

**The Church of God, International
Bible Correspondence Course**

LESSON 1

Why Study the Bible?

Bible study can be fascinating. That may sound odd if your past approach has been to start with Genesis and read straight through. Chances are you made it to Leviticus and gave up. Let's face it, the Bible is not always easy reading. It requires attention and effort, and it may even require a little help. When Philip encountered an Ethiopian who was reading the Scriptures, he asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian looked up from the book of Isaiah and answered, "How can I, except some man should guide me?" (Acts 8:31).

The Bible is not one book, but many. And it is an ancient book, written in strange tongues with the truth expressed in many complex ways. There is a surface simplicity that reaches out to the mind of a child with remarkable clarity and purity. Yet there is a depth and subtlety that has baffled philosophers down through the ages. The books of the Bible seem in many cases unrelated, and yet there is a pattern that is deliberately interwoven, sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious.

Solomon wrote: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honor of kings to search out a matter" (Proverbs 25:2). For reasons we'll go into later, God has not laid out the truth in stark clarity for all men to see. The truth will come, but it may come slowly. It may come with considerable effort. Sometimes a guide is needed, yet the individual must search out the answers for himself.

It is in that spirit that this course is presented. Few scriptures will be quoted verbatim in the course, because we want you to look in your Bible and see where the of Scripture. We will ask you to do four things:

Look up the scripture and read it in its context.

Mark the relevant scriptures in your Bible.

Make notes, preferably in the margin of your Bible.

Answer some simple questions designed to bring the scripture into focus.

YOUR BIBLE

We are often asked for our recommendation on Bibles and Bible study aids. While this is largely a matter of personal preference and needs, we can make some general observations. Obviously, your most important acquisition for Bible study is the Bible itself. If you already own a Bible, your initial decision is made for you. Chances are that your Bible is a King James Version, but many people find that hard reading. They want

to know which translation is best, easiest to read, most accurate, or most literal. Unfortunately, no one translation fits all these descriptions. If you are going out to buy a Bible, be it your first, second, or third, what do you look for? An excellent article appeared in Christianity Today (April 22, 1983) entitled "Bible Translations: A Guide Through The Forest," by Leslie Keylock. The author includes a thorough summary of several popular translations. You may wish to stop by your local library and read this issue of the magazine before you invest in another translation, but we will include a few of our own observations for what they are worth.

King James Version (1611,

Most biblical quotations you will read in our publications are from the KJV. Most of us have used the King James Bible for so long and are so familiar with it, we just hate to change. The main argument for keeping it is that some of the best concordances are based on the King James Version. Unfortunately, the language has changed so much since 1611 that the old Bible simply doesn't mean what it used to mean.

Keylock suggests that one of the reasons we keep using the old KJV is that we love its style. According to the King James Bible, Jesus told His disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled." The Good News Bible tells the disciples, "Do not be worried and upset" (John 14:1). The KJV has a beauty of expression that is rarely matched.

Revised Standard Version (1952, RSV)

The Revised Standard Version retains much of the beauty of the King James Version while getting rid of a lot of archaic expressions. Unfortunately, the Revised Standard Version has now had over thirty years to become archaic itself. The RSV was especially noted for its scholarship, but so much has been discovered about the Bible since 1952 that even the RSV is out of date. For this reason, the Revised Standard Version Bible Committee has released a New Revised Standard Version (1989, NRSV). Naturally, this reflects the progress of scholarship in the intervening years.

New American Standard Bible (1963, NASB)

According to Keylock, "The most literal, word-for-word translation on the market today...is the New American Standard Bible." Some authorities consider the NASB choppy and hard to read. But for those who have no background in the biblical languages, it serves as an interesting counterbalance to some of the more modern free translations or paraphrases (such as the Living Bible). However, even this literal translation slips up in places. In Mark 7:19, for example, the words "Thus He declared" are gratuitously added. They are in no ancient Greek manuscript.

The Jerusalem Bible (1966, JB)

The Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible have replaced all earlier Bible translations among Catholic readers. Many scholars consider them good translations except for some Catholic idiosyncrasies and some rather opinionated notes.

New English Bible (1970, NEB)

The New English Bible, the first British Bible to break completely with the King James tradition, is remarkable in that it is a work intended to be both accurate and literary. It is one of the few modern translations that has attempted to maintain the literary standards of the King James and Revised Standard Versions.

Some scholars charge that the NEB translators did too much rearranging of the text. Nevertheless, it makes good reading.

Living Bible (1971, LB)

As Keylock points out, the Living Bible is not really a translation. It was an attempt made by one man to put the Bible in a language his children could understand. It is easily the most readable contemporary interpretation of the Bible. The reader should not expecting to find scholarship, however, as its author knows neither Hebrew nor Greek. Others have suggested that it is no more readable than the New International Version and that the author's doctrinal views are visible in both the translations and the footnotes. In spite of all this, it does read well and is extremely powerful_particularly in the Old Testament prophets. But one does need a counterbalance_maybe the New American Standard Bible.

Good News Bible (1976, GNB)

Newsweek magazine said the Good News Bible was "useful for new readers, but short on poetry and majesty." It is translated by Southern Baptist Robert Bratcher and is what Keylock calls a "dynamic equivalence" translation. By that he means that the translators did not attempt to make a literal translation. First, they ask what the biblical text really means and then they try to find the equivalent meaning in contemporary English. One has to wonder, however, whether "Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires" is any better than "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness."

New International Version (1979, NIV)

Keylock concludes that the New International Version is "rapidly developing into the closest thing to a standard Bible among evangelical Bible-reading people in America." Many scholars feel that the NIV is a balanced translation. It stays close to the Hebrew and Greek text without becoming stilted as the NASB.

New King James Version (1982, NKJV)

As its title suggests, the New King James Version stays very close to the King James Bible by simply replacing archaic words and phrases with more contemporary expressions. The purpose of the NKJV is to "maintain that lyrical quality which is so highly regarded in the Authorized Version." Scholars generally agree that they accomplished that, but wonder if the translation went far enough in making necessary revisions.

Reader's Digest Bible (1982, RDB)

The Reader's Digest Bible is simply a condensation of the Revised Standard Version by about forty percent. Keylock points out that the strongest criticism has been to the introductions to some of the books, which adopt critical views of the Bible. It is really not a useful translation even for an amateur who is settling in for a serious study of the Bible.

Which One Is For You?

As you can see, you have a wide variety of choice when you go out to purchase a new Bible. If you don't own one at all, and you're only going to buy one Bible, your choice should probably be between the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, or the New King James Version. After that it depends upon what you're looking for. If you want easy readability, the Living Bible is hard to beat. If you want a more literal translation, perhaps the New American Standard Bible is for you.

Whatever you choose, keep in mind that the truth of God can even survive bad translation. But you still should not carelessly accept one version of a controversial scripture. One other point if you are buying a new Bible. The version you will use the most, carry to church, read in bed, make notes in, etc., should be of good enough quality to last a lifetime. Look for one with wide margins so you can make notes in it. After a few years, that personally marked and annotated Bible will be one of your most cherished possessions. Your other translations can be more economically bound.

Bible Study Helps

Frequently, we receive letters asking where a given scripture, sentence, or phrase is to be found in the Bible. "I know it's in there somewhere," they complain. "I just can't find it." Well, they could if they had a concordance.

A complete or exhaustive concordance simply takes every place in the Bible a given word is mentioned and lists it in the phrase in which it is found. If you've heard, for example, that the phrase "Every tub shall sit on its own bottom" is in the Bible, all you have to do is look in your concordance under "tub" and learn that it isn't there after all.

When you go to buy a concordance, you'll find quickly why so many continue to use the King James Version. Most concordances are compiled from the King James Version of

the Bible. The two most popular concordances are Cruden's Complete Concordance and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. Cruden's Concordance is smaller, cheaper, and handier to use. Strong's Concordance is a huge volume, but it also includes a cross-reference to the Greek and Hebrew words used in the Bible.

If you'd rather have a subject index instead of the key word index of the concordance Nave's Topical Bible should fill the bill nicely.

At least as important as a concordance is a Bible handbook. It's easy for the beginning student to get lost. A Bible handbook gives you valuable background and information as well as the story flow of each of the books of the Bible. One of the most economical and easy to use is Halley's Bible Handbook, although others may serve just as well.

People also ask about commentaries, but I must caution that they are rather expensive and of marginal value for most students of the Bible. For years I got by nicely with the Critical & Experimental Commentary and Clarke's Commentary of the Bible. If I could only keep one of them, I would keep the Critical & Experimental. If you can find a second-hand copy of it, at a good price, it's not a bad investment. But you should realize that both these commentaries are sadly out of date. You will find much more useful the Expositors Bible Commentary published by Zondervan Press. It is much more up to date, easy to use, and contains a lot of valuable information—but it's expensive.

I can't speak for everyone, but I do not consult my commentaries nearly as often as I do my International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. After the fundamentals of two or three versions of the Bible, a concordance and a Bible handbook, I have no Bible study aid more helpful than my Bible encyclopedia. Shop carefully. You might find an old set at a bargain. There is a new version on the market now which has replaced the old one and lowered its purchase price. Nevertheless, the old one is still of considerable value. Far down the list of useful books would be an atlas of the Bible and a dictionary of the Bible. I have both but consult them less often. If you don't have a Bible book store nearby, write to Christian Book Distributors, P.O. Box 3687, Peabody, MA 01960 and request their current catalog. Even if you do have a book store nearby, you can probably beat the price through a mail-order book store.

Marking your Bible

Systematic marking of the Bible can be effective in three major ways:

It focuses attention on the scriptures at the time of marking.

It brings your eye back to the scripture easily and quickly in future study.

It makes key scriptures easier to find later.

Some are reluctant to mark books (especially the Bible), but underlined scriptures, good marginal notes, and chain-referenced scriptures may be useful for years to come.

We recommend a Bible with good paper, a little room in the margins, a couple of colored pencils for underlining and a fine-point pen for marginal notes. Beyond these suggested items, all you need is time and a quiet place to get acquainted with the Word of God.

It is not our purpose to give you all the answers or to dogmatize the teachings of the Bible. It is our sole purpose to serve as a guide in helping you discover for yourself the mysteries of God's Word and to help you find the tools to discover meanings that you otherwise might never see. Rather than trying to give all the answers, we will primarily try to help you ask some of the right questions.

Before you begin, be aware of one thing. If you enter on a careful, reverent and persevering study of the Bible, your life will never be the same. You will come to a knowledge of truth you will be unable to ignore. If you will take a few minutes before and after your study to pray about the things you are learning, you will make a start in building a deeper relationship with your God and Savior.

The Bible Can Change Your Life

1. By what standard is a man to live his life? (Deuteronomy 8:1-3; Matthew 4:1-4)
2. If a person's life has gone bad and he wants to turn it around, what can he do? (Psalms 119:9-16)
3. What did King David see as his primary source of understanding, his source of light? (Psalms 119:97-130)
4. What is the source of our freedom? (John 8:32)
5. What is Truth? (John 17:14-17)

Spreading the Word

Read Acts 8:1-40

6. Why did God allow persecution to come upon the early church?
7. Was the "preaching of the Word" limited to the apostles only?
8. Does the physical act of baptism necessarily indicate conversion?
9. Why did God deliberately send Philip to this area only to reach one man?
10. Is it sometimes necessary to have a guide in the study of the Bible?
11. What was the focus of Philip's "Bible study" with the Ethiopian eunuch?
12. What indications do you find of the requirements for and the mode of baptism? (Recommended reading: The Church in Prophecy, What is the Real Gospel? and Is Water Baptism Required for Salvation? These articles are available from our offices, and they are free of charge.)

Perhaps the most important instruction Christ left His disciples is the Great Commission: "Go you therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19,20).

Unfortunately, long after Christ's ascension and long after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the church had essentially not "gone" anywhere. Three thousand people had been baptized in one day as a result of Peter's first inspired sermon. The success of the church in Jerusalem continued, and it just may not have occurred to the apostles and elders that there was any urgency about going to the rest of the world.

This may point out the danger that one might allow his religion to become only a personal pleasure leading to neglect of his responsibility to other people. It's worth asking why the church had made so little progress in going to the world by the time of the eighth chapter of Acts. It may well be that God used persecution as a means of moving the people out into the world. Then each could become a light in various nations and communities, in order that still more people might come to know the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:1-4).

It's also interesting to note that when the persecution arose everyone was scattered from Jerusalem except the apostles (Acts 8:1). We are then told that those that were scattered were the ones that went everywhere preaching the word (verse 4). Any suggestion that only the apostles could have been preaching the gospel is false, according to this scripture. Indeed, we find in verse 5 that Philip, who had previously been ordained as deacon, is preaching the gospel throughout Samaria.

The section in the chapter about Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) is particularly interesting as we find this infamous sorcerer believes the truth and is baptized (verse 13). Yet later on we find Peter saying to him, "You have neither part nor lot in this matter: for your heart is not right in the sight of God" (verse 21). Note well that mere belief and the act of baptism do not necessarily guarantee that a person is a converted Christian.

The eighth chapter of Acts is included in this lesson primarily because of the narrative concerning Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In the first place it is a rather rare occurrence for an angel to appear to an evangelist, and this is of additional interest because Philip is sent, apparently on foot, a distance of at least fifty miles to intercept one man en route from Jerusalem to Africa. Why would God have done this? If we see this as an effort to reach one man who could be influential in carrying the gospel to others in northern Africa then the incident makes sense. If only those who are ordained can preach the gospel to others, then it seems a little strange that this trip would have been made merely to reach one man.

It is worth noting that a man may not necessarily come to a complete understanding of God's will without some kind of guidance or help from others who understand and know the Scriptures (Acts 8:30,31). In this particular case, of course, this man lacked the knowledge of Jesus Christ to combine with the knowledge of the prophet Isaiah in order to come to an understanding of the truth. Notice also that the focus of Philip's message is Jesus. "Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus" (verse 35). All that Philip mentions here regarding the requirements for baptism is a total wholehearted belief (verse 37). It will become evident from other

scriptures, however, that encompassed in the belief is the concept of repentance of sins and an acknowledgement of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Preparation

Read I Peter 3:15

13. Does it seem that God intends His people to be a witness?

14. Is preparation necessary? 15. If so, why? It is important to understand that it is God's intent that all Christians be involved in the promulgation of the gospel and that diligent preparation and study are necessary to be able to give "an answer to him that asketh thee a reason of the hope that is within you in meekness and fear."

A Special Message to Timothy

Read II Timothy 2 and 3

16. Do you see any indication here of the extent of involvement Paul expected of men in the church?

17. Are there any pitfalls to be avoided in the study and discussions of Scripture?

18. Why does Paul equate "study" with being a workman?

19. What is the first line of defense for the Christian against the perilous "last days" of which Paul wrote?

20. Who were Jannes and Jambres, and how do they fit into this account? (Exodus 7:11).

21. Are we likely to have less trouble with those who would attempt to disrupt the church as we approach the end time?

22. What would Timothy have considered "the Holy Scriptures" when he was a child?

23. What does Paul mean by "all scripture"?

24. What is the role of the Scriptures in the life of the man of God?

When Timothy was a child, not one word of the New Testament had been written—it is easy to forget. When we speak of the Scriptures, or "Holy Writ," we are talking about the whole Bible, but not so with Paul and Timothy. For them, the "Holy Scriptures" were strictly the Old Testament. Far from having no use for the Old Testament, Paul and other New Testament writers appeal to it as their fundamental authority. Philip preached Christ from it, and Paul told Timothy that it could make a man "wise unto salvation."

(For additional material on II Timothy, write and ask for cassette tape #EP37.)

Why Parables?

Read Matthew 13:1-23

25. Why did Jesus speak to the multitudes in parables?

26. Is the truth always easy to see and understand?

27. Whose fault was it that the multitudes did not understand?

28. Will all men understand the gospel to the same degree?

29. Will some people not understand the gospel at all?

30. Did the Old Testament prophets fully understand all that God was revealing to them?

It is sobering to read Jesus' response to His disciples' question, "Why speak you unto them in parables?" (verse 11). It is not so disturbing to realize that the things concerning the Kingdom of God are "mysteries" as it is to face the fact that these mysteries are revealed to one man and concealed from another. True, Jesus goes on to explain that "This people's heart is waxed gross...", making it very clear that they had closed their own eyes. But His parables did not reach them. Even His disciples had to have explanations of them from time to time, and they were the ones to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven were revealed.

It is also sobering to realize that many prophets and righteous men had desired to know things that Christ was revealing and had never been privileged to know them (verse 17). It should be especially sobering to anyone who has supposed that he is somehow more righteous than others because he somehow understands the plan of God. The truth is that there are times in which God chooses to reveal different truths to different people, and sometimes it is the sinner who will respond to the revelation of God while the "righteous" feel they don't need it.

Understanding and Spiritual Maturity

Read Isaiah 28:1-13

31. What is the possible symbolism of an excess of wine or strong drink in this chapter? (Isaiah 29:9,10; Revelation 14:8)
32. Is there an indication here of a progression of understanding?
33. Will it be necessary to search out related concepts and put them together in order to get a complete picture?
34. Does it appear that God has deliberately obscured the truth where some men are concerned?
35. Why would He do so? (compare Romans 11:32-36)

The symbolism of drunkenness in this context goes well beyond the literal meaning involving alcoholic spirits and the error that man gets into because of a stupefied brain. It includes the concept of a "spirit of error" or false doctrine with which most of Israel had been afflicted. There is implication that only a few are liberated from that spirit of error, as the prophet cries: "Whom shall He teach knowledge?" He goes on to indicate that some spiritual maturity is necessary in order to progress in the understanding of God (verse 9). All the truth is not found in a simple statement in one place in the Bible. It is necessary to lay one precept on top of another precept in order to gain a complete understanding. A line must be taken from one place and added to a line from another place in order to produce a meaningful concept.

One of the most remarkable truths to be revealed to man is that God Almighty in heaven has blinded some of mankind in order that He need not hold them guilty for what they have done (Romans 11:32-36).

False Prophets

Read Deuteronomy 13:1-5

36. Is it possible to be misled by a prophet?
37. Are miracles and signs of any value in determining the validity of a prophet's message?
38. Why would God allow a deceiver to perform a sign or wonder?
39. What is the false prophet's goal or purpose?

It is quite disturbing to face the concept of "false prophet," perhaps because facing it implies a responsibility on the part of the servant of God to observe, discern and decide. It's so tempting to look for simple formulas to do that for us, but they don't exist.

Perhaps the most important concept from this passage is that men, any men, may lead us astray. The next most important concept is that miracles and signs are not the criteria for determining who is a servant of God.

Who Are Servants of God?

Read Isaiah 8:19, 20

40. What is a criterion for determining who is a servant of God?
- The one dependable standard of comparison for a prophet, dreamer, minister, or apostle is simply the law of God and the testimony of His servants. There are some who hold as a doctrine that God does not reveal everything at one time, but progressively reveals more and more truth down through the ages. This is, of course, true. But how can you know if a given "revelation" is from God or if it only arises from the wanderings of some human mind? One part of the answer is simple enough. Subsequent revelation cannot negate previous revelation. If a so-called "new truth" disagrees with old truths which have been thoroughly substantiated and absolutely proven, then this "new truth" cannot be accepted. Any self-styled prophet must agree with the Scriptures or be rejected, as the following section illustrates.

Who Gets the Gospel?

Read Acts 15:1-41

41. What is the primary issue in this controversy?
42. Was there automatic agreement among the leaders of the church?
43. How would you describe the method for arriving at an understanding in this case?
44. Briefly describe the role of each of the apostles in this discussion.
45. Who makes the "decision" in this dispute?
46. Was it necessary to appeal to Scripture for a ratification of the acts and events described?
47. Was it necessary that the decisions "please" anyone other than James?
48. Just how serious could a disagreement among the apostles become?
49. Was any punitive action taken as a result of disagreement?
50. Were there any "prophets" present at this meeting?

By comparing this chapter with the first two chapters of Galatians, we can conclude that the primary question was whether the gospel might continue to be preached to Gentiles (Galatians 2:5) or whether it could only go to the circumcised. Paul, Peter, and others appeal to events. They point out what God had done through them respectively. But James recognizes an important truth: The Scriptures had to agree (Acts 15:15). Otherwise they only had circumstantial and inconclusive evidence. James aptly points out that the Pharisees' exclusive approach was untenable in the light of Scripture. God had said that the Gentiles (by definition, uncircumcised) might receive the gospel in the latter days.

In summary, any minister, apostle, or prophet must be tested by the Scriptures.

It is also worth noting in verse 19 that the Greek word for "sentence" in the King James Version is translated "judgment" in the Revised Standard Version. The latter translation is probably more accurate.

(For additional reading on this, request our article, "Did Peter have the Primacy?")

Regarding the above questions, it would be instructive at this point to review Matthew 20:20-29 and answer the following questions:

51. Did some of the disciples have a traditional "authoritarian" view of church structure?
52. How would you describe Christ's reaction to the Gentile concept of dominance and rule of one man over another?
53. Was any apostle to "exercise dominion" over the others?

Search the Scriptures

Read Acts 17:1-11

54. What was Paul's source material for his presentation?
55. What was the central thrust of his message?
56. What technique did the Bereans use to test Paul's message?
57. Just what did the writers mean by "the Scriptures"?
58. Is there ever a time when the servant of God is justified in ceasing to search the Scriptures to test a preacher and his message? (I Thessalonians 5:21)

Merely because we have found a preacher to be right on numerous occasions does not mean he will stay right. No man is infallible, and constant vigilance is a continual responsibility for the Christian. This is not to imply that suspicion is called for, but we need to keep men in proper perspective. Only God is infallible.

Whole Armor of God

Read Ephesians 6:10-18

59. Who is the real enemy? Is it some other human being?
60. How many items of the armor of God have to do with the study of the Word of God?

Jesus spoke of a time when false Christs and false prophets would arise and show such great signs and wonders that "if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24). Of course, the person who is deceived doesn't realize that he's deceived. As the wise man wrote, "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes." Therefore, our own conviction that we are right proves absolutely nothing. It can be a little scary when you think about it, but there is a strong defense available to every Christian.

Be aware right from the start that the enemy in this battle is not some other human being, but the spiritual powers of darkness_i.e., Satan the devil. Perhaps the most powerful weapon at our disposal in this battle is the Word of God. Four items included in the armor of God have to do directly with the study of the Bible. The first mentioned is truth; and Jesus said in His prayer for His disciples, "Sanctify them through your truth: your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Next He mentions the "preparation of the gospel of peace" which involves the careful study of the gospel so that any Christian can explain it to the seeker-after-God. He then mentions the shield of faith, and Paul tells us: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). Finally we are told to pick up as our chief weapon "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (verse 17).

The man who is determined to do as the Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily, comparing what he is told with what God says, will be a hard man to deceive. "The Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

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