

LEARNING *and Living* GOD'S WORD

REVISED EDITION

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 REGULAR BAPTIST
Press

Dedication

To my students at Cedarville University—
past, present, and future—
whose responsiveness to God’s Word
has brought such deep joy to me.
3 John 4

Learning and Living God’s Word: How to Study the Bible
Revised Edition

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Preface to the Revised Edition

LEARNING AND LIVING GOD'S WORD has been in print since 1993, so after twenty-five years it is due for a revision. Much of the content is the same as in the original edition, although as I have taught this material, I have refined some of my explanations. Throughout this edition I have incorporated many small changes, but chapter 4 has received a major makeover because of the recent emergence of so many online resources for Bible study. Totally new is chapter 11, which provides introductions to the various kinds of literature found in the Bible, with discussion of how the basic inductive procedure of Bible study (developed in the first ten chapters) needs to be adapted when studying the different genres of the Bible.

What remains unchanged in this edition is a simple approach to the observation, synthesis, and application of the Bible. This is the approach that I have taught to my Cedarville University students for thirty-four years, and they have consistently found it transformative for their personal Bible study. I fear that too often Bible study has been made exceedingly hard and that many Christians have perceived it is beyond their grasp. What this approach does is to help men and women who do not have advanced theological training to realize that they, too, can study the Bible well on their own. By this means the truth of the Bible is unlocked for them, and they are able to function as Bereans (see Acts 17:11) who examine the Scriptures to determine whether what they hear and read is true.

How to Use This Book

LEARNING AND LIVING GOD'S WORD is a special kind of book. It is not a novel with a gripping story. Neither is it a textbook with facts to memorize. It is a manual—a workbook designed to teach you how to study the Bible on your own. This book will guide you into the skills you need to learn and live God's Word. It was born out of a small group study in my church after five young couples asked me to teach them the skills of personal Bible study. Whether you are a teen, a college student, or an older adult, this manual can help you.

I have prepared this material with many different people in mind. It is the kind of book I needed when I first tried to study the Bible on my own as a high school student. This manual presents the skills I have taught to several thousand students at Cedarville University. They, in turn, have taken the material back to their churches and around the world on missions trips and in long-term ministries.

With all of the books on Bible study available today, what makes *Learning and Living God's Word* different?

First, it is personal. You can use this book to teach yourself. Be sure to complete the practice exercises and then to reflect on the questions at the end of each chapter. You will be surprised at how quickly your skills will grow.

Second, it is practical. Many Bible study books are excellent in theory, but they do not do as well at teaching how to make the theory work out in practice. This manual focuses on developing your skills. It does not stop with exhorting you about what you ought to do; it explains how to do it. Once you have mastered the basics, you can

progress to more advanced books to develop and hone your skill in Bible study.

Third, it is flexible. It works as a self-study tutorial. However, a teacher can use it in a class of teens, college students, or adults. In addition, home Bible study groups and adult Bible fellowships can work their way through the manual. It is a user-friendly method that really works.

I trust that the Lord will use this book to teach you the dynamic, life-changing skill of Bible study as you learn and live God's Word.

Getting a Good Start



Why Should We Study the Bible?

With so many books to choose from, why study the Bible? After all, it is a long and ancient book that refers to times and nations unfamiliar to the modern reader. Why should we study the Bible?

For many people the Bible is worthy of study because of the profound influence it has had on world literature and culture. The stirring dramas of Shakespeare and the lofty poetry of Milton repeatedly allude to Biblical events and characters. Many authors, even in contemporary times, develop themes that find their source in the Bible. To understand much of European and American art, music, and literature, people need a basic familiarity with the Bible.

Others recognize the influence the Bible has had on the laws, values, and thinking of our society. Public leaders frequently appeal to the Bible to support their positions. The Bible has been brought into recent social discussions, such as abortion, gender issues, capital punishment, euthanasia, and immigration.

These uses of the Bible alone would justify its study. However, the Christian has even more important reasons. Three of these reasons are

found in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. First, we should study the Bible because it is God's communication to humans. Paul states in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is inspired by God. The word *inspired* means literally "God-breathed." The Bible is God's speech to us; it is what He wants us to know. When we study the Bible, we are listening to God's voice. If the Bible was important enough for God to say it, it is certainly important for us to listen to it. We should study the Bible because as God's Word it is important.

Second, the Bible has several benefits for those who study it. Because the Scripture is inspired by God, it is profitable for *teaching*, that is, for positive instruction concerning God and His will. In the Bible God tells us Who He is, who we are, and what He wants us to do. The Bible is also beneficial for *reproof*, or for negative admonition pointing out our sins and inadequacies. Like a doctor, it diagnoses our spiritual diseases and points out our needs. In addition, it *corrects us* by giving direction about how to get back to God's way. The Bible is like a coach who at halftime shows the team how they can correct the mistakes that have caused them to fall behind in the game. Furthermore, the Bible *trains in righteousness* by giving continuing direction for living in accordance with God's standard. It cheers us on as we seek to live in a way that pleases God. We should study the Bible because of its benefits listed in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Third, all of these benefits have a larger goal, which is spelled out in 2 Timothy 3:17: "That the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (NASB). The word *adequate* refers to fitness. The ultimate purpose of our Bible study is not just accumulating a lot of facts; it is our spiritual fitness. When we hear and obey God's Word, we get into spiritual shape so we can do what God wants us to do. God's Word equips us to do God's work.

Although the Bible is an important piece of literature that has influenced the Western world, its significance is even greater for the Christian. As Christians, we study the Bible because in it the Lord has spoken to us. As we study His Word, the Lord teaches us, reproves us, corrects us, and trains us in righteousness. This is all intended to

make us spiritually fit to do His work. These are the primary reasons why Christians should study the Bible.

How Should We Study the Bible?

As a young Christian I was often encouraged to study the Bible, but no one gave me much instruction on how to do it. I can remember picking up a few hints from Sunday School papers, sermons, and youth club talks, but no one ever showed me how to take a passage of the Bible, study it carefully, understand it clearly, and apply it appropriately. My well-intentioned teachers were long on exhortation, but short on explanation.

For years I floundered through repeated attempts to study the Bible, each time giving up in frustration. After talking with many people over the past forty years of my ministry, I have come to realize that this frustration was not unique to me. Many Christians want to study the Bible for themselves, but they just do not know how. They have sufficient desire, but they lack clear direction. In fact, this problem is not limited to young Christians. Many godly believers who have lived for the Lord for many years will confess that when it comes to studying the Bible, they are lost or are at least wandering around in circles.

As people attempt to study the Bible, they tend to fall into three general approaches. Each of these procedures has benefits, but also some limitations.

Analytical approach

The first common procedure is the analytical approach, or what we may call the “telephone directory” type of Bible study. Telephone directories have a lot of facts, but no overall plot. Those who follow this approach analyze in minute detail the words of the text and compile lists of observations about what they find. Some pastors and teachers use this method in their ministries. When you come out of one of their sermons or classes, you may feel as if you have tried to sip water out of a fire hose! You may hear about things such as aorists,

hiphils, and the Jebusites, but you end up with no clear idea of the passage's meaning or application.

Certainly the analytical method has the benefit of seeking the precise understanding of the words used in the Bible, and it trains the reader in the skill of careful observation of what God said. However, by focusing exclusively on the details, students may well miss the bigger picture. This lack may move them in the direction of imbalanced doctrine, because they have not considered how other passages in the Bible may balance, inform, or qualify the verse they are studying. Many false beliefs start in this way, with the reader blowing out of proportion a word, a verse, or a concept, and ignoring the rest of Scripture. In addition, the student may have a difficult time relating the observations to contemporary life. The analytical procedure is great for seeing the details, but it often seems piecemeal and irrelevant to life today.

Devotional approach

A second type of procedure is the devotional approach, or what we may call the “wishing well” technique. With this procedure, the reader goes to the text to find some blessing or instruction for life but is unconcerned with what the text means in and of itself. Because the reader wants the Bible to provide encouragement or direction for the day, unsurprisingly the search often seems to result in what it sets out to do, and the Bible seems to relate to specific needs.

Nevertheless, such devotional use of the Bible has some limitations. Devotional reading may misuse the text by twisting it to directly address the reader's questions. Instead of listening to what the Bible says, the devotional reader may reinterpret the Bible to say what he wants to hear. Consequently, though the reader may indeed find many truths that seem to apply to life, the nagging question persists: Is that what God really said, or is that something I made up myself? Thus the devotional reader may lack confidence that the application or blessing is truly what the text means. Even though the devotional method on the surface seems highly relevant to life, it may actually produce hesitancy to put one's whole weight on the applications and blessings that have been found.

Secondhand commentary approach

The third common procedure in Bible study consists of “peeking over the shoulder” of commentaries, podcasts, videos, or sermons. Instead of personally studying the Bible, in this approach the student depends upon what others have written or said. No doubt this method often results in accurate interpretation, and in many cases the sources suggest meaningful, specific applications. After all, good sermons and books are written by people who have spent years in developing their skills in understanding the Bible. They may know the original languages that the Bible was written in and be familiar with a range of interpretations and arguments about the passage. In addition, skillful Bible teachers and writers are effective because they are keen observers of life, so their messages are filled with helpful and relevant applications for life today.

However, relying on someone else’s study is much like kissing through a pane of glass—you get the same general idea, but you miss the personal excitement! When someone else studies the Bible and then tells us what he found there, we do not get to enjoy discovering God’s truth for ourselves. In addition, hearing God’s Word through a third party may well cause us to be less likely to obey what God has said. The Bible is most compelling when we hear the message directly for ourselves. The secondhand commentary approach may be highly accurate and applicable, but it leaves us a step away from hearing God’s Word ourselves.

What Do We Need?

We need a technique for Bible study that builds on the benefits of the three common procedures but avoids their limitations. In addition, it must be efficient enough to fit into people’s fast-paced and busy lives and flexible enough for use with the various types of literature in the Bible.

The ideal procedure of Bible study has four major components. First, it must yield maximum accuracy. Because the Bible is God’s Word, we must not remain content to get just the gist of its message.

Our Bible study must be accurate enough to probe the details of God's message. Second, we want to attain maximum application. It is not good enough to know only what the Bible said to people thousands of years ago in a culture far different from ours. Bible study has to be relevant; it needs to address life today. Third, our method needs to retain for us the joy of personal discovery. Fourth, our process will be most useful if we can do it within a reasonable time. The approach developed in this manual meets all four of these standards.

How Does It Work?

The Bible study procedure explained in this book is called the inductive process of Bible study. We can visualize it with the following chart:



The technique begins with observations of the Biblical text. These observations help us to understand in precise terms what the passage meant when it was originally written within the context of the ancient world. This first step involves the observation of both the words used and the structure that links the words together. This step will be developed in chapters 2–5 of this manual.

Step 1: This initial step of observation by itself produces only analysis. By looking at the passage in detail, we discern many pieces of data. This data, however, is disconnected, so it does not give us a clear understanding of the writer's message. If we stopped at this step without proceeding to steps 2 and 3, we would run the risk of missing the forest for the trees.

Step 2: The second major step works to synthesize the passage. This step draws together the pieces of information that have been accumulated in the process of observation. As a result, the student is

able to articulate the central idea of the passage. The idea endeavors to represent accurately and succinctly the writer's emphasis to his original audience. This approach will be detailed in chapters 6 and 7 of this manual.

Step 3: The final step focuses upon applications, as the writer's idea is used to illuminate many areas of life today with specific, measurable applications. Applications may address many different target audiences, but their appropriateness can be measured by analyzing the relationship between the original audience and the specific target audience, as is discussed in chapters 8 and 9.

Each of these three steps of Bible study is built upon an implication drawn from the Bible. Observation recognizes that the Bible was originally written in the language of common people because God wanted to make His truth available to all. The premise of step 2, the idea step, is that the Bible is a piece of literature organized into coherent units containing one key idea each. Then the process of application, step 3, holds that the Bible as God's timeless truth speaks to lives today in conjunction with its message to the original audience.

As we study the Bible, we have the great resource of the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry. As Jesus states in John 16:13, He gave the Spirit of God to guide His people into all truth. In our study of God's Word, we must indeed give it our best effort, but at the same time we can depend upon the Holy Spirit to teach us what the Bible means and how it applies to life.

Key Points to Remember

According to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, we should study the Bible because

- it is important: God said it, so we should listen to it;
- it is beneficial: it teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains us; and
- it develops our spiritual fitness: God's Word equips us to do God's work.

Common procedures of Bible study have both benefits and limitations:

- The **analytical procedure** sees the details, but misses the whole picture and the application.
- The **devotional procedure** seems to apply to life, but it may misuse the text.
- The **secondhand commentary procedure** may be accurate and applicable, but it does not give the student the joy of personal discovery.

The ideal procedure of Bible study (inductive Bible study) seeks

- maximum accuracy,
- maximum application,
- joy of personal discovery, and
- reasonable time commitment.

Questions for Reflection

1. Which of the benefits of Bible study listed in 2 Timothy 3:16 do you need most in your life now? Why?
2. How would you describe your spiritual fitness at this time? In which areas of your life do you need to shape up?
3. How confident are you in your present approach to Bible study?
 - Very confident
 - Confident
 - Somewhat confident
 - Not confident at all
4. Which of the three common procedures of Bible study have you used in the past?
5. How can the inductive process of Bible study especially help you?