

the fourth step

Seek to extend our knowledge of God's character, his promises and his requirements through contemplation and study of the bible

God 'puts it in writing'

Much has already been said about the essential role of communication in our relationship with God. Our time spent daily in prayer will draw us ever closer to him, as petition, praise and all the other elements combine to bring us directly into his presence. We will become attuned to his leading, and we will learn to recognise his voice. Such intimacy is vital to our development as Christians, yet God's communication with us is by no means restricted to prayer times. In fact, the largest part of what he wants us to know, and therefore what we will ever *need* to know, is available to us *right at this moment*. Along with the leading of the Holy Spirit, the bible is one of God's primary means of communication with his people. It tells us much of what we need to know about God's nature, his promises and his requirements of us. It gives us a breath-taking insight into his love for us, and how that love reached its ultimate expression on the cross. It gives us a priceless record of how God has related to people in real-life situations, and an invaluable appreciation of how we should relate to *him*.

taking it personally...

In the bible, God reveals himself to every generation. The truths it contains are as immediate and essential in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. In fact, it couldn't be more pertinent or up-to-date if it had been written this morning - *because God's nature does not change*. Part of that nature is manifest in his love for us *as individuals*. He wants *us* to know about and experience that love, he wants *us* to know and experience *him*. Such things are so important that God had them put in writing, but it would be quite wrong to see the bible as merely a 'standard issue' guidebook to Christianity. In every way that matters, the bible is God's personal gift to each of us. When we read of his love, we are really reading of his love for us; when we see how Christians should be and what they should do, the bible is talking about *us*...the promises of eternity are ours - and the bible is ours, he meant *us* to have it. When we take the bible personally, as we are meant to, we will realise the potential of this extraordinary gift. It is life-changing and empowering, it comes directly from Almighty God ...and it is addressed to *us*.

During a British coronation, a bible is placed in the hand of the monarch with the words, "The most valuable thing this world affords." For the Christian, this is entirely true - the bible is priceless. Scripture is "*God-breathed*"- that is, imparted by the Holy Spirit - "*and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"(2 Timothy 3:16-17) In other words, the bible is a tool to bring us to full maturity in Christ, and to equip us for dynamic service. For others, though, scripture is a closed book. Jesus, speaking to some Jews, said, "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*" (John 5:39-40)

The obvious point Jesus was making is that bible study does not produce eternal life - a relationship with Jesus gives us that. These people's study of scripture was to no avail - *because they had rejected the author*. The bible is unique for many reasons, not least because it is the only book that requires its readers to have a relationship with the author before they can fully benefit from it. Let's see why... *'The man without the Spirit does not*

accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.' (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The bible comes from the Spirit of God. It can only be understood by those who have the Spirit living within them - and no-one who rejects Christ has his Spirit.

We have the Spirit of God - the Spirit who *will* 'guide you into all truth', (John 16:13). He will open our hearts and minds to scripture, and he will use it to bring us into a mature and fruitful relationship with God. As long as we remain open to his leading, and we have a reasonably focussed approach to reading and study, we will be richly blessed by 'the most valuable thing this world affords'.

making it work - bible reading

A focussed approach to reading the bible implies *method* and *regularity* - we need a little self-discipline to get the maximum benefit from God's word. Of course, we may often be blessed just by picking up the bible and contemplating a passage of scripture - and we can continue to do that. To consistently get the most out of reading, though, a more structured approach is best - for example, we might want to start with a gospel, proceed to one of the letters to the early churches, and then go to Psalms. We could perhaps get a copy of 'The bible in one year', which contains short daily readings combining an Old and New Testament passage with an extract from Psalms or Proverbs. Whatever we choose, we want to benefit from *all* the wisdom of the bible, so our plan should take us through the whole book eventually. As for regularity, little and often works well. A short *daily* reading, prayerfully considered, is a great way to get to know the bible, and it creates continual opportunities for God to lead, instruct and build us up...

study - reading's 'other half'

Bible *reading* gives us an overview of scripture, a general 'feel' for the nature of God and how we should relate to him. It is invaluable because as we read his word, he is able to teach us, lead us, and to influence our thinking - so that our character more closely resembles that of our saviour. Ostensibly, bible *study* performs a similar function. In study we discover more about the nature, promises and requirements of God. We are drawn deeper into relationship - we may sometimes find ourselves engaging in spontaneous worship during study. Yet, whereas reading gives us the big picture, study fills in the details. We will be blessed in both, enlightened in both - *but we need both*. Put simply, every insight, every revelation - from and about God - is valuable to his people. The big picture, by itself, is not big enough - because there is more. The details only reach their full potential when seen in the context of the big picture. We want to have the deepest, most fulfilling relationship possible with God - the most complete revelation of his love. Reading *and* study go together - they are both opportunities for God to draw us close... so let's take both opportunities!

Bible studies are often corporate affairs - churches arrange studies for groups within the congregation. These times of fellowship and learning play a vital role in spiritual growth, building up the individual and church alike. They may be combined with prayer and worship in a 'house-group' format, where a small number of people have fellowship at the home of the group-leader - usually once a week. Whatever form it takes, this provision is important in the development of all Christians - it's God's plan that we meet together in his name. We should become part of whatever these arrangements are in our church - not just for fellowship, study and prayer, but also because we can *contribute* in these groups. We are disciples of Christ, and we have something to offer. It may be only a prayer, or an insight, or a bit of support. It may be much more than any of these - it may be something powerful and life-changing. We need to be in a fellowship where we can be built up - but we also need to

be aware that God is not going to wait until we are perfect to use us, and that service to others often starts in the house-group environment. Of course, the privilege of service, itself, is often used by God to build us up, and we will be looking at that in detail later in the programme. But for now, we should recognise that church bible studies/house-groups are important for many reasons, and, if we are not already committed to one, we should be seeking advice on where to get involved.

making it work – bible study

When studying at home, there are a variety of methods we can use. There are 'study guides' which deal with topics, e.g., salvation, sin, prayer; some that go through a book of the bible, and others that will highlight a bible 'character' - Moses, David or Job, for example. We can choose our own topics and use a study plan such as the '**4 C's**' format, which is straightforward and effective. For any study, a good translation of the bible with a concordance (word list) is most helpful. The only other requirements for the '**4 C's**' model (shown below) are a notebook and pen:

The '4 C's' bible study plan

Time commitment - 20 minutes +

Method

1. **Pray** for wisdom and enlightenment from the Holy Spirit.
2. **Read** the short, pre-selected passage carefully and prayerfully, and *consider* it.
3. On the notebook, put the book, chapter and verses reference at the top, then the following headings:
 - a) *Context.*
 - b) *Concepts.*
 - c) *Challenges.*
 - d) *Consequences.*
4. Under **Context**, jot down anything you know about the context of the passage - what the situation was at the time, why the passage appears when it does, who it was addressed to, etc. Refer to the surrounding verses to make sure that nothing relevant has been 'cut off' from either end of your portion of scripture.

Concepts - What was the *point* or points of this passage? What was it saying, what was it meant to achieve?

Challenges - Are there things you find difficult about this passage? Are there *concepts* you don't fully understand? If there are, it may well be that God wants to reveal their meaning through further study. Be sure to follow up on these by prayerfully considering related passages - *the wider context*. A bible with a concordance will help identify such passages, and will be very useful when going 'in depth'. The wisdom and understanding that God gives as we search and study is word goes straight to the heart - and stays there.

Consequences - What does this passage mean to you today? Is it an encouragement, or perhaps a warning? Is there anything in it you need to act upon? How should you respond to it - how should you apply it to your life?

'4 C's' is one of many bible plans designed to give the user a good grounding in scripture. It is quick and simple, but also very effective - because it is really concerned with how we *think* about God's word...and what we *do* about it. Whatever method we choose, we want our study time to deliver the benefits we have been considering. We will pray for the wisdom, discernment and guidance of the Holy Spirit, but bible study - like other areas of our relationship with God - requires a little input from our side. As ever, when we put our faith into action, however imperfectly, God blesses us out of all proportion to our efforts. There are rich rewards in studying scripture, and our contribution to receiving them is *application*.

We apply our time, but we also apply our *minds*.

Real revelation, real understanding comes from the Holy Spirit. Such revelation doesn't often come as a bolt from the blue, and possibly *never comes at all* to those who think that the Spirit is only there to save them the effort of using their God-given faculties. It *generally* comes as we consider scripture to the best of our ability, inviting the Holy Spirit to 'put the pieces together' for us, correct us, or take us to a higher level of understanding altogether. Using our minds is not about intellect or education, though - it is about showing *desire*. It is about showing a desire for a deeper walk with God, for a deeper understanding of what it means to be in relationship with him. Our cleverness (or lack of it) has little bearing, because God is always ready to give wisdom to those who seek it. It is our willingness - our 'little input' - that makes the difference.

How should we apply our minds to scripture? If we are using '4 C's' or similar, we are already doing that. But there will be times when God wants us to go deeper, and perhaps times when we just want a clearer idea of what the bible is saying to us. Such occasions are opportunities to know God and his Word better, and we can take advantage of them with a little application and some common-sense guidelines. These guidelines work with any type of study, and can be used by anyone - no theology degree necessary!

Guidelines for study - going deeper and getting it right

1. Prayer. We want God's perspective of scripture and what it really means - so we need to be in a position to hear from him. That means being in good standing with God, then asking his Holy Spirit to lead us and direct our thoughts as we undertake our study.

2. Context. Context is important, because taking things 'out of context' often completely changes their meaning. There are several aspects to consider when we look at context 'in-depth', which are...

a) The immediate context. This is just the passage in which our verse (or word) appears. It may tell us a lot about why the verse was included, who it was addressed to, and what it would have meant to those who first heard it.

b) The wider context. Does the 'theme' of our verse occur in other places in the bible? If so, does it appear in a similar context? Often, recurrent themes are concepts that all Christians need to know or apply. Examples - The power of faith, the penalties of sin, salvation, obedience, helping the poor, etc.

c) **The historic context.** Is the historic and cultural context important? Does the verse address a particular time or situation in history? Is it Old or New Testament, or can the same idea be found in both?

d) **The 'related' context.** Is there another idea or concept which frequently appears with the one we are looking at? For example, 'sin' is often found alongside 'repentance'. It may give us a clearer picture if we include any related issues in our study.

An understanding of the context will give us a good idea of what our verse is about, and why it is in the bible. It may also tell us if it was a special response to particular circumstances, or a general principle which still applies today.

3. Agreement. Quite straightforward. Any valid interpretation of scripture will not disagree with the established truths of Christianity.

4. Literal. The bible generally means what it says - literally. The obvious exceptions are metaphors and allegorical passages.

5. Translation. For study, a good standard translation of the bible - with a concordance - is best, though a 'paraphrase' is fine for daily reading.

Aside from a couple of common-sense additions, these guidelines just give us a clearer picture about *context* - an important part of our '4 C's' study format. For many bible passages, '4 C's' will produce excellent results - after all, *the bible generally means what it says*. But when we are looking at challenging scriptures, applying the guidelines will significantly enhance '4 C's' (or any other study). We will be using the best methods available to understand scripture, and our willingness and determination- our *input* - is an invitation to God to confirm in our hearts what it *should* mean to us. These simple guidelines will ensure that we gain maximum benefit from our study times, but they are also important for another reason - they will protect us from false teaching.

test everything. hold on to the good. (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

The bible plays a vital role in our development as Christians, and so it is not surprising that God provides - in every generation - gifted teachers to help his people understand it. These may be serving at a local level (in our church or house-group) or sometimes they are internationally known public speakers. We can be greatly blessed by such teachers, as their efforts enhance our own studies. There are also, however, people who *presume* to teach in God's name, yet their teachings are damaging to individuals and church alike. Such people were around even when the bible was being written, and are frequently mentioned in scripture - for example::

"But there were false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them - bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up." (2 Peter 2:1-3)

Their teaching is *destructive*, their motive is *greed*. Put simply, they tell lies in the name of Jesus for financial gain. So, how do we avoid becoming victims of these false teachers? *We*

test everything! We use our guidelines to check what we are being told. As true disciples of Christ, we need never be taken in by false teaching - we have the Holy Spirit and the bible on our side. To see how this works, let's consider something that is commonly taught: There are people who teach that all Christians should be wealthy, and that those who are not either lack faith or are 'secret sinners'. If we have 'faith' (so the story often goes) God is *obliged* to help us financially and, conveniently, we can demonstrate our faith by donating to the 'ministry' of the teacher.

When we apply our guidelines to this teaching, this is what we will find: The Holy Spirit will *not* lead us to believe it. When we examine the *immediate context* of the verses and half-verses these teachers quote, we will see that they have been taken completely out of context - in fact, some will be taken from the many passages which condemn these views. For the wider perspective, we can consider any number of passages where the bible teaches on selfishness, greed, being content in all circumstances, dying to 'self', suffering, serving two masters, the love of money - the list goes on. We can read about what *real* faith actually is, God's sovereignty, and how his blessing cannot be 'bought'. We can read the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul.

False teaching damages people's relationships with God, brings the church into disrepute and diverts resources away from the needy. The good news is that none of God's family need ever be victims of it, because he has provided us with the Spirit and the Word... "Test everything. Hold on to the good."

Putting it all together

Let's summarise the ideas from this session:

1. The bible is a primary means of communication from God to his children. Reading and studying it will significantly deepen our understanding of God and our relationship with him.
2. It has been imparted by the Holy Spirit as a tool to bring us into Christian maturity and fruitful service.
3. *The bible has never been more relevant than it is today.* It is for *us*, in this generation.
4. It can only be properly understood by those who are in relationship with God - by those who have his Spirit.
5. Bible reading is most effective when it is a planned, daily activity which encourages us to respond.
6. Study, combined with reading, gives us the complete picture of God as he has revealed himself in the Bible, and our rights and responsibilities as his family members. Study is an invitation for God to bless us, and to build us up in our faith.
7. Church bible studies, or house-groups, are valuable not just for learning and fellowship, but also as places where we can begin to serve others.
8. Effective and productive study is a joint venture. It comes from the leading of the Holy Spirit with a little application on our part. Using simple guidelines will not only mean we get the most out of our study, but also that we will never be misled by false teaching.

The fourth step says we will:

Seek to extend our knowledge of God's character, his promises and his requirements through contemplation and study of the bible

It is a commitment to give our heavenly Father a little quality time on a regular basis. We do that already - through prayer and worship - yet the bible has so much to offer in terms of Christian maturity and empowerment for service that we cannot ignore it *and* reach our potential in Christ. If you are ready for the bible, for a voyage of discovery *with* the Spirit *from* the Word, then you might like to join in the following prayer of commitment:

Heavenly Father,

I thank you for the gift of the bible - for the wisdom and revelation it contains. I thank you that it is an expression of your love for me, and a guide to experiencing that love. I commit myself from this day on to make regular use of this priceless gift, through contemplation and study. I also thank you that your other great gift - the Holy Spirit - will guide, enlighten and encourage me as I dwell on your word, and that - day by day - I will be drawn closer to you through these times together.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

The fourth step is really a commitment to Christian maturity, a dynamic relationship and blessings out of all proportion to the discipline involved. Not only that, we'll probably find that we enjoy it!

comments and questions for the group meeting

the journal...continued

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - 2 Timothy 3:14 - 17

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The bible is life-changing and empowering, it comes directly from Almighty Godand it is addressed to us.*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - John 20:30-31

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*Bible reading is most effective when it is a planned, daily activity which encourages us to respond.*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Acts 8:26-35

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *Study is an invitation to God to bless us, and to build us up in our faith.*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Psalm 119:9-16

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*Study, combined with reading, gives us the complete picture of God as he has revealed himself in the bible, and our rights and responsibilities as his family members.*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - 2 Peter 1:19-21

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *We have the Spirit of God - the Spirit who will 'guide you into all truth', (John 16:13). He will open our hearts and minds to scripture, and he will use it to bring us into a mature and fruitful relationship with God.*

Day Six - The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.

PREPARATION FOR THE FIFTH SESSION

Please prepare for the fifth session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group