. This story clearly expresses John’s emphasis because it reveals Jesus’ authority over life and death. Let’s look at another example of ways two Gospel writers presented their accounts to emphasize different messages.

Carefully read Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. Locate Jesus’ temptation on “New Testament Timeline”(located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). What differences do you notice between these two accounts of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness?

What is different about the order of the three temptations of Jesus in these two accounts?

Luke reversed the last two temptations of Jesus as compared to Matthew's account of the same event. Most scholars think Luke did this to emphasize key themes in the temptation he listed last.

Look again at the chart on page 119. How does the Book of Luke portray Jesus' identity?

Now read again Luke's account of the third temptation. What themes might Luke have wanted to emphasize by placing this temptation last?

In Luke's account of the third temptation, the city of Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem are prominent themes. Luke's Gospel places a strong emphasis on the significance of the city of Jerusalem, and Jesus' cleansing of the temple is a key event that culminates in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion (see Luke 19:45-48). Also, Luke presents Jesus as the perfect Son of Man who always submitted to the Father's will, so the Devil's temptation to test God the Father is revealing. Jesus refused to force the Father's hand. It may be that Luke placed this temptation last to emphasize these key themes.

Even though Jesus' temptation was unique to His identity as the Messiah and His role in God's redemptive plan, we can learn from the way He dealt with temptation. How do Luke's unique emphases in his account of the third temptation help you respond to temptation as Jesus did? Be prepared to share your ideas with your group.

The Book of Acts is another New Testament book that relies on stories. This book tells the story of the early church as it was empowered by the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem and expanded across the Mediterranean world. The author, Luke, told the rest of the story he began in his Gospel. In doing so, he used the same process of selecting and arranging his material to emphasize certain events and points. For instance, especially from chapter 13 to the end of the book, Luke primarily focused on Paul's ministry to show the rapid spread of the gospel and the universality of God's redemptive plan.

Find Paul on "New Testament Timeline" (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). When did his missionary journeys take place?

Read these stories about the rapid expansion of the gospel: Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 15:1-35; 16:6-34; 17:15-34. Examine the map of Paul's missionary journeys on page 126. Locate the places on the map where these stories took place. In the boxes on the map, state the significance of each story you read.

Luke and Acts both utilize stories, but there is a significant difference between these books. Whereas the Book of Luke gradually unfolded Jesus' identity, in Acts the curtain was pulled back all the way. Jesus had died for the sins of the world and had been resurrected and shown to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Now exalted in heaven, Jesus had given the promised Holy Spirit, transforming the fearful disciples into a powerful force that would change the world. Paul's missionary journeys reflected the unfolding growth of God's mission throughout the known world, and the focal point of that mission was Jesus Christ.

What about your story? Is Jesus at the center of your life's testimony and mission? In what ways?

Are you spreading the message of Jesus beyond your own personal experience to intersect with the journeys of others around you? Pray that God will empower you to tell the story of what Jesus has done for you.



THE MISSIONARY JOURNEYS OF PAUL ⁴

- ↑ 1st Journey Acts 13:4–14:28
- ↑ 2nd Journey Acts 15:36–18:22
- ↑ 3rd Journey Acts 18:23–21:26

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

ACTS 15:1-35

ACTS 11:19-26;
13:1-3

ACTS 17:15-34

ACTS 16:6-34

Alexandria

EGYPT

Jerusalem

JUDEA

DEAD SEA

Caesarea

Antipatris

Jordan R.

Prothensis

Tyre

Sidon

PHOENICIA

Damascus

Salamis

Cyprus

Paphos

Antioch

Seleucia Pyra

Tarsus

Derbe

Iconium

Lystra

PAMPHYLIA

Perga

Attalia

LYCIA

Patara

Colossae

Laodicea

PHRYGIA

Phileadelphia

ASIA

Sardis

Ephesus

Miletus

PERGAMUM

Thyatira

ASIA

Assos

MYSIA

Troas

Thrace

Mitylene

ASIA

Smyrna

CHIOS

Samos

AEGEAN SEA

Parmos

ASIA

Cos

Rhodes

Cnidus

ASIA

Delphi

GREECE

Corinth

ACHAIA

Athens

ACHAIA

Cenchreae

ACHAIA

Sparta

ACHAIA

Berea

MACEDONIA

Mt. Olympus

MACEDONIA

Thessalonica

MACEDONIA

Amphipolis

MACEDONIA

Neapolis

MACEDONIA

Philippi

MACEDONIA

Byzantium (Istanbul)

THRACE

Chalcedon

THRACE

Angora (Ankara)

BITHYNIA AND PONTUS

Antioch in Pisidia

PISIDIA

Iconium

LYCAONIA

Antioch in Syria

SYRIA

Hierapolis

CILICIA

Ephrates R.

SYRIA

Black Sea

BLACK SEA

Galatia

GALATIA

Cappadocia

CAPPADOCIA

Phrygia

PHRYGIA

Lycaonia

LYCAONIA

Asia

ASIA

Thrace

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Day 4 What the Stories Tell Us About Jesus

In week 3 as we focused on how to read the Old Testament stories, we discussed seeing God as the main hero of the stories. When we read the stories in the Gospels and Acts, we need a similar orientation. God is still the main hero of the story, and in the New Testament stories God the Son, Jesus, is clearly the focus. Darrell Bock has said:

The first thing we have got to do is ask, “What does this story tell me about Jesus, the unique Promised One?” which from the Gospels’ perspective is the same as asking, “What does this story tell me about God?” ... The most foundational question for reading the Bible well is to ask, “What does this tell me about God?” Period. I don’t care where you are, whether you are in the Gospels or somewhere else. He is the orienting point of the story. As I get properly oriented to Him, I not only get the story right; I get my life right. Sometimes people come to the Bible and ask, “What does this passage say about me?” and they bypass the God part.⁵

When we ask, “What does this story tell me about Jesus?” the question provides us with an important interpretive lens for reading New Testament stories with greater understanding and meaning.

Let’s look at an example. Recall the story of the men in Mark 2:1-12 who cut a hole in a roof and lowered their paralytic friend into a house where Jesus was preaching. Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). What does this say about Jesus? That’s exactly what the Jewish teachers were wondering, “Why does He speak like this? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v. 7). Jesus responded by asking, “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, pick up your mat, and walk?’” (v. 9).

At this point in the story we should be thinking, *Healing and forgiving sins—only God can do those things!* And that’s the point of the story. Jesus said, “ ‘So you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’ He told the paralytic, ‘I tell you: get up, pick up your mat, and go home’ ” (vv. 10-11).

When we ask what this story says about Jesus, we realize it's saying He is none other than God in the flesh!

Let's look at some other examples of what the New Testament stories reveal about Jesus.

In your Bible read Mark 5:1-20. Who are the main characters in this story?

What does this story tell you about Jesus? Read the passage several times and list as many insights as you can find. Dig deep!

Notice Jesus' responses to the other characters in the story when they ask him for something. To whom did Jesus say yes, and to whom did He say no?

Yes:

No:

What do Jesus' answers say to us about following Him?

How did reading with a focus on Jesus change your perspective on this passage?

You will discuss your answers about this passage with your group this week.

As we learned yesterday, Mark's purpose in reporting Jesus' healings and miracles was to depict Jesus as Servant, and Jesus' servant ministry revealed His identity as the Messiah. This miracle demonstrates the Messiah's supreme power over demonic forces. It also demonstrates God's grace in releasing the demon-possessed man from torment. Notice that Jesus said no to the man's request to follow Him. Jesus had a higher purpose for him: to go and tell others about God's gift of mercy (see v. 19).

Read Acts 9:1-20. Who are the main characters in this story?

What does this story tell you about Jesus? Read the passage several times and list as many insights as you can find. Be ready to share with your group.

How did Jesus respond to each character in the story?

What do Jesus' answers say to us about following Jesus?

How did reading with a focus on Jesus change your perspective on this passage?

We learned yesterday that in the Book of Acts, the veil has been pulled back, fully revealing who Jesus is. In this passage Jesus is shown as the resurrected, ascended Lord who still acts powerfully in miraculous ways. Also consider the magnitude of Jesus' love and grace in confronting Saul, saving him, and calling him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Saul's response was to begin preaching that Jesus "is the Son of God" (v. 20). Jesus also said no to Ananias when he expressed fear about visiting Saul. Jesus had chosen Saul to carry the gospel message to the Gentiles, and this plan was incontrovertible.

Spend time praising Jesus for who He is in the Gospels and Acts—prophesied King, obedient Servant, perfect Son of Man, divine Son of God, risen and all-powerful Lord. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you as you read the New Testament stories.

Day 5 The Climax of the Story

If someone asked you, “What is the most important event in your life?” what would you say?

You probably identified an event that has significance for your values and goals—something that contributed to who you are and your purpose in life. For Jesus, those events were His crucifixion and resurrection. They were the culmination of His life purpose because He came to earth to sacrifice Himself for our sin and to be raised in victory over the power of death. When we read the stories of the Gospels and Acts, we need to understand that the crucifixion and resurrection sum up all that has gone before in the Gospels and anticipate all that is to come in the Book of Acts. They are the pivotal, defining events in the stories of the New Testament.

Locate Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection on “New Testament Timeline” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife).
Read Luke 24:13-35. What elements in this story point to the crucifixion and resurrection as the culmination of all that had happened in Luke to this point?

Read Luke 24:36-49. What elements in this story parallel Jesus’ actions in His encounter with the two men on the road to Emmaus?

Remember that the story was still unfolding for these followers of Jesus. Although they were aware of what Jesus had done during His life, they couldn’t quite make sense of everything that had happened. Yet their hearts burned

within them (see v. 32) when Jesus explained His life in terms of Scripture. His breaking of bread with them powerfully showed that He had sacrificed Himself for them. His appearance to them indicated that as their resurrected Lord, He would continue to be present with them. Ultimately, the resurrection put everything into perspective for Jesus' followers.

Jesus' death on the cross made it possible for believers to enter a new covenant, a new relationship with God, through the blood of Jesus. Jesus' death served as the sacrifice for our sins: "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm" (1 Pet. 3:18). We must never stop being grateful for our undeserved salvation, but the story isn't about our comfort. Jesus' obedience to the point of death also serves as the model for all who want to be His disciples.

Read Luke 9:23-24.

He said to them all, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it."

Why is the cross the foundation for Christian discipleship? Be prepared to share your response with your group.

Thomas à Kempis wrote, "Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of his cross."⁶

**How do you respond to the previous statements?
Check your response or write your own.**

- I have taken up my cross to follow Christ and am willing to suffer for His sake.
- I desire the comfort of salvation but am not willing to suffer.
- Other:

Stop and pray, expressing your desire to take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Jesus. Ask Him to show you how you can be obedient in sacrificially following Him.

Darrell Bock helps give contemporary Christians a proper perspective on the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection:

The resurrection pulled the curtain back all the way on Jesus' identity and the implications of His death. When that tomb goes empty, the point isn't merely that we will live one day because He lives. That's telling the story with us at the center of orientation. If you want to tell the story with God at the center of orientation, the story becomes this: God has raised this Jesus and brought Him to His right hand in His very presence in heaven to share His throne. Jesus has been vindicated as God's Son, the Messiah, the Lord and center of the whole universe, and He has an offer for you—receive the forgiveness of your sins and a new way of relating to God—a completely new kind of life, life to be lived as it was designed by God to be lived. Bow to Him as your Lord and join in His mission for the world. That's the punch line in the story and sums up the point of all the stories in the Gospels and Acts.⁷

Hebrews 12:1-3 states, "Since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart." As we run life's race, we are told to keep Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection front and center. Our story makes sense only when

we keep our eyes on the One who endured the cross and rose to be our advocate at the right hand of God.

In what ways are Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection the key orienting events of your life? Be ready to share with your group.

Crucifixion:

Resurrection:

If you have not yet placed your trust in Jesus, now is the time to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. Call out to Him in prayer, confessing your sin and bowing down to Him as the One who conquered sin and death. Place your trust in Him as the risen Savior and Lord. Then share with a pastor or friend the decision you have made.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 7

Reading the Teachings of Jesus

Session 7 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. How does secular culture depict Christians in a negative light? Is there any truth to these charges?
2. Identify walls that modern religious people build between themselves and those who do not follow Christ (p. 117). How does this impact a believer's influence on nonbelievers?
3. What can we learn about temptation from Jesus' experience in the wilderness (p. 124)?
4. Why is it important to ask, "What does this story teach about Jesus?" instead of "What does this story say about me?" What did you learn about Jesus from the activities on pages 128–29?
5. Discuss what you've learned in this study about crucifixion. What specific detail most impacted you? Why is the cross the foundation for Christian discipleship (p. 132)?
6. How are the cross and resurrection the climax of the New Testament stories? How are they focal points for the story of your life (p. 134)?

If you have not yet placed your trust in Jesus, now is the time to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. Call out to Him in prayer, confessing your sin and bowing down to Him as the One who conquered sin and death. Place your trust in Him as the risen Savior and Lord. Then share with a pastor or friend the decision you have made.

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

How to Read Jesus' Teaching

1. Jesus' teaching is often organized according to main _____.

2. Jesus' teaching revolves around a central _____.

All the teaching of Jesus comes together around the idea of the _____ of God.

3. Jesus' message was communicated through a variety of _____.

- Jesus used _____ in His teaching.

- Jesus used _____ in His teaching.

- Jesus used _____ in His teaching.

- Jesus used _____ in His teaching.

A parable is a story that is set alongside a _____ in order to focus on that spiritual truth.

4. Jesus' teaching has a primary goal: _____.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 7

READING THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

One of my most memorable moments as a teacher occurred when I was with a class of Greek students at a popular coffee shop. We were translating a passage from 2 Corinthians 4: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus. For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ” (vv. 4-6).

Suddenly, a young woman sitting nearby spoke to us. She said she had been having thoughts about God and had been trying to pray. Using the passage we were translating, I explained that through Christ we can have true knowledge of God. It was a powerful teaching moment for my students as they saw the passage come to life. The knowledge of God was made more clear to the woman.

Jesus, the greatest master teacher, taught His lessons in the middle of real-life situations. This week we will investigate the characteristics of Jesus’ teachings that made them so rich and life-changing. By recognizing His teaching methods and themes, we can understand how His words can come to life in our lives and the lives of others.

DAY I

Key Themes in Jesus' Teachings

At times the Gospels present blocks of Jesus' teachings that are held together by a common theme. These segments function like a filing cabinet to group common teachings together, organizing them in a way that makes them accessible to the readers of the Gospels. Jesus probably presented these teachings in a variety of settings and at multiple times, and the Gospel writers grouped them together thematically. Other times Jesus undoubtedly strung together several illustrations to illustrate a main theme and to make it more memorable. When we read the Gospels, therefore, we need to look for common themes that tie sections of Jesus' teachings together.

Matthew 24:36–25:30 is an example of a passage that includes several of Jesus' teachings on related topics. This passage follows Jesus' discourse in which He identified events that would occur at the end of the age, before His return. He began this section by saying, "Concerning that day and hour no one knows" (v. 36), referring to the time of His second coming.

Read Matthew 24:36–25:30 in your Bible. What were the actions of the following characters that caused Jesus to deem them wise or unwise?

People in the days of Noah:

The owner of the house:

The faithful servant:

The wicked servant:

The foolish virgins:

The wise virgins:

The servant with five talents:

The servant with two talents:

The servant with one talent:

What were the costs of disobedience?

What were the rewards for obedience?

Now identify at least five themes you find in this passage, along with the verse references.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now circle which one of these themes you understand to be the main theme of this passage—the theme that ties together all of the others.

You probably identified themes like these: Jesus will return; no one except God knows the exact time; don't be alarmed; remain watchful; be ready; stay obedient to the Master; act wisely; be a good steward; and expect rewards commensurate with faithfulness. The overarching theme might be expressed

as “Be prepared for Christ’s return.” You can see that the repetition of the theme communicates its importance and strongly emphasizes obedience to Jesus’ message.

As you look at the themes you listed in the previous activity, what implications can you see for Christian discipleship? How can a follower of Christ live differently in light of Jesus’ teachings? Finish the following sentences.

1. In light of this passage, Christ followers should

2. In light of this passage, Christ followers should stop

3. In light of this passage, I will

Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the 16th century, once said, “I keep only two days on my calendar: today and That Day.”¹ He meant Christians should live and serve God to the fullest today, and we should always live in light of the day Christ returns.

Are you living in such a way that you would be ready if Jesus came back today? How are you staying prepared and watchful?

Read Ephesians 5:15-16.

Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

Evaluate your plans and use of time this week. How might they change if you knew Christ would return one month from now? Plan to share your ideas with your group.

Day 2 The Central Message of Jesus' Teachings

When Jesus walked on earth in the first century, questions about the Roman occupation of Israel were in the air. How would God deal with this intolerable plight—Jews living in the land God had promised them but under the thumb of Rome? Teachers of Jesus' day were asking, "Why is God letting this happen? What do we need to do about it? When will God restore the kingdom of Israel?"

Jesus' teachings were no exception. The kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus' teachings. When Jesus began teaching, He announced that God's rule had arrived. This caught everyone's attention, and many people naturally wondered whether Jesus understood Himself to be God's anointed King, the Messiah who would overthrow Israel's oppressors. Yet Jesus didn't issue a call to arms. In fact, He said God's kingdom is different from an earthly kingdom, offering spiritual freedom to people who would repent of their sins and allowing them to enter a new relationship with God.

For many of us today, the concepts of king and kingdom seem antiquated. Yet these themes are woven throughout God's revelation of Himself in both the Old and New Testaments. In short, they communicate that God is the true Ruler of the universe. For example, the psalmists wrote:

The LORD is King forever and ever (Ps. 10:16).

*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom;
Your rule is for all generations (Ps. 145:13).*

Jesus' view of and teaching about God's kingdom was built on the Old Testament but also developed the theme in important ways.

- Much of the Old Testament treatment focused on the earthly, geographical kingdom of Israel, while Jesus' teachings focused on the eternal rule of God.

- The Old Testament kingdom focused on the Israelites, whereas Jesus' teachings focused on the kingdom as universal.
- In the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets, God's ideal kingdom is often spoken of as a reality in the distant future. But in Jesus' teachings the kingdom of God is near, having come on the scene with Him and His ministry. We as believers are to live as if God is the rightful Ruler of the world—because He is!

Based on what you have read so far, how would you define *kingdom of God*, according to Jesus' teachings?

In speaking about God's kingdom, Eugene Peterson writes, "Everybody treats us so nicely. No one seems to think that we mean what we say. When we say 'kingdom of God,' no one gets apprehensive, as if we had just announced (which we thought we had) that a powerful army is poised on the border, ready to invade. When we say radical things like 'Christ,' 'love,' 'believe,' 'peace,' and 'sin'—words that in other times and cultures excited martyrdoms—the sounds enter the stream of conversation with no more splash than baseball scores and grocery prices."²

How does this quotation help you grasp the impact Jesus intended by announcing the kingdom of God?

Why do you think the kingdom of God does not raise more excitement than it does in Western culture?

Match each teaching of Jesus with the correct summary statement about the Kingdom.

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| ___ 1. Matthew 6:33 | a. The kingdom of God begins small but grows. |
| ___ 2. Matthew 13:24-30 | b. People who have entered the kingdom and those who have not will coexist while on earth. |
| ___ 3. Matthew 13:31-32 | c. Christians should seek God's rule in their lives. |
| ___ 4. Mark 1:14-15 | d. Repentance and believing God's good news are the proper responses to the presence of His kingdom. |

Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God challenge believers to live counter-culturally for God in the world. We coexist with unbelievers, but our loyalty is to our King.

What changes in your life might draw more attention to the radical nature of God's kingdom? You will share your ideas with your group this week.

Read carefully and prayerfully the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, reflecting on what it says about God's rule in the world.

*You should pray like this:
Our Father in heaven,
Your name be honored as holy.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.*

Now write what each part of the prayer says about
God's rightful rule over our lives and the world.

“Our Father in heaven”:

“Your name be honored as holy”:

“Your kingdom come”:

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”:

“Give us today our daily bread”:

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven
our debtors”:

“And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver
us from the evil one”:

“For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.”

Now pray the prayer to God as your King.

Day 3 Jesus' Teaching Methods

One indication of Jesus' brilliance as a teacher has to do with the wide variety of methods He used. Craig Blomberg comments:

Almost all of the teaching methods used by Jesus were well known and used in Israel, especially by other rabbis. Jesus uses parables, controversial pronouncements against those tagged as out of step with God's will, long speeches, dialogues, proverbs, riddles, and the like. When He is not speaking parables, He is likely to be using short, proverb-like sentences, either by themselves or in clusters. One thinks, for example, of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.

There are times, particularly in the Gospel of John, when we see Jesus offering more lengthy sermons. These often seem to be structured similarly to ways that rabbis gave sermons or homilies. He also asks rhetorical questions, challenging people to answer questions that He knows the answer to, prompting them to think in particular ways about themselves and God's kingdom. He appeals to object lessons, illustrations from common, everyday life. He may use a vine or a lamp or salt as a word picture meant to teach people clearly about some aspect of God and His agenda for life.³

Remember that Jesus' audience was merely listening, not taking notes, so Jesus used techniques designed to make His lessons memorable. If we learn to recognize Jesus' teaching methods, His lessons can become more memorable to us as well.

Here are some of the teaching methods Jesus used.

- Drama: acting out a truth
- Hyperbole: exaggeration used to drive home a point
- Metaphor: a comparison made by saying one thing is another
- Object lesson: the use of a common, everyday object or person to teach a truth
- Parable: a graphic story meant to illustrate spiritual truth
- Proverb: a short saying that sums up a general truth about life

- Quotation: the use of an Old Testament passage to make a point
- Riddle: a clever question used to stimulate thinking
- Simile: a comparison using the word *like* or *as*

Read each Scripture or Scripture summary and identify which of the foregoing teaching methods it illustrates.

Jesus' washing the disciples' feet (see John 13:1-10):

"You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13):

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed" (Matt. 13:31):

"Jesus, knowing the thoughts of their hearts, took a little child and had him stand next to Him" (Luke 9:47):

"How can they say that the Messiah is the Son of David?" (Luke 20:41):

"A disciple is not above his teacher" (Luke 6:40):

"Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' " (Mark 7:10):

The story of the lost son (see Luke 15:11-32):

"If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off " (Matt. 5:30):

Read Matthew 6:25–7:29. List three of the teaching methods Jesus used in this passage.

Review Matthew 6:25-34 and record each use of object lessons in this passage.

To the right of each object lesson above, write the spiritual truth taught by that object lesson.

State a principle that stood out to you in this section of Jesus' teachings.

How does Jesus' teaching device make that truth more memorable to you?

How can you apply that principle to your life? Be prepared to share your answer in this week's group session.

Most of the passages you read today are probably familiar ones that you have read many times. The challenge is to read Jesus' familiar passages with fresh eyes and with a heart that is open to hear what God is saying. Practice identifying Jesus' teaching methods as you read, letting them serve as keys to new understanding.

Day 4 Jesus' Parables

A parable is a creative story told to illustrate a spiritual truth. Jesus was a master at telling stories, and parables are one of His main teaching tools.

**Examine the chart “Jesus’ Parables” on page 150.
Why do you think Jesus told so many parables?**

We have seen in earlier weeks that people readily relate to stories because they identify with the characters and life situations in stories. Most people can easily remember stories, so they are more likely to remember the truths being taught. Parables were simple stories that afforded Jesus an opportunity to share truths in a way even uneducated listeners could understand. He used common characters and situations, such as farmers, houses, sheep, coins, and trees, that His hearers would instantly recognize.

Craig Blomberg has commented on how to read Jesus’ parables:

There are several key principles to keep in mind as we read and interpret the parables. The stories employ a few key characters to represent God and various ways of responding to Him and His kingdom. In about two-thirds of the parables, one can identify a master figure (a king, father, slave owner, landlord, shepherd, etc.) whose actions in some way mirror God’s actions. So, for instance, in the parable of the prodigal, the father represents the love of God as seen in the ministry of Christ. . . . In the parables we also find pairs or groups of contrasting subordinates: a good son and a wicked son, a good servant and a wicked servant, lost sheep and sheep that aren’t lost. Not always but more often than not, the category of son or servant or subordinate who turns out to be the good example is not the one anyone would have suspected at the beginning of the story. And the person we would have expected to be the good model turns out to be the one who has to be rebuked in some way.⁴

Jesus' Parables⁵

PARABLES	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE
Two foundations	7:24-27		6:47-49
Sower	13:1-23	4:1-20	8:4-15
Wheat and weeds	13:24-30,36-43		
Mustard seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
Yeast	13:33		13:20-21
Hidden treasure	13:44		
Priceless pearl	13:45-46		
Net	13:47-50		
Landowner	13:52		
Lost sheep	18:12-14		15:1-7
Unforgiving slave	18:23-35		
Vineyard workers	20:1-16		
Two sons	21:28-32		
Vineyard owner	21:33-41	12:1-9	20:9-16
Wedding banquet	22:1-14		
Fig tree	24:32-33	13:28-29	21:29-31
Faithful slave	24:45-51		12:42-48
10 virgins	25:1-13		
Talents	25:14-30		19:11-27
Sheep and goats	25:31-46		
Growing seed		4:26-29	
Creditor and debtors			7:41-43
Good Samaritan			10:25-37
Friend at midnight			11:5-8
Rich fool			12:13-21
Slaves watching for master		13:34-36	12:35-40
Barren fig tree			13:6-9
Wedding banquet			14:7-14
Large banquet			14:15-24
Calculating the cost			14:28-33
Lost coin			15:8-10
Lost son			15:11-32
Unrighteous manager			16:1-8
Rich man and Lazarus			16:19-31
Master and servant			17:7-10
Persistent widow			18:1-8
Pharisee and tax collector			18:9-14

Read the parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32. Assuming that the father in the story represents God, write down at least five truths this story teaches about God.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

This parable gives us a wonderful picture of God, emphasizing His waiting for the son to return, His forgiveness of the son's sin, His acceptance of and love for the son, His rejoicing over the son's return, and His restoration of the son's position in the family. The fact that the father ran to meet his son adds poignancy to the story, because this response by the wealthy head of a Jewish household would have been considered undignified. This cultural detail dramatically illustrates how much God loves us.

Considering that Jesus told this parable in the presence of Pharisees and teachers of the law who had condemned Him for associating with sinners (see Luke 15:1-2), identify whom you think Jesus intended each brother to represent.

The younger brother:

The older brother:

How do you think Jesus' original listeners would have been surprised by the following elements of the story?

The father's response:

The restored status of the prodigal:

The father's correction of the older brother's behavior:

How surprised the Pharisees must have been by this story! They probably identified with the older brother, who kept the law; yet he was the one shown to be in error. Meanwhile, the younger brother, like the sinners the Pharisees had disparaged in Jesus' presence, was welcomed and blessed after he repented. But notice that the father invited the older brother to join the celebration. Jesus was offering hope to even the Pharisees!

Think about your relationship with God. With which of the brothers do you most closely identify? Explain why.

How does the story of the prodigal son challenge views about God that are common in your culture?

How does the story challenge views about God that are held by members of your church or by you? You will discuss your ideas with your group this week.

Identify two ways you might live differently this week, based on the story of the prodigal son.

1.

2.

Approach God with the humility exhibited by the prodigal. Express your sorrow for any sin that is keeping you from close fellowship with your Father. Ask for His forgiveness and joyfully accept the blessing of being His child, restored and loved by your Father.

Day 5 The Primary Goal

As we read the teachings of Jesus, we always need to keep in mind His primary goal: to call people to Himself and to shape disciples of the kingdom of God. At some point in our lives, we must realize that Christ did not teach simply to inform us; He wanted to transform us. He did not want to merely comfort us, rebuke us, or instruct us about right living; He intended to call us to a pattern of life radically different from the patterns of the world. In Matthew 5–7 Jesus presented what is often called the Sermon on the Mount, in which He taught us how to live as citizens of God’s kingdom. He taught on making a difference in the world, fulfilling the law, loving enemies, giving to the needy, praying, fasting, storing treasures in heaven, not worrying, and not judging others.

Today we will look at the closing verses of that sermon to understand more completely the primary purpose of Jesus’ teachings.

Read Matthew 7:13-14.

Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.

What teaching methods did Jesus use in these verses?

How does Jesus’ teaching about the gates apply to Christian discipleship?

Jesus used a metaphor to point out the spiritual truth that only the choice to follow Jesus’ more narrow approach to life leads to life in the kingdom of God. The way of the world is broad and easy to follow, but it leads to destruction. Jesus’ narrow way must be chosen not only to enter the kingdom but also to follow the King every moment of every day.

Read Matthew 7:15-23. Identify the two metaphors Jesus used in these verses.

What do these images have in common, and why is this teaching very important for Christian discipleship?

These metaphors compare false teachers to familiar items in the world—wolves and fruit-bearing trees. They provided a concrete way for Jesus' hearers to remember His point, and they function the same way for us. A follower of Christ can identify false teachers by their works. A true believer obeys the will of the Father.

Read Matthew 7:24-27.

Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of Mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. And its collapse was great!

What teaching method did Jesus use in this parable?

Why was this teaching a fitting conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount?

How do these verses relate to the narrow gate and the wolf in sheep's clothing?

Remember that clusters of Jesus' teachings are often associated by a common theme. What would you say is the theme of Matthew 7:13-27?

In verses 24-27 Jesus used parables to illustrate the wisdom of obeying His words and the folly of ignoring them. These verses apply to the entire sermon, and they contrast with the teachings of false teachers described in verses 15-23. Jesus' words are true, and the fruit of His life demonstrated obedience to His Father. It's no wonder we are told, "The crowds were astonished at His teaching, because He was teaching them like one who had authority" (vv. 28-29). One summary of the theme of this passage might be: only Jesus is the true Teacher, and He has the authority to demand obedience to His words.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.'"⁶

How does this reflection relate to the theme of Matthew 7:13-27?

The passage we studied today testifies to Jesus' identity as King. His words are true, and He has the authority to demand His disciples' obedience, just as He submitted in obedience to His Father. His way is narrow and difficult, but it is the only way that leads to life. As He said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." When you read His teachings, look for ways He is calling and guiding you to a closer walk with Him.

Is your house built on the solid rock of God's truth or on the shifting sand of disobedience? Pray and ask God to show you anything in your life that might be keeping you from obeying His teachings.

- Inadequate time in His Word
- Love for entertainment
- Pursuit of career or wealth
- Lack of compassion for others
- Judgmental attitude
- Materialism
- Lack of concern for the kingdom of God
- Unwillingness to forgive others
- Other:

If you are ready to follow Jesus more closely as His disciple, profess His authority over your life and commit to read and obey His teachings.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 8

Reading the New Testament Letters and Revelation

Session 8 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. When you consider the implications of Christian discipleship, how would you live differently if you knew Jesus was going to come back one month from now (p. 141)?
2. What one thing could you do to use your time more wisely?
3. The kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus' teachings. What changes need to be made in your life to draw more attention to the radical nature of God's kingdom (p. 144)?
4. From Jesus' object lessons in Matthew 6:25-34 (p. 148), what truths could you apply to your life?
5. Think about the truths you discovered in the story of the prodigal son (p. 152) and discuss the following.
 - With which of the brothers do you most closely identify? Explain why.
 - How does the story of the prodigal son challenge views about God that are common in your culture?
 - How does the story challenge views about God that are held by you or by members of your church?

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

How to Read the New Testament Letters

1. Understand the historical _____ or occasion of the letter.
2. Understand the _____ of the letter.
3. Move from culture to culture _____.

Three Forms of Literature in Revelation

1. Letter
2. Prophecy
3. Apocalyptic

Guidelines for Reading Revelation

1. Read in light of the original _____.
2. Study the use of _____.
 - Pay attention when John _____ a symbol.
 - Read in light of the _____.
 - Utilize a good _____.
3. Understand how _____ Revelation is for today.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 8

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS AND REVELATION

The communication options we have in the modern world are amazing and ever expanding. Doug Moo has commented on the technology of communication in the days when our New Testament was written:

A wide variety of materials were used in the ancient world, including animal skins, but often people used papyrus, a paper-like material made from the stem of a plant. ... For longer letters ... sheets of papyrus could be glued end-on-end and then rolled up to make a scroll. Writing was done with ink, at times made by mixing soot, oil, and gum. ...

Often the person doing the actual writing of a letter was a trained scribe. ... Scribes had to cut their own papyrus into sheets, mix their own ink, and cut their own reed pens. ... Scribes normally were used because they could write small, neat, carefully crafted letters and make the best use of the scroll.¹

That gives you an idea of how the New Testament letters were written. God in His wisdom gave us 20 of the 27 books in the New Testament in the form of letters (I believe Hebrews is actually an ancient sermon). This week we will consider how to read, understand, and apply those books to our lives.

DAY I

The Historical Context of the Letter

I did something a bit different for Father’s Day this year. Rather than send my dad a standard Father’s Day card, I wrote him a long letter, telling him what I remember from my years growing up as his son. I talked about sports, fishing, hunting, times at the beach, working alongside him as he laid bricks on a patio, and many other things. The common refrain was “I remember. . .” The letter closed with a celebration of his strength, character, love, and skills and an expression of my thanks for him. When I finished, I dated and mailed the letter. Therefore, that letter has a specific historical context. To understand it fully, a reader would need to know something about my dad and me. Understanding our history would fill in much of the picture reflected in the words of the letter. It also matters that the letter was written in 2010, when I was approaching age 51 and my dad was in his early 80s.

Similarly, our New Testament letters were written in specific historical contexts (see “New Testament Timeline” (located online at lifeway.com/readthebible-forlife) to get an idea of when the letters were written). They were written to address specific situations in a church or a group of churches. Therefore, we need to understand as much as we can about the situation that prompted the writing of each New Testament letter. With some books—like 1 Corinthians, for example—this task is more easily done. With others the exact historical situation and community concerns behind a book might be less clear. But if we can discover the historical context of a letter, we can better understand how the writer intended us to apply its instruction to church or personal life.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:11 we read, “No one can lay any other foundation than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ.” That’s a good and helpful teaching we can readily apply to our Christian lives. But if we study the historical context of 1 Corinthians, we learn that Paul wrote to address harmful divisions in the church. The people had formed factions around Paul, Apollos, Peter, and other leaders instead of uniting around their allegiance to Christ. Consequently, the church looked more like the world than the body of Christ. Paul admonished the Corinthians to unite around the cross of Christ so that He would be

glorified. The historical context of this letter greatly contributes to a proper understanding of Paul's message.

Let's discover the historical context of another New Testament letter.

Find Paul's letters on "New Testament Timeline," (located online at lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife). Now, using a study Bible or a Bible dictionary, read an article on Paul's Letter to Philemon. What did you learn about the following points of the historical background behind this book?

Author:

Date:

Recipient(s):

Situation:

Now read the Book of Philemon. How does knowledge of the historical situation behind the book aid your reading of the book?

What is one verse in Philemon that is clearer to you now?

The historical background of Philemon is essential to an understanding of this letter. Paul's approach to this difficult situation is a great example of the application of Christ's love to everyday first-century life. The light of the gospel has the power to transform every human relationship. This and other New Testament teachings laid the foundation for the abolition of slavery.

Using a study Bible or a Bible dictionary, read an article about the historical situation behind the Book of Colossians. What did you learn about the following?

Author:

Date:

Recipients (including the location of Colossae; find it on the map on p. 126):

Situation (especially Paul's concerns about the false teaching threatening the Colossians):

Now read Colossians 2:16-23 in your Bible. In what ways does understanding more about the historical background behind the book help you read this passage?

The Colossians were tempted by a false teaching that substituted certain religious practices for a life lived by the power of God's Spirit. Paul told the believers that no amount of rule keeping, ritual, or self-denial could bring more of Christ's power into their lives or deliver them from sin. He admonished them to hold firmly to their relationship with Jesus, the Messiah (see 2:17, 19), for spiritual fullness and growth.

What are ways we can create false religious practices today that replace a vibrant relationship with Christ Himself?

Today's Scriptures have in common an emphasis on Jesus' supremacy in all things. Pray and ask God to help you grow in a right understanding of biblical teaching about Jesus so that your life will shine a spotlight on Him.

Day 2 The Structure of the Letter

When you read a letter, you expect it to follow a specific form, beginning with a salutation like “Dear George.” Next, if the letter is personal, it might continue, “I hope you and your family have been doing well.” The letter ends with something like “Sincerely,” followed by a signature.

The New Testament letters, by their nature, also have a general structural pattern they follow. Understanding that structure can help a reader discern the author’s message. Most New Testament letters include the following elements.

- A greeting in which the sender might identify himself and perhaps those to whom the letter is addressed
- A word of grace or grace and peace
- A word of thanksgiving and perhaps a blessing
- Perhaps an opening or introduction
- The body of the letter, which presents the author’s main points
- The closing may include a word of blessing for the recipients, beginning with “Now the God of grace . . .,” followed by the writer’s prayer for the recipients. The closing might also include the name of the person the author enlisted to write out the letter.

With practice you can learn to recognize these parts of a New Testament letter. You can also do two other things to grasp a letter’s big picture.

1. Read through a book or a section of a book, watching for transitions and the treatment of main themes. Most Bibles have headings or subheadings at the beginning of new movements in a book that identify the topic the author was addressing.
2. Read an outline of the letter in a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or Bible commentary. Taking time to review the book’s outline can help you navigate the twists and turns of a New Testament letter.

The structure of a letter can give us important clues about its message. Doug Moo provides the following example from the Book of Romans.

The first seventeen verses of Romans are the letter’s opening statement. Up until verse 16, Paul writes to the Romans about his ministry

and his desire to come visit them, but with verse 16 there is a decisive shift, the apostle now focusing on the theme of the *gospel* with red-hot intensity. In Romans 1:16-17 he writes, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. For in it God’s righteousness is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.” These two verses are important. They present the theme of the letter and the point from which Paul launches into an extensive treatment of the nature of the gospel in the following chapters. If we understand that, we will read those chapters asking, “How am I to understand the gospel?” So grasping the role of Romans 1:16-17, which really is an important hinge between the opening and the main body of the letter, can help us read Romans better.²

Let’s practice identifying the structural components of a New Testament letter.

Read the first and last chapters of I Peter. Answer the questions below and write the chapter and verse references that include these elements.

Who is the sender?

Who are the recipients?

What does the word of grace say?

What part of the letter is found in I Peter 1:3?

What chapter and verses make up the closing?

Who wrote down Peter’s words?

Interestingly, Peter’s greeting provides immediate clues about the subject of his letter. It says his readers have been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father and set apart by the Spirit for obedience and for the

sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ” (vv. 1-2). The first chapter explains that they had been born into salvation and a living hope through the blood of Jesus Christ. Then Peter instructed these believers to live their lives set apart and holy, as their Heavenly Father was holy. The rest of the letter gave them directions for living a life of obedience to the One who had died for them. Discovering the structure of this letter helps us identify its theme and understand the way Peter presented his message.

Let’s practice examining the structure of another New Testament letter.

Locate Galatia on the map on page 126. Using a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary, read an article on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Examine the outline of the book provided in the article and record three main points here.

Now read Galatians 2:15-21.

We who are Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners” know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified. But if we ourselves are also found to be “sinners” while seeking to be justified by Christ, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild the system I tore down, I show myself to be a lawbreaker. For through the law I have died to the law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Summarize the theme of this passage.

Underline every occurrence of words having to do with justification. Circle all occurrences of the word *Christ*. Finally, draw a box around each use of the word *faith*.

How do these three terms relate to Paul's primary message in this passage?

You probably wrote that the theme of this passage is justification by faith in Christ. Justification is a believer's righteousness or right standing with God through faith in Jesus. Paul taught that we cannot be justified, or made right with God, by observing the law but only through faith in Christ, who was crucified for our sin.

Referring to the outline of Galatians you found in a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary, carefully read the first two chapters in the book.

What was Paul's criticism of the Galatians in 1:6-10?

Since the time the Galatians had accepted Christ, false teachers had come into the church and maintained that the believers must be circumcised and observe

the law to have right standing with God. Paul stated that these teachings clearly perverted the gospel of Christ. Paul's criticism of the Galatians in chapter 1 is foundational to his teaching in chapter 2 because the only true gospel is the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Any other gospel is a false gospel. Paul eagerly defended his credentials because he wanted the Galatians to know this gospel he preached came not through human invention but through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul erected these ideas early in the structure of his letter as pillars for his explanation of the gospel of grace in 2:15-21.

Reread Galatians 2:19-20.

Through the law I have died to the law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Based on the literary context you have considered, how is the truth of these verses relevant for Paul's message to the Galatians?

How is this truth relevant for your life today?

In your group session this week, you will discuss what you have learned from your personal study of Galatians.

Justification by grace through faith is possible only through complete identification with the crucified Christ. This is just as true for believers today as for the first-century Galatians. Being justified through Christ requires that we die to the law, acts of righteousness, or any other human method of trying to earn salvation. Recognizing the way Paul structured his letter can help us appreciate the impact it must have had on the original readers and grasp the importance of Paul's impassioned teaching on the free gift of salvation through faith in Christ.

Day 3 The Cultural Context of the Letter

Have you ever had the opportunity to travel to a different culture? If you have, you probably noticed things that were similar to your own culture and others that were quite different. For instance, when we lived in Great Britain one spring, we learned that many British families feed their children supper first; then the adults eat afterward. On a trip to Scotland from Cambridge, we were hosted by a couple who invited us to supper. The husband asked me, “At what time do the children eat?” Puzzled, I stammered, “Well, we eat at about 5:30.” He responded, “I didn’t ask when you eat; I asked when the children eat!” We were experiencing a communication breakdown due to a cultural difference.

The various cultures of the New Testament world were quite different from our own, and those cultural differences come into play when we read and apply the New Testament letters. Even though there are obvious differences between New Testament culture and ours, we need to keep in mind as we read the letters that human beings themselves have not changed, nor has God. Therefore, many of the issues dealt with in the New Testament letters are as applicable to us today as to first-century readers. Readers today still need to come to terms with questions like these:

- What are human beings basically like?
- What is the fundamental human problem?
- What is God like?
- Who is Jesus Christ, and what did He accomplish on the cross?

These and many other questions lie at the heart of the New Testament letters. So the key is to recognize the principles behind the teachings in the letters so that we can see their relevance for our lives today.

On the other hand, there are at least three ways we can go wrong when dealing with these cultural differences.

1. To read over them and fail to discern the underlying principle
2. To misunderstand the significance of the cultural expression in a passage
3. To interpret all expressions of culture in the New Testament as normative for us today

Doug Moo provides an example of a teaching in a New Testament letter that is colored by distinct cultural practices.

One passage that is debated to this day is 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul talks about the importance of head coverings for women in the church. This is in a section of the letter in which Paul addresses problems that had come up in worship. We're not even sure exactly what he means, whether it's a head covering like a veil or whether it's a particular way of wearing the hair, but obviously something was going on in that culture that made the covering of the head of the woman significant. It had a certain symbolic importance then that a lot of us just aren't familiar with. To understand that passage as we read it, we need to dig and find out what was significant about a woman's head being covered. We might find, for instance, that married women in that culture kept their hair "done up" rather than loose and flowing, which in some circles was a sign of singleness or (in a Jewish context) even that a woman had been suspected of adultery. Some pagan women "let their hair down" when involved in worship of the gods. Another possibility is that some of the women were wearing their hair cut short, almost shaved off, which again could be a symbol of someone convicted of adultery or a sign in the broader culture of a woman being involved in lesbianism. The point is that Paul was concerned about the signals being sent by a woman not having her head covered in the Christian worship service.³

Find Corinth on the map on page 126. Read 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. What principles do you see in this passage that we could apply today without submitting to irrelevant practices of another culture?

The relevance of this passage lies in the fact that God calls us out from the ways of the world to live set-apart, holy lives. Adopting the world's ways can communicate that we approve of certain values and lifestyles that violate God's Word. So an application of this passage might focus on avoiding certain types of clothing, adornments, or practices that are associated with sinful acts in our culture.

Let's try to interpret another passage that refers to cultural characteristics of first-century Jewish life.

Carefully read I Corinthians 8 two or three times. Notice all references to food, knowledge, and idols in the passage. Be prepared to discuss your answers to the following with your group.

What did Paul say about knowledge in verses 1-3?

What did Paul say about idols and gods in verses 4-6?

What was Paul's concern in verses 7-13?

Summarize the principle represented by Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 8.

In cities of the ancient world, food was often brought as a sacrifice to the pagan temples. Some of the food could then be sold or made available for people to eat, either at the pagan sanctuary or at a banquet hall. Some of these meals were seen as means of fellowship with the pagan god. For some believers, the question was whether it was acceptable for a follower of Christ to eat that meat.

Paul knew food offered to idols was just food, and he acknowledged Christians' freedom to eat that food. But he was concerned that doing so might cause weaker Christians to stumble by luring them back into pagan practices. Paul concluded that even though believers had the right knowledge about food offered to idols, they shouldn't use that knowledge in a way that hurt others.

Although those of us in modern, Western cultures probably don't struggle with eating meat offered to idols, what are situations in the modern church that might parallel the situation Paul described? What are two situations in which a Christian's correct knowledge and the freedom to exercise that knowledge might cause a weaker Christian to stumble? You will share your ideas with your group.

1.

2.

Pray that God will help you grow in sensitivity to ways your actions—even those that are theologically correct—might affect less mature brothers and sister in Christ.

Learning about the cultural context of a New Testament letter can help ensure that we apply the teachings in valid ways. As the New Testament writers dealt with first-century issues, they usually told their readers why they should or should not do something. From these explanations we can glean principles that are relevant for a host of issues we face today.

Day 4

Reading for Specific Application

At the end of week 1 we talked about being doers of the Word. The letters of the New Testament hold great relevance for believers today who want to do God's Word, applying it to their lives. The letters of the New Testament are readily applicable to our lives today because they address what might be called life-on-the-street Christianity. The letter writers of the New Testament attempted to teach believers how to live for Jesus in everyday life, and they gave very specific exhortations in that regard. Doug Moo has identified three reasons the New Testament letters are so relevant to believers' lives today.

1. **“Immediacy.** The writers of the New Testament letters often seem to be writing directly to us. They talk about many of the same issues and challenges we face as believers today.”
2. **“Their importance in teaching foundational Christian truth.** If you think about it, this is the only group of books in the Bible written to encourage and instruct Christians in a wide variety of issues related to church life or personal life.”
3. **Familiarity.** “The letter is also a form that we are familiar with. . . . We know how letters work.”⁴

When you read the letters of the New Testament, think in terms of very specific application. Ask yourself, *What does this letter tell me about how I should live for Christ in the world? What guidelines are here for working and worshiping together as Christ's church? How do I need to think or act differently to obey these teachings?* Let's practice by looking at James 1.

Read James 1:19-27 and answer the following questions.

My dearly loved brothers, understand this: Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for man's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness. Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and evil, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save you. But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and imme-

diately forgets what kind of man he was. But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but one who does good works—this person will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, then his religion is useless and he deceives himself. Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

In verse 22 how did James describe a person who is a hearer but not a doer of the Word? Explain what you think James meant.

What is the word picture James used in verses 23-24? Why do you think he used this picture?

According to verse 25, how are we supposed to respond to God's Word, and what is the result?

James used a revealing word picture to emphasize the importance of both hearing and doing the Word. Only when we look into the mirror of God's Word do we see the truth of who we are and who God is. When we don't practice what we read, we fail to act on the truth God has taught us in His Word, and we open our lives to deception. On the other hand, when we act on God's "perfect law of freedom" (v. 25), we are blessed.

Are you a blessed doer of the Word? Mark the scale below to portray your application of God's Word.

A hearer who rarely applies
the Word to real life

A blessed doer who is being
changed by the Word

Read James 1:27 again to see three things involved
in doing God's Word.

*Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this:
to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep
oneself unstained by the world.*

Check any of the following actions you have done
in the past month.

- Cared for orphans (or someone who is helpless
and without resources)
- Cared for widows (an older person who needs resources
to live)
- Kept yourself unstained by the world (chose
purity instead of immorality)

What is a specific, tangible action you will take this week to
apply one of these three actions?

Read James 3:1-12 in your Bible. Be prepared to share
your responses to the following with your group.

List the word pictures used to describe the tongue.

In the list you made, write *D* beside the word pictures that describe the tongue as destructive. Write *B* beside the word pictures that depict the tongue as small but having a big impact. Write *E* beside the word pictures that depict the tongue as evil—out of control and deadly.

James 3:1-12 addresses the destructive power of the tongue when believers use speech to hurt others. Check the areas in which you need to discipline your tongue.

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Criticism | <input type="checkbox"/> Bragging | <input type="checkbox"/> Verbally abusing someone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gossiping | <input type="checkbox"/> Cursing | <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking harshly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Exaggerating | <input type="checkbox"/> Lying to protect yourself | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | | |

If you have used speech in any of these harmful ways, confess your sin to God and ask forgiveness from those whom you have hurt. You might also ask a fellow believer to pray for you, encourage you, and hold you accountable.

Day 5 The Powerful Symbols in Revelation

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived through the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany, taking a firm stand against the Third Reich as inherently evil and anti-Christian. With Allied guns on the horizon, just two weeks before the defeat of the German forces, Bonhoeffer was martyred along with other conspirators against Hitler. During his time in prison before his execution, Bonhoeffer and his family corresponded by way of letters. Bonhoeffer's reflections on the Christian life, the church, suffering, and death were rich. He saw things from a cosmic perspective, confident that God, the Ruler of the world, would defeat Hitler and set things right. The theologian and his family often used coded language to communicate so that the Nazis would not know what they were really saying.

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament includes letters, prophecies, and stories, but it primarily belongs to another class of biblical literature called apocalyptic. Through a series of visions that God shares with the writer, God pulls back the curtain of reality so that the person receiving the visions can see the bigger picture of what is really going on behind world events. In short, the message of Revelation is that God is in control, and those who follow Him will be victorious over the forces of evil in the world.

Like Bonhoeffer's letters, Revelation was written in a time of severe persecution and uses coded language, especially symbols, to communicate truth. God didn't have the writer use symbols to obscure his message but to communicate truth about God and the world, the destiny of the forces that oppose God and His people, and spiritual principles behind God's redemptive plan. In addition to predicting future events, Revelation conveys a profound message of encouragement for believers as they struggle against evil in the world. For this reason we can apply the truths of Revelation to our lives in the same way we apply the teachings of any other biblical book—if we learn how to read it properly. Today we will consider some tools for reading and understanding this difficult but fascinating book.

Search in a newspaper or on a Web site for political cartoons that use symbols of some kind. For example, an elephant might represent the Republican Party, and a donkey might represent the Democratic Party. Identify the symbol(s) in the cartoon and the message the cartoon is communicating.

The symbol(s):

The message:

You see symbols like these every day, and through experience you have learned not to take them literally but to recognize the meanings behind them. The same is true of the symbols in the Book of Revelation. For example, Revelation 19:7-8 says:

*Let us be glad, rejoice, and give Him glory,
because the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and His wife has prepared herself.
She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure.*

You probably recognize the Lamb as Jesus and the bride of Christ as believers rather than a literal lamb and a literal woman. The writer used symbols to convey the intimate relationship between Christ and His people, as well as the purity of those Christ has redeemed through His death on the cross. Symbolic language charges the imagination and more powerfully expresses the glory of that moment when we will be united with Christ for all eternity.

Scott Duvall has identified some tips for reading Revelation with greater understanding.

- **Pray for insight.** God wants us to understand the book.
- **Read with humility.** Beware of people who claim to understand Revelation perfectly. Be willing to change your interpretation when the evidence points in a different direction.
- **Read in light of the original audience.** We need to understand what the teaching meant in John's day to understand what it means today.

- **Don't try to find a historical chronology.** Revelation doesn't give us a precise timetable of future events. Focus on grasping the primary message in each vision.
- **Pay attention when John interprets a symbol for you.** For example, he tells us the golden lampstands are the churches (see 1:20), and the red, fiery dragon is Satan (see 12:9).
- **Read in light of the Old Testament.** The prophecy about the two witnesses in Revelation 11 says they will have “the power to close up the sky so that it does not rain” and “power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every plague” (v. 6). These actions sound like the works of Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:1) and Moses (see Ex. 7:14-24). So your interpretation of Revelation 11 needs to take into account the ministries of these Old Testament figures.⁵

Let's try our hand at interpreting a passage in Revelation.

Read Revelation 5:1-8. Draw a picture of the Lamb, as described in verse 6.

According to Revelation 5:9-12, how did this Lamb win the victory?

You probably recognized the characters and followed the story line in this passage, but you might have to rely on a commentary to understand all of the details. The One sitting on the throne is God the Father. The scroll symbolizes His complete plans for the world, which He will give as an inheritance to His people, who are followers of the Lamb. In the Roman Empire during the first century, seals, made by dripping hot wax across the seam of a rolled-up scroll, were used in legal documents like wills. Seven seals signify that the scroll is sealed completely, to be opened only by the proper authority. The cry of verse

2, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” shows the need for a mediator between God and the earth. Christ is the Victorious One who can accomplish God’s purposes for the world and give the inheritance to God’s people.

Two word pictures, or metaphors, used for Christ in this passage have their roots in the Old Testament. The “Lion of the tribe of Judah” is taken from Genesis 49:9-10, and “the Root of David” comes from Isaiah 11:10 and Jeremiah 23:5. These word pictures present Jesus as the Messiah, God’s true King. Revelation 5:6 pictures the Messiah as a slaughtered Lamb. The background for this symbol is the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

Read Isaiah 53. What are parallels between the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and the Lamb in Revelation 5?

In Revelation 5 what does the symbol of Jesus as a slaughtered Lamb signify?

This vision presents Jesus as worthy to open the scroll because He brought God’s redemptive plan to completion by dying on the cross. Verse 9 says He redeemed people for God by His blood. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was the perfect sacrifice for sin and therefore the perfect mediator between God and humanity.

Yet notice in verse 6 that the Lamb is standing, representing His resurrection. He has seven horns, representing absolute power, and seven eyes, symbolizing absolute knowledge (see Zech. 4:10).

What is the response to the Lamb in Revelation 5:9-14, and who is singing the response?

Using the words of Revelation 5:9-14, spend time worshipping Jesus. Thank Him for His sacrifice for your sins. Thank Him for providing an inheritance for you as His child.

I hope today's study gave you a glimpse of the rich meaning behind the symbols in Revelation. Admittedly, this Bible book is difficult to understand, and the symbolic language can give the false impression that the book is far removed from our lives today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Life can be very hard, relentlessly beating on our faith and perspective. But Revelation 12:11 reminds us that the believers overcame Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." The knowledge that God wins gives us strength and hope to persevere in the present. In addition, the Book of Revelation holds out hope for the time when we will be in God's presence. Scott Duvall sums it up:

The story of the Bible really is about God getting us back into His presence. You see this in the covenants. You see it in the tabernacle and in the temple. You see it in Jesus' incarnation and in the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts to indwell the church. Now in Revelation 21–22 the temple of God has come down to earth, and the Bible ends where it started, with God walking with people.

I can't fathom what that will be like, but God says to us, "I want to be with you." That is a happy ending to the story.⁶

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

WEEK 9

Reading the Bible Today

Session 9 Group Experience

Respond to the Word

1. Recall a meaningful letter, note, e-mail, or text message you have received. Discuss what made these words special to you. What circumstances surrounded this communication?
2. A key teaching of Galatians is that no human method of trying to gain salvation works. What are some things people think they can do to earn eternal life? According to your study of Galatians 2:15-21 (pp. 166–69), how is salvation attained?
3. Discuss issues in the modern church similar to the “food offered to idols” situation Paul described in 1 Corinthians 8 (pp. 172–73). What is the key principle in Paul’s teaching? With that principle in mind, how far should a Christian go to avoid being a “stumbling block” to other Christians?
4. Recall word pictures used to describe the tongue in James 3:1-12 (pp. 176–77) and discuss what these examples teach about the importance of watching what we say. In our everyday conversations how seriously do we take these words? How seriously should we?
5. What one word describes your general feeling about the Book of Revelation? Read Scott Duvall’s quotation on page 182. Why is reading and understanding Revelation important for Christians?

Supplemental articles are provided at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife.

Watch the Video

1. Work personal reading of the Bible into your _____.

- Read _____ and meditate _____.
- Have realistic _____ and a good _____.
- Have a consistent _____ and _____.
- Have good _____ and a _____ in hand.
- _____ what you read.

2. Read the Bible with your _____.

- You are the primary _____ of your children.
- Have a _____ of Bible reading and listening.
- How are you teaching your children the _____ of Scripture?

3. Encounter the Bible as a part of the _____.

- Receive the Word preached as an act of _____.
- Participate in small-group study as an act of _____.
- Encourage others in the Word as an act of _____.

Close with Prayer

This video session is available at www.BiblicalTraining.org/readthebibleforlife

Week 9

READING THE BIBLE TODAY

Reading the Bible on a regular basis is an essential life habit, and like other important practices, Bible reading is a skill we can continue to develop over a lifetime. Thankfully, this skill improves over time if, guided by God's Spirit, we read wisely and with a right attitude. In the past eight weeks we have discussed many insights and practices that can help you grow as a reader of the Bible. But one of the greatest things you can do is to simply begin reading the Bible on a consistent basis. J. C. Ryle has written, "Begin reading your Bible this very day. The way to do a thing is to do it, and the way to read the Bible is actually to read it. It is not meaning, or wishing, or resolving, or intending, or thinking about it, which will advance you one step. You must positively read. . . . The words of Scripture must actually pass before your mind."¹

This week we will consider ways to read the Bible well in various contexts: our personal lives, our families, and our churches. As you complete the activities this week, think about how you can grow as a faithful follower of Christ, reading and living the Word in these contexts. Our goal is for Bible reading to become a natural part of our daily schedule and a practice that stays with us for the rest of our lives.

DAY 1

Personal Bible Reading, Part I

A friend of mine was in high school when his mother decided to wean the family off excessive sugar in their daily diet. The family drank sweet tea on a regular basis, so my friend's mom challenged the kids to go without sugar in their tea for six weeks. At the end of that period, my friend had grown accustomed to and even liked his tea without sugar, and he still drinks it that way.

Healthy choices and habits are the foundation stones for a healthy life, whether those patterns concern the way we eat, exercise, or sleep; react to crises; treat other people; relate to the body of believers; or feed on God's Word. Today let's think about our patterns of personally interacting with God's Word.

Answer the following questions about the patterns you have developed in your daily life over the past eight weeks.

Where do you do your Bible reading?

When do you do your Bible reading?

Approximately how long do you spend reading your Bible each day?

What tools have you consistently used in your Bible reading?

How have you grown in your Bible reading?

Mark on the scale the degree to which Bible reading has become a habit in your life.

Bible reading is
not a habit at all.

Bible reading has become
a strong habit in my life.

Identify benefits and challenges of the Bible reading and study you have been doing over the past eight weeks.

Benefits:

Challenges:

Spend time thanking God for the former and asking for His help with the latter.

Let me make five suggestions that will help you in the process of reading the Bible regularly and meaningfully.

- 1. Read the Bible prayerfully.** Engaging with the Bible regularly is a spiritual exercise, and you need spiritual power and discernment to interact with it. As you begin your Bible reading, pray, asking God for a receptive, disciplined heart for the Word, and ask Him to speak to you through His Word. Your prayer should always be “Turn my heart to Your decrees” (Ps. 119:36).
- 2. Read expectantly and joyfully.** As you read Scripture, expect to hear from God, joyful and thankful for what you find in its pages.
- 3. Meditate on the Word.** It’s easy to get into a pattern of simply reading through the assignment for the day without thinking more deeply about what you are reading. Meditating means mentally chewing on what you are reading, considering it, thinking about what the passage means, and identifying implications for belief and practice. See the chart “How to Meditate on God’s Word” on page 189 for additional ideas on meditation.

HOW TO MEDITATE ON GOD'S WORD

Meditation is deep thinking about Scripture—reflecting on what God has done and thinking about His ways. Meditation helps you absorb Scripture so that you can live its truth in your life. Here are some methods you can use to meditate.

Think through questions about a passage or write questions in the margins of your Bible. Probe the passage, asking who, what, when, where, why, and how. Ask, “Who is saying this? Why did that person respond to God that way? Where is this taking place? What is important about this part of the passage? What does this say about God’s heart and values? How does God want me to apply this teaching?”

Think deeply about a verse one word at a time. Read the passage repeatedly, each time emphasizing a different word. This makes you linger over the verse, and you begin to detect nuances in meaning. For example, practice emphasizing different words as you read Mary’s instruction to the head steward about Jesus in John 2:5: “Do whatever He tells you.”

Select a passage during your quiet time and meditate on it when you have time during the day, such as while driving or waiting in line.

Offer a prayer based on the passage. For example, if you read Psalm 139:5-7, you might pray, “Lord, may my children sense Your presence wherever they go today. Show them that You are actively involved in their lives.” If you read Psalm 1, you might ask God to make your children people who meditate deeply on His Word.²

4. Read for transformation. The Bible was not meant merely to inform you but to transform you as your mind is renewed in accordance with God's truth: "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). When you read the Bible, expect to hear from the Lord and think about ways to apply God's truth to your life.

5. Read with perseverance. Commit yourself to work hard at being consistent for the next 10 to 12 weeks, the amount of time required to form a long-term habit. As you are faithful with your Bible reading and begin seeing it make a difference in your life, you will begin to hunger for your time in the Word, just as you hunger for a good meal. Commit to make it through the challenging times and stay on track. Your perseverance will pay off.

Read Psalm 118:1-9 four times in your Bible. With each reading, focus on a different one of the first four principles you have studied today:

1. Read the Bible prayerfully. Allow the different parts of the psalm to prompt your thinking in how to pray.
2. Read expectantly and joyfully. How might you anticipate God responding to your prayers? Do you expect God to speak to you through the reading? What parts of the passage give you joy?
3. Meditate on the Word. Think very deeply about a phrase at a time in verse 1. What new meanings stand out?
4. Read for transformation. How might you specifically apply a part of this psalm to your life today? How might you worship God, change your thinking about God, or do something in response to what you have read?

Day 2 Personal Bible Reading, Part 2

Yesterday you learned five principles for reading the Bible more effectively. Here are two more suggestions.

6. Be realistic about the goals you set and have a good plan. Instead of randomly selecting Scripture passages each day, adopt an approach that will expose you to all of God's Word over time. If you take just 20 to 30 minutes a day, you can read the whole Bible in a year. In 10 to 15 minutes a day, you can read the whole Bible in two years. The key is not volume but consistency and a clear plan. A number of good plans are available.

- You can download a plan from www.BiblicalTraining.org/rbl.
- You can use the two plans provided at the back of the trade book *Read the Bible for Life*.
- You can download free plans from the Internet by searching for Bible Reading Plan.
- You can order *LifeWalk*, a monthly devotional magazine that provides a systematic plan for reading the Bible in a year.³
- You can purchase a one-year Bible, which specifies the amount of material you need to read each day to read the Bible in a year. *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible* (B&H Publishing Group, 2011) provides such a plan.

Some Bible-reading plans are laid out canonically, following the order of the books in the Bible. Others are chronological, giving you a sense of how the story of the Bible develops historically. Some provide plans for reading both Old and New Testament passages each day. Set realistic goals for yourself and choose a Bible-reading plan that will help you meet those goals.

7. Read in light of the overarching story of the Bible. Reading the Bible is much more meaningful if you read in light of the overarching story. I hope this study has given you an idea of how the whole story fits together beautifully and powerfully. As you read, notice great themes such as God's Word, creation, sin, judgment, sacrifice, walking with God, the people of God, the Kingdom, the nations, the covenant, deliverance, redemption, and the Messiah.

As you study a book of the Bible, it is helpful to record major themes and summaries so that you can get the big picture. A book-summary chart like the one on this page can help. Follow these directions to complete the chart when you study a Bible book.

- 1. Identify the chapters or major divisions in the book.** In some cases a major division of a book might include material that is found in more than one chapter.
- 2. Write a title for each chapter or major division.**
- 3. Summarize each paragraph in the chapters or major divisions.**
- 4. Write on another sheet of paper an outline of the Bible book.** Base your outline on the major divisions you identified. These major divisions may reflect different times, places, or ideas. Beneath these major divisions you will place small divisions, which may consist of chapters, individual paragraphs, or groups of paragraphs. You can learn by comparing your outline with another outline in a commentary or in an introduction to the book in a study Bible.⁴

BOOK SUMMARY⁵

Book of the Bible

Chapter or Major Division

Title or Theme of Chapter or Major Division

Summary or Key Ideas of Paragraphs in Chapter or Major Division

Two tools are available to help you read the Bible consistently and in light of the entire story. *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible* takes you through the Bible step-by-step as the events happened, and each day's reading is clearly marked. This Bible, which uses the Holman Christian Standard Bible® translation, also has introductory articles on each phase of biblical history and presents charts that help keep you oriented to each stage in the developing story of the Bible. The other tool is called *A Reader's Guide to the Bible*. It follows the same reading plan as the chronological Bible, but you can use this tool with any translation. Each day presents a brief commentary that will coach you on how to read the parts of Scripture well, pointing to key themes, background information, structure, and application of the Scripture for that day.⁶

Bible reading can also be encouraged by having reading partners who are going through the Bible at the same time you are. You can pray for one another, encourage one another, and share insights and applications.

Record your plan for Bible reading during the next year.

I plan to spend _____ minutes a day in Bible reading.

I am going to use the following Bible-reading plan.

I plan to enlist the following reading partners.

Consider committing yourself to read the Bible on a daily basis for at least the next three months. If you need an idea to bridge the gap between the end of this study and the time your new plan begins, try reading through Psalms and Proverbs for the next month to three months. Each day read five psalms and one proverb. You will be able to cover these two books in one month, but reading them several times can lay a strong foundation for your future Bible-reading plan.

As you consider your commitment to read the Bible daily, read Isaiah 55:9-13, which focuses on the power and productivity of God's Word. Prayerfully meditate on each part of the passage.

Record the four words that follow the word *My* in verses 9-11.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What are God's ways and thoughts contrasted with in verse 9?

How are God's ways and thoughts different from ours?

What is a practical implication of the truth in verse 9 for the way we live our daily lives?

What is the result when God's Word goes out in verses 10-11?

What is the result when God's Word goes out in verses 12-13?

How does the figurative language communicate the message of verses 10-13 effectively?

Isaiah's message for the people of Judah was a message of deliverance from exile by the power of God's Word. When God speaks, His Word always accomplishes the purpose He has planned. Isaiah used figurative language to present a soaring vision of spiritual growth and blessing when God's Word goes forth. The same is true in the lives of those who study God's Word. His Word will not return to Him empty but will transform you and bless you in ways you have never imagined.

Day 3 Reading the Bible with Your Family

As my wife, Pat, and I have reared our children, we have tried to read the Bible with them in order to accomplish at least three basic things:

1. To teach them to love God
2. To teach them a biblical view of the world
3. To teach them biblical principles for living

The ways parents accomplish these goals vary from family to family. Here are some general approaches that may help you cultivate the important habit of family Bible reading.

1. Establish a pattern of Bible reading in your family. Many families have regular family devotions. Our friends, the Salazars, have a time of family Bible reading and discussion every day at a set time. Mike, the dad, explained:

We do fairly simple things. We start early, usually between 6:00 and 6:30 depending on the day. We open with prayer and review memory work. The smaller ones are memorizing the books of the Bible, and the older ones are memorizing Scripture. We review what has already been memorized and then move on to learning more books and another verse or two. All that usually takes fifteen minutes. After memory work we read together. I have the kids alternate and read aloud. We usually read several chapters, but that depends on the book. We stop and discuss, and the kids are free to interrupt to ask a question or make a point. All this usually takes between thirty and forty-five minutes.⁷

Some families, like the Salazars, have a devotional time in the morning; others, after supper or at bedtime. In addition to devotional reading of the Bible, our friends the Van Nestes have begun singing the psalms at suppertime. Other friends use a devotional guide like *Open Windows*⁸ or *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers. Others read through the Bible together, using a chronological Bible. Still others systematically teach their children biblical theology. And don't underestimate the value of biblical storybooks, recorded songs, and videos. Whatever you do, read the Bible in the context

of your family—together, separately, and consistently. Give a place to God’s Word in the normal patterns of your home life.

Maybe your kids have already left home or you do not have children. Who, then, is closest to you? Find one or several other members of the body of Christ with whom you can read the Bible. Reading and discussing Scripture is a wonderful way to build relationships while challenging one another to be doers of the Word.

List members of your family or fellow believers with whom you can regularly read the Bible.

Describe ways your family or friends currently read the Bible together.

Check the words that describe your family Bible reading.

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular | <input type="checkbox"/> Sporadic | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Intentional | <input type="checkbox"/> Rare | <input type="checkbox"/> Ineffective |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Occasional | <input type="checkbox"/> Effective | |

- 2. Help your family grasp the big picture of Scripture.** Reading an entire Bible book together will provide opportunities for you to teach your family the connection of this book to the rest of Scripture. Use opportunities like Christmas and Easter to share the whole story of redemption.
- 3. Train your family to listen to the Bible as it is taught.** God has given teachers and preachers of the Bible to the church as a gift. Teach your children to participate in the community of faith as good listeners. Instruct them to listen to the preacher’s sermon and to draw pictures or take notes. Then discuss the sermon over lunch.

Carefully read Psalm 78:5-8 in your Bible, meditating on the details of the passage.

What did God command fathers (ancestors) to do?

What are four reasons ancestors were to teach their children God's Word?

1. So that they might
2. So that they might put
3. So that they might not
4. So that they might keep

What is the result if this pattern is maintained?

God expects parents to intentionally and purposefully teach their children His Word. Do you want to see your children grow up to have biblical values, to live by biblical principles, to put their confidence in God, and to keep His commandments? Then take responsibility for their spiritual development.

Review the ideas you read about today. How can you and your family begin reading the Bible together in fresh ways?

Take time to pray about each family member's interaction with God's Word.

Day 4 Reading the Bible with Your Church, Part I

God intended us to live our Christian lives robustly in the context of a community of faith, a church. The church provides us a context for hearing, discussing, and living God's Word.

Throughout Scripture God instructed His people to hear and obey His Word. For example, in the Book of Deuteronomy Israel was poised to enter the land of promise. *Deuteronomy*, which means *second law*, is Moses' retelling of Israel's history, especially its covenant with God, to a new generation of people during the final weeks before crossing into the land. Deuteronomy 32 is Moses' final song, challenging the people to be faithful to the Lord, His covenant, and His law.

Read Deuteronomy 32:44-47.

Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and recited all the words of this song in the presence of the people. After Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, "Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to carefully follow all the words of this law. For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Circle all occurrences of the word *words*. What roles are the words of the law to have in the community of God's people?

God instructed the Israelites to heed His words and to teach their children to observe them. His words are life.

God also inspired the New Testament writers to emphasize the role of His Word in the lives of His people. In his letter to the Colossians Paul con-

fronted a false teaching that had been plaguing this congregation. Then he presented a series of practical exhortations on living the Christian life in community.

Read Colossians 3:16-17.

Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.

And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

What role does God's Word play in this passage?

What parallels do you notice between the passages from Deuteronomy and Colossians?

Both of these passages highlight the life-giving influence of God's Word among His people. In Deuteronomy the Israelites were about to enter a land where they would be surrounded by followers of false gods and teachings. The Colossian church had been infiltrated by heretical teachings that undermined a proper understanding of Christ's deity and lordship. One group was told to "take to heart all these words" (Deut. 32:46), while the other was told to let the message about Jesus "dwell richly among you" (Col. 3:16). In both cases God's Word would bring life and truth to the community of His people.

The same is true of Christ's church today. The Word of God must be central to everything a church teaches and does. For a church that finds itself surrounded by a society that promotes secularism on one hand and false beliefs on the other, God's Word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (see Ps. 119:105).

Check all of the ways you interact with the Bible in the context of your local church.

- Hearing the Word preached by a pastor
- Hearing the Word read in a worship service
- Small group/cell group
- Sunday School/Bible study
- Discipleship group
- Class or seminar on how to read and study the Bible
- Informal discussions with church members
- Special events or conferences
- Leadership training
- Other:

Identify how your attitudes and actions are affected when you interact with God's Word in the following contexts.

	ATTITUDES	ACTIONS
Listening to a sermon		
Participating in a small group, Sunday School class, or discipleship group		
Informally discussing the Bible with other Christians		

When you listen to a sermon, you receive instruction in theology, learning how the Bible forms your thinking about God, people, and the world. You are also challenged to live by the truth of God's Word. Participating in a group gives you an opportunity to examine the Scriptures in depth, to discuss your ideas with other believers, and to apply the Scriptures to your life needs. Informally discussing Bible passages with others opens your eyes to new insights about the Word and brings opportunities to apply the Word to immediate life circumstances. Your attitudes and actions can be changed by interacting with the Word in the body of Christ!

Day 5 Reading the Bible with Your Church, Part 2

Perhaps you have heard of the legendary feud between the Hatfields and McCoys. The two families became symbols of a culture of killing in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky and West Virginia in the late 19th century. It is estimated that 150,000 people were caught in the feuding culture of eastern Kentucky. A man named J. A. Burns became convinced that the only way to change the culture was by teaching the children how to think in a biblical way. So with the help of business people in the area, including my great-grandfather, Robert Carnahan, Oneida Baptist Institute opened in 1900 as a Christian boarding school for children from the mountains.

On the school's commencement day in 1915, George Baker was riding his mule in Oneida when Charlie Roberts pulled out a gun and started shooting at him. Instead of hitting George, he hit the mule, which made it as far as the school and died in the street there. George returned fire. People immediately sent for J. A. Burns. Burns sat down with the two men, and they listened to him. They agreed to let the court take care of the matter of the dead mule. Burns had the men shake hands and later said, "That ended the quarrel. There has not been any killing ... since last May. There is not going to be any. The days of feuding are done in our town." In fact, within a generation of the opening of Oneida, the feud culture was eradicated, due in large measure to the advent of Christian education.

Biblical values matter. Biblical thinking has a profound effect on individuals, families, and churches. As Christians learn to think biblically and live their lives according to biblical principles, communities can be changed for the better.

The Bible itself includes stories that reflect this truth. The Book of Nehemiah recounts a critical moment in the history of Israel. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians defeated the kingdom of Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, sending thousands of Jews into exile hundreds of miles away from their homeland. The prophets explained that the exile was punishment for their abandonment of God's law and their violation of the covenant. Eventually, the Persians, ruled by King Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians and

allowed the Jews to go home in 538 B.C. Yet for many decades the city of Jerusalem was still in disrepair, and the wall was broken down. The Book of Nehemiah focuses a great deal on the rebuilding of the wall, but it also focuses on restoring God's people as a covenant community. Central to that restoration was a return to God's law.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12. In the first six verses of the chapter, how did the people respond to Ezra's reading of the law?

In verses 7-8 how were the people helped to understand what they were hearing?

In verse 9 how did the people respond when they were deeply convicted by the Word?

In verses 9-12 how did the leaders encourage the people?

In this passage we see an important pattern:

Ezra read the law.

→ *The law was translated and interpreted.*

→ *The people listened attentively.*

→ *The people understood.*

→ *The people responded to the Word in brokenness.*

→ *The people worshiped and celebrated.*

→ *The leaders encouraged the people.*

Identify how this pattern occurs in the life of your church as people interact with God's Word.

The reading of the Word:

The Word translated and interpreted:

People listening attentively:

People understanding the Word:

People responding to the Word in brokenness:

Worship and celebration in response to the Word:

Leaders giving encouragement:

The Word plays a central role in the body of Christ. The integration of the Word into the life of the church builds a rhythm into the community of faith. We hear the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, meditate on the Word, and seek to live the Word, allowing it to shape us as individuals, as families, and as churches in the way we think and live. Our Word-oriented lives then become expressions of worship to God. Romans 12:1 reads, "By the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship." To present ourselves to God in response to His

Word is worship. If we are reading the Bible with the church, the result will be the application of the Word in the nitty-gritty details of day-to-day life in a way that is worshipful—in a way that glorifies God. When Scripture begins to change us, drawing us into a God-centered life, showing us our place in God's story, our lives are transformed by the renewing of our minds (see Rom. 12:2).

How does your interaction with God's Word affect your relationships with unbelievers and make an impact on your community?

Spend time thanking God for your experience of God's Word in your church. Think about the various contexts in your church in which you are blessed to hear and study the Bible. Commit to grow in the Word as a faithful member of the body of Christ.

Listen

Review this week's material and identify one thing you have learned that will help you listen to God's Word more effectively.

Understand

Write one way you have grown in your understanding of God's Word this week.

Respond

Identify one way you have responded meaningfully to God's Word this week.

Session 10 Group Experience (Optional)

Respond to the Word

1. Identify some guidelines for reading the Bible personally (pp. 188–92). What is your plan for reading the Bible in the coming weeks and months (p. 193)?
2. How do you read and talk about the Bible in your family (or with your closest friends; p. 196)?
3. Read Psalm 78:5-8 (p. 197). According to these verses, who has the primary responsibility for training children in God’s Word? How did this discipleship occur in your family of origin? What are you doing in your family and church now to teach the Word to your children?
4. Read Deuteronomy 32:44-47 and Colossians 3:16-17 (pp. 198–99). What evidence reveals the centrality of Scripture in your church?
5. How can your church grow in living the truths of listening, understanding, and responding to God’s Word?
6. How does your interaction with God’s Word affect your relationships with unbelievers and make an impact on your community?
7. What tools have you found most helpful as you have learned to read the Bible more effectively over the past nine weeks? How have they helped you?
8. What have been joys of learning to read the Bible better? What continues to be a struggle for you?
9. Spend time in prayer thanking God for your small-group time together and for His living and active Word.

Notes

Introduction

1. Brad J. Waggoner, *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 69.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 6. Available from the Internet: <http://books.google.com>.

Week 1

1. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 128. Available from the Internet: <http://books.google.com>.
2. Adapted from *Mary Jones and her Bible* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000).
3. A *Reader's Guide to the Bible* is available from LifeWay Church Resources Customer Service, (800) 458-2772.
4. Adapted from Avery T. Willis Jr., *MasterLife 1: The Disciple's Cross* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1996), 19–20.

Week 2

1. Adapted from “Amos Introduction,” HCSB Study Bible [online, cited 15 October 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.mystudybible.com.
2. David Dockery, in George Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 27–28.
3. Andreas Köstenberger, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 36.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1951), 102.
5. David Dockery, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 27.
6. Andreas Köstenberger, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 43.
7. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1978), 11, 23.

Week 3

1. Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare, Volume 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 208. Available from the Internet: <http://books.google.com>.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 56.
3. Bruce Waltke, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 79–80.
4. *Ibid.*, 85.

Week 4

1. J. G. Millar, “Deuteronomy,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 164–65.
2. Steven B. Cowan, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 358.
3. Danny Hays, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 96–97.
4. Adapted from *Holman Illustrated Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2006), 925, and Preben Vang and Terry Carter, *Telling God's Story* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 130.
5. Gary Smith, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 137–38.
6. *Ibid.*, 139.

Week 5

1. David Howard, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 112.

2. Adapted from Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 275–76.
3. Donald S. Whitney, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 232.

Week 6

1. New Living Translation Study Bible, 2nd ed., (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 1595.
2. Darrell Bock, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 152–54.
3. Adapted from Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 108, and Mike Beaumont, *Holman Illustrated Guide to the Bible* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 79.
4. Adapted from Charles L. Quarles “Paul,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [online, cited 22 October 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.mystudybible.com.
5. Darrell Bock, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 158.
6. “Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*,” *Timeless Witness* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 188.
7. Darrell Bock, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 166.

Week 7

1. Bryan Chapell, *The Wonder of It All* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 210.
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 30.
3. Craig Blomberg, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 174–75.
4. *Ibid.*, 179–80.
5. Vang and Carter, *Telling God's Story*, 205–6.
6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 153.

Week 8

1. Doug Moo, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 189–90.
2. *Ibid.*, 194.
3. *Ibid.*, 196.
4. *Ibid.*, 188–89.
5. Adapted from Scott Duvall, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 214–15.
6. *Ibid.*, 218.

Week 9

1. J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion*, ed. J. I. Packer (Great Britain: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1959), 94.
2. Adapted from Donald Whitney, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 233.
3. Order *LifeWalk* by calling LifeWay Church Resources Customer Service, (800) 458-2722, or by visiting www.lifeway.com.
4. Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1989), 61–63. Out of print.
5. *Ibid.*, 62.
6. To order *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible and A Reader's Guide to the Bible*, call (800) 458-2722 or visit www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife.
7. Mike Salazar, in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, 265–66.
8. Order *Open Windows* by calling LifeWay Church Resources Customer Service, (800) 458-2722, or by visiting www.lifeway.com.