

## Bible Study

Today people commonly believe that the Catholic Church was just “the church” for a period of many centuries, and that the Reformation happened because the church had become too corrupt; it started out good but went bad over time. That is actually not the case. The origin of the Catholic Church can be traced back to Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and it was bad from the start. The Catholic Church has *always* taught a false gospel of salvation by works, and all throughout its history there have been genuine Christians who opposed it and believed in salvation by grace through faith. The Catholic Church has *never* been the true church; instead it has spent 15 centuries opposing the true church and doing everything in its power to stamp it out – up to and including the execution of *millions* of people. You don't hear much about it anymore, but the Catholic Church has a long and bloody history.

One of the key threats to Catholicism during the past 1500 years was the Bible. It was immediately obvious to many people who read the Bible that the teachings of the Catholic Church were wrong and heretical. Since the Bible was a threat, the Catholic Church made ownership of Bibles a crime punishable by death. A great many people were hunted down and brutally murdered because they owned a copy of the Word of God. The Pope actually sent out armies to find Christian cities and massacre everyone inside, for the “crime” of believing in salvation by grace through faith. Throughout its history the Catholic Church has executed an estimated 50 million people for the “crime” of rejecting Catholic doctrine. They have never apologized for this.

Given the awful persecution that genuine believers suffered during the Middle Ages, you would think that their knowledge of the Bible would have suffered. After all, it was very difficult to even get a copy of the Bible (especially before the printing press was invented), and it was incredibly dangerous to own one. Yet, as it turned out, believers during this period had an amazing knowledge of the Bible. This is what one Catholic inquisitor had to say:

“They had the Old and New Testament in the vulgar tongue; and they teach and learn so well, that he had seen and heard a country clown recount all Job, word for word; and divers, who could perfectly deliver all the New Testament; and that men and women, little and great, day and night, cease not to learn and teach” (Orchard, p. 266).

What a testimony! Not only did these persecuted believers study and teach the Bible *day and night*, but there were some who could recite the entire book of Job – and others could recite *the entire New Testament*! Another inquisitor had this to say:

“They can repeat by heart, in the vulgar tongue, the whole text of the New Testament and great part of the Old: and, adhering to the text alone, they reject decretals<sup>1</sup> and decrees with the sayings and expositions of the Saints” (Faber, p. 492).

These ancient Christians could not only recite the entire New Testament, but a *great part of the Old Testament as well*. That is absolutely astounding!

Today things are very different. The Catholic Church has lost its power to hunt down and execute Christians; the last time it tried to kill someone over the Bible was in 1902 when the

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<sup>1</sup> Statements issued by the Pope, which the Catholic Church claimed were binding on all Christians.

Archbishop of Sucre (in Bolivia) suggested that a man who was handing out Bibles should be executed. There are still parts of the world today where Christians are hunted down and persecuted, but in the United States we are largely free to own Bibles and openly conduct Bible studies. Bible study material is readily available, and thanks to modern technology it is even possible to listen to the sermons of pastors who are thousands of miles away. The amount of Biblical knowledge that we have access to is simply staggering.

Yet, despite this, we know far *less* about the Bible than our ancestors. There are few Christians today who have even *read* the entire Bible. Our forefathers did more than just read it: *they actually had most of the Bible memorized*. I have never met *anyone* who could even come close to reciting the entire New Testament. That level of Biblical knowledge is simply unheard of today.

The reason for this is quite simple: our ancestors cared a great deal more about the Bible than we do. The Bible really mattered to them – but in our time (in the age of Laodicea) the churches are characterized by people who simply don't care. The Bible doesn't mean very much to us. I've lost track of how many times I've tried to tell a Christian about the Bible only to be told “Well, you know, I just don't really care.” People in ancient times cared so much about the Bible that they were willing to *risk their lives* to study it. Today that kind of passion is gone. There are still some pastors who beg their congregations to read the Bible, but most people can't be bothered. Many Christians think that reading the Bible is a chore – it's something they feel that they should do, but it's not something they actually want to do. The average American spends 5 hours *each day* watching television, but most Christians can't be bothered to spend 15 minutes reading their Bible.

Yes, it's true that the Bible is long, but let's be honest: that's not the real problem. The Harry Potter series is more than 4,000 pages long, and people who are fans can read the entire series in a matter of weeks. These fans spend endless hours studying the complex world of Harry Potter, learning about the characters and the plot and all of the tiny little details. Their passion for the books is so great that the hours that they spend reading them aren't a burden. In fact, they are so enthralled with the books that they don't even notice the passage of time.

Our ancestors had that kind of love for the Bible. They were truly passionate about it and were willing to risk death to own a copy of the Word. They loved it so much that studying it wasn't a burden. In fact, they very nearly memorized the *entire Bible*, simply because they were into it *that much*. They weren't forcing themselves to go through some kind of painful religious exercise; they genuinely loved it. It was a great joy to them. They had a tremendous love for God, and that love manifested itself in a love for God's word.

We are not at all like that. Our generation cares so little about the things of God that we make Him want to vomit:

**Revelation 3:15:** "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see."

Don't get me wrong – the modern church is all about serving God. We spend lots and lots of time busily serving the Lord in all sorts of ways. It's just that we don't care very much about His Word. The Bible is so unimportant to us that reading it is a chore. Some people feel guilty about not reading it and try to squeeze in a few minutes here or there as time permits. If the truth were known, though, we don't actually *want* to read it.

If Christians care about the Word then why is it so difficult to find people who have read the entire Bible? If you read just one chapter a day you can read the entire Bible in 3 years. How is it that we can find time to watch 5 hours of television each day and yet we can't find time to read even one chapter out of the Bible? Isn't this a rather glaring sign that we just don't care?

There are other people who try to read through the Bible but who get stuck in Leviticus or Numbers and then just give up. To me this is a sign that their heart just wasn't in it. After all, if you really cared, wouldn't it make more sense to research the parts that are hard to understand – or, in a worst-case scenario, simply skip over them and move on to whatever is next? People who are die-hard Harry Potter fans will spend *years* discussing the parts of the series that are hard to understand or that don't make sense. Christians, though, just throw up their hands and say “I give up. What's on television tonight?”

This all comes down to a matter of the heart. If we *actually cared* about the Bible then we would read it and study it. In fact, we would do everything we could to learn about it. If we truly loved God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then we would have an incredible passion for His Word. We would *want* to know it. We would make it a priority. We wouldn't see reading it as a burden or afterthought; instead we would be all over it. We would care so much about it that we would know it forward and backward, inside and out.

Would that God would give us a heart like the one our ancestors had! I wish modern Christians had the same enthusiasm and passion for the Word as our forefathers. It would make a tremendous difference.

## Read the Word – All Of It

This goes without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway: God wants us to read His word. He wants us to study it, think about it, meditate on it, and delight in it:

**Psalm 1:2:** “But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”

God also wants us to live by it, and to hunger for it the way we hunger for food:

**Matthew 4:4:** “But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

Think of it this way: God wants us to live by His Word. How can you possibly live in obedience to His Word if you haven't read it? How can His Word be a light to your path if you don't know it?

People treat the Bible as if it contains a few good passages that are mixed up with a lot of fluff. They study some parts of it and leave large portions of it unread and unlearned. The fact is that *all* of the Bible is important. It does not contain any extra or unnecessary parts:

**2 Timothy 3:16:** “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Notice how clear this verse is! *All* Scripture is given by the inspiration of God. *All* Scripture is profitable. It is *all* meaningful. Don't just read the “good parts”; it is *all* “good parts”. You need to read all of it and know all of it.

In order to make sure that I don't miss anything, I like to start reading the Bible at the very beginning (Genesis 1) and read straight through to the end (Revelation 22). I've done this for many years and have read the Bible cover-to-cover many times. I'm not saying that this is the only way to study the Bible, but it's not a bad way. There are some people who just open their Bible at random and read whatever passage they happen to find. I am very leery of this approach because it makes it easy to skip entire portions of the Bible. *All* of it needs to be read. I encourage you to come up with a study plan that encompasses the entire Bible on a regular basis.

Here is another way to look at it: are you absolutely sure that *everything* in your life is more important than reading the Bible? Yes, we all have responsibilities, and yes, those are important. There are some people who read the Bible instead of doing their jobs, and that is a terrible thing. But are you really so busy that there is absolutely *no way* you could possibly spend some time with God in His Word? Isn't it far more likely that the reason you never get around to reading your Bible is because you don't actually care about it?

I realize that sometimes things come up. I read the Bible regularly, but there are some days when I don't. I am *not* saying that it is a sin to go an entire day without reading your Bible. What I am saying is that we need to do a lot more with our Bibles than just let them collect dust on a shelf. We need to have a plan to not only read it, but to read *all* of it *on a continual basis*. It's not good enough to read it once and then put it back on the shelf and forget about it; we need to stay in the Word our entire lives. A true sports fan would never say “Well, I've seen one football game so I'm good to go.” Since he is a true fan, he *keeps* watching football games. If we truly love God then we will *keep* reading His word – not because we should, but because we love it.

## Know The Word

As Christians, we should know what the Bible teaches:

**2 Timothy 2:15:** “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

The reason we should read the Bible is so that *we can learn what it teaches*. Reading the Bible is not an end to itself; instead, it is how we learn its teachings. We also need to learn how to properly interpret the Bible (which is a topic I will discuss more later on).

The reason we need to learn what the Bible teaches is twofold. First, it is so that we can honor God with our lives. We can't possibly honor God if we don't know what His Word says. The Bible is the only thing we have that tells us what honors God and what doesn't; there are no other sources of divine revelation. Without the teachings of the Bible we are walking in darkness.

But there is another reason we should learn it, and that is so that we can defend the faith:

**I Peter 3:15:** “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:”

We need to know the Bible so that we can give an answer to those who ask questions. Modern Christians are absolutely terrible at this. They can tell you *what* they believe, but they can't tell you *why* they believe it. They can't defend their beliefs. Most of the time they can't even point you to Bible verses that defend their positions. The reason for this is because their beliefs aren't based on the Bible; instead they're based on what their pastors or parents have told them. When they were growing up they were told to believe certain things, and so they do. Their beliefs have no Biblical foundation; it's just tradition.

That is *not* how God wants us to be. God wants us to believe things *because His Word teaches them*, not because that's how we were raised. As Christians we *must* have the ability to defend our beliefs with the Word. In fact, the truth is that our beliefs *ought to come from the Word in the first place*. If we are starting with a belief and then going to the Bible to try to justify it then we are doing it backwards. Instead of imposing our beliefs on the Bible or using it as a prop to defend what we already believe, we ought to be reading the Bible and believing what it teaches. When the Word disagrees with what we already believe (and that will happen quite a lot) then we need to *change the way we think* and believe what the Bible says. There are many people who look at the Bible and say “Well, I just don't believe that”. The truth is, as a Christian, *you have no choice but to believe it*. If what you believe disagrees with the Bible then *you are wrong* and you need to change. You do not have the option of rejecting the Bible's teachings and doing your own thing.

Which brings me to my next point:

## Don't Just Believe What You're Told

A lot of people treat their pastor as if he was God. They simply believe whatever he says. If a pastor or teacher stands up and tells them that the Bible says so-and-so, they will just believe it. I'm sure this seems like a very spiritual thing to do, but the truth is it's a terrible mistake. God charges us to study the Bible *for ourselves* and compare everything we hear to the Word of God to make sure that it's true. We ought to be like the Bereans:

**Acts 17:11:** “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

Why were the Bereans “more noble”? Because when they were told something they *searched the Scriptures for themselves* to see if it was true. In fact, they did this *on a daily basis*. They actually exercised discernment!

The modern church desperately needs to learn this skill because there is a staggering lack of discernment today. A pastor can get up and say almost anything and people will just believe him. People are *not* going home and searching the Scriptures to see if their pastor was right. Instead they're

just saying “Well, that sounds good to me” and going on about their lives.

The fact is that a lot of things that pastors say are actually *not* true. For example, almost everyone believes that angels sang at the birth of Christ. There is even a famous hymn entitled “Hark, The Herald Angel Sings”. People have heard this all their lives and don't even question it – but it's wrong. Angels did *not* sing at the birth of Christ. In Luke 2 we find the account of Christ's birth, and this is what it says:

**Luke 2:13:** “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,  
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

The angels *said* “Glory to God in the highest”; they didn't sing it. This isn't some complicated and hard-to-find truth; it's right there in Luke 2. It takes all of five minutes to look up the chapter, read it, and verify what the song says – but *nobody does that*. Instead people just believe what they're told.

Likewise, it's a widespread belief that Gabriel will blow the trumpet when the Lord returns; there's even a song about it. This “fact” is also wrong. Gabriel appears four times in the Bible (Daniel 8:16, 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26) but he never blows any trumpets, and he's not even mentioned when the Bible is talking about the angels that are involved in end-times events. It only takes a few minutes to find this out but no one ever checks. They just believe what they are told.

I can go on and on and on. This doesn't just affect minor things; there are all sorts of major doctrines that people commonly get wrong, but no one bothers to look it up for themselves and see what the Scripture actually says. The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily, but we don't; instead we watch television because that's more important to us.

## Interpret The Bible Correctly

When people do read the Bible, the question they ask themselves is this: “What does this passage mean to me?” *That is the wrong question to ask*. Despite what you may have been told, the Bible is *not* about you. God did not write the Bible with you in mind; in fact, there are large portions of the Word that are not aimed at you at all. (For example, some parts of it are written to Israel, and other parts are written to those who will live through the Tribulation. Taking a command that was given to Israel and applying it to the Church is a terrible mistake.) The question you should be asking is this: **what does the passage actually mean?** What is God doing in this particular passage, and what can we learn from it?

Think of it this way: when you get a bill in the mail you don't look for hidden personal meanings. Instead you interpret the bill objectively using the standard rules of grammar. You understand that when the electric company sends you a bill for \$293.11, it's because you owe them that amount of money and they want you to send them a check (and if you don't, they will cut off your power). You understand that bills are *bills* and you know what to do in response. It's not complicated.

This is very simple – but people don't interpret the Bible that way at all. Instead of researching the context, reading the entire passage, and trying to figure out what the writer was trying to say, they read verses out of context and utterly mangle them. People interpret Bible verses as if they were some kind of personal fortune cookie – and as a result they get into all kinds of trouble.

For example, take this verse from Joel:

**Joel 3:10:** "... let the weak say, I am strong."

This verse is quite famous. In fact, we even have hymns about it! People read that verse and say "See, God is telling me that I am actually a strong person." We thunderously cry out "Let the weak say, I am strong!" It is a cheer – a rallying cry. It gets us all excited. It's great – except we are *completely butchering what the passage is actually saying*.

If you read the entire chapter of Joel 3 you will discover that God is talking about the battle of Armageddon. At the end of the Tribulation the armies of the world will gather and attack Jerusalem. They are determined to wipe out the Jews, but God mocks them. God says that He will defend His people and utterly wipe out the invaders. He then mockingly tells them this:

**Joel 3:9:** "Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up:

10 Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruninghooks into spears: **let the weak say, I am strong**.

11 Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause thy mighty ones to come down, O Lord.

12 Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about."

God isn't encouraging the Gentiles; He is making fun of them. He is saying that the Gentile nations are claiming to be strong, but they are actually weak. They are coming to make war and wipe out Israel, but instead God will judge them and wipe them out. When God says "let the weak say, I am strong", what He is actually saying is this: you Gentiles are claiming to be strong, but in reality you are weak and I am going to utterly annihilate you.

Do you see how the *actual* meaning of the verse is *completely different* from the way most people interpret it? Finding the real interpretation wasn't hard: all we had to do was *read the entire chapter* instead of focus on just that one verse. It wasn't hard.

The rules for interpreting the Bible are not difficult. First, **if plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense**. If the Scripture can be taken literally then it *should* be taken literally. A symbolic or "spiritual" interpretation should *only* be used when a literal interpretation makes no sense or when the passage is clearly symbolic. Whatever you do, *do not* interpret the entire Bible symbolically. Only apply a symbolic interpretation when it is absolutely clear that the Bible is using symbolism. *The Bible is not an allegory*. You do not have the right to make it mean whatever you want it to mean. Your job, as a student, is to find the *actual* meaning of the passage.

Second, **interpret Scripture with Scripture**. When you run across a case of Biblical symbolism you are *not* allowed to decide for yourself what the symbol means. In order to find out the meaning of the symbol you must look the symbol up in the Bible and see how the Bible interprets that symbol. *The Bible defines the symbols it uses*. Whatever you do, don't look it up somewhere else; don't use external sources to define the Bible's symbols.

Third, as we saw in the case of Joel 3, **context is everything**. Don't read just one verse; instead read the entire chapter. It's really best to read the entire Bible and keep everything in mind, because sometimes the answer is not in the chapter that you're reading. For example, in 2 Kings 18 Rab-shakeh told the Israelites that King Hezekiah had taken away God's altars and high places. That may sound plausible, but it's actually a lie. The truth is that Hezekiah loved the Lord and served Him – but that

isn't mentioned in 2 Kings 18. The only way to find this out is to know the story of Hezekiah. You have to do your homework.

The final point to remember is to **keep the audience in mind**. Just because God told Israel that they couldn't eat bacon doesn't mean that *you* can't eat bacon. The Mosaic Law applied to ancient Israel; it does not apply to modern Christians. Likewise, God made some promises to Israel that He did not make to the Church. Just because God promised it in the Bible *does not mean God promised it to you*. When reading a passage you need to figure out who the passage is about. This is difficult and takes a lot of time and experience, but fortunately there are resources available to help. If you read the Bible and mistakenly assume that all of it applies to you then you will end up in a lot of trouble. This does *not* mean that you can ignore some parts of the Bible, but it does mean that parts of it are to be used in different ways.

For example, in the book of Revelation the Bible makes it clear that anyone who takes the Mark of the Beast will be damned forever. The book of Revelation also says that the Mark appears during the Tribulation. Since the Church will be raptured before the Tribulation begins, that means that the Church will never be confronted with the temptation of taking the Mark. Revelation's warning about the Mark is aimed at people who will be on Earth at that time, *not* us. Since we know the **context** and the **audience** we can arrive at the correct interpretation. We can also know that if we become Christians now, before the Rapture, then we will never have to face the Mark at all.

## In Conclusion

There is a great deal more that can be said, but my time is short so I will close. It is *vital* that we study the Bible and learn what it teaches. It is vital that we take what we hear and compare it to the Word. It is vital that we know how to defend our beliefs and answer those who question us.

More than that, though, and above all else, it is vital that we develop a true passion for the Word. We need to love it and cherish it. If we truly love God then we will love His word; if we are passionate about Him then we will be passionate about the things He has said. If we have no love for the Word then the chances are very great that we have no real love for God either. We must cry out to God and ask for a heart that is passionate about Him, and we need to prepare our heart to seek Him. If our heart is cold and our passion is gone then our Bible studies are never going to get very far.

For my own part, I have made it a practice to continually read the Bible cover-to-cover. I have read the entire Bible many times, and each time I read it I see things that I had not seen before. The Bible never gets old and I never exhaust it; the more time I spend in it the more things I find. Even the seemingly boring parts have treasures hidden in them, if we will just take the time to dig them out.

If at all possible, though, I would advise you to do more than just read your Bible. Reading the Bible is good, but it's easy to read a passage and then immediately forget what was just read. You should strongly consider getting a journal and writing a few brief notes about the chapter that you just read. What did the chapter mean? Did you learn anything? Was there anything that you found strange or difficult to understand? Is there anything that you might want to research later?

You don't have to spend a great deal of time on this or go into a lot of depth. But if you do this – if you take the time to think about the chapter and write about it – you will get a great deal more out of the Bible than you did before. It will open up entirely new vistas.