

How to Study the Bible

This is a peculiar book you are holding. Words crafted in another language. Deeds done in a distant era. Events recorded in a far-off land. Counsel offered to a foreign people. This is a peculiar book.

It's surprising that anyone reads it. It's too old. Some of its writings date back five thousand 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. King's have branded it as illegal. A thousand times over it the grave has been dug and the dirge had begun, but somehow the Bible never stays in the grave. Not only has it survived, it has thrived. It is the single most popular book in all of history. It has been the best-selling book in the world for years!

There is no way on earth to explain it. Which perhaps is the only explanation. The answer? The Bible's durability is not found on earth; it is found in heaven. For the millions who have tested its claims and claimed its promises, 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.

Since you were a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise. And that wisdom leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

(II Tim. 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.

That's the reason 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 offers answers to these crucial questions. It is the treasure map that leads us to God's highest treasure, eternal life.

How to Study or Use the Bible

But how do we use the Bible? Countless copies of Scripture sit unread on bookshelves and nightstands simply because people don't know how to read it. What can we do to make the Bible real in our lives?

The clearest answer is found in the words of Jesus.

Ask and God will give it to you. Search and you will find. Knock, and the door will open for you.

Matthew 7:7

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

But the Helper will teach you everything and will cause you to remember all that I told you. The helper is the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name.

John 14:24

Before reading the Bible, pray. Invite God to speak to you through his Word. Don't go to Scripture looking for your idea; go searching for His.

Not only should we read the Bible prayerfully, we should read it carefully. "Search and you shall find" is the promise. The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed, but rather a mine to be quarried.

Search for it like silver, and hunt for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand respect for the LORD, and you will find that you know God.

Proverbs 2:4

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.

Be a worker who is not ashamed and who uses the true teaching in the right way.

2 Timothy 2:15

Here's a practical point. Study the Bible a bit at a time. Eating twenty-one meals in one sitting once a week does not satisfy hunger. 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 desert ground. (Exodus 16:14)

God gave manna in limited portions.

God sends spiritual food the same way. An insight here, an understanding there. A little lesson here, a little lesson there.

Don't be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. What is important is to search every day. A steady diet of God's Word over a lifetime builds a healthy soul and mind.

There is a third step in understanding the Bible. After the asking and seeking comes the knocking. After you ask and search, then knock. "Knock and the door will be opened for you."

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?” It’s another thing to do it. But for those who do it, those who choose to obey, a special reward awaits them.

The truly happy are those who carefully study God’s perfect law that makes people free, and they continue to study it. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God’s teaching says. Those who do this will be made happy.

James 1:25

If you only read the Bible and never obey, you’ll never know the joy God has promised.

Our New Study

I hope you enjoyed reading the “How to Study the Bible” section and I hope you will pay special attention to many of the ideas that were presented as you study God’s Word. This will be very important as we begin our new LIFE Group Study in the Gospel of Mark. We will begin with some specific introductory material about the second Gospel. Please don’t skip over this section, because it will be important as we get into the meat of the book itself.

During this study we will not be making comments on every verse of Mark. Instead we will try to discuss the major points and give you a good understanding of the message of the book.

Mark is a Gospel. Gospels are a unique type of Bible book. A Gospel is the telling of the story of Jesus with a specific audience or purpose in mind. Gospels are not complete biographies and they do not claim to follow a strict chronology. Because each Gospel is written to a specific audience, you may see an emphasis on certain facts in each one of the Gospel accounts.

The word “gospel” means *good news*. The message of Jesus for fallen humankind is a message of hope and salvation. Even though Jesus was rejected and crucified, the “Good News” is that he took our punishment and our sins to the cross. The Good News is that he arose on the third day and he commissioned his people to preach that Good News to the nations. One valuable tool the disciples would have as they presented the message of Jesus would be the Gospel of Mark.

Introduction to Mark

Tradition holds that this, the shortest of all four Gospels, was recorded by John Mark. John Mark may have been a Roman citizen like the apostle Paul, since he has a Roman surname (Mark or Marcus). His mother was a Christian woman by the name of Mary, who lived in Jerusalem. Mark was well acquainted with the apostle Peter (Acts 12:12), and was the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10). He also accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey.

Most scholars agree that Mark was the earliest of the Gospels to be written. Most believe that he wrote the gospel after the death of Peter, but before the fall of Jerusalem – between AD 64 and 70. Others believe that he wrote his gospel as early as AD 50.

The audience to whom Mark was writing is almost certainly Gentile. For example, Mark's explanation of certain Jewish practices to his readers means that they must have been unfamiliar with them (7:3-4; 15:42). Also there are certain Aramaic forms in the text that are translated for the reader (5:41; 7:34; 14:36).

It is uncertain where the Gospel was written, but many believe that it was written in Rome.

The purpose of the Gospel of Mark was to address concerns typical of Christians of his generation and these same concerns are pertinent to us today. Mark wrote to preserve the story of Jesus after the first generation of Christians died. His major concerns were these.

1. Mark wrote to encourage Christians to persist in faithful discipleship, particularly as they faced all kinds of persecution. The sayings of Jesus encourage perseverance (8:34-38; 13:11). He also encouraged faithful discipleship through the examples of the people Jesus touched while he was on earth. John the Baptist, countless individuals who needed healing, those who were demon possessed, the first disciples who left all to follow Jesus, the woman who anointed Jesus; all these encourage those who read the Gospel and who are willing to follow to live lives of self-sacrifice.
2. Mark wrote to encourage Christians to be faithful witnesses of what Jesus did. Jesus called his first disciples to be "fishers of men" (1:7). Even in the face of harsh opposition and trial Mark shows us how the early believers followed through bringing their friends to Jesus; the friends who brought the paralytic, the former demoniac who proclaimed how much Jesus had done for him, the Syrophenician woman, those who brought their little ones. All these displayed the importance of bringing others to the one who could really help.
3. Mark encouraged his readers to hope in the promises of Jesus; the promised Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of Heaven, suffering and glory, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The Gospel of Mark is called one of the synoptic Gospels. The word synoptic means, "to lay side by side." The first three gospels are very similar in outline and content, but there are some differences. The following are some of the similarities.

- Mark may be divided into 105 sections. Of these, 93 occur in Matthew and 81 in Luke.
- Mark contains 661 verses, compared to Matthew's 1068 and Luke's 1,149. Of these 661 verses in Mark, Matthew includes 606 (with some variation), while Luke includes 320. Only thirty-one of Mark's verses do not occur in either Matthew or Luke.
- Matthew occasionally varies Mark's order of events. So does Luke. Matthew and Luke together, however, never vary Mark's order. One of them always agrees with Mark's order of events; most often, both do.

- Matthew and Luke frequently smooths the rough edges off Mark's rather coarse Greek. Matthew simplifies the language; Luke makes stylistic changes. But often Mark's words are reproduced exactly in the original.

What this means is that it is probable that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark in front of them as they composed their Gospels.

On To the Text!

The Gospel of Mark has a unique beginning. It does not begin with the birth of Jesus or the family tree of Jesus as do Matthew and Luke. Neither does it begin with a theological statement, as does John. It begins with the ministry of John the Baptist.

The prophetic voice in Israel had been silent for over 400 (since the days of Malachi, 400 BC). Israel still longed for the everlasting Kingdom promised from the time of David through all the prophets of the Old Testament. The promise had been repeated during the exile in Babylon: God would deliver his people from bondage and establish his righteous rule among his people.

To do so, God would send a Messiah, a special anointed one to rule as King over Israel. Whenever the Jews thought about the coming Messiah, they always envisioned an earthly Kingdom centered in Jerusalem. During the long 400 years of silence, many individuals claimed to be the Messiah, only to be struck down by the Grecian or Roman forces. The people of Israel had been little more than a vassal state for almost the entire period between the prophets of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus Christ.

The world in which the Jews lived little resembled their hopes and dreams of a Kingdom of righteousness their own prophet predicted. The Herods, the ruling family set up in Israel by the Romans were, to say the least, a horrible family, full of intrigue, assassinations, and gross immorality.

But now, during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (about AD 30), the prophetic voice was once more heard in Judah. The voice came through the person of John the Baptist. The miraculous story of his birth is recorded in the Gospel of Luke (1:5-25). John was a kinsman of Mary the mother of Jesus, and was sent to the earth by God with a special mission to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Mark begins his Gospel by informing his readers that John's ministry was a direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy concerning a messenger that God was sending to prepare the way.

In the closing words of the last prophecy of the Old Testament, Malachi speaks concerning John's ministry.

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that Great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Malachi 4:5, 6

Malachi's prophecy clearly agrees with the message of John. He came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Before the ministry of Jesus began, he was preaching to turn the hearts of the people back to God.

In those days, when a King traveled, he sent workers to smooth the road and announce the coming for the King. This was John's job for the King of Kings.

It was certain that some people might come to the conclusion that John was the Messiah. He turned these thoughts aside by informing the people that there was one coming after him, who was so much greater than he that he was not even worthy to "stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals." John sincerely stated that he was not even worthy to be a servant of the one who was to come.

Even his baptism would be more powerful by virtue of the Holy Spirit with which the Messiah would baptize.

The Baptism of Jesus

One day when John was baptizing people in the Jordan River, Jesus arrived desiring John to baptize him. Despite John's protestation that Jesus should in fact baptize him, he did as Jesus asked him. God immediately sent a clear message to those who were there that this is, in fact, the one God has sent. The heavens were torn open, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended and the voice of God was audibly heard.

You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

Mark 1:11

At this crucial moment in the history of humankind, the three parts of the Godhead are present and are in agreement. The Father and Holy Spirit confirm that Jesus, the Son of God, is in fact the Messiah.

After the awesome and unique experience of His baptism, the Holy Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness to be exposed to the temptations that would test him. Mark tells us that Jesus and Satan battled in the deepest wilderness. Even though the angels attended him, Jesus met Satan's challenge to his divinity.

Calling the First Disciples

There is a lapse of time between the incidents recorded in verse 15 and verses 16-20. As is characteristic of Mark's Gospel, we are quickly moved from Jesus temptation in the desert to Jesus challenge to his first disciples to leave everything and follow him.

Jesus takes up the message of John after John is put in prison, with one major exception. Instead of crying out that the Kingdom is coming, Jesus proclaims, "The time has come!" It is time for everyone to turn from their lives of sin and to embrace the message of the Gospel.

Jesus commanded two sets of brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, to follow him. The brothers had followed Jesus earlier (John 1:35-42), but this call was to continuous discipleship. Immediately, they left their business and followed Jesus.

These sets of brothers set a clear example of how everyone should follow Jesus. Notice the active words, “at once,” “they left their nets,” and “followed.” Discipleship is active. Disciples hear the words of the Master and they immediately put them into practice.

The First Miracle

Mark 1:21, marks a big transition in the Gospel. It is the beginning of the description of Jesus’ ministry. There are many important things that happen in the initial stages of his ministry that merit close examination.

First, Jesus began his ministry in a very natural place - the synagogue. The synagogue served as the “church” of the Jews. But there were some basic differences between the Christian Church and the synagogue of the Jews.

1. The synagogue was primarily a teaching institution. Synagogue services generally consisted of only three things – prayer, the reading of God’s Word, and the exposition of it. There was no singing and no sacrifices were made. The Temple was the place of worship and sacrifice; the synagogue was the place of teaching and instruction.
2. The synagogue was far more influential in the everyday lives of the Jews by virtue of the fact that the Jews often met in their synagogues more than once each week. Jewish law maintained that wherever there were at least 10 Jewish families, there must be a synagogue. If a man had a new message to preach, the synagogue was the obvious place to do so.
3. The synagogue provided a unique opportunity to deliver such a message. The synagogue had certain officials. First there was the Ruler of the Synagogue. He was responsible for the administration of the affairs of the synagogue. Then there were the distributors of alms. A daily collection was made from those who could afford to do so. It was then distributed to the poor; the poorest people might receive up to 14 meals each week. Then there was the minister called the Chazzan. He was the keeper of the scrolls on which the Holy Scriptures were written. The synagogue had no permanent preacher or teacher. When the people met in the synagogue, the Ruler would call on any competent person to address the people. That is why Jesus was able to proclaim his message to the people.

So that stage was set. Jesus taught the people and amazed them. He taught as one who had authority, not like one of the teachers of the Law. The Rabbis would generally cite many sources during their messages, relying on the authority of great teachers or significant leaders. In Jesus’ exposition of the Word, he authoritatively gave its meaning without relying on any other sources.

And so Jesus begins his ministry, teaching in the synagogue, but challenges are just ahead. The evil spirits will do everything in their power to defeat the King of Righteousness, but the King of Darkness will fail.

Daily Reading – Personal Study and Group Questions

Week 1:

Day 1 – Read “How to Study the Bible” on pages 1-3

The Strange World of the Bible.

1. List some of the countries where you find the action of the Bible taking place.
2. List two of the major languages with which the original Bible is written?
3. List three major Old Testament miracles and three major New Testament ones.

Day 2 – Read II Tim. 3:15, 16

Mining for Treasure

1. What is the purpose of the Bible?
2. Why do you think this book endured for so many Centuries?
3. What do you think is the first step in understanding the Bible?
4. List some ways that you can be a careful student of the Bible.

Day 3 – Matt. 7:7; Proverbs 2:1-6

Manna for the Soul

1. What are some helpful ways you have found to study the Bible?
2. List some recent insights you have gained from studying God’s Word.
3. How much Bible study a day is adequate to make one spiritually healthy?
4. Name some rewards that come from consistent Bible study.

Day 4 – Read Acts 13:1-13; Acts 15:36-41

The Gospel According To Mark

1. Read about the first missionary journey in Acts 13 and 15. What happened to Mark on the journey? What kind of conflict did this eventually cause? Who do you think was right – Paul or Barnabas? Would you have taken John Mark on the next journey with you?
2. Try to find out in an introduction of Mark why some people think that Mark was the scribe and Peter was the author of the Gospel of Mark?
3. What does the word “Gospel” mean? Is the entire Bible the gospel? If not, which parts are gospel and which parts are not?

Day 5 – Read the Introduction section in the materials provided

The Reason Why

1. Who is the probable audience to whom Mark is writing? What leads you to believe this?
2. Why is it so important for us to read Mark’s gospel today? Read the three purposes listed for Mark’s Gospel in the introduction. How many of those purposes are important for us today?

Week 2:

Day 1 – Read Mark 1:1-8

A Template for the Rest

1. Do a side-by-side comparison of the way the first three Gospels begin. Notice the differences. How is Mark like the others? How is it different?
2. What would account for the differences between the Gospel accounts?
3. How does the beginning of Mark’s Gospel speak best to a Gentile audience?
4. What kind of Messiah do you think the Jews looking for? How did Jesus measure up to their expectations?

5. Why do you think John wore such unusual clothing?

Day 2 – Read Luke 1:5-25; John 1

The Day of the LORD

1. Using a Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia, research the Herods. What would life be like under their rule?
2. In what ways would John's ministry prepare the way for the Messiah?
3. Read John 1. How does the description of John the Baptist in this chapter help you understand John's ministry better?
4. Why is it possible for people to mistake John for the Messiah? How does he counter this?
5. Think about Elijah in the Old Testament (I Kings). From your understanding of Elijah, what kind of prophet would John the Baptist be?

Day 3 – Read Mark 1:9-13

Fulfilling All Righteousness

1. How was John's baptism like and how is it different from Christian baptism?
2. In your opinion, if you were baptized by John, would you need to be baptized again after the resurrection of Jesus? Give reasons why or why not.
3. Why was it important for Jesus to be baptized by John? And why the message from God after his baptism?
4. What was the purpose of the temptations in the wilderness? Why did the Spirit lead Jesus to the wilderness? What is the significance?

Day 4 – Mark 1:14-28

Discipleship

1. What does the word “disciple” mean? What do disciples of Jesus do?
2. In what ways do the examples of the two sets of brothers affect our response to Jesus today?
3. What does the word “synagogue” mean?
4. Why would Jesus go to a synagogue to begin his ministry?
5. Is it significant that the first thing Jesus did when he began his public ministry was to teach? Does that indicate something about the nature of his ministry?

Day 5

The Perfect Place to Begin

1. Look up the word “synagogue” in a Bible Dictionary. To what institutions are synagogues comparable in our culture?