

INTRODUCTION

This book is grounded in five main theological truths about the Bible. We'll look at these five truths in turn:

1. The Bible is *God speaking*: the “inspiration” of the Bible
2. The Bible is *powerful*: the “authority” of the Bible
3. The Bible is *understandable*: the “perspicuity” of the Bible
4. The Bible is *literary*: the “nature” of the Bible as literature
5. The Bible is *one story*: the “unity” of the Bible, with one main author

My goal is to take these basic truths about the Bible and show how they apply to Bible study—both to what it is and to how we should do it. We'll take some “big-picture” looks at the theology of the Bible, but we'll get very practical, too, by the end of the book.

Along the way, you'll be exposed to a lot of stories and quotations from real students and youth leaders who have gotten excited about real Bible study, and have also faced the real challenges and struggles connected with making Bible study “work” for young people. I hope these are very encouraging and enlightening to you; they certainly have been to me!

Before we get into it, let me just attest that I am not an expert at this! I began writing this book during my time as a high school pastor at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Now, as a college pastor at the same church, I'm still learning every day how to help the students I lead study the Bible in the best way possible. We're still figuring it out! But my core conviction is that God—the mighty Creator God of the universe—speaks to young people (and old people) most fundamentally through his Word. If that's true, then we need to figure out how to study his Word better. We want to hear God speak. There is no voice more important for students to hear.

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“If it is true that the Bible tells us about God, not least what kind of God he is, it is no less true that unless God really is that sort of God, it is impossible to appreciate the Bible for what it is. To approach the Bible correctly it is important to know something of the God who stands behind it.”

—D. A. CARSON¹

HAVE YOU BEEN THERE?

Ryan had heard it since he was a little kid. “The Bible is the inspired Word of God.” It had never meant very much to him—an answer to a theological trivia question in Sunday school, nothing more. After all, we refer to lots of things as “inspired,” right? We talk about artists who have a moment of inspiration, and then go on to create beautiful works of art. Athletes, after a great game, have been known to say things like

this: “I was just really inspired by what Coach said to the team at halftime in the locker room.” Ryan had always had a vague impression that the inspiration of the Bible must be slightly different from what happens to an artist or an athlete, but he wasn’t quite sure how to work it out. Did it mean that the Bible is special in some way? Did it mean that God made the Bible magically appear? Could it really mean that God still speaks to people today through a several-thousand-year-old book?

INSPIRATION

The Bible. Sixty-six books. Forty different authors. Around 1,500 years in production. And this is all together in one volume. Kind of amazing, isn’t it? Some of these facts have served as bases for many attacks on the Bible and its reliability. How can we really believe that all those different authors—over more than a thousand years—could put together something that has any relevance for us today? The simple answer is this: God is the author of the Bible. Yes, there are human authors who composed the books of the Bible, but there is ultimately one main author: God.

We can say that God is the author of the Bible because of the Christian doctrine of *inspiration*. This doctrine teaches that the human authors of the Bible were inspired by God the Holy Spirit to write exactly the words that God intended them to write. In Scripture, the word “inspiration” communicates the sense that these human authors were “carried along” by the Holy Spirit as they wrote (2 Peter 1:21), and that the Holy Spirit “breathed” into them in a way that ensured that their words would be God’s words. Because of inspiration, we can say that God is the author of the Bible. The Bible is God speaking.

Listen to the way the apostle Paul summarizes the biblical truth of inspiration: “All Scripture is breathed out by God

and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). He makes a really incredible statement, doesn’t he? All Scripture—all the books written by various human authors over hundreds of years—is “breathed out” by God. That is what the Bible teaches. Now, let’s not get inspiration mixed up with dictation. Some of you may have a picture in your minds of God somehow taking control of Moses’ arm and guiding every stroke of his pen by force while Moses took a nap. That is not what we’re talking about here! The human authors wrote from their own experience, personalities, and situations—as we’ll see later in this book when we talk about literary genres. But God in his power and wisdom guided their writing perfectly and carefully so as to lead them to include exactly what he wanted in the book that would guide his people for the rest of human history. His leading was sure, intentional, and perfect, even while they wrote out of their unique personalities and situations. That is an amazing work of an incredibly wise and powerful God, and it makes Scripture absolutely unique; there is no book like it in the world, and there never will be!

AN ILLUSTRATION OF INSPIRATION

I have a wonderful assistant who helps me in many ways with the youth and student ministry at our church. Sometimes I ask her to do things. (OK, I ask her to do things a lot!) Let’s say that I ask her to make a reservation for our youth group at a camp. I might call her on the phone to ask her to do that. I might walk over to her desk and ask her in person. I might send her an e-mail. Now, let’s say I choose the last option: I send her an e-mail, asking her to make a reservation at a camp. Then, a couple of days later, I ask her whether she’s made the reservation, and she says, “No, of course not. All I got was an

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e-mail from you.” Would that be right? No, of course not. Why? Because, for my assistant, an e-mail instruction is as good as a face-to-face instruction. This sounds weird, but where my e-mail speaks, I speak! That is what we are saying about the Bible. Where the Bible speaks, God speaks. Period. So, what does that mean for how we view the Bible?

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE SEE THE BIBLE

If this fundamental truth of inspiration is indeed a truth, then we need to affirm that *everything* in the Bible is true. God doesn’t mess up. In other words, we can read any passage in the Bible and know that it is accurate and correct in what it portrays. The Bible is reliable. This belief does call for a certain amount of faith. We are called to believe in a God who is powerful enough to carefully oversee the writing of thousands and thousands of words—using human authors to accomplish his great purpose of communication with the people he created.

There is another fundamental truth that comes from the doctrine of inspiration, or the idea that the Bible is God speaking. This is the truth of “authorial intent.” In other words, if God is the author of the Bible, then the Bible *means* something. And its ultimate meaning is what God—the author—*intended* it to mean. This concept is going to fly in the face of a lot of what you are probably being taught in your literature classes today. Some of you have heard of “reader response theory,” the idea that the reader of a text is the one who really determines what the text means. That concept has worked its way into a lot of Bible studies. You’ll know that this idea is at play when you hear someone ask the question, “What does this Bible passage mean *to you*?” Now, that’s not always a bad question, but it should never be the *first* question that we ask in Bible

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study. Because the Bible is God speaking—because God is the ultimate author of the Bible—the first question we should always ask is, “What does this Bible passage mean—and what does God intend it to mean?” Because God is the author of the Bible, and because he does intend the words to mean something specific, that question is answerable for us in the context of Bible study, although it may require hard work!

Another way to communicate this idea is through this important statement about Scripture: “The Bible can’t mean something that it *never* meant.” The Bible’s meaning doesn’t change based on time, audience, or situation. It meant something to its original audience, and that original meaning still guides how we interpret the Bible today. The Bible teaches “timeless theological truths”—realities about God that will never change, even while they are grounded in the historical events and situations of the human biblical authors. The God we hear from today, through Scripture, is the same God who spoke to and led his people so many years ago.

That leads us to a third implication of the doctrine of inspiration. If the Bible is God speaking, then everything in the Bible is there *on purpose*. I’m sure some of you have at some point in your lives (maybe in the midst of getting bogged down in the book of Leviticus in your personal devotions) wondered whether parts of the Bible just “slipped through the cracks.” Did God really mean for this passage to be in the Bible? Is this really important? What we are saying, when we affirm that the Bible is God speaking, is that the *entire* Bible is God speaking. It’s all there on purpose, for our benefit, and according to the will of God. It is all, therefore, worth reading, studying, and understanding. God, the ultimate author of Scripture, put the Bible together in a purposeful way.

Finally, if the Bible is God speaking, then we need to realize that the Bible is *still speaking today*. The doctrine of inspiration

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leads us to see the Bible as completely different from any other book in the entire world. It is alive! We can actually hear God's voice in the words of the Bible. Scripture has the ability to touch us and affect us in powerful ways—in ways that no other book can. Listen to how the author of Hebrews describes the living nature of Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). This is no ordinary book. The Bible is God speaking. And God—the living God of the universe—still speaks powerfully through his written Word today.

So, before we get into some implications of inspiration for Bible study, let's summarize what we've been saying here. God is the author of the Bible; the Bible is therefore God speaking. We can even say this in a slightly stronger way: where the Bible speaks, God speaks. This means that the Bible is true. It has a discernible meaning (based on its author's intent). It is intentionally put together by God. And it is still alive and powerful, since God is still speaking through it to his people today.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE STUDY THE BIBLE

The Nature of Bible Study: It Is Personal

A lot of you have been to a lot of Bible studies. Some of you have not enjoyed them. You can be honest if that's you! That's been me at many points. Bible studies can be dry, formal, even boring. Sometimes, I think, that's what drives students away from real Bible study toward meetings that are a little more focused on fellowship, sharing, and accountability. But could it be that we are reacting against—not Bible study itself—but a certain *nature* of some Bible studies?

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Bible studies that are boring have missed an important point. Because of the doctrine of inspiration that we've just been talking about (the fact that the Bible is God speaking), Bible studies should be fundamentally *personal* even more than they are *propositional*. That's a fancy way to say that Bible studies shouldn't be just about getting through a set of questions, or learning some facts about a passage. They should be about personally engaging the God who talks to us through his Word! Bible studies that stop at propositions and don't move people closer to the personal God of the universe have completely missed their point.

Imagine, for example, that a girl or guy you really like at school writes you a letter. You stuff it in your pocket during class, and save it to read later when you're safely in your room. Finally the day is over, and you rush home, close the door to your room, and unfold the letter. Imagine reading that letter and just focusing on the facts in an "academic" way. "OK," you say to yourself, "this is a letter from my crush to me, focusing on this person's romantic interest in me and admiration for some specific qualities about my personality and appearance." I don't think so. You're going to *pore* over that letter, aren't you? You're going to analyze every line—not just to get the facts, but to feel the meaning and the emotion behind the words. You're going to let the words affect you personally; you understand that the letter is coming from the hands of a person you're crazy about. There is nothing boring about reading that letter!

That's how our Bible study should be. We don't come together around God's Word to get a list of facts or a stale summary of a passage. We come together around God's Word to let the *personal* God of the universe speak *personally* into our lives. Bible study should be intensely personal, because we know that a person—God himself—is behind the words that we read and study together. And the only way this can

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happen is if we are first part of the community of God. The Bible speaks to us personally as we are corporately invested in Christ's community, the church. That will be part of my argument for why Bible study is so important!

“Going to church, listening to sermons, singing songs in worship, and personal Bible reading were all very formative and important to me, but in a student Bible study (particularly *student-led* Bible studies), I often had trouble seeing their worth. As a rather introverted person, hanging out with people was always a sort of a struggle, but finding value in *discussion* about the Bible was also difficult. What could a group of high schoolers possibly discover in this text that would not only overcome the awkwardness of learning how to discuss ideas/topics/themes but would also be personal enough to allow us to be vulnerable and to apply the Scripture to our lives?”

—Mike Solis (student, Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois)

We do need to clarify this a little bit and note that by *personal* we do not mean “relative.” In other words, the personal nature of Bible study does not take away the reality of authorial intent—that a Bible passage does have a meaning that is determined by its author, and ultimately the God who inspired the human author. “Personal” Bible study does not mean Bible study that turns directly to individual experience, asking only, “What does this mean to me?” The personal nature comes *through* the discovery of the true meaning of Scripture. Personal Bible study is discovering, in the context of Bible study, the meaning of a Bible passage, and then allowing that

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truth to speak directly to your own mind, heart, and life. It is a commitment to not stop at academic discovery, but to continue into personal application and reception. It is finding the truths of the Scripture and letting them change your life.

To illustrate this, let's go back to the story of the love letter from your crush. The personal nature of that letter doesn't mean that you make that letter mean whatever you want it to mean! In fact, if you really care about this person, your goal in reading it will be to figure out *exactly* what that letter means. What does your crush mean by "interested"? What was the intention behind that scary word, "unsure"? If anything, the personal nature of a love letter makes you even more determined to understand the intended meaning absolutely correctly.

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN BIBLE STUDY

All this discussion about the personal nature of Bible study points us to the fact that this is not a dead exercise. A Bible study is not like a book club, which is made up of a group of humans alone, discussing a book written by a human author. Bible study is not dead because the Holy Spirit—the third person of the Trinity—is intimately involved. That is the wonder, and the supernatural nature, of a true Bible study. It is a group of humans, yes, but as they dig into God's inspired Word, the Holy Spirit is active, making the Word do its work of confrontation, conviction, and application. Bible study is a supernatural, "living" kind of exercise, because the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in it.

We can't miss this! The reason that studying the Bible is different from studying any other book is that the Bible was composed by human authors who were *inspired by the Holy Spirit*. The reason that studying the Bible today is really about

hearing God's voice is that *the Holy Spirit still speaks to people today through the Bible*. This means that, when we correctly interpret what the Bible is saying, we participate in allowing the opportunity for God's Holy Spirit to communicate to people in a powerful, true, real, and relevant way. It is so important for us to understand the study of the Bible this way. We need to "get it right," because only then can we understand the Holy Spirit in the way he speaks to God's people!

The Goal of Bible Study: To Hear God Speak

You can see that we're definitely approaching the final goal of Bible study. If the Bible is God speaking, then the goal of Bible study, ultimately, is to hear God speak as clearly as possible. It is not just to get the right answers or to learn things that are true. The goal of Bible study should ultimately be hearing God talk to us through his written and inspired Word, by the power of his Holy Spirit, who is actively working through the Bible.

Let's go back to the story about the love letter from your crush at school. We pointed out already that you wouldn't read that letter just to get propositional truths out of it, or in order to put together a concise summary of its content. You would read it personally, conscious of the fact that it was written to you by a special person. But the personal aspect of that letter would not mean you would read it any less carefully. If anything, it would cause you to read it *more* carefully! You wouldn't want to miss a single word. You'd probably read it a few times, just to make sure you had grasped the main point, and really understood what it was saying. The personal nature of that letter would cause you to give great concentration to getting it right, so that you could accurately understand what that person was trying to communicate to you.

This idea can be applied to Bible study as well. A group of students studying the Bible together should be very focused on “getting it right.” They should be absolutely sure that they’ve made their way to the main point of a passage. But this isn’t so they can get a grade, pass a test, or check a box that says “Bible study: Completed.” They should do those things in a Bible study—work hard to get it right, find the main point, discover the right application—so that they can hear God speak to them clearly and personally through his inspired written Word. And that is never boring.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of “getting it right” in a Bible study. If the goal of Bible study is to hear God speak, then we should be doing everything we can to correctly understand any passage in the Bible so that we don’t *think* we hear God saying something he’s really not saying! This does not make Bible study a purely academic exercise, but it does mean that true Bible study takes hard and careful work. We’ll need to consider things such as context, key words, repeated phrases, structure, and parts of speech. We’ll talk a lot more about this later. For now, we’ll just say this: to hear God speak, we need to make sure we’re getting it right. As we said before, the Bible can never mean something that it never meant.

The Attitude of Bible Study: Humility

We approach written material with a lot of different attitudes. In the grocery store, as you glance at the latest celebrity scandal plastered on the cover of a magazine, you may have an attitude of disgust (hopefully not fascination). When you scan your history textbook as you review for a test, you have a kind of “utilitarian” attitude; you are focusing in on the key points you need to review, and using the textbook to help you master those specific topics. When you read a novel—just for fun, not for an assignment—you probably have the attitude that

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is closest to the one we should have when studying the Bible; you take in the story and enjoy it. And yet, in Bible study, the primary attitude we ought to have is one of *humility*. If the Bible really is God speaking to us, then our internal monologue as we approach his Word should be, “Lord, I’m listening. Teach me, and help me to obey.” We read it to understand it, know it, and enjoy it. Of course, we can be guided in this study by the many great pastors and theologians who have gone before us (and we should!), but every Christian can also look at the Bible for himself or herself and learn what it teaches. But we do so as we place ourselves *under* its authority. We don’t stand over it; we allow the Bible to rule and guide our lives and hearts.

A lot of people don’t approach the Bible with that attitude. Some people are disgusted by certain parts of the Bible; they don’t think that God should punish sin or send people to hell. Some people use the Bible the way you use your history textbook: they take verses out of context to win an argument or back up a political position. Other people genuinely enjoy reading the Bible, but they aren’t submitting to its words; they just read it as they’d read a novel. God’s people are called to study his Word with an attitude of humility. We sit under it; we don’t stand over it.

This attitude toward Bible study is summarized best by Isaiah the prophet. Listen to God’s words, as recorded by Isaiah: “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). When was the last time you had this picture in your head when you thought about a teenage Bible study—a few kids, huddled together in a living room, *trembling* together at God’s Word as they humbly listen to it and apply it to their lives? It probably isn’t the first picture that popped into your head when you started reading this book. And yet, that’s really what Bible study is all about.