

The background of the entire image is a vibrant blue sky filled with soft, white, puffy clouds. The clouds are scattered throughout, with some appearing more dense and others more wispy, creating a serene and open atmosphere.

BIBLE 101

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Bible Reading Fellowship

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The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

Introduction

The Bible is the most important book ever written; and, for the Christian, it is the Book of Life. We can only know how God wants us to live by knowing and understanding what is in Scripture.

Yet, for many Christians, the Bible remains largely a mystery. They may be able to quote a few verses and may have read portions of it from time to time. But, for the most part, they fail to understand its importance and steer clear of it most of the time. As a result, it remains on the bookshelf or the coffee table gathering dust.

This study was designed to remind the faithful Bible student how the Bible came to be, and how it can most effectively be used; and, at the same time, to be an introduction to the Bible for the Christian who has little knowledge of it and why it is essential to his or her well-being. *Bible 101* can be read as any other book or it can be used as a group study course.

Each chapter contains a basic teaching about the Bible, followed by an exercise and reflection and discussion questions. Whether you are studying it alone or in a group, you are encouraged to do each exercise and answer the questions. Ideally, members of a weekly study group will read one chapter each week, do the exercise as "homework," and be prepared to answer and discuss the questions at the weekly meeting.

This book should, at a minimum, accomplish the following purposes: (1) give us a better understanding of how the Bible came to be and (2) how it fits together, (3) give us confidence that it is a reliable book, (4) help us understand why we need to read and understand the Bible as a whole (Old Testament as well as New), (5) show us how to apply Scriptural principles to the situations we face in life, and (6) familiarize us with some of the leading characters in the Bible.

May you be blessed in this important venture.

Chapter 1: This Book, the Bible

In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the angel of the Lord spoke to the apostle Philip and told him to go south to the desert road that ran from Jerusalem to Gaza. On the way he met an Ethiopian eunuch—an important official in charge of the treasury of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch was reading from the book of Isaiah, the prophet. Philip was led by the Spirit to ask the man, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“How can I,” he answered, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come into his chariot and sit with him. Philip explained the Scripture to the eunuch and shared the Good News of Jesus Christ resulting in his baptism.

Many of us are familiar with this story and many other Bible stories as well. We hear passages from Scripture in our church or Sunday school classes. Why, then, would we want to find yet more ways to read and study the Bible? The Bible is where we find God and God so powerfully finds us! It is where people have sought God for centuries. We, like the eunuch, often need someone to guide us.

As we begin to study the Bible, we discover that it contains not only many books, but many types of literature. There are historical books, prophetic writings, laws, poetry, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic documents. They were written at different times, places, and circumstances and must be interpreted accordingly.

O.C.Edwards, in *How Holy Writ Was Written*, writes: “When confronted with the idea of so many books produced over so many centuries in such widely differing places and cultures, one does not have to be much of a romantic to begin to wonder how these books came into existence. Just a little thought on that question can produce a perspective that is often overlooked. These books were all written by people. So accustomed are we to thinking of these works as authoritative and inspired that it is easy to be under the impression that they appeared, handed down from heaven already written, or, ...at the very least, the automatic writings of persons in trance-like states. But the God Christians worship does not override human agency; instead, this God accomplishes most of the divine purposes through human beings. When God decided on a full self-revelation, the form was full human existence as Jesus the Christ. It is hardly likely, then, that the authoritative writings of Christians would bypass the involvement of men and women and suddenly appear, like the sanitary products that boast that they are ‘untouched by human hands’.”

Therefore, when reading the Old Testament, we must remember that those writers did not have the benefit of the full revelation of God in Christ. They had finite minds and were influenced by their culture and the law as they understood it. Because God's revelation in Scripture is progressive, their writings must be understood and evaluated in the fullness of the light of Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, as held before us in the New Testament.

The Bible is important to us because it is the basis of Judeo-Christian literature and is invaluable as a history book. Written against the background of the world movements of the great empires of the Middle East—Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome—the Scripture writers have greatly enriched our knowledge of those times. The Bible is also important to us because in it we can recognize God's intention and intervention in history from the first covenant made with Abraham to the fulfillment of God's purpose in Christ, his sacrifice on the cross. The history of the Hebrew nation is our history also. It is our roots!

For a Christian, the Bible is forever indispensable because it is the one place where we find Jesus Christ. It is literally the only source book for the life and teachings of Jesus. Take the Bible away and we would be left with fleeting memories, and subjective opinions. Likewise, it is where we find ourselves, what we are to be—in Christ. We cannot grow to spiritual maturity and become what God has created us to be unless we know God—understand His nature, the nature of people, and have a relationship through Christ with Him.

In Scripture we discover the reality of sin and the need of redemption. In Scripture we seek confirmation of the things we have been taught, so our theology can be formed and our faith strengthened.

Before there was any permanent form of recording, the history of the Hebrew people was told and retold from generation to generation so the nation of Israel would never forget their special relationship with God.

Of the 39 books which make up the Old Testament, the first five are known as the Pentateuch. They are also referred to as the Torah by the Jewish people. Torah means "law," but may also be translated as "teaching."

The material brought together in these books came from various sources, different geographical locations, different times (spanning hundreds of years), and from both oral and written traditions. One collection of these narratives was compiled about 950 B.C. in an attempt to record some sort of cohesive history of the Israeli nation. It is not difficult to imagine why certain stories are repeated and why details may vary when we consider the

enormous task of compilation. Each story grew out of an encounter with God and was cherished by the people.

The books of the Pentateuch include Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Although primitive in approach, the Hebrew people had a comprehension of their God and their own human condition that was uniquely spiritual, a gift from God. They understood that God's ultimate intention was for mankind's good, and that it would be through them that human redemption would be fulfilled. The plan was initiated by God with moral and ritual demands made on the people. However, the Israelites continued to sin and grumble, and God continued to forgive them.

The historical books—Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther—indicate just how much material had been recorded during the time of Israel's kings, although other sources were also available. We see Israel at its finest hour, and we see it brought low by sin and disobedience. We see God's message fulfilled in a nation's history. Though the people had chosen to have kings, "the Word of the Lord," through the prophets, still controlled history.

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are referred to as the books of Poetry and Wisdom, though poetry and wisdom are certainly not confined to these five books. These books, written in many forms (i.e., allegories and parables), are rich in language and powerful in thought. They convey a pattern for life dealing with people's relationship with God and with each other. The message is to the heart, declaring that life's greatest joy is found in living in God's will.

There are 17 prophetic books, five of which are called the major prophets because of their length. They are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. The 12 minor prophetic books are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. These writings cover a period of 250-300 years, during a time of decline for the Hebrew nation. The people had turned from God, following instead their own sinful nature. God in His mercy called certain men to bring His message of both judgment and hope to His people.

The position of prophet was not inherited as was the position of priesthood, and many answered the call reluctantly. Prophets had a close relationship with God, understanding His nature and "seeing" into the affairs of people. The call to obedience and a return to a responsible and moral society was not a popular message. The false prophet, who lulled God's people into a sense of complacency, was more readily heard.

The promise of a messianic kingdom brought hope to the Hebrew nation, and for the Christian, it is the foreshadowing of the final covenant made perfect in Christ.

Early Christian Scriptures contained the Apocrypha. These 15 books were originally found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. They were written from 300 B.C. to A.D. 100, during the period of decline of the Hebrew nation. Apocrypha means "doubtful authorship or authenticity"; these writings were not considered inspired or sacred, but helped fill the time gap between the Old Testament and the coming of Christ. Today, if these books are included in a Bible, they appear between the Old and New Testaments.

Because many of the early converts to Christianity came out of the Jewish tradition, the Hebrew Scriptures were used in their worship services. However, as Christianity spread and there were more converts from the Greco-Roman world, they adopted the Septuagint as their Bible until the New Testament came into being. By A.D. 90, Paul's letters were being circulated throughout the Christian world, the Gospels were being written, and soon their reading became a central part of the liturgy of the Church. These writings were considered "inspired" and to be "the Word of God." They also were used to settle disputes concerning doctrine and as guides for moral behavior. They were the first books of the New Testament, our source for all we know about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Gospels were compiled from the stories that were shared during Jesus' ministry—his sermons, his healings, his teachings and the confrontations he had with the religious leaders. The stories were spread by word of mouth. Scrolls were scarce, and many people could not read. However, there is no reason to believe that early Christians did not use the same extreme care in preserving these stories as the Jewish people had done for centuries. These events were significant to the early Church and they were not to be forgotten! For us they are a valuable and cherished inheritance.

The Gospel of Mark, the earliest and shortest, was written about A.D. 65. It's a powerful writing, proclaiming, at the start, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The Gospel is full of Jesus' mighty acts. More is written about what Jesus did than what he said. The greater portion of this book emphasizes Jesus' rejection, suffering and crucifixion. Oddly, there is no mention of the resurrection. We do not know if the Gospel was left unfinished or if part of it was lost.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic Gospels (*syn* "together with"; *optic* "seeing"— thus, seeing together). However, the reasons for writing the Gospels were varied as were the choices of the stories. These differences increase our knowledge and enrich our understanding.

Matthew was obviously interested in emphasizing Jesus' relationship with the Jewish faith by including his genealogy in the line of

David. Jesus is seen as a fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a Messiah, but the writer is careful to point out that Jesus is not the political figure that some hoped for and that his kingdom is not of this world. Matthew includes Jesus' interpretations of the Torah in his "Sermon on the Mount," his judgment of the Jews for their faithlessness and his denouncing of the Pharisees. Many events, teachings and parables of Jesus are found only in this Gospel.

Luke's Gospel is considered to be one of the most beautifully written books of the Bible. Luke gives us the fullest life story of Jesus. Although he has drawn on Mark's Gospel, he has done a great deal of personal investigative reporting. He was a Gentile, and never mentioned as a follower of Jesus while he lived, yet his narrative is beautiful in detail. He wrote of Jesus' great compassion and concern, seeking out those who were otherwise ignored—the poor and downtrodden, the despised Samaritans, and women who had little status. More is said of prayer and the Holy Spirit than in the other Gospels. Luke saw Jesus as the Savior of the world, not just Israel. This Gospel was written for everyone.

The last Gospel, according to John, was written about A.D. 90. Rather than repeat stories and parables found in the other Gospels, John is more interested in interpreting the events of Jesus' ministry. John's emphasis is on the deity of Christ, quoting those things Jesus said about himself rather than reporting what he did. He declares in the prologue that Jesus was the Word, that the Word was with God and the Word was God and that this same Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The second part of Luke's writing is his history of the early Church called the "Acts of the Apostles." Acts covers about 30 years from the ascension of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul. The Church grew as a result of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit, belief in the resurrection and eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ. Problems in the early Church are openly discussed along with conflicts of ministries and the persecutions of early Christians. The Church was beset with strange rumors. Luke wanted to account for the troubles that were stirred up by the Jewish leaders. He introduces the two major religious traditions—the Hebrew Christians and the Greek Christians—and the discord they brought to the Church.

The second part of Acts covers Paul's ministry and gives us a background of his epistles. Because of Luke's love for the truth and his personal friendship with Paul, we have an accurate view of the birth, growth, struggle and spirit of the Church in the first century.

Thirteen of the epistles are credited to Paul. They were written for the practical reason of keeping in contact with the churches Paul had founded or visited. 1 and 2 Thessalonians are thought to be the earliest of the

letters and address one of the first problems of the Church—the delay of Christ’s return. Other practical aspects of Christian living are discussed.

The letters to the Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians are referred to as the “gospel” letters. They address the struggle of the Church trying to survive in a pagan environment. Paul encourages the new Christians to live a moral life, strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon were all written while Paul was in prison. They contain some of his most profound teachings.

Paul’s pastoral letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, deal with the problems of church organization. He gives advice on how to handle them and lists the qualities to be looked for in choosing their leaders as well as advice on personal conduct.

The letter to the Hebrews is full of Old Testament symbolism and was probably written to those Jewish Christians who seemed to be drifting back to Judaism. Its writer sought to convince them that the Scriptures contain spiritual meanings that had been hidden until they were revealed in Christ.

The remaining books are referred to as general epistles. They include 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude. They warn against the prevailing heresies and encourage those who are called to endure suffering for their beliefs. John reminds the Church of Jesus’ command to love one another. James’ letter gives practical advice to the early Christians and stresses the importance of being “doers of the word,” and that “faith without works is dead.”

The book of Revelation was written about A.D. 90-95 by the Apostle John during his exile on the Isle of Patmos. The book is full of symbolism and encouragement to persecuted Christians to stand firm in their faith. Revelation is a book of vision, holding out the promise of a new heaven and a new earth under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Thus, we have seen how the Bible came into existence. By far the most important book ever written, this sacred work is now available in a variety of translations, with many study aids incorporated into it. Every person can find "this book, the Bible" in just the right form for his or her own use.

Exercise:

Analyzing a passage 1. Some people like a simple, but systematic way of looking at a Bible passage. Analyzing a passage in the way suggested here has long been a favorite for many people. All you need is a Bible, a piece of paper and a pen or pencil to write with.

Turn an 8 ½ X 11 sheet of paper horizontally and divide it into three sections, with the left and right-hand sections each taking up about one-fourth of the page, and the center section representing about half the page. Label the left-hand section, "What does it say?" The center section is labeled, "What does it mean?" The right-hand section is captioned, "How does it apply to me?"

Then follow these steps:

- a. Choose a narrative passage, something that tells a story.
- b. What does it say? Read the passage at least twice and then briefly state the facts: a summary or outline of the passage to help focus the essentials into your mind.
- c. What does it mean? What are the implications of the passage? What deep truths does it reveal? You should list a brief statement of each truth so revealed.
- d. How does it apply to me? What one thought, prayerfully received from this passage, makes the greatest impact upon you personally? Write it down and resolve to do something about it.
- e. Applying Bible principles. The Epistle of James (1:22) says, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." This method of analyzing a Bible passage allows God to speak to us about our relationships—with Him and with others—and about attitudes to cultivate, habits to form or break, and actions to take or avoid. When you write down how the passage applies to you, state it in "I will" or at least "I desire" terminology.

Questions:

1. What made you decide to participate in this course?
2. Is there one particular question or issue you hope to have answered here?
3. How would you describe your Bible background coming into this course?
4. Why do you think the Bible is worth studying?
5. Some folks say the Bible is God's "living word." Explain.

Chapter 2: Book of Books

Having seen how the Bible in its present form came into existence, let us now look more specifically at what is contained in this “Book of Books.”

From the beginning people have struggled with their environment in order to survive. They realized that there were forces beyond their control, so they sought answers in the cycles of nature. Fear of what they could not understand drove them to seek ways of appeasing the various powers or the many gods they believed ruled the world.

The Hebrew people saw their God as a god of nature, but they were given a more spiritual understanding as God revealed Himself as the one true God who made and controlled all. It was God’s intention to reveal Himself to His people so they could be in partnership with Him. They were to be responsible for the earth and to live in a community of love and trust in the world He had created, a world that was very good.

Their creation story put mankind in the Garden of Eden, made in God’s image, created for this special relationship with Him. However, sin separated mankind from God and from each other. God’s punishment was immediate but merciful. In their banishment, people became more wicked. This time God chose to destroy them, saving only one righteous man, Noah and his family. Mankind’s second chance, after the flood, proved no more successful than the first. Continued alienation is told in the story of the Tower of Babel.

By 2000 B.C. anarchy reigned as each person did what was pleasing to himself. God called Abraham to bring His message of reconciliation to the people. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and through him (his seed), to bless all people. God asked Abraham to leave all that he knew, his homeland and his gods, and travel to the land he was to inherit. Although he and his wife were very old and childless, Abraham by faith obeyed God. God fulfilled His promise (covenant) with Abraham and a son, Isaac was born.

Isaac was the father of Jacob whose name was later changed to Israel (one who strives with God). Jacob had 12 sons through whom the twelve tribes of Israel came into being.

The story of Jacob’s youngest son Joseph tells why the Hebrews left their land to live in Egypt where eventually they were enslaved. Fearful of their growing strength and numbers, the rulers oppressed them even more. God saw their suffering, and around 1300 B.C. called Moses to be His instrument of deliverance of His people. Despite his reluctance, Moses, like Abraham, was obedient. God used Moses to battle Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people to freedom—across the Red Sea into the desert. During their

desert travels, the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai where God made a covenant with them.

God reminded the people of all He had done for them. He called them to be a holy nation and to worship Him as their God, their only God. He called them to live in love and harmony and gave them the Ten Commandments to help them live harmonious lives. Israel was to be an example, a chosen people to show the world what God had planned for His people to be. The years of wandering in the wilderness gave the Hebrews time to solidify as a nation, form an army and develop their liturgy of worship with God as their head.

After Moses' death, Joshua was chosen by God to lead the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan, conquering the local inhabitants and dividing the land among the twelve tribes. After conquering the Canaanites, the people gathered again at Shechem renewing their covenant with God and pledged themselves to Him and each other. They were zealous, remaining faithful for a time, but eventually they adopted the culture of the Canaanites and worshiped other gods.

As the threats of invasion from other nations grew, the Israelites called to God to give them a king to lead them. God gave the Israelites Saul as their king, but also gave them prophets to speak the "word of God" to keep the king accountable. Saul was a strong military leader but his pride and disobedience led to his downfall.

Saul was succeeded by David who reigned during Israel's finest hour. Israel's enemies were defeated, Jerusalem captured, alliances made and trade routes controlled. However, David was not without sin. He was an adulterer, who committed murder to cover his affair and get what he wanted. He was punished, but the anointing remained on David because he always had a heart for God. He repented and he kept the covenant with God.

Solomon, David's son, inherited the throne and a wealthy nation. In spite of his reputation as a wise king, he was a selfish and cruel ruler. His wealth and power increased but at the expense of God's people. The magnificent Temple was built, but worship was reduced to ritual and ceremony, and he allowed his pagan wives to worship their own gods. The position of prophet was weakened and the stage was set for revolution.

When Solomon's son Rehoboam refused to lessen the oppressive policies of his father, the ten tribes of the northern region withdrew. The northern tribes became known as Israel and the southern tribes as Judah. Most of the succeeding kings of Israel "did evil in the sight of the Lord." The covenant with God was disregarded and the social structure fell apart. The cries and warnings of the prophets were ignored. The sin of Israel would

eventually lead to their fall to the Assyrians. Judah would be the last hope of God's people to fulfill His covenant.

Judah had one last great moment under the rule of Josiah. Order was restored, reforms were made. A trend based on obedience to law instead of a relationship with God eventually developed.

The prophets tried to remind the people of their responsibilities to God and warn them of God's pending judgment. The reformation was short-lived. Judah fell, the Babylonians in 587 B.C. and the exile began.

The Hebrew nation had come full circle. They had been rescued from Egyptian captivity. They had accepted God's call to be His representatives to the world, but they repeatedly were disobedient and found themselves again in captivity. It seemed that God had turned from them, but this was not the end.

The exile became a blessing in disguise. The people were forced into a renewed relationship with God. During this exile, they compiled their history and reformed their theology with emphasis on obedience to religious law. As usual, the prophets believed it was not enough, but their warnings of further destruction were ignored. However, the prophets also held out the hope of salvation through a remnant of faithful who would survive. Isaiah was preaching the ministry of servanthood (Isaiah 53:3-6). This message was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In 539 B.C. Babylonia fell to Cyrus of Persia. The Jews were permitted to return to Palestine. Many, who had established themselves in captivity, chose to remain while those who returned found life very difficult. While the Temple was finally rebuilt, the promise of the "day of the Lord" never came. Morale was very low and the community eroded. Ezra was chosen by the priests to bring reform to Israel. The "holy writings" (the Pentateuch or Torah) which had been compiled during the exile were presented to the people. Again, the people repented and rededicated themselves to serving God. It was the birth of Judaism.

Alexander the Great invaded Asia in 324 B.C. After his death his empire was divided and Palestine was annexed to Syria, a country that worshiped pagan gods. The Jews were forbidden to practice their religion and were again persecuted. A revolt led by the Maccabees was successful in forcing the Seleucids to withdraw. Israel was free until the Romans conquered the known world.

Rome's interest centered in building a cultural civilization. "Pax Romano" allowed the Jews to practice their religion and have their own ruling body, subject to Rome. This is the world into which Jesus was born.

It had been centuries since the Hebrew nation had the benefit of a prophet to receive the “word of the Lord.” The Jewish leaders had chosen obedience to the Law as their way of worship. They worshiped God outwardly but their hearts did not belong to Him. The Hebrew people were burdened by the impossible task of obeying many laws imposed by the religious leaders in the guise of “worship.” Salvation by strict obedience to Torah was their religion.

Jesus brought the people the message of love and hope. His miracles and ministry of physical and spiritual healing were wonderfully received. However, his teachings of social reform and his interpretation of the Law infuriated the religious leaders. The time was different, the scene was familiar, God’s intention was the same—to redeem the world!

Once again we see the need for obedience and faith: first, the story of Mary and the annunciation, and in Joseph's acceptance of his responsibility in God's plan. Jesus' humble beginnings and the appearance of the angels to the simple shepherds show us that the world should perhaps rethink its values. The adoration of the wise men indicates that salvation is for all people. Simeon and Anna speak of the faithful remnant of those who waited and trusted God's purpose to be fulfilled. We don't know much about Jesus' childhood, but we are told that "he increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

Jesus gathered around him twelve disciples whom he loved and taught. His message was simple, to love God and love other people. The Gospels share Jesus’ teaching, preaching and wisdom. As we read them, we become witnesses to his rejection, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

The apostles and many disciples were filled with joy when he first appeared to them after his death and resurrection. At the time of Jesus' arrest, they had feared for their own safety and had deserted him. Like the writers of the Old Testament, those who wrote the Gospels made no excuses for the failings of their people. The early Christians believed they were part of God’s action in the world and all experiences with Him were to be carefully and accurately preserved.

The contrast between what the disciples were like before they were empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and what they were later is an important lesson for the Church. With the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain it, the early Church grew. There were many new converts who met to pray and break bread. They continued to worship within the Jewish community until they were forced to move out into the Gentile world.

It was the stoning of Stephen that led to their dispersal. Instead of stopping the growth of the Church, its persecution was instrumental in its spreading. Paul was able to preach the Gospel in the synagogues that had

already been established throughout the Mediterranean area. Many Gentiles were attracted by the faith and morality of the Jewish Christians. They were receptive to the hope of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. However, Jewish Christians were not ready to accept the Gentiles.

We learn about the problems encountered by the Church from the letters written to address them. Paul's epistles are a treasure of theology and practical advice concerning faith, Christian living, and Church organization. Other letters were written to encourage those who would be called to suffer for their faith during the time of persecution by the Roman government.

It was during this era of persecution that the Church went underground and became like a secret society.

Because of the uncertainties of the time and because Jesus had not yet returned, it was important that the life of Jesus and his death and resurrection be recorded. Along with the letters that were being circulated among the churches, these writings became part of the New Testament, the record of the fulfillment of the new covenant in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus we have the gift of gifts, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus we have this book, the Bible. It is for us, the most important book that has ever been written. A book of great variety and of great power. Much of it remains incomprehensible to the casual reader. Therefore, we ask, as the Ethiopian eunuch, "How can I understand it unless someone explains it to me?" By serious study, and by help from those whose perseverance, intelligence and spiritual insights have clarified the message in this Book of Books.

Exercise:

Analyzing a Bible passage 2. This is a more detailed method of analyzing a Bible passage than we experienced in our prior exercise. In this method, the passage does not need to be a narrative, but can be any section of Scripture. It is analyzed in seven different ways, as follows:

a. *Background.* As we look at the passage of Scripture, we should try to understand the background in which it occurs. What is going on? Who is doing what to whom? This helps us to get the passage into its proper context.

b. *Perspective.* We should take a commonsense approach to what we read, so that we can get it into perspective. We should avoid absurd conclusions or trivialities that have nothing to do with the heart of the message.

c. *Affirmation.* There may be, in the passage, something that affirms us in the kind of life we are leading, that supports us and tells us that

we are on the right track in following the Lord. What makes us feel good about the passage?

d. *Uncomfortable truth.* On the other hand, we should look for "the uncomfortable truth" in the passage. What is said that threatens our complacency, that accuses us of sin, that shows us that God is calling us another step forward that we would just as soon not take? What gets my attention about the passage?

e. *Principle involved.* We should next try to find the principle or principles involved. We should look below the surface of what has been said to discover the thing of lasting effect that should serve to guide us in the days and years ahead. What are the universal principles in the passage?

f. *Application.* Each of us should then seek the specific thing the passage says to us. What change or changes in my attitudes, habits and/or lifestyle is indicated by this passage?

g. *Response.* Finally, what are we going to do about what we have found? Bible study is of no real value unless it leads us to resolve that we will be guided by what it has taught us.

In order to help us fix this method of Bible study more effectively in our minds, we will now explore a passage of Scripture using this method. Please read Matthew 6:24-34 in the Bible of your choice, and use the method set forth above as the means of studying the passage. Here is what one person found in exploring this particular passage according to this method. He used the New English Bible for his study.

Background. As we can probably tell from our Bible, the passage is from Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." The setting is that Jesus is teaching his followers.

Perspective. He is not telling his followers to live exactly like birds or flowers in the sense of going around naked or with ragged clothes on, or not eating or earning a living. He is talking about the problem of anxiety.

Affirmation. I felt affirmation from the passage concerning my own vocation. Some years ago I left a well-paying job and promising future to go into a much less secure situation because I felt that that was what God wanted me to do. He has provided for me and for my family in the years since then, demonstrating the truth of what Jesus says in the passage.

Uncomfortable truth. Despite God's providence, I do often worry about tomorrow. If I had as much faith as I would like to have, I wouldn't worry about tomorrow. I would look forward to the opportunities of tomorrow rather than the problems it may bring.

Principle involved. To me, the basic principle involved in this passage is that we have a choice of either living in God's kingdom—under God's rule and protection—or being anxious slaves to the world.

Application. The application to me is that I need to stop wasting my time worrying. I need to use my time more constructively: to see what God would have me do, and to be more responsive to those around me.

Response. I put my response in the form of a prayer:

"Lord, help me to reorder my life so that I live as a child of the kingdom and not as a slave to the world."

Questions:

1. Of all the peoples of the world, why do you suppose God chose to reveal himself to the Hebrews?

2. Have each member of your group take about three minutes to write a brief description of what happened at the beginning of this class session. Then read aloud several of these eye-witness accounts, noting their differences. How does this exercise help us appreciate the differences between the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry?

3. Can you see parallels between events in your own life and those in Bible narratives? For example: Abraham was called apart by God; has God called you? Joseph forgave his brothers for trying to kill him; can you forgive others? God sent Paul to speak the Good News throughout the Mediterranean world; did God send someone to share this same news with you?

Chapter 3: Who Swallows Jonah Today?

(A Look at the Authority of the Bible by John W. Howe)

"Defend the Bible? I should rather defend a lion!" Spurgeon

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...." So begins the book of Hebrews (1:1,2) in the New Testament. Note that the author sees a continuum in God's revelation to us: of old he spoke through the prophets, more recently he has spoken—decisively and most clearly—through his Son, Jesus Christ.

In Mark's Gospel, chapter eight, beginning at the 34th verse, we find Jesus himself telling his followers they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him, and that those who save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, and the sake of the gospel will save them. He asks, "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" A remarkably sobering question, isn't it? But then Jesus goes on to say this: "Those who are ashamed of me *and of my words* in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).

How might we end up forfeiting our lives, our souls, eternity with God? One way is by being ashamed of Jesus and his words. Most of those who call themselves Christians are not (knowingly) ashamed of Jesus himself, but an awful lot of people seem to feel they have the right to pick and choose which of his *words*—and those of other parts of the Bible—they will accept. "I really like what Jesus says about loving and affirming my neighbor, but I'm not sure I buy everything he says about tithing, or faithfulness in marriage, or—whatever."

I've actually heard people say, "I accept Jesus as 'the way, the truth and the life' *for me*, but I certainly don't believe that 'no one comes to the Father except through him.'"³ Intriguing statement, isn't it? Especially when you consider that both phrases are part of the same sentence, and it was Jesus himself who uttered them! (John 14:6).

A little later Jesus said, "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10). Note: the *words* Jesus speaks are the *works* of the Father. God does His work, and speaks reality into existence, through the very lips of Jesus.

For Christians, our view of Scripture (indeed, our view of anything) must begin with Jesus himself. "Servants are not greater than their master," he said (John 15:20). The problem is that to know what Jesus thinks of the

Bible, we have to go to the Bible itself. And that seems to many a circular argument. I want to try to demonstrate that it really isn't; instead, let me put it this way: *The Bible is a unique Book, having characteristics that are both human and divine (like the Lord Jesus himself), and it is Jesus' own imprimatur contained within the Bible that gives us confidence to trust its inspiration and authority.*

Key Passages

Let us examine a few key passages of Scripture that express something of the way the Bible sees itself.

2 Timothy 3:16,17: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." The root word for "inspiration" is the same as "respiration." The sentence could be literally translated: "All Scripture is God-breathed."

Notice what St. Paul says about its purpose. 1) Scripture is the basis for our *teaching*. How do we decide what to teach? Is it a matter of whatever is politically correct at any given moment? The latest Gallup poll? Three out of five dentists surveyed? No, it is a matter of what God has said to us in the Scriptures. What about reproof? How dare we say that someone is wrong, either doctrinally or ethically! Well, it's not really up to *us* to say so at all, but it is a matter of examining both teaching and behavior in the light of Scripture. If someone is shown to be wrong, how is he or she to make things right again? By *correction*, according to the Scriptures. And finally, Paul mentions *training* in righteousness—inculcating into each one of us patterns that are pleasing to God until they become almost second nature. All this equips us for the good work God has for us. St. Paul makes the remarkable statement that everything we will ever need to do—whatever good work will ever be required of us in any circumstance—is provided for us by God in the holy Scriptures!

Now in that passage the word "Scripture" refers to what Christians call the Old Testament—the Scriptures of Jesus' day and the first generation of his followers who lived during the period when the New Testament was still being written.

2 Peter 1:20,21 says something quite similar to the Timothy passage. "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Of course there is a human characteristic to Scripture, because men and women wrote it down. Each had his or her own distinct personality, style, even vocabulary. Luke is different from John; Ezekiel is very different

from Isaiah. But in addition to the human dimension, Peter insists, it was the movement, the prompting, the inspiration of God that directed them.

Again, Peter was referring, as Paul was, to the Old Testament. But notice a little comment he made two chapters later. Summing up his letter, he says, in effect, "I'm trying to say the same thing to you that Paul says in all his letters" (2 Peter 3:15b,16). And then he adds: "There are some things in them (Paul's letters) hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other Scriptures.*" Three remarkable assertions in one sentence: 1) Peter himself had trouble understanding some of Paul's writings! (Aren't you glad to learn you're in such good company?) 2) "Twisting" Scripture—i.e., trying to make it say something it doesn't—leads to destruction. 3) Paul's letters are already being accepted by the early Church as *Scripture*. No less a person than St. Peter endorsed the writing of Paul as *Scripture* during both of their lifetimes.

Jesus' Imprimatur

Earlier I said that Jesus himself gave us his imprimatur on the authority of Scripture. Actually he gave us a three-fold imprimatur. First he endorsed the Old Testament. He did so over and over, but perhaps most succinctly in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until the heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17, 18).

In Luke 24:13-35, the risen Christ appeared to two of his followers as they were returning home in despair after his crucifixion. In the midst of their confusion and grief, Jesus said this, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Notice, it was *necessary* because the prophets said it would happen! In other words, if they said it we can believe it with confidence. And then, Luke adds, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures." Don't you wish you could have been there?

In John 5:39 Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf." Jesus endorses the (Old Testament) Scriptures, and says that they were actually written about him! Again, "If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (John 5:46, 47).

Secondly, as we have already seen, Jesus claims that his own words and teachings are authoritative because they are not his alone, but they come

from the Father. "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14: 10).

Then thirdly, Jesus looks *forward* to the time when what we call the New Testament would be written down, and in essence he gave his own stamp of approval to it before the fact. Not once, but three times.

In John 14:25, 26 Jesus says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The importance of this promise simply cannot be overestimated. Jesus is saying that the same Holy Spirit who inspired, or moved, or spoke through, or "breathed" the word of God through the prophets of old and the writers of the Old Testament will come alongside the apostles and empower and enable them as they recount his teachings and ministry. Specifically, he will help them remember all that Jesus himself has said.

If we were historians, the best we could do in presenting our story would be to trace it back to eyewitnesses, to those who were actually present to see and hear the events. That is precisely the claim of the New Testament writers: "I was there; I saw it." (Or, in some cases, "I got it directly from those who were there"—see, for instance, the introduction to Luke's Gospel, chapter 1:1-4.) Eyewitness evidence would be sufficient for secular history, but Jesus says it isn't sufficient for God! In addition to the testimony of his apostolic eyewitnesses, he says, the Holy Spirit will come, and help you remember all that I have taught you.

He says it a second time in John 15:26, 27. "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning."

Yet a third time does he make the same promise, and here he adds a significant element to it: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12-15).

Thus we have from the lips of Jesus himself a three-fold affirmation of the authority of Scripture. He endorses the Old Testament as having come from God; he repeatedly claims that his own words are directly from the Father; and he promises that a principal function of the Holy Spirit will be to

help the apostles remember, interpret and supplement what he had told them in person.

But what about St. Paul? He was not one of the twelve, not an eyewitness, and yet he wrote so much of the New Testament. Study the first chapter of Galatians very carefully, especially verses 11-24. Paul makes the astonishing claim that he did not receive the gospel he proclaimed "from any human source," but rather it was directly "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." In effect, he is claiming to be an "eyewitness" after the fact, by having had the facts revealed to him directly. Years later he conferred with the original apostles, who agreed he had the story straight, but he received it, he says, from the Lord himself. As we have already seen, Paul's letters were actually the first "books" to be recognized as *Scripture* in the New Testament.

Skepticism about the Bible

Sometimes we encounter people who say, "You can't believe the Bible; it's so full of contradictions." Let me suggest that we mustn't allow such broadsides to go unchallenged. "Would you please show me some?" is a very telling response. In my experience the people who make these kinds of sweeping generalization are hard pressed to come up with any substantial examples of "contradictions" in Scripture. There are, of course, minor discrepancies such as numbers that are easily miscopied, occasional confusions of one person's name with another's, and that sort of thing. Here a good commentary will quickly resolve the problem. But the challenge is to find major outright contradictions—places where the Bible says one thing one time, and something completely irreconcilable with it another. It ought to be easy, if the Bible is "full" of contradictions, shouldn't it?

When I was in seminary I found myself in the company of a number of students who questioned Biblical authority. I couldn't resist asking one of the most respected professors, in a class of over 200 students, "Sir, can you show me a single instance of there being such a contradiction in the Bible that it would cause us to question the authority and inspiration of the Book?" He thought for a few moments, and then replied with a single word: "No."

If someone presents (or you should happen upon) what appears to be a real problem—do your homework! Get a Bible commentary, perhaps several of them. Ask someone who knows more about it than you do. It will be a wonderful reassurance and faith-builder to discover that the vast majority of "problems" in the Bible do have good solid explanations.

Of course, disbelief in the miraculous is another sort of problem altogether. I will not try to deal with that in this brief essay other than to quote that delicious verse, Psalm 115:3, "Our God is in the heavens; he does

whatever he pleases." If you (or your friend) are having a problem believing in miracles, let me recommend C. S. Lewis' book *Miracles* as a point of departure.

Caricaturing the Bible

Often critics and skeptics will caricature the Bible. They will say things like, "How can you trust a book that teaches slavery, or that only men are created in the image of God, and women are their property, or that the earth is flat, and all that sort of thing?" But the Bible doesn't teach *any* of those things!

The Bible did allow in ancient days for a form of slavery that was really a kind of indentured servanthood, very unlike the horror we developed in colonial America up to the time of the Civil War. The "slaves" of Bible times always had rights and privileges such as provision for keeping their families together and even for buying their way out of slavery. In the New Testament, Christians who had "slaves" were commanded to treat them as full equals (cf. Philemon, especially verses 15,16). It is the worst kind of intellectual dishonesty to read into the Biblical text a form of slavery that didn't exist until nearly two millennia after it was written, and then condemn the Bible for "endorsing" it!

Yes, the Bible teaches that the husband is the "head" of the wife, but in precisely the same way that Jesus is the head of the Church. He models for us what headship is, and in a word, it is servanthood. If Jesus doesn't "lord it over" the Church, there is no warrant for a Christian husband "lording it over" his wife. Headship is *responsibility*, not *prerogative*. See Ephesians 5:21-33.

Scripture does speak of the "rising of the sun and the going down of the same" (Psalm 113:3), and the "four comers of the earth" (Revelation 20:8)—but we commonly use the same terms ourselves. The weathercaster tells us when the sun will "rise" and "set" each day. Does he think the earth is flat, and the sun revolves around it? Job 26:7-9 says God "stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing.... He has described a circle on the face of the waters, at the boundary between light and darkness." That doesn't sound much like a flat earth theory to me!

Get Specifics

The inspiration and authority of the Bible is an enormous subject, and I am only scratching the surface of it. But in the face of such widespread ignorance and skepticism about it, I want to make the small suggestion that we take another look. "Believe your beliefs, question your questions, and doubt your doubts," as the old saying goes. Don't let people dismiss the

Bible out of hand as they so often try to do. Get them to be *specific* about their objections to the authority of Scripture. "Could you show me some things beyond metaphors and figures of speech that are so out of line that we have to dismiss this Book as irrelevant?"

One of the most common objections is: "Surely you don't believe God created the world in seven days?" Well, what is a "day?" Most of the time it designates a 24-hour period, measured by the earth alternatively facing, then facing away from, the sun. But if that's how it is used in the Genesis account of creation, there's a problem: the sun itself isn't created until the fourth "day!" On the other hand, the Bible says in both Old and New Testaments (Psalm 90:4, and 2 Peter 3:8) that to the Lord a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day. So a "day" can be an indefinite period of some considerable duration. Once we're over that hurdle, take another look at the Genesis account. God begins with an inanimate world, then creates life in the sea and the lower plant forms on land, then he moves through what looks awfully like an evolutionary development within the animal kingdom, coming at last to the creation of humankind in His own image. The only difference between the Biblical account and our best secular understanding of the world we live in is that the Bible knows who is behind it all.

Of course there are a wide variety of literary genres in Scripture. I love it when people ask me, "But surely you don't take the Bible literally, do you?" I invariably reply: "I take the literal parts literally." In addition there is poetry, allegory, metaphor, history, parable, apocalyptic writing, predictive prophesy, and so on. A huge question that must always be addressed whenever we study the Bible is: what kind of literature is this particular passage, and how do we deal with this kind of literature? When the Scripture says "the trees clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12) I need to understand it as a poetic metaphor. When the Bible says the streets of heaven are paved with gold (Revelation 21:21) I understand it to be symbolic of a place of holiness, purity, and inestimable value—I don't need to ask whether it is 14 or 21 carat. When I read the story of Jonah I need to see that the point of the story is that God can have mercy even on pagan Nineveh, and a man being spared death by drowning and being swallowed by a great fish is a picture of God sparing a whole people swallowed up in sin. But notice: *these are questions of literary criticism—i.e., "what kind of literature is this?"—they are not questions of the Bible's authority!* Much less are they questions of the miraculous; if God could raise Jesus from the dead, I have little doubt he could spare Jonah three days in the fish's belly. The *National Geographic* has reported stories of men being swallowed by sperm whales and living to tell about it, so if it was a miracle story it wasn't a particularly big one! But

as a matter of fact, on *literary* grounds, it is doubtful that we are intended to be asking such questions at all.

Exercise:

The Bible speaks for itself. Many times and in many ways, God tells us how important it is for us to study Scripture. An interesting, one-time project is to give the Bible an opportunity to "speak for itself."

There are listed below a number of passages of Scripture that talk about the importance of Scripture. Read them, making a brief note of what each passage says. Then, make a list of as many reasons as you can think of, from the Scripture passages (and any more you can think of that were not listed), why it is important to read the Bible.

Suggested verses: Joshua 1:7-8, 22:5; 2Kings 17:13; 2 Chronicles 33:8; Psalms 119:97-105; Proverbs 1:1-6, 6:23, 29:18; Hosea 4:6; Matthew 5:17-18, 13:23; Luke 24:45; John 14:21; Acts 17:11, 20:32; Romans 15:4; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Timothy 4:6; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 4:2.

Questions:

1. Is the Bible "the Word of God" or is it "'man's word on God" or is there some better description?"
2. Do you have problems with some of the things the Bible says? Share them.
3. How can you deal with or seek to resolve these problem areas?
4. What sort of feelings do you have when confronting problem areas that you just can not resolve? What do you do next?

Chapter 4: A Sure Foundation

by Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

There are many reasons why the Old Testament appears to be irrelevant to some Christians. One has to do with historical discontinuity between ourselves and the Old Testament. Many differences between the Old Testament world and our modern world exist.

The people of the Old Testament spoke Hebrew; few Christians do today. Technology is vastly different. They walked about in sandals; we wear Reeboks. We drive cars; they rode on camels. Even more striking are the different social structures. In the Old Testament world, especially in the book of Genesis, the structures of Israel were, by and large, patriarchal. A patriarch was the head of his clan and led his people, his family. Today that is not the way things are done except in the most remote parts of the world. There were also different religious experiences. When was the last time you saw an ax head float on water? (2 Kings 6:1-7). When was the last time you saw fire come out of heaven and consume a sacrifice? (Genesis 15:9-20). When was the last time you saw a sea part? (Exodus 14:1-31). Or saw a burning pillar of fire and smoke and cloud leading you through a desert? (Exodus 13:21). These were the religious experiences of people in the Old Testament, but we don't have them today. Yes, we do see miracles around us, and we do see God at work in people's lives. But we don't have the dramatic displays of God's power that the people in the Old Testament knew.

In many respects, these differences create a vast distance between us and the Old Testament world. For some people these differences create a sense of irrelevance, a sense that the Old Testament is just not important for us today.

The second reason many people believe the Old Testament to be irrelevant involves misunderstanding the New Testament references to the Old Testament. Many Christians hold views of the Old Testament which they believe stem from the New Testament itself. They think the Old Testament doesn't apply to us today because they misunderstand portions of the New Testament. Let's look at some of these New Testament verses.

First, Matthew 5:21-47, a very familiar passage in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not murder. And anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." As a result, some would say that Jesus disagreed with the Old Testament. "The Old Testament said that, but I tell you this." This is a basic

misunderstanding of Jesus' ministry. It was absolutely inconceivable that a Jewish Messiah, Jesus, could disagree with the Old Testament.

On further study, we find that Jesus did not disagree with the teaching of the Old Testament itself but rather with the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees as they interpreted the Old Testament incorrectly. It is extremely important for us to understand that Jesus did not disagree with the Old Testament. We will see that he actually affirmed the validity of the Old Testament rather than disagreeing with it or discounting it. A similar passage can be found in the book of Romans 6:14. "For sin shall not be your master because you are not under law but under grace." Not under law but under grace. The expressions "under the law" and "under grace" are common expressions among Christians today. We use them all the time, but, for the most part I think we misuse them. That is because people say that we are not under the law, meaning under the Old Testament. The law is irrelevant because we are under grace, and by that, people mean the New Testament.

In fact when Paul said we are not under the law but under grace he did not mean that Christians are without obligations to the Old Testament. Nor did he mean that the Old Testament is irrelevant or inapplicable to Christian living. Such a thing could not be said by a man like Paul, a Jew and a Rabbi, who constantly based his teachings on the Old Testament. Instead, when Paul used the expression "under the law," he meant we are not under the *judgment* of the law; we are not under slavery to sin through the law. Rather, our relationship with God is dominated by grace.

However, be mindful that this is the kind of relationship all saints have had with God throughout the ages: Abraham, David, Noah. Throughout the entire Bible people have been saved by grace through faith. In that, the New Testament does not differ from the Old.

In Romans 10:4, Paul said that Christ is the end of the law so that there might be righteousness for everyone who believes. Many would say this means that Jesus came to bring an end to the Old Testament law. Now, all we have to do is to read that short part of the Bible that we call the New Testament. (If you take a Bible and hold it up in front of you and gather between your thumb and your first finger the section of the Bible that is the New Testament, you can see how small it is compared to the Old Testament. That should tell you that if we eliminate the Old Testament from our practical Christian living we eliminate a great deal of God's word from our lives.) What Paul really said in this passage is that Christ is the end, the *telos* (i.e., the *goal*) of the law, not the end of it in the sense that he came to destroy it or to set it aside. He is the goal. He is the purpose for which the law was written. In other words, the law was given to us to teach us about Jesus, to prepare the way for him.

We have dealt very briefly with the reasons why the Old Testament is not irrelevant. Now, we want to affirm its relevance. Exactly why do we believe that the Old Testament is relevant? Why would I devote a major portion of my life to teaching the Old Testament? Why would the Church continue to have Old Testament stories taught in Sunday School? What is it that makes us believe that the Old Testament is relevant for the modern world when there are so many differences between our world and the old?

There are continuities between the Old Testament and the present; we are connected by three main principles. Both the Old Testament world and the modern world have the same God, the same world and the same kind of people. In these three ways we can describe a bridge of continuity between the Old Testament and the New.

Think about God. What is it about Him that makes His spoken word in the Old Testament relevant for us living in the days of the New Testament? The Bible teaches that God is immutable. His immutability means that He does not change in His character. He does not change His promises. His basic covenant commitment to us remains throughout the ages.

If we have an unchanging God, a God who does not say one thing one day and the opposite the next day, then we can assume that what He said in the Old Testament has some relevance for us in the New. God's character is consistent, and His covenant fidelity is extraordinarily important. In 1 Kings 8:23, Solomon prays and speaks of God as one who keeps His covenant. There are many places in the Bible that refer to the fact that God is faithful in keeping His covenant promises. Where did God make these covenant promises? He made these covenant promises in the Old Testament, and as you go from one age to the next in the Old Testament—from the days of Noah to the days of the patriarchs, to the days of Moses, to the days of David—you find that people of God look back to previous covenants to see how God would treat them in their own day. The fact that we have the same God, immutable in His character and faithful to His covenant, gives us hope. There is a continuity between us and Old Testament days; what was revealed then can be used today.

There is another thing that helps us bridge the gap between ourselves and the Old Testament. That is the fact that we live in the same world. There is a great deal of difference between that Old Testament world and ours, but there are a lot of connections as well. One connection is the fact that today is the result of yesterday. The modern world is deeply influenced by events that took place in the days of the Old Testament on that little piece of property known as Canaan. What could be more influential in today's western society than the Ten Commandments? We are the historical result of that ancient

world, and for that reason we find relevant the things that God spoke in that world.

Many of our so-called Judeo-Christian traditions are direct results of events that took place in Old Testament days. More than that, the Old Testament is relevant because our lives are not that different. They struggled with problems not so different from our own. Their world was like our world in many ways. The fact that ancient people faced circumstances similar to those we face allows us to understand that the word God spoke to them is relevant for us today.

Finally, people. People bridge the gap between the old world and our world. We are dealing with the same kind of people. How are we the same? First the Bible says we are the image of God, that all people throughout the ages are the image of God. Our linguistic abilities, our mental capacities, reflect the fact that we are the image of God. When we think in certain ways, you can be sure that the people of the Old Testament thought in similar ways. When we react to circumstances psychologically or emotionally, we know how they may have reacted. For example, when we hear God command Abraham to sacrifice his son, we know the kind of psychological response Abraham must have had. We can find many connections between ourselves and people in the Old Testament.

There is another connection between people then and people today; they are all sinful. 1 Kings 8:46 says that everyone sins. That sounds very much like Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." We can count on the fact that people were sinful in the Old Testament much as they are sinful in the New Testament.

To affirm the relevance of the Old Testament, we can think of the bridge, connecting us to the Old Testament having three main strands or three main layers. We deal with the same God, we live in the same world, and we are the same kind of people

To fully affirm the relevance of the Old Testament, we must move one step further to make sure that we understand correctly the New Testament viewpoint. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." That should be clear enough, yet some people understand the word "fulfilled" as meaning no longer necessary. That is not what Jesus meant at all, as we can see from verses 18 and 19. "I tell you the truth. Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not even the least stroke of the pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called

great in the kingdom of heaven." We certainly can tell from this passage that Jesus did not come to get rid of or to discount or to play down the Old Testament as a norm for Christian living.

The apostle Paul, in a number of places, made it very clear that the Old Testament is relevant. In 1 Timothy, he said, "All scripture is God-breathed and is profitable." What scripture was Paul talking about? The Old Testament! The New Testament was yet to be written. In 1 Corinthians, Paul told stories from the books of Exodus and Numbers, telling how God destroyed the first generation of Israelites in the wilderness. In verse 11 he wrote, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." These passages were written for us, Christians living in the New Testament age, for our benefit, for our purposes, for our lives.

This brings us to the question of the necessity of the Old Testament. Why does the Christian Church believe that the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible, is necessary? What is it that we get from the Old Testament that we cannot get from the New Testament?

First, the breadth in the Old Testament is so much greater than that of the New Testament. Over two millennia are covered in the revelation given to us in the Old Testament. There are many different circumstances, many different situations in which the people of God found themselves, much diversity. Think about the New Testament in contrast. Throughout the New Testament, as important and as good as it is, only a brief period of time is covered, and the circumstances of the people of God at that time are similar. They are basically disenfranchised, poor, running, persecuted. We're not dealing with the great variety that we find in the Old Testament.

Think of the diversity of experience within the Christian Church today. There are Christians who are rich, others who are poor; Christians at war, others at peace. There are Christians at the head of their countries and cultures, and Christians in the prisons of their cultures. The breadth of situations in the Old Testament becomes very important for us as we address the breadth of situations in our day. This is one of the reasons why the Old Testament is so necessary, because as we walk through its books we see that they are addressing different situations, different circumstances, and these circumstances provide us with avenues for understanding our own lives today.

Not only does the Old Testament address many situations that we must deal with in our lives, but it also addresses a variety of issues that the New Testament doesn't address. Have you ever wondered why the New Testament talks very little about prayer? Do you wonder why the New Testament

doesn't say much about music or worship? Why not? Because the New Testament was never meant to be read alone.

The New Testament is, in a way, laid on the sure foundation of the Old Testament. The New Testament writers did not concern themselves with prayer, worship and music because the Old Testament already had given a great deal of attention to these matters.

Christians are mistaken if they think that the Lord's Prayer is the only thing they need to know about how to pray. They forget that Jesus is summarizing prayer. In fact, the Lords Prayer cannot be understood correctly apart from the psalms of the Old Testament. The Lord's prayer brings the psalms together in a short package.

Have you ever thought it strange that in the New Testament the title given most often to Jesus is Christ (*Christos*)? Have you ever thought it strange that the New Testament never defines what *Christos* means? Why doesn't the New Testament define what a Christ is? The answer is plain: the Old Testament does it for the New Testament. If you forget the Old Testament, if you want to cut that out of your life, then you can't know who Christ is.

The New Testament does not speak much about social justice. Why? I think it is because the New Testament is addressed to people who were completely powerless to do anything about social injustice. Instead, it addresses matters of personal justice and personal mercy. Does that mean that Christians don't have to concern themselves with social justice? Of course we must. Where then, do we find our guidance? Where do we find an understanding of how to achieve social justice in this world? The Old Testament provides the guidance and the insight we need for applying God's word in the area of social justice.

We have focused on the appearance of irrelevance in the Old Testament—based, to some extent, upon our misunderstanding of the New Testament references to the Old. We have affirmed the relevance of the Old Testament, saying there are continuities of the same God, the same world, the same kind of people. If we understand the New Testament correctly, we will understand that it does not deny the relevance of the Old Testament at all. Why then is the Old Testament relevant? Because of the breadth of situations that it brings to bear upon our lives, and because it provides us the sure foundation the New Testament builds upon and without which we can easily misunderstand the New Testament teachings.

Exercise:

Meditating on Scripture. The inspired reading method of meditation can produce blessings in our lives and can be a valuable part of our daily time with the Lord. Meditating on the Bible involves the use of your imagination, as well as your intellect. Begin by settling into a quiet and receptive attitude, then read very slowly. You are not trying to accomplish anything other than to receive any message the Lord has to give you.

Sometimes a particular word or phrase will seem to "jump off the page." When this happens, stop reading, be still and allow God to speak to your heart and mind with His message. Often the significance is clear but at other times some pondering will be necessary. In any event, pausing at the end of each sentence is essential so that the thoughts can drift through your mind.

It is helpful to ask questions: what lies behind these words?, what memories, images or concepts do they bring to the surface?, what does the incident or words mean to you? Let your senses and imagination be involved as you reflect on the story and put yourself into the particular situation. You may also ask why a person took such an action, what Jesus really meant by his words, what is really going on, what God is trying to do—all leading to the primary question of what He is saying to you.

When a clear message is received, it is time to end your reading. Only one message per meditation is needed unless you feel that God is calling you to continue.

Having received a message, we then will want to respond to this encounter with God. As Bishop John Coburn teaches, we need not only to "picture and ponder," but to "promise." This may be to thank God for His loving concern, but often it also involves committing oneself to action based upon the revelation received. You need to be specific in your plan and to carry it out as quickly as possible.

A practical concern is the length of time to be set aside for meditation. This is difficult to answer because sometimes the message may be received quickly and with an obvious response; at other times much pondering will be needed. Thirty minutes is an average time.

Meditation gives us assurance of God's presence, provides a way in which to receive His guidance, and often directs and encourages the actions which are in His purpose for our lives.

Questions:

1. Read from the Old Testament Nehemiah 9:7-13. The Bible continually calls the people to look back on their own history, particularly at God's past love, power, and faithfulness. Thus they can have confidence that God will continue to provide, protect, forgive, and cleanse them. Take a look at your own history with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and recall specific acts of his grace.

2. "Why waste your time trudging through such an archaic complicated book? Get with the times!" What is your response?

Chapter 5: Applying Scripture

How often do we hear people disparage the Bible because principles set forth in it seem so outdated and inapplicable to our day? In a survey of one Christian denomination by the Gallup Organization, only 34% of the respondents said that they used the Bible to arrive at God's will in making decisions about issues they face in life. No wonder we need guidelines to help us apply Scripture to our lives!

In his book *Applying the Bible*, Jack Kuhatschek gives some helpful guidelines. He says, "In a sense, studying and applying the Bible is like entering a time machine. We must cross the barriers of time, language, culture and geography in order to understand the people of the Bible and how God's word applied to the situations they faced." So, our first step is to consider the ways we cross those barriers.

1. *The time barrier.* To be properly understood, a passage of Scripture must be looked at from its historical context. Some of this information is contained in the passage itself; by reading the full passage (rather than only a verse or two), we can tell a great deal about what was going on (the physical circumstances, the issue being addressed, etc.). Additionally, it is helpful to have a Bible dictionary or other resource book to provide further information. Obviously, with regard to this "barrier" and the others we will consider below, a commentary on the Scripture such as *Journey through the Word* is invaluable.

2. *The language barrier.* The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. We can't be expected to have knowledge of these languages in order to understand Scripture. Fortunately, this barrier has been crossed for us by Bible scholars who have translated it into the English language. There are three types of translations: literal (such as the Revised Standard Version), dynamic-equivalence (New International Version, New English Bible) and free translations (Living Bible, J.B. Phillips' New Testament in Modern English). Literal translations are true to the original languages but can make for awkward reading; free translations are easy to read but aren't overly concerned with precise wording. Jack Kuhatschek recommends a dynamic-equivalent translation for study purposes: "They don't try to update matters of history or culture (a lamp is a lamp and not a flashlight). But they translate the biblical words and phrases into clear and contemporary equivalents in English. As a result, they are easy to read and faithful to the original message."

3. *The cultural barrier.* Many cultures are represented in the Bible (Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Jewish, Greek, Hebrew, etc.), and what

happens and what is said in Scripture is greatly affected by these cultures. For instance, why did Jesus so often use Samaritans as examples in his teachings? To understand the cultural situation in a passage, it is again helpful to look for clues within the text itself and then to go to a Bible dictionary or other resource to look for further information.

4. *The geographical barrier.* The obvious best way to overcome this barrier is to visit the Holy Land. Unfortunately, few of us get to do that. However, there are Bible atlases available at our bookstore, and many Bibles contain maps which can help us trace the route of the Exodus or Paul's missionary journeys.

In order to apply Scripture effectively in our lives, it is important to be able to cross some barriers. If our relationship with God is primary in our lives, we want to understand His "handbook for living" as best we can. We are blessed today with resources that can aid us substantially in crossing these barriers.

A second step in applying the Bible is finding the general principles that should guide our lives. Jack Kuhatschek says, "Learning to generalize is one of the most important steps in applying the Bible. When, on the surface, a passage seems to have little application to our situation today, we need to look beneath the surface for the general principle."

Kuhatschek then gives some ways of finding general principles in a passage of Scripture. He suggests that we ask:

1. *Does the writer state a general principle?* The most general principle in Scripture is stated by Jesus in Matthew 22:36-40: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." The writers in the New Testament often set forth a general principle and then follow with examples of how that principle applies to particular situations. Although the specifics may not apply to us today, the general principle will most always apply.

2. *Why was the specific command or teaching given?* Some general principles are not stated in a passage of Scripture but must be ascertained by what is being said in the specific situation. Kuhatschek uses the example in Galatians 5:2 of Paul saying that, if the Galatians allow themselves to be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to them. Why, then have Christians continued to be circumcised if Paul has told us not to be? Looking at the passage in context, it is clear that Paul was dealing with a particular situation. The Galatians were trying to justify themselves by keeping the Law of Moses. The principle here is not "don't get circumcised" but "do not seek to be justified by the law."

3. *Does the whole of the passage reveal a general principle not otherwise obvious?* In Ephesians, it is necessary to look at 5:21 ("Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ") as the general principle that helps us understand 6:5 ("Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling")—a verse that would otherwise be perplexing to us in a day when we disdain slavery.

It needs to be said that "proof-texting" (looking up a verse of Scripture to prove an opinion or prejudice we may have) is not the same thing as discovering general principles in Scripture. Just the opposite! In discovering general principles, we want not only to know what God said, but why He said it.

Our third step in applying Scripture to our lives is just that: applying general principles to our lives today. This could involve application to a situation identical to the one found by the people in the passage or a comparable situation.

1. *The identical situation.* Obviously, Jesus' command that we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves, applies just as fully to us today as it did to those to whom Christ spoke.

2. *The comparable situation.* In 1 Corinthians 8:9, Paul states a principle: "Only take care lest this liberty of yours [of eating food that has been sacrificed to idols] somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak." That principle hardly has direct application to us today; we don't face the situation Paul was dealing with in the passage. Yet, it does clearly apply to comparable situations we face today such as drinking alcoholic beverages around a recovering alcoholic who thereby could be tempted to return to drinking.

One final note about applying Scripture to our lives. We should do so prayerfully. We want to know what God would have us do, and how He wants us to live; understanding the Bible and applying it to our lives is a necessary part of that process. But so is growth in a relationship with God through prayer.

If our prayer lives are not informed by Bible study, our prayers will be sadly lacking and often misguided. If our Scripture reading is not approached prayerfully, we can fall into the same trap as the Pharisees condemned by Jesus: setting up a loveless set of laws to govern our lives (and by which to judge others!). As with everything else in the Christian life, we need balance.

Exercise:

The "Proper" Method of Group Bible Study

What is the "Proper" Method of Bible Study? Among liturgical churches, there is a prescribed prayer for each Sunday of the year. These special prayers are called "Propers." In the Book of Common Prayer, Proper 28 is the one for "Bible Sunday." It encourages worshipers to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Scripture. Interestingly, experts in educational process tell us the best way to learn is to hear (in order to begin to absorb), to see in order to retain more, to write it down, to tell someone else about it and then either to teach it ourselves or put it into practice. Thus, the experts and the Book of Common Prayer agree on the best way to learn Scripture. The "Proper" Method of group Bible study employs these principles. It works this way:

1. *Hear.* The passage is read aloud in the group.

2. *Read.* Each person then reads the passage quietly to self, slowly, meditatively. (3-5 minutes).

3. *Mark.* Each person then writes down one thing (word, phrase, thought) that stands out to him or her, and tells it to the other members of the group. (5 minutes).

4. *Learn.* Each person then prayerfully explores what God seems to be saying to him or her through the one thing noted and written down. (2-3 minutes).

5. *Inwardly Digest.* Each person then tells the others what he or she has learned from God about the item noted and what will be done about it. Inward conviction is expressed in action. (5 minutes).

Suggested passages to choose from: Matthew 7:7-12 ("Ask and it will be given"); 7:24-27 (Parable of the Two Builders); 9:35-38 (Harvest plentiful, laborers few); 28:16-20 (The Great Commission).

Questions:

1. Read Ephesians 2:8-10 or Psalms 139:13-16 or any other brief passage from several different Bible translations. Which version speaks most clearly to you?

2. What are some "comparable modern situations" where you might apply these ancient verses? Read Exodus 23:4; then Exodus 23:5.

3. Have you ever read the Bible (or heard it read aloud) and had a phrase "jump out at you?"

Chapter 6: Bible People We Need To Know

The characters in the Bible are very special people. It is because of what God did through them, and to them, that we have human examples of how He wants us to live.

Some of the people we will look at are the most important Bible characters, some are not, but they are all people we need to know. They were chosen somewhat at random but also because they illustrate important things we can learn from God.

Abraham. Originally known as Abram (meaning "exalted father"), God changed his name to Abraham ("father of many"). This father of the Hebrew people is noted for his *faithfulness*.

Abraham lived about 2000 B.C. at a time when the world had lapsed into idolatry and wickedness. Abraham believed in one God and had direct communication with God. Although Abraham and his wife Sarah were elderly and without children, God made a covenant with him that he would be the father of a great nation and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Abraham's life was filled with faith. At God's command, he left home and went to another land, obeying without question. Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son when God commanded him to do so. However, God did not let Abraham take Isaac's life; He was only testing Abraham's faith. Because of Abraham's faith, a whole nation of descendants came through Isaac. Both King David and Jesus Christ are direct descendants of Abraham.

Joseph. Son of Jacob and great grandson of Abraham, Joseph is a classic example of *righteousness*.

Joseph was sold into Egyptian slavery by his brothers who were jealous of him because he was his father's favorite. Although he suffered many hardships and temptations, he did not give in to them, and ultimately became Pharaoh's chief advisor and governor of Egypt. Joseph saved Egypt during the seven year famine and brought his father Jacob and his brothers and their families to live in Egypt under his protection.

The Israelites increased greatly in number, but after the death of Joseph a change of dynasty made Israel a race of slaves for the next four hundred years.

Moses. Moses is the Old Testament's example of physical, emotional, and spiritual *strength*. Born about 1400 B.C. to a Hebrew family at a time when Pharaoh had commanded that all Jewish males be killed at birth,

Moses was miraculously saved and raised by Pharaoh's daughter in Pharaoh's court.

As a young man, he became concerned about the plight of the Jewish people in Egypt and killed an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew. As a result, he had to flee for his life, and spent many years in exile in Midian. While tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and told him to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrew people out of slavery and into the Promised Land.

The journey from Egypt to Canaan resulted in the Hebrew people being in the wilderness for 40 years, during which time Moses faced every challenge imaginable. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments during this time, and he is known as the Law-giver. The first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) are the books of Moses.

Gideon. This judge of Israel is an example of how God can make a hero out of a *doubter*. At a time when Israelite farmers were suffering from Midianite raids, Gideon, while working on his father's farm, heard the Lord's call to end the oppression. However, Gideon believed himself incapable of the task and asked for a sign. The sign was given by way of a sacrifice consumed by fire from the rock on which it had been placed.

Gideon then pulled down the altar to Baal on his father's land, getting the attention of his neighbors. When the Midianites next encamped in the Valley of Jezreel, Gideon called his tribe to arms, but then became fearful and again asked God for a sign. This was given when dew appeared on the ground while Gideon's fleece remained dry.

Following God's command, Gideon reduced his army to a very small disciplined crew. These few, however, overcame the Midianites by instilling in them fear and confusion. Gideon accomplished this by surrounding the camp, blowing trumpets, smashing jars and shouting. The Israelites asked Gideon to be their ruler, but he refused, saying that God was their ruler (See Judges 6-9).

Ruth. This Moabite woman is an example of *loyalty*. She had married the son of Elimelech of Bethlehem and his wife Naomi who had come to Moab because of famine in their own country. Elimelech and his two sons died, so Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. Ruth insisted on going with her.

While searching for food, Ruth went to the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's, to gather grain. Boaz noticed Ruth and had his men give her extra grain. Upon telling Naomi of Boaz's generosity, Naomi suggested to Ruth that she offer to be his wife.

Boaz and Ruth were married, and their son Obed became an ancestor of David. Ruth is an example of a foreigner who chose to put her life under the God of Israel. (See Ruth).

Samuel. This great man of the Bible is a sign of *endurance*. He was born to Elkanah and Hannah who had longed for a child without success. Hannah prayed that if God would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord. The boy was put in the care of the priest of Shiloh, Eli, who had two worthless sons, Ophni and Phinehas.

Young Samuel received a message from God that the sons of Eli would die because of their sins, and they were later killed in a battle with the Philistines. (The Ark of the Covenant was captured in that battle but later returned because the Philistines were troubled by a plague following its capture).

Samuel emerged as a leader of a confederacy of the tribes of Israel. The people then demanded a king to unite them. Samuel at first refused, but later chose Saul to be the King of Israel. Samuel remained in a leadership role, even reprimanding the king. Finally, because Saul had been disobedient to God, Samuel told Saul he must relinquish his reign and went to Bethlehem and anointed David as Saul's successor. Samuel was the last of the judges of Israel. (See 1 Samuel 1-25).

David. 1050 B.C. The greatest King of Israel, David was "the man after God's own *heart*" (Acts 13:22).

David was the shepherd boy who killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, with his sling shot. Chosen by God to succeed Saul as king, David was a valiant warrior, musician, and writer of many of the Psalms. However, while David loved God with all his heart, he was human and not without sin. The story of David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba is one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament.

David repented his sin, and went on to be one of the most revered people in Scripture. However, the consequences of his sin led to the corruption of his household, his son Absalom rebelled against him, and his kingdom, in succeeding generations, fell apart.

Elijah. Perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, Elijah represents *holiness*. He is initially known for his perseverance in opposing the cult of Baal introduced in King Ahab's time by his Phoenician wife Jezebel. He appeared before Ahab and predicted a three-year drought, then crossed over the Jordan out of Ahab's jurisdiction.

Later, Elijah lived in Zarephath in Sidon with a widow whose larder was continually, miraculously refilled. When the widow's son became ill and died, Elijah brought him back to life.

Finally, Elijah returned to King Ahab and challenged the priests of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. The sacrifice to Baal never caught fire while the sacrifice to God was consumed. Thus having demonstrated the superiority of the God of Israel, rain immediately followed the contest. However, Elijah fled the wrath of Jezebel, hiding in a cave on Mount Horah and hearing the still, quiet voice of God.

Elijah was sent to anoint Hazael as the future king of Syria, Jehu as the future king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor as prophet. Those three worked to destroy Ahab's family. (See 1 Kings 17-19,21; 2 Kings 1:1-2: 18).

Elisha. This prophet was a *miracle worker*. While plowing his father's field, the prophet Elijah appeared and cast his mantle over Elisha, signifying Elisha as his successor. Elisha accompanied Elijah on the latter's final trip beyond the Jordan River when Elijah was caught up in a whirlwind into heaven, leaving his mantle—the symbol of his office—to Elisha.

At this time Elisha rejoined the company of prophets, being accepted by them as Elijah's successor. A series of miracles is attributed to him: salt into a spring brought purified water and fertile land; meal into poisonous stew purified it; a jar of oil was multiplied, allowing a poor widow to pay her debts. Elisha brought back to life the son of a Shunammite couple with whom he sometimes lived, and healed the Syrian commander Naaman of leprosy.

The above are just a few of the miracles worked through God's prophet Elisha. (See 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1—8:15; 9:1-3; 13:14-21).

Josiah. This king of Judah is a symbol of *unity*. He became king at the age of eight, following the long and treacherous reign of Manassah (who persecuted prophets and encouraged idolatry) and the two-year reign of Ammon, Josiah's father, who was assassinated.

From his youth, Josiah was committed to serving God. While still young, he ordered the destruction of the altars to Baal. Then he began work on repairing the temple. During construction a book containing substantially the original material from the book of Deuteronomy was discovered. Josiah had the book read in the presence of the people of Jerusalem. He renewed the covenant with God and celebrated the Passover feast.

Josiah reigned during a time when the Assyrian empire was crumbling and Babylonian power was increasing. He united his people by strengthening the religious life. During his reign he seems to have recaptured some of his nation's former holdings, for it is recorded that he destroyed pagan shrines at Bethel and in the cities of Samaria. This activity aroused the fears of Egypt, and King Josiah was killed at the Battle of Megiddo. Jeremiah wrote of Josiah that he ruled with justice and righteousness and

was concerned for the poor. (See 2 Kings 21:21-23: 30; 2 Chronicles 34;35; Jeremiah 1:2ff; 3:6; 22:15-16; Zephaniah 1:1).

Nehemiah. This devout Jew is an example of *leadership*. While in exile in Persia, he was cupbearer (and confidant) to King Artaxerxes. Upon learning that an attempt to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem had failed, Nehemiah asked for, and received, permission to go to the city. He was appointed governor of Judea in 445 B.C. and served in that office for 12 years.

Being an excellent planner, Nehemiah inspected the walls of Jerusalem and prepared to rebuild them. Despite both internal and external pressures he motivated the people to rebuild the walls. Always prepared, he kept some people on guard while others carried out the construction.

Nehemiah uncovered and acted against unscrupulous money-lenders, resisted plots to subvert the work and to destroy him, brought religious renewal and reformation to the people and regained respect for the Law. He had to come back to Jerusalem later to restore reforms that had begun to deteriorate. (See Nehemiah).

Esther. This queen of Persia is an example of *bravery*. Her name is given to a book of the Bible which recounts a deliverance of the Jewish people.

King Ahasuerus of Persia divorced his wife because she refused to appear at a banquet and wed the young Jewish girl, Esther, whose Jewish name was Hadassah. Esther's uncle (and adoptive parent), Mordecai, discovered a plot by Haman, the grand vizier, to destroy the Jewish people. Mordecai persuaded Esther to risk her life by going into the king's presence to plead their cause. She first invited the king and Haman to a banquet in her apartments where the plot was revealed and the Jews given the right to defend themselves.

Esther was thus an instrument of God's providence. This story is the basis for the annual Jewish festival of Purim. (See Esther).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is noted for her *obedience*. God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin who was to be married to a carpenter named Joseph. Gabriel told Mary that she had been especially favored by God to be the mother of the Son of the Most High, whom she was to name Jesus. Because of her willingness to accept this role, the Holy Spirit came upon her, and Jesus was conceived.

Despite the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' conception and birth, it was difficult for Mary fully to understand her son, and what God expected of him. She did not understand why, on a trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, rather than departing with his family he stayed behind to dialogue with the teachers of the Law. Later, when he began his itinerant preaching and

healing ministry, she and Jesus' family became concerned about his mental health.

Faithful to the last, however, Mary was at the foot of the cross as her son died. Later, she was with the other followers of Jesus when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost.

Jesus. Son of God, *Savior* of the world...the *Christ*. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of a virgin woman, Mary. He was raised in Nazareth as a carpenter's son. At age 30 he started his public ministry by first gathering twelve men as his disciples. He performed many miracles during his three years of public ministry. He condemned the Pharisees for their legalistic practices and shared with the Jewish people how they could have a personal relationship with God. His "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5:1—7:20) is considered the greatest treatise on godly conduct.

At age 33, Jesus was crucified and died. God raised him from the dead after three days and he remained visible to his disciples and many followers for forty days. He then ascended into heaven.

Jesus is revealed in the Old Testament as the coming Messiah and is the central person of the New Testament. He reigns in glory as God the Father's eternal Son.

Peter (also known as Simon and Cephas) was the leader of the 12 Apostles of Jesus. He is noted for his *impetuosity*. A fisherman by trade and the brother of another Apostle, Andrew, Peter was one of the most intimate friends of Jesus (along with the brothers James and John). Jesus taught him how to fish for people.

Peter was of a volatile disposition, meaning well but often misguided in his enthusiasm. He was the first publicly to identify Jesus as the Messiah, but almost immediately was unable to accept the prediction of how Jesus was to die. Seeing Jesus walk on water, he tried to go out and meet him, then lost faith and began to sink. He professed absolute loyalty to Jesus, then betrayed him when Jesus was taken away to be crucified.

Later, after Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter became the most vocal leader of the early church, and boldly proclaimed Christ.

Paul (initially known as Saul of Tarsus in the Bible) became the church's greatest *teacher*. He came into prominence after Jesus had died. He was raised as a Pharisee. His zeal for the Hebrew Law caused him to head up the persecution of the new Christian "Way."

Jesus made himself known to Paul in a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus that completely turned Paul's life around. Although we do not know the ways in which Jesus communicated with him, Paul gained a

greater understanding of the Christian faith than anyone, and he succeeds Peter as the main character in the book of Acts.

Many of Paul's teachings come to us through the Acts of the Apostles, but many more through his letters (the Epistles) which make up a large part of the New Testament. Paul spent much of his life introducing Christianity to both Jews and Gentiles, establishing and/or reinforcing churches in many cities including Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Phillipi, Colossae, and Thessalonica to which his letters were written.

Barnabas. An example of *encouragement*, Joseph Barnabas, a Jew of a priestly (Levite) family, was born in Cyprus. He was a member of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem and was among the first to sell his land and give the proceeds for distribution to the poor.

When Saul (Paul), who had left Jerusalem as an enemy of Christianity, returned saying that he had become a Christian, Barnabas alone accepted him and brought him to the church leaders. When word came that Christians at Antioch were preaching to the Greeks, Barnabas (because he was a Cypriote) was to investigate. He was so pleased with the growth of the church there that he went to Tarsus and brought Paul back with him; yet, he seemed always willing to take a secondary role to the dynamic Paul.

Paul and Barnabas continued to work and travel together, at one point taking Barnabas' cousin, John Mark with them. Later, when Barnabas suggested to Paul that John Mark accompany them on a preaching trip, Paul refused because the young man had left them during an earlier trip. Thus, Barnabas and Paul separated, and Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus.

Although Paul and Barnabas no longer traveled together, they were apparently reconciled later, for Barnabas is commended in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. (See Acts 4:36; 9:27, 11:22-26; 13-15; 29-30; Galatians 2:13; 1 Corinthians 9:6).

Mark. Here is the man to whom, in our day, we would give the award for an outstanding *come-back*. He is assumed to be the writer of the Gospel which bears his name. John was his Jewish name, but he also used a Greek surname and was referred to as John Mark.

The earliest Christian community met at his mother's house in Jerusalem. He was a cousin of Barnabas and accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. However, he left them at Perga for some reason not reflected in the records. Thus Paul refused to take John Mark along on a subsequent trip, causing a split between Paul and Barnabas.

Later, however, he was with Paul in Rome when Paul was imprisoned, thus having restored himself with the great apostle. A reference in 1 Peter indicates that he was an interpreter for Peter. Thus, it is assumed that the

Gospel of Mark is based on Peter’s recollection of Jesus. (See Acts 12:12; 16:27ff; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13).

Aquila and Priscilla are examples of *faithfulness*. Aquila was born a Jew, in Pontus, a city of the Roman empire. As husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla had lived in Rome but moved to Corinth when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. There they met Paul who lived with them and shared in Aquila’s vocation as a tent maker.

Aquila and Priscilla were perhaps among the first converts in Corinth. When Paul moved to Ephesus, they went with him. When they heard Apollos preach, they instructed him more fully in the faith and saw him begin his work of witnessing to Christ as the Messiah.

Priscilla and Aquila apparently continued to live in Ephesus for some years because Paul sent greetings to them there in several of his letters. Later, however, they once again lived in Rome because Paul, in writing to the church in Rome, expressed his appreciation for them, indicating that they had risked their lives for him. (See Acts 18:1-4, 18-19, 24ff; Romans 16:3).

Timothy. This young companion of Paul and leader of the early church is an example of a *trouble-shooter*. He was a follower and traveling companion of Paul’s. A native of Lystra, he was born to a Jewish Christian mother, Eunice, and a Greek father. He had been circumcised as a Jew, and his grandmother Lois had been a member of one of the earliest Christian families.

During Paul’s second missionary journey Timothy was chosen to accompany the apostle, setting out with him from Lystra. When, at Berea, Paul was suddenly forced to leave because of opposition from Thessalonian Jews, Timothy and Silas remained, later joining Paul at Corinth. Timothy was involved in other “trouble-shooting” journeys for Paul, to Macedonia (with Erastus), Thessalonica and Corinth. At one point he was imprisoned and released.

Paul’s Letters to Timothy were written to him. (See Acts 19:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 6; Hebrews 13:23; 1 and 2 Timothy).

Exercise:

Character Study. The people in the Bible should be very special to us because they are ones God has dealt with in ways we can read about and understand. We can see ourselves—our obedience and disobedience—reflected in these people. As we see how God dealt with them, we can understand better how He deals with us, and thus we can know Him better.

Therefore, a character study is worth the effort, although it may mean more work on our part than other methods of Bible study. A character study is accomplished by following the steps below:

a. Choose the character in the Bible you want to study. It may be a person you have always been interested in, someone you ran into in the course of other Bible study or an Old Testament character referred to in the New Testament (such as in Hebrews 11; Galatians 3:7; and Luke 4:27).

b. Next you should decide how best to get the information you will need about the character. Was he the author of a Book of the Bible? You will want a Concordance handy to check all of the references to him in the Bible. You will also want to obtain a commentary or other book that can give you background information about the times and circumstances in which the person lived.

c. You will now want to ask yourself several questions, such as: (1) When did this person live; (2) Where; (3) What was life like during his time; (4) What do we know about the person or persons who wrote about him; and (5) What is the date of the writing, and how long before it did the character being studied actually live?

d. At this point, you are ready to begin your study. First you will want to read everything you can find about the individual in the Bible. (If he was the author and subject of a Book of the Bible, as with most of the prophets, you will want to read the Book through at one sitting, if possible, preferably in a translation with which you are not familiar). Then you will want to read about him, to the extent you find that helpful, in commentaries or other resources available to you. As you pursue this study, you should be asking yourself: (1) What sort of person is this; (2) Did he obey God or go his own way; (3) What were his motivations; (4) Did the people around him understand him, and why or why not; (5) Have we, in the past, really understood him; (6) How did he deal with those around him; (7) How did he react to their treatment of him; (8) What does he tell us about the nature of God; (9) What are or were the lasting effects of what he said and did; and (10) What can we learn from him?

e. Finally, following up on the last question above, we need to apply the principles, the truths of God, revealed to us through the character we have been studying. Knowing about him, how am I helped to become more what God wants me to be?

Questions:

1. Picturing yourself in the role of a Bible character—even a very minor one—may give insight into the scripture passage. Try identifying the feelings and reactions of
 - a. the flute player in Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26.
 - b. father Zebedee in Matthew 4:21-22.

2. Compare two Scripture readings written about a thousand years apart:
the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10
the Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55
Even though we come on the scene about two thousand years later, what elements of these two women's joy at conception and childbirth can you share with them?

3. Let us look at Christian men and women in our lives who exhibit Ruth's loyalty or Samuel's endurance or Nehemiah's leadership (etc.). Tell us about the people who have been models for you.

Afterword

For the person who does not already have a satisfactory means of reading the Bible daily, the completion of this study may leave you wondering, "Where do I go from here?"

There are, of course, many Bible commentaries and courses that can be helpful in meeting this need. Simply contact the Bible Reading Fellowship at the address, phone number or e-mail shown on the cover, and we will be delighted to tell you of some options available to you.