

## Scripture Teaching 03:

# Study

### Intro hook:

- It's an open secret that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time.
- It's not *actually* a book. More on that in a minute, but every year, more than one hundred million copies are sold.
- Newspapers omit it from their weekly bestsellers list because it would always be number one.
- And yet (in my country) research says 78% of Americans have a Bible, but only 9% read it.
- 84% of millennial Christians check their phone first thing upon waking, but only 6% read Scripture to begin their day.
- We live in a bizarre time; never before in all of church history has the Bible and good teaching on the Bible been so widely available, yet so few of us bother with it.
- The famous pollster George Gallup once quipped that the Bible is “the best-selling, least-read book in America.”<sup>1</sup>
- That's not technically true, but he's naming the shame many of us feel about our relationship to the Bible.
- For many of us, the library of Scripture has yet to become what it was designed to be — a pathway into life with God. Instead, it's a *problem* — an intellectual enigma or a moral stumbling block or yet another item on our “good Christian” to-do list.
- If you feel this way, *you are not alone*.
- And it can be tempting to avoid the Bible altogether or to settle for a surface-level relationship with Scripture.
- But as apprentices of Jesus, regular, thoughtful engagement with Scripture is *essential*.

**Seam:** Far more is at stake than many of us realize.

**Turn:** Turn in your Bibles to Luke 4.

- Let's look at another story of Jesus and Scripture:

### **Luke 4v1-13:**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written [that's a verbal formula Jesus regularly used to quote Scripture]: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" [That's a quote from Deuteronomy 8. Notice: What does Jesus do when he's tempted? He quotes Scripture.]

<sup>5</sup> The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: [Deuteronomy Chapter 6.] 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

<sup>9</sup> The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For [And watch what the devil does] it is written:

"'He will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you carefully;  
they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" [That's Psalm 91.]

Jesus answered, "It is said: [And here comes Jesus with a little exegetical kung fu] 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" [Another quote from Deuteronomy 6.]

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

### **Jesus and the devil:**

- Notice two things from the story:

#### **1. Look at how steeped in Scripture Jesus was:**

- The devil comes to tempt him off the path.
- And what comes out of him? Deuteronomy.
- Jesus' "automatic response" in the language of neuroscience, his gut reaction under

pressure, was to quote Scripture.

- That's how saturated his mind and heart were in the Bible.
- But secondly ...

## **2. Look at how cunning the devil was with Scripture:**

- He quotes Scripture, too. And quite adroitly.
- He just slightly manipulates it to tempt Jesus to avoid the cross.
- No surprise that he's called the "deceiver" by Jesus.
- And we see from the story; his lies are often incredibly sophisticated.
- Can you imagine if Jesus had been deceived?
- We would not be here today.

### **The devil today:**

- And the deceiver does to Jesus' followers what he did to Jesus.
- But unlike Jesus, we often fall for it.
- And ... without *any* help from the devil, *people* do this all the time — they misinterpret Scripture to advance their own agenda.
- Be it sociopolitical or theological or moral — all sorts of horrible things have been done in the name of "the Bible."
- In my country, we look back on the way slave owners in the South manipulated the Bible to claim that slavery was justified.
- We rightly scoff at that. No biblical scholar would ever affirm that reading of the Bible.
- But we *assume* we would never make a mistake like that ...
- But what are our generations' blind spots?

### **Point:**

- And don't think that if you are a "Bible-believing Christian," you are immune.
- Jesus spent much of his time correcting misreadings of the Bible from the Pharisees — who were Bible *scholars*.

- Think of the Sermon on the Mount:
- “You have heard it said”<sup>2</sup> — followed by a quote from the Hebrew Bible and a common misinterpretation of the day.
- “But I say to you ...”<sup>3</sup> — followed by Jesus’ interpretation of the text.
- We need this, too, to be constantly honing our interpretation so that we are not deceived.

**Hinge:** We need the discipline of study.

### **Study:**

- Study is the patient application of our minds and hearts to the process of learning what the text says, what it meant to the original audience, and what it all means for us today.
- It’s the biblical equivalent of what we would call “research.”
- But it’s more: It’s applying our minds *and our hearts* to really *listen* to God with a desire to obey whatever he says.
- But it’s a discipline.
- Because the reality is: Scripture is really hard to read.

**Seam:** Let me name four of the most pressing challenges that require study to navigate.

### **Four challenges:**

#### **1. It was written in another language.**

- Hebrew and Greek and Aramaic.
- And despite what you hear, there is no such thing as a word-for-word translation.
- Languages don’t map perfectly over each other.
- All translation involves interpretation.
- Secondly ...

#### **2. It was written in another time and place.**

- The ancient world was, in some ways, eerily like ours today.
- But in other ways, it was totally alien.

- Reading Scripture is a cross-cultural experience ...
- And in the same way that if you were to travel to another culture (if I were to travel from the U.S. to Indonesia or Ghana), you go with a spirit of humility and curiosity, you ask a lot of questions, you find a guide or a local to explain it all to you, and you recognize that there's just a lot you don't know.
- With the Bible, if you don't understand the cultural background of a text, it can be incredibly easy to misread it.

### **3. It was written by *dozens* of different authors in a variety of genres.**

- This is *key*: The Bible is a *library*, not a book!
- In the ultimate irony, the "Bible" is an unbiblical name that came into use centuries after the canon.
- Bible is from the Latin *biblia*, which means "book."
- *But Scripture is not a book*; it's a collection of all sorts of writings, from books to letters to law codes and many more.
- But it's easy to forget this since it's all put together in one *book*.
- Remember, it wasn't bound together until much later. Gutenberg's printing press made it possible for you and I to carry the entire library around in our bag and YouVersion made it possible to put it all in our front right pocket!
- But originally, it was a library of dozens of scrolls.
- This is *really* important because you come to a library very differently than you read a book, right?
- Very few people sit down on the couch with a good cup of coffee and read a technical manual for a car engine, or take notes and underline key lines in a Sci-Fi thriller, or practice *lectio divina* over a social media caption.
- And different types of literature convey truth in different ways through history or allegory or poetry.
- All sorts of problems come when people don't recognize that Scripture is written in all sorts of genres.
  - The Psalms are poetry.
  - Leviticus is a law code.

- Some scholars argue Jonah is a work of satire.
- Matthew is a biography.
- Ephesians is a letter.
- Revelation is apocalyptic, a genre we don't even *have* anymore.
- The key is to learn how to read Scripture, not *literally*, but *literarily*.
- Meaning, if we want to understand it, we have to read each writing in its genre to discover what the author *intended* to say.
  - For example, when Isaiah says, "The trees of the field will clap their hands,"<sup>4</sup> he's not saying that one day trees will be like in *The Lord of the Rings* and walk around with hands — it's poetry!
  - He's saying that the very creation itself is suffering under the weight of human sin and one day all creation will finally be free of the curse.
  - That's pretty clear when you're reading Isaiah 55. But what about when you're reading Genesis 1 and the six days of creation? Or Revelation and the Beast? Or Paul's language about Jesus coming on the clouds?
  - The question we have to ask is *not*, "Is the Bible true?"
  - As followers of Jesus, we start from the assumption that it is.
  - The question is, "What type of literature am I reading? And how was it intended to be read?"
  - My point is: It's a library. We have to read it on its terms, not ours.
  - And the fourth challenge is:

#### 4. It was written over 1,500 years.

- This library is part of a "canon" that our friends at BibleProject define as "a unified story that leads to Jesus."<sup>5</sup>
- Almost half of the Bible is made up of stories.
- But all those stories and the poetry and letters and legal documents together tell one long, *unified* story.
- But this story was *written* over a period of a millennia and a half and it tells the story of *all of human history*, from creation to recreation.
- If you just pick up your Bible and open to a random page and read — if you don't

understand where you are in the larger story — you can get really confused, really fast.

- For example, a lot of people believe the Bible is full of contradictions.
- But most of them go away the moment you read them in light of the larger story.
- Think of *Star Wars*.
  - In *The Empire Strikes Back* — the best movie ever made — Master Yoda tells Luke, “Don’t go face Vader. Stay and complete your training.” But then in *Return of the Jedi*, he tells Luke he *has* to go face Vader to complete his training.
  - Was Yoda contradicting himself? No.
  - The first command made sense at one point in the story when Luke was young and untrained, but the exact opposite command had to come later in the story when Luke was more mature.
- The Bible is *full* of stuff like that:
- For example, as followers of Jesus, we don’t keep the food laws from the Torah anymore. Not because they were bad or wrong, but because they were for an earlier part in the story.
- In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he says the Torah was like a tutor or a nanny; its role was to grow up the people of God. But now that we are older, the Torah’s commands still hold wisdom for us, but they are no longer binding.
- Think of how you nanny or parent a child.
- When kids are young, you command them to go to bed at 7 pm and sleep for twelve hours. That’s great when you’re two, but if you were to do that at twenty-two, it would be lazy.
- In the same way, some commands in the Old Testament are for all-time — they are repeated by Jesus and the New Testament writers and we follow them today — but others were for a time, for an earlier part in the story.
- Whereas we follow *all* the commands in the New Testament because that’s our chapter in the story.
- But if you don’t understand where you are in the narrative, you will get lost in it.
- Tim Keller says it well:
  - “The reason for our confusion is that we usually read the Bible as a series of disconnected stories, each with a ‘moral’ for how we should live our lives. It is not. Rather, it comprises a single story, telling us how the human race got into its present condition, and how God through Jesus Christ has come and will come to put things right.”<sup>6</sup>

**Hinge:** This is why we need study.

- You can open up a translation of the Bible, read it at face value, with no background, and still get a lot out of it.
- But if you *study* it, it will open itself to you in profound ways.

### **The Brothers K:**

- I'm currently reading *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, widely considered one of the greatest novels of all time.
- But it was written 150 years ago, in *Russian*.
- If I just read my English translation, I will enjoy it, and there are killer paragraphs I will stop and highlight, but a ton of it will go over my head.
- But the more I *study* — what Russia was like 150 years ago, what certain phrases meant at the time, when I learn that the three brothers in the story portray Freud's three parts of a person: the ID, the Ego, and the Superego — the novel begins to open up its genius.
- The Bible is that 10x.
- To quote Tim Mackie, "The writers of the Bible are literary geniuses."
- When you begin to study it, you realize the literary design and level of sophistication in Scripture are extraordinary.
- That's *why* the Bible is very hard to understand at times.
- Most great literature is!
- In fact, it wasn't until I started reading literary fiction that I felt like I finally understood how to read the Bible.
- Unlike a summer blockbuster, literary fiction has layers of meaning. Its meaning isn't always clear, and it's incredibly honest about the pain of life.
- And yet it has the potential to enrich and enlarge your soul.
- Reading Scripture is more like reading *East of Eden* by Steinbeck than watching a superhero movie.

**Seam:** So, do you need a PhD in biblical studies to read the Bible? No. My kids read it every morning. But if we want to give Scripture the effect it was designed for in our spiritual formation, we need to study it.



**Now, let me offer you a few short words of advice on study.**

### **1. Place yourself under gifted, trusted teachers.**

- Teachers play a key role in the Church of Jesus.
- In every generation, there are people who have devoted their lives to better understand Scripture and who are gifted by God to teach.
- One of the best and most important steps you can take is to sit regularly under their teaching.
- This is one of many reasons why it's so important to be a part of a church.
- And what a time to be alive! We have access to teachers, not just in our church, but from all over the world and down through history!
- We can listen to the podcast of a gifted preacher, or take an online course from a biblical scholar, or read a book from a church father.
- But choose carefully who you listen to.
- Look for teachers who are widely respected by the church at-large.
- Look at their theology, but also their way of life.
- Expose yourself to a variety of voices. Don't just listen to the echo chamber of your tribe or tradition.
- There are teachers that emerge in every generation and over the centuries that the wider church essentially says, "This person isn't inerrant, but they are a trustworthy guide to the library of Scripture and the heart of God."
- We would do well to listen.
- Secondly:

### **2. Build a library.**

- If at all possible, begin to collect your own resource books to study from.
  - You can start with a Study Bible.
  - You can add a Bible dictionary.
  - Then start on commentaries, which take you line by line through books of the Bible.

- And so on.
- You may end up with a shelf, a bookcase, or a whole room in your house ...
- But even if it's small, begin to invest in a library to have on hand as you read.
- Third:

### **3. Pick an area of study in your season.**

- Life is long! God willing, you will have decades to study the Scriptures.
- We encourage you to pick an area of study and live there for a few months, or a year, or even longer.
- That could be a book. You could pick a book of the Bible every year and spend twelve months learning more about it.
- Or it could be a biblical theme.
  - Years ago, I was so confused by the Bible's teachings on money. You read Proverbs and it sounds like all godly people end up rich, but then you read Jesus and it can sound at times that all money is bad. I was lost.
  - So over two or three years, I just read everything I could on a biblical theology of money. I asked questions to mentors and friends. I would listen to any teachings I could find on the subject.
  - And God used that time greatly in my formation.
- Finally:

### **4. Don't go it alone.**

- The Bible is communal literature, written *by* and designed to be read *in* community.
- Find guides and traveling companions for the journey.

### **Summary:**

**The key is to intentionally incorporate the discipline of study into your ongoing life with God.**

- Finally, let me offer you a warning: There is a latent danger in study that comes from Jesus himself.
- In John 5, Jesus said to the Pharisees:

- “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” —John 5v39-40
- Jesus is saying it is possible to devote yourself to study and yet be *deformed*, not formed.
- You may know some people who study the Bible obsessively, yet are close-minded, arrogant, and mean-spirited.
- It turns out: There is *no* guarantee that as our knowledge of Scripture increases our spiritual maturity will increase along with it.
- This is why all study must live inside a life of discipleship to Jesus.
- And ...

**Sticky line:** The motivation *must* be love.

### Ending:

- Study often doesn’t *feel* very “spiritual” at all! It feels kind of academic and like you’re in your head more than your heart.
- But it *is* a spiritual discipline *when it’s done for the right motivation* — to know and love God and become more and more like him.
- Toward the end of the Oscar-nominated film *Past Lives* by Celine Song, there’s an incredible scene where the married couple is lying in bed. She’s a Korean immigrant who came to the U.S. as a teenager and ended up years later living in New York City married to a Jewish guy from the Bronx.
- And he’s been learning Korean slowly but surely.
- She asks him why as she speaks perfect English.
- He says:
  - “You never sleep talk in English. You only dream in Korean ... You dream in a language I can’t understand. It’s like there’s this whole place inside you I can’t go.”
- He’s learning Korean because he wants to be able to better understand his wife ... to be closer to her.
- That’s the motivation for study, not academic curiosity or spiritual showmanship, but to better understand God’s first language.

- And like learning a new language, it requires patience, discipline, and a whole lot of tedium, but it's all animated by a desire to love God with all your heart and *mind* and soul.
- As with everything in the Way of Jesus, the ultimate motivation is love.

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## Notes

1. Gibson, David. (2000). 'We Revere the Bible ... We don't Read It.' Washington Post.
2. See Matthew 5 for examples.
3. See Matthew 5 for examples.
4. Isaiah 55v12
5. [bibleproject.com/about](http://bibleproject.com/about)
6. Keller, T. (2009). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*. Penguin Books.