

## ***BEGINNINGS: Introduction***

**Subject:** A consideration of reasons for reading and studying the Bible

**Main Idea:** The Bible always evokes a response.

**Principles:**

1. *The true offense of the Bible is its supposition that a God exists who has rightful authority over us.*
2. *The main obstacle faced by most people who want to know the Bible is simply investing the time to actually read and study it.*

### **Introduction**

People are rarely neutral in their attitude toward the Bible. When a missionary and author gave a presentation entitled “*God’s Law or Chaos*,” one journalist responded that he preferred chaos!<sup>i</sup> Some people are just that offended by the Bible! Although some revere it, others seem downright fearful of it. A few treasure it, but many are outright hostile toward it. Responses vary, but one thing is for sure: the Bible always evokes some kind of a response!

Regardless of your attitude toward the Bible, since you are reading or listening to this introduction, you obviously have some level of interest. There are several good reasons why people find the Bible interesting.

## **I. Interest in the Bible**

### **A. Why Study the Bible?**

- i. An Intellectual Reason: Some of us first come to read or study the Bible out of curiosity. This is an excellent place to begin. More copies of the Bible have been produced than any book in history.<sup>ii</sup> While this is no proof that the Bible is what it claims to be (God’s Word), it is sufficient to make any thinking person interested in what it says.
  1. *The Bible is Unique*: What is it that makes the Bible so unique?
    - a. First, the Bible contains a unique variety of literary styles and topics. It is a history book, it contains parables and allegories, it is a hymnal, it is a book of poetry, it is a book of law, and it is a book of prophecy.
      - i. The history contained in the Bible finds no equivalent in literature. Renowned archaeologist W.F. Albright says, *Hebrew national tradition excels all others in its clear picture of tribal and family origins. In Egypt and Babylonia, in Assyria and Phoenicia, in Greece and Rome, we look in vain for anything comparable.*<sup>iii</sup>

- ii. While other books speak of prophets and prophecy, only the Bible contains predictive prophecy that has been historically fulfilled. There are dozens of specific prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, including things like the place of His birth, over which an imposter could not have had any control.
  - iii. Among its topics are subjects that have been “hot topics” (and often controversial) in nearly every era – marriage and child-rearing, money, premarital sex and homosexuality, the origin of the universe, and good and evil, just to name a few.
- b. Second, the Bible is unique in that it makes no attempt to hide the flaws of its characters. Some of the writers of the Bible divulge things that would discredit their character. If they fraudulently sought to deceive us into believing they were recording God’s Word, they would have had no reason (and would have been extremely unlikely) to give some of the information they record.
  - c. The Bible is also unique in that no other book has had so profound an influence on civilization. Its lofty ideals have set it apart.
  - d. A fourth reason for its uniqueness is that the Bible presents a single continuous story despite the number of years over which it was written and the number of authors and their very different backgrounds.
    - i. More than forty individuals wrote the Bible’s 66 books over about 1500 years. Among these individuals were kings and peasants, scholars and shepherds.
    - ii. It was written in three languages: Hebrew (a pictorial language), Aramaic (probably the longest continuously living language known<sup>iv</sup>), and Greek (the international language at the time of Christ).
    - iii. In spite of all this, it unfolds a unified story from beginning to end. The Bible is certainly unique!

2. *The Bible Evokes Objections*: Another reason for intellectual curiosity about the Bible is simply that so many people object to it. The Old Testament prophets were imprisoned and killed for their messages. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had Him killed because of His claims. The writers of the New Testament were persecuted for what they proclaimed, and every Bible-believing generation since has witnessed strong opposition of one kind or another.
  - a. Diocletian, Roman emperor in A.D. 303, issued an edict to destroy the Scriptures. 25 years later, the emperor Constantine ordered that 50 copies be prepared at the government's expense.
  - b. Sidney Collett recounts, *Many centuries later, Voltaire, the noted French infidel who died in 1778, said that in one hundred years from his time Christianity would be swept from existence and passed into history. But what has happened? Voltaire has passed into history, while the circulation of the Bible continues to increase in almost all parts of the world, carrying blessing wherever it goes.*<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, it has been pointed out that fifty years after Voltaire's death, the Geneva Bible Society used his press and house for producing Bibles.<sup>vi</sup>
3. The Bible has had such an impact and has created such a stir, that any intellectually curious person would at least want to read it. But there is another reason why we may want to read and study the Bible, a spiritual one.

## ii. A Spiritual Reason

1. *The Search for Meaning*: Behind all philosophy and religion stands a search for meaning. Most honest people will admit they want to know the meaning of life, or at the very least, a sense of purpose for their own life.
2. *The Search for Immortality*: The human search for immortality is undeniable. We see it every time we acknowledge that time flies too quickly. The underlying longing is for timelessness; in other words, eternity. We hope something we do will one day be remembered or that we will have made a difference of some kind. From where does this desire come? It reflects our longing for immortality.

3. *The Search for Truth*: In recent years, doubts about the existence of truth outside of our own standard have shaped western thinking and culture. But we must ask, “From where does the universal objection to rape, child abuse, and senseless murder come?” If there is a standard of morality that transcends us, there must also be a Lawgiver who has imprinted each of us and stands as Judge over us. Sadly, this realization has caused too many quick-minded individuals to halt their pursuit of truth. After all, who wants to acknowledge Someone with the right to judge their every thought and action?
4. *The Bible’s Answers*: The Bible makes the astounding claim that not only does God exist but that He has also remained actively involved with His creation from the beginning. It claims to be His word – the only reliable voice of authority. Many people who refused to crack the cover of a Bible have turned to it for answers when in crisis and can attest that the living God has met them through the pages of His word. Their stories are testimonies in their own right that the Bible is no ordinary book.

**B. Can I Trust the Bible?** Once one begins to read the Bible, the realization that it is far from an ordinary book causes many to seek confidence that what they are reading is trustworthy. Fortunately, such evidence is available.

- i. The Bible’s Own Claims: Though a self-made claim can’t be considered authentic proof by itself, it is still important to know that the Bible claims to be the inspired word of God in its entirety. Almost anyone who reads it will acknowledge that it has the ring of authority. It is hard to believe that the writers of a book with such high moral standards would attempt to deceive us by pretending it was something it is not. This one thing we are forced to be honest about: either it is a forgery or it isn’t. Can we consider a misleading book a “good” book? Would we use a forgery as a standard to guide our lives? If the Bible is wrong in its claim to be the inspired Word of God, we have no reason to trust anything else about it. We can’t choose parts we like and parts we don’t. Either it is reliable, or it is not. The manuscript evidence overwhelmingly suggests the Bible’s historic reliability.
- ii. Manuscript Reliability: Former Princeton professor Bruce Metzger, one of the world’s leading Biblical text critics, said that in contrast to any other ancient text, “the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material.”<sup>vii</sup> More manuscript evidence exists to support the Bible than any ten pieces of classical literature combined.<sup>viii</sup>

1. Although, as with all other ancient literature, there are no known original manuscripts of the Bible, there is an abundance of copies. By comparing them, one can reconstruct the original with nearly complete accuracy. As of 1999, there were more than 5,686 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, as well as over 10,000 Latin Vulgate and 9,300 other early versions to compare for accuracy. In contrast, Homer's *Iliad* is second, with only 643 surviving manuscripts.<sup>ix</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, confirm that the Old Testament text has not changed substantially through all the centuries. These scrolls are 800-1000 years older than previously known manuscripts.
  2. Additionally, the amount of time between when the books of the New Testament were written and the dates of the earliest existing copies is 250-300 years. By comparison, the amount of time between the writing of Sophocles' plays and the dates of the manuscripts upon which we base their substance is more than 1400 years!<sup>x</sup> No other work of classical literature has less time than the New Testament between the original writings and the copies in existence.
- iii. Archaeological Confirmation: In addition to manuscript reliability, archaeology has yet to uncover anything that contradicts the Bible. In fact, certain historical details of the Bible that were previously considered to be wrong in the absence of any other historical confirmation have since been proven to be true. For example, the Bible speaks of the Hittites at the time of Abraham. Critics once discredited the Bible for this, claiming there were no records of Hittites at that time. Yet archaeology has now uncovered evidence of more than 1,200 years of Hittite civilization.
- iv. Scientific Evidence
1. The Big Bang Theory found its basis in 1929 in Edwin Hubble's proof that the universe is constantly expanding. This discovery proves that the universe had its beginning at a distinct point in time.
  2. Further scientific support for the Bible is found in what is called the "fine tuning" of the universe. It is a near impossibility that a planet could be so perfectly "tuned" for the survival of life without intelligent design. (These things will be discussed more in the next lesson on creation.)

- v. A Matter of Faith: In the end, each person must ask himself or herself, “*How much evidence is enough* for me to be convinced the Bible is God’s authoritative Word?” Some people are so offended by the idea that Someone exists with ultimate authority over them that they are unable to use their sense of reason objectively. No amount of evidence will be enough to prove something we don’t want to believe. Ironically, the moment we decide we are willing to submit to God and the authority of His Word, we find the final piece of evidence we need to confirm its reliability: its power to transform our lives!

**Summary Statement:** While there are good reasons to both study the Bible and to trust it, in the end we must be honest with ourselves about whether or not we are willing to trust a Higher Authority with our lives.

**Principle:** *The true offense of the Bible is its supposition that a God exists who has rightful authority over us.*

Why is this so offensive to us?

- One reason some people are offended is that they’ve been disappointed by God. They have experienced a great deal of pain or they see the pain of others. Life is full of pain. They’re not sure they *want* to trust a God who permits evil.
- But the main reason people are offended by God’s rightful authority over them is explained by the Bible’s teaching that since sin entered the world, all people have been born with a sin nature.
  - The essence of sin is rebellion against God. Sin isn’t just a matter of wrong behavior; the very core of our being is sinful. This is manifested in our secret and even subconscious determination to run our own lives. We are naturally at enmity with God.
  - Yet the Bible says, “God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God sent His Son Jesus to pay the penalty we owe Him for our sin and to reconcile us to Him.
  - As long as we fail to acknowledge our sinful rebellion against God, we will, on some level, continue to view God as our enemy and never appreciate the joy to be found in submitting to Him. The verse I mentioned just now says that God sent Jesus as a demonstration of His love for us. Understanding and believing that God loves us in a way that exceeds even the love of a parent is the key to unlocking our spiritual arrogance and selfishness. When we come to believe that God loves us and that He is trustworthy, far from being offended by His rightful authority over us, we actually desire it, since we know His ways are always ultimately in our best interest.

**Application:** As we begin this study of the Bible and consider its claim that there is a God who has rightful authority over you, what attitude will you bring to its pages as you read? If your curiosity about the Bible is merely intellectual or because of a present crisis, what will you do with the Bible’s claim of God’s authority over you? The Word of God always evokes a response of one kind or another.

**Transition:** Despite widespread interest in the Bible, most of what we hear people say about it is said in ignorance. Few take the time to really *know* the Bible. I’m sure, like me, you’ve even heard professing Christians say things like, “Doesn’t the Bible say somewhere that...” Many have not really devoted much time to personal Bible reading and study.

## II. Knowing the Bible

**A. Reasons to Know the Bible:** I have already described intellectual and spiritual reasons people have interest in the Bible. The Bible is also a source of great wisdom and holds practical answers for daily living. However, the *highest motivation* to know the Bible is to know *the God of the Bible*. The reason these are called *GOD of the WORD* Bible studies is because the ultimate goal is not only to know the Bible but more importantly, to know the *God* of the Bible. He has revealed Himself to us through the Bible, and that should be the Christian’s motivation for dedicating him or herself to knowing it.

### B. Knowing Who Wrote the It

- i. “The Word of God”? I have been saying the Bible is the word of God. You may wonder about this since it seems to be authored by people.
  1. The Bible claims to be the word of God because ultimately, God Himself is the author. It is *His revelation* to mankind. However, the books of the Bible were written down by many different individuals over hundreds of years. The Holy Spirit *inspired* each of these individuals. Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). God *superintended* the writing to ensure that the original documents were without error.
  2. Without losing sight of the fact that God is the supreme author of Scripture, those who were inspired by Him can still be called “authors” of the Bible’s sixty-six books. In this sense, there is “*dual authorship*.” The writers were inspired in at least three different ways.
    - a. The writers knew some of the things recorded in the Bible by *natural means*. For example, Luke said he researched carefully and documented his findings.

- b. The Holy Spirit gave *the ideas* that were to be presented. We can see that the Bible was not dictated by God word for word for there are varying styles of writing that reflect the writer's backgrounds and personalities.
  - c. However, God dictated some parts of the Bible *word for word*. For example, Exodus 20 clearly contains God's exact words: "And God spoke all these words, 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me.'" Later, we read that "the finger of God" inscribed the Ten Commandments on stone tablets (Exodus 31:18, Deuteronomy 9:10).
3. Despite these different types of inspiration, God's supervision of the writing ensured the Bible, in its original documents, was exactly as He intended it to be. He protected every writer from error.

**C. How We Will Cover the Bible:** I have mentioned that the Bible tells one unified story. Many people know certain scenes in the story: like the story of Daniel in the lion's den, or the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors. However, these are really sub-stories of a much bigger unified story, and most people do not know how all these stories fit together.

i. Two Parts of One Story

- 1. The Bible was divided into two testaments in the 4<sup>th</sup> century – the Old and the New. But it is one continuing story with no division in its unified narrative.
- 2. However, we can never appreciate the story of the life of Jesus and the church He established, told in the New Testament, until we have an understanding of the first half of the story, told in the Old Testament. This is no different than trying to pick up and begin reading any other book from the middle without having read the first half.

ii. GOD of the WORD Subdivisions:

- 1. There are eight *GOD of the WORD* Bible studies. These move progressively through the story from beginning to end. These studies break the Old and New Testaments down into further major groupings within the story. There are five studies that cover the Old Testament and three studies that cover the New Testament.

2. In our study, some parts of the story will be examined under a microscope. Other parts will be looked at from a broader viewpoint. The *Beginnings* study covers only the first eleven chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The second study, called *Patriarchs*, covers the remainder of Genesis. These two studies examine the text in closer detail than any of the other studies, with *Beginnings* giving us the most up-close look of all. This is important since, in any story, it is always important to carefully understand the beginning in order that the rest makes sense.

#### D. Knowing the Story

- i. *Beginnings*: The first eleven chapters of Genesis give us the earliest history of man. They tell of God's creation. They tell about sin's entrance into the world. They tell of the cataclysmic flood God used to destroy virtually all life. Following the Flood, they tell how the nations as we know them today emerged and spread over the earth.
- ii. *Patriarchs*: The remainder of Genesis tells us the story of God choosing one man, Abraham, and his family as His instruments to communicate His message to the world. Abraham's grandson Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel.
- iii. *Exodus*: The next four books of the Bible are included in the *GOD of the WORD* study called *Exodus*.
  1. This part of the Bible tells the story of an Israelite leader, Moses, who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to the homeland God promised them, Canaan.
  2. It contains a great deal of law, given by God to Israel through Moses. These laws were essential for the survival of a fledgling nation – civil laws for its government, moral laws for its spirit, and ceremonial laws for its religious orientation. God gave *all* the laws so Israel would represent Him well to the other nations. Therefore, all the laws taught them (and us) something about who God is.
  3. The people entered a covenant with God to be His people. According to the terms of the covenant, God promised they would flourish if they were obedient to Him. But if they disobeyed, things would go badly, and ultimately He would allow them to be overrun by other nations.
- iv. *Promised Land I*: The study called *Promised Land I* gives the first 400 or so years of history in which Israel lived in the land God promised them.
  1. Initially, Moses' successor Joshua, a military leader, oversaw them. Joshua led the military campaigns in which Israel took hold of Canaan.

2. After Joshua's death, other military leaders, called Judges, ruled Israel for three to four hundred years. This was a dark time for Israel spiritually. The last Judge of Israel was Samuel.
  3. At the close of the Promised Land 1 study, Israel prefers to become like other nations and be ruled by a dynasty of kings.
- v. *Promised Land 2*: The remainder of the Old Testament is covered in the *Promised Land 2* study.
1. In this part of the story, Israel experiences both spiritual heights and spiritual lows. As God promised, when Israel followed the Lord closely she flourished politically. However, when Israel turned her back on the Lord, she struggled as a nation. Israel discovers that having a king rule over her is only as good as the king himself.
  2. Under King David and his son Solomon, Israel experiences the peak of prestige and power among the nations. However, Solomon's son was less wise and the kingdom split, leaving him with only the southern part of the land, called Judah.
    - a. The northern kings were almost all wicked. God began to send prophets to call the kings, and through them the people, back to Him. But the kings ignored the warnings. So, after centuries of patient warnings, eventually God followed through on the terms of the covenant and sent the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel and carry the people off into captivity.
    - b. The descendants of David remained on the throne of the southern kingdom of Judah. Many of the southern kings were also wicked, but some of them were good kings. When they strayed from Him, God sent prophets to Judah. Though Judah was more faithful than her northern brother-kingdom, Judah eventually became so unfaithful that less than 150 years after northern Israel was overrun by Assyria, the Babylonians overthrew Judah, also deporting most of its citizens.
  3. After 70 years of captivity, a remnant of Jews was permitted to return to Israel and reestablish the worship of God.

4. From the moment sin entered the world until the end of the time of the Old Testament, God's people awaited the fulfillment of a promise God made in the first chapters of Genesis – a promise to send a deliverer, a Messiah, to save them. After so many years of history, it was clear that even Israel, through whom God revealed Himself to all the nations, could not and would not remain faithful to Him. Most Israelites thought the Messiah would primarily bring them political deliverance. They missed the point that unless they were delivered spiritually, there could be no political restoration.
- vi. *Gospels*: For 400 years God did not speak to Israel through prophets. Then, during Roman rule, John the Baptist came on the scene to speak for God and to announce the coming of the Messiah. The Gospels tell the story of the life, death, and resurrection of the long-awaited Messiah. These accounts prove Jesus of Nazareth was God's Son and the long-awaited Messiah.
- vii. *Acts 1*: After Jesus completed His work on earth, He ascended to heaven, leaving behind a commission to all His followers. They were to teach all nations concerning Him and baptize them into His name. Jesus also promised that He would return one day and take all His followers to be with Him forever.
  1. The *Acts 1* study covers most of the book of Acts and several New Testament letters (sometimes called epistles). This part of the Bible gives the history of the early church after Jesus' ascension and how they began to fulfill their mission. The clear message is that the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, was the power behind all that was being accomplished.
  2. This part of the story also tells how Gentiles were first reached. The apostle Paul led the charge to reach Gentile nations with the "Gospel," the good news of Messiah's salvation.
- viii. *Acts 2*: The last *GOD of the WORD* study, *Acts 2*, covers the history in the last few chapters of the book of Acts, and the remaining letters in the New Testament, including the unique book of Revelation.
  1. In this part of the story, the church sees a second generation of Christians. Persecution against the church heats up.
  2. The Bible ends with prophecy regarding the future. It indicates that near the end of human history, rebellion against God will reach a new height with an Antichrist leading the charge. But it also tells of the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus' promise to return to earth and overthrow the rebellion. It tells of the final judgment of all people of all ages, the glorious eternal future of God's people, and a future of horror for all who have rejected Him.

**Summary Statement:** The goal of the *GOD of the WORD* studies is to give those who participate a good understanding of the complete story of the Bible so that they may know God more fully.

**Illustration:** Former Yale University president William Lyon Phelps once said, *I thoroughly believe in a university education for both men and women; but I believe a knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without the Bible.*<sup>xi</sup>

So, why don't more people know the Bible today? If the main offense of the Bible is its supposition that God has rightful authority over our lives, I find the main obstacle to knowing the Bible is simply putting in the time.

**Principle:** *The main obstacle most people who want to know the Bible face is simply investing the time to actually read and study it.*

**Application:**

- Although some of you may be attending this study because you are curious about the Bible and still checking out its claims, my guess is that most of you have moved beyond superficial interest and really want to know the Bible.
- Probably, most of you believe the Bible is God's Word; you believe you need to know it in order to know God better. Skepticism is not what's keeping you from knowing the Bible. Your struggle may simply be prioritizing reading and studying it.

**Illustration:** Most people understand that to learn to play an instrument, to excel at a sport, to learn a trade or a new language, time must be invested. Yet when it comes to the Bible, many people who know they need God's word in their life hope they will get what they need secondhand, listening to their pastor on Sunday or by reading a book someone else has written about the Bible. They've failed to understand that there is no shortcut to truly knowing the Bible, anymore than there is a shortcut to learning to play the piano or any other number of worthwhile things. You simply have to put the time in! Despite our rationalizations, for most of us, there will never be a stage in life when that will be easier to do than the present.

**Testimony:** For many years most of my knowledge of the Bible was secondhand. I grew up going to Bible-teaching churches. My parents gave us some Bible instruction. I even attended a Christian college where everyone graduated with the equivalent to a minor in Bible.

In the early years of marriage, I always attended Bible studies in the churches where we lived. Eventually, I even oversaw the studies in a large church where we were members. I knew Christ as my Savior, and I certainly knew *something* about the Bible.

One day, a neighbor began asking me to go to a well-known international Bible study that teaches people to really study the Bible for themselves, without being “spoon-fed.” It took me two years to finally agree to go.

At the end of my first year in the study, I thought I would probably continue. It was a pretty good study I thought – enough to make me want to return. But by the end of my second year in the study, something tremendous had happened. I had developed a thirst for God’s word I had never had before.

We lived in Phoenix, Arizona in those years, and since Phoenix is a hot, arid desert region, people there are encouraged to drink a lot of water. Before living there, I’d never enjoyed drinking water. I just didn’t think I felt thirsty. But after living there for a few years, I decided I should probably take the advice I’d been given. At first, it was only out of commitment that I drank more water. But over time, I noticed that if I missed my quota of water, I felt thirsty – thirstier than I ever felt before I became a real water-drinker.

Reading and studying the Bible for yourself is just like this: In the beginning, you may find doing your homework is like trying to get serious about an exercise regiment after years without exercise. But over time, you will develop a thirst for God’s word that you’ve never experienced before.

### **Conclusion**

Could it be that you are a Christian who has been living a spiritually dehydrated life for years without knowing it?

In Isaiah 55:10-11, God says His word is like rain that waters the earth, in that, *it always has some impact*. “...My word that goes out from my mouth...it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” Here we find a promise of a return on our investment in reading and studying God’s word! If you put in the time, you are guaranteed an investment of eternal significance: The Bible always evokes a response. It will change your life!

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<sup>i</sup> As quoted by Peter Hammond

<sup>ii</sup> McDowell, Josh. (1999). *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 8. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> Finkelstein, Louis, ed. (1960). *The Jews, Their History, Culture, and Religion*, 3. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol 1. New York: Harper and Brothers, (as quoted in McDowell, 13).

<sup>iv</sup> Dockery, David S., Kenneth A Mathews and Robert B. Sloan. (1994). *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, 221. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, (as quoted in McDowell, 5).

<sup>v</sup> Collett, Sidney. (n.d.) *All About the Bible*, 63. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, (as quoted in McDowell, 10).

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<sup>vi</sup> Geisler, Norman L and William E. Nix. (1968) *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 123-124. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968 (as quoted in McDowell, 10).

<sup>vii</sup> Metzger, Bruce M. (1968). *The Text of the New Testament*, 34. New York: Oxford University Press (as quoted in McDowell, 9).

<sup>viii</sup> McDowell, 9, also ch. 3.

<sup>ix</sup> McDowell, 34-35.

<sup>x</sup> McDowell, 35.

<sup>xi</sup> As quoted by Billy Graham in the forward to Mears, *What the Bible is All About*.