

BIBLE

IN

LIFE

Hearing and Heeding the Bible

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INTRODUCTION

I became a follower of Jesus when I was a sophomore in high school. Immediately afterward, my first Christian mentor did something for me right away that was both wonderful and frustrating at the same time. She got me started reading the Bible.

Every week at church she handed me a new set of worksheets that guided me through several chapters of the Bible. For about six months, I read the chapters that corresponded with each worksheet, answered the questions, and turned in the worksheets to her on Sunday. This was the beginning of my relationship with the Bible.

And it was both a wonderful blessing and a cause of frustration. Why frustration? Because so often I didn't understand what I was reading.

Question marks began to litter the margins of my Bible. In a few places were written the words "Ask the pastor." I even crossed out some notes because they were wrong. I also bought a workbook from the Christian bookstore hoping it would help me figure things out. It didn't and I was disappointed.

Often, we tell new believers, "You just need to read the Bible." And while that's true, it's not completely true. Based on my own experience and thirty years of ministry, it's fair to say that only reading the Bible isn't enough. In fact, I've known people who have been Christians for years but gave up reading the Bible a long time ago because they found so much of it confusing.

So on one hand, being encouraged to read the Bible was a huge blessing to me because I began learning who God was and what he wanted my life to be like. But on the other hand, I struggled to understand all I was reading and needed help.

And this tension is often a reality that comes with reading the Bible.

This is because the Bible has a dual nature just like Jesus had a dual nature. Jesus was both human and divine. As a human, he dressed, talked, ate, and lived as a first-century Jew from Galilee. But at the same time, he embodied the fullness of the living God. Likewise, the Bible is both from this world and from God. It is ancient literature and God's Word. So to read the Bible well, we must read it in a way that fits both aspects of its nature.

The fact that the Bible is ancient literature means reading it is like traveling to a foreign country in a time machine. Both the content and the form derive from a very different world than ours. This is what makes it confusing.

For example, there are genealogies with all sorts of “begats.” And weird laws that just don’t make sense. And strange stories that are hard to imagine. And whole books like Revelation that seem bizarre and confusing. There’s Hebrew poetry and narratives and Jewish debates and letters to specific groups of people answering questions we never thought to ask. It’s a very human book.

But it’s also God’s Word, which means it’s intended to communicate God’s wisdom and ways to us. And that’s what makes reading it a huge blessing. For example, it promises to help us flourish as human beings (Ps. 1:1–3), and Jesus says hearing and heeding his teachings will give us a stable foundation for life (Matt. 7:24–27). Also, Psalm 19 describes the beauty, sweetness, and joy-filled benefits of God’s Word. And because it’s God’s Word, our efforts to understand it are rewarded with a massive payoff.

So we must learn to read the Bible well. In fact, the way we read the Bible directly affects the shape our spirituality takes. Just reading the Bible isn’t enough because we can misread it. Then our misunderstanding will become misapplication, and our walk with God will be distorted.

Do you want your spiritual life to be biblical, to conform to God’s ways? Then you must make sure you hear the text accurately. After you’ve done that, you must respond to it—heed its message—appropriately.

Helping you hear and heed the Bible is the goal of this book. I want you to be able to read the Bible as historical literature and listen to what God is saying in the text. In this way, you can read and study the Bible in a manner that fits its nature as ancient literature and its intent of revealing God and his will to us.

Do you remember how Jesus often said, “The one who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 8:8). He frequently said this after telling a parable. In fact, Jesus told a whole parable that was all about how people hear: the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4–15). In that parable, Jesus taught that simply hearing the Word isn’t enough. You must hear it, take hold of it, and begin to practice it so that it grows to fruition.

So the first part of reading the Bible well is hearing. Paying attention. Listening closely. Seeking to understand. Learning to have ears to hear. But after we hear and understand, we must take the message to heart. Hold on to it. Absorb it into our life. Learn to heed the Word.

Hearing and heeding. That’s the only approach to the Bible that honors its dual nature. This means we must read the Bible with our whole being. Head and heart. Mind and strength.

In the first part of this book, we’ll explore the five spheres of context to which we need to pay attention to hear the Word. Paying attention to these spheres is how we honor the Bible’s nature as ancient literature. Then in Part 2, we’ll consider five practices that will enable us to heed the Word more fully

in our lives and context. At the end, I include some recommended resources that will help you learn some of the details explained here.

So let's begin with the five spheres of context that help us hear the Word.

PART 1

HEARING THE WORD:

Five Spheres of Context

When we read the Bible, we must seek the original meaning of the text. We aren't free to make up our own meaning. The original authors intended to communicate a message to the original audience. That's the meaning we must seek to grasp, which means we must read the Bible in its original context. Here are five spheres of context to be aware of that shape the original meaning.

Narrative Context

The first sphere of context to consider is the narrative context, which refers to the overall story of the Bible. Even though the Bible is a collection of sixty-six different books, one overarching story holds the whole book together. And while Christians tend to gravitate to the New Testament letters or the teachings of Jesus because they are so much more direct about how to live the Christian life, we must remember that Jesus and his apostles culminate the biblical story.

The Bible is not primarily a rule book or even a theological reference book. First and foremost, it's the story of how God redeems and restores the world. All the individual Bible stories you may have learned as child in Sunday School are part of that overarching narrative. The account of Jesus in the Gospels is not a new story but the culmination of the original story that begins in Genesis and continues throughout the whole Bible.

To help you get a handle on the narrative context, here is the story of the Bible in brief:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and he created human beings on the earth to be his partners in ruling over and caring for the earth and everything in it. God was King and he created humans to be his viceroys, extending his wise, generous, loving reign all throughout the earth.

But humans fell prey to the serpent's temptation and broke faith with their Creator and King. This ruptured their partnership and unleashed wickedness and death on earth. Exiled from God's garden,

humans now experienced death. Yet God didn't give up on them and his purpose for them. He had a plan to solve this mess.

Since humans were at the heart of the problem and since human partnership with God was his grand goal, the solution would come through a human. A human being—the “seed” of the woman (Gen. 3:15)—would crush the head of the serpent, reverse the curse, and reconcile humans to God and restore them to their position as viceroys over the earth.

In the course of time, God selected a man and his wife, Abraham and Sarah, through whom the promise of restoration would be carried forth. Through Abraham's “seed,” all the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12). From this couple came the nation of Israel, the lineage of promise, who was called to be the people of the solution. God set them apart to be his people, made a covenant with them, and gave them his Law so they could be a light to the world.

But Israel was infected with the human disease and repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. Israel broke faith with her maker and King and violated the covenant, suffering its curses (including the curse of exile). Thus, Israel was led off to Assyria and Babylon. But just as with humans at the very beginning, Israel was not eliminated, and God didn't give up on his purpose to bless the whole earth through her, through the seed of Abraham, and through a faithful human being.

So God brought Israel back from exile. The people resettled in the land and rebuilt the temple, but foreign oppression continued, and God's glory didn't fill the temple again. Although Israel had returned from exile, God's promises still waited their final fulfillment.

Then “when the fullness of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law” so “the blessing of Abraham” might come to the whole world (Gal. 4:4–5; 3:14). Jesus was everything Israel was called to be but failed to be. He was everything humans were created to be but failed to be. He was the culmination of the biblical story. He was the seed of the woman, who redeems and restores people back to the image of God, back to being God's loyal partners in reigning over and caring for this world.

This story shapes the context of the whole Bible. Picking up the story in the book of Matthew is like walking into a movie 75 percent of the way through it. No, I'm not saying you should start in Genesis if you're brand new to the Bible. And nothing is wrong with having someone start reading the Bible in one of the Gospels. But the more someone knows the earlier parts of the story, the more they'll catch what's going on in the Gospel stories. And they'll only partially understand some teachings or issues in the New Testament (or not understand them at all) if they don't know the earlier parts of the story. So much of Jesus' teachings alluded to, echoed, or grew out of what happened in the Old Testament story that preceded him. The same is true with the teachings of the apostles in the New Testament letters. They regularly quoted from the earlier parts of the story to show how Jesus was the fulfillment of it.

I once disciples a twenty-five-year-old young man who had no church background. He had recently started going to church with his wife and admitted to me that he was lost during virtually every sermon. As he put it, “I sometimes get an inspirational thought or something, but for the most part

I have no idea what's going on. I don't know whether the passage comes before Jesus or after Jesus or how anything fits together."

We met at a coffee shop, so I grabbed a napkin and pen and wrote out the five-hundred-year markers of the biblical story from Abraham to Jesus. (See the historical context below for an example of this.) This provided a huge help in making sense of the Bible and the preacher's sermons on Sunday mornings.

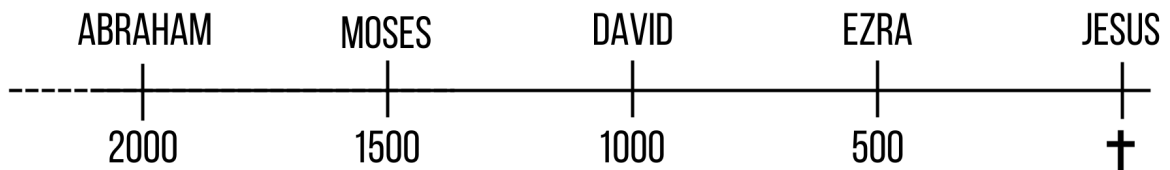
This illustrates the need for a basic grasp of the narrative context if we're going to be able to hear the Word. And the more familiar we are with the overarching story of the Bible, the more the Bible will come to life and make sense.

Key Actions

- ❑ Learn the chapters in the biblical story.
 - ❑ Identify where you're at in the story. What God does, how he interacts with people, and what he expects of people change depending on the part of the story you're in. This is why I created the [Bible survey online course the way I did](#)—to help people learn the main chapters in the story and see how the whole book fits together.
 - ❑ When reading the New Testament, watch for any quotes from or allusions to the Old Testament. How does that affect the meaning of the passage you're reading?
-

Historical Context

We must remember real people wrote the Bible to real people living in a real time and place. The Bible covers a wide span of history with different periods, empires, and rulers. Approximately two thousand years occurred between Abraham in Genesis 12 and the time of Jesus. In fact, a helpful way to remember the timeline of the biblical story is to break it down into five-hundred-year chunks.



Individual Bible stories or passages are rooted in the specific historical settings represented by these five-hundred-year chunks. For instance, a story could be set in Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt. Maybe it's set in Assyria or Babylon. Perhaps it's set in Persia or Greece or during the reign of the Roman Empire. The biblical authors rarely gave much detail but rather assumed their readers were familiar with the rulers, events, and cultures they referred to . . . even if we aren't familiar as modern readers.

That's why we must remember that even though the Bible was written *for* us, it wasn't written *to* us. Thus, to hear the Word we need to be willing to act a bit like historians. Familiarizing ourselves with the world stage surrounding Bible books and passages brings the Bible to life and enables us to grasp the original message. Knowing which empire ruled the biblical world, who was the king and how he became king, and what the political situation was like is hugely important. You can find some of this online, but a good Bible survey will help. (See the list of resources at the end of book.)

Getting a handle on Israel's history is necessary too. After we grasp that, we must pay attention to how a stage in Israel's history affects a specific story or passage. Is the section we're reading set during the time of the judges when Israel was a loose federation of tribes? Or is it set in the time of the united kingdom under Saul, David, or Solomon? Or is it from the period of the divided kingdom when the nation fragmented and apostasy was rampant? Did this prophet write pre-exile or post-exile? Grasping this helps us see to whom and what the biblical writers referred.

As you move into the New Testament, you have the historical setting of the Gospels, the historical realities encountered in Acts, and the specific situations reflected in the letters. Learning about some of this enables us to make sense of what's happening or what's being taught.

Also, sometimes a biblical writer played off the historical reality he lived under or spoke into. For example, the book of Mark opens with the words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). This is a not-so-subtle polemic against Caesar and the Roman Empire. The Priene Inscription describes the birthday of the "god Augustus" (the emperor at the time of Jesus' birth in Luke 2) as "the beginning of the gospel for the world." At that time, Augustus was heralded for bringing peace and being the savior of the world. Mark's opening line subversively insists Jesus is in fact the Son of God, not Augustus, and the news about him is the true gospel.

Or when Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he said their "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). This played directly off Philippi's political situation. Although the Philippian believers lived in northern Greece in the region of Macedonia, their city had received the status of a Roman colony, of which they were very proud. Thus, their citizenship was in Rome. But Paul said to the church, "Just as your city is like a colony of Rome in northern Greece, your church is like a colony of heaven in Philippi. Let that shape everything about how you live. Your way of life should reflect the culture of your true citizenship in heaven."

As we read the Bible, we sometimes meet people we need to understand to make sense of what's happening.

- Who were the Pharisees? What did they believe? What was their relationship with the general populace of the Jews? What were their political beliefs and connections?
- Who were the Sadducees? What did they believe? What was their relationship with the general populace of the Jews? To the politics of the day?
- Who were the Samaritans? Who are they? Where did they come from? What was their relationship with the Jews?
- In the Old Testament, who were the Philistines? The Amalekites, Canaanites, and all the other “ites”?

Because God revealed his Word in a very down-to-earth way, you must pay attention to the historical context to read the Bible well. As a result, the world of the Bible will come to life, and you’ll begin to hear the text more clearly!

Key Actions

- ❑ Be curious and ask lots of questions: Who? What? Where? When? Questions help you see what you need to know. After you have questions, use the resources listed at the end of this book to begin looking for answers.
 - ❑ Familiarize yourself with the world stage around Israel. What countries ruled at different time periods, and how did they affect Israel or events in the Bible?
-

Geographical Context

I used to teach the book of Acts to college freshman every year. Their first assignment was to read the entire book in one or two sittings and answer a few questions. One question was: “What difficulties did you encounter in your reading?” Every year most students mentioned that not knowing the geography made understanding Acts difficult.

So once again we’re faced with the fact that the Bible is a very down-to-earth book. Because it is rooted in the real world, we must learn the map. Usually, Bible stories happen where they do because of geographical factors, such as topography, trade routes, roads and travel ways, and local politics. These factors all affect how the stories play out the way they do.

We must know the location of places such as Babylon, Nineveh, the land of Goshen, Galilee, Samaria, and Ephesus. We must know when a location refers to a region and when it’s a city. We should be able to locate rivers, mountains, and seas. Knowing where places are and why that location matters enables us to hear the text well.

For example, much of Paul’s ministry in the book of Acts took place in major cities along major roads.

- Philippi was a leading city in its district and sat on the Egnatian Way, the major East to West highway that ran across northern Greece. After Paul started the church, he left colleagues behind to strengthen the church there, which he later visited multiple times.
- Corinth was one of the top cities in size and prominence in Paul's day. It too sat on a major travel way. Shipping from East to West all went through Corinth because sailing around the southern tip of Greece was a long, treacherous voyage. So ships or their goods were hauled across land to the opposite harbor, and then they resumed their voyage. This meant people from all over the empire traveled through Corinth. No wonder Paul spent eighteen months there, sent so many letters there, and worked so hard to ensure a healthy church in Corinth. From there, it could radiate all throughout the empire.
- Ephesus was the fourth largest city of the empire, had a major harbor, and all roads in Asia were measured in distance from Ephesus. So once again, Paul spent more than two years there, establishing the church and sending out ministry partners to other cities. In this way, Luke (the author of Acts) said, "All Asia heard the word" (Acts 19:10).

Acts clearly illustrates that Paul's missionary strategy involved strong churches in major cities from which the gospel could spread throughout the region.

Another example would be the Valley of Elah, where the story of David and Goliath occurred. If you look at a map of Israel, the topography moves from the coastal plain in the west along the Mediterranean Sea to the Shephelah a few miles inland and onto the Central Highlands where Jerusalem, the capital, was located. The Philistines lived in cities along the coastal plain. The Shephelah were low-lying hills that acted as a buffer zone between the Philistines and the Israelites. Six valleys in the Shephelah served as corridors from Philistine territory along the coast to the Israelite Hill Country, and the Valley of Elah was one of those six corridors. It was the one closest to Jerusalem. Control of it was thus a huge win for either country. That's why the battle took place there and victory was so important to the security of Israel.



Another aspect of geographical context is weather and climate patterns. Seasons of the year combined with climate realities shaped life in ancient Israel and explained the cycles of feasts and holidays. Rainy seasons, planting seasons, and harvest seasons led to spring feasts of wheat and barley harvests,

and fall holidays related to fruit harvests. Many stories in the Bible assume these realities, so being familiar with them unlocks what's happening and why.

Key Actions

- ❑ Look at a map to see where a story or event took place.
 - ❑ Be curious and discover everything you can about this location.
 - ❑ Ask yourself what's significant about this location in the biblical story.
-

Cultural Context

Because the Bible is rooted in the real, historical world, biblical passages reflect a way of life, a culture, that is different from ours in many ways. They were written to specific people who had different assumptions about the world and how it worked. They had customs and daily routines that were different from ours. They had their own value systems and practices. They had different thought patterns, languages, and idioms. The biblical text reflects all this.

An important part of correctly understanding the Bible, then, is “getting into” the world of the Bible. We must mentally transfer ourselves to those ancient times, places, and conditions. (Remember, foreign travel in a time machine.) What would have been a person's hopes and fears? What would they have valued? What was the moral climate of the day? The goal is to answer the question: “What was it like to live then?”

When we read the Bible, we bring with us our own culture—our assumptions about the world, our values, and our beliefs about how things ought to work. And that acts like a filter that colors what we see and how we react to what we're reading. A classic example of this comes from the nativity story in Luke 2.

When my kids were young, the movie *The Nativity Story* premiered around Christmas, and we took our kids to see it. While watching, I couldn't help but notice all the Western assumptions that made their way into the film.

Here's a few:

- In the movie after Mary's parents arrange her marriage to Joseph, she is troubled and goes off alone to wrestle with her fate of marrying this man. In the West, marriage is based on romantic love and is the culmination of a dating relationship. It's not arranged by one's parents. So the creators of the movie assumed that Mary would be troubled. But in their ancient Near Eastern culture, Mary would've have been delighted. Arranged marriage was the expected pattern and made perfect sense. Further, Joseph was, after all, a respected, righteous man in the community.

- The movie shows Joseph and Mary traveling alone from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just the two of them. This makes sense to us. If we want to go somewhere, we get in our cars and go. But this was highly unlikely for Joseph and Mary. In that time and place, people traveled in large groups for safety and support. We see this later in Luke 2 when Mary and Joseph left twelve-year-old Jesus behind in Jerusalem because they thought he was in the caravan with friends or family.
- The film also includes all the traditional elements from a modern children's Christmas play. Mary riding a donkey. Arriving in Bethlehem at night. A grumpy inn keeper. None of these details are in the biblical text, and most don't fit what the text says or the culture of that time.
- Finally, the movie portrays Mary giving birth to Jesus all alone in a cave with Joseph by her side. Once again, that doesn't fit the culture. Men weren't present when women gave birth. Other women were usually there to help, including an experienced midwife.

So it was a nice family film to watch with our kids at Christmastime, but it certainly didn't portray the nativity the way it happened. It also illustrates how we need to acknowledge that we bring our assumptions to the text so we can be aware of that tendency, and then work to learn the biblical culture to hear the text well.

As we consider the cultural context, we should remember the Bible covers a large span of time, as we noted above. That means some of the cultural conditions changed from the time of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to the time of the apostle Paul preaching in the cities of the Roman Empire. The cultural conditions changed from location to location as well. We understand this in our modern context too. The culture of the US is not the same today as it was in the 1950s. Also, the culture of Kenya is not the same as that of Australia. Thus, one blanket culture doesn't cover the entire Bible. As we study the cultural context of the Bible, we must be aware of the time and place we are seeking to learn about.

Components of Biblical Culture

Religion. Religious rituals and practices have a huge impact on culture. In the case of the Bible, both Israel's religion and the religions around Israel are huge parts of the biblical story.

- In the Old Testament, who were Molech, Baal, Asherah, and the other gods and goddesses that are mentioned? How were they worshiped? Where did they stand in the pantheon of gods?
- In Exodus, why did the Israelites build a golden calf?
- What's the Jewish concept of circumcision, and why is it so important in the book of Galatians?
- What was synagogue worship like? What did it mean to be put out of the synagogue?

Agrarian Society. Throughout the Bible, Israel was predominantly an agrarian society where farming and village life were the norm.

- What were the farming practices?
- What were the main crops?
- What were the seasons, and when were crops planted and harvested?
- What were tenant farmers? What was their relationship to landowners?
- What was Jewish village life like?

Answering these types of questions unlocks several the Bible stories, including much of the Gospels.

Communal. Cultures of the ancient Middle East and the greater Mediterranean world in which the Bible takes place were communal. The mindset of individualism found in the cultures of the modern West was foreign to them. Behavior was evaluated on its impact on the group. Did it bring honor or shame to the group? Did it benefit or harm the group? That's why in the Bible "one another" is more prominent than "me."

Greco-Roman Context. Most of Paul's ministry—and much of the book of Acts—took place outside of Israel, in the cities of the Roman Empire. In this context, Greco-Roman culture prevailed. This culture was very different from the Jewish culture of the Gospels. Here we need to learn what life was like in the cities of the Roman Empire, which will help us understand Acts and the New Testament letters.

Key Actions

- ❑ Be culturally sensitive. When something seems odd or different, remember that you are traveling to a foreign country in a time machine.
- ❑ Be curious about life in their world and discover everything you can about it.
- ❑ Use the recommended resources at the end of the book to begin learning what it was like to live in their time and place.

Literary Context

No one likes to have their words taken out of context! So who would want to do that to Moses, David, John, Peter, Paul, or any of the other authors of the Bible? So if we're going to hear the Bible well, we need to read the Bible in context. That means we need to think paragraphs, not sentences (or verses). While modern chapter and verse divisions help us find our way around the Bible, they can also cause us to miss the context. For example, we focus on a verse we love, or we stop reading at a chapter break even though the flow of thought continues into the next chapter. So we need to think paragraphs (not verses), and then ask how the paragraphs before and after connect to the passages that we read.

Not only that, but the Bible is a collection of books that makes up one large story, as we described earlier regarding narrative context. That means the whole story is part of the literary context. We should look for any ways the passages that we read relate to or echo earlier parts in the story. Some scholars

call this “hyperlinking,” where a text in the New Testament links back to a story or event or teaching in the Old Testament. This too is part of the literary context.

Two important benefits come with paying attention to the literary context. First, paying attention to context helps us trace an author’s flow of thought. Generally, thoughts are connected to each other so that one thought leads to the next. Sentences have such a relationship so they can develop a theme. Sentences grouped together around a theme form a paragraph. Likewise, paragraphs connect to each other to develop an even larger theme. This is the author’s flow of thought, and understanding sentences in this way is typical of how people communicate. It makes intelligent communication possible.

Individual passages are only part of the whole literary piece, which for our purposes are Bible books, and they need to be understood in relation to the whole argument of the book. In other words, considering the context helps us understand the author’s train of thought and place a passage into that train of thought.

Second, paying attention to context also helps us gain an accurate meaning of words. Certain words have a range of meanings, so in a given sentence, the specific nuance of a word depends on the words surrounding it. Take, for example, the word “rose.” If I said, “I gave my wife a rose,” what does it mean? A flower, and hopefully she liked it. But if I said, “I rose late this morning,” it means something very different.

This is how words work. They have a range of meanings, and what a word means specifically depends on the context in which it’s found. Take the word “soul,” for example. In a context where it’s contrasted to the body, such as in Matthew 10:28, a soul refers to our inner being. But in Luke 12:15–21, where the word “soul” relates to the word “life,” a soul refers to our whole being, which connotes our life.

Another aspect of literary context is genre, which refers to the type of literature we read. Historical fiction is different from biography, which is different from a history textbook. Poetry is different from a news story. Each genre has its own conventions and “rulebook” for how to read it properly.

The Bible is a collection of books and includes a variety of genres. The Bible has seven main genres. We must read them according to their conventions and intentions.

Historical Narrative. Narratives are stories, but I prefer the word “narrative” because “story” often refers to something fictional. Bible narratives tell us about real events that happened in history, but not just any events. The authors carefully selected what they wrote about to show God at work in his creation and among his people. They are theological history. Also, historical narrative is the most common genre in the Bible. The Old Testament makes up about 75 percent of the Bible, and 40 percent of the Old Testament consists of narratives. The first five books of the New Testament are also narratives.

Law. In a general sense, the Law refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Much of that, however, is historical narrative. So more precisely, the Law refers to those sections of Exodus–Deuteronomy that are law codes for the nation of Israel. These laws are part of God’s covenant with Israel after he redeemed them from Egypt and set them apart as his people. The Law tells Israel how to live as God people in their time and place.

Hebrew Poetry. The Psalms are perhaps the most well-known collection of Hebrew poetry, but Hebrew poetry shows up in the prophets and the wisdom literature as well. Poets write in more vivid ways, using word pictures and emotion-laden language. Figures of speech and repetition are common features of Hebrew poetry. As we read, we must recognize that poetry evokes the imagination and affects the heart.

Wisdom Literature. Wisdom literature was well-known throughout the cultures of the Ancient Near East of which Israel was a part. Wisdom literature seeks to describe what is usually true in day-to-day living; it offers “wisdom” for right living and right choices. As one scholar puts it, wisdom literature teaches “the skill of living.”¹ Biblical wisdom literature places God at the center: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). The goal is to pass on wisdom about how God as Creator designed life to work. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Solomon are all categorized as wisdom literature.

Prophecy. Often, we think the Old Testament prophets’ main task was telling the future. Although that is included in their writings, their main job was to enforce the covenant that God had made with Israel. God raised up the prophets to call Israel to repentance and to apply God’s Law to their specific time and culture. Through them, God announced he was enforcing his law, and if they didn’t repent, then the curses of the covenant would come to pass. Along with this, they also promised that even if that were to happen, God would not forget them. They thus offered hope to the faithful by proclaiming what God would do in the future.

Letters. Twenty-one of the twenty-seven New Testament books were letters written to nurture the faith of the early Christian communities. They addressed the questions, problems, or needs of those original churches to whom they were addressed. We must remember they are letters, so in a sense we are reading someone else’s mail.

Apocalyptic. The term “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation.” This word is used in the first verse of the book of Revelation, which is the most well-known piece of apocalyptic literature but not the only piece. In addition to Revelation, you will find apocalyptic literature in Daniel and Zechariah. Apocalyptic literature flourished among the Jews from approximately 150 BC–AD 100. It is a form of prophecy where God revealed his hidden future plans, usually through dreams or visions that feature fantastic—and often strange—symbols. The goal was to reassure God’s suffering people that he was still on his throne and his purposes would come to pass. It thus provided comfort and called God’s people to be faithful despite hardship.

1. Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 148.

Key Actions

- ❑ Keep in mind the kind of genre you're reading and how that type of literature works.
 - ❑ Think paragraphs. How does this passage connect with the paragraphs before and after it?
 - ❑ Pay attention to the flow of thought for the whole book as well as specific sections.
 - ❑ Clarify the meaning of specific words and phrases.
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Before we leave Part 1, I want to point out that it would be easy to feel a bit overwhelmed by these spheres of context, especially if you are detail oriented. Let me reassure you that you don't have to master all these overnight. You don't have to dig into all these contexts every time you read a passage from the Bible.

Being aware of them, however, will help you make more sense of what you read. It helps you read the Bible looking for the original context. And if you will take the time to learn this kind of material little by little, then over time you will gain a reservoir of knowledge from which you can readily draw that will naturally enable you to hear the Word with greater understanding.

Be sure to check out the list of resources at the end of this book for tools that can help. You may also want to check out my [Listener's Commentary Study Hub](#) where I include pictures, maps, charts, special studies, and recommended resources for each book of the New Testament all in one place.

PART 2

HEEDING THE WORD:

Five Key Practices

Being aware of those spheres of context helps us hear the Word well in its original context. But the Bible is not only ancient literature; it's also God's Word. Second Timothy 3:16–17 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work." In other words, God's Word aims to change our behavior.

The Bible is not just a history book; rather, it communicates a message that shapes our beliefs about the world, our values, our ambitions, and our entire way of life. Hearing the Word, therefore, is only the first part of the communication process. After we've understood the message, we need to respond appropriately to that message.

When my kids were young, we frequently had them repeat back to us what we told them to make sure they heard what we said. I've watched a lot of parents do this same thing. But the purpose of that practice isn't simply so our kids can repeat what we've said. We want to confirm that they both heard and understood so they will do what we asked.

The same is true in our reading of the Bible. The goal is to hear *and heed* its message. The Bible intends to show us how to live faithfully as God's people and his partners in this world. Because of this goal, after we've heard and understood the message of the text, we must respond to that message in a way that changes how we live.

Here are five practices that will help you heed the Bible.

Read Relationally

We read the Bible not merely (or mainly) to know the Bible. We read it to know God. In the beginning, God created people to live as his partners in ruling over and caring for the earth and everything in it. God was King, and humans were to be his viceroys, extending his wise, generous, loving reign all throughout the earth. They were to do this in close relationship with God.

Of course, we live post-Genesis 3, and humans have broken faith with our loving King ever since. But God in Christ has reconciled us to himself and is restoring us to living out our partnership with him day by day.

So when we read the Bible, we're not merely sitting alone (or with friends) trying to figure out what it says and how to respond. We're reading it with God right there with us. Keeping this in mind, we can read relationally. It's not simply trying to understand a book but also building a relationship with a friend.

Key Actions

- ❑ *Remember God is with you as you read.* When you read the Bible by yourself or with others, God is there with you. You're not simply reading the Bible; you're reading it with him.
- ❑ *Talk to God as you read.* One key to reading relationally is talking to God about what you're reading. (A free video course at johnwhittaker.net models one way to do this.) What challenges you from the text? Talk to God about that and ask him for insight and strength to live it out. What comforts you? Thank God for that. What insights into God's nature or character do you see in the text? Praise Him for those things. In this way, your reading becomes an interactive conversation with God who loves you and invites you to do life with him and for him.

When you read the Bible relationally in this way, you get to know God and nourish your soul.

Practice Reflection

I'm a tea drinker, not a coffee drinker . . . so work with me here. To make a good cup of tea, you must leave the tea bag in the hot water long enough for it to absorb the flavor of the tea. If you just dipped the tea into the water and pulled it out immediately, you would have a pretty weak (and nasty) cup of tea.

Reflection is to Bible reading what steeping is to tea. If we only open our Bible or Bible app, quickly read the passage for the day, and then move on, our reading will have a pretty weak impact on our life. To heed the Bible we must absorb the Bible, and that requires reflection.

Reflection also closely connects to what the Bible calls "meditation." Meditating on the Word includes saying the passage under your breath, thinking about it, pondering your life in light of it, looking at the passage from various angles, and reflecting on its significance. Doing this is how you absorb the Bible into your life.

The book of Psalms opens with a wisdom poem about the powerful impact this kind of reflection on Scripture has on our life.

Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the Law of the LORD, and on His

Law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. (Psalm 1:1–3)

The psalmist said delighting in God’s Word and meditating on it results in a flourishing life—a life that’s like a green, lush, fruitful tree. So to heed the Word, we must practice reflection.

Practicing reflection entails reading with your everyday life in mind. Don’t read the Bible merely for the sake of information. Don’t read it as an item on your religious to-do list that you can check off. Instead, read it personally, looking into it like a mirror to see yourself accurately. Let it show how you’ve changed, where you still fall short, how your thinking is offtrack, and how you can please God.

The whole aim of reflecting on Scripture is allowing the Word to penetrate and saturate your heart. This is crucial to heeding the Word. Quite honestly, the quality of your application is directly tied to the consistency of your reflection. Meditating on the Bible is to the soul what digestion is to the body; by it you appropriate God’s Word and are nourished, and without it you will never truly be fed. If you want to apply the Bible to your life so that you heed it well, then you must give time to contemplating it.

Practice reflection.

Key Actions

- ❑ Slow down. Carve out time. Don’t rush. Read passages slowly and thoughtfully.
- ❑ Remove distractions. Set aside your phone. Focus.
- ❑ Create reminders to bring you back to the passage throughout the day. Maybe just a moment or two during your lunch break. Maybe a stoplight is a chance to slow down and recount a text under your breath. Think about your daily routine. How can you pause throughout your day to recall and reflect on Scripture?
- ❑ Open your heart. Be ready to hear God speak to you through a text.

Identify the Implications

As we talk to God about what we read and reflect on it, we should seek to identify the implications of the text. This means prayerfully discerning how it intersects with our world and our life.

In this way, we move beyond analyzing the text and allow the text to analyze us. We submit ourselves to God who has spoken through the text. We submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture and permit it to examine us. We ask questions such as: How do we need to adjust our lives, values, goals, priorities, ambitions, habits, and ways of treating people? What are the implications for our job,

family, money, and time? If we take this passage to heart, what will stay the same in our life? What will change?

Something that truly helps us see the implications is asking: “What is the main point of the passage?” Summarizing the main point in a sentence or two will bring immense clarity to our understanding of the text. Then we can consider the implications of that main point.

One way to approach this is to explore the implications regarding the various roles and relationships in our life.

- Parent
- Spouse
- Job
- Neighborhood
- Recreation
- Finance
- Friends
- Church
- Extended family

As we prayerfully reflect on the text, we can ask God for insight into how this passage intersects with these different aspects of life.

- What issues in your life does the truth of this text address?
- What issues in your culture does the truth of this text address?
- What changes does the truth of this text require?
- What would the truth of this text look like lived out in your everyday life?

As we ask these kinds of questions of the text, we will gain a fresh vision for human well-being and flourishing. We will begin to see all the ways God’s Word intends to shape human living. We will get a picture of how a group of people who take His Word seriously do life.

Another approach that some have found helpful for considering the implications is to read for a SPECK. To do this, we ask is there any:

- *Sin to avoid?* Is there a specific sin the passage tells us to or avoid?
- *Promise to claim?* Faith is confidence that God keeps his promises. What are those promises? As we read and study, we learn these promises if we pay attention.
- *Example to follow?* Much of the Bible is biographical and historical. It shows godly people living in the normal events of their world. What examples do they set for us about repentance, prayer, holiness, compassion, generosity, conviction, courage, etc.?

- *Command to obey?* If there's a command in the text, humbly examine your life and plan to obey.
 - *Knowledge of God or humanity?* Such knowledge about who God is or what it means to be human shapes our worldview. Thinking about the implications builds us up in the faith.
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Key Actions

- ❑ Summarize the main point of the passage.
 - ❑ Identify how the main point intersects with the dominant culture around you.
 - ❑ Identify how the main point intersects with your relationships and responsibilities.
-

Engage the Imagination

My granddaughters have great imaginations. They have healed me from imaginary diseases by visits to imaginary doctors. We have rescued people from being lost or trapped as members of the Paw Patrol. I've drunk imaginary tea, eaten imaginary soup, and a whole lot more. But imagination is not just child's play. It is also a gift for gaining insight.

Unfortunately, we don't always see it that way, and as we grow older our capacity for imagination wanes. We might even think it is just for children. But it's an intellectual skill that enables us to uncover new possibilities, create new tools and resources, and acquire new understandings and insights.

When it comes to hearing and heeding the Bible, engaging the imagination is a powerful practice. It can raise new questions to study, provide a truer-to-life picture of Bible stories, and open the door to a deeper experience of the text. In fact, when heeding the Bible, imagination is the link between the head and the heart.

There are two ways to engage the imagination. Keep these two ways in mind as you read the Scriptures:

Picture the story. Bible stories are the most natural place to engage the imagination. Reading stories—from a modern novel to a biblical story—naturally invites us to picture the people and setting or scenery. But unlike a modern novel, Bible stories are a little more challenging to imagine. Biblical authors use less descriptive details. The culture and setting are unfamiliar to us.

And because we approach the text as God's Word, sometimes we fail to read it as a story. But stories they are, even though they communicate God's Word to us. So we should read the Bible accounts as stories, which entails entering the story by means of our imagination.

Here's a way to think about it that might help. If you were going to make a movie of this biblical story, what would it look like? In other words:

- What would people be wearing?
- What would people be eating?

- What would the setting and scenery look like?
- What would it sound like?
- What would the expressions on people's faces look like?

This often raises new questions for research, which deepens our understanding of the story and our ability to picture it.

Also try looking at the story from different angles. What does it look like and sound like and feel like from the perspective of various characters in the story? Put yourself in the story. Stand with the crowd around Jesus. Watch as he heals this girl or welcomes this tax collector or tells this story. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you wonder? Enter the story.

Picture what it means to live in this way. Imagine what it would look like to obey this passage or to live in light of the truth it teaches. Even though it may not seem as natural, engaging the imagination is useful with non-story passages as well. Consider the Psalms. They use tons of figurative language that invite us to picture the imagery described.

Take Psalm 23, for example. What does it look like to have so much confidence in your Good Shepherd that you know you'll lack no good thing? What does it feel like to rest in green pastures or be led beside calm waters? Can you imagine it? What does it feel like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death by yourself . . . and then with your Good Shepherd?

Thus, engaging the imagination leads to a deeper experience of the psalm.

The same is true with teaching texts in the New Testament letters. They aren't as image rich as a psalm, but we can still employ the imagination to picture what living the passage out or taking it seriously would resemble.

For example, Romans 5:1–2 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we also have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand." Picture God granting you a favorable verdict and declaring you "not guilty." As you imagine that scene, what does it feel like? What image comes to mind as you think about "peace with God"? And what feelings accompany the image? What does grace look like and feel like? Imagine standing in a room full of that! Picture yourself taking the text to heart. Maybe even write down these images and feelings to help your thoughts be more complete and concrete.

Engage the imagination.

Key Actions

- Imagine the story. What do you see? What does it look like, sound like, smell like, etc.
 - Ask yourself what it would look and feel like if you took this passage seriously.
-

Embody the Passage

The fifth practice is to embody the passage. That is, begin to heed it. Based on having heard the text and absorbed it, start living it out in the concrete details of your life.

You have summarized the main idea of the passage. You have reflected on it, considered the implications, and entered it with your imagination. Now, prayerfully respond to it by living the truth out. This is what it means to embody it.

Some passages are completely clear on how to apply their teachings in our world. Some are not because they describe the way the original audience was supposed to embody the truth in their world. Since their world was very different from ours, we can't embody it the same way.

So if how to apply a text is unclear, be patient. You don't have to master it overnight. More time spent studying and thinking about the text will lead to a greater ability to hear and heed it. Nevertheless, here is some guidance that will help you get a handle on how to move a passage from their world to our world.

First, discern the original purpose of the passage. What is the author hoping to achieve by writing it? Why did he say this?

Second, consider the original application. How did the author expect the original readers to respond? Was there something he expected them to do? Was there a belief he wanted them to adopt? Was there a new perspective to acquire? How were the original readers supposed to embody this passage?

Third, articulate the principle(s) that the original application embodies. If the original application is tied to the culture of the original readers, what are the core truths embodied in it? For example, the original application of 1 Corinthians 8 is tied to eating meat offered to idols, which is not much of an issue in many cultures today. But that is a specific application of a more general truth: do not use your freedom in Christ in a way that harms the faith of a fellow Christian. And that is a specific implication of Christian love that considers a fellow Christian more important than us.

Finally, we should figure out how to embody that core truth in our world. We have looked at the original application in the concrete world of the original audience. Then we uncovered the more general core truth that original application embodies. Now we are ready to take that general core truth into the concrete details of our world and embody it where we live every day. We must think through situations where that core truth intersects with our own culture. We need to consider what embodying the truth in those situations would look like. And we begin to put the truth into practice with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As noted above, for some texts, how we should respond is clear. The challenge won't be in understanding it but in doing it. For others, we're going to have to spend some time reflecting on the truth of the text to discover the best ways to put it into practice. After we see what the text requires of us, we begin heeding the best we know how. We do this in partnership with the Holy Spirit. He strengthens

us and enables us. Then he grants fresh insight and wisdom for how we should embody the truth more. And in faithfulness to him, we do that.

As a result, we continually hear and heed Word of God.

Key Actions

- ☐ Specify the original application of the passage.
 - ☐ Identify the core truth that the original application embodies.
 - ☐ Determine how the core truth needs to be lived out in both your culture and your life.
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CONCLUSION

The Bible is a true gift to us. It's why we can know God. We don't have to guess who God is or what he's like. We're not struggling on our own hoping to figure it all out.

God has revealed himself to us. He has shown us his purposes and plans, his wisdom and ways.

His Word shows us why we exist, what it means to be human, and how he designed us to operate. It unveils how we got offtrack and how he restores us to himself. It brings clarity to life. According to Psalm 19:7–10, God's Word is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey. It restores the soul, gives wisdom to the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes.

Since that's what the Bible is, it's worth the effort to listen to it and to work hard to understand it in its original context. It is worth it to take the time to absorb it into our lives, humbling ourselves under its message, taking it seriously, and putting it into practice. It's worth it to hear and heed the Bible.

My prayer is that this book helps you do that!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN WHITTAKER is a preacher, teacher, and pastor. He is the creator of the Listener's Commentary on the New Testament at listenerscommentary.com. Just like a book commentary, the Listener's Commentary teaches through the books of the New Testament paragraph by paragraph, except in audio format. The goal is to provide a clear understanding of the text that helps you grow in your faith on your phone or tablet or computer.

John is also the host of *The Bible in Life* podcast.

John likes to describe his Bible teaching as “blue jeans theology.” It's Bible teaching that's in the language of everyday life and set in the context of every day to help people follow Jesus in their everyday life.

John holds theology and ministry degrees from Boise Bible College, Cincinnati Bible Seminary, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. John has served in ministry for over thirty years. He served as a Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Boise Bible College for nineteen years and currently serves as an adjunct professor there. He also helped plant a church in Kuna, Idaho, where he preached for eleven years. He served for four years as a teaching and campus pastor at The Pursuit in Boise, Idaho, taught classes for Eternity Bible College, and preached in various places around the country as well as the world.

John loves Mexican food, a quiet day in the woods, and his family . . . but most of all he loves to help people see how God's Word speaks to their lives, and his greatest thrill is to see people come alive to the joy of walking with God honestly, humbly, and transformationally.

You can learn more about John at johnwhittaker.net.



LIST OF RESOURCES

The Listener's Commentary Study Hub

I created the Study Hub to make it easier for you to study the Bible by putting key resources and information in one place. That way you don't have to bounce all over the internet hoping to find something helpful. I include pictures, maps, charts, special studies, and recommended resources for each book of the New Testament, and I'm constantly adding more material.

Bible Project

If you're not familiar with the Bible Project, you should be. They produce high-quality, short videos on Bible themes and Bible books helping people see how the Bible is one story that leads to Jesus.

One-Stop Bible Study Tools

Each includes interlinear Bibles, commentaries, word study resources, concordances, Bible dictionaries, sermon illustrations, and other online resources.

- studylight.org
- blueletterbible.org
- biblestudytools.net Under the study tab you can find a variety of resources.
- speedbibledictionary.com/
- biblehub.com
- biblegateway.com Click study tools on the left, and you can begin to find some helpful resources.

Biblical Archaeology

- biblearchaeologyreport.com
- biblicalarchaeology.org/ Sponsored by the Biblical Archaeology Society.

Biblical Culture/Customs

- crivoice.org/historyculture.html Topical articles are categorized under four sections: general, Old Testament, Intertestamental Period, and New Testament.
- middletownbiblechurch.org/biblecus/biblec.htm. Lengthy articles on various topics of everyday life in the ancient world.
- nazarethvillage.com/about/research-and-archaeology/ Pictures, media, and research related to first-century village life.

Biblical Pictures

- holylandphotos.org Photos of sights and customs from the biblical world.

A Few Useful Books

If you're willing to invest some money into some Bible study resources, here's a select few books that will help you learn some of the contextual matters we discussed in this book:

- *A Survey of the Old Testament* by Andrew Hill and John Walton
- *A Survey of the New Testament* by Robert Gundry
- *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* by Carl G. Rasmussen
- *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (5 vols.)
- *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament* (5 vols.)
- *IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* by John H. Walton
- *IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament* (2nd ed.) by Craig S. Keener

Note: I am required by law to mention that the book links are affiliate links, which means I get a small commission at no additional cost to you. I only recommend resources that I personally use and believe in.