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Living By the Book

Living By the Book Workbook

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LIVING
BY THE
BOOK

The Art and Science of Reading the Bible

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WHY PEOPLE DON'T STUDY THE BIBLE

Shortly after I became a Christian, someone wrote in the flyleaf of my Bible these words: “This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.” That was true then, and it’s still true today. Dusty Bibles always lead to dirty lives. In fact, you are either in the Word and the Word is conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ, or you are in the world and the world is squeezing you into its mold.

And yet the great tragedy among Christians today is that too many of us are under the Word of God, but not *in* it for ourselves. For example, I met a man once who had driven his entire family all the way across the country to attend a conference of Bible teaching.

Amazed, I asked him, “Why did you come so far?”

“Because I wanted to get under the Word of God,” he said.

On the face of it, that sounds wonderful. But later it hit me: Here was a man willing to drive twelve hundred miles to get under the Word of God; but was he just as willing to walk across his living room floor, pick up a Bible, and get into it for himself?

You see, there’s no question that believers need to sit under the teaching

of God’s Word. But that ought to be a stimulus—not a substitute—for getting into it for ourselves.

Who reads the Bible? According to the Barna Group, in 2006 about 47 percent of Americans polled claimed to read the Bible at some point in a week (up from a low of 31 percent in 1995). However, a famous Gallup survey from a number of years ago found that while 82 percent of Americans claimed to believe that the Bible is either the literal or “inspired” Word of God, and more than half said they read the Bible at least monthly, half couldn’t name even one of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. And fewer than half knew who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

Have you ever seen a Bible “parked” in the rear window of someone’s car? That’s common where I come from. A guy will come out of church, hop into his car, toss his Bible in the back, and leave it there until the next Sunday. That’s quite a statement of the value he places on God’s Word. In effect, when it comes to Scripture he’s functionally illiterate six out of seven days a week.

The Bible is owned, read on occasion, even taken to church—but not *studied*. Why is it that people do not get into Scripture for themselves, to understand it and see it make a difference in their lives? Let’s find out by listening to six Christians describe their experience in this regard.

KEN: ‘I NEED SOMETHING THAT WORKS.’

HGH: Ken, you’re a business executive with a lot of responsibility. You’re well educated. I know you love the Lord. Where does Bible study fit into your life?

Ken: Back when my kids were young, we used to read a verse or two every morning at breakfast, or maybe at dinnertime. But I wouldn’t say we ever studied the Bible. And of course it’s not the sort of thing you’d do at work.

HGH: Why not?

Ken: Well, work is work. You’re there to do a job. When I go to work I’m thinking about our payroll, our customers, the bills we’ve got to pay, what our competitors are doing. The Bible’s about the last thing on my mind.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not one of these people who acts one way at

church and another way at the office. But let's face it—the business world is no Sunday school class. You're up against things that aren't even mentioned in the Bible. So it doesn't exactly apply to your day-to-day situation.

HGH: Ken, you've put your finger on the problem of *relevance*. And that may be the number-one reason people are not studying God's Word today. They think it's archaic, out of date. It may have had something to say to another generation, but they seriously question whether it has anything to say to ours. Yet, as we'll see, God's revelation is as alive today as it was when it was first delivered.

WENDY: 'I DON'T KNOW HOW.'

HGH: Let's move on to Wendy, who is a copywriter for an ad agency. Wendy, you seem to have a lot of energy and initiative. I'd be willing to bet that you'd make an outstanding student of the Bible.

Wendy: Actually, I've tried, but it just didn't work out.

HGH: How so?

Wendy: Well, I went through a phase once where I decided I was really going to *study* the Bible. I'd heard someone at a seminar say that it's impossible to know God apart from knowing His Word. I knew I wanted to get closer to the Lord, so I made up my mind to really get into Scripture. I bought all these books about the Bible. I came home from work every night and spent about an hour or more reading and trying to understand it.

But I realized that I didn't know Greek or Hebrew. And there were an awful lot of things that people were saying about different passages that made no sense to me. I mean, I'd read what somebody had to say about a text, and then I'd read the text, but I couldn't figure out how they'd come up with it. Finally, it just got so confusing, I quit.

HGH: Oh, so it was a problem of *technique*. That's common for many people today. They're reluctant to jump in because they know they can't swim. And

our culture doesn't help much. We've become saturated with visual images, and frankly, we're losing our ability to read. That's why one of the things we're going to do in the next section is recover the skills of how to read something such as the Bible.

ELLIOTT: 'I'M JUST A LAYMAN.'

HGH: Okay, let's hear from Elliott. Elliott's the man you want if you've got a swimming pool on the fritz. He can show you how to keep that water crystal clear. Furthermore, he brings an incredibly strong work ethic to the job, and I think his faith has a lot to do with that. Elliott, something tells me you pay a lot of attention to your Bible.

Elliott: Well, let me put it this way—I pay attention to what I understand in the Bible. The Ten Commandments. The Golden Rule. “The Lord is my shepherd.” That sort of thing. But the rest of it I pretty much leave up to my pastor. I mean, he understands all that stuff, and if I ever have a problem, I can just go to him. He seems to know what it all means. Me, I just try to live it out the best I can.

HGH: That's encouraging. You're trying to practice the truth you do understand. But Elliott, I hear you saying what thousands of Christians are saying today: “*I'm just a layperson.*” Or, “I'm a homemaker. I'm not a professional. You can't expect me, an individual who has no theological training, who maybe never even finished college, to study a book like this.”

That's the way I felt when I started out as a new believer. Somebody said to me, “Howie, you need to spend time in the Word.”

I thought to myself, *How in the world do I go about doing that? I've never been to seminary. I'm not a minister. I can't understand this stuff.*

But as we're going to see, you really don't need professional training to understand the Bible. You don't have to know Greek and Hebrew. As long as you can read, you can dig into the Scriptures for yourself. In this book, I want to help you learn how.

And by the way, don't be put off by the word *study*. I wish we had a better term than “Bible *study*,” because for most of us, “study” is a bad-news item. It

has all the appeal of flossing our teeth. We know we're supposed to, but. . . .

In this book, we're going to discover that Bible study can be fascinating beyond words, and even fun. So hold on.

LINDA: 'I JUST DON'T HAVE TIME.'

HGH: I mentioned homemakers, and, Linda, I guess that describes you. You're at home full-time with three small children. How do you feel about Bible study?

Linda: Oh, I'd love to study the Bible. I really would. Like you say, I've got three little ones to keep up with, and sometimes I'd do anything to get a break. My husband works day and night so that I can stay home. But that means I've got the kids all day long, and I'm lucky to get even twenty minutes to myself. You can't study the Bible in twenty minutes. Even if I could, I'm usually just trying to catch my breath. I wouldn't have the energy.

HGH: I understand exactly what you're saying. My wife, Jeanne, and I reared four ourselves, and now we have six granddaughters, as well. So we're aware that parenting is an extremely demanding job. For us it has been a priority. I guess that's really the issue you're raising—where does Bible study fit on my list of *priorities*? Unfortunately, for many of us it's number twenty on a list of twenty-seven things. It's nice, but certainly not necessary. Hold on to that, because in the next chapter we're going to discover that the study of the Word is not an option—it's an essential.

TONI: 'I HAVE MY DOUBTS ABOUT THE BIBLE.'

HGH: Toni, I'm eager to hear your comments. You're a student on a university campus. Is there still a place for studying Scripture in that setting?

Toni: Yeah, I suppose people ought to read the Bible. There are some very interesting and inspiring passages in it. But I'm not sure about some of the miracles and predictions and stuff. I mean, Jonah and the whale? That sort of thing is really hard to believe. And I know people quote Scripture to say

whether something is right or wrong. It seems like you can make the Bible say just about anything you want it to say.

So I think you should read it once in a while, just to kind of know what's in there, or maybe to help you feel better if you're down. But study it? I don't know about that.

HGH: All right, you raise some genuine concerns. Is this Book *reliable*? Is it *authoritative*? Can we base our lives on it? Does it have credibility? Or, when we read it, do we have to throw our intelligence out the window and, as one person put it, strain to believe what we know, deep down, is utterly preposterous? We're going to discover that it is completely reliable, and that the more we study it, the more consistent and reasonable it turns out to be.

GEORGE: 'I CAN'T SEEM TO MAKE IT INTERESTING.'

HGH: Let's take one final comment. George, your interest in the Word has a lot to do with the fact that you teach an adult Sunday school class at your church.

George: Yes, I guess I have more reason than most people to study the Bible. When I read through a passage, I'm always thinking about my class, and how I'm going to teach it to them. But I'll be honest—it's hard to get people interested in the Bible. It seems like they'd rather talk about sports or what's going on at work than the great doctrines of the faith.

I don't expect anybody to become a great theologian. But 2 Timothy 3:16 says that the Bible is profitable for doctrine, and it seems to me that a lot of the problems people complain about could be remedied if they paid a little more attention to what the Bible has to say.

HGH: I think you're discovering what anyone who wants to communicate spiritual truth runs into: It's very difficult to get people excited about one's own insights into the Word. Unless they're making their own discoveries on topics that relate directly to their experience, Bible study will just bore them to tears. They just won't feel motivated to invest time in it. So that's really your challenge as a teacher—to offer them a process by which they can uncover

spiritual truths for themselves. And I hope you'll learn some ways to do that through this book.

By the way, one way not to do it is through guilt. Guilt is a poor motivator. It's very powerful, but it's also poisonous to the learning process. It kills the joy that ought to mark firsthand acquaintance with the Word. Guilt drives more people away from the Scriptures than into them.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

Well, we've seen a number of reasons that people do not study the Bible. Which one(s) applies to you? Do you question the Bible's relevance to real-life issues? Are you locked out of the process by a lack of technique and basic skills? Are you convinced that this Book is just for professionals, not lay-people, that it takes special training to understand it? Is Bible study a low priority (or no priority), especially with so many other demands begging for your time? Do you have doubts about the Bible's reliability, and whether you can ever really determine its meaning? Do you perceive Bible study as dreadfully boring and not worth your attention?

If you identify with any of these reasons, then this book is for you. We're going to address all of these issues and more. Every one of these obstacles can be overcome. But first, having looked at the negative—why people don't study the Bible—let's turn around and ask, Why must we study the Bible? In the next chapter, I'll give you three important reasons why Bible study is not an option—it's an essential.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

The great tragedy among Christians today is that too many of us are under the Word of God, but not in it for ourselves.

What about you? Do you regularly read and study the Bible on your own? Or are you part of the majority of people who rarely if ever open the Bible for themselves? Here's a simple exercise to help you evaluate your Bible reading habits.

How often do you read the Bible? (circle one)

NEVER ONCE A MONTH ONCE A WEEK TWO OR THREE
TIMES A WEEK EVERY
DAY

When you read it, how much time do you spend reading?

5 MIN.
OR LESS 15 MIN. 30 MIN. 45 MIN. 1 HR.
OR MORE

Here are a few reasons that people give for not reading the Bible. Check the ones that express why you don't read the Bible more than you do.

- The Bible doesn't seem relevant to my life.
- The Bible seems confusing and hard to understand. I don't know how to make sense out of it.
- I used to read the Bible, and it made me feel good. But after awhile, it didn't seem to have the same impact, so finally I gave it up.
- I feel guilty when I read the Bible.
- The Bible is hopelessly out-of-date. It may have some interesting stories, but it has little significance for life today.
- I rely on my pastor or minister to explain the Bible to me. If I need to know something, he will tell me about it.
- I have doubts about the Bible's reliability.
- I don't have time. I'm just too busy.
- The Bible seems boring to me.
- I don't own a Bible.
- The Bible is full of myths and half-truths. Why study something that lacks credibility?
- I don't read, period! It's not just the Bible; I don't read anything.

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— W O R K B O O K —

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF READING THE BIBLE

Moody Publishers
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OBSERVING A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE

“What makes one person a better Bible student than another? He can see more, that’s all. The same truth is available to both of them in the text” (p. 51).

If you want to get more out of Bible study, it helps to know what you’re looking for. Use the following list of questions to help guide you in your search of Scripture. You probably won’t use every question for each passage you study, but at least they provide a good starting point. The more completely you can answer these questions, the better you will observe God’s truth, which then provides a strong foundation for interpretation and application.

- Who is the author of the passage?
- Whom is the author addressing? (God’s people? A specific church? Unbelievers?)
- What is the most important term and/or concept of the passage?
- What are the main verbs? What are the tenses of those verbs?
- Are there terms you need to define so you can better understand the passage?
- Are there people or places you need to identify?
- What do you already know about the people and places mentioned?
- Can you identify any cause-effect relationships in the author’s writing?
- In what ways does the passage apply to your own personal life? (If there isn’t an obvious application, is there a more subtle one?)
- What things from this passage might you want to study later in further detail?

NOTE You might want to make a copy of this page to place in each of the Bibles you use.

OBSERVING A VERSE

TODAY'S PASSAGE:

Psalm 93:1

TIME COMMITMENT:

30 minutes

“Remember, in Observation your main concern is, What do I see? Pay special attention to terms and grammatical structure. Also look at the context” (p. 65).

Let's try observing Psalm 93:1. Since we're choosing a psalm, the context of what comes before and afterward may not be as important as in a narrative passage. However, the more you read the psalms, the better you can detect similarities and contrasts.

But for now let's turn our attention to this single verse:

“The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty; the Lord has clothed and girded Himself with strength; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved.”

Begin by going through the questions on the “Observing a Passage of Scripture” sheet (p. 15). Not all of them will apply, of course. But note the present tense of the verbs. If the psalmist wrote in present tense, does that mean the verse is now past tense?

What would you say is the main theme of this verse?

Forget about religious language for a moment. What then comes to mind when you think about a “lord”?

In addition to the questions already provided, here are a few additional things to observe to get you started:

- What words or phrases are repeated? Why do you suppose they are so emphasized?

- God is described by the terms “majesty” and “strength.” What connection, if any, do these terms have? (Does one necessarily suggest the other?)

- Why did the author suddenly move from describing “the Lord” to writing about “the world”?

- We all know the earth is turning on its axis. So what does it mean that the world “will not be moved”?

- Does this verse evoke any positive feelings for you?

- Might this verse cause less positive emotions for some people (fear, anxiety, etc.)?

What other observations can you make from this single verse?

OBSERVING A VERSE

TODAY'S PASSAGE:

1 John 3:12

TIME COMMITMENT:

30 minutes

“Whenever you study any verse of Scripture, be sure to place it in its context. See it both in terms of what goes before and what follows” (p. 58).

First John 3:12 should provide ample opportunity for you to practice your observation skills. Here is the verse, with space provided for your notations:

“not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.”

Here are a few suggestions:

- Again, begin by using the questions on the “Observing a Passage of Scripture” sheet (p. 15). This time you should find more significance in the author, the context, and the people mentioned. (Regarding context, any time a verse begins in mid-sentence, you have a clear mandate to take note of what precedes it.)

- Read the story the writer refers to (Genesis 4:1–16). What new insight does this shed on the verse?

- Determine why this verse is dropped into the center of a chapter focusing on God’s love.

- Try to think of examples in your own life in which you see a contrast between righteous and evil actions and the consequences that result.

- When, in your own life, have you acted as Cain did (to a lesser extent)? When have you suffered as Abel did? How does this verse speak to each of those situations?

What other observations can you make about this verse?

READING THE BIBLE AS FOR THE FIRST TIME

TODAY'S PASSAGE:

(See below)

TIME COMMITMENT:

30 minutes

“It helps to read the Bible in different versions. If you’ve been reading the same translation for years, try something fresh and contemporary for a change” (p. 69).

Today’s assignment might require a trip to the library or a nearby Christian bookstore. Or perhaps you can borrow some Bibles from friends or your church. But be prepared to find several different translations/paraphrases of the Bible to read and compare.

One of the best ways to read the Bible as for the first time is to look up portions of Scripture that are most familiar to you. But if you don’t have a particular passage in mind, try one or more of the following:

- The creation story (Genesis 2:4–25)
- Psalm 23
- A prophecy about the coming Messiah (such as Isaiah 9:6–7)
- The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12)
- Paul’s conversion (Acts 9:1–19)

Select one or more passages and read the same account from four different Bible versions. Some readings are likely to be quite similar. But if you contrast the King James Version with *The Living Bible*, for example, be prepared for a significant difference. In each case, try to put aside what you already know and let the text speak to you freshly, as if it were the first time you were reading it.

NOTE any discoveries or insights in the space below.
