



REAL CONVERSATION:
THAT STRANGE BOOK

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Why should we care to learn from a historical book?

I oftentimes found myself empty-handed and unequipped in my search for a solid Bible study. I was one of those Christians that fluctuated between reading the Bible, but not knowing how to understand its truths and apply them. Then, out of frustration and lack of immediate results, I would give up and turn to Christian books, sermons, and videos for my source of biblical wisdom. I would read books by Christian women for Christian women that would drag me on their emotional roller coaster ride. I would watch church live streams of household-name pastors who packaged the Bible to be appealing and entertaining. I would even watch videos of Christian motivational speakers who gave me three steps in becoming my best self. I determined that when I got older, I would figure it out, but for now, this would do. Then, out of guilt or during a big life transition, I would end up on my knees pleading to God for help. I believed God and His Word were just there when I needed Him. I was conditioned to believe that the Bible was all about me.

If I were to keep with this trend in making it all about us, then I am missing the mark. If I were to solely focus on the fact that God loves us, He calls us and has a plan for our lives, then I am not showing the whole picture. Yes, of course, those are complete truths. However, the message of the Scriptures is not one of self-edification. In fact, the Bible is not about us. The Bible is a book about God. The gospel is actually incredibly offensive; the true gospel should sting. The more we read Scripture, the more we will see our own sin and shortcomings reflected. Through His Word, we should see just how much we need a Savior because of our sinful nature. Sin is real, it separates us from God, and we must repent of our sin and believe the gospel. I care about you enough to share that with you.

This trend of deviating from the true message of the Scriptures is partly due to our modern culture's hunger for immediate gratification. We do not want to study or work hard to understand some historical book that seems to have no relevance for our modern lives. After all, we are living in the twenty-first century and Jesus came to Earth about two thousand years ago. While Jesus's life and ministry are recorded in the New Testament, the Old Testament is even older than that. So, the Bible is, by our standards, really, really old! Why should we care to learn from a historical book?

The purpose of studying God's Word is to understand the nature, character, and will of God. God is immutable, meaning that He is unable to change or be changed. God is the same in the past, present, and future. So that we may know Him, God provided His Word for us believers. Therefore, if we approach studying God's Word as an opportunity to know this immutable God then logically the Bible is relevant. Because God's nature and character are unchanging, then the Bible is completely relevant to us today in the twenty-first century.

What is that strange big book?

The Bible itself is quite strange. It is very sophisticated ancient literature. It is not written in this period of time with our English vernacular and idioms. It was written many years ago, across different periods, in many different places, and by many different people. It is completely normal to think that it is strange.

But, the Bible is also quite beautiful. It is a literary work of art that has transformed lives across time. As we learn more about the nature of God, we became enamored with this intricate and beautiful narrative that God orchestrated just to bring us closer to Him through Jesus. God did not just provide us with a compilation of sermons and a list of do's and don'ts. The Bible includes creation, kings, poetry, prophecies and fulfilled prophecies, the life of Jesus, letters to the early church, and a description of the end times. It includes people that succeeded and people that failed. God utilized forty different authors in different periods with different literary styles to compile sixty-six books into one great work. And yet, despite all these differences, each book of the Bible contributes to the unified storyline about the depravity of the human condition and the hope of Jesus Christ to save humanity.

The Old Testament is a collection of books that describe the history of Israel, Jesus's heritage, long before Jesus was born. God wove together the Old Testament narrative to point the Israelites toward the coming of Jesus. We care about the Old Testament because it helps us understand the nature of God more fully. What we now call the Old Testament were the only Scriptures available to the Israelites at that time. The law, historical accounts, and prophecies of the Old Testament all reveal humanity's need for a Savior and thus point to the hope of Jesus.

Jesus makes his earthly appearance in the New Testament. He is the ultimate culmination of every motif in Old Testament Scripture. The Gospels of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John describe what He did and said during His ministry on earth. These four books were written by some of Jesus' disciples, the group of twelve, that learned from Jesus and followed Him during His ministry. So, each book is an account of Jesus's life from four different eyewitness perspectives. After the Gospels, the book of Acts details stories of Jesus's early followers and the early church. This is followed by a group of letters describing Jesus as the culmination of God's plan and what it means to follow Him. The last part of the New Testament is a description of end times in which we look forward to the hope of Jesus returning and ruling. Jesus will bring resolution and the world will be recreated perfectly as God originally intended. Believers will live united with God as rulers over the new earth and all believers will love one another.

As you begin reading the various books of the Bible, it can be easy to lose track of the main story. Everything in the Old and New Testaments point to the hope of Jesus. This story tells us what life is about and invites us to participate in this story. It is a story about dying to our sinful flesh and living by a power that is greater than ourselves. This is so that we may live self-sacrificially, glorifying God with our lives, and truly loving people.

As we learn more about Jesus's work on the cross and how God wove this narrative together, His Word will change us. The divinely inspired words of Scripture that we have the liberty to access,

are literally life changing. People, sinful people, who have read Scripture with the power of the Spirit have experienced freedom and hope that no other historic book can produce. That is because God promises that His Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12). Scripture is the active speech of God that is working upon us to bring us life. Reading and studying His Word rejuvenates and refreshes our spirit because it places us in communion with Him, the giver of Life. God is not boring at all and neither is His Word. It really is just a matter of reading it and experiencing its beauty for yourself. I am excited to show you practical ways that helped me do just that.

How should we study the Bible?

Instead of bringing our immediate gratification mindset to the Bible, let us view studying the Word like adding to a savings account instead of a checking account. Typically, with checking accounts, money goes in and it quickly goes right back out. But with savings accounts, money goes in and stays there for a while until it is needed. Take that mindset to read the Bible. While you may not see immediate results from your daily reading, you are, in essence, contributing to your savings account of biblical wisdom, insight, and knowledge. This is because you are learning more about the nature, character, and will of God. When you study in this manner you are fully prepared when the time comes to withdraw the biblical wisdom, insight, and knowledge you need. By viewing your study of the Bible in this light, you will begin a process of diminishing yourself and elevating God, instead of the other way around.

Studying the Bible is not all that scary. You do not have to be a pastor or go to seminary to do it. You simply need the Spirit to guide you, eyes to read or ears to hear, and study tools you have learned while in school.

I recommend the New American Standard Bible (NASB) or the English Standard Version (ESV) as they are literal translations. The New International Version (NIV) is a good balance of thought-for-thought and word-for-word translation from the original Hebrew and Greek text. I personally use all three in my study as I find that reading the same passages from different translations helps me comprehend them better. If you prefer a digital Bible, I recommend the Holy Bible or the Blue Letter Bible App for multiple translation options.

Once you pick your translation or translations, the key is to read the Bible consistently and systematically. Consistency is key, so find a process that works best for you. Start small, like five minutes a day, five days a week working your way through the Gospels. Although it would seem logical to start with Genesis and work your way through, I recommend starting with the Gospels first. Becoming familiar with Jesus's life and ministry is essential to understanding the rest of Scripture.

Studying the Bible systematically is a solid gold standard. While in school, you would not just open your textbook to a random page and expect to learn much from it. You would ideally start from the front of the book or at least start from the beginning of the chapter. This is similar to studying the Bible. It is recommended to read a book in the Bible, like the book of Matthew, in order, the way it was written. You would start at chapter one and work your way through chapter twenty-eight. This dramatically helps in comprehending and interpreting passages as you establish context, what happens before and what happens after the passage being studied.

The common method taught amongst the evangelical community is to approach Scripture study in this order: comprehension, interpretation, and application. First, comprehension is determining what the biblical text is actually saying. You do this by establishing context, context, and more context. For the immediate context of a specific passage, start by reading the chapter before and after the passage you are studying. Before reading a book of the Bible, questions you should be asking and answering are the who, what, where, and when questions. For example: Who is the author? Who is the intended audience? What was the historical and cultural climate of that time?

What is the purpose of the book? Where did the author write the book? Where was the intended audience located? And when did the author write the book? For answering the who, what, where, and when questions, I recommend reading the introductory paragraph in your study Bible. I also highly recommend visiting The Bible Project. They create succinct, informative videos that are helpful for establishing this type of historical and cultural context.

Also, comprehension is about using study principles you have learned throughout your education. A great practice is trying to paraphrase paragraphs of the passages you are studying. Each paragraph of biblical text is generally a complete thought. So, this practice encourages you to understand what the passages are saying because you have to put them into your own words. To do this, likely you will be looking up words in a dictionary to understand their meaning. You will also be studying groups of words looking for individual words or phrases that are repeated and emphasized; as well as relationships between ideas like comparisons and contrasts. As you move through the book, this practice will allow you to see how each complete thought flows from one to the other. By doing so consistently and systematically, you begin to accurately see the overarching themes of the book while still understanding the details.

Second, interpretation is determining what the biblical text actually means. The interpretation piece flows from the comprehension information. The interpretation piece should lead you to answer this question, “What does this passage mean to the intended audience?” Context is key to interpretation. To understand what the biblical passage means, we have to understand what it says. Knowing the context preceding the passage and following the passage, as well as the historical and cultural context is crucial to interpreting correctly.

Third, application is determining what the biblical text teaches us about the nature, character, and will of God. Let the comprehension and interpretation pieces guide you. To greater understand the nature of God is the whole purpose of reading and studying His Word. This is because learning about God through His inspired Word changes us. It teaches us how to live lives that are pleasing and glorifying to Him. Additionally, application is not simply discovering the answer then moving on, it requires the implementation of it into our daily lives.

Do you see how skipping the comprehension and interpretation pieces can easily lead one to make the Bible a book about us instead of God? When we make the leap quickly, then chances are we will not extract the correct meaning and thus the application of the text. Instead, we will read with selfish eyes that seek to affirm certain lifestyle choices or worldly desires. You can read anything into the Bible if you take passages out of context. That is why context, context, and more context is so crucially important to accurate Bible study. Therefore, studying the Bible consistently and systematically puts our immediate self-gratification mindset on hold and teaches us to learn about the nature of God. This is how we slow our roll and stop the leap from reading a passage to applying it immediately to our lives.

To practice in-depth Scripture study using comprehension, interpretation, and application, I recommend starting with a smaller book of the Bible, like Ephesians. You may do this after your reading of the four Gospels or alongside it. Chapters one through three of Ephesians are about the gospel message. Meanwhile, chapters four through six show how the gospel message

changes us as Christians, teaching us how to live individually and as a community of believers. At your own pace, break down each paragraph at a time, paraphrasing each complete thought into your own words. Take your time, do not rush, let this teach you about the nature of God so that you may be changed.

While your first priority is to read and study biblical texts on your own, I do have some wonderful additional resources that have aided in this process for me. As previously mentioned, before diving into any book of the Bible, I recommend viewing the correlating video at The Bible Project. They have clear, animated videos that provide a framework and substantial context for each book of the Bible. A book that really helped me to practically apply principles of Bible study is Jen Wilkin's *Women of the Word*. She is passionate about biblical literacy and aiding women in studying the Bible for themselves in the manner it was intended to be studied. For a more textbook type book, I recommend *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. It breaks down the different biblical genres and teaches you how to study each type of genre the way it was intended. Additionally, I recommend my own pastor's teaching. Pastor Stephen Armstrong started a ministry called Verse by Verse Ministry International in which he teaches through entire books of the Bible in a systematic, verse-by-verse fashion. When I have specific questions, I like searching through the Bible Answers section of the Verse by Verse website. I also find myself at Got Questions Ministries when I am searching for biblical answers.

A couple of my friends taught me a great method that they use weekly. They study a passage on their own one day, then the next day they listen to Pastor Stephen Armstrong's teaching on that passage. In this way, they practice Bible study skills on their own, but supplement it with quality, in-depth teaching. Here is the link to the Ephesians study at the Verse by Verse Ministry website. There are twenty-five lessons in audio and written format.

As a yearly idea, my dad has a great recommendation. One year, he reads the Bible in its entirety. Then the next year, he focuses on studying one book of the Bible. This has been a great practice for understanding and becoming familiar with the entire Bible and recognizing common themes. Then, when studying an individual book of the Bible, one may explore different biblical genres and see how God wove this intricate story together. But when in doubt, always go back to the Gospels to learn more about Jesus and the hope He provides for us as believers.

If you prefer an auditory method, I find listening to the Bible is very effective. In 2019, I enjoyed listening to the Daily Audio Bible. Brian Hardin of the Daily Audio Bible uploads a fresh reading of the Bible daily, going through the entire Bible in a year. Every episode is a reading from the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs, in that order. The Daily Audio Bible is an app or you can download the podcast.

My goal for this quick resource was to make you excited to get started. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the resources available, I hope this kickstarts your own Bible study with tools that have significantly helped me. It took me years to find these tools and explore them. So, I am giving you tried and true resources that fueled my hunger and desire to learn more!

Resources

The Bible Project

Women of the Word by Jen Wilkin

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart

Verse by Verse Ministry International

Verse by Verse Bible Answers

Got Questions

Verse by Verse Ephesians Study

Daily Audio Bible