

CHAPTER TWO

NO OTHER BOOK LIKE IT

As we saw in the previous chapter, God saved you by touching the hard, dead core of your spirit and bringing you to life. Being born again is the greatest miracle you will ever experience. It certainly won't be the last supernatural event of your life, but it will remain the most profound. All other spiritual experiences will be overshadowed by this climactic event.

Now that you are spiritually alive in Christ, you have a growing capacity to understand spiritual truth. You can now comprehend spiritual mysteries that once seemed irrelevant, or possibly even ridiculous, to you. God has begun revealing to you that the Bible is a *living* book... not in the sense that it will fetch the newspaper for you or pull up a chair at the kitchen table, but living in the sense that its words penetrate deep into your heart and address specific issues in your life.

“When the believer opens the Bible, it is with the profound and solemn conviction that he is about to listen to the voice of God!”

— Octavius Winslow

Every new Christian should have an increasing hunger to know the content of the Bible. It is written, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). As you study God's Word, you

will find that it refocuses your view of God, of yourself, and of others. In fact, it will begin to shape your entire life. Like a master road map, it will begin directing the steps you take. It will begin changing the attitudes of your heart, the words of your mouth, and the priorities that govern your life.

You will find that this living Word knows more about you than you know about yourself. Not only will it teach you about who you are, but it will also reveal the multi-faceted nature of the God you serve.

Not Magic, but...

Many view the Bible as a list of “do’s and don’ts.” What a sadly distorted view of this magnificent book! The Bible contains the very words of Almighty God. It has been preserved through the centuries as his primary means for communicating to his people. When followers of Christ read the Bible, the Holy Spirit speaks through it and impresses its content on our hearts. God’s Word guides, heals, comforts, confronts, encourages, warns, convicts, and changes us in order to make us like Jesus.

Apart from a diligent diet of God’s Word, true spiritual progress is impossible. Every lasting spiritual breakthrough you ever experience will depend on having your mind renewed with God’s thoughts, which are contained in his Word (Romans 12:2). Do not be overwhelmed at how much you do not know. Do not be concerned about sections that are confusing or difficult for you to understand. At this point, rejoice that you hold in your hand a book made of paper, leather, ink, and glue that—when studied with a humble and teachable heart—comes alive with relevant answers and guidance for your life.

The Bible is your key to becoming what God wants you to be. Not only will it show you what to do (and what not to do), but it will create within you a desire for the very things it requires! Better yet, by hiding God’s word in your heart (Psalm 119:11), you will be empowered to act on those desires—to develop a brand-new set of habits and thoughts that please God.

These last few paragraphs almost sound like I’m describing a magic wand, don’t they? The Bible isn’t magic, but it *is* supernaturally powerful, and we must approach it with an attitude of reverence (Isaiah 66:2). For as we digest its teaching, as we yield our minds and wills to its truth, a mysterious transformation begins to occur—we begin reflecting the image of Jesus Christ.

Last year, more Bibles were sold than any other book in the world. The same was true five years ago. Fifteen years ago. Fifty years ago. In fact, the Bible is the top-selling book of all time, and reaffirms that rank every

year. What book has been translated into over 1,500 languages? The Bible. And why? Because millions have dis-

For Further Study:

Read Psalm 19:7-11.
See how many benefits of Scripture you can find in this passage.

1 It’s 6:15 on a Thursday morning... you’ve just read a verse in your Bible that is totally confusing. What should you do?

- ☐ Assume God is telling you to go back to bed
- ☐ Drink several cups of coffee
- ☐ Ask God for insight and continue with your reading
- ☐ Try to find “Dial-a-Pastor” in your Yellow Pages
- ☐ Search the Internet for a Marvel Comics version of the Scriptures

covered what you will discover as well: that God's Word powerfully transforms the lives of those who come to it hungry for real truth...and ready for lasting change.

What the Bible Says About the Bible

Can you imagine driving in a country that had no traffic laws? It would be a disaster. With nothing but their own instincts to guide them, drivers would be lucky to make it more than a block or two without getting demolished.

Every 16-year-old needs a driver's manual to learn how to survive on the highways. Likewise, every Christian needs the Bible to live the Christian life. It lays out the parameters. It sets the standards. God's Word is to have complete and final authority in every area of your life. You certainly can't steer your life by the signposts of modern culture. All that a Christian thinks, says, and does should be governed by God's Word.

Unless you have grown up in an environment where the Bible was respected and obeyed, you may find these last few statements a bit shocking. You may even be thinking to yourself, *Why? What qualifies the Bible to be the final authority in my life?* It's a good question. As we look for an answer, let's let the Bible speak for itself.

The Bible is inspired by God. *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*

The phrase "God-breathed" means that God, not man, brought this book into existence, even though he used

human instruments. As John Stott has written, "He [God] took minds, pens, hearts, educations, tongues of men and inspired them to write exactly what he wanted to say." No other book can claim divine authorship. Every word from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 is God's

perfect, infallible word to mankind. This is what gives the Bible its authority.

The Bible is "living." *"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).*

Meditate on Psalm

119:105. Without the Bible to guide you, you're blind.

“ By the authority of the Bible we mean that the Bible, as the expression of God's will to us, possesses the right supremely to define what we are to believe and how we are to conduct ourselves.²

”

— Millard Erickson

For Further Study:

According to 2 Peter 1:20-21, what is the origin of Scripture?

For Further Study:

What do the descriptions of God's Word in Jeremiah 23:29 tell you about its power?

Meditate on Luke

21:33. The Bible's truth will never be contradicted by scientific developments, cultural shifts, or archaeological findings. It will stand forever.

Scripture is not some musty historical record of a God on the move in millennia past. It is a living document that speaks to God's people in every generation and culture. Though written thousands of years ago, the Bible's wisdom is timeless. It offers understanding and insight for every dilemma or challenge you will ever face. As you read it, the Holy Spirit will reveal things to you and help you apply it to your daily experience.

It was said of Moses that he "received *living words* to pass on to us" (Acts 7:38). His words, and all the other words in the Bible, still live and speak to us today.

The Bible is penetratingly powerful. *"The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).*

God's Word has no peer. It has no rival. It far surpasses any other piece of literature or body of knowledge. Of all the "double-edged swords" man has devised—the sword of humanistic philosophy, the sword of psychology, the sword of rationalism, or even the sword of Ann Landers—none can pierce and change the heart like the Bible can.

Scripture is sufficient for handling every situation. Nothing else provides the moral guidelines, the practical wisdom, the hope, or the food for man's soul like God's Word. It comforts the widow, convicts the sinner, imparts wisdom for the parent, reconciles husbands and wives, encourages the desperate, heals the sick, and strengthens the weary. God's Word is sharper than *any* double-edged sword and it cuts deeply into every possible condition humanity will ever face.

The Bible is flawless. *"As for God his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless" (Psalm 18:30).*

Scripture contains no errors, and it doesn't contradict itself. Greater than the greatest literature, it is flawless communication from its Author to his audience. God's Word does not capitulate to man's evaluation; rather, it evaluates man. Every part of man. And the assessments it makes are accurate in every detail.

The Bible is above all things. *"I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Psalm 138:2).*

God's Word seeks counsel from no one. It needs no human approval or endorsement. People may disagree with it, hate it, ignore it, or burn it, but that does not jeopardize its authority in the slightest.

Man's opinion of God's Word is totally irrelevant, for it is God, not man, who has elevated Scripture above all things. He has established his Word as central and supreme. God's Word will accomplish all he has decreed (Isaiah 55:11).

2 The only appropriate response to Scripture can be described in one word. What is it? (See Isaiah 66:2)

Though many have challenged and mocked it, God's Word towers over the paltry objections of its challengers. Scripture will abide forever, and not one word of it will pass away. We do well to approach it reverently, submitting to its wisdom and feasting on its wonderful revelations of God.

Studying as if Your Life Depended On It

I live in Virginia Beach, where our local newspaper regularly runs fishing reports. One September it reported an eerie event that occurred off the coast of North Carolina. The story went like this.

A charter boat had been fishing for blue marlin and finally hooked one. A big one. Breaking the calm, one of the reels began making the unmistakable "ziiiiiing" everybody had been waiting for. The first mate sprang into action, coaching the novice fisherman as the marlin slashed and fought frantically to shake itself free.

For two hours the 700-pound fish and the 60-foot boat were locked in a battle of wills off the continental shelf. Finally the giant marlin surfaced, exhausted, and floated quietly on its side. Every ounce of fight was drained from its majestic body. But neither the peaceful blue skies nor the 2,000-foot deep indigo water gave any indication of what was to follow.

The first mate, who had witnessed this drama dozens of times, routinely grabbed the line and began maneuvering the fish into position to haul it aboard. He knew the proper technique was to wrap the line *once* around his gloved hand and forearm. That way, if the marlin gave a sudden jerk, he could loosen his grip and the line would slide harmlessly off his arm. But this time, for some unknown reason, the mate wrapped the line *twice* around his arm.

With an unexpected, violent thrash of its powerful tail, the marlin made a final effort to jerk free. The line knotted around the mate's wrist. In an instant he was yanked overboard. Horrified, the rest of the fishing party watched as the giant fish swam casually down into the depths, pulling the first mate behind him.

For Further Study:

Read Deuteronomy 32:45-47. How did Moses describe God's laws to the people of Israel? Can you see your need to treat Scripture with this same respect?

He was never seen again.

The first mate paid a horrible price for not doing his job the way it should have been done. Landing a panic-stricken, 700-pound fish is not something you should approach carelessly. The same goes for the Christian life. Attempting to live for Christ without a steady diet of God's Word is flirting with serious danger.

How should you approach the Word of God? As if your life depends on it—because it does. I recommend the “RTAMMA” approach: Read, Think, Ask, Memorize, Meditate, and Apply. It's not much of an acronym, but it may help you remember the six steps necessary for getting the most out of Scripture.

Read. You can't benefit from the Bible without reading it. That's pretty obvious. But in order to read it effectively, you've got to slow down and interact with it. Set aside time in your day to read a couple of chapters in an unhurried way, slowly bathing your mind with truth. Turn off the stereo. Stop daydreaming about next week's hunting trip with Uncle Louie or the Grand Opening Sale at the new discount mall. Focus on listening to God speak to you through his Word.

For most of us, early morning is the most practical time to read. This requires going to bed early enough so you can wake up clear-headed and not be comatose. (Notice how God's Word is already affecting your lifestyle?

“ Let us read the Bible reverently and diligently, with an honest determination to believe and practice all we find in it. It is no light matter how we use this book.³ ”

— J.C. Ryle

When it is the passion and priority of your life, it even affects your bedtime!)

Though the entire Bible is God's inspired Word, new Christians should choose their diet carefully. Many start off fast in Genesis, only to die a slow death midway

through Leviticus. One way to add variety is to read a chapter from the historical or prophetic books of the Old Testament, then a chapter from the poetic books (Job, Psalms, or Proverbs), followed by a chapter in the New Testament. An average reader like myself can do all this in 20 minutes. Another option is to go chapter by chapter through a particular book of the Bible.

Systematically working through the Scriptures is vital for spiritual growth. Excuses abound why we can't or don't, but...how can I say this tactfully?...they are all bogus. You always find time to do what's important to you.

My wife Janis jogs almost every day. How does she find

Meditate on

1 Timothy 4:7-8. Your spirit won't naturally enjoy exercise—you need to get it in shape.

the time? She doesn't—she *makes* time, because jogging is important to her. Why do I only jog once or twice a year? Because it is important to me to *avoid* jogging.

Golf, on the other hand, is serious business. I always find several slivers of time each summer to hack around a course. By now you know why: it is important to me. (It is my form of aerobic exercise.) Janis, however, has never

played golf in her life. And she shows no signs of starting any time soon.

If we want to grow as Christians, we need to *make* time to read the Bible faithfully. Otherwise, says author Donald Whitney, “we severely restrict the main flow of God’s sanctifying grace toward us.”⁴

Think. Sometimes I reach the end of a Bible passage and realize I have been thinking about everything under the sun except what I was reading. I have spent times of Bible study planning a fishing trip with my boys, or mentally fine-tuning my backswing, or worse! When this happens (and it inevitably will), it is best to pause for a moment

and ask God to help you focus your thoughts. Then, force your renegade mind to think about what’s on the page.

Ask. When I receive a personal letter, I instinctively want to know, “Who is this from?” The second question that comes to mind is, “What is going on in this person’s life that prompted him or her to write?” Asking questions like these during Bible study will help you immensely in grasping the deeper spiritual truths of a passage. Who is the author? Who is the audience? What is the cultural and historical setting of this particular book? What does the passage tell you about yourself, about God, or about some biblical truth? A good study Bible will answer many of these questions in its introductory or study notes. Other helpful study tools would include a concordance, a Bible dictionary, and a Bible atlas.

Memorize. I am amazed at how many people say they can’t memorize Scripture. These are the folks who can recite verbatim the entire roster of their favorite baseball team, the phone numbers of all their friends, ingredients and measurements for 20 different recipes, or the days, times, and channels of their favorite TV shows. But when it comes to memorizing God’s Word, they are convinced they have the brainpower of pea soup.

3

How often do you read the Bible?

Check one of the boxes below to see how your Bible reading habits compare with those of the average American.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Daily (11%) | ☐ 2–3 times a week (9%) |
| ☐ Weekly (13%) | ☐ 2–3 times a month (6%) |
| ☐ Once a month (8%) | ☐ Occasionally (26%) |
| ☐ Never (22%) | ☐ Can’t say (5%) |

Percentages indicate number of Americans polled who gave each response. Source: George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion In America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1989), p. 40.

Meditate on Psalm

119:97. Does this reflect your feelings about God’s Word?

For Further Study:

What do you think it means to write truth “on the tablet of your heart”? (Proverbs 3:3) How can Scripture memorization accomplish this?

When it comes to memorizing Scripture, the issue is not ability but motivation. Let me illustrate.

One day I was trying to help my children learn some Bible verses. They looked at me as if I had just asked them to go over Niagara Falls in a bathtub. They were convinced it was too hard. So I made each of them a deal. In order to get their allowance, they would need to memorize at least three verses of my choice per week. Otherwise, they would miss out.

Within two or three days they had the verses memorized by heart and could recite them perfectly. Hmmmm... This led me to a couple of conclusions. First, my children *could* handle the brain strain of memorizing Scripture. Second, I was headed toward personal bankruptcy.

I periodically jot verses on a 3 x 5 card and review them throughout the day. Janis will often post verses next to

“ Regardless of how busy we become with all things Christian, we must remember that the most transforming practice available to us is the disciplined intake of Scripture.⁵

— Donald Whitney

the kitchen sink so she can glance at them as she works. This simple discipline is a great way to inscribe God’s Word on your mind and heart.

Meditation. As important as these first four steps are for absorbing God’s Word, nothing packs the spiritual

wallop of meditation. Think carefully about this quote from Charles Spurgeon, the British pastor who captivated thousands with his preaching during the mid-1800s:

Our lives are not nourished merely by listening awhile to this, and then to that, and then to the other part of divine truth. Hearing, reading, marking, and learning, all require inwardly digesting to complete their usefulness, and the inward digesting of the truth lies for the most part in meditating upon it. Why is it that some Christians, although they hear many sermons, make but slow advances in the divine life? Because they neglect their closets, and do not thoughtfully meditate on God’s Word.⁶

Biblical meditation has nothing to do with Buddhist shrines and saffron robes. The word meditation simply means to “talk to oneself,” or to reflect on a thought. Think of a cow repeatedly chewing its cud—that’s what your brain does when you meditate on something.

People meditate all the time without realizing it. They meditate on the paper they are trying to write by

semester's end. They meditate on next week's board meeting or the cost of installing new kitchen cabinets. I've seen people at stoplights jabbering to themselves about something so consuming, they just had to talk about it!

“Remember, it is not hasty reading, but serious meditating upon holy and heavenly truths, that make them prove sweet and profitable to the soul... It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most, that will prove the choicest, sweetest, wisest and strongest Christian.”⁷

— Thomas Brooks

Meditation is work—exhausting work at times. Why? Because your mind tends to be the most undisciplined part of you. Yet God still commands Christians to meditate on his Word. Reflect on the following comment by John Flavel, a Puritan pastor who lived in the 16th century:

We have a deep distaste for meditation. This is not a matter of temperament. The recluse or introvert has no advantage over the active, busy Christian. True meditation is a work to which we are all naturally indisposed, but it is one to which the Holy Spirit prompts those whom he indwells, those who have trusted Christ. To the work of meditation...believers must apply themselves; but first they must recognize it as a duty and understand what it involves.⁸

Think about Scripture. Memorize it. Say it over and over to yourself. Emphasize different parts of a verse and consider the various shades of meaning that surface. For instance, you might meditate on Psalm 1:2 like this:

“But his **delight** is in the law of the Lord...”

Why “delight” and not some other word? What does it mean to delight in something? What do I delight in?

“But his delight is in the **law** of the Lord...”

How could a law be delightful? What’s my attitude toward the law?

“But his delight is in the law of the **Lord**...”

What does the title “Lord” imply? How well do I respond to human authority? To God’s authority?

Ponder the text. Chew on it. Extract from it the priceless insights that feed and inspire your soul. If you wish to benefit from the spiritual discipline of meditation, here are the requirements: a will submitted to God’s Word, a

Meditate on Psalm

1:1-3. What is the man in this passage known for? What are the results?

4 If you were a Hindu, you would meditate in order to empty your mind. How would you describe the goal of Christian meditation?

heart hungry for all God says, and a mind focused on the passage at hand.

Application. The last and often most neglected part of Bible study is application. “Like chewing without swallowing,” writes Donald Whitney, “so meditation is incomplete without some type of application...If we don’t apply those verses to life they won’t be of much more lasting value to us than they are to [a] parrot.”⁹

You can’t grow strong as a Christian unless you learn to apply God’s Word to your life. Application, not just information, should always be

your ultimate objective when studying the Scripture.

One of the most effective ways to apply Scripture is to interact with it in a question-and-answer format. Let’s close by entering into a dialogue with the two verses that [undergird] this entire chapter:

For Further Study: For a description of someone who listens to the Word without applying it, read James 1:22-25.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Does this passage show me something about God?

It sure does. He has personally “breathed” Scripture into being. He has given me a resource that’s practical. And he is concerned about the effect of his Word on me.

Does this passage show me something about myself?

Righteousness doesn’t just happen—I must be trained in it. That training will involve rebuking and correcting. Am I willing to pay that price for righteousness? Am I yielded to Scripture’s teaching and convinced that it is God-breathed? If so, I can look forward to being “equipped for every good work”—what potential! My life isn’t meaningless. God has work for me to do!

Does this passage tell me to stop doing something or start doing something?

It shows me four specific uses for the Bible: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Do I know what these things mean? Am I doing them? This passage also tells me to be *thoroughly* equipped for every good work. What’s my current status? In what areas am I ill-equipped? What parts of Scripture should I be studying

“ If the Bible were the most boring book in the world, dull, uninteresting and seemingly irrelevant, it would still be our duty to study it. If its literary style were awkward and confusing, the duty would remain. We live as human beings under an obligation by divine mandate to study diligently God’s Word. He is our Sovereign, it is his Word and he commands that we study it.¹⁰ ”

— R.C. Sproul

in order to become better equipped?

There are many other questions you could ask yourself after studying these two verses. It takes time and thought, but this active dialogue with Scripture will transform your Bible study from a tedious chore into a daily adventure. Application is essential, for only then is real spiritual growth occurring. Only then is measur-

able change taking place. Only then is God’s Word having the impact on your life he intends for it to have. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What were your impressions of the Bible before you became a Christian?
2. If the Bible is God’s “primary means for communicating to his people” (page 16), what are some other means?
3. Can you recall a time when God’s Word guided you through a specific situation or decision?
4. Has it ever seemed like a particular verse of the Bible “leaped out at you”? Describe your experience to the group.
5. What part of the Bible are you reading currently? When do you read? Do you have a favorite reading spot?
6. Are there tips you could share with the group that have made your own Bible study more consistent or profitable?
7. As a group, pick any passage of Scripture and spend five minutes asking questions about it. (See page 24)
8. Are you willing to live under the authority of Scripture?

RECOMMENDED *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald
READING Whitney (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991)
How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth by Gordon Fee
and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan
Publishing House, 1982)
Knowing Scripture by R.C. Sproul (Downers Grove, IL:
InterVarsity Press, 1977)