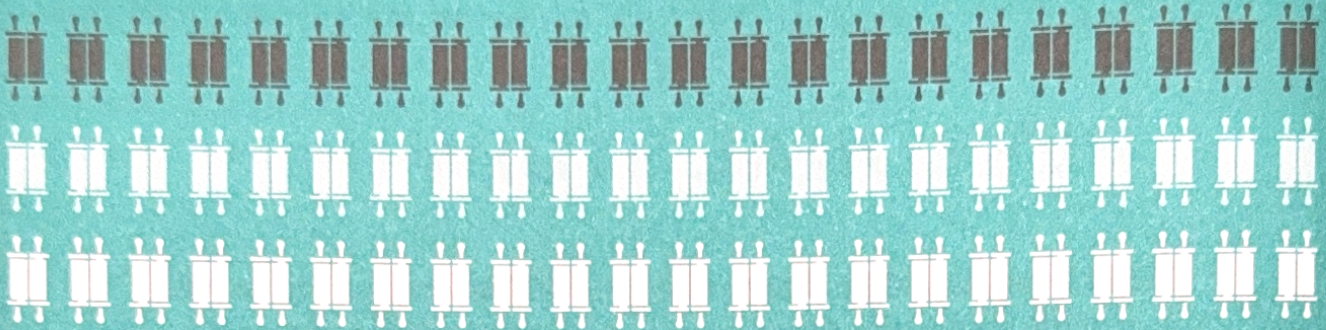


SESSION ONE

PERSONAL STUDY

The evangelist Billy Graham said, “The Bible is not an option; it is a necessity. You cannot grow spiritually strong without it.”² The goal of this personal study section is to help you learn more about what the Bible is and how to study it so you can grow spiritually. *How* you study matters just as much as *what* you study. These personal studies will help you explore the story of the Bible, how to understand its historical context, and why the literary styles in the Bible matter (and how to decipher them). As you work through these exercises, be sure to write down your responses to the questions, as you will be given a few minutes to share your insights at the start of the next session. If you are reading *The Bible, Simplified* alongside this study, first review the introduction and chapters 1–3 of the book.

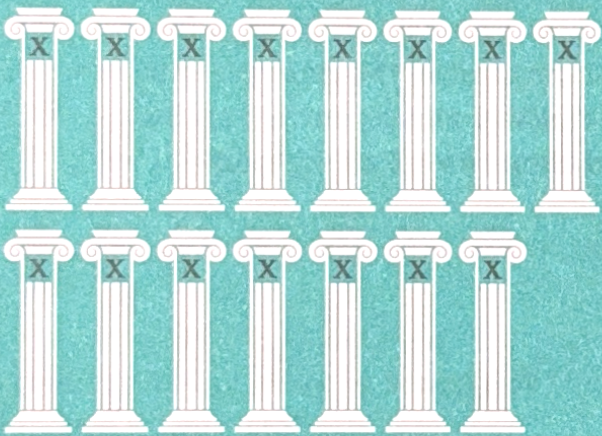
The Bible is a collection of
66 BOOKS



written by
40 (or more) AUTHORS



over a span of
1,500 YEARS



from
3 CONTINENTS



in
3 LANGUAGES



and all make sense in the storyline of Scripture

STUDY 1 | God and His People

Opening the Bible can feel overwhelming. Look at how small that text is! How thin the pages are. How much farther you have to go. However, if you open your Bible with a little knowledge about what it is and how it works, it will feel less daunting.

Our word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which means “the books.”³ This is what the Bible is—a collection of sixty-six books written in narrative, poetry, and prose. The Christian Bible is split into the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the original Hebrew Bible used by the Jewish people. It is comprised of thirty-nine books that were written by twenty-five (or more) authors and spans the time of Creation to around 400 BC. The New Testament is comprised of twenty-seven books penned by nine (or more) authors and primarily spans the first century AD.

The books in the Old and New Testaments *inform* one another. Understanding the Fall in Genesis, when sin entered the world, is crucial for understanding the mission of Jesus in the Gospels, when he came to redeem humanity from sin. Knowing about the enslavement of the Hebrew people in Egypt, as told in the book of Exodus, helps in understanding the freedom Christ brought to all who are enslaved in sin.

One of the major themes in the Bible is God’s desire to have a relationship with us. Scripture is clear about how God feels about his people. For instance, Deuteronomy 7:9 says, “The LORD your God . . . is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations.” Psalm 86:15 says, “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

God’s love for us is a common thread in Scripture. We fall short of that love. We don’t deserve it. Abraham, Moses, and Jacob were all the forefathers of the faith, but they weren’t perfect. The Israelites often strayed. They broke their covenant with God again and again. So God, in his steadfast love, formed a new covenant with us through Jesus.

When you’re reading this big story, Jesus’ death is the climax. His resurrection is the resolution. And this part of the story doesn’t just happen in the Gospels. It started at the very beginning, on page one of Genesis. Jesus is on every page. When we understand this, the Bible is more hopeful, more exciting, and much easier to understand.

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 7:7-9; Psalm 86:15-17; John 3:16-17; Luke 15:11-32

OBSERVATION

- 1 Based on Deuteronomy 7:7-9, Psalm 86:15-17, and John 3:16-17, what is God's love like? How does this make you feel about your relationship with God?
- 2 How does the story in Luke 15:11-32 symbolize the kind of love that God has for all people? How does it capture the overarching theme of God's love in the Bible?
- 3 In this story, the father represents God, while the two sons represent different kinds of people who sin against the Lord (the rebellious and the self-righteous). How would you describe what motivates each of these characters in the story?

CHARACTER	What motivates this character?
THE FATHER	
THE YOUNGER SON	
THE OLDER SON	

How do you see parts of your own nature reflected in the story of the two sons?

APPLICATION

- 4 Using the following scale, how would you rate your knowledge of the Bible?



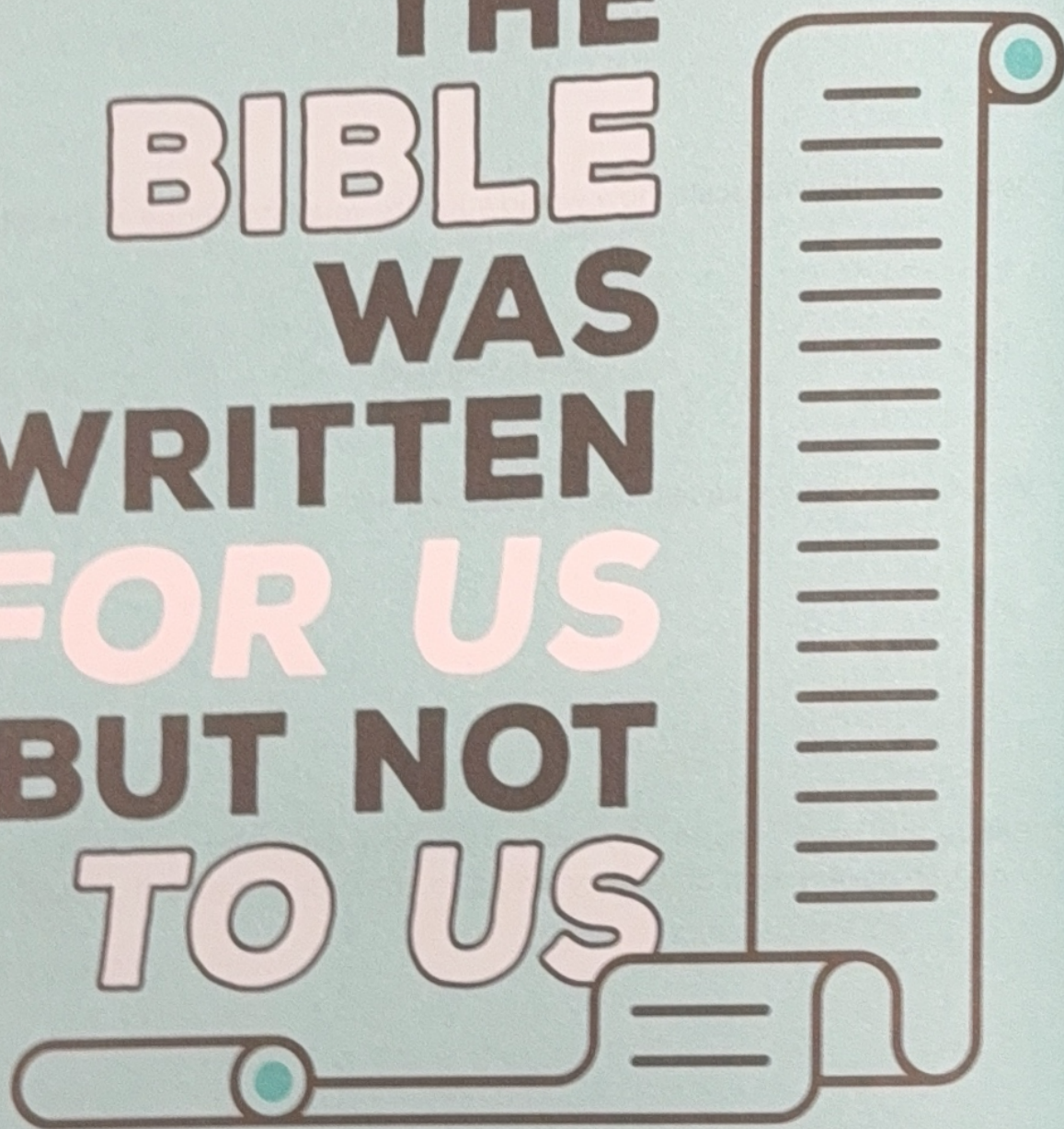
Why did you give yourself this particular rating?

- 5 Before this week's session, how would you have described the Bible to someone who had never heard of it? Why would you have described it that way?

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for the parables, psalms, and stories inside of it. Help me understand you better as I study your Word. Reveal yourself to me so that I may accept your love and deepen my relationship with you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

**THE
BIBLE
WAS
WRITTEN
FOR US
BUT NOT
TO US**



STUDY 2 | Context Is Key

Imagine starting a new TV series on episode four rather than episode one. The main characters are in conflict, but you don't know why. An undercover agent is getting closer to solving the case, but you don't know what the case is. This would be confusing, right? You would wonder what was going on, who the characters were, where they were from, and why they were motivated to do what they were doing. However, if you had started the series by watching episode one, you would know the answers to these questions.

When it comes to the Bible, overlooking historical and cultural context is kind of like starting a TV series halfway through. You miss out on a lot of crucial information that informs the story and helps it make sense. In addition, you might draw incorrect conclusions about what is happening and why. This is inconvenient with a TV show. With the Bible, it's dangerous. Misinterpreting God's Word can have serious consequences. This is why context is key.

The Bible was written *for* us, but not *to* us. This means that the authors of the Bible had a specific audience in mind when they wrote their books. Moses, who is traditionally held to be the author of Genesis, was writing to the Hebrews, who were trying to understand their history as a people group.⁴ David, the author of many of the psalms, was writing personal poetry about his love for God, trust in God, and respect toward God. Paul, in his works, was generally writing to churches in places like Rome, Corinth, and Philippi.

Understanding this context will enrich your experience of the Bible. As you discover *who* wrote *what* to *whom*, and *when* and *why* it was written, you will better understand what God is trying to convey through that particular passage. For example, Jesus often compares himself to a shepherd (see John 10:11). You likely don't have much experience with shepherds and sheep, but Jesus' audience was largely agricultural. He was speaking about their day jobs. They knew what the shepherd did, and they knew the religious elite of the day considered shepherds to be members of an unclean profession.⁵ Jesus was associating himself with this group! It was a snub to the religious elite—something you can only understand if you know the context.

Explore today's readings by practicing a little context work. See how this type of study can reveal even more about God's Word.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:17-30; Exodus 12:1-17; John 1:29

OBSERVATION

- 1 The story in Matthew 26:17-30 takes place on the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Consider this as you answer the following questions.

What took place on the first day of this festival (see verses 17-19)?

What did the participants eat and drink at this event (see verses 26-29)?

- 2 The story in Matthew reveals *what* Jesus and his disciples did but not *why* they did it. For this, you need some context. So now read Exodus 12:1-17.

What does this passage reveal about the Passover, which was the meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples (see verses 1-11)?

What is the significance of the unleavened bread used in this meal (see verse 15)?

Jesus said the wine used at the Passover represented his blood. What significance did blood play in the first Passover for the Israelites (see verses 12-13)?

- 3 The Passover can also help you understand the words of John the Baptist that you read in John 1:29. What is the significance of Jesus being “the Lamb of God”?

APPLICATION

- 4 When has a lack of context caused you to misinterpret something that you read in the Bible? When has context helped you understand Scripture better?

- 5 Below are some resources you can use to explore historical and cultural context. You have thousands of options to choose from at all sorts of price points, so it's up to you which direction to go, but this will give you a basic starter list.⁶

Historical context:

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, edited by Craig S. Keener (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, edited by John H. Walton, et al (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

HarperCollins Bible Commentary, edited by James L. Mays (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

New Bible Commentary, edited by Gordon J. Wenham, et al (Lisle, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994).

Cultural context:

The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians, by N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

A Survey of the Old Testament, by Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023).

Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding, by Lois Tverberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2018).

Simply Jesus, by N. T. Wright (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

Simply Christian, by N. T. Wright (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2021).

Video series and podcasts:

That the World May Know, by Ray Vander Laan, sixteen volumes (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family; Grand Rapids, MI: HarperChristian Resources, 2006–2018).

The Bible Project (bibleproject.com), offers videos, podcasts, articles, and classes to help people experience the Bible in a way that is approachable and transformative.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help me understand what you're communicating in the Bible. Help me to learn how to hear your voice. Give me time and energy to dig into your Word so I can apply it to my life. I know with Scripture there is always more to learn. Amen.

Below are some resources you can use to explore the different genres of writing. You have thousands of options to choose from at all sorts of price points, so it's up to you which direction to go, but this will give you a basic starting point.

For more information on the different genres of writing, visit the links below.

The following resources are available for free or at a low cost. Edited by David S. Jones.

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STUDY 3 | Narrative, Poetry, and Prose

Unless you were an English nerd in school, the phrase “literary style” probably doesn’t excite you. In fact, it may send you right back to your high school English class—a place you would rather *not* return to. But understanding the different literary styles in the Bible isn’t simply another lecture from boring English class. It’s a way to better engage with the Bible, understand it, and relate to the God who inspired it.

As you learned this week, the Bible is written in three literary styles: narrative (or story), poetry, and prose discourse. *Narrative* makes up the majority of the Bible (about 43 percent). Stories are how we best make sense of the world around us. In fact, according to neuroscience, our brains are hardwired to understand our lives and our context through story.⁷ So it just makes sense that so many authors of the Bible used this literary style when writing their books.

Poetry makes up about 33 percent of the Bible. The five books of poetry in the Bible are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. *Prose discourse* makes up about 24 percent. It includes letters (think of the books written by Paul and others in the New Testament) and speeches (like the ones by Moses featured in Deuteronomy).

You are probably drawn to one style over another. Some of us love a good story. Others are suckers for the emotional stuff—poetry that speaks to the deepest parts of us. Some enjoy the debate, discourse, and organization of a logical argument. Yet while you may *prefer* one style, *all* are needed. If the Bible were just one long argument written by Paul, you would probably get bored. If it were just one story after another, you would be missing context and application. And if it were just one epic poem written by David, you would miss the ebb and flow of characters, narrative, and plot.

Some of these styles reflect the audience of the time and what they would understand. While you may feel comfortable with the logic, data, and facts of discourse (something Paul often used for his audience), Jesus’ audience would better comprehend through story, which is why he told so many parables.

Understanding the literary style of the Bible helps us understand the context in which it was written and the purpose it served. Put together, this mix of styles results in a beautiful and complex piece of literature—the depths of which we will never fully be able to explore.

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 2:23-3:12; Judges 6:1-16; Psalm 106:7-12; Hebrews 11:24-29

OBSERVATION

- 1 Sometimes you will find narratives in the Bible that are similar in nature. Read the stories of Moses' calling in Exodus 2:23-3:12 and Gideon's calling in Judges 6:1-16.

What was the situation in Israel in each story (compare Exodus 2:23-25 to Judges 6:1-6)?

What did God say to each man (compare Exodus 3:9-10 to Judges 6:15)?

How did each man react to God's calling (compare Exodus 3:11 to Judges 6:15)?

How did God reply to each man's objection (compare Exodus 3:12 to Judges 6:16)?

- 2 Sometimes you will find poetry in the Bible that recounts a story previously told. Consider Psalm 106:7-12, which refers back to a story told in Exodus 14:1-31. What is the story being retold in this psalm? Why do you think it benefited the

Israelites to have a psalm like this that reminded them of what had happened to their ancestors generations before?

- ③ Now consider Hebrews 11:24–29. What literary style does the author use in this passage? What is his purpose here in referring back to the story of the exodus?

APPLICATION

- ④ Which of the three styles used in the Bible—narrative, poetry, or prose—appeals to you the most? Why does that style especially resonate with you?
- ⑤ After studying each of these different styles, why do you think all three are essential to the Bible?

PRAYER

Lord, your Word is vast, complex, and beautiful. Thank you for inspiring the authors who wrote it to create their texts in so many unique and different ways. Give me a heart for your entire Word—even those parts that seem too difficult and complex at the moment for me to understand. Renew my passion for it daily so I never tire of opening my Bible. Amen.

CONNECT AND DISCUSS

Connect with a fellow group member and discuss some of the key insights from this session. Use any of the following prompts to help guide your discussion.

1

What did you like best from the content in this session, including both the group study and personal study? Why?

2

How has this study encouraged or inspired your exploration of the Bible?

3

How has this study challenged you and your relationship with the Bible?

4

What do you feel most excited to explore in the sessions ahead? Why?

CATCH UP AND READ AHEAD

Use this time to go back and complete any of the study and reflection questions from previous days that you weren't able to finish. Make a note below of any revelations you've had and reflect on any growth or personal insights you've gained.

Read chapters 4-10 in *The Bible, Simplified* before the next group gathering. Use the space below to make note of anything in those chapters that stands out to you, inspires you, or encourages you.

Schedule | Week 2

BEFORE GROUP MEETING	Read chapters 4-10 in <i>The Bible, Simplified</i> Read the Welcome section (page 24)
GROUP MEETING	Discuss the Connect questions Watch the video teaching for session 2 Discuss the questions that follow as a group Do the closing exercise and pray (pages 24-28)
STUDY 1	Complete the personal study (pages 31-33)
STUDY 2	Complete the personal study (pages 35-37)
STUDY 3	Complete the personal study (pages 39-41)
CONNECT AND DISCUSS	Connect with one or two group members Discuss the follow-up questions (page 42)
CATCH UP AND READ AHEAD (before week 3 group meeting)	Read chapters 11-16 in <i>The Bible, Simplified</i> Complete any unfinished studies (page 43)