

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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The Bible is a peculiar book. Words crafted in another language. Deeds done in a distant era. Events recorded in a far-off land. Counsel offered to a foreign people. It is a peculiar book.

It's surprising that anyone reads it. It's too old. Some of its writings date back 5,000 years. It's too bizarre. The book speaks of incredible floods, fires, earthquakes, and people with supernatural abilities. It's too radical. The Bible calls for undying devotion to a carpenter who called himself God's Son.

Logic says this book shouldn't survive. Too old, too bizarre, too radical.

The Bible has been banned, burned, scoffed, and ridiculed. Scholars have mocked it as foolish. Kings have branded it as illegal. A thousand times over the grave has been dug and the dirge has begun, but somehow the Bible never stays in the grave. Not only has it survived, but it has also thrived. It is the single most popular book in all of history. It has been the bestselling book in the world for years!

There is no way on earth to explain it. Which perhaps is the only explanation. For the Bible's durability is not found on *earth* but in *heaven*. The millions who have tested its claims and claimed its promises know there is but one answer: the Bible is God's book and God's voice.

As you read it, you would be wise to give some thought to two questions: *What is the purpose of the Bible?* and *How do I study the Bible?* Time spent reflecting on these two issues will greatly enhance your Bible study.

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Let the Bible itself answer that question: “*From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*” (2 Timothy 3:15).

The purpose of the Bible? Salvation. God’s highest passion is to get his children home. His book, the Bible, describes his plan of salvation. The purpose of the Bible is to proclaim God’s plan and passion to save his children.

This is the reason why this book has endured through the centuries. It dares to tackle the toughest questions about life: *Where do I go after I die? Is there a God? What do I do with my fears?* The Bible is the treasure map that leads to God’s highest treasure—eternal life.

But how do you study the Bible? Countless copies of Scripture sit unread on bookshelves and nightstands simply because people don’t know how to read it. What can you do to make the Bible real in your life?

The clearest answer is found in the words of Jesus: “*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you*” (Matthew 7:7).

The first step in understanding the Bible is asking God to help you. You should read it prayerfully. If anyone understands God’s Word, it is because of God and not the reader.

“*The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*” (John 14:26).

Before reading the Bible, pray and invite God to speak to you. Don’t go to Scripture looking for your idea, but go searching for his.

Not only should you read the Bible prayerfully, but you should also read it carefully. “*Seek and you will find*” is the pledge. The Bible is not

a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried. “*If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God*” (Proverbs 2:4–5).

Any worthy find requires effort. The Bible is no exception. To understand the Bible, you don’t have to be brilliant, but you must be willing to roll up your sleeves and search.

“*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Here’s a practical point. Study the Bible a bit at a time. Hunger is not satisfied by eating twenty-one meals in one sitting once a week. The body needs a steady diet to remain strong. So does the soul. When God sent food to his people in the wilderness, he didn’t provide loaves already made. Instead, he sent them manna in the shape of “*thin flakes like frost on the ground*” (Exodus 16:14).

God gave manna in limited portions.

God sends spiritual food the same way. He opens the heavens with just enough nutrients for today’s hunger. He provides “*a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there*” (Isaiah 28:10).

Don’t be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. Some days a lesser portion is all that is needed. What is important is to search every day for that day’s message. A steady diet of God’s Word over a lifetime builds a healthy soul and mind.

It’s much like the little girl who returned from her first day at school feeling a bit dejected. Her mom asked, “Did you learn anything?”

“Apparently not enough,” the girl responded. “I have to go back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next . . .”

Such is the case with learning. And such is the case with Bible study. Understanding comes little by little over a lifetime.

There is a third step in understanding the Bible. After the asking and seeking comes the knocking. After you ask and search, “*knock and the door will be opened to you*” (Matthew 7:7).

To knock is to stand at God's door. To make yourself available. To climb the steps, cross the porch, stand at the doorway, and volunteer. Knocking goes beyond the realm of thinking and into the realm of acting.

To knock is to ask, *What can I do? How can I obey? Where can I go?* It's one thing to know what to do. It's another to do it. But for those who do it—those who choose to obey—a special reward awaits them.

*"Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do"* (James 1:25).

What a promise. Blessings come to those who do what they read in God's Word! It's the same with medicine. If you only read the label but ignore the pills, it won't help. It's the same with food. If you only read the recipe but never cook, you won't be fed. And it's the same with the Bible. If you only read the words but never obey, you'll never know the joy God has promised.

Ask. Search. Knock. Simple, isn't it? So why don't you give it a try? If you do, you'll see why the Bible is the most remarkable book in history.

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## INTRODUCTION TO

# *The Book of Revelation*

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**A**n ancient legend tells of a general whose army was afraid to fight. The soldiers were frightened. The enemy was too strong. Their fortress was too high and weapons too mighty.

The king, however, was not afraid. He knew his men would win. How could he convince them?

He had an idea. He told his soldiers that he possessed a magical coin. A prophetic coin. A coin which would foretell the outcome of the battle. On one side was an eagle and on the other a bear. He would toss the coin. If it landed eagle-side up, they would win. If it landed with the bear up, they would lose.

The army was silent as the coin flipped in the air. Soldiers circled as it fell to the ground. They held their breath as they looked and shouted when they saw the eagle. The army would win.

Bolstered by the assurance of victory, the men marched against the castle and won.

It was only after the victory that the king showed the men the coin. The two sides were identical.

Though the story is fictional, the truth is reliable: assured victory empowers the army.

That may be the reason God gives us the book of Revelation. In it he assures victory. We, the soldiers, are privileged a glimpse into the final battlefield. All hell breaks loose as all heaven comes forth. The two collide in the ultimate battle of good and evil. Left standing amid the smoke and thunder is the Son of God. Jesus, born in a manger, is now triumphant over Satan.

Satan is defeated. Christ is triumphant. And we, the soldiers, are assured of victory. Let us march.

## AUTHOR AND DATE

The author of Revelation identifies himself only as “John,” and it is likely this was not a pseudonym but the name of a well-recognized person in the church. The historical evidence reveals the majority of early church fathers (including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen) identified this individual as the disciple John, who along with Peter and James was a member of Jesus’ “inner circle.” Later church historians (including Eusebius and Jerome) believed the author was “John the Elder,” an obscure figure mentioned only in fragments from Papias as residing in the city of Ephesus around the same time the work was believed to have been written. The author notes he is writing from the island of Patmos, a small volcanic isle off the coast of Asia Minor (see 1:9). Early tradition held the disciple John was exiled to this island at some point during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, which would place the writing c. AD 95. It is believed John was the last of Jesus’ disciples to die, c. AD 98, at an old age.

## SITUATION

Similar to the other epistles in the New Testament, the author of Revelation directs his work to a specific audience—in this case, church members in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (all located in western Asia Minor)—who were facing some

form of persecution for their belief in Christ and were tempted to revert to their former way of living. Unlike other New Testament literature, the author notes his work is also a book of prophecy (see 1:3; 22:7, 18–19), and as such is written in a style similar to the prophetic books of the Old Testament (especially Daniel and Ezekiel). Furthermore, the author employs a genre of writing that flourished c. 200 BC–AD 200 known as *apocalyptic* literature, which draws heavily on the use of symbolism and imagery (typically portrayed through a vision) to show how God would one day bring about the ultimate end of evil and establish a new heaven and a new earth for his followers. While the symbols John uses seem strange and even bizarre to us today, his readers would have understood he was encouraging them to stay true to Christ and persevere, for God knew the suffering they were enduring and would one day reward them for their faith.

## KEY THEMES

- God has a plan and a future for the world.
- God will be ultimately victorious over evil.
- There will be a final accounting for our faith and our lives.
- There is a better world in store.

## KEY VERSE

*“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:4).*



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## INTRODUCTION TO

# *The Book of Ephesians*

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I've just witnessed a beautiful wedding. The most beautiful I've ever seen. That says a lot, since I've seen a lot. Ministers see many weddings. It's a perk of the profession.

Is there anything more elegant than a wedding? Candles bathe a chapel in gold. Loving families fill the pews. Groomsmen and bridesmaids descend the aisles with bouquets of newness and rings of promise. What an occasion.

And nothing quite compares with that moment when the bride stands at the top of the aisle. Arm entwined with her father's, she takes those final steps with him and steps toward a new life with her groom.

Ahh, the glory of a wedding. So to say I just saw the most beautiful one is no small thing. What made these nuptials so unforgettable? The groom. Usually the groom is not the star of the wedding. The fellow is typically upstaged by the girl. But this wedding was made special by the groom. It was enhanced by something he did.

And who he was made what he did even more startling. You see, he's a cowboy: a stocky fellow who went to college on a rodeo scholarship. But the one standing by me was not a macho calf roper, but a pinch-me-I'm-dreaming boy who'd never seen a bride so gorgeous.

He was composed as he walked down the aisle. He was fine as he took his place at the altar.

But when he saw the bride, he wept.

It was the moment he'd dreamed of. It was as if he'd been given life's greatest gift—a bride in all her beauty. By the way, those are the very words Paul uses to describe the church: a bride in all her beauty.

*"[Jesus] died so that he could give the church to himself like a bride in all her beauty. He died so that the church could be pure and without fault, with no evil or sin or any other wrong thing in it"* (Ephesians 5:27 NCV).

Ponder that verse. Jesus died for a bride. He died so he could be married. This passage anticipates the day when the groom will see his bride—when Christ will receive his church. Jesus' fondest longing will be fulfilled. His Bride will arrive.

The letter to the Ephesians celebrates the beauty of the church—the Bride of Christ. From our perspective the church isn't so pretty. We see the backbiting, the squabbling, the divisions. Heaven sees that, as well. But heaven sees more. Heaven sees the church as cleansed and made holy by Christ.

Heaven sees the church ascending to heaven. Heaven sees the Bride wearing the spotless gown of Jesus Christ.

It's enough to make one weep.

## AUTHOR AND DATE

Paul, who persecuted the early church before his life was radically altered by meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1–31). Paul founded the church in Ephesus during his second missionary journey c. AD 52 (see 18:19) and spent three years teaching there during his third missionary journey c. AD 54–56 (see 19:8–10). He ultimately left the city following an uprising by the local silversmiths, who were angry his teaching had led to a loss in their profits (see 19:23–31). Paul likely wrote the letter c. AD 60 from Rome, where he was imprisoned at the time, and intended it to be circulated to a number of churches in the region

around Ephesus rather than to a specific community in the city. It was delivered by Tychicus, likely at the same time as Colossians and Philemon (see Ephesians 6:21–22).

## SITUATION

The general nature of Ephesians makes it difficult to determine the exact purpose for which Paul wrote the letter or the specific problems that he was seeking to resolve. However, if the letter was written at the same time as Colossians, it can be surmised that Paul was seeking to address the same types of problems in the Ephesian church as in the church in Colossae: the infiltration of false teachings. As with the letter of Colossians, Paul wished to stamp out this false teaching before it could do major damage, and, in the process, encourage the believers to recognize their high calling as children and heirs of God.

## KEY THEMES

- We have many spiritual blessings through Christ.
- Each believer is gifted through the Spirit of God.
- Our faith should work its way into all of our relationships.
- Our spiritual strength comes from God through his Word and our faith.

## KEY VERSE

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).*



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## INTRODUCTION TO

# *The Book of Galatians*

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The Emancipation Proclamation was ready to be signed. The papers were complete. All that was lacking was the signature of the president. But Abraham Lincoln was not ready. He had spent the morning at a reception and his hand was swollen from greeting visitors.

“Let me wait until my hand is better,” he reportedly requested. “I don’t want my signature to be shaky. I want people to know I set the slaves free in confidence.”

Galatians states that Christ did the same for us. “He set the slaves free in confidence.” No hesitation. No reservation. No reluctance. No exceptions.

The book of Galatians is the Emancipation Proclamation for the church. Written by one who had known slavery, it declares and defines Christian liberty. Paul wrote it to refute the devilish idea that salvation is based on adherence to a religious code.

Many of the early Christians were Jewish Christians who were accustomed to following the Law. Though they had accepted the gift of grace offered by Christ on the cross, some were falling away and substituting human effort for God’s gift. Paul recognized this for what it was: legalism.

Everywhere the gospel has been preached, there have been those who contend it is too good to be true. Some argue it’s not enough to be saved

by faith; we must earn God's approval (legalism). Some teach we earn God's favor by what we know (intellectualism). Others insist we are saved by what we do (moralism). Still others claim that salvation is determined by what we feel (emotionalism).

However you package it, Paul contests, legalism is heresy. Salvation comes only through the cross—no additions, no alterations.

We are free in Christ. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Galatians is a document of freedom. As you read, note the confidence of the writer. His hand doesn’t shake, his conviction doesn’t waver, his belief doesn’t falter.

Neither should ours.

## AUTHOR AND DATE

Paul, who persecuted the early church before his life was radically altered by meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1–31). Paul and Barnabas established churches in several cities in the Roman province of Galatia (the south-central part of modern-day Turkey) during their first missionary journey c. AD 47 (see Acts 13–14). It is likely Paul wrote the letter of Galatians to the congregations in this region shortly after this journey but before the Jerusalem Council took place c. AD 48 or 49. If this date of composition is correct, it would make Galatians the earliest of Paul’s existing letters. It is not known where Paul was based when he composed this letter, but it is possible that he wrote it from Jerusalem.

## SITUATION

After Paul returned from his first missionary journey, he received reports that teachers preaching “a different gospel” had infiltrated the Galatian churches and were “trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6–7). These teachers were proclaiming that if the people wanted to receive salvation from Christ, they also had to follow all the

laws of Moses, observe the Jewish customs, and in effect become “practical Jews” (see Acts 15:1–5). So many of the Galatians were being persuaded by this argument that Paul was compelled to meet the threat head-on by writing a no-holds-barred letter that showed them the error of this way of thinking. For Paul, only faith in the saving work of Jesus was required for salvation, and he wanted the Galatian believers to remember the true gospel of grace that he had shared with them.

## KEY THEMES

- Salvation comes by grace, not works.
- We should bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
- We will reap in life what we have sown in life.

## KEY VERSE

*Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? (Galatians 3:3).*

