

CHAPTER 1 THE HEAVENLY FOOD

I grew up in a family with many Christian-based values. At the age of 11, I asked Jesus to change my life. For the first time in my short existence, I sensed that God had forgiven all of my sin.

As a new Christian, I felt a responsibility to read the Bible on a daily basis. But, as an 11-year-old boy, I hated to read. Nevertheless, I forced myself to crack open the Bible. I did well at first, but soon slacked on my Bible reading. Eventually, I ran out of spiritual energy.

Abstaining from reading the Bible for long periods of time was akin to avoiding food for a long duration. Only eating occasionally would cause my body to become weak and unhealthy. In the same manner, I didn't feed my soul and was spiritually starving. I continued to attend church services and listen to sermons, but this failed to properly nourish me. Trying to live through a week simply by hearing the Bible preached two or three times, with no Bible reading of my own seemed like enduring a week by eating only two or three meals. Spiritual malnutrition!

A few years later, I became increasingly aware of my poor spiritual diet. Eventually, I began to read the Bible more consistently. Before long, an intense love for the Word of God grew in my heart. As an 11-year-old boy, I had failed to realize that the Bible serves as more than a book to read sporadically. The Bible is the Word of God, the Book Christians live by, the Heavenly food.

Living According to the Bible

The Bible is spiritual food.¹ First Peter 2:2-3 says, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." You will never find meaning in life without filling your mind with God's truth. David (ca. 1000 B.C.), the second king of Israel, said in Psalm 119:9, "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your Word" (NKJV). Psalm 119:105 says, "[God's] Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." Also, John 15:3 states, "You are already clean because of the Word which I [Jesus] have spoken to you" (NASV).

Daily read your Bible in a quiet place where you can study without interruption when your mind works best, whether morning, noon, or night. Attempt to read at least one chapter each day, or buy a one-year Bible so you can read through it annually. If you can not find a one-year Bible, you can read three chapters every day Monday through Saturday and five chapters on Sunday to complete the Bible in one year.

Of course, no biblical rules indicate how much Scripture you should read daily or annually. You have some freedom here but the more Bible you read the better.

The Bible stands as a unique book, and you can never read it too much. Your goal is not to just read it but to live it. An important point to remember is not how much of the Word *you get into*, but how much of the Word *gets into you*.

¹ *Bible* means the book, and *Scripture* refers to the Bible or a specific biblical passage. Throughout *Growing Up in Christ*, I frequently refer to the Bible as "the Word" or "the Word of God."

Pay attention to the biblical context when you read. Context refers to the verses and chapters surrounding a particular passage. If you skip around from book to book, ignoring the context, you may misunderstand a passage's true meaning.

Keep the original audience in mind as you read. Consider the passage in its natural, historical setting. The Bible is relevant and applicable for today, but don't apply it carelessly. Since there is a correct and incorrect way to interpret Scripture, be careful about haphazardly claiming promises. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, NKJV). Many books can assist you in studying the Bible and appropriately applying its promises.² Church leaders can also help you interpret Scripture.

You need to know what the Bible says in order to know God and His will. As a friend aptly stated, "If you are not educated by the *Word*, you will be educated by the *world*." Be prepared for Satan's schemes. The only way to prepare yourself is by knowing God's Word. Memorize key verses, perhaps one a week. In addition to your life-long pursuit of understanding the Bible, remember that it is your key source for getting to know God intimately. The Bible serves as the primary channel through which God will communicate with you.

Making Sense of the Bible

The Bible consists of two main sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament authors wrote the majority of this section in Hebrew. The New Testament authors wrote in Greek.

Scripture reveals God's will to mankind and explains God's plan of salvation for sinful humanity. It describes how God is defeating His enemy--the devil. More precisely, the Bible shows people how to have a personal relationship with the Lord.

In the Old Testament, God promises something special for Abraham (ca. 2000-1900 B.C.) and his offspring, the Jews. God told Abraham, "I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3, NKJV).³

Furthermore, in Exodus 20:3-17, God gave the Jews the Ten Commandments through Moses (ca. 1445 B.C.):

- 1). You shall have no other gods before Me.
- 2). You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- 3). You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- 4). Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy [undefiled].
- 5). Honor your father and your mother.
- 6). You shall not murder.
- 7). You shall not commit adultery.

² See suggested reading list at the end of this book.

³ Also see Genesis 17:7 and Galatians 3:16, 29. Concerning the future of Israel, see Matthew 19:28 and Revelation 7:1-8; 21:12-14.

- 8). You shall not steal.
- 9). You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- 10). You shall not covet your neighbor's wife (or house, etc).

These commandments were given to the Israelites so they would know how to relate to God. According to Deuteronomy 4:13, the Ten Commandments, often called the "Mosaic covenant" by scholars, were God's summation of His guidelines for how the Israelites might lead holy lives--lives given to following God wholeheartedly--and best receive the promise of Genesis 12:2-3 (see above) revealed to Abraham. However, because God knew they would not keep these commandments (Deuteronomy 31:16, 20), He eventually made a new covenant, or promise, with Israel. Examine Jeremiah 31:31-34:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

The new covenant promised the coming forgiveness for Israel's sin and promised transforming power to live holy lives (Ezekiel 1:19-20).⁴ In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God tells Israel, "And I will give you a new heart--I will give you new and right desires--and put a new spirit within you. I will take out your stony hearts of sin and give you new hearts of love. And I will put My Spirit within you so that you will obey My laws and do whatever I command" (Living).

God loves all people, not just the Jews. In fact, God said that He is not only Lord of the Jews but Lord of the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). All of humanity needed a Savior, not only Israel.⁵ Therefore, from the lineage of King David, God eventually sent Jesus (Acts 13:23).

The New Testament, the second part of the Bible, gives a thorough account of the new covenant's fulfillment. In other words, the New Testament expounds upon Israel's (and all who believe) redeemer, Jesus. The New Testament shows that Jesus, the Savior,

⁴ For a better understanding of how people in the Old Testament had a relationship with God, see the **Appendix**. Furthermore, see 2 Corinthians 3-4 and Hebrews 7:11-9:28 for clarification on the old and new covenants.

⁵ See Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 9:6; Luke 2:32. Throughout this work any references with three or more biblical books cited will be put in a footnote to reduce clutter in the main text.

came to earth and fulfilled the old covenant. The Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, describe Jesus' earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Jesus' death provided forgiveness for humanity's sin, at least for those who believe in Him (Matthew 26:28).

In the Book of Acts chapter 2, God gave His Holy Spirit to 3,000 believers, mostly Jews.⁶ As mentioned earlier, however, the good news of the new covenant is that God's provision for sin extends beyond the Jews.⁷ Acts 8 and 10 show that God gave His Spirit to all who believe in Him regardless of their ethnic origin. (Also see Acts 15:7-9.)

The Book of Acts lays out the activity of the Spirit working through the church. Simply put, the remainder of the New Testament instructs believers how to live until Jesus returns. The last book of the Bible, titled Revelation, describes how God will victoriously defeat Satan, bring history to a close, and establish a visible kingdom.

The Lord is the ultimate Author of Scripture; however, He used the personalities and writing styles of men to record what He spoke to them (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible contains *every* word God wanted it to have. Second Timothy 3:16 says that, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." In other words, Scripture will lead you in the right direction spiritually, and otherwise.⁸ You can never go wrong by obeying Scripture.

The Bible contains 66 books that were written throughout a period of 1,500 years, and approximately 44 human authors contributed to it. One of the amazing aspects of the Bible is that it agrees internally and does not contradict itself.

Scribes worked as professional copiers; many spent their time preserving the Word of God. Thousands of biblical manuscripts have been preserved from ancient times.⁹ Even though no one possesses the originals, the existence of many ancient manuscripts testifies to the accuracy of Scripture. If the Lord created everything, then

⁶ For a more thorough discussion of the person of the Holy Spirit, see chapter 5 in this material.

⁷ Hosea 2:23; Acts 28:28; Romans 9:25-26; Ephesians 2:13; 1 Peter 2:10.

⁸ Consider what the Bible says about itself in Psalm 138:2; Proverbs 30:5-6; Isaiah 55:11; Matthew 5:17-20; Mark 12:36; Luke 16:17; 24:27; John 5:46-47; 10:35; 17:17; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 2:3; 4:2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 12, 14; 2 Timothy 3:16-17 [Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18]; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:12; 2 Peter 3:16. Interestingly, the Bible describes itself in several ways: gold (Psalm 19:10), a hammer (Jeremiah 23:29), a sword (Hebrews 4:12), a mirror (James 1:23-24).

⁹ See Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 36.

surely He can accurately deliver His Word to humanity without error.¹⁰ But don't be surprised when you meet those who disagree with you concerning the Bible's accuracy.

Summary

Scripture functions as the main spiritual food for believers. God gave His Word so people would understand His overall purpose in history. The Bible shows people how they can have an intimate relationship with the one true God of the universe. Believers should study God's Word frequently so that they can live in conformity to its truths.

Assignments

1. Memorize Psalm 119:11, "I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You."
2. Start reading the Bible today. Perhaps you will want to start in the Old Testament with the Book of Genesis or in the New Testament with the Book of John. Or you might want to start with a shorter New Testament book like Philippians, Colossians, or James. Strive to read at least one chapter each day. Consider using a notebook to record the passage, the details of its contents, and how you can apply what you read.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the two main divisions of the Bible?
2. How is the new covenant, that God made with Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34, relevant to the nation of Israel and the followers of Christ, the church?
3. Is the Bible accurate on all issues it discusses?
4. How does daily Bible reading help believers?

¹⁰ See John 14:26; 16:13 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 to better understand the Holy Spirit's role in making sure the human authors recorded Scripture correctly.

Answers to Chapter 1 Discussion Questions

1. What are the two main divisions of the Bible? *The Old Testament and the New Testament. "Covenant" is another word that can be interchanged with "testament."*

2. How is the new covenant, that God made with Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34, relevant to the nation of Israel and the followers of Christ, the church? *God promised to put His law in the hearts and minds of Israel and Judah. He called this the new covenant that would enable them to obey. Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, Galatians 6:16 and other passages indicate that Christ's promise to empower Israel to one day obey His Word is also now applicable to the church.*

3. Is the Bible accurate on all issues it discusses? *Yes. There are certainly many difficult passages in Scripture, but, historically, Christians have always affirmed the truthfulness and accuracy of Scripture.*

4. How does daily Bible reading help believers? *It gives them insight into the very heart and mind of God. It shows believers how to joyfully live in obedience to God.*