

GROWING

in

GOD'S WORD

How to
increase
your
Understanding
of the
Bible

*Grant
Steidl*



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*“Desire the pure milk of the Word,
that you may grow thereby.”
1 Peter 2:2*

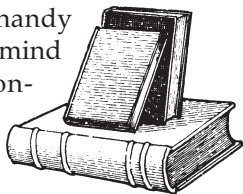
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INTRODUCTION

As you begin *Growing In God's Word*, it is good to consider for a moment the subject of our study. According to one author,

*"The Bible is the book of books, the oldest book in existence, the most circulated and the best read book in the whole world. The 1631 languages in which all or part of the Bible is available, represents what is spoken by some 98% of the world's population. It is thus a universal book and the greatest traveler in the world. It is seen in the royal palace and in the humble cottage and read by emperors and beggars, giving comfort, light, and salvation to millions. It has been marvelously preserved for us down through the centuries in spite of Satan's many fierce and fiery efforts to destroy it. Many have been martyred for it, choosing rather to die than to deny its precious truths."*¹

If you keep your Bible handy as you study, and keep in mind the eternal value of its contents, you will not be disappointed.



KNOW THE GRAND THEME OF THE BIBLE

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the grand theme of the Bible from cover to cover. He Himself

said so just after His resurrection. Speaking to two of His disciples, He went back to the very beginning of the Bible and “expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). Speaking later in the same chapter He said:

“These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44,45).

How did the disciples respond to the words of their Lord? Their eyes were opened. Their hearts burned within them. Their strength was renewed. Their faith was enlarged. We will experience the same thing as we study the Bible to learn more of our Lord Jesus Christ.

DEPEND UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Read very carefully the following quotation from 1 Corinthians 2:9-12:

“But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God

except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God."

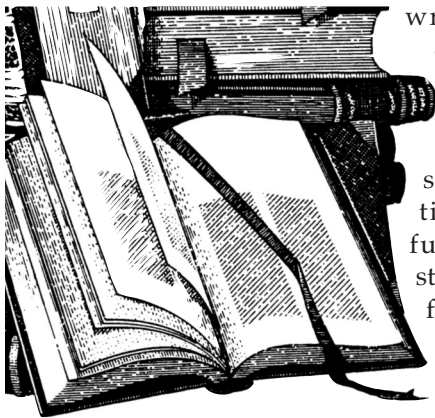
Notice three things which this passage says about the Holy Spirit:

1. He reveals to us things which we cannot perceive by our natural senses.
2. Only the Spirit knows the things of God. The "natural man," that is, the person who has not trusted Christ as personal Savior, does not understand the things of God (see 1 Cor. 2:14).
3. We who have trusted Christ as our personal Savior have received the Spirit that we might know the things that are freely given us of God. These things are revealed in the Bible.

UNDERSTAND HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

The Bible is inspired of God. Second Timothy 3:16 says: *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

The Bible was written over a period of some 1600 years by over 35 different writers. These



writers were directed by God to write things which they themselves sometimes did not fully understand. Their different writing styles are evident, and yet they wrote

down God's thoughts, not their own. In a marvelous way, He inspired and moved them by His Holy Spirit to reveal His Word to mankind. As the apostle Peter puts it, "*For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Peter 1:21).

The Old Testament of the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. Since very few people read these languages today, God has moved faithful men down through the centuries to translate the Bible into their native languages. Today, there are versions and translations of the Bible in nearly every language. In some languages, such as English, there are many different versions. Although there are a few spurious translations, most of the translations and versions differ only

in minor details, not important points.² This demonstrates God's great purpose that all men should have access to His life-giving Word in a language they can understand.

RECOGNIZE THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

Recognize that the main purpose of all Scripture is to reveal the ways of God. With this in mind, keep the unity of the whole Bible before you even as you study its individual books. Recognize the place and necessity for every part of the Bible.

As you study the Bible, take note of ordinary rules of grammar, sentence structure, and literary form. The Bible uses many different literary forms and devices: narrative, history, poetry, allegory, symbolism, proverbs, prophecies and doctrinal discourses, to name just a few. For example, the book of Proverbs uses a very different literary form than the letters of Paul.

The chapter and verse divisions, common in most Bibles, are not part of the inspired text.³ They were inserted later by editors to break up the text into simpler divisions. They are usually helpful in studying the Bible, but not always.

The Bible has been given in the context of actual historical people, places, and events. Therefore, some knowledge of history is valuable in studying the Bible. Whenever the Bible

touches on information contained in reliable sources of information, it is always confirmed to be true and accurate.

Since the Bible reveals spiritual truth, otherwise unknown, it may appear unfathomable or even confusing to the human mind. That is why you must first be “born again” to understand the Bible. It is only then that the Holy Spirit indwells you, giving you both the desire to know and the ability to understand the Bible. As soon as you have been born again, you will want to begin studying it in careful dependence upon the teaching of the Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 2:20,27).

APPROACH THE BIBLE REVERENTLY

In approaching the Bible you need to be aware of some of the general means whereby we gain knowledge and understanding, and then relate these to your Bible study.

We all have accumulated a storehouse of information in our minds through what we have experienced, read and heard. As we gain new information, we tend to assess it in the light of what we already know. However, when studying the Bible you need to reverse this process. Rather than judging the truth and value of the Bible in the light of what you already know, you need to judge the truth and value of what you already know in the light of the Bible.

For instance, you may have learned that as human beings we evolved from lower forms of life. Since this conflicts with the biblical truth that we have been created by God, you will need to reject this previously learned theory. As you think about your past ways and experiences and knowledge, adopt the attitude of Psalm 119:59 and 104: *"I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies...Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way."*

Then there is the matter of your intuition, that faculty within you whereby you become aware of things without the conscious use of reasoning. You may say, "I just feel that this thing is right." Such intuitive feelings are not necessarily bad, but they must be subjected to the objective truth of the Word of God. The important thing is not what you feel, but what the Word of God says. Feelings can be uncertain or even deceptive, but the Word of God is perfect and trustworthy, regardless of your feelings. As Psalm 19:7 says, *"The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple."*

Another thing to consider is the imagination. We need our imagination. In it we form mental images of what we are learning. Our imagination can be creative, but it can also run wild. Therefore, it needs to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and made subject to the stated truth of the

Bible. Jeremiah the prophet describes some people who used their imagination in the wrong way: "*Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward*" (Jer. 7:24).

Finally, in studying the Bible, you will come to passages which you don't understand, or which you may even question. Jot down such questions and ask them to an older Christian who knows more about the Bible than you do. But don't be distracted from your study by such passages. Recognize that the problem is with your understanding, not with the truth or accuracy of the Bible. So prayerfully seek help from others if it is available; but in any case, move on in your study.

REALIZE THAT GOD'S TRUTH IS MANY-SIDED

For example, man is both mortal and immortal. Christ is pictured as a lion as well as a lamb. Although God is in control of man, man is not a mere robot. We should expect such seeming paradoxes when dealing with things that are infinite, and be prepared to accept all aspects of infinite truth even when they appear to be contradictory and irreconcilable to our finite minds. Give to each passage of the Bible its full and proper force, even if it goes contrary

to your own pet ideas. God will deepen your understanding of His Word in His good time.

Use and appreciate the commentaries and expositions of men of humble faith and consecrated scholarship. The Lord has given the writings of gifted teachers for the blessing and upbuilding of His people.⁴ If you are wise, you will soon learn that your own understanding of a passage is not the final word on it; and if you are humble, you will not find it difficult to subject your own thoughts to the teaching of others more mature and instructed in the Word.

On the other hand, it is important for you to recognize that there is an infinite gap between the best of man's writings and the Word of God itself. No mere man has a complete knowledge of the truth, so sometimes equally devout believers will disagree. Consider the differences, and seek the enlightenment and testimony of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Scriptures. Remember that commentaries should never take the place of daily reading and study of the Bible on your own. The commentaries of others may not be readily available to everyone for various reasons. You



can get along without commentaries, but you can't get along without the Word of God.

TAKE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE FIGURATIVELY

Much of the Bible is written in figurative language. It explains new and unknown things by comparing them with things that are well known. The most perfect illustration of this is the fact that God became a man so man could understand God. The Lord Jesus Christ expressed the eternal, the spiritual and the divine in terms of the temporal, the natural and the human.

While we must take figurative language in a figurative way, we must be careful not to give figurative interpretations to that which is plain and literal. Above all, we must not contradict plain, doctrinal truth or morality on the basis of passages which are difficult to interpret.

Some main forms of figurative language with biblical examples:

- ♦ **Comparisons** (similes and metaphors): *"And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass"* (Rev. 21:21).

"As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him" (Psa. 103:13).

- ♦ **Word Pictures:** *"You are ... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone"* (Eph. 2:19,20).

- ◆ **Personification** (projected figures or representations): *"The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!'"* (Jud. 9:8).
- ◆ **Parables** (stories that illustrate a truth): The Lord Jesus frequently used parables such as the following: *"Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them ... When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside"* (Matt. 13:3,4,19).
- ◆ **Type or Symbol**: This refers to the presentation of a truth through the use of objects or events that represent that truth. For example, in Exodus 12 of the Old Testament, the passover lambs that were killed in place of the firstborn sons in the land of Egypt typified and pointed on to the Lord Jesus. In the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 5:7 says, *"Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us"*; and John 1:29 refers to Jesus as *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

Some simple rules for interpreting figurative language:

- ◆ Clearly recognize figurative language and treat it accordingly. For example, the Bible speaks of *"the devil ... as a roaring lion"* (1 Pet.

5:8); and the Lord Jesus refers to the bread at the last supper with these words: "*This is my body*" (1 Cor. 11:24). Neither description is intended to be taken literally.

- ◆ Realize that it may require special study to understand what is symbolized. The book of Revelation is a prime example of this. Always interpret figurative language in the light of its context and in harmony with the general teaching of Scripture.
- ◆ Never make a figurative interpretation the main basis of a doctrine or article of faith. By nature, a figure is additional and illustrative, not basic. The reality which it represents must exist elsewhere in Scripture, independently of the illustration.
- ◆ Concentrate on the central point or main truth illustrated by the figurative language. Don't be confused by incongruous details. For example, in the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16, it may seem like the Lord is commending dishonesty. Of course he is not. He is merely making the point that we should use present resources with a view to the future.
- ◆ Avoid fanciful interpretations which entertain rather than edify. All interpretations of figurative language must clearly illustrate the truth of the Bible.

SIMPLE RULES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY

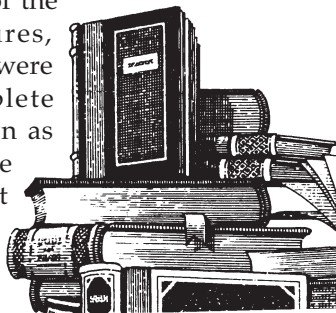
Because the Bible is the Word of the all-knowing God, it describes future as well as past and present events. Its purpose is to make plain the ways of God to man. As we learn how God acts, we develop trust in Him. He does not hide from His friends what He will do (Gen 18:17). The fulfillment of prophecy proves the faithfulness of the One who has declared the end from the beginning. The outstanding example of biblical prophecy concerns our Lord Jesus Christ. Over 300 Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in His birth, life, death and resurrection.

Simple rules for interpreting prophecy are:

- ◆ Seek first to appreciate each prophecy in its original setting and application.
- ◆ Realize the progressive nature of God's revelation. Although He is always the same, He doesn't always seem to act the same. He acts in accordance with the purposes He is carrying out at a given time. For example, in the Old Testament, He instructed the nation of Israel to war against enemy nations because He was using Israel as His instrument of judgment against their abominations; but in the New Testament, He instructs Christians of this present dispensation of grace to love

their enemies because they are His instruments of love to reach the lost.

- ◆ Recognize the figurative use of names such as Sodom (fettered), Gomorrah (bondage), Babylon (confusion), Philadelphia (brotherly love) and Demas (popular), and see how they support the text in which they appear.
- ◆ Don't study prophecy just to satisfy curiosity.
- ◆ Recognize the possibility of varying and mistaken interpretations. For example, when Christ came into the world, there were varying interpretations of the Messianic Scriptures, and many of them were wrong. The complete truth became known as He fulfilled all of the Scriptures. Don't claim to be infallible in your understanding.



- ◆ Recognize that the primary purposes of prophecy are to reveal Christ and to change the lives of those who read it.

LET THE BIBLE GUIDE YOUR DAILY LIFE

Always read the Bible as a guide to your daily life. Aim at discovering spiritual

truth which you can apply to your life. Set your heart to obey it, not simply to know it. Read it with a humble attitude of self-judgment, being prepared to make changes in your life as it pinpoints areas of failure.

The Bible generally presents broad principles to be applied to our lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than specific rules for us to impose on ourselves and others. Recognize the place of individual conscience and judgment in applying the Scriptures. God treats us as His children, giving all we need to live as obedient, fruitful and happy children.

Recognize that although our understanding of God's revelation is limited, there is no limit to what He can reveal through His Word. The more we study, the more will be revealed to us. In accordance with 2 Timothy 1:13,14, seek to develop a systematic understanding and knowledge of the various doctrines of the Bible. Collect and classify its various teachings, seeing god's truth as one grand connected whole—a totally consistent system. Never stop seeking to learn more of God's precious truth.

USE DIFFERENT WAYS TO LEARN THE BIBLE

Although the Holy Spirit has been given us to understand the Bible (Jn. 14:26; 16:13), we must diligently learn what it says to discov-

er its precious truths. There are at least 5 basic ways of doing this:

1. Bible Reading: This involves reading a passage from the Bible—perhaps a chapter, several chapters, or even a whole book of the Bible. The purpose in Bible reading is to get a general view of what God is doing and saying. Its purpose is not to get into the details of the passage. God gives us a wonderful promise about reading the Bible in Revelation 1:3: *“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.”*

2. Bible Hearing: This involves listening to others as they teach the Bible, whether in person, over the radio, on tapes, or in other ways. In listening to others, we need to have our Bibles open. We need to be like some early Christians of whom it is said: *“...they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”* (Acts 17:11).

3. Bible Study: This involves analyzing a Bible passage in order to grasp its meaning; and to see its significance in relation to other parts of the Bible. A good reason for studying the Bible is found in 2 Timothy 2:15: *“Give diligence to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”*

4. Bible Memorization: This involves repeating a verse or passage of the Bible over and over again until you can quote it without looking at the passage. In Psalm 119:11, this is called, *"hiding the Word in our hearts."* If we memorize the Bible, we can think about the Bible at times when we are not able to read it. It becomes even more valuable when we understand the significance of the verse or passage we have memorized. Then it is not merely a matter of rote memorization of words and phrases.

5. Bible Meditation: This involves thinking and reflecting on what we have already learned from the Bible, as we heard, read, studied or memorized it. If we truly delight in the Word of God, we will do this often. Psalm 1:2 speaks about the blessing of one who meditates on the Word of God: *"But His delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."*

MAKE YOUR BIBLE STUDY COUNT

Let's look briefly at the third way of feeding on the Word of God described above. Bible Study usually involves three basic steps: Observation, Interpretation and Application.

1. OBSERVATION

What Is In the Passage? At this first stage, you are not trying to understand what the passage means, but merely what it says. You need to ask yourself lots of questions as you carefully read through it. In observing the facts in a passage of Scripture, it will help if you realize that most of the books of the Bible fall into one of two major categories: narrative books and discourse books.

Narrative Books are those which describe historical events. God communicated His messages through these events. Some good examples of such books are Genesis and Ruth in the Old Testament, and the four Gospels in the New Testament. In looking at the facts in narrative books, you might ask the following questions:

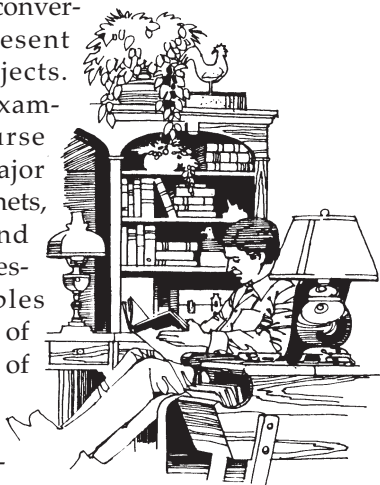
- ◆ **Who** are the main characters? What is their background? How do they relate to one another? What is their part in the story? What are their attitudes and reactions? What decisions do they make?
- ◆ **What** is the central action? Is it a story displaying love, conflict, or simply life in general? Is there a crisis or turning point involved? What results follow this central action? How do these results affect the people and story?
- ◆ **Where** does the action take place? Why are the people in the story there? How did they

get there? What relation does the place have to the people and the action?

- ◆ **When** and **Why** does the action take place? Note the chronological time if it is specifically mentioned. Is time important to the story? What takes place immediately before or after the action you are considering? Is there either a stated or implied reason?

Would you like to try a bit of this type of study right now? Turn to Matthew 9:1-8 as a sample passage. Read it carefully several times and write down your answers to the questions asked above.

Discourse Books basically present doctrine rather than action. Instead of describing people's actions and conversations, they present and explain subjects. Old Testament examples of discourse books include major parts of the prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. New Testament examples include the letters of Paul. Many books of the Bible include both narrative and discourse sec-



tions. In getting the facts in a discourse book you might ask the following questions:

- ♦ **Who** is the writer whom God used to write this book? To whom is he writing? What is his relationship to them? What is the writer's situation? For instance, knowing that Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written while he was in prison may shed some light on our understanding of the power of Christ in the life of the writer.
- ♦ **Why** did the writer write this book? Is he addressing some special doctrinal or moral problems faced by those to whom he is writing? For example, Paul wrote the book of First Corinthians to correct a number of problems that had developed in that church.
- ♦ **How** are the ideas in the particular passage related? How do they support one another? How do they move to a conclusion? For example, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul develops the subject of resurrection—beginning with the facts of the resurrection, moving on to some evidences for it, pinpointing the issues involved and concluding with the results of resurrection for believers.
- ♦ **What** specific commands and admonitions are given? What warnings are given? What correction is offered? What action does the writer urge his readers to take?

To do a sample of this type of study, read through the short book called Philemon, and write down your answers to each of the above questions.

2. INTERPRETATION

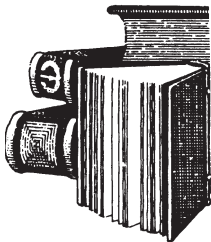
What Does the Passage Mean? The most important thing to understand about any passage is the message which the Spirit of God is conveying in it. What is His meaning and intention? In dependence upon His guidance, take the following steps:

- ◆ **Analyze** the key words and phrases. Look up the words you don't understand in the dictionary. If you have a concordance, find the same word in other passages of the Bible and consider how it is used in those places. For example, the word "walk" is a key word in the book of Ephesians (2:2,20; 4:1,17; and 5:2).⁵
- ◆ **Evaluate** what is being said. What is the main point of the passage under consideration, and what are some of the lesser points? If you were to give a title to this passage, what would it be? For example, a title for the book of First Timothy might be, "How To Behave in the House of God." (See 1 Timothy 3:15 as a key verse to that book.)
- ◆ **Relate** what the passage says to the message of the entire section or book in which it is found. For example, note how Peter's refer-

ences to the sufferings of Christ in 1 Peter 2:21 give encouragement and example to the suffering saints to whom Peter is writing.

3. APPLICATION

How Can I Apply the Bible To My Daily Life? A willingness to obey the Word of God is vital. You must be willing to accept the truth of God as revealed to you by the Holy Spirit, and put it into practice in your life. Listen carefully to what the book of James says: *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does"* (James 1:22-25).



How do you apply the Bible to your life? By meditating on the passage you are studying until God impresses on your heart something that He wants you to put into practice. This may not happen every time you study the Word, but always be on the lookout for practical applications. Realize that applying the Bible to your life may cause you to do various things which will produce spiritual growth:

You may be led to **worship**, because you have learned something of God's greatness, His character or His attributes. 1 Chronicles 29:11-16 is an example of a passage that leads one to worship.

You may be led to **give thanks**, because you have been reminded of some of the wonderful things God has done for you. Some of the prayers recorded in the Bible such as Colossians 1:9-13 end up in thanksgiving.

You may be led to **repent**, because the passage you have been studying has uncovered some of your actions or attitudes that are not pleasing to the Lord. For example, if you are a person who is quick to get angry and to express that anger, James 1:19-20 will teach you a better way.

You may be led to **make restitution**, because the Bible has shown you that you have wronged another person and need to make it right. A passage on maintaining good relationships with other Christians, such as Romans 14, might speak to you about this.

In applying a passage of Scripture to your life, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- ◆ **What** have I learned about God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit in this passage? How should I respond to what I have learned?

- ✦ **Whose** example should I follow or avoid?
- ✦ **What** attitudes should I adopt or reject? Do I need to confess something to the Lord as I see my own failure mirrored in the life of one of the characters?
- ✦ **What** does this passage teach me about my responsibility to God or to other people?
- ✦ **What** encouragement for my Christian life does this passage offer me?

CONCLUSION

What a wonder that God has revealed His thoughts to us in His precious Word the Bible! As you study the Word of God, He will transform your life for His own glory by the power of the Holy Spirit. He will bring you more and more into conformity with His beloved Son. Consider this as you ponder these words: *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

NOTE OF APPRECIATION

Many of the thoughts in this pamphlet have been adapted from *Understanding God's Word*, by Alan Stibbs, Intersociety Press (no longer in print).

FOOTNOTES

1. *Our Wonderful Bible*, by R. K. Campbell, Believers Bookshelf, Sunbury, PA, 17801, USA.
2. An example of a spurious translation would be the *New World Translation* used by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Some examples of reliable translations are J. N. Darby's *New Translation* (recognized for its accuracy), the *King James Version*, the *New King James Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, and the *New International Version*.
3. Although this is true for most of the Bible, the sequencing and headings of the Psalms are divinely inspired.
4. There are many who have written commentaries on books of the Bible. Three who come highly recommended are: C. H. Macintosh, H. A. Ironside and Leslie Grant. Many of their books are available from Believers Bookshelf, Sunbury, PA 17801, USA.
5. As you get deeper into Bible study you will find that the same English word may be used to translate several different words in the original Greek (or vice-versa). You can learn to distinguish these with the use of *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* or an interlinear Greek New Testament.

THE BIBLE

This book contains the mind of God, the condition of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you.

It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure.

Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Here, paradise is restored, heaven is opened, and the gates of hell are disclosed. **Christ** is its grand subject, our good is its design, and the glory of God is its end.

It is given to you in life, will be opened at the judgment, and will be remembered forever. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and condemns all who trifle with its sacred contents.

Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. This Book – the Book of Books, the *Book of God*, the **Bible** – is the revelation of God to man!

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