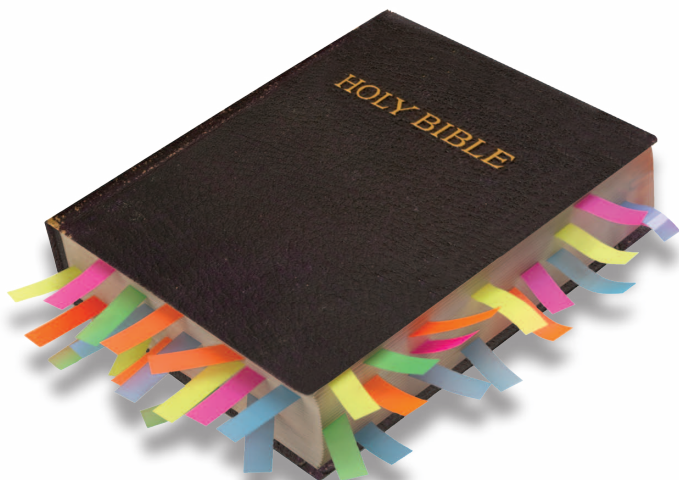


"If you have any questions about the Bible—this is the place to start."

JOHN ORTBERG, author of *Who Is This Man?*



THE BIBLE QUESTIONS

Shedding Light on the World's Most Important Book

HAL SEED

SAMPLER

BOOK AVAILABLE
AUGUST 2012

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Dear Christian Leader,

I'd like to invite you to join me in launching a Bible-reading revolution in our nation.

Long gone are the days when families had the time to sit together after dark and read the Bible out loud. Fewer Americans are attending church than were a century ago, and many of those churchgoers feel uncomfortable and unprepared to study the Bible for themselves. It is clear that, as a nation, our Bible reading is waning. I'd like to reverse that trend.

In 2006, we wrote *The God Questions* to help churches and groups like yours reach people for Christ. Hundreds of churches experienced thousands of conversions, increased small group attendance and strengthened believers' faith. Now we'd like to take it a step further with *The Bible Questions*.

The Bible Questions is a six-week campaign that:

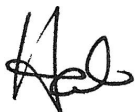
- Answers the top twenty questions people have about the Bible.
- Starts with Bible basics and ends with teaching people how to study Scripture for themselves.
- Empowers your members to be inviters.
- Develops a daily devotional habit.
- Appeals to teens, collegians and men.
- Focuses the whole church on the importance of the Bible.
- Increases your small groups.
- Brings people to Christ.

The Bible Questions book has four weeks of daily readings and six weeks of small group discussions. I've developed a six-week sermon series, along with a Leader's Guide and PowerPoint slides, which you can access and utilize at www.pastormentor.com. Outreach Inc. has developed outreach and invitational tools, which you can access at www.outreach.com.

Will you join me in launching a Bible-reading revolution this year?

What follows are three sample chapters and one small group study, so you can get a flavor for how *The Bible Questions* will work with your church or group.

God bless you in your leadership!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'H. J. ...' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Contents

Foreword	9
This Is the Bible	11
Part One: Primary Questions	13
1 Who Wrote the Bible?	15
2 How Is the Bible Different from Other Books?	26
3 Who Decided What Went into the Bible?	33
4 How Accurate Can the Bible Be?	40
5 Did God Really Write the Bible?	47
Part Two: Purpose Questions	53
6 Does the Bible Speak to People?	55
7 What's the Bible's Purpose?	61
8 Can the Bible Make Me a Better Person?	66
9 What's the Central Message of the Bible?	73
10 What's the Bible's Story Line?	83
Part Three: Probing Questions	93
11 Why Are There So Many Translations?	95
12 Why Was God So Violent in the Old Testament?	104
13 Why Is There Only One Way to Heaven?	110
14 When Will Jesus Return?	118
15 Where Is the Trinity Found in Scripture?	125

Part Four: Practical Questions.	131
16 How Do I Study the Bible?	133
17 How Do I Find the Meaning of the Text?	142
18 How Do I Apply What I Learn?	148
19 Where Can I Get Help with the Bible?.	154
20 How Can I Master this Book?	163
Small Group Study Guide	169
Acknowledgments.	191
Appendix 1: The Bible Study Process.	193
Appendix 2: The Bible in One Verse	195
Notes	199
About the Author	203

Did God Really Write the Bible?

*I must confess to you that the majesty of the scriptures astounds me. . . .
If it had been the invention of man, the invention would have
been greater than the greatest heroes.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau



Across the centuries and cultures, people have believed that the Bible is the Word of God. Does that mean that God wrote it? After all, in chapter one I listed the authors of each book of the Bible. So in what way did God participate in the writing of Scripture? In a scientific culture like ours, it's hard to imagine a supernatural presence breaking into the corporeal world. Yet most cultures in history have had no problem with that idea.

Remember the Motilone tribesmen mentioned in chapter two? This Stone Age culture had within its collective consciousness a conviction that God had produced a means of communicating with them. Being a preliterate society, the Motilones had no concept of a book. They imagined God speaking through a banana stalk.

OTHER PEOPLES OF THE BOOK

Halfway around the world from the Motilones live the Lahu

people. The Lahu live on a tiny strip of Myanmar that borders China, Thailand and Laos. For centuries these people believed that Gui'Sha, the Creator of all things, had given their forefathers his law written on rice cakes!

According to legend their forefathers had eaten the rice cakes during a famine, rationalizing that now they would have God's word inside of them. The Lahu believed they could not fully obey Gui'Sha's laws until they regained the precise written form of his laws. Their holy men taught that when the right time came, Gui'Sha would send a white brother with a white book containing the laws of Gui'Sha.

Bordering the Lahu is a people called the Wa. The Wa were headhunters who believed that one day a white brother would come with a copy of the book they had lost. In the late 1800s, a prophet named Pu Chan began teaching that the Wa needed to cease headhunting because the time the white brother would come was fast approaching, and he might not share God's law if he saw them engaging in such practices.

In 1892, William Marcus Young brought his family to Myanmar (then known as Burma). He felt called by God to do mission work in this country. Settling in the city of Kengtung, a modern city by 1890s standards, Young began to preach from the Bible in the marketplace.

One day a group of men in tribal clothing surrounded Young as he preached. As they stared at his Bible they began pleading with him to follow them up to the mountains. "We have been waiting for you!" they explained. After some discussion, Young followed them. The Lahu people began responding to his message in droves. They had no trouble believing that God had written a book to them.

Meanwhile, Pu Chan, the prophet of the Wa people continued to teach that the white man with the book would come to them soon. One day he saddled a little pony and told his disciples to follow it to *a white brother bearing the book of Siyeh, the True God.*

The story gets a little crazy at this point, but it's documented by Don Richardson in *Eternity in Their Hearts*.¹ Pu Chan's pony traveled two hundred miles across mountain trails to the city of Kengtung. The beast turned into Young's missionary compound and stopped at an unfinished well. The Wa men who had been following it didn't understand what had happened—until they looked into the well and noticed a white man looking back up at them. "Hello strangers!" he said. "May I help you?"

The Wa messengers asked, "Have you brought the book of God?" Young nodded.

As you can imagine, this tribe of 100,000 people were very responsive to the man with the book. Embedded in their culture was the assurance that God had developed a means to communicate with them. The Bible claims to be that source.

INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

All Scripture is God-breathed. The apostle Paul pointed us toward an understanding of God's influence on the Bible when he wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). There are three important words in Paul's statement. The first is the word *all*. Whatever influence God exerted on Scripture, he exerted it on *all* the words of the Bible. The second important word is *Scripture*. In the previous chapter we learned the five distinguishing marks that help us recognize what is Scripture and what isn't. The third and most important term is *God-breathed*. In Greek the word is *theopneustos*. It's a compound word (*theo* = God; *pneustos* = breathed). *Theopneustos* literally means "breathed into by God."

Paul is saying that God breathed his thoughts, desires and content into the minds of the authors as they wrote each word of the sixty-six books of the Bible. Theologians describe this as *plenary* (all), *verbal* (words) and *inerrancy* (without error). As they wrote the original texts of Scripture, God breathed into

the authors the words, concepts and ideas he wanted written, in the way he wanted them written. Somehow he did this through the unique personalities of each writer without compromising their free will.

Moved by the Holy Spirit. The apostle Peter helps us understand the process of inspiration further. He says, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21). Peter experienced God’s “breathing into” while writing two books of the Bible. His personal experience was that he was moved by God to write what God wanted written. The writing was God’s idea and God’s initiative, using Peter and others to record it for him.

If that’s true, how do we account for the different styles used by each author? Isaiah wrote with confidence. Jeremiah wrote with sorrow. Daniel used strange descriptions. John used simple words. Luke employed technical language.

The answer is, God prepared authors—their heredity, their experiences and the time they lived in history—to be able to understand and express exactly what he wanted written. The Holy Spirit worked in unique and supernatural ways so that each biblical author’s written words were “the words of God.”

The Word of God. Paul seems to have understood this intuitively. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, he wrote, “We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.” At certain times when Paul wrote or spoke, he had a clear sense that God was “breathing” into him, communicating “the word of God” to his people.

WAYS GOD COMMUNICATED

Handwriting. Twice in the Bible (Exodus 24:12 and Daniel 5:5) God physically wrote what he wanted to say. The rest of the time, he used prophets and apostles to write for him.

Dictation. The various biblical authors wrote 413 times “This is what the LORD says” (or “Thus saith the LORD,” in the King James Version). Scripture writers recorded the phrase “God said” around 3,800 times. An example of this is in Jeremiah 26:1-2: “This word came from the LORD: ‘This is what the LORD says: . . . Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word.’” God’s “breathing” was so emphatic that at least 3,800 times the Bible’s authors felt as if he was dictating to them.

Supernatural influence. First Corinthians 2:13 says, “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.” Some portion of God’s influence included teaching and explaining spiritual truths.

EXACT WORDS ARE IMPORTANT

In the final chapter of the book of Revelation God makes it clear that the precise words of his book are important.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City. (Revelation 22:18-19)

Charles Wesley wrote,

The Bible must be the invention of either good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God. Therefore: 1. It could not be the invention of good men or angels, for they neither would nor could make a book and tell lies all the time they were writing

it, saying, “Thus saith the Lord,” when it was their own invention. 2. It could not be the invention of bad men or devils, for they would not make a book which commands all duty, forbids all sin, and condemns their souls to hell to all eternity. 3. Therefore, I draw this conclusion, that the Bible must be given by divine inspiration.²

ASSIGNMENT

Read 2 Timothy 3:14–4:2.

1. Why was it important for Timothy to have confidence in the words of Scripture?
2. Why is it important for you to have confidence in the words of Scripture?
3. What difference does it make whether the Bible is *the words of men* or *the Word of God*?

NOTES

¹See Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1985), pp. 85-104.

²Charles Wesley, cited in Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), p. 178.

Can the Bible Make Me a Better Person?

*The existence of the Bible, as a book for the people,
is the greatest benefit which the human race has ever experienced.
Every attempt to belittle it is a crime against humanity.*

Immanuel Kant



At eight years old, Josiah became king. His father, Amon, had done such a poor job of ruling that he'd been assassinated by his own advisers. Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, had been an equally poor ruler. Amon and Manasseh led the people away from God and abandoned his temple. We learned earlier that the scrolls of the Old Testament were stored in the temple.

When young Josiah realized the condition of his kingdom, he commissioned his priests to repair and reopen the temple. In what might be a comical scene if it wasn't both tragic and true, Hilkiah the high priest went into the temple and found the sacred scrolls. Apparently, no one had thought of, taught or handled God's Word for over a generation.

The king's secretary reported, "Hilkiah the priest has given

me a book” (2 Kings 22:10). He started reading it to the king.

When Josiah heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us. (2 Kings 22:13)

The Bible’s epitaph on Josiah reads, “Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25).

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

One way to answer the question, *Can the Bible make me a better person?* is to conduct a personal experiment: Read the Bible and watch how it influences you over time.

Another way is to look for changes in others who have read or are reading the Bible. The truth of God’s Word changed Josiah dramatically. The first time he heard it, it prompted him to tear his robes, which was an ancient sign of repentance and mourning.

Or look at the Wa people. I’ll bet if we asked their neighbors if the Bible can make people better, they’d all agree that the Wa were much improved, having given up their headhunting.

Likewise the Motilones. Fifteen years after Bruce Olson translated “God’s banana stalk” for them, this once headhunting tribe set up medical clinics and were offering free medical help to the peoples they had once hunted.

FRANCIS KAMAU

I have a friend who planted a church in Nairobi, Kenya, a few

years ago. His name is Francis Kamau. His people call him “Bishop” because of the work he’s done in getting churches started all over English-speaking Africa.

Nairobi is a big city (population three million). When Francis prayed about where to start his church, he decided to locate it in an area that was filled with bars and brothels. The Bishop knew that God’s Word changes lives, so he waded into an area that needed the most changing.

I preached at Francis’s church not long ago. One of the church members gave Lori and me a ride to our hotel afterward. “See this boulevard?” he said. “When the Bishop first started, there were prostitutes all along this street. Today, many of them are members of our church and have found better ways to make money.”

Can the words of a book really change lives? No. But the *truth* inside the words can, when infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s the dynamic of the Bible. Its truth, brought to life by the Spirit, changes lives every day. Sometimes those changes are big, like inspiring someone to stop killing à la the Wa and Motilones. Sometimes those changes are small, like prompting a child to be kinder to her mother, or encouraging an employee to stop taking company supplies for personal use.

HOW THE BIBLE CHANGES PEOPLE

Paul’s pattern in his letters is to open with theology and close with practical application. The book of Romans covers some significant theology in its first eleven chapters, but then it shifts to application in chapter twelve. Based on what Christ has done for us, Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Transformation begins with the mind. What you think about and how you think about it shape your attitude and behaviors every minute of the day. Growing up, I was a competitive swimmer. I would spend several hours each day counting laps and calcu-

lating times. As a result, I'm still pretty good with numbers today. Since becoming a Christian, I have spent significant time reading, studying and thinking about the words of the Bible. As a result of that, most of my thoughts these days are about God's plans for this world and how he wants me to treat people.

THINKING GOD'S THOUGHTS

We've already established that the Bible conveys the thoughts of God recorded in the words of men. The great virtue of reading and studying the Bible is that doing so enables us to think God's thoughts after him. If you want to know what God thinks about how you should treat people, read Matthew 22:39. He tells us clearly, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Or memorize Philipians 2:4, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (ESV).

The thing about this world is, it's not the way God intended it to be. One day it will be restored to an Edenlike condition. For now, sin reigns, and creation is under a curse. Listen to your parents fight and your mind will absorb an image of a manner of fighting that is probably not the way God intended. Watch a television show and you'll see people do things to one another that certainly aren't what God planned.

But when we read the Bible and we come across statements like "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:26), and "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25). These perspectives resonate with our souls, but they're not resident in our world, unless we learn and model them.

Paul said the way to avoid being conformed to the pattern of this world is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Anyone who grew up playing with Transformers and Decepticons knows that when they are "transformed" from machines to robots, they stay that way until they are deliberately changed back. The verb

tense Paul uses for “transform” is a tense that means “transform and keep transforming.” Being transformed is a continuous action. That’s why people who start reading the Bible never stop reading it. We need continuous input so we don’t change back.

Our world keeps sending us messages and models of an inferior way to do things. God’s Word shows us a better way. To keep improving in this better way, keep feeding your mind on Scripture so you don’t slip back into your old ways and patterns.

The Bible doesn’t identify the author of Psalm 119, but whoever he was, he observed something profound: “I have hidden your word in my heart / that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). The Scripture he absorbed was diminishing his tendency to sin. That’s an argument for memorizing portions of Scripture. The more your brain has top-of-the-mind-awareness of God’s view of things, the less your heart will want to do things that hurt you and other people.

WHY IT’S HARD TO READ THE BIBLE

Most of the significant battles we face take place inside our mind. We want to be a more productive person. That means we’ve got to decide to go to bed earlier. We want to get in better shape. That means we’ve got to decide to work out. We don’t like our job. That means we’ve got to decide to either have a better attitude or look for a new place of employment. God knew this principle, so he wrote us a book to help us think better. Then he infused his Holy Spirit into the book so that we would have supernatural help in understanding and applying what he wrote.

Satan knows this, which is part of the reason why it’s hard to sit down and read the Bible. The deceiver of our souls will do almost anything to keep us from allowing our mind to be transformed. Ephesians 6:12 says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil.” The struggle starts with our mind. Thankfully, the more we absorb Scripture into our

mind, the easier it becomes not only to spend time reading the Bible but also to live like Jesus. Because belief determines behavior, and right behavior reinforces right belief.

Another reason we find it hard to read Scripture is because of what the Bible calls our “flesh.” We’re creatures of habit who don’t like to change. Reading Scripture really will change us, and we know it intuitively. So every time our conscious mind says, *I want to read the Bible*, our subconscious mind retorts, *If you do, it will change you, and change is painful*.

The next time that happens, redirect the reasoning in your mind with this thought: *This kind of change will make my life better, because I’ll become more of the person God intended me to be*. Then dig in and be transformed!

THE BIBLE AND CHILDREN

In Daniel 1, Daniel and his three best friends are enlisted by the Babylonian high court to take part in a counselor-in-training program. Besides being schooled in the classic learnings of the day, like history, geography and astronomy, they’re pressured to conform to the pattern of the Babylonians by eating foods forbidden in the law of Moses.

With grace and aplomb, these four teenagers emerge three years later as the best of the best in their class. In every matter of wisdom and understanding, King Nebuchadnezzar himself accounts them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. How did this happen?

The one factor that was different for the four Hebrews than for all the other courtiers was their background in the Bible. Prior to coming to the palace Daniel and friends had studied the Scriptures at home, with their parents and countrymen. The Scriptures had transformed them in ways the court’s tutors could not.

A similar thing happened to Timothy in the New Testament. One reason he was such an able leader was because of the transforming

work the Bible had performed on him while he was growing up. Paul writes, “As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Can the Bible make you a better person? That’s its purpose and promise. Read it and it will change your mind. As your mind changes, so will your behavior. It won’t happen overnight. Like an athlete who goes to the gym every day, your transformation will take place little by little, over time. That’s the secret to a whole new you!

ASSIGNMENT

Read Romans 12:1-3, 9-21.

1. How are the principles in vv. 9-21 different than the pattern of this world?
2. Which of these patterns do you need to change today, and how will you do it?
3. What sorts of Bible-absorption habits do you need to develop in order to continually transform your mind? Do you need to establish a habit of daily Bible reading? (If so, when and where will you do it?) Do you need to join a Bible study or small group? Would you like to start memorizing Scripture?¹

NOTES

¹To learn how to memorize Scripture, I recommend *The Topical Memory System* by the Navigators. It will start you on a lifetime of great Scripture memory habits.

How Do I Study the Bible?

*I have always said, and will always say, that the studious perusal
of the sacred volume will make better homes, better citizens,
better fathers and better husbands.*

Thomas Jefferson



Daniel was dragged into captivity during his teenage years and spent his life growing up and serving in the courts of Babylon. In his twenties he became the prime minister, serving multiple kings in this capacity. At the ripe old age of eighty-seven, he journaled about his personal experience with Scripture.

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes . . . I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Daniel 9:1-3)

From this we learn that Daniel read the Bible regularly and took it very personally.

On this particular day, Daniel was reading Jeremiah 29. There

God says, “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place” (v. 10). As Daniel was reading, he got out his abacus and realized that Israel had been in exile for almost seventy years. It was time to go home! As was his habit, he did more than just read the Scriptures, he applied what he learned by praying that God would fulfill the prophecy he had just read.

Since ancient times, people have made life-altering discoveries by studying the Bible. Unfortunately, far too many Christians restrict God’s access to their hearts by limiting their intake of God’s Word to the Sunday morning sermon. This kind of diet leaves people biblically malnourished and often critical. They expect their pastor to feed them all the spiritual calories they need for the week, in forty-five minutes or less.

CRAVE IT

The apostle Peter encourages Christians, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). Observe three things in this verse.

First, *your appetite for the Bible ought to be like a newborn baby looking for its next meal*. When our son Bryan was three months old, Lori resumed her graduate studies. Once a week she made an hour’s trek to Denver Seminary to work on her master’s degree. I was left at home with bottles of milk and the task of taking care of our little bundle for the evening.

The first night this happened, I was unprepared for Bryan’s voracious appetite. At the proper time I removed a bottle from the freezer and started warming it in a pan of water. The milk was still frozen when Bryan began to whimper. I turned the flame up under the pan and tried to comfort him with some gentle rocking, to no avail. His whimpering became whining, then howling, then wailing. In desperation I took the half-frozen bottle out of the water and inserted the nipple in his mouth. I figured this frigid

liquid would shock him and give me more time to put it back in the water and heat it up properly.

Not a chance! He consumed that bottle like a vulture on a dead antelope. Within minutes the liquid was in his stomach and all that remained was the big frozen ice ball in the middle of the bottle. He must have been experiencing brain freeze from all that cold milk, but he only fussed for more.

As quick as I could, I put the bottle back in the water and took a second bottle from the freezer, for good measure. As fast as I could heat those things, his little lips downed them like they were his last meal. My little newborn had an appetite for milk!

Besides having a newborn's appetite, Peter also says, we ought to "*crave* pure spiritual milk." Babies don't think too far ahead, but as we age, we're able to anticipate a good meal. The apostle's point is, we ought to look forward to reading and studying the Bible like a pregnant woman craves a bowl of ice cream or a gourmet pizza.

Such desire doesn't happen instantly. God's Word is an acquired taste. Psalm 19:10 says the words of God are sweeter than honey. Yet many of us shy away from it like it is soured milk. People who learn to study the Bible for themselves can't imagine *not* reading it regularly. But many people never spend enough time in it to acquire that kind of taste. This is a shame of the highest magnitude.

Peter's third piece of advice is that we *study* the Bible so we can grow up. Notice, he is not saying the purpose of Bible study is to *know* more but to *grow* more. The Bible's purpose is to teach, rebuke, correct and train us in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Not to fill our brain with simple biblical facts, but to fill it with God's perspective and transform our life.

Over the next five chapters, I want to teach you how to study the Bible in a way that is addictive, so that you crave the pure milk of God's Word.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

If you've ever listened to a great Bible teacher you've probably wondered, *Where did he (or she) get those insights? How did she (or he) discover all that in the text?* Chances are they followed a three-step process. The process is a time-tested one; it progresses from *observation* to *interpretation* to *application*.

If you will follow this simple three-step system, your life will be transformed on a daily basis.

As I open my Bible each morning, I ask the Lord to guide me to insights that will feed my soul, increase my character or enable me to serve others more effectively. I then turn to wherever I left off my reading the day before. With the possible exception of Psalms and Proverbs, every book of the Bible was meant to be read from start to finish. If I'm reading a narrative section of the Bible (usually one of the books of history, though prophetic books have stories in them too), I read an entire story. If I'm reading in one of the New Testament Epistles, I usually read a chapter (but sometimes just a paragraph). If I'm reading wisdom or prophetic literature, I read whatever seems like a logical unit of thought. I read the whole section through to see what's there, like a scout investigating the trail ahead of his troops. Then I get out my pen to write and reflect.

OBSERVATION: WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

The first step I take is to determine what's in the text. This is the *observation* phase of my study. Observation asks the question, *What does the text say?* It's amazing how simple that question seems, and how much we miss until we ask it.

I write down my observations, then move to step two, which is *interpretation*. Interpretation asks, *What does the text mean?* I record my interpretation, and then move to step three. *Application* asks, *What am I going to do about this?*

We'll cover interpretation and application in the next two chapters. For now, let's concentrate on learning to observe.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem that reminds me of the six questions I ask while observing the text.

I keep six honest serving-men,
(They taught me all I knew.)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
I give them all a rest.¹

A keen observer approaches the text of Scripture like Sherlock Holmes does a crime scene. They ask, Who did this? What went on here? When did it happen? Where did they come from? How did it unfold like this? Why is this particular passage included in Scripture? The six questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *how* and *why* are your best friends during step one. The more questions you ask, the more you'll see in the text.

We live in a fast-paced culture. It's hard for us to slow down to see what's going on around us, much less to slow down long enough to see what's happened in a book like the Bible. Doing so opens a whole new world. Like walking along a trail, we see things that were always there but we never paused to observe.

POWERS OF OBSERVATION

Great teachers know that students learn more when they make discoveries for themselves. This is the major difference between *being fed* and *feeding yourself*. When I make an observation for the people in my church, they're impressed. When I help them make observations for themselves, they're blessed (pardon the rhyme). The good (and bad) news is, the only way to learn to make observations is to make some for yourself.

Learning to make observations. During my sophomore year of

college I was introduced to a story called “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz.” It’s a real story that sheds brilliant light on the skill of making observations. The student was Samuel Scudder, an aspiring scientist who was beginning his study of natural history at Harvard University. Agassiz was the famous Dr. Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-born paleontologist. The fish was a Haemulon. I later found out that the common name for Haemulon is a “grunt.”²

Upon entering Dr. Agassiz’s laboratory, Scudder was handed a pan with a Haemulon in it, basted in alcohol. His assignment was to make as many observations as possible of the fish. In Scudder’s own words:

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the Professor—who had, however, left the Museum; and when I returned . . . nothing was to be done but to return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed—an hour—another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters’ view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the Museum, but had gone, and would not return for several hours. . . . Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying-glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish: it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp the teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows, until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish;

and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the Professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet, and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words, he added, “Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknowns to me: the fringed gill-arches and movable *operculum*; the pores of the head, fleshy lips and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fins and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment, “You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued more earnestly, “you haven’t even seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!” and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the Professor’s criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly; and when, towards its close, the Professor inquired, “Do you see it yet?”

“No,” I replied, “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.”

“That is next best,” said he, earnestly, “but I won’t hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.”

This was disconcerting. Not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without

reviewing my discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the Professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw. “Do you perhaps mean,” I asked, “that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?”

His thoroughly pleased “Of course! Of course!” repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next. “Oh, look at your fish!” he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned, and heard my new catalogue.

“That is good, that is good!” he repeated; “but that is not all; go on” and so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. “Look, look, look,” was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the Professor had left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

While Scudder makes observation sound like a tedious chore, it’s really not. It’s more like an adventurer exploring new territory to discover what’s there. Every step you take, every place your eye lands is new and exciting.

Another way to think of observation is like the salad of biblical study. It provides the roughage that will keep you regular and help you digest all you take in thereafter. It’s the first of a three-course

meal. In my personal Bible time, if I have a half hour, I'll spend ten minutes reading, ten minutes writing observations, five minutes interpreting and two to three minutes writing my application. If I have an hour, I'll double that. If fifteen minutes, I cut it in half.

ASSIGNMENT

Read Acts 2:41-47. Here I have given you five examples of observations from this passage. Read through them. Then take a sheet of paper or spiral notebook, and write down at least ten observations to add to the list. You should be able to do this in under ten minutes. For a bigger challenge, make twenty-five observations. For a really big challenge, go for fifty! Keep your list; you'll want to use it again with the coming chapters.

Observations of Acts 2:41-47:

1. Someone took the time to count how many had been baptized and joined the church (v. 41).
2. In this great church the new believers were so zealous for their faith that they didn't merely attend meetings and go through motions, they *devoted* themselves to the things of the Lord (v. 42).
3. The four activities they devoted themselves to (teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer) are spiritual habits that increased their faith (v. 42).
4. God's Spirit was free to work miracles in their midst (v. 43).
5. There was a spirit of generosity among the believers (vv. 44-45).

NOTES

¹Rudyard Kipling, "The Elephant's Child," in *Just So Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).

²The full story can be found at <www.intervarsity.org/mx/item/4503/>.

Study 1

Inspired

(If you are participating in the sermon series, this study should be done following the “How Is the Bible Different from Other Books?” sermon.)

GETTING STARTED

1. According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, *inspire* means “to exert an animating, enlivening or exalting influence on.” Tell the group about a time when someone inspired you.
2. The Greek word for *inspire* is *theopneustos*. It means “breathed into by God.” From your understanding, how is God-breathed inspiration different than an inspiring performance or an inspiring person?

COLLECTING THE FACTS

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17

3. What are the four ways the Bible’s inspiration is profitable for people?
4. What might it be like to be rebuked or corrected by Scripture? Give a personal example if you can think of one.
5. Do you think it’s possible for a person to grow to the point of being “equipped for every good work” (v. 17)? If so, what would that look like?

Read 2 Peter 1:16-21

6. Peter says we would do well to pay attention to the words of

the prophets (v. 19). Then he compares their words to “light shining in a dark place.” How does this phrase help you understand the nature of biblical inspiration?

7. Who initiated prophecy, and how did it happen (vv. 20-21)?

DID YOU KNOW?

Jeremiah was a prophet who regularly wished for a different job. In Jeremiah 20, he describes the downside of being a channel for God’s message:

You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived;
 you overpowered me and prevailed.
 I am ridiculed all day long;
 everyone mocks me.
 Whenever I speak, I cry out
 proclaiming violence and destruction.
 So the word of the LORD has brought me
 insult and reproach all day long. (Jeremiah 20:7-8)

Jeremiah didn’t like being ridiculed, so he decided to stop speaking for the Lord. He resolved to keep his mouth shut whenever God gave him a revelation. It didn’t work:

But if I say, “I will not mention his word
 or speak anymore in his name,”
 his word is in my heart like a fire,
 a fire shut up in my bones.
 I am weary of holding it in;
 indeed, I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9)

8. How was Jeremiah’s experience with divine revelation similar to what Peter described in 2 Peter 1:20-21?

DISCOVERING TIMELESS TRUTHS

9. What difference does it make to you that the words of Scripture are *theopneustos* (breathed into by God) rather than just words written by impressive people?
10. What should you expect to experience every time you read or study a passage of Scripture?

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

11. If Scripture really can train you to the point where you will be “equipped for every good work,” what would you like it to equip you for this week?
12. What will you need to do, read or study these next seven days in order to let Scripture equip you in this way?

READING REVIEW (TIME PERMITTING)

13. Looking over chapter one, what did you learn about the Bible or the authorship of the Bible that you'd like to remember?
14. According to Peter Stoner (chap. 2), what are the chances that the Bible's fulfilled prophecies are coincidence?
15. List the five marks of canonicity (chap. 3).
16. What is Codex Sinaiticus (chap. 4) and why is it important?
17. Who were the Talmudists and Masoretes (chap. 4), and what contribution did they make to the Old Testament?
18. What happened at Qumran (chap. 4), and what difference does it make to our understanding of the reliability of Scripture?

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER



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