

How to Get the Most Out of Bible Study

Leo R. Van Dolson

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Chapter 1

Listen—God’s on the Line

For whom was the Bible written? It was written for you—that’s right—*you!* It is not just for the pious intellectual or the Bible scholar who can read God’s Word in the original languages, although it is, of course, for each of them as well as for you. But God meant for the Bible to be read and understood by everyone.

One of our problems in this scientific age is that we have been conditioned to think that only the trained expert “really understands.” Or maybe that isn’t the real problem—maybe it’s only an excuse. Maybe we’ve just become used to letting the experts and the scientists do our thinking for us. Maybe we’re just too used to being spoon-fed everything. It’s easier that way! Consequently many of us shy away from anything that demands extra effort. We’d rather push a button.

And that’s what seems to be happening with a large number of people who try to study the Bible too. Since it takes effort, they give up without finding the blessing that God has placed there for those willing to discover personally the value and experience the joy of in-depth Bible study.

Let’s look in on four individuals who regard themselves as Christians and find out how each relates to the challenge and opportunity of personal Bible study.

Charlie. After a long, hard day Charlie sat down for a few minutes to study his Bible. It was quite late at night, and Charlie was worn out from his activities—particularly his school homework. He found it almost impossible to focus his mind on the words he was reading, even though he was a “straight-A” student. If the truth were known, his intellectual accomplishments sometimes got in his way as he attempted to study the Bible. You see, Charlie enjoyed philosophy and the study of contemporary theology. The subtle doubts that such study raised made it difficult for him to accept the Bible at face value. Besides, he had already determined pretty much what his goals and values would be in life, and consequently he found it difficult to accept anything that in any way contradicted these predispositions.

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Shelley. Not far away, but much earlier that same day, Shelley picked up her Bible and began to read too. Shelley liked reading her Bible. She was convinced that it was the thing to do. Yet, to be truthful, Shelley was both shallow and superficial in her approach to religion. She loved the promises of the Bible but shied away from those passages which indicate that Christian faith grows through trials. The last thing Shelley wanted was trouble—trouble of any kind. To her, religion was great as long as it fitted into her selfish purposes. Since what she was reading didn't fill this bill, she snapped her Bible shut and turned on the television.

Dizzy. This young man got a lot out of reading the Bible when he took the time. But Dizzy was easily distracted. After reading for a few minutes, he'd begin to think about the run-in he had with his boss last Friday or that he really should go out and mow the lawn. The porch needed painting, and he was worried about Ellen's headaches. As these thoughts began to crowd out the import of what he was studying, Dizzy carefully marked his place, laid the Bible on the end table, and went out to wash the family car.

Reddy. Dizzy's next-door neighbor, Reddy, got up that morning while the rest of the family was still asleep. Experience had taught him that he needed these early, quiet hours for Bible study before going to school. Whenever he neglected to do this, things just didn't seem to go right.

After a period of prayer in which he asked the Lord to help him understand what he was about to read, he opened his Bible to the place where he had left off the day before. Soon he was totally immersed in the thrill of personal discovery. Joy and peace filled his heart as he gulped down great drafts from the fountain of the water of life.

After a quiet period of meditation and study Reddy felt a surge of courage run through him. What a great day this would be! He was happy to be alive and particularly pleased that as a son of God he could represent his Lord before his schoolmates and friends. He closed his Bible with the prayer that God would help him share what he had just learned with someone who particularly needed that which God had given him for this day.

Parable of the Sower. Any resemblance in the responses described above to Christ's parable of the sower is purely intentional. As we

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thoughtfully analyze Jesus' fascinating story, we discover that those who are exposed to the Word of God fall into four categories:

1. The careless, prejudiced, and indifferent (wayside hearers).
2. Those who are shallow and superficial (stony-ground hearers).
3. The easily distracted (thorny-ground hearers).
4. Those who are most receptive (good-ground hearers).

Charlie's case shows that the careless and indifferent approach to Bible study is actually worse than not studying at all. The wayside hearers who have such an attitude seem to approach their occasional contact with the Scriptures with this motto: "Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed." Prejudice, and preconceptions all stand in the way of actually understanding truth.

Shallow and superficial Shelley is really too self-interested to gain much from her study. She represents those who trust in themselves and their own good works to "get by" spiritually. They have no real intention of ever letting themselves be molded into the image of Jesus. The Bible is not simply a tranquilizing agent. It does impart peace—but by showing us how to overcome those things that destroy our peace.

If Dizzy were a girl, we'd call her a Martha. The cares of the world interfere with the task of gaining Christian victory. Martha represents those independent people who enjoy doing everything themselves. They're uncomfortable when they learn that it's impossible for humans in and of themselves to accomplish what is essential in salvation—that their only hope is in depending on what Jesus has already done for them, and continues to do in their lives.

There's nothing wrong with bedtime snacks, providing it's the Bible that you're snacking on. But too many, like Dizzy in our parable, use the Bible *only* for a quick bedtime snack and neglect putting it to the use for which it was intended—as our daily bread.

But we're all so busy. How can we actually find time for serious Bible study? Stop and think about what you actually do in one day's time. Is it all really essential? What would happen if we cut out the nonessentials? Wouldn't there then be time to accomplish everything that we know demands priority attention? Someone has said, "Life stripped to its essentials is freedom." Maybe that's one reason Jesus counseled, "The truth will make you free." John 8:32. Set aside a specific amount of time each day for Bible study, and you'll find that this promise does work.

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Good-ground hearers, like Reddy, not only are honest with themselves and earnestly interested in discovering God's will for their lives, but they've trained themselves to get the most out of the time they regularly set aside for Bible study. What is their secret? How can we grow in our ability to get the "meat" (solid food) rather than just the "milk" out of God's Word? Meat, of course, must be chewed and is harder to digest; but it takes an understanding of strong doctrine for us to become strong Christians.

Where Do We Begin? Obviously we begin with exposure to the Word. The more we develop the study habit, the easier it becomes to study. The first essential step, after praying that the Holy Spirit will guide and direct, is reading. Naturally there's a big difference between casual and careful reading. One problem with much of our Bible study is that we are so familiar with the *words* that we skim over them without giving enough thought to the *Word*—or what the words are actually trying to tell us.

John White, a former missionary in Latin America, reports that Roman Catholics and communists who study the Bible for themselves find it easier to grasp what a Bible passage is actually saying than do evangelicals. He attributes this unexpected fact to the mental blocks with which most evangelicals approach Bible study. *They think they already know.*

One way to help get around this problem of preconceived opinions about a Bible passage is to read it in a different version or, if possible, in a different language.

When you do this, it's surprising how fresh and meaningful the old words become. You begin to see concepts that you had never thought of before in connection with that passage, and you gain new insights into its value as applied to your own everyday problems and needs.

Willard Harley, Jr., in his impressive little volume entitled *Get Growing, Christian* concludes that "a Christian should be able to outline every book of the Bible from memory. He should be able to identify major personalities in the Bible and describe their contributions. He should be able to trace the life of Jesus Christ and outline the content of His sermons. Many Christians feel that such knowledge is reserved for pastors and theologians, but the Bible was written for everyone, and its content should be thoroughly absorbed by every Christian." That's quite a challenge, isn't it?

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Putting What We Learn to Practical Use. Of course it's not enough to understand fully what God wants us to know. Unless we, by His grace and power, put to work in our personal lives those precious truths He has revealed as a result of careful study and exciting discovery, we're probably better off if we never become involved in the search for God's will.

Second Timothy 3:16, 17 lists the reasons why God's Word is valuable to us. Scripture is given for (1) doctrine, (2) reproof, (3) correction, and (4) instruction in righteousness. And the ultimate objective is "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." R.S.V.

You see, you're not just studying another textbook when you inductively approach the Bible. You're letting God tell you what He thinks is most important for you to learn about your life now and in the future.

He has much to tell you that's important and interesting.

Listen—won't you? God's on the line.