

In the Word with Max Lucado

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



Hope. Pure and simple.

In the Word with Max Lucado

THE BIBLE is a peculiar book. Words crafted in another language. Deeds done in a distant era. Events recorded in a far-off land. Counsel offered to a foreign people. This is a peculiar book.

It's surprising that anyone reads it. It's too old. Some of its writings date back five thousand years. It's too bizarre. The book speaks of incredible floods, fires, earthquakes, and people with supernatural abilities. It's too radical. The Bible calls for undying devotion to a Carpenter who called Himself God's Son.

Logic says this book shouldn't survive. Too old, too bizarre, too radical.

The Bible has been banned, burned, scoffed, and ridiculed. Scholars have mocked it as foolish. Kings have branded it as illegal. A thousand times over the grave has been dug and the dirge has begun, but somehow the Bible never stays in the grave. Not only has it survived, it has thrived. It is the single most popular book in all of history. It has been the best-selling book in the world for three hundred years!

There is no way on earth to explain it. Which perhaps is the only explanation. The answer? The Bible's durability is not found on earth; it is found in heaven. For the millions who have tested its claims and claimed its promises there is but one answer—the Bible is God's book and God's voice.

As you read it, you would be wise to give some thought to two questions. What is the purpose of the Bible? How do I study the Bible? Time spent reflecting on these two issues will greatly enhance your Bible study.

Chapter One

A MOST PECULIAR BOOK

WHAT IS the purpose of the Bible? Let the Bible itself answer that question. Since you were a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise. And that wisdom leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:15)

The purpose of the Bible? Salvation. God's highest passion is to get His children home. His book, the Bible, describes His plan of salvation. The purpose of the Bible is to proclaim God's plan and passion to save His children.

That is the reason this book has endured through the centuries. It dares to tackle the toughest questions about life: Where do I go after I die? Is there a God? What do I do with my fears? The Bible offers answers to these crucial questions. It is the treasure map which leads us to God's highest treasure, eternal life.

But how do we use the Bible? Countless copies of Scripture sit unread on bookshelves and nightstands simply because people don't know how to read it. What can we do to make the bible real in our lives?

The clearest answer is found in the words of Jesus.

Ask, He promised, and God will give it to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you (Matt. 7:7).

The first step to understanding the Bible is to ask God to help us. We should read prayerfully. If anyone understands God's Word it is because of God and not the reader.

But the Helper will teach you everything and cause you to remember all that I told you. The Helper is the Holy Spirit whom the father will send in my name (John 14:26).

Before reading the Bible, pray. Invite God to speak to you. Don't go to Scripture looking for your idea; go searching for His.

Not only should we read the Bible prayerfully, we should read it carefully. *Search and you will find*, is the pledge. The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried. *Search for it like silver, and hunt for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand respect for the Lord, and you will find that you know God (Prov. 2:4,5).*

Any worthy find requires effort. The Bible is no exception. To understand the Bible you don't have to be brilliant but you must be willing to roll up your sleeves and search.

Be a worker who is not ashamed and who uses the true teaching in the right way (2 Tim. 2:15).

Here's a practical point. Study the Bible a bit at a time. Hunger is not satisfied by eating twenty-one meals in one setting once a week. The body needs a steady diet to remain strong. So does the soul. When God sent food to His people in the wilderness, He didn't provide loaves already made. Instead, He sent them manna in the shape of *thin flakes, like frost on the desert ground (Exod. 16:14).*

God gave manna in limited portions.

God sends spiritual food the same way. He opens the heavens with just enough nutrients for today's hunger. He provides. *A command here, a rule there. A little lesson here, a little lesson there* (Isa. 28:10).

Don't be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. Some days a lesser portion is all that is needed. What is important is to search everyday for that day's message. A steady diet of God's Word over a lifetime builds a healthy soul and mind.

A little girl returned from her first day at school. Her Mom asked, "Did you learn anything?" "Apparently not enough," the girl responded, "I have to go back tomorrow and the next day and the next...."

Such is the case with learning. And such is the case with Bible study. Understanding comes little by little over a lifetime.

There is a third step in understanding the Bible. After the asking and seeking comes knocking. After you ask and search, then knock.

Knock and the door will be opened to you (Matt. 7:7).

To knock is to stand at God's door. To make yourself available. To climb the steps, cross the porch, stand at the doorway and volunteer. Knocking goes beyond the realm of thinking and into the realm of acting.

To knock is to ask, *What can I do? How can I obey? Where can I go?*

It's one thing to *know* what to do. It's another to *do* it. But for those who do it, those who choose to obey, a special reward awaits them.

The truly happy people are those who carefully study God's perfect law that makes people free, and they continue to study it. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God's teaching says. Those who do this will be made happy (James 1:25).

What a promise. Happiness comes to those who *do* what they *read!* It's the same with medicine. If you only read the label but ignore the pills, it won't help. It's the same with food. If you only read the recipe but never cook, you won't be fed. And it's the same with the Bible. If you only read the words but never obey, you'll never know the joy God has promised.

Ask. Search. Knock. Simple, isn't it? Why don't you give it a try? If you do, you'll see why the book you are holding is the most remarkable book in history.

What a vital truth! Understanding the purpose of the Bible is like setting the compass in the right direction. Calibrate it correctly and you'll journey safely. But fail to set it, and who knows where you'll end up.

Chapter Three

PRINCIPLES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

SOME TIME ago I sat down with my daughters to play a card game. We had received the game several months ago and remembered the fun we had the first time we tried it. So we decided to play again.

The cards were not the typical ones with spades and aces, but rather a different set designed especially for this contest. As we dealt the cards we realized something was missing—the instructions. We couldn't find the instructions.

No problem, we thought. We'll remember the rules as we go along.

One of the girls asked how a person wins this game. We couldn't remember. That was also on the instruction sheet. *No problem, we thought, we'll figure it out as we go along.*

The results were interesting. First, we tended to make up rules which fit our personal needs. (Amazing how a bad draw can jar your memory about an obscure rule offering second chances.)

Since we couldn't remember how to determine the winner, we all had different objectives. Some wanted to get as many cards as possible. Others wanted to lose as many cards as possible. Since we didn't know the objective, we couldn't agree upon the plan.

The result was chaos. Four people making four sets of rules with four different objectives.

Fortunately, we finally found the instructions and learned, to the surprise of each of us, that none of us was entirely correct.

It's hard to play together if you don't know the goal.

Now, take that simple card game and amplify it by two millennia of heritage and centuries of denominational loyalty and a dozen or so layers of religious tradition and you have an idea as to the difficulty of biblical interpretation.

Each of us knows what it is like to discuss the same Bible with a person and reach two conclusions.

Ideally it would be nice to say, *The Bible says what it means and means what it says*. But realistically, we have difficulty understanding what the Bible says. I often get questions from people about how to interpret the Bible. Here are a few examples.

1. Jesus washed His disciples' feet. He commanded that His disciples do the same. We, however, have no foot-washing ceremony...should we?
2. Timothy was told by Paul to have a little wine for his stomach's sake...yet didn't the same Paul warn about being drunk on wine?
3. Paul commanded the women in Corinth to pray with veils on their heads...should we be distributing veils to our sisters?
4. "A woman must not wear men's clothing" (Deut. 22:5). Does that mean women should sell their jeans?
5. Paul commanded Christians in Rome to greet one another with a holy kiss...are we disobeying if we don't pucker up? If we are to kiss, where are we to kiss? How often should we kiss? What if we forget to kiss? Can someone kiss in our absence?
6. What do we do with the peculiar passages like "Baptism for the dead" (1Cor. 15:29), "the groaning of nature" in Romans 8, or Christ's preaching to the "spirits in prison" in 1 Peter 3:18, 19?
7. First Corinthians 11:14 states that long hair is shameful for a man but befitting for a woman. Should we shun any man with long hair?
8. "I want men everywhere to pray lifting up their hands in a holy manner, without anger and arguments" (1 Tim. 2:8). If we pray without uplifted hands are we disobeying God?

How do we answer these questions? We begin by remembering that the Bible is God's Word given in man's language. Scripture is a marriage of eternal truth with historical particularity.

- _ It was written in another time.
- _ It was written in another culture.
- _ It was written in another language.

Unless we understand that, then we cannot begin to understand the Bible.

Our world is different than the world of the Bible. Our language, dress, and culture are not the same of those of Israel in the era of Jesus. Consequently, we are interpreting the Bible all the time. For that reason, we need to be careful about using the right rules of interpretation.

Here are a few that you might consider.

* * *

THE TEST OF PRIORITY

How vital is this point to the theme of the Bible?

Some sections of Scripture possess more compelling relevance to the human condition than others. Note the words of Paul:

I passed on to you what I received of which this was most important: that Christ died for our sins, as the Scriptures say; that he was seen by Peter and then by the twelve apostles (1Cor. 15:3-5).

Paul states that there are some truths which are “most important.” He then defines those truths which are “most important.” He then defines those truths as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Bible is not a flat landscape void of mountain peaks and highlands. It has great variety in contour and geography. Though every word of the Bible is important, not every word is equally important. Though every text contributes to the whole, not every text is of equal weight. For example, the same apostle Paul spoke regarding the resurrection of Christ and the jewelry of women. Are the topics of equal importance? Hardly. We can disagree regarding clothing, but to disagree regarding the Resurrection could prove fatal.

Does that mean that parts of the Bible have no value? No. It’s just that some have more value than others. Imagine I am holding three coins: a quarter, a dime, and a nickel. Which coin has the greatest value? The quarter. Does that mean that the dime and nickel are not important? Of course not. They simply have different value.

The wise Bible student knows which verses are *quarter verses* and which are *nickel verses*. The good student majors in the majors and minors in the minors.

Jesus criticized the religious leaders of His day for not doing this. *You’re hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you get, but on the meat of God’s Law, things like fairness and compassion and commitment—the absolute basics! You carelessly take it or leave it. Careful bookkeeping is commendable, but the basics are required (Matt. 23:23, Peterson).*

Is it possible to know the Bible and miss its central message? *Absolutely.* That is exactly what Jesus meant when He said, *You carefully study the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. They do in fact tell you about me, but you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39, 40).*

Measure the teaching by the test of priority so you won’t make the same mistake.

* * *

THE TEST OF CONSISTENCY

Does this point transcend cultural eras and situational particulars?

Let's imagine that you and I are on a trip across the United States. We start in California and conclude in Georgia. As we travel I notice that you comment on certain things. When we reach the Rockies, you make a remark about the thin air. As we travel the plains you share some of what you now about wheat. Driving through Chicago reminds you of your favorite pizza. And Kentucky motivates you to discuss thoroughbred horse racing. All those comments came from your mouth and were heard by me.

Does that mean that they were pressing issues to you? Does the fact that you said them imply that they are areas of vital importance to your life? Probably not. Yet, if I wanted to find out what mattered to you, what would I do? I would look for the topics which surfaced repeatedly throughout the journey.

Your health might be on your mind—if so, you might mention it in Utah and in Kansas, regardless of the geography. Perhaps you are anxious about hunger, so you mention it in the mountains and in the desert. I could measure what matters to you by how often it surfaces in your conversation.

The same is true in Bible study. Truths that matter tend to resurface regardless of culture or era. Regardless of nation or century. Biblical teaching regarding decency and humility is consistent. The principle of tolerance and unity threads its way throughout the Bible. Love of God, love for neighbor, respect for life, regular worship, devotion to family—these are consistently advocated and totally honored throughout Scripture. Ask yourself, “Was this statement intended to be a permanent rule or was it a specific instruction given to address a specific situation?” Give it the test of consistency.

Perhaps it would be helpful to pause and give two examples of this on two contemporary controversial issues. The practice of homosexuality and the role of women.

It may surprise you to know that the Bible is not uniform when it comes to women's ministries in the church.

Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 instructed the women not to teach or have authority over men. If we took this literally then women would not be allowed to sing in the assembly, offer opinions in class, or even say “amen” to a point made by the preacher.

The question surfaces, was this intended to be a permanent rule or was it a specific command given by Paul to a specific situation?

Let's give it the test of consistency. How consistent was Paul in this question? Did he teach the same in other cities and write the same in other letters? It might surprise you to know that he did not.

In Romans 16:1 a woman named Phoebe is listed as a deacon and in Romans 16:3 a woman named Junia is listed as an apostle. Women are found teaching in Acts 18:26 and prophesying in Acts 21:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:5. Why would he have women speaking in one place and urge them to curb their tongue in another? A careful study of 1 Timothy reveals that troublesome women were a major part of the problem at the church.

Apparently the problem in Ephesus was a local problem. And the instructions regarding silence were intended for those listeners.

* * *

THE TEST OF INTENTIONALITY

What was the original intent of the author?

When you look at the illustration below, what do you see?



A duck? A rabbit? A billy goat? A claw hammer? Many people look at the same drawing and see a different object. How do we ascertain the truth?

One way would be to ask the artist. *What was your intent when you drew this sketch?*

Often when two people look at the same verse of Scripture, they see different things. *How do we know what the verse means?* One way would be to ask the Writer. *When You wrote this verse, what did You intend to say?*

We should begin by determining the genre or type of literature in which the verse is found. If I wrote you a poem, I wouldn't intend for you to use it as a science document. On the other hand, if I wrote you a history paper, I wouldn't want you to discount my thoughts as poetic.

The Bible contains many types of literature. Some books are historical; others are personal letters. Some are poetic and others are prophetic. Some stories are parables; others are actual.

When reading a particular verse, it's imperative to ask, *What is the meaning of this section? What's the meaning of the book?*

By the way, don't be discouraged when a particular verse or passage is extremely difficult to understand. There is a direct correlation between the clarity of an issue and its importance to your life. Would a good God shroud a crucial truth? I don't think so. We may never know what Paul meant when he spoke of the "baptism of the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29 or Jesus' preaching to the "spirits in prison" in 1 Peter 3:19.

In some cases, these verses were not meant for us. The original author and his audience are referring to an event or problem you and I don't know about. We are

overhearing one side of a conversation. These verses may make for interesting dialogue but we must not dwell on them lest they eclipse the greater matters of the Bible.

* * *

THE TEST OF HONESTY

Are you studying the Bible for yourself?

This last test is very personal, yet equally important. Are you studying the Bible for yourself? Or are you letting others interpret the Bible for you?

The man who looks into the perfect law...and makes a habit of so doing, is not the man who hears and forgets. He puts that law into practice and he wins true happiness” (James 1:25, Phillips).

Imagine you are selecting your food from a cafeteria line. You pick your salad, you choose our entrée, but when you get to the vegetables, you see a pan of something that turns your stomach.

“Yuck! What’s this?” you ask, pointing.

“Oh, you don’t want to know,” replies a slightly embarrassed server.

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, if you must. It’s a pan of pre-chewed food.”

“What?”

“Pre-chewed food. Some people prefer to swallow what others have chewed.”

Repulsive? You bet. But widespread. More so than you might imagine. Not with cafeteria food, but with God’s Word.

Such Christians mean well. They even listen well. But they discern little. They are content to swallow whatever they are told. No wonder they’ve stopped growing.

Remember: *Be careful in your life and in your teaching* (1 Tim. 4:16).

Chapter Four

READ THE STORY: WHEN MY PAIN MEETS GOD'S WORD

READ THE story.

When life closes in, read the story. When someone you trusted repays you with dishonesty.

When searing yesterdays stall soaring today's.

When you've been knocked off the mountaintop and climbing back up seems hopeless.

You're faced with a decision. What do you do with your disillusionment? What do you do with your broken heart? We're not talking inconveniences or hassles. We're not discussing long lines or red lights or a bad game of tennis. We're talking heartbreak. What do you do with that heartbreak?

Read the story. That's what Jesus did when He encountered two disillusioned followers on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a couple of days after His death.

Their world has tumbled in on them, just like yours. It's obvious by the way they walk. Their feet shuffle, their heads hang, their shoulders droop. The seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus must feel like seventy.

As they walk they talk "about everything that had happened" (Luke 24:14). It's not hard to imagine their words.

"Why did the people turn against Him?"

"He could have come down from the cross. Why didn't He?"

"He just let Pilate push Him around."

"What do we do now?"

As they walk, a stranger comes up behind them. It is Jesus, but they don't recognize Him. Disappointment will do that to you. It will blind you to the very presence of God. Discouragement turns our eyes inward. God could be walking next to us, but despair clouds our vision.

Despair does something else. Not only does it cloud our vision, it hardens our hearts. We get cynical. We get callused. And when good news comes, we don't want to accept it for fear of being disappointed again. That's what happened to those two people.

Later on they say these words:

And today some women among us amazed us. Early this morning they went to the tomb, but they did not find his body there. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive! So some of our group went to the tomb too. They found it just as the women said, but they did not see Jesus (Luke 24:22-24).

When reading Scripture we can't always tell in what tone the words were spoken. Sometimes we don't know if the speaker means to be jubilant or sad or peaceful. This time, however, there is no question about what they're thinking: *As if it's not bad enough that Jesus was killed, now some grave robber has taken the body and duped some of our friends.*

These two followers aren't about to believe the women. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Cleopas and his friend are putting their hearts in a shell. They won't take another risk. They won't be hurt again.

Common reaction— isn't it? Been hurt by love? Then don't love. Had a promise violated? Then don't trust. Had your heart broken? Then don't give it away. Do like P.T. Barnum. Settle the score by blaming the world and hardening your heart.

There is a line, a fine line, which once crossed can be fatal. It's the line between disappointment and anger. Between hurt and hate, between bitterness and blame. If you are nearing that, let me urge you, don't cross it. Step back and ask this question: *How long am I going to go on nursing my hurt?*

At some point you have to move on. At some point you have to heal. At some point you have to let Jesus do for you what He did for those men.

Know what He did? First of all, He came to them. I know we've already mentioned that, but it's worth repeating. He didn't sit back and cross His arms and say, "Why can't those two get on with the program?" He didn't complain to the angel and say, "Why won't they believe the empty tomb? Why are they so hard to please?"

What did He do? He met them at their point of pain. Though death has been destroyed and sin annulled, He has not retired. The resurrected Lord has once again wrapped Himself in Human flesh, put on Human clothes, and searched out hurting hearts.

Read carefully their words and see if you can find their hurt: *Jesus said to them, "What are you talking about?" They said, "About Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet who said and did many things before God and all the people. Our leaders and the leading priests handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. But we were hoping that he would free Israel"* (Luke 24:19-21).

There it is. "But we were hoping...." The disciples had hoped Jesus would free Israel. They had hoped He'd kick out the Romans. They'd hoped Pilate would be out and Jesus would be in. But Pilate was still in, and Jesus was dead.

Unfulfilled expectations. God didn't do what they wanted Him to do.

They knew what they expected of Jesus. They knew what He was supposed to do. They didn't have to ask Him. If Jesus is the Messiah, He won't sleep in my storm. He won't defy tradition. He'll do what He is supposed to do.

But that's not what He did. And aren't we glad? Aren't we glad the prayer of Cleopas and his friend went unanswered? Aren't we glad God didn't adjust His agenda to fulfill the requests of those two disciples?

They were good disciples. With good hearts. And sincere hearts. They just had the wrong expectations.

When my oldest daughter was about six years old, she and I were having a discussion about my work. It seems she wasn't too happy with my chosen profession. She wanted me to leave the ministry. "I like you as a preacher," she explained. "I just really wish you sold snow cones."

An honest request from a pure heart. It made sense to her that the happiest people in the world were the men who drove the snow-cone trucks. You play music. You sell goodies. You make kids happy. What more could you want? (Come to think about it, she may have a point. I could get a loan, buy a truck, and...Naw, I'd eat too much.)

I heard her request, but didn't heed it. Why? Because I knew better. I know what I'm called to do and what I need to do. The fact is I know more about life than she does.

And the point is, God knows more about life than we do.

People wanted Him to redeem Israel, but He knew better. He would rather His people be temporarily oppressed than eternally lost. When forced to choose between battling Pilate and battling Satan, He chose the battle we couldn't win. He said no to what we wanted and yes to what we needed. He said no to a liberated Israel and yes to a liberated humanity.

And once again, aren't we glad He did? And aren't we glad He does?

Now be honest. Are we glad He says no to what we want and yes to what we need? Not always. If we ask for a new marriage, and He says honor the current one, we aren't happy. If we ask for healing, and He says learn through the pain, we aren't happy. If we ask for more money, and He says treasure the unseen, we aren't always happy.

When God doesn't do what we want, it's not easy. Never has been. Never will be. But faith is the conviction that God knows more than we do about this life and He will get us through it.

Remember, disappointment is cured by revamped expectations.

I like the story about the fellow who went to the pet store in search of a singing parakeet. Seems he was a bachelor and his house was too quiet. The store owner had just the bird for him, so the man bought it.

The next day the bachelor came home to a house full of music. He went to the cage to feed the bird and noticed for the first time that the parakeet had only one leg.

He felt cheated that he'd been sold a one-legged bird, so he called and complained.

"What do you want," the store owner responded, "a bird who can sing or a bird who can dance?"

Good question for times of disappointment. What do we want? That's what Jesus asked the disciples. What do you want? Do you want temporary freedom—or eternal freedom? Jesus went about the task of restructuring their expectations.

You know what He did? He told them the story. Not just any story. He told them the story of God and God's plan for people. *Then starting with what Moses and all the prophets had said about him, Jesus began to explain everything that had been written about Himself in the Scriptures* (Luke 24:27).

Fascinating. Jesus' cure for the broken heart is the story of God. He started with Moses and finished with Himself. Why did He do that? Why did He retell the ancient tale? Why did He go all the way back two thousand years to the story of Moses? I think I know the reason. I know because what they heard is what we all need to hear when we are disappointed.

We need to hear that God is still in control. We need to hear that it's not over until He says so. We need to hear that life's mishaps and tragedies are not a reason to sit tight.

Corrie Ten Boom used to say, "When the train goes through a dark tunnel and the world gets dark, do you jump out? Of course not. You sit still and trust the engineer to get you through."

Why did Jesus tell the story? So we'd know the engineer still controls the train.

The way to deal with discouragement? The cure for disappointment? Go back to the story. Read it again and again. Be reminded that you aren't the first person to weep. And you aren't the first person to be helped.

Read the story and remember, their story is yours!

The challenge too great? Read the story. That's you crossing the Red Sea with Moses.

Too many worries? Read the story. That's you receiving heavenly food with the Israelites.

Your wounds too deep? Read the story. That's you, Joseph, forgiving your brothers for betraying you.

Your enemies too mighty? Read the story. That's you marching with Jehoshaphat into a battle already won.

Your disappointments too heavy? Read the story of the Emmaus-bound disciples. The Savior they thought was dead now walked beside them. He entered their house and sat at their table. And something happened in their hearts. *It felt like a fire burning in us when Jesus talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us* (vs. 31).

Next time you're disappointed, don't panic. Don't bail out. Don't give up. Just be patient. Return to the Word and let God remind you He's still in control.

Read the story!

* * *

For Further Study

For further study, I suggest you read:

--*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, (Zondervan Publishers, 1982).

--*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, by Bernard Ramm, (Baker Book House, 1970).

In the Word with Max Lucado
Published by Word Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America

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