Today we will begin a new series, BE ONE: Essential Disciplines. There are four disciplines we will examine:

Over the next four weeks we learn skills on “How to Read Your Bible”. We will learn to look at a passage in its historical, grammatical and literary context. In this way, we will grasp the biblical author’s meaning so that we can properly apply it to our lives.

Here are the reading assignments for the following weeks:

**DISCIPLINE 1, READING THE BIBLE**

- April 8th, Exploring the context: Read the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15
- April 15th, The Importance of History: Read the Book of Jeremiah, chapter 29
- April 22nd, The Literary Context: Read the Book of Jonah
- April 29th, The importance of words: Read the Book of Philippians

**Who is God?**

**Who is Jesus?**

**Why the Cross?**

**Why the Bible?**

**Why am I Here?**

We have just completed the BE ONE Essential Truths curriculum. We have answered the five essential questions:

1. Reading Your Bible
2. Prayer
3. Stewardship
4. Sharing Your Faith

Next Steps:

1. Watch Bible Reading video: click on Be One Essentials page at bethanychurch.com.
2. Read Bible Reading Study Guide.
3. Discuss in a Group or one-to-one.
4. Come to church next Sunday.
1. Why Study the Bible?

The Bible means many things to many people. Some read it daily to receive encouragement and guidance. Some read it occasionally, perhaps when crisis occurs, like the loss of a family member, a job or a close relationship. And some haven't read the Bible at all, or at least they haven't read it in years. It remains an unused treasure, collecting layers of dust on a shelf somewhere at home.

If we wish to become devoted disciples of Jesus, however, we must learn to know the Bible intimately. In our Essential Truths course, we describe the Bible as “God's Story that has the power to shape our story.” In that course – which, by the way, you should complete before taking this course – we argued that the Scriptures are God's inspired word for us, given to make a difference in our lives, reshaping us into the image of Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us:

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12

When we take this living and active Word seriously, it will inspire, instruct and challenge us to become the disciples of Jesus that we are called to be.

2. A Story Told Through Other Stories

God has chosen to speak this Word to us in a long history of interactions with His people. Because He deals with real people in this history, His Word becomes the story of these interactions. The central plot of this story centers on Jesus. God takes thousands of years to build this story, preparing us for the arrival of His Son in the humble town of Bethlehem. Jesus is born and raised as a young Jewish man, lives a short thirty-something life, dies an unjust death on a cross, and then rises again to launch a new phase in the revelation of God's eternal kingdom. Then for another 60 years or so, selected, inspired disciples of Jesus tell His story and draw out the implications of His story for all of us, for all time, in all cultures.

This grand and glorious story permeates the scriptures. It is told through countless smaller stories, stories that overlap, intersect and color one another. The story of Abraham winds into the story of Moses, which gradually leads into the story of King David, whose descendants rebel. This rebellion in turn causes God to call several great prophets who warn of judgments that pour out over the next several centuries, until at last David's Kingdom almost seems to disappear. But then we also hear of a Son of David who will one day restore that kingdom, a Son later revealed to be Jesus of Nazareth, who is crucified, risen and coming again as King of Kings. Like multicolored threads woven through a beautiful, intricate tapestry, each episode in this broad, sweeping story has its own set of stories that shape and inform the larger picture.

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of the Bible in this document are taken from The New International Version (2011); Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
Here, in the weave and turn of all these stories, we discover the sheer joy of Bible study. You may remember the popular PBS mini-series called Downton Abbey. Each episode details the complex lives of an upper-class English family and their servants, as traditional cultures clash with modern change. The casual observer could enjoy something of the story by watching a single episode. But the real fun began when you stuck with the story over many episodes, where each character’s story develops from week to week, informing the larger story of joy, crisis and change. This example gives us just a small glimmer of the joy that awaits the student of the Bible, as he or she follows the rich textures of countless stories through centuries of change as the narrative builds to a glorious finale in the person of Jesus.

3. Where Do We Begin?

So how do we jump into all these stories and begin to sort out what they mean for us today? We are ultimately looking for Timeless Truths, truths that can cross from these ancient stories into our own stories, truths that apply to all people, in all times, in all cultures. How do these truths emerge from the Biblical stories? What process can we use to discern these truths?

We recommend that you begin with two basic questions:
1. What Did God Say?
2. What Does It Mean for Us Today?

What Did God Say?

First, we begin with a simple question: What did God say? Or, to be more precise, what did God say to the original hearers and readers of His word?

• The Original Setting of the Story

To answer this question well, we must get a sense of the original setting in which the Biblical stories were first told. What were the cultural, religious, economic and political questions of the day? What do we know about the time and place where the events took place? How did people speak, work, struggle and enjoy life with one another? Since God revealed Himself within this ancient context, through stories told to ancient people, we must know something about this context in order to fully understand the original meaning of the story. Scholars therefore refer to the historical or cultural context of a biblical passage.

Look, for example, at this text written by the Apostle Paul to a church in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. He says that:

“…[E]very woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head…” 1 Corinthians 11:5

To understand this text, we must enter this ancient Greek world. What sort of head covering did women wear in those days? Why were they worn? What does it mean that women were praying or prophesying in early public worship services? All these questions help us to discover what God originally says to these early readers of Paul’s letter.
Then, and only then, can we begin to understand what God is saying to us today. If we skip this first step, and rush to apply the text too quickly in our time, we may impose arbitrary, unnecessary restrictions on a woman's participation in worship. Head coverings in our contemporary cultures, for example, may not mean the same thing that they meant in ancient cultures, so why would we ‘force fit’ this ancient cultural custom in our modern world?

At first glance, this need to understand the ancient historical and cultural context of the Bible can be discouraging, but the challenge is not as daunting as we might imagine. Thankfully, many wise scholars have provided tools to help us sort all of this out. Fortunately, we don't all have to become seminary-trained scholars to understand what the Bible truly says.

• The ‘Flow’ of the Story

But there is also another type of context. As we mentioned above, the Bible tells a story through many related stories. To successfully understand one story, then, it will help us to see how one story flows into another, or how one part of a story flows into another part. Scholars call this the literary context of a passage.

For example, when reading the story of Moses, it is helpful to know that the people of Israel found themselves in Egypt because of one of Moses’s ancestors, a man by the name of Joseph, who rose from slavery to become one of the leaders in this foreign land and who brought his relatives there to provide for them during a time of famine. (See Genesis 47-48)

Or, when reading a letter from Paul, it is helpful to see the entire argument that he is making, to determine what a particular part of this argument means. For example, all the wonderful promises written in Romans, chapter 8, build on a foundation of truth that he has laid down in chapters 1-7.

• The Language of the Story

One final note about determining what God originally said in His story. Because He chose to speak through generations of historical people, He used languages that most of us no longer understand. We must therefore consider the language of the story. Most of the Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew, and all but a few words of the New Testament were written in a common form of ancient Greek. Thankfully, however, gifted scholars have given us a wealth of contemporary English translations to choose from, and we will recommend some good translations in Bible Reading – Part 2.

What Does It Mean for Us Today?

• Looking for Timeless Truths

After we have done our best, then, to determine what God said to the original readers and hearers of His word, we can ask the big ‘So What’ question: What does this ancient story mean for us today? How will God’s Story shape my story?

As we stated earlier, at this point in our study, we are looking for “Timeless Truths”, truths that apply to all people, in all times, in all cultures. As we examine what God says to the original hearers and readers of scripture, we can begin to see common teachings that permeate the entire Bible. A bigger picture and a larger world-view begins to emerge. This larger view helps us see:

  • God: His Nature and Work
  • Humanity: Our Nature and Purpose
  • Creation: Its Nature and Purpose
  • Sin: Its Nature and Effect
  • Jesus – The God/Man who is Lord and Savior

As these big, sweeping themes of the Bible come into focus, we can start to understand how these individual passages of scripture apply to us in our world.
• Our Example from Paul’s Letter

What, then, can we say are the Timeless Truths that emerge from Paul’s teaching, cited above, regarding a woman wearing a head covering while praying or prophesying?

In the literary context of this passage, Paul is discussing the fact that both men and women ought to act appropriately while participating together in worship. In the ancient Jewish culture, men and women worshipped separately, but now, in a new Christian context, both genders worshipped together in the same room. This could create a bit of a scandal in a culture where not only men and women, but also Jewish and Gentile disciples now met together in a new worship setting! So, in this potentially combustible setting, Paul urges his ancient readers to conduct themselves with an appropriate degree of modesty, given the standards of the day, in this new worship context.

A Timeless Truth in this passage, therefore, deals less with head coverings and more with the larger issue of appropriate worship where both genders are attending. Both men and women must dress and behave modestly in public worship, so that they will not distract one another from focusing on God. Worship must be about Him, not about us!

• Stating the Big Idea

So then, we would say that the Big Idea of this passage is that:

_Men and women must dress and behave appropriately when they worship together._

This is our way of stating in plain language a Timeless Truth that emerges from this passage. This truth applies to all people, at all times, in all cultures.

Every time we study the Bible, then, our goal should be to walk away with a ‘Big Idea’. We define a Big Idea as:

_A brief statement that summarizes a Timeless Truth emerging from a passage of the Bible, expressed in plain, simple language._

The more you study the Bible, the easier these Big Ideas will jump out at you from the text. They will eventually provide a new world view for you, providing ongoing correction, comfort and challenge as you become a more faithful disciple of Jesus.

Conclusion

Obviously, we have just begun to scratch the surface of Bible study in this session, but we hope we have given you a few foundational principles to get you started. In our next session, we will get more practical. What are some concrete steps we can take to grow in our discipline of reading the Bible? But, in the meantime, we pray that God will lead you even deeper in your relationship with Jesus. For more information, please visit us at bethanychurch.com.
1. Getting Practical

If you have reached this lesson, then we know you are serious about reading and studying the Bible. In our last session, we covered some basic principles of interpreting the Bible, and now, in this session, we get practical. To begin your life-long journey into the scriptures, we recommend four basic elements:

1. A Study Time
2. A Study Method
3. A Study Group
4. Study Resources

By including these four elements in your Bible Reading practice, you will eventually develop this spiritual discipline, a healthy habit that will continuously feed your mind and soul with the inspired Word that God has for you.

2. A Study Time

1. Investing in a Relationship

First, then, we recommend a fixed, daily Study Time. Just as our bodies will not survive unless we take time to eat, sleep and exercise, our souls will quickly deteriorate unless we take time to feast on, rest in, and meditate upon God's word.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible and it celebrates the treasures of God's Word. Listen to just a few of thoughts from this early worship song:

“My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.”
Psalm 119:28

“The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.”
Psalm 119:72

“If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.”
Psalm 119:92

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”
Psalm 119:103

The Psalmist clearly believes that his spiritual survival depends upon the time that he puts into meditating on God's revealed Word.

2. Establishing a Fixed Time & Place

Because of our already crowded schedules, most of us should set a fixed, daily time to focus on scripture. Like any relationship, we must invest time in our relationship with God if we want it to grow. Our everyday experience teaches us that busyness can destroy relationships. If we don't invest time in our spouses, families or friends, these relationships grow cold and...
distant. That’s why many couples schedule date nights, and parents schedule family times to ensure that we take the time to share life together.

The same thing holds true in our spiritual relationship with God. We might even consider our daily study time a spiritual “Date Night” with the Lover of our Soul, and a “Family Time” with our Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For most people, early mornings work best to set our hearts and minds right before heading off to face the challenges of daily life. Here we can recall the example of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark tells us that:

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Mark 1:35

Jesus valued His time with the Father so highly that He got up while it was still dark! He was not about to miss this intimate time of spiritual communion.

Even if you are not a morning person, however, this example of Jesus still applies. Whether we meet with God in the morning, afternoon or evening, we must view our time with the Him as non-negotiable, whenever that fixed time might be.

Likewise, notice that Jesus “went off to a solitary place”. It will be easier to keep our fixed study time, if we designate a quiet place in which to meet God daily. A favorite chair in a quiet place will do nicely. Some people even designate a space in their home as a “prayer closet.” Still others make daily trips to a park, a coffee shop, a secluded place in the office, or even in their cars before they head to work.

Whatever time and place you choose, make this appointment with God fixed and regular. Guard that time diligently. As much as possible, don’t let the distractions of life rob you of your daily interaction with God as He speaks to you through His Word.

3. A Study Method

Once we designate a fixed Study Time, we must decide how to use that time. We must establish a regular Study Method. Our methods will evolve as we grow deeper in our relationship with God. To begin, however, we suggest a simple method that can be completed in about 30 minutes. This simple method consists of six steps.

1. Open with a brief prayer. Ask God to teach you what you need to know from His Word today.

2. Read a short passage from the scriptures. We recommend that you start with the book of Mark or Psalms.

3. Reflect on this passage using the principles we discussed in our last session. Ask two basic questions: “What did God say?”, and “What does it mean for us today?”. It will be helpful to have a journal handy to capture your thoughts in writing.
As you are getting started, don't over think this step. Stick to the big picture. Do your best to grasp the major points and the big picture, leaving deeper details for later reflection. Over time, you will become more and more curious about the contexts and overlapping stories of the Bible, and then you will find your Study Times growing longer and much more rewarding.

4. Restate the Big Idea of the passage. Recall from our last session that a Big Idea is a Timeless Truth that applies to all people, in all times, in all cultures. Review this last session for an example of a Big Idea statement. Once you define this statement, you may want to record it in your journal.

5. Apply the Big Idea of this passage in your life today. Remember that God gave us His Story so that it might shape our story. His Spirit uses His Word to change us. At this stage of your study, therefore, consider what difference should this truth make your life. To make this application, think about whether this story...
   • inspires or encourages you in difficult times,
   • instructs you about what is true and what is false, or
   • challenges you to make a change in your attitude or your actions.

Again, it will be helpful to record this application in a journal. If possible, share this insight with someone, and give them permission to ask how you are progressing with this application.

6. Finally, close in prayer, asking God's Holy Spirit to encourage and empower you to apply this scriptural principle in your life today.

That's it. Six simple steps to get you started. Begin here, and you will quickly find that you are drawn deeper and deeper into God's story. You will want to remain as long as possible at the feast of God's Word. But don't rush. Be patient. And remember: have fun with it! The Psalmist says that this whole experience of reflecting on God's word should be a “delight”!

4. A Study Group

A large part of our delight in God's Word will come when we reflect on the Bible together. We therefore recommend that you commit to a Study Group. God's Story is such a rich treasure, so we will always benefit from other peoples' thoughts and experiences surrounding it. God's great story is a diamond with millions of facets, and none of us can see all these facets by ourselves. We need a community of faithful followers engaging with the Bible together to experience its beauty and power in greater depth.

We recommend that Study Groups meet weekly, but, if that is not possible, you should at least meet monthly. All our campuses will have a way for you to find a group that meets in your area. You can meet in someone's home, a breakfast place, at church or at your work place.

When looking for a good Bible Study Group, insist on the following criteria:
   • Group members are consistent in their attendance. Everyone will have to miss occasionally, but a consistent group commitment will enhance the value of your study together.
   • Everything shared in the group stays in the group. Complete confidentiality is essential. Other people's thoughts and experiences are not yours to share.
   • Find your answers in the scriptures. While people will have many different opinions and experiences regarding spiritual things, the group must share a common desire to find their answers within the pages of the Bible. God has given us His Word as a light to our path, so we are best served to stay focused on that light.
   • Find a group that has fun together! You will be much more faithful to a group if you enjoy it. And, if one group doesn't work for you, look for another, until you find one that is a better fit. It may take a while, but don't give up. In the end, you will discover that your Bible Reading will be much more rewarding and fulfilling if you can join with others.
5. Study Resources

Along with your Study Time, a Study Method and a Study Group, we recommend that you use good Study Resources.

1. A Good Translation

Your first important resource is a good Bible translation. While there are many good English translations to choose from, we recommend one of three possible options, because we believe they each are based on solid scholarship and, each in their own way, have tried to remain as faithful as possible to the original meaning of the authors’ language. These three options are:


Each of these translations are available freely in apps and on the internet. While each translation has their share of advocates willing to argue on its behalf, we believe that any of these options will provide a faithful understanding of the original authors’ language.

2. A Study Bible

Next to a good translation, your most important resource should be a good Study Bible. This resource offers several helpful tools:

1. A Summary of each book of the Bible, explaining what we know about the author or authors, the original readers, the historical context in which it was written, and what the primary message and purpose of the book seems to be.
2. Footnotes that explain historical or cultural references in a passage, and possible meanings of language that may seem hard for us to grasp in our contemporary culture.
3. Maps, timelines, charts and other graphics that summarize and place in context some of the material we are reading.
4. Cross references to other Biblical passages that address similar themes.
5. Possible contemporary applications of various biblical passages.
6. And several other tools and tips.

While these Bible Study helps are not “inspired” like the Biblical text itself, these tools will help us to discern what God’s inspired Word is saying to us. Each of the English translations mentioned above have Study Bibles available, and each of our campuses should be able to assist you in finding a Study Bible that best fits your needs.

3. Other Resources

In addition to a good Study Bible, several other resources can help you delve into the mysteries of God’s Story. We have provided a recommended list of these resources on our Bethany Church web site. Many of these resources are web-based and free for your personal use. They include:

- Bible Commentaries
- Maps & Charts
- Study Guides
- Web Apps
- And several others....

Over time, you will discover the resources that are most helpful for your study.

Conclusion

So then, where do you go from here? We hope that you will make the commitment to grow in this spiritual discipline of Reading the Bible. Begin by setting a fixed time and place to study and use the simple method we have outlined in this session. And then join a group to make the experience more rewarding. As you take these concrete steps, we pray that God will lead you even deeper in your relationship with Jesus. For more information, please visit us at bethanychurch.com.
Bible Reading Discussion Guide

Opening
Discuss a time in your life when a passage from the Bible provided hope or direction for you.

Going Deeper

1. Why Study the Bible?
   ✓ What do you think the author to the Hebrews means when he says that the Word of God is “Sharper than any double-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12)
   ✓ Why should this truth inspire us to study the Bible?

2. A Story Told through other Stories
   ✓ Read 2 Samuel 7:4-17. Why do you think that God chose to reveal His promise through King David, about a thousand years before Jesus is born?
   ✓ Read Hebrews 1:1-2. How did the Old Testament prophets prepare God’s people for the coming of Jesus?

3. Where Do We Begin?
   ✓ Why is it important to discern what God really says, before we decide how His word applies to us today?
   ✓ Why should we know something about the original setting and ‘flow’ of a biblical story to understand it properly?
   ✓ How does the story of the Bible lead us to “Timeless Truths” that can guide us through life?
   ✓ Read Mark 2:13-17. What would you say is the “Big Idea” in this passage. (Write a statement together, using the instructions found earlier in this guide.)

Next Steps

• Choose a passage in scripture, and summarize in one paragraph, “What Did God Say?” Remember you should first discern what God says, before you decide how to apply it. If you need a place to start, read Mark 4:21-25.

• After completing the previous step, now write a “Big Idea” statement that expresses a Timeless Truth, a truth that applies to all people, in all times, in all cultures.

• Discuss your reflections with someone else, either in a group or one-on-one.
Bible Reading Discussion Guide

Opening
What are some of the most difficult obstacles we face when we try to read and understand the Bible?

Going Deeper

1. Getting Practical
   ✓ Of the four practical elements mentioned in this section – A Study Time, A Study Method, A Study Group and Study Resources – which element could you begin first to work on, in order to deepen your understanding of the Bible?

2. A Study Time
   ✓ Read Psalm 1:1-2. Why does the Psalmist believe we should meditate on God’s words “day and night”?
   ✓ What sort of challenges do you face in setting aside a normal time for Bible study? What can you do to make sure that this practice is embedded within your daily schedule?

3. A Study Method
   ✓ As Next Steps in Part 1 of this guide, you were encouraged to practice a simple method of Bible Study, which ends in the statement of a Big Idea. If you were able to complete this assignment, share this experience with the group.
   ✓ If you use a different study method that works for you, please share this method with the group. Perhaps it will work for someone else.
   ✓ How can we get better at practicing our selected method of Bible Study?

4. A Study Group
   ✓ Read Acts 2:42-47. List the various things that the early church members did to grow in their faith. Why was it important that they practiced these things together, in community?
   ✓ Why is it important to join with others to study the Bible?

5. Study Resources
   ✓ Share with your group some study resources that you have found especially helpful.

Next Steps

• What one change will you make this week to improve your commitment to Bible study. Share this action with the group and invite them to challenge you on this action item the next time that you meet.

• Review the Be One Essentials web site and the Study Resources that are offered there. Go to bethanychurch.com and click on the Be One Essentials button.