



The Christian Life

Module 5

How to Study the Bible

MODULE FIVE

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INTRODUCTION

By this time, you have undoubtedly discovered for yourself the great spiritual depths of the Bible. You know from personal experience how God speaks to you at your point of greatest need. That is because, as we discussed in the last lesson, the Bible is the Word of God, and it is, as Hebrews 4:12 says, “sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires”.

Some people don't like to read the Bible because it does speak to their hearts. But we know that you want to dig into God's word. This lesson will provide an overview of the Bible as well as teach you proven methods of the Bible study.

There's no reason why you cannot become a proficient Bible student. Take notes and pray as you study. Trust God to help you and He will. **Knowing how to study God's Word will make a great difference in your understanding of it.**

One other note before you begin. This lesson is in two parts. You may, if you wish, take the final Self-Study to Part One before you study Part Two.

Part One: A Survey of the Bible

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The Bible is not a single book but a collection of the various types of literature, included within its covers are historical narratives, legal codes, devotional historical meditations, proverbial sayings, prophecies, personal letters, and theological treatises. But throughout the Scriptures, in each variety of expression, the same God is speaking a message of love to mankind.

It is believed that approximately forty authors wrote the entire Bible. Actually, that figure probably goes much higher. Many of the psalms were written anonymously and may have been the work of a number of authors. Also, some of the major historical books of the Old Testament (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles) were written by unknown historians and were probably the composite work of several authors.

A Diversity of Style

Thus, although all of Scripture was inspired by God, each book of the Bible is unique. God gave man the **message** of the Bible, but He did not dictate the style of writing. Also, each book reflects the time and culture in which it was written.

This is especially true of the Old Testament. You will recall from the last lesson that the Old Testament was written over a 1000-year period. The period of history covered,

however, starts back at the Creation and ends at about 450 B.C., a span of at least several thousand years.

(NOTE: The date of the Creation is a matter of debate even among Christian scholars and scientists. It is much too lengthy a subject to be discussed in this course.)

As you read more and more of God's Word you will see how God sometimes dealt differently with people of various cultures during many historical periods. We can be thankful that He is a God of love and understanding who comes to us in our own time and on our own level.

2. THE OLD TESTAMENT

The thirty-nine books which comprise the Old Testament cover the period of history before Christ. Chapters one through eleven of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, give us a general picture of the history of man from Adam to Noah. But the remainder of the Old Testament is concerned primarily with the Hebrews, or Israelites, later known as Jews. They became God's chosen people because of Abraham's obedience and faith in God.

(NOTE: Abraham was considered the father of the Hebrews. For an understanding of why God made a covenant with Him and thus with the Hebrew people, study Genesis 12:1-4; 13:14-18; and 15:1-6. Note in particular Abraham's (at that time he was called Abram) response to God.

The books of the Old Testament are generally broken down into the following five categories:

Law	History	Minor Prophets
Genesis	Joshua	Hosea
Exodus	Judges	Joel
Leviticus	Ruth	Amos
Numbers	1 & 2 Samuel	Obadiah
Deuteronomy	1 & 2 Kings	Jonah
	1 & 2 Chronicles	Micah
	Ezra	Nahum
	Nehemiah	Habakkuk
	Esther	Zephaniah
		Haggai
		Zechariah
		Malachi
Poetry	Major Prophets	
Job	Isaiah	
Psalms	Jeremiah	
Proverbs	Lamentations	
Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel	
Song of Solomon	Daniel	

Although this is a convenient way to help you remember the nature of the Old Testament books, the categorizing is not always exact. Genesis, for instance, says little concerning law. It is an historical book, and, we might add, **one of the most exciting books in the Bible.**

Neither does the heading "Poetry" adequately describe the five books listed in this category. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are more properly classified as **wisdom literature**, for they contain the wisdom of God, not only for ancient man but for us today. Psalms is an anthology of devotions of prayer and praise.

The Old and New Testaments Contrasted

STUDY John 1:16-18.

People often ask, "What is the difference between the Old and the New Testaments?" The primary difference is that the Old Testament is basically a history of God's dealings with men under the old covenant, or that of **law**, as opposed to the New Testament, with a new covenant of **grace**. John says that, "the Law was given through Moses, but God's unending

love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ.” This does not mean that the Law was untrue, but that through Jesus, God and His truths were more fully revealed.

Since we are living under grace, God’s new covenant with man is through Jesus Christ, and not law, therefore, **the New Testament is the best place to begin your Bible study.** It is not recommended that a new Christian study the Old Testament books (with the exception of Psalms) until he or she has studied some in the New Testament. (Recommended New Testament reading will be listed later in this lesson).

STUDY Exodus 21:25 & Matthew 5:38-45.

These two passages dramatically illustrate the basic difference between law and grace. In Old Testament times men were quite barbaric, and sin and lawlessness had to be dealt with in harsh ways.

But when Jesus came, God’s grace became totally operative. **We do not, as Christians, live under the Old Testament Law.** In fact, Paul writes in Romans 10:4 that Jesus Christ has “accomplished the purpose for which the law was given.” For, as he says in Ephesians 2:13-16, by dying on the Cross for our sins. Jesus actually **ended** “the system of law with its commandments and regulations.”

You might also remember that in Lesson four, **The Bible**, in our discussion of the New Testament, Hebrews 8:6-13 was given as a reference to the new covenant in Christ. In that passage v. 13 states, “When God speaks of a “new” covenant, it means he has made the first (in other words, the old covenant of the Law) one **obsolete.**”

Bondage to a Legal Code

STUDY Galatians 2:15-16 and 3:11.

It is tragic that some Christians are in bondage to a legal code for their assurance of salvation. **Paul very plainly tells us that no law can save us, and that God’s old covenant law does not apply to believers today.** We are living in the period of grace through Jesus Christ. **Man-made laws and rules will never save anyone.**

The question always arises that if Jesus Christ replaced the law, what about the sins mentioned in the Old Testament? For instance, is the Seventh Commandment, which prohibits adultery, applicable today? Yes, adultery is still a sin. All Old Testament moral principle, are still valid, and sex outside of marriage is a sin in God’s eyes. (See Mathew 15:19 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

It is important to remember the following two points: (1) The Old Testament law, as a **legal system arbitrary and binding on all who would seek salvation, is no longer in effect.** (2) The moral principles of God contained within that obsolete system **are still valid under the new covenant.**

STUDY Romans 7:6 & 2 Corinthians 3:4-6.

Let’s let the Apostle Paul further explain himself. He says in Galatians 5:18, “when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.” **Every Christian has received the Holy Spirit.** (Not the Baptism in the Holy Spirit which will be discussed in Lesson Nine). Therefore, **we are not led, by law.** Rather, we are led by the Holy Spirit and the inner witness He gives; and by the New Testament which was inspired by the Holy Spirit. We want to make it clear, however, that the Old Testament is of much value to

Christians. Paul, following a discussion of several Old Testament incidents, says, “These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

God’s basic dealings with men have never changed. God speaks - man responds. Man cries to God - He responds. For instance, in Jeremiah 29:13 God says, “**If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.**” That is profound advice for men of all ages.

Old Testament Power

STUDY Romans 15:4.

The entire Old Testament abounds with God’s wisdom and illustrates the kind of relationships He yearns to have with each of us. Though the Law of the old covenant has passed from the scene of history, **the Old Testament still speaks to us in the power of God’s love and wisdom.**

In addition to your New Testament reading, which will be recommended to you at the end of the next topic, try studying devotionally in the Psalms. The power of that ancient literature will amaze and bless you in many ways.

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT

The prophesied Messiah of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament by Jesus Christ. The New Testament is a record of the life and ministry of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. It is our basic training course and guide in all matters of faith, both doctrinal and practical. The New Testament books break down as follows: -

Gospels

Mathew
Mark
Luke
John

History

Acts

Letters

Romans
1&2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1&2 Thessalonians
1&2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1&2 Peter
1,2 & 3 John
Jude.

Prophecy

Revelation

The Gospels (the word “gospel” means “good news”, referring to the good news of Jesus) were written to **establish Jesus as an historical person, God’s own Son visiting man from Heaven, and to present Him as the Saviour of the Word.** The love and wisdom of Jesus fills page after page of the Gospel records.

The Acts of the Apostles is a **history of the early church.** It chronicles over 30 years of history from Christ’s going up into Heaven through the time of Paul’s missionary journey (though he was a Roman prisoner!) to the great city of Rome shortly before his martyrdom about 66 A.D. This book could have been titled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit into the lives of the early believers”. It is a record of the many miracles wrought by the Holy Spirit as the early Christians witnessed of Jesus Christ throughout the Mediterranean area.

The 21 **letters** of the New Testament were written for various reasons, but, generally speaking, they were sent to growing congregations of young Christians who needed guidance and help in their new lives in Christ, and to young ministers. **Each is packed with instructions in correct doctrine, righteousness, and the practical aspect of living the Spirit filled life.**

The last book in the Bible, Revelation, is basically a **prophecy** of future events, which were revealed to the Apostle John. But also, in Chapters 2 and 3, are seven mini-letters to seven

historical churches located in what is now part of Turkey, each letter was dictated by the ascended Christ and is still applicable to our lives today.

Where does a new believer begin reading in the New Testament? A good place is **Gospel of Mark**. Mark gives us a terse yet powerful narrative on the life and ministry of Jesus. From there go to **John's first letter**. John speaks of love, showing us the preciousness of the love of God and how each of us can and should radiate His love. Next you might study 1 Corinthians, a very practical book on everyday Christian living, and Galatians, Paul's famous writing on law and grace.

All of the above books will give you a basic understanding of the Christian life and greatly aid you in everyday Christian living, and one thing is certain - **once you begin studying the Bible you will never put it down. It is the most exciting and powerful** book in the world.

Part Two: Dynamic Bible Study Methods

1. TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE BIBLE STUDY

The Bible is not only an old book it is a **BIG** book. Except for the small print editions, most Bibles are over 1000 pages! Your first thought when you initially examined a Bible may have been, "Wow! All that? I'll never read it!".

But you can take heart in the fact that there are methods available which enable us to better understand and study the Bible. This section is devoted to a brief look at some of the helpful tools God has given us to more effectively study and learn His word.

All of the following references will be available to the student online. Smart phones, iPads and laptops all have a powerful facility for carrying with you the Word of God in many translations and references.

Bible Dictionary,

A good Bible dictionary is a valuable aid in understanding unfamiliar **terms, names, and places** from ancient Bible days. Most dictionaries also contain informative study helps such as historical chronologies. There are several good Bible dictionaries to choose from and they are relatively inexpensive.

Concordance

One of the most useful tools in finding scripture is a concordance, **a concordance is a listing of words found throughout the Bible.** You can get complete concordances of every word in the, or you can obtain an abbreviated version with a listing of key words only. Many Bibles include abbreviated version following the New Testament. A concordance is a must for every Bible student.

Topical Bible

Whenever you want to look up certain subjects in the Bible, a topical Bible is a necessity. The combined use of a concordance and a topical Bible will enable you to find every verse in the Scriptures on any subject you might be interested in.

Commentaries

Commentaries consist of notes and interpretations of Scripture by one or more authors on books of the Bible. They can be very valuable in helping one understand Scripture. Most commentaries come in a series although you can find individual books by a variety of authors.

A word of caution: Commentaries must never be understood as the Word of God or accepted as the final word. Some commentaries were written by men who do not believe that God inspired the Bible. Others, while they may have been written by godly, conservative Christian scholars, nevertheless reflect personal bias and prejudice. **The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself.** Keep this in mind as you use a commentary in your Bible study.

Topical Books

At your Christian book store or online you can find topical books on practically every subject in the Bible. There are many fine topical books on the market which should be on the shelf of every Bible student. However, as with commentaries, be **careful. Some**

topical books are based on false doctrine. Always compare topical books with Scripture.

No Book is a Substitute for the Bible.

Don't fall into the trap of substituting the reading of books for Bible study. Rather, combine the two, and you will see a great increase in your knowledge of the Bible.

Cross Reference:

Perhaps the most valuable aid in Bible study is the **cross reference**. Cross references are the scripture references printed beside Bible verses. A good Bible will have numerous references.

References refer you to similar verses or passages of scripture which are usually one of the following: (1) An Old Testament verse which has been quoted by a New Testament writer. (2) The same doctrine (3) A similar thought (4) The same key word or phrasing.

SELF-STUDY #1

As an example, the cross references for John 5:23 refer us to four other verses. Your assignment is to look up each verse and write down in your own words what it says.

- (a) Luke 10:16 _____

 - (b) John 15:23 _____

 - (c) Philippians 2:9-11 _____

 - (d) 1 John 2:23 _____

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You can now see for yourself the value of cross references. The four verses not only gave you further confirmation of John 5:23, but also heightened the meaning of it. Get in the habit of looking up ALL cross references. They will help you understand the Scriptures and bless your life in the process.

2. PERSONAL TIPS FOR DEVELOPING GOOD STUDY HABITS.

One reason some Christians cannot seem to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures is because they have never been taught good study habits. And lack of any teaching concerning good study habits sometimes lets a person slip into bad habits.

Therefore, we will first cover the negative - **how NOT to study the Bible.**

(1) **Don't read haphazardly.** In other words, don't skip around reading here and there. After all, we don't read books and magazine articles that way, do we? Just as they wouldn't make much sense chopped up, neither would the Bible.

(2) **If possible, don't read by verses.** The old King James Version of the bible, unfortunately, is not broken down by paragraphing, and the continuity is sometimes hard to follow. Most modern translations, however, are paragraphed. Again, we strongly recommend that you get a good, modern version for your study Bible, preferably one with references and a concordance.

(3) **Don't Read ONLY a predetermined number of verses or chapters.** The chapter and verse system of our Bible was originated several hundred years ago and does not always adequately divide the Bible for effective study. Rather, it is best to study **complete stories**, as in the case of historical narratives, or thought units; as in the case of doctrinal truth. Sometimes the chapters conveniently break the books up into individual stories and **thought units**. When they do not, see if you can find the natural breaking points. Then study the complete unit or story until you have a good grasp of what God is saying.

(4) **Don't study the Bible without asking God's help.** Remember, the Bible is His Word. Seek the illumination of the Holy Spirit every time you open your Bible.

Positive Bible Study Helps

Now let's look at the positive side of Bible study. Here are some tips for good study habits which will aid you in learning God's word.

(1) **Get alone with God and His Word for an undesignated period of time.** As we pointed out earlier, it is better to study **complete stories** or an entire **thought unit**. For instance, John 1:1-18 is **major** thought unit because it contains a connected series of theological statements about Jesus Christ. Within those 18 verses are several **minor** thought units, but the whole passage should be studied as a unit to grasp the significance of what John is saying.

In the second chapter of the Gospel of John there are two complete stories. Verses 1-11 tell us of Jesus first miracle, when He turned water into wine; and verses 12-22 relate the cleansing of the temple, when Jesus drove out the money-changers who were cheating the people. Each of these stories should be studied as complete units. (Verses 23-25 are just additional notes of Jesus life and thought).

You will find that with this method of Bible study you'll have to be flexible about the amount of time you set aside for study. But once you try this method, you'll want to use it all the time. The Bible will become a more exciting part of your life, and your understanding of it will increase.

(2) **Make notes or highlights in your Bible.** The Bible is a study book, and study books were meant to contain notes. So when God illuminates your mind on a particular verse or passage, jot it down in the margin. Then you can refer to the thought time and time again.

(3) **Diligently compare scripture with scripture.** One of the reasons we have such a huge Bible is that God had much to tell us. While some verses or passages can stand alone as the sole teaching on a given truth, others cannot. The Gospels, for instance, do not tell the whole content of Christian truth. The letters are really a series of commentaries on the Gospels, explaining in much greater detail what the Christian life is all about.

Therefore, it is imperative that you use the study tools listed earlier, especially references and concordances, in comparing scripture with scripture and thereby gaining a grasp of the whole Bible.

(4) **Relate each verse of Scripture to its immediate context.** Many people misunderstand what the Bible is saying simply because they quote verses out of context. You will not have that problem if you learn to study complete thought units. **But the key is to be aware of what the author is saying throughout several verses.** Ask yourself, “How is this verse connected to those around it?”

Some verses, like John 3:16, can stand alone. But most are “parts” related to the “whole.” Avoid using verses out of their original context.

(5) **Pray over a scripture until understanding comes.** The Bible is first and foremost a spiritual book, and because it is there are some difficult verses and passages. (Remember what Peter said about Paul’s letters in 2 Peter 3:15-16). You may not immediately understand a particular verse or passage. Often God will reveal the meaning to you several days later.

3. HOW TO INTERPRETE FIGURATIVE AND SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

STUDY John 7:37-39.

First of all, what do we mean by **figurative and symbolic** language? Anything which is figurative is that which is expressed in terms **usually meaning something else**. The figurative expression is comparable in certain aspects to the real meaning. Symbolic language is simply that which stands for something else. Neither are ever meant to be interpreted literally.

In the Bible, figurative language appears in parables and prophecies, but more often as simple metaphors. Often the meanings are explained for us.

For example, in our **STUDY** passage Jesus said that he who believed in Him would have “rivers of living water” flowing from his heart (literally: “innermost being”). John explains in 39 that Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit, whose power and ministry in our lives can easily be likened to a river.

STUDY Mark 9:43-48.

In this passage we have a classic example of symbolic language. After all, if we were to cut off all the parts of our bodies which became engaged in sin we would be so horribly deformed that we’d be confined to bed! And **Jesus Himself said that sin originates from the heart or the soul of man rather than his physical body** (see Matthew 15:18-19).

What Jesus meant was that we should avoid hell at all costs. That certainly means repenting of sin. And it may mean giving up some things very dear to us if they would drag us away from God.

In this passage the meaning is **not** explained for us. **But it is clear from our understanding of other passages of Scripture.** You can see the importance of comparing scripture with scripture.

Don’t Take Each Verse Literally

If in doubt as to what might be figurative or symbolic, a general rule of thumb is **not to take a verse literally if it would be absurd to do so, or if it seems to contradict another teaching of Scripture.**

Rather, first of all look for an explanation in a verse that follows. Pray that God will help you understand its meaning as you compare it with other scriptures. You may also want to study several Bible commentaries.

CONCLUSION

It’s been a long lesson, but not long at all if you studied Part One and Part Two separately. However, you will soon appreciate this lesson as one of the most valuable you have ever studied. **There is no substitute for personal Bible study in developing a clear, logical, and concise understanding of the Word of God.**

We suggest that you refer to this lesson often. Make some notes on its pages if you have not already done so. Continually reread its contents as a check on your study habits.

You can become a competent Bible student. With God’s help and your own determination, you can develop an excellent knowledge of the Bible and the precious truths Jesus taught us. **We believe that you will do just that.**

SELF-STUDY #2

Part One

1. What type of literature is **not** found in the Bible?
 - (a) Historical narratives.
 - (b) Personal Letters.
 - (c) Lesson in theology.
 - (d) Fiction.
2. Which of the following factors contributed to the writings of each biblical author?
 - (a) His cultural background
 - (b) The period of history in which he lived
 - (c) His knowledge.
 - (d) All of the above.
3. The Old Testament is of no concern to non-Jews. T () F ()
4. God made a covenant with Abraham because of his great faith. T () F ()
5. The poetry of the Old Testament contains the wisdom of God. T () F ()
6. Christians do not live under the Old Testament law. T () F ()
7. What did Jesus do with the law when He died on the cross?

8. What does Hebrews 8:6-13 say about the law?

9. What does Paul tell us about the law and man-made rules?

10. The Gospels are a record of Jesus' life and teaching. T () F ()
11. The Acts of the Apostles instructs us in proper church ritual. T () F ()

Part Two

12. Bible commentaries may contain false statements. T () F ()
13. Topical books can often effectively take the place of Bible study. T () F ()
14. Cross references shed further light on a given Bible verse or passage. T () F ()
15. When studying the Bible, which of the following methods is most effective?
 - (a) Read 10 VERSES AT A TIME.
 - (b) Skip around until you find a verse you can understand.
 - (c) Study complete stories or thought units in one sitting.
 - (d) Spend 15 minutes every day in earnest study.

16. A good Bible student's Bible will be marked up with personal notes. T () F ()
17. In relationship to the Gospels, the New Testament letters:
- (a) Present us with a different picture of Christianity.
 - (b) Amplify the content of the Gospels.
 - (c) Merely give us details of the personal lives of the early Christians.
 - (d) All of the above.
18. To understand the **context** of a scripture means to understand its relationship to the verses around it. T () F ()
19. Neither figurative nor symbolic language were meant to be taken literally.
T () F ()
20. You can become a proficient Bible student. T () F ()

ANSWERS TO SELF-STUDY #1

- (a) God speaks to us through Jesus.
- (b) If anyone hates Jesus, he automatically hates God.
- (c) God has decreed that it is before Jesus Christ all men must bow and worship.
- (d) It is only through Jesus that man can know God.

ANSWERS TO SELF-STUDY #2

Part One.

- 1. D
- 2. D
- 3. F
- 4. T
- 5. T
- 6. T
- 7. He abolished it, OR He fulfilled it
- 8. It is obsolete.
- 9. Neither can save us, OR do not apply to believers today.
- 10. T
- 11. F

Part Two

- 12. T
- 13. F
- 14. T
- 15. C
- 16. T
- 17. B
- 18. T
- 19. T
- 20. T