

First published in 2013

By Jubilee Press

21 Nelson Road, Observatory, Cape Town, 7925

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Beginnings

Lex Loizides

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New Beginnings

Congratulations! Welcome to a new life in Jesus Christ!

The step you have taken in giving your life to Christ is very important.

Being loved by God brings wonderful changes. Following Jesus brings joy and genuine freedom as well as new responsibilities. You have started a brand new life. Your home may look the same, your circumstances may have not changed yet, but inside of you big changes have happened. A new life is yours!

I want to encourage you to take hold of that new life and give yourself to God every day.

These studies are a great way to begin applying the changes that God is making in your life and character. Not everything will be easy but Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ (John 8:31)

As you study God’s truth, your experience of God’s love and the freedom He brings will increase! Jesus said, ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life!’ (John 14:6)

These studies are best used as interactive guides between you - a new Christian - and a more experienced Christian. You should plan to meet once a week and work through the material together. If you have time, there are suggestions for further discussion as well as some recommended reading.

If it’s not possible for you to meet with a more mature believer, you will still gain much from carefully studying on your own.

Gospel truth

The simple gospel message is this: God created the world, and men and women, in His image. But, in the exercise of their free will, the first humans rebelled against God and sin entered the world. But, out of His wonderful love, God had initiated a rescue plan – to save people from the eternal consequences of their sin through Jesus Christ. God loves us. He loved us so much He gave His Son to die for us. This is true of you individually. When Jesus died on the cross, He took the punishment for all your sins – every one. On the third day He rose from the dead and many people saw Him over the next 40 days.

This is the Christian message - the gospel of Grace - which you have heard and believed. You have trusted in Christ.

And He promises that having believed:

- You are now forgiven of all your sins
- You can live a new life in Him
- You can change from your negative old ways to constructive new ways
- You have a loving God as your Father
- You have the Holy Spirit as your Helper
- You have a new mission in life – to tell others about Jesus and make a difference in your world
- You have a new family, the family of God: the Church

As with others in the church, you are about to begin a new adventure – the adventure of walking with God. As you take your first steps it is my prayer that God would fill you with grace and understanding so that you will know Him and grow into all that He has for you.

This study is an introduction to some great new realities that have opened up for you in Christ. The Christian life is one of constant growth and learning. This series will help you to get to grips with the basics. There are other studies in this series that will help you progress in your walk.

As you work through each chapter with a more mature Christian, feel free to ask questions. The goal is not to rush through as much material as possible, but to understand what is being taught and reflect on its implications for your life.

Enjoy!

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Note on looking up Bible verses: Please find the Contents page of your Bible. The references in this booklet are as follows: e.g. John 1:10-14 = Name of the book (John), Chapter number (1), verse/s (:10-14). Please ask a more experienced Christian to help you find the correct verses if you are finding it difficult to locate the verses we are referring to.

Note on Bible translations: The Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew. We enjoy a wealth of new translations of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts into modern English. Newer translations reflect recent changes in English and can help us enjoy the meaning of the original writers. Several English versions of the Bible will be used in this study.

I'd like to thank Leigh Berg for preparing the questions, and John Bradshaw and Jan Winter for their fine editorial help.



The Bible

One of the great blessings of the Christian life is the Bible itself! God has not left us in the dark but has given us light through His written word!

The Bible is still the top selling book worldwide

In his book *Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel writes that it is estimated that more than 44 million Bibles are sold every year! He then quotes the *London Times* reporting that ‘As usual the top seller by several miles was the Bible. If cumulative sales of the Bible were frankly reflected in best-seller lists, it would be a rare week when anything else would achieve a look in. It is wonderful, weird or just plain baffling in this increasingly godless age - when the range of books available grows wider with each passing year - that this one book should go on selling hand over fist, month in, month out. All versions of the Bible sell well all the time. Can the Bible Society offer an explanation? “Well,” I am told disarmingly, “it is such a good book!”’

What is the Bible?

Is it just a story book for children, great for them but not really relevant as we get older?

Is it a so-called ‘Western’ spiritual book, just one of the world’s many sacred books?

Or is it more?

If it is merely the result of human reasoning about God then perhaps the U2 song applies: ‘I still haven’t found what I’m looking for’. But if God has spoken, and this is His word, then perhaps we should take it more seriously.

The prophet Isaiah was convinced he was speaking the word of God and boldly said, ‘Listen O heavens, and hear O Earth, for the Lord speaks!’ (Isa 1:2)

That’s a pretty big claim – for a pretty big audience!

We are convinced the Bible is of God

As Christian believers we are convinced that the Bible was inspired by God, and although we can see the style and concerns of the writers in their books, we believe it is not only human words, but God’s words spoken to us through human writers.

The Bible claims this for itself. Consider these verses:

‘Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.’ (2 Peter 1: 21)

‘This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit.’ (1 Cor 2:13)

‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.’ (2 Tim 3:16)

Believers through the ages have testified that God has directed, guided and spoken to them through its pages.

Believers assert that the Holy Spirit Himself has illuminated passages to them at different times and in different ways that leaves them in no doubt that the Bible is the word of God. This comes with power, application, conviction, amazing relevance and real authority.

We want to respond to the Bible appropriately

With excitement, awe and gratitude, and with hunger for more!

If you respect someone, you also respect what they say. John Calvin, a great Bible teacher, said, ‘We owe to Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God.’ He doesn’t mean worship - but he is suggesting that it is a sign that we take God seriously when we take His word seriously.

Let's study one of the hymns of the Bible.

Psalm One (NASB)

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,

Nor stand in the path of sinners,

Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Which yields its fruit in its season

And its leaf does not wither;

And in whatever he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,

But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,

But the way of the wicked will perish.

The contrast in Psalm One

The Believer (how we are now)	The Unbeliever (what we were like before)
The Blessed man	A mocker, a scoffer
Freedom	Carried along by the crowd
Delighted in God's Word	On the pathway of sin
Sweet meditations – image of refreshing streams	Dry withering tracks, barrenness
Stability in life - like a planted tree	Insecurity that comes from mockery and cynicism
Fruitful lifestyle	No fruit, withering, hungry
Sure expectation of success	No hope, but judgment
God looks after him	Excluded and rejected, perishing

The way to this happiness is by delighting in God's Word

‘But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.’

The Bible is different from other books. Usually, we read a book once. Occasionally we'll read a book twice and then we're done. But the Bible is a different kind of book and it can keep nourishing you through the years of your Christian life. It is a book that can feed your soul and bring life to you – so it is good to begin to develop the habit of reading the Bible, even if it's only a little each day at first.

It's as natural for a baby to want food as it is for you to want God's Word

Peter tells new believers: 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation' (1 Peter 2:2)

Babies tend to cry and howl until they are given milk. It feels like an emergency! They need their milk! But then peace is restored when they are fed! We, too can feel agitated and upset, but a simple, pure word from God can bring peace and calm to the soul and nourish us! That's why we should desire God's word, and learn as much as we can so that we can grow.

Jesus, when He was being tempted, knew His Bible and said, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matt 4:4)

God wants us to delight in His Word – AND it's the best thing for us!

The believer described in Psalm One is a 'blessed' person. The source of their strength and the secret of their success is delight in God's word.

God tells Joshua in the Old Testament that knowing, loving and obeying His word is a key to living a life characterised by God's blessing:

'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.' (Joshua 1:7-8)

How do we delight in God's Word?

Start reading!

For your devotional reading, I suggest you use a printed book version of the Bible rather than an app on your smartphone or iPad. You need to be able to focus. There are excellent Bible apps for referencing, but for focused reading, you're just too near your device to be distracted by incoming mail or notifications. Go to a bookstore and buy a Bible. The New Living Translation, the ESV or the NASB are excellent English versions.

In the front of your Bible there is a contents page. You can start reading one of the books and when you're finished put a tick next to that book and go on to an-

other. The Bible is a small library of books so there's plenty to enjoy. As you finish book after book you can keep track of the progress you're making at the Contents page. Make it your goal to read the whole Bible, book by book.

You could begin with the Gospel of Mark, which is a fast moving biography of Jesus Christ.

Stop, pray and make notes

As you read you will be learning new things. Suddenly something will strike you as truly wonderful. Stop and take a notebook and write it down. You can copy out the verse or verses or just the thoughts that came to you as you read. Feel free to discuss what you are learning with a mature believer. If God speaks to you stop, pray and make notes.

Obstacles and their answer

Objection - I don't have enough time to read the Bible properly!

Answer - Sometimes we are genuinely rushed for a whole day without a break, but often we just fritter away our time. You can surely carve out 20 minutes of each day to read God's word.

Objection - I can't really get into it. Reading my Bible never seems attractive!

Answer - You need to revive your appetite and learn to concentrate. Many of us are so attracted by trivia that we need to re-learn how to give time to more important things.

As you develop your knowledge and experience of the Bible you might like to begin a Bible reading plan. There are many online. Ask a mature Christian friend to help you.

If you feel you can give the necessary time to read the Bible through in a year here is a very popular Bible Reading Plan:

<http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.one.year.tract.pdf>

Objection – Someone in the Bible did something terrible. If they did it in the Bible does that mean God is okay with it? I'm not sure I want to keep on reading!

Answer – No, it doesn't mean God's okay with it. The Bible is an accurate reflection of both God's grace and of human folly. The characters in the historical portions of the Bible often did unwise or sinful things.

The results of delighting in God's Word

Stability and strength

The psalmist says that if we learn to love the Bible we will be like a 'tree firmly planted by streams of water'. The promise is of stability and strength, as well as nourishment and refreshment. When we consider such promises, it is surprising that we don't want to spend more time delighting in God's Word!

Jesus also said that those who hear and do His word would be building a house on rock - on a solid foundation - rather than on sand, which can collapse easily under the pressure of life's storms.

Fruitfulness

A further promise is that we would be fruitful. This tree 'yields its fruit in its season'.

Jesus also promised the same thing. There is a connection between knowing God's Word and bearing fruit. 'If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this My father is glorified, that you bear much fruit.' (Jn 15:7-8)

Perseverance

Life can get tough. We can get tired. But the promise here is that if we delight in God's Word our 'leaf will not wither'. We will have access to nourishment – it's an open secret, but it's a secret source of strength for you.

We see this truth both in Scripture and in experience. At times of real pressure God's word can lift us up again. Psalm 119:50 says, 'This is my comfort, Your word has revived me.'

Prosperity in all of life

Jesus said that He was announcing the ‘year of the favour of the Lord’. Those who believe in Jesus begin to live life under the banner of God’s favour. Psalm One helps us how to stay under that banner in our daily lives.

In fact, it even suggests that if we put God first in everything and delight in His word, we will know His prosperity for us.

That doesn’t mean we won’t encounter difficulty. It doesn’t mean we avoid suffering or loss. And it certainly doesn’t mean we will be rich. But in everything we will know the love and favour of God over us. He will make us to prosper!

Psalm One says that if we delight in God’s word, turn away from cynicism and walk in the right paths then our ‘leaves never wither’, and we prosper in all we do.

You can claim that as a promise and immediately apply it to:

- Your prayer life
- Your attempts to share the Gospel with friends
- Your ability to serve others
- Your ability to earn and provide
- Your relationships with people in the local church
- Your desire to see increase in your sphere of influence
- The wellbeing of your loved ones

While those outside the Christian faith still need to hear the Gospel, and those who are ‘scoffing’ still need to understand, nevertheless you have now entered the privilege of a relationship with God. Keep going forward and keep enjoying your Bible.

For further discussion

1. Read Psalm 119:1-16 and consider what the writer says about God’s word.
2. Read Matthew 7:24; James 1:22; and 1 John 2:4-5. What do these verses tell you about God’s word?

3. Do you have any questions regarding the Bible being the Word of God? Discuss these – and refer to the resources in the suggested reading list if this is an area you'd like to investigate further.
4. What are the implications for us in believing that the Bible is the Word of God?
5. How could you make more time available for regular Bible reading?

Suggested reading

FF Bruce - *The New Testament Documents. Are they Reliable?* (IVP)

Amy Orr-Ewing - *Why Trust the Bible* (IVP)

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart - *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Zondervan)