
HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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.

INTRODUCTION

ROMANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome c. AD 57, almost three decades after the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the Church. It is fair to say that Rome was the “center” of the world in the days of Paul. The most famous poets, politicians, philosophers, and people came from Rome, moved to Rome, or longed to visit this influential city. Paul knew that if the gospel grew healthy roots in Rome, it could spread all over the world. If the church in Rome was gripped by the grace of God, it could influence and help believers far and wide.

THE BIG PICTURE

Some of Paul’s letters were written to dear friends, others to people he had mentored, and still others to churches that knew him well. The letter to the church in Rome was different. It was written to a group of believers who had not

met Paul and were actually a bit cautious about him. He was a controversial person they had heard about but did not know personally. Paul's hope was to visit the believers in Rome on his way to Spain. So, as a preamble to their meeting, Paul sent a letter that was inspired by the Holy Spirit and came from deep within his heart. Romans is one of the richest theological works ever penned, yet it is also deeply personal.

The first eleven chapters focus with laser precision on the core beliefs of the Christian faith. If a believer wants to dig into the central teaching of the Bible, almost all of the core doctrines can be found in the book of Romans. The theme of these chapters is correct belief, or what theologians would call *orthodoxy*. Paul is showing the Roman church that his beliefs were absolutely in line with the Scriptures and the teaching of Jesus.

Starting in chapter twelve, there is a shift. With one word, the focus moves from belief to action. When Paul declares "Therefore," in Romans 12:1, he turns the reader's attention to what scholars call *orthopraxy*, or right Christian living. Once we know what we believe, we can move into action and daily behavior that honors and glorifies God.

In this one letter, Paul shows the Roman church that his beliefs and practices are unquestionably in line with the truth they have been taught. He gives a Spirit-breathed clarification of what the gospel is and how Jesus' people are to think and live in the grip of God's amazing grace. Paul, with authentic clarity and deep transparency, thus goes from being a controversial stranger to the Romans to a brother and friend—before they ever meet him.

Paul's words to the Romans contained the power to save souls, shape minds, and transform lives for the glory of Jesus. The exciting thing is that reading this book of the Bible can

still do all of these things today! So brace yourself as you read this letter from Paul.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Romans that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **The reality, danger, and power of sin.** Sin is the deepest problem that human beings face and has eternal consequences (see Romans 1–2).
- **God’s grace is real, amazing, and available to all people.** Through Jesus, every person is invited to enter a relationship with the Father and be cleansed of their sin (see Romans 3–5).
- **God has broken our chains and set us free, but the battle with sin continues.** Our old way of life is dead and we are alive in Jesus, but the process of spiritual growth and becoming like Jesus takes a lifetime and demands continual surrender to the will and ways of God (see Romans 6–8).
- **God’s beautiful story comes in four movements: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.** We are part of a spiritual family tree that spans the Old and New Testaments in the Bible. God is engrafting us into a bigger story and family than we can imagine (see Romans 9–11).

- Christians follow in the steps of their Savior. This means that we walk the pathway of love. In a world driven by selfish ambition and self-centered demands, we humbly serve and sacrificially love others (see Romans 12–13).
- Followers of Jesus are like passengers on a ship. We are all on the same journey. We are part of an amazing family of faith, and God calls us to live in fellowship with each other (see Romans 14–16).

In the first eleven chapters of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul lays out the core beliefs of the Christian faith with clarity and precision. Then, in the final five chapters, Paul reveals how to live in ways consistent with those beliefs. So, as you start this journey, ask God to help you *understand* your faith at a deeper level than you ever have before, and then pray for the courage and strength to *live out* what you learn in your daily life. In addition, ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand God’s grace, walk in that grace, and share it freely with every person you meet.

INTRODUCTION

MARK

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

John Mark was not one of the original disciples of Jesus. His name first appears in the book of Acts, after Peter miraculously escaped from prison and made his way to a home that belonged to John Mark’s mother (see Acts 12:12). From there, the young man became a traveling companion of Paul and Barnabas, until he deserted them in Pamphylia, causing a rift between the two men (see 12:25; 13:13; 15:39). John Mark went on to travel with Barnabas, but scholars believe he maintained a close association with Peter, from whom he learned about the Savior. John Mark penned his fast-paced Gospel just a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the early AD 60s, to believers in Rome and around the Roman world. This was a time of severe persecution, and his Gospel brought hope to those who were feeling discouraged. It also gave clarity for anyone who wondered what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

THE BIG PICTURE

While the three other Gospel writers—Matthew, Luke, and John—focused on details of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, Mark gets right to the heart of the matter. A few decades had passed since Jesus’ ministry, and some people were growing a bit fuzzy about what it meant to be a follower of the Messiah. Persecution of Christians was intensifying, and there was a temptation among the believers to compromise, apologize, or simply give up on their faith. Sadly, some were doing exactly that!

So, Mark needed to take the early Christians back to the basics. With clarity and precise language, he pulls no punches as he explains exactly what it means to be a follower of Christ. As we read his words, we discover an invitation to ask: *Who is this Jesus? What does he expect of me? Is suffering a normal part of the Christian life? What will encourage and strengthen my trust in Jesus?* These are questions that all who put their faith in Jesus—at some point in their lives—will ask themselves, maybe again and again. These questions are not born of a lack of faith but serve to strengthen and stabilize our relationship with the Savior.

As we read John Mark’s rapid-fire account of the ministry of Jesus, we find answers to these questions . . . and many others. When we embrace these biblical answers, our faith will solidify, our hope will deepen, and our pathway forward will grow clear. We will find that God’s strength fills us as Jesus draws near. So lace up your running shoes. Open your heart and mind. And come with your questions! Get ready to move as Mark’s Gospel reveals what it means to follow Jesus. Your life will never be the same.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Romans that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **Jesus has been given all authority.** This authority was clear for everyone to see. Jesus had power over the natural world, spiritual forces, sickness, and even death. As people encountered the Savior and recognized this, they were either drawn to him or resisted him (see Mark 1–3).
- **Jesus calls us and sends us out.** There were many people who flooded to Jesus and were drawn to his ministry. But out of the many, Jesus called twelve men to be with him and to go out with his message to the world. Jesus calls people near to him, and then he sends them out (see Mark 3–6).
- **Jesus was always willing to reveal God’s truth.** Even those who walked closest to Jesus and witnessed his power, ministry, and character did not fully understand who he was or what he expected of them. Although many others seemed to be deaf to the truth of God and blind to who he was, Jesus was always ready to open ears and give sight to the blind (see Mark 6–8).
- **Jesus redefined greatness.** Jesus told his followers that he would suffer and die. He also declared on multiple occasions that after he died, he would rise

from the grave. He wanted his followers to understand that humble service was the path of discipleship. Greatness is found in following him and walking the path of sacrifice (see Mark 8–10).

- **Jesus is the King of heaven and ruler of an eternal kingdom.** Near the end of Jesus' life, as he came to Jerusalem, he presented himself as the King. The crowds celebrated this declaration, but the religious leaders challenged his authority at every turn and eventually had him put to death (see Mark 11–13).
- **Jesus rose from the grave.** Jesus, the servant King, was arrested, mocked, abused, tried, crucified, and executed on a cross. He was placed in a tomb and was dead for three days. But then he rose again in glory, power, and eternal authority over hell, death, and the grave. Jesus is still the King of all kings and rules today and for eternity (see Mark 14–16).

Those who prefer a slow and ambling journey through the life of Jesus that fills in every blank and has a flourish on every sentence will struggle with Mark's Gospel. But those who love to get to the point, who prefer direct communication, and who appreciate it when others tell it like it is, will delight in Mark's approach. So, as you start this journey, take a deep breath, say a prayer, and get ready to move at the rapid pace of Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

I AND 2 THESSALONIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The letters to God’s people in the church in Thessalonica were written by Paul, the Pastor. First and Second Thessalonians came from deep within his pastoral heart. Although there are clear theological underpinnings, Paul’s primary focus in these letters is how we should live more than a deep exposition of what we are to believe. These profoundly personal letters were written around AD 50–52 and address what it looks like to live as a Christian. These letters were written to real-life people living in the largest city in Macedonia. This capital city was at the crossroads of the world. Positioned on the Via Egnatia and Thermic Gulf (both travel and trade routes), Thessalonica was a center of culture, religion (of every sort), and trade.

THE BIG PICTURE

When Paul and his ministry companions arrived in the city of Thessalonica, they came battered, bruised, and weary. They had just been in Philippi and had been stripped, flogged, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison. After being miraculously set free from jail and leading a revival meeting with the jailer and his family, they moved on (see Acts 16:16–40). The next stop was Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1–9).

Rather than find a quiet place to lick his wounds and have a little “me time,” Paul went right to the synagogue in Thessalonica and for three weeks in a row he preached the message of Jesus the Messiah. By the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, some Jews became Jesus followers and many Greeks who were spiritually hungry also came to faith in the Savior.

Once again, conflict arose, mobs incited violence, and the Christians in the city packed up Paul and his ministry companions and sent them on to Berea. They were only in Thessalonica for a couple of months, but Paul fell in love with the people in this fresh new Jesus community.

What happened next is staggering and beautiful! It stands as an example for all Christians, in all places, at all times. The believers in the city of Thessalonica fell so in love with Jesus and followed the Savior with such passion, that word of their faith began to spread from city to city. Paul would show up in a new region to do ministry and the people there were already talking about how the Thessalonian believers had warmly welcomed Paul and his companions, how they had rejected idols and embraced the true and living

God, and how their lives were focused fully on Jesus (see 1 Thessalonians 1:7–10).

In response, Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write two short, power-packed letters to this group of passionate Jesus followers. The first letter is only 89 verses. The second is 47 verses. Think about it, Psalm 119 is 150 verses long. The two letters to the Thessalonian church are only 136 verses combined. Yet, Paul addresses many of the core beliefs and practices Christians of all maturity levels need to know about to honor Jesus and impact the world.

The books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians stand out as deeply pastoral and practical for all believers. If you want to remember what really matters about faith in Jesus and hear the call to follow Jesus on your daily adventure of faith, these books will propel you forward on your journey.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **The power of an effective witness.** Be a faithful and passionate follower of Jesus and the world will see and be impacted (1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 1).
- **God delights in resilient faith.** Stand strong in your faith and hang in there, even when things get tough (1 Thessalonians chapter 2 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 2).

- **Keep the gospel of Jesus central . . . always.** There are many things that matter, but at the center of our faith and lives should be the good news of Jesus (1 Thessalonians chapter 2).
- **Live with Christian love, care, and family tenderness.** We should be concerned for the well-being of others. Of all the commandments, Jesus was clear that loving people should always be central to who we are and what we do (1 Thessalonians chapter 3).
- **Let Jesus be Lord of all.** Follow Jesus and live for him in every part of your life. This is what it means to be his follower (1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 3).
- **This life is not the end of the story.** Jesus will come again! So, we are to live for our Savior every day and be ready to see him face to face for eternity (1 Thessalonians chapters 4 and 5 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 2).

Thessalonica was positioned on major trade routes—a cultural center and a hub of all sorts of religious activity. If the good news of Jesus could take root in this place, it would spread across the known world. There were travelers in and out of this region daily and they were headed to the ends of the earth . . . literally! The simple truths that God taught these believers through the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians were world-changing. They still are! These same truths can transform your life and continue through you to impact people all over your world.

INTRODUCTION

PHILIPPIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi between AD 60 and 62. He was a prisoner and chained to a Roman guard. In this dark and discouraging place Paul's joy was not extinguished but continued to burn bright. The city of Philippi took its name from Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. It was one of his military strongholds in northern Greece. Fast-forward a few hundred years, and Philippi was conquered by the Romans in 31 BC. So, Paul is writing to Roman citizens. They spoke the Latin language. They wore Roman dress. Their coins had Roman inscriptions. The city itself was patterned after Rome, and it sat on the Via Egnatia, which was a major military road in the Roman Empire.

Philippi had a wide variety of religious influences. There were altars to Greek gods. Archaeologists have found sanctuaries to the Egyptian gods Iris and Serapis. And, of course, there

were monuments to the Caesars. The Imperial Cult, as it was called, was the official state religion. There was also a Jewish community that lived in Philippi. It was to these Christians in this pluralistic and secular environment that Paul wrote a letter of unparalleled joy.

THE BIG PICTURE

Just four chapters, 104 verses, and Paul mentions his Savior more than forty times. Every theme and truth found in Philippians is saturated in the presence and power of Jesus. It is in this book that we find the great Christ hymn that gives a vision of Jesus' incarnation, humiliation, sacrifice, and ultimate glorification. Joy is everywhere in the book of Philippians, and that is because Jesus is present in all places, even in persecution. While incarcerated and chained, Paul's heart is free, and he can rejoice.

History does seem to repeat itself. When Paul came to the city of Philippi his plan was to proclaim the gospel and lift up Jesus as the Messiah. After sharing the good news with a group of women outside the city along a river, a businesswoman named Lydia came to faith in the Savior and was baptized along with many members of her family (Acts 16:11–15). After being taunted by a demon-possessed woman for many days, Paul cast out the evil spirit, which led to a major uproar in the city (Acts 16:16–24). The Roman leaders responded swiftly and severely. Paul and his ministry team were all publicly stripped, beaten with rods, severely flogged, put in prison, thrown in the inner cell, and fastened in the stocks.

At midnight the other prisoners and the guard were treated to a worship concert and prayer meeting. In a shocking and reflexive act of faith, Paul and his companions burst into songs of praise and prayers of adoration. Joy and music filled the prison! These bruised and battered Christians were not cursing God, government, or guards through clenched teeth. They were celebrating the grace of Jesus with open mouths and hearts.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was in jail again. He was rejoicing again. He was willingly suffering with a smile on his face, prayers on his lips, and a song in his heart. History was repeating itself.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Philippians that are worthy of our focus. These include:

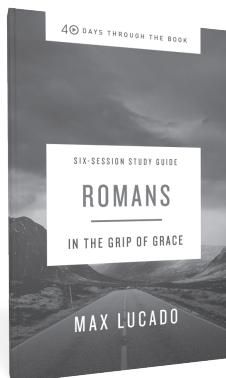
- **Love-filled prayer.** The recipients of this letter are not strangers but friends, family, beloved partners in the gospel. You can feel Paul's affection for these people all through this prayer and the whole letter (see Philippians 1:1–11).
- **Evangelistic hopefulness.** Paul actually finds joy in the fact that his unfair incarceration has given him an up-close chance to share Jesus with each and every guard to whom he was chained. Before you knew it, the whole palace guard knew Paul's story and the story of Jesus (see Philippians 1:12–26).

- **The humility and exaltation of Jesus.** In one of the first recorded hymns of the early church we see the willing heart of Jesus to leave glory, live perfectly, die sacrificially, and rise in victory. Because of this, every knee will bow to him and every tongue in all creation declare that Jesus is Lord (see Philippians 2:1–11).
- **When we know Jesus, we are transformed.** Paul calls all followers of the Savior to grow in faith, adjust their attitudes, and walk in holiness. To help us have a picture of what this can look like, we get snapshots of two faithful and humble servants: Timothy and Epaphroditus (see Philippians 2:12–30).
- **A contrast of human righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus.** Legalism and trust in human religious devotion is always a temptation, but Paul teaches us that this is all garbage compared to the cleansing and glorious grace of Jesus (see Philippians 3).
- **Keep your eyes on Jesus.** How do you resolve conflicts? How do you stay joyful in hard times? How do you keep keeping on when you are weary? The answer to all three of these questions is: keep your eyes and focus locked firmly on Jesus (see Philippians 4:1–9).
- **Contentment and a generous heart grow out of a love for Jesus.** The transformational power of our Lord will change us at the deepest level . . . even the temptation

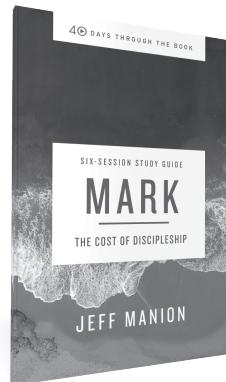
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to be possessed by possessions can be overcome by the power of our risen Lord (see Philippians 4:10–20).

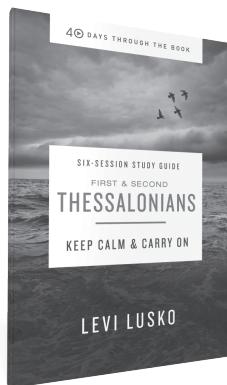
The heartbeat of Philippians is for believers to have a Jesus-centered vision of life. How do we find joy in all of life's ups and downs? Jesus! How do we grow in contentment and generosity? Jesus! How do we grow in contentment and generosity? Jesus! Where should our focus be so that our life makes sense? Jesus! Perhaps these words from the prayer of Saint Patrick summarize it best: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me . . . Christ when I lie down . . . Christ when I arise."



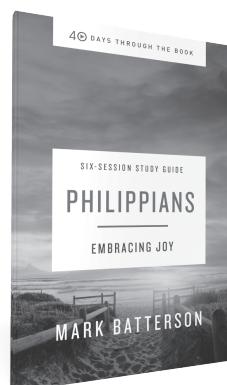
ROMANS
In The Grip Of Grace
Max Lucado



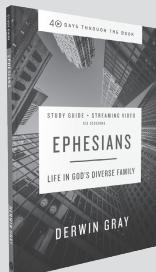
MARK
The Cost Of Discipleship
Jeff Manion



THESSALONIANS
Keep Calm & Carry On
Levi Lusko



PHILIPPIANS
Embracing Joy
Mark Batterson



COMING SOON!
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