

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. **KNOW** therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today. And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the

laws and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery sermons and scorpions

KNOWABLE WORD

These shall not be made by female hands among you, as among your livestock. And the Lord will take you from among the nations, and you shall be a people for him, as he said to your fathers. And the Lord will bring you into a good land, as he swore to your fathers, a land of flowing streams, a land of hills and valleys, a land of olive trees and fig trees, a land of wheat and barley, a land of vines and pomegranates, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery sermons and scorpions and that he may confirm the **WORD** that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. **KNOW** therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you. When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the **WORDS** that the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And at the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant. Then the Lord

HELPING ORDINARY PEOPLE LEARN TO STUDY THE BIBLE

let the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth. He will confirm his covenant with you, as he swore to your fathers. And the Lord will bring you into a good land, as he swore to your fathers, a land of flowing streams, a land of hills and valleys, a land of olive trees and fig trees, a land of wheat and barley, a land of vines and pomegranates, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery sermons and scorpions and that he may confirm the **WORD** that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. **KNOW** therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you. When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the **WORDS** that the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And at the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant. Then the Lord

PETER KROL

FOREWORD BY TEDD TRIPP

(Revised and Expanded Edition)

KNOWABLE WORD

HELPING ORDINARY PEOPLE
LEARN TO STUDY THE BIBLE
(Revised and Expanded Edition)

Peter Krol

For Ben Hagerup,
who first showed me
how exciting Bible study could be.

CruciformPress

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“Peter Krol has done us a great service by writing the book *Knowable Word*. It is valuable for those who have never done in-depth Bible study and a good review for those who have. **I look forward to using this book to improve my own Bible study.**”

Jerry Bridges, author and speaker (d. 2016)

“At the heart of *Knowable Word* is a glorious and crucial conviction: that understanding the Bible is not the preserve of a few, but the privilege and joy of all God’s people. **Peter Krol’s book demystifies the process of reading God’s Word and in so doing enfranchises the people of God.** I warmly encourage you to read it. Better still, read it with others and apply its method together.”

Dr. Tim Chester, The Porterbrook Network

“**Here is an excellent practical guide to interpreting the Bible.** Krol has thought through, tested, and illustrated in a clear, accessible way basic steps in interpreting the Bible, and made everything available in a way that will encourage ordinary people to deepen their own study.”

Vern Poythress, Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
Westminster Theological Seminary

“This book has three primary virtues and many secondary ones. Its primary virtues are the nobility of its goal (to equip Christians to interpret and apply the Bible), the accuracy of the proposed methodology for interacting with the Bible, and the practical approach to the subject. Additionally, ***Knowable Word* book does a splendid job of employing the practice of ‘learning by doing.’**”

Leland Ryken, Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton
College and author of *How to Read the Bible as Literature*

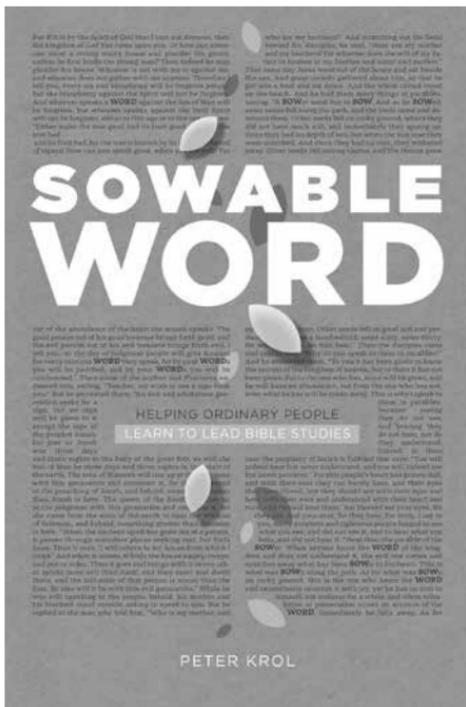
“Peter Krol has written a book that many will find helpful in studying the Bible. Not just new believers, but anyone who wants to think about Scripture will find much here that strengthens their ability to read, study, understand, and apply the biblical text. Illuminating illustrations, helpful examples, and good exercises make this a **good, solid tool** that might be best used in a small group that is either starting to study Scripture together, or that wants to become better readers of the Bible. **A book to be recommended, read, and used.**”

Frederic Clarke Putnam, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, The Templeton Honors College at Eastern University (St. Davids, PA).

“The Word of God is a feast laid before us. Yet we should be concerned with the Church’s growing inability to enjoy this feast. If we don’t know the Bible, we won’t know the God of the Bible, either. *Knowable Word* does a tremendous service. It gives us tools to dig into the Bible that go far beyond the most common light and superficial methods. **This book is biblically rooted, theologically rich, time-tested, and extremely applicable.** Read and use it in your own study, and give it to others in your life and ministry. Enjoy the feast!”

Stephen Lutz, pastor, and author of *King of the Campus* and *College Ministry in a Post-Christian Culture*

Don't miss this companion volume from Peter Krol



[Sowable Word: Helping Ordinary People
Learn to Lead Bible Studies](#)

Knowable Word: Helping Ordinary People Learn to Study the Bible
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Contents

	Foreword	7
	<i>by Tedd Tripp</i>	
	Preface to the Second Edition	13
One	Why Study the Bible?	21
	<i>Unpacking Scripture Rightly</i>	
Two	From Familiarity to Observation	33
	<i>Five Elements and Four Skills</i>	
Three	From Presumption to Interpretation	69
	<i>Keys to Understanding</i>	
Four	From Inertia to Application	105
	<i>Hearing, Doing, and Changing</i>	
Five	Head, Heart, Hands	121
	<i>Three Spheres of Change</i>	
Six	The Unity of the Whole	145
	<i>Correlation across Texts</i>	
	Appendix	155
	<i>You Are Approved!</i>	
	Author and Acknowledgments	159
	Endnotes	160

Foreword

The Bible is a treasure. The infinite God has communicated truth to finite creatures, and he has done so in human language, not celestial. In the Bible we have truth in a fixed form, in words that read the same from day to day. God has revealed all the truth we must understand to live in his world; we are not left to our own devices.

The Bible is objective. We need not derive truth through subjective spiritual impressions. God has revealed truth in an objective form. He has revealed Himself with words; words written down by men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and kept from error as they wrote. (2 Peter 1:20–21).

The Bible is a revelation of absolute truth. The only way finite humans can have absolute truth is by revelation. All human knowledge is subject to constant revision. More study, additional information, and new discoveries must be collated and incorporated to continually reshape what is known. Human knowledge always has a tentative quality. Thus, there is a non-permanence to human knowledge. Not so with the Bible. God has infinite knowledge. He knows all things real, all things possible, and all things potential. Since God has infinite knowledge he can, and has, revealed absolute truth. In the Scripture we have a limited revelation

of truth (we don't know everything that could be known), truth that will always be true (it will never prove false or unreliable), and truth that is sufficient (it is all the truth we will ever need). What a treasure!

Since God used words to give us a book of absolute truth, truth we need to know and understand—what could be more important than understanding this book? Sadly, many Christian people see the Bible as a confusing book shrouded in mystery and requiring some secret insight if it is to be understood. No wonder so few really study it. No wonder it is sometimes read as a religious exercise rather than as the life-giving treasure it truly is.

That's what *Knowable Word* is all about. The Word of God is knowable. Christians can learn simple steps that will enable them to understand and inwardly digest the Word of God and be transformed by its truth.

In *Knowable Word*, Krol introduces and develops three methods for unlocking the meaning of any passage of Scripture. 1) Observation—what does it say? 2) Interpretation—what does it mean? 3) Application—how should I change? Throughout the book Krol opens and expands on this straightforward and memorable method for knowing God's Word. He tells us what to observe, how to find the right interpretation, and suggests ways in which we must make application. In each of these steps the reader is given an easy-to-remember framework for keeping all the pieces in order.

Knowable Word is especially valuable because it is field-tested. Peter Krol has been teaching this approach to Bible study for years. He teaches these things to university students as a DiscipleMakers staff and to ordinary people in the pew as an elder in Christ's church. Each audience, though diverse in life-stage, education, and age, is able to track with this teaching. Krol brings clarity and ease of communication to understanding the Bible. This book possesses the rare quality of being simple without being shallow. It is at once accessible and yet profound and challenging.

I had the joy of seeing Peter teach this material in the church I served as pastor for twenty-nine years. The illustrations used in teaching were from the Proverbs, but the same method was employed—observation, interpretation, and application. In reading this book I was struck with how clearly the methods of understanding the text worked even though the passage under consideration was different.

When Krol taught this method of Bible study to our congregation, people came alive as each step unfolded. They found themselves able to make observations, which they would not have made without these categories, from which to frame their observations. I witnessed their excitement as they made observations that made sense of the text under consideration. I saw the smiles that said, "Hey, I can do this." The reader of *Knowable Word* will have the same experience.

The same was true with interpreting. Krol provides neat, accessible ways of asking questions that aid in the process of interpretation. These questions lead to interpretive conclusions. Again the class was abuzz with the excitement of more ideas than could be adequately entertained during the limited class time.

The time spent in observation and interpretation led seamlessly to application for our Sunday school class. The class was given simple, memorable ways of thinking about how Scripture maps on to life. It was practical application that impacted our thinking; what we should think, how we should feel, and what we should do.

Woven through this book, Krol has placed timely *Your Turn* exercises to enable the reader to practice what is being learned. These exercises take the content of the book out of the theoretical and into the practical.

It is hard to over-estimate the value of this tidy volume. It is clear and uncomplicated. No one will be off-put by this book. It will engage the novice and the serious student of Scripture. It works as a solid read for individuals or as an exciting study for a small group, whether old or young.

Since “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17), it is my prayer that this little volume

Foreword

will be richly blessed by God to the edification of his saints.

Tedd Tripp

Preface

to the Second Edition

As a guitarist, I used to have a joke with fellow guitarists. How do you ever get a guitarist to stop playing his guitar? Put real sheet music—not merely chord charts—in front of him! That joke has become a parable of sorts for my ministry of helping people learn to study the Bible. That’s because, sadly, people with Bibles don’t always know how to use them. They know how to collect study guides, commentaries, sermon audio, study Bibles, lecture notes, magazines, blog feeds, and inspiring quotes. They’re good at absorbing and repeating what they’re taught. They know how to read the “chord charts.”

But the average Christian alone with a Bible is as helpless as the average guitarist stuck with real sheet music.

Now don’t get me wrong: Study guides are a crucial part of Christian education. Their role in Bible study is like that of a tee in the sport of baseball.

The tee is the first guidepost for children learning to play the sport. It assures young athletes that they can hit the ball and not fear it will hit them. It defines where to stand, where to swing the bat, and when to run. It’s a good friend and capable mentor.

As those athletes develop, the tee endures as a tool. Even the pros use tees to help them perfect the mechanics of batting. However, *the tee is not part of the big game*. While the tee trains and refines, it prepares players for the game of baseball, and then it gets out of the way.

In the same way, decent study guides shape Bible students. They assist young Christians in practicing the basics. They embolden new leaders by providing a ready-made structure for discussion groups. They develop mature believers by honing their understanding of Scripture and keeping them connected with the insights of others.

But this book will help you learn to play the game without a tee. It will help you learn to study the Bible for yourself.

Who Is This Book For?

The Reformation and its offspring put Bibles in the hands of ordinary people, but these hands are often clumsy in their craft. So explanatory materials have multiplied, fueling in the hearts of God's people an increasing fervor for God's word. And God willing, this fervor will never abate. If you are among those who share this fervor, this book is for you.

1. Are you a beginner who loves God and his word? Perhaps you see others draw close to God through his word, and you want in on it. You faithfully

attend church services, but you're certain you could never do what the pastor or leader does. So you keep listening and watching. You'd be delighted to experience richer insight; you just don't know where to start.

2. Are you a mature Christian who wants to internalize your Bible study skills? Churches are full of people who have a daily quiet time with their Bible, journal, and *workbook* or *study guide*. These folks have experienced some decent Bible study, and they pretty much get the basics. But they want to be able to do it on their own. Does this describe you? You're used to riding with training wheels, but you're itching to pop them off, let loose, and just keep pedaling.

3. Are you a leader who longs not only to teach but also to equip? You have an effective ministry. People come to Christ. People grow in Christ. People lead others to Christ and engage their communities. The church or small group thrives. But the ministry centers on you, the leader. People come to you with questions; they get answers and go on their way. You desire a better legacy for the Lord—one that produces disciple-making disciples—but you don't quite know how to reproduce yourself. You do what you do instinctively, and you're not sure how to package it up for wholesale distribution.

Who Has Used This Book?

I first wrote *Knowable Word* to take what we do in our campus ministry with DiscipleMakers (www.dm.org) and package it up for others to benefit from. Since the book's publication, I have been delighted to hear from a number of people I expected would benefit from it—especially pastors, small group leaders, and Sunday school teachers.

But I've also heard from others whom I wouldn't have predicted to be within reach of this book. A missionary, who has been training indigenous pastors of underground churches for nearly two decades, tells me he now uses the book for coaching those church leaders. An attorney tells me he's distributed copies among families in his fellowship. An 89-year-old man writes to say it's helped his mentoring of his nephew. And a southeast Asian teenager sends his thanks for helping him to better understand the Lord's Book, which has pointed him more clearly to Jesus.

The most common category of folks who have contacted me about the book have been youth pastors. I did not write *Knowable Word* with teenagers in mind, but the Lord has for some reason seen fit to use it in support of youth ministry in various parts of the world. And I couldn't be more grateful. My own church (Grace Fellowship Church of State College, PA) has the following as one of its objectives in children's ministry:

To encourage and model to the middle school and high school children how to spend time with God in his Word and prayer and to teach them how to study and apply the Word for themselves by learning and practicing OIA through various books of the Bible. To give them opportunities to study a subject topically so they can begin to understand the whole counsel of God about questions they or their friends may have.

If this book helps other churches in some small ways to develop a similar vision for discipling their young people, I couldn't be more thrilled.

What Has Changed in the Second Edition?

In addition to improving the prose in various ways, this second edition expands substantially on the topics of structure, context, and literary form (which now includes not only what the first edition called “genre” but also a new concept called “text type”). In the years since the first edition was published, I have come to a deeper understanding of each of these concepts and what role each plays in the OIA method. Structure has become, in my opinion, one of the most important things to observe, as it, more than any other observation, surfaces the contours of not only the artistry but also the very *argument* the author seeks to make. Context really matters; without an eye for it, Bible readers

are prone to go in so many different directions, which would likely have been unrecognizable to the Bible's original authors. And text type provides a complement to genre, as a parallel way to view a text's literary form; in fact, I've found that text type often provides students an even more useful set of tools than those provided by observing the genre.

I've also given more specific steps to help you follow an author's train of thought, identify the weightiest segment of a passage, and thereby be more likely to discover the author's main point. In my personal training of others, I find the greatest challenge for most is to gain a healthy suspicion of their familiarity with the text so they might learn how to truly observe it. But once that milestone has been reached, the next most difficult skill is determining the author's main point. Our ability to perceive that main point requires us to know how to think and how to follow an argument. So I've expanded the instruction at that point to help you master these crucial skills.

What Almost Changed in the Second Edition?

The most frequent feedback I have received on the book is the request for an "answer key" to the *Your Turn* exercises found throughout the book. To date, I have staunchly refused providing one to any inquirer on the ground that the act of providing my own answer

key would undermine the entire purpose of helping *you* gain the confidence you need to study the Bible for yourself and to believe you are approved to do so.

However, I have become persuaded that the climb—from *spectator* of my ongoing demonstration of the OIA method with Genesis 1 to *practitioner* of the self-guided study questions for Genesis 2—is a bit too steep for those who have never before tried this at home. So I have decided to now let people know how I would answer the questions I pose in those *Your Turn* exercises.

But I will do so only if you promise not to view those answers as the only “right” answers. And if you don’t look at those answers until you’ve first tried to answer the questions for yourself. I offer them not as an authoritative or impeccable way to study Genesis 2:4–25, but simply as a potential measuring rod by which you can evaluate whether you’re on the right track in practicing the skills laid out in this book.

That is why the answer key “almost” changed in the second edition. You won’t find it in this book. I couldn’t make it too easy for you to flip right from the exercises themselves to my guidance on the exercises, could I? If you would like to read my answers to the *Your Turn* exercises, you’ll have to first try them yourself. Then if you want to see if you’re on the right track, you can visit the blog at www.knowableword.com/resources and find the Guidance for *Your Turn* Exercises. It wasn’t ordained by angels in the hand of a

mediator or anything like that, but perhaps it will provide some suitable help and courage.

Now, are you ready to begin? May every word of God prove true, as he proves to be a shield to those who take refuge in him (Proverbs 30:5).

One

Why Study the Bible?

Unpacking Scripture Rightly

In my home office, there's a fireproof safe where my wife and I keep our most precious possessions. There are the expected legal papers, but mostly we've filled it with the forty-five love letters that document the development of our romance. This bundle of letters is more than a collection of mementos; it's our story.

The story begins with a question mark.

A love-struck young man composes a poetic thank-you note to a sweet girl who has done a nice thing for him. He ends the note with a simple question—a question clear enough to give her reason to write back, but vague enough to prevent any guilt should she choose not to.

But she does write back, asking her own vague question in return.

This is it! Queen's knight to c3. Game on...

The remaining details must remain private, but I'll share this much: we pored over every letter we received. We wrapped our hearts in them, squeezing every juicy jot and tittle for its last drop of meaning. We didn't read

these letters because we had to, though there was some sense of compulsion. We didn't read them primarily to learn about one another, though it's true each letter brought more information. We did more than read them. We fixated on them, indulged in them, absorbed them. Through it all, we sought one thing: to get to know each other. We each knew there was someone behind the text, a person we desperately wanted to know. So we read—and did more than read—because we wanted a relationship.

You see where I'm going with this, right? You and I have the Bible as an absolutely indispensable help in building our relationships with the God who wrote it. He already knows us perfectly, and he wants us to know him better and better. He became a man to reconcile us to himself and live with us forever, and he left a book documenting the whole affair. "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

But do you really know how to dig into that book? Most of us know how to collect study guides, commentaries, sermon audio, study Bibles, lecture notes, magazines, blog feeds, and inspiring quotes—stuff *about* the Bible. We're good at absorbing and repeating what we're taught—what we heard *someone else say* about the Bible. But most of us don't know how to dig into the Bible itself, mine its endless seam of precious gems, and come away spiritually richer and

more in love with the awesome God who has given us his only Son as our Lord and Savior.

Now don't get me wrong: Bible study guides are a crucial part of Christian education. They represent a non-threatening way to get started in Bible study, a limited approximation of the real thing. So, while they can be a great step in the right direction, they are not the destination. In the same way, quality study guides can help shape Bible students. They assist young Christians in practicing the basics. They embolden new leaders by providing a ready-made structure for discussion groups. They develop mature believers by honing their understanding of Scripture and keeping them connected with the insights of others.

But this book is different. Its primary purpose is not to tell you what the Bible says, and with few exceptions it will not serve up gems mined by others. Instead, it will point you to the seam, hand you the tools you'll need, and teach you the best way to extract the endless riches of Scripture. It will help you learn to study the Bible for yourself, and thus know better the God who gave us his Word to make himself known.

No Celestial Choirs Needed

Sometimes we think we need a special encounter to know God. We seek a mountaintop experience where we can behold his glory and see him face to face. We want to hear his voice speaking with clarity and power.

We long to be wowed from on high. The apostle Peter had such an experience with Jesus, and he concluded that you and I don't need to have the same experience.

We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word *more fully confirmed*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place. (2 Peter 1:16b–19a)

Peter loved the mountaintop. There's nothing wrong with the mountaintop. But don't miss Peter's larger point—we don't *need* the mountaintop to know God; what we *need* is to pay very close attention to the Word God has already spoken. *That* is where he speaks with the greatest clarity and the most authoritative power.

This is why, when Paul wanted to introduce people to Jesus, he introduced them to the Bible (Acts 17:1–3). Since the whole Bible is about Jesus (John 1:45, 5:39–40; Luke 24:44–49; 1 Peter 1:10–12), we likewise can meet him there.

In short, we study the Bible to know Jesus and to help others know him.

Maybe you've never studied the Bible without a tour guide or commentary, and you'd like to learn

the basics. Perhaps you know the basics but want to make them instinctive, like an athlete perfecting a skill through constant repetition. Or perhaps you already teach the Bible, but you do so intuitively, unsure of how to take what you do and package it up for wholesale distribution among your flock.

Whatever your situation may be, a simple, sensible Bible study method will help. This book offers such a method, but first, guess what? You already have a Bible study method.

Everyone Has a Bible Study Method

How do you respond to the word *method*? Does it make you nervous, or is it a relief? Does it make you feel like you're in a laboratory? Does it resurface bad memories of rules, rules, and more rules from your upbringing? Or does it inspire you with the promise of clarity and direction?

Whatever your reaction, I propose that *everyone* has one or more Bible study methods. Most of these are *unintentional* and *informal*. Here are some examples.

The Divination Method: Open the Bible... flip through it until something strikes you... read what you find... trust this is God's will for you today.

The Support Group Method: Read a passage of the Bible... close the Bible... consider (or discuss, if in

a group situation) how you feel about what you just read.

The Prayerful Method: Ask God to bring to mind a passage of the Bible that will address your current problem or need... listen to what thoughts come into your mind... look at those passages for encouragement or help.

Other methods are quite *intentional* and *formal*.

The Cross-Reference Method: Read a passage of the Bible... look up another passage that this one reminds you of... look up a third passage that the second one reminds you of... look up a fourth passage that the third one reminds you of... repeat until exhausted.

The Word Study Method: Decide which topic you'd like to study in the Bible... identify one or more key words that represent your topic... search the Bible for passages that use those key words... read each verse that comes up... compile the teaching of all the verses into a unified whole... live in light of what you learned.

The Expert Method: Read a chosen passage of the Bible... read study notes or a commentary on that passage of the Bible... believe and act upon what the commentator wrote.

If the Bible is important to you, you have almost certainly used at least a few of these methods, and probably have a favorite one. The problem is that *not every method is a good one*. Many of the most popular

methods don't (and can't) result in correct interpretation. If God wrote the Bible so we'd know Jesus, shouldn't we make sure we're understanding what we read?

OIA: Unpacking the Bible Rightly

This book is all about a very old Bible study method that has had many names,¹ but today often uses the acronym OIA:

1. Observation—what does it say?
2. Interpretation—what does it mean?
3. Application—how should I change?

You can restate these three steps as “what,” “why,” and “so what.” Or again, as “what the original author said,” “what that meant to the original audience,” and “what it means in our context.”²

The OIA method has many benefits. It teaches us to hear the text and respond to it. It trains us in critical thinking and clear communication. It interests post-docs, preschoolers, and everyone in between. It can be learned in five minutes and perfected over a lifetime.

The other methods I mentioned aren't completely wrong, but most of them focus on one skill (observation, interpretation, or application) exclusively. But consider what happens if we miss any part of the OIA process.

If we neglect good *observation* of the text, our service to Christ can easily launch off in the wrong direction. We love him and want to know him, but we're like homebuilders who ignore the blueprint and trash the work order: we end up with "interesting" houses not up to code and possibly unsafe to live in.

If we neglect good *interpretation* of the text, our beliefs and actions will likely be unbiblical. We will end up like homebuilders who have constructed a geothermally heated yacht, completely missing the designer's intention.

If we neglect good *application* of the text (how we ought to change), we might be wasting our time altogether. We can be like foolish builders founding a home upon sand (Matthew 7:26–27). We build it, but since no one can live in it for long, nothing really changes.

Why OIA is the Best Method

There are three reasons why I'm convinced that the substance behind the OIA method of Bible study represents the best of all possible approaches.

OIA Describes How All Communication Works

OIA is neither new nor innovative. It simply outlines the steps by which all human beings communicate with each other—we observe what was communicated, we interpret the meaning, and we respond (and when all

goes well, we respond appropriately). God designed communication to work this way, so our Bible study should follow this universal pattern.

For example, if you see me in public, you might *observe* me as I approach, smile, and stick out my right hand. You would *interpret* that I mean you no harm and want to greet you. You would *apply* the interaction by reaching out your own hand, taking my hand with yours, and saying, “Hello.” Communication has now taken place.

Or let’s say I ask you a question. You might *observe* the higher inflection at the end of the sentence (the audible question mark), a resultant silence, and raised eyebrows. You would *interpret* these signs to mean that I want you to answer the question. You would *apply* your conclusion by answering the question, frowning in thought, holding up a finger to request more time, or ignoring me altogether.

You cannot escape OIA. You do it all the time. The OIA method helps you to make explicit what is implicit in any form of communication. It’s how you figure out anything, really. Why not use it when studying the Bible?

OIA Works for Any Person, Anywhere, of Any Age

The OIA method merely codifies what all communicators do intuitively. Thus, Sunday schools can teach this method to young children. Everyday people like

you and me can employ it in our quiet times. Bible scholars can use it to sharpen their insights and evaluate competing interpretations. Cross-cultural missionaries can use it in the field.

OIA Summarizes Jesus' Approach to the Bible

Jesus is the Lord, and his Spirit is the author of Scripture (1 Peter 1:11), so we should learn our Bible study method from him. See here how he corrects the Pharisees.

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”
(Matthew 21:42–44)

First, Jesus draws his critics’ attention to Psalm 118. This *observation* of the Old Testament text hits hard, since Jesus’ two prior parables (Matthew 21:28–41) made clear that the chief priests and Pharisees are like the builders who rejected the cornerstone (Matthew 21:45). Second, Jesus *interprets* the psalm in verse 43, asserting that God will take the kingdom away from

them and give it to others who bear the fruits of faith. Finally, Jesus *applies* the psalm in verse 44, offering the chief priests and Pharisees a stark choice: either “fall on Jesus and be broken, or wait for him to come in judgment and crush them.”³

Jesus often references Scripture, but he’s rarely as overt as in Matthew 21:42–44. Usually he assumes or implies the interpretation and states the observation and application explicitly (see Matthew 13:10–17 or Mark 12:35–37). One place he observes and interprets, but expects his audience to apply, is Luke 4:17–21. But note this well: *whenever Jesus references an Old Testament text, he uses the OIA process.*

In asserting that OIA is the best Bible study method, I’m not suggesting there’s an easy one-size-fits-all way of plugging every text into an equation. But I am proposing there’s a clear and valuable method by which you can understand what God is communicating in his Word.

Your study of the Bible should not be arbitrary. Don’t allow poor methods to keep you from knowing Jesus better.

Your Turn

1. Pay attention the next time you communicate with another person. Try to identify the observation, interpretation, and application.
2. Read and consider Matthew 13:10–17. What passage does Jesus quote? How does he observe the text? How does he apply the text? What is his assumed interpretation?
3. Read and consider Mark 12:35–37. What passage does Jesus quote? How does he observe the text? How does he apply the text? What is his assumed interpretation?

4. Read and consider Luke 4:17–21. What passage does Jesus quote? How does he observe the text? How does he interpret the text? What is his assumed application?

We Need God’s Spirit to Study the Bible

We must not expect God to grant complete—or even adequate—knowledge of himself without some hard work on our part. Our Lord wants us to pursue him with heart, mind, and strength, and he delights to meet us when we make that effort. At the same time, our faith is never to be in how well we understand and implement a process, because then our faith would be in our own mastery of a technique. Remember that our sin infects everything, including our thinking. Remember also that while the OIA *process* is an excellent tool, and one that Jesus models for us throughout the gospels, no process can grant the kind of divine illumination that God wants to provide as we study the Bible.^a

Bible study ultimately becomes fruitful only when we approach the Bible rightly, in reliance on the Holy Spirit to grant us a measure of access to the very mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:6–16). What a joy, then, to know that if you want such access, all you have to do is ask (Luke 11:13).

a. Yes, God is fully able to break into our daily existence and reveal himself to us under any circumstances. But the consistent message of Scripture is that these are unusual events, and that it is primarily through his revealed Word that God chooses to communicate with us.

Two

From Familiarity to Observation

Five Elements and Four Skills

Valerie loved Jesus and served faithfully in church. But during Bible study, she was jumpier than a ticklish Leprechaun.

“This reminds me of something I read yesterday...”

“Charles Spurgeon said...”

“It’s like the time when I...”

“How should I respond to people who say...?”

“Where did evil come from?”

“Where is the verse that says...?”

“After all, you know, when two or three are gathered together...”

The only way forward was to focus her. One simple question usually worked: “So how do you see that in the passage?”

Before we can set our eyes on the horizon, we have to get our noses in the text. Our study must begin with observation. When we observe, we try to figure out

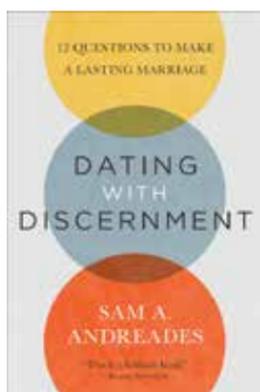
what the text says — not what we want it to say, think it should say, or heard someone else say about it. We receive each text on its own terms, and that process requires careful observation.

The Greatest Enemy of Observation is Familiarity

When I think I know something as well as I need to, I stop trying to learn more about it. This is just human nature, and much of the time it's a rational approach. How many stairs are in your house? What is the license plate number on your car? (If you have a vanity plate, your answer doesn't count.) If you don't know exactly, it probably doesn't matter too much. You are already as familiar with these things as you need to be. But when it comes to Scripture, we make a serious mistake when we allow familiarity to stop us from seeking to know more, or to know more clearly. In fact, when it comes to the Bible, familiarity can quickly become our enemy.

Much of the problem comes from the fact that what passes for familiarity is quite often simply wrong. Do you remember the story where the resurrected Jesus walks through a wall? It's in John 20:19 and 26, but read it again, observing carefully.

John says the doors were locked. He says Jesus came and stood among the disciples. But *he does not say Jesus walked through the wall*. In fact, because



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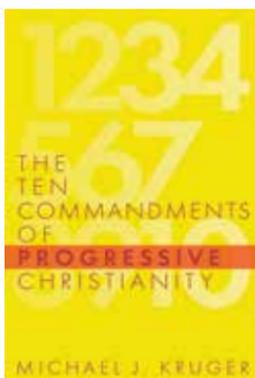


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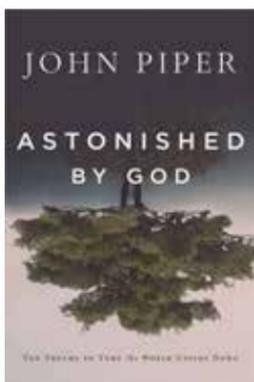
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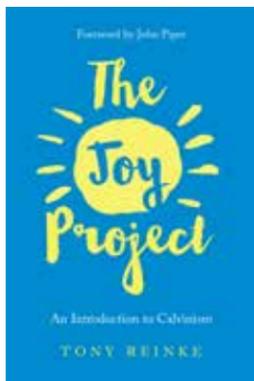


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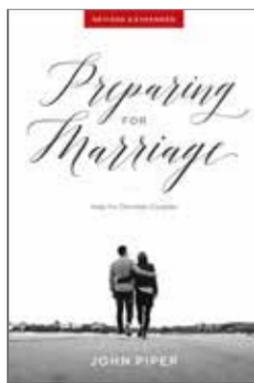
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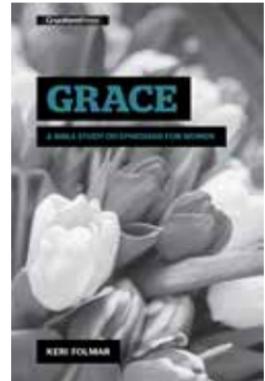
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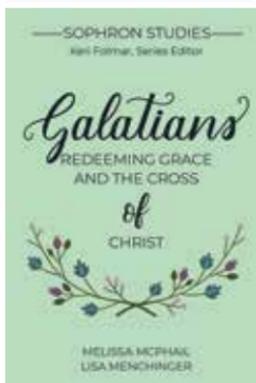
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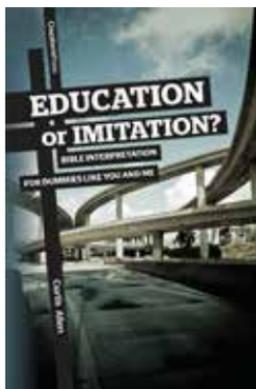


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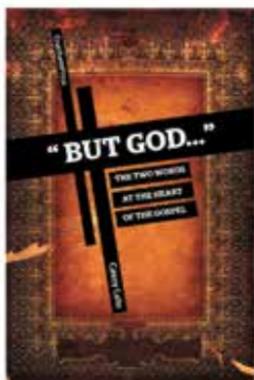


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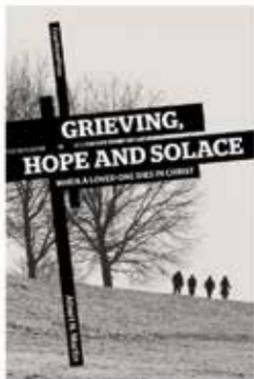
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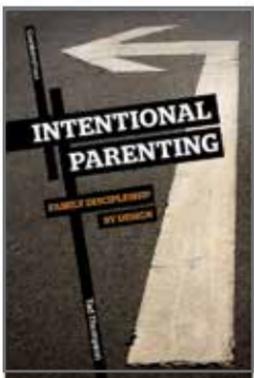
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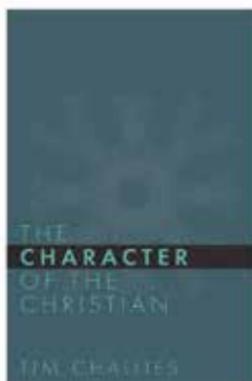
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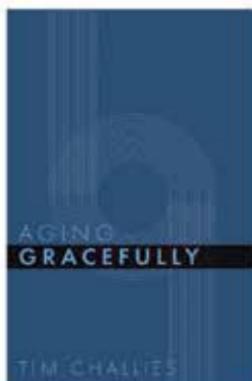


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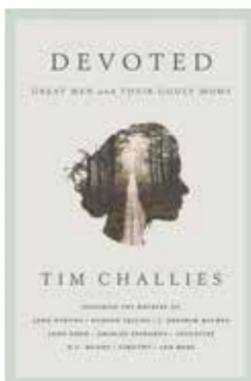


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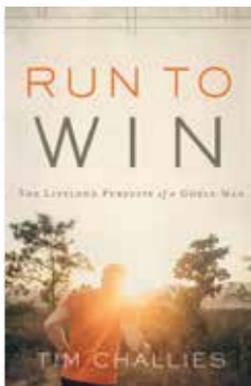


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