

“The Disciplines of Devotion series is a timely and valuable resource for women who long to grow in spiritual depth and maturity. With biblical insight and godly wisdom, each volume offers practical help for cultivating habits that lead us closer to Christ. I’m thankful for this series and eager to see how God will use it to strengthen and encourage the hearts of women.”

Melissa B. Kruger, author; Vice President of
Discipleship Programming, The Gospel Coalition

“These gospel-centered primers are saturated with scriptures that nourish the delight of knowing Christ. The accessible content, coupled with practical ideas and heart-oriented application questions, invites the reader to draw near to God through cultivating Spirit-empowered holy habits.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries,
Presbyterian Church in America; coauthor, *Transformed:
Life-Taker to Life-Giver* and *Life-Giving Leadership*

Bible Study

Disciplines of Devotion

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Bible Study

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Bible Study

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For my Tuesday Bible study sisters.

Contents

Series Preface *ix*

- 1 What Is Bible Study? *1*
 - 2 What Are the Blessings of Bible Study? *11*
 - 3 A Plan for Study *23*
 - 4 A Foundation for Study *31*
 - 5 A Method for Study *39*
- Conclusion *49*

Recommended Resources *53*

Series Preface

ON A CHILLY JANUARY MORNING, two friends and I huddled around a coffee shop table to share life updates and prayer requests. One friend reflected on the previous year with frustration: “I feel like I didn’t accomplish anything.” The other friend and I, surprised by her assessment, rattled off a long list of worthwhile things she had done. But she persisted. It wasn’t that she truly believed she had accomplished nothing; it was that the things she had done weren’t the things she had hoped to do. Things she valued had been pushed aside by what seemed more urgent in the moment.

I could say the same, and I bet you could too. As women living in a do-it-all culture, we tend to

have a lot on our plates. We juggle work, husbands, children, aging parents, and friends. We manage households, serve in the church, and volunteer in the community. Year after year, many of our goals and good intentions get pushed to the back burner—especially when it comes to spiritual growth.

We want to grow in relationship with the Lord. We want to know the Bible better, fight sin, and establish a consistent prayer life. But amid all the things we have to do, we often miss the one thing we really need. In Psalm 27:4 David said,

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

As king, David surely had many things to do and many things he might have asked of God. But he knew that what he most needed was to dwell with

the Lord. Similarly, Jesus explained to Martha in Luke 10:41–42 that she was “anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” What was the one thing? Sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching.

As you consider your relationship with the Lord, are you more like David or Martha? Are you *devoted* or *distracted*? I suspect that many of us would admit that we identify with Martha’s distraction but also long for David’s devotion. So how can we grow in devotion to God in a world of endless distractions?

We see from both David and Martha that a life devoted to the Lord won’t happen by accident. David resolved to seek after God’s presence. Jesus suggested that Martha needed to sit down and listen. You see, discipline helps us grow in devotion.

In fact, throughout history Christians have used spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and Bible study to seek the Lord and grow in relationship with him. If the phrase “spiritual disciplines” sounds intimidating, don’t worry! It simply means practices

that promote spiritual growth.¹ And these practices can help you draw near to God whether you're a new believer or have been walking with the Lord for decades.

Perhaps the idea of cultivating a life of devotion to the Lord is new or confusing, and you don't know where to start. You have faith in Christ, but you're trying to figure out what it looks like to grow in relationship with him.

Or maybe you're going through the motions of spending time with God, but if you're honest, he feels distant. You want the Holy Spirit to warm your affections for the things of God and restore the joy of your salvation.

Or perhaps you have a vibrant relationship with the Lord, but you'd like to learn new ways to seek him. You've been wanting to try fasting or you'd like to learn about Sabbath rest.

Whatever your situation, the *Disciplines of Devotion* series was written for you. Each booklet explores

1 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991), 17.

one thing—one practice to cultivate, one spiritual discipline to grow in—to help you draw near to the one true God. In each booklet, you'll gain a biblical understanding of a particular discipline and why it's worth cultivating. And you'll explore three practical ways to get started.

If you'd like to grow in these disciplines alongside other believers, we've included reflection questions to facilitate group discussion. Consider using this series in one-on-one discipleship, with a group of teens, in a neighborhood Bible study, or with a church small group. Also, Christians have a variety of perspectives on these disciplines, so if you'd like to continue your personal study, you can find a list of recommended resources at the end of each booklet.

When you finish this volume, let me encourage you not to set it aside in a pile of good intentions. These booklets can be read in less than an hour, but the disciplines they recommend can help you seek the Lord for a lifetime—even as you go about all the things you have to do.

Preaching about the “one thing” David desired in Psalm 27:4, Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren observed, “Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days. . . . But if we are true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions.”²

The *Disciplines of Devotion* series isn’t about productivity or efficiency or doing less. It’s about pursuing a life of devotion to the Lord in an age of endless distraction. It’s an invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8) no matter how much is on your plate.

Winfrey Brisley

SERIES EDITOR

2 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms* (Eerdmans, 1932), 146.

What Is Bible Study?

ONE OF MY CORE childhood memories involves tiptoeing into the kitchen during the dark early-morning hours to find my mother sitting at the table reading her Bible. With an array of colored pencils and pens, she marked up the margins and made notes, always glancing up to smile and say, “Good morning!” before returning to her study. Day after day, year after year, I found my mother this way: praying, reading, studying, and taking notes of things she wanted to remember from the Bible.

Even as a young child, I understood that the life of a Christian was marked by this act of Bible study.

I had watched my parents treat the Bible like a story they never grew tired of. My grandparents, too, had worn, marked-up copies of Scripture that carried them through decades of faithful Christ following. Through my young, childish eyes, the Bible was a treasure map, a story with secrets, a code to live by, a way to know things about God, the world, and myself.

Now that I'm a mom in my forties, my own kids find me sitting in our living room during the early-morning hours with my Bible open as I mark up the pages and take notes in a spiral notebook. As I've grown up in the faith, I've realized that my thoughts about studying the Bible as a child weren't too far off. God's word isn't just a map, though. It's the treasure itself. It's a record of God's faithfulness that stretches across millennia with the secret to joy and eternal life. It's a code to live by as redeemed people who belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. It's God's chosen means of revealing himself to us. We study God's word because it has a transformative effect on our lives.

Defining Our Terms

Bible study is one of those spiritual disciplines we know we should commit to but aren't always sure how to put into practice. Sheer intimidation can squelch any attempt to even try! When you think of Bible study, you might picture a pastor in his study with piles of commentaries. Or maybe you think of a seminary professor parsing Greek texts and lecturing students on subjects that seem way over your head. Maybe you groan when one of the more obscure biblical books—such as Leviticus or one of the Minor Prophets—pops up in your Bible-in-a-year plan, and you don't know how to find your bearings when reading. Perhaps you simply feel as though you're too young in the faith to have any business studying the Bible on your own.

Whatever it is that makes you feel as though Bible study is out of reach, I want you to know that God's word is for *you*. He didn't reserve it for pastors or teachers or people who have walked with him for fifty years. His word is accessible to each of us at every

age and stage of spiritual growth. You are equipped by the Holy Spirit to study.

In the next chapter, we look at the biblical reasons why we should study God's word, and then in the rest of the book, we examine how to study. But for now, let's define what Bible study is so we're on the same page: *Bible study is the close examination of Scripture for the purpose of spiritual growth, a deeper understanding of God and his story of redemption, and a closer relationship with him.*

Because God's word is not like any other book, we study it not merely to learn new things. Rather, we study it to know God's character, to grow in confidence of his love for us, and to deepen our relationship with him. As we study, we consider what the Bible says, what it means, and how it applies to our daily living. We pay special attention to how God unfolds his plan of redemption throughout the Bible's narrative.¹ And with time and the help of the Holy Spirit, we will be transformed by it. Bible study is

1 If you are unfamiliar with the concept of redemptive history or the unity of the whole Bible, check out Greg Gilbert, "Infographic: The

a spiritual discipline that broadens our understanding of Scripture while also shaping our hearts and minds to obey it.

Is Bible Study the Same as Bible Reading?

Bible study requires regular reading of Scripture, but it's more than only reading. Reading is where we start, but study is where we explore. Think of reading as the diving board and study as the plunge into the pool. You need the diving board every time you want to dive into the pool, but if you never leave the diving board, you'll miss the joy of connection with the water.

Reading is always a starting point in studying God's word, and reading on its own is deeply helpful in wrapping your mind around the story of Scripture. As Jerry Bridges puts it, "Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth."² Faithful Bible reading gives you a general understanding of Scripture; Bible

Story of Redemption," Crossway, October 16, 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/>.

² Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (NavPress, 2008), 32.

study helps work it into your heart, soul, and mind. While you must read God's word to study it, you must do more than read it. You must *immerse yourself* in it.

Donald Whitney says that “the basic difference between Bible reading and Bible study is simply a pencil and a piece of paper.”³ Study involves writing down observations, questions, and themes. It might include outlining a text to help you see the big picture or considering how it points to Jesus. Bible study plunges you into the depths of God's word where you search for truths that transform you from the inside out.

Seek God Through Study

Psalm 119 paints a portrait of the wise, happy person who loves God's word and lives closely to it. Throughout the psalm, the author uses several words interchangeably: word, testimonies, statutes, commandments, precepts, ways, and rules. Each time,

3 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991), 37.

he's referring to God's law—the Torah—which is the first five books of the Old Testament. Psalm 119 celebrates the benefits of God's word as it guides, teaches, corrects, and comforts God's people.

The key to enjoying these benefits is found at the beginning of the chapter:

Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
 who seek him with their whole heart.
 (Ps. 119:2)

Note what it is that brings blessing: keeping God's testimonies (obeying his word) and seeking him with one's whole heart. These two acts are connected. God has made himself known through Scripture, and in order to seek him, we must make a study of his word. For us as twenty-first-century Christians, his word goes beyond the Torah. Indeed, the whole Bible is God's preserved, infallible revelation of himself. His word is true and contains no errors. Jesus confirmed the objective truth of the Bible in his high priestly prayer: "Sanctify them in

the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). If Jesus acknowledges that the written word of God is true and authoritative, we should too.

So if we want to know and love God, we must study his word to learn about his character and his ways. Seeking him with all our hearts calls for active searching. It requires opening our Bibles and examining the text closely for meaning. It necessitates spending time wrestling with the words not only to understand them but also to obey them. It will take time—and patience. But that, in my experience, is when we receive the blessing the psalmist is talking about. Blessing comes from seeking the Lord in his word, for as we search, seek, dig, and wrestle with Scripture, we learn, understand, grasp, and grow.

Blessing comes through the work of study. Knowledge blooms when we’ve observed the text from many angles and sought to see Christ in all Scripture. Wisdom blossoms when we’ve thought deeply about the chapter we’re reading and looked for ways to obey the commands in our own lives and contexts. Love for God pushes through the coldest, toughest, driest

heart when it's watered with the refreshing stream of Scripture—a stream that never runs dry. Deep study of Scripture can change our lives because the Holy Spirit uses our deep study to change our hearts. But if we want to see this change, we must commit to doing the consistent work of diving in and searching for the treasure therein.

For this reason, the method laid out in this booklet involves studying without using any other prepackaged study material. There's certainly a time and place for supplemental or guided study, but you may gain more confidence in approaching Scripture if *you* are the one with the pencil and the piece of paper, if *you* are the one jumping off the diving board into the deep end of the pool.

But before we jump into the how, let's look a little more at the why. Scripture is filled with principles and exhortations that encourage us to study deeply. In the next chapter, we consider the biblical reasons that this spiritual discipline is for every believer, no matter your educational background or spiritual age. You *can* study God's word.

Reflection Questions

1. What has been your past experience with Bible study (if any)? What has prompted you to learn how to study the Bible now?
2. How does Bible study differ from Bible reading? Why are both necessary?