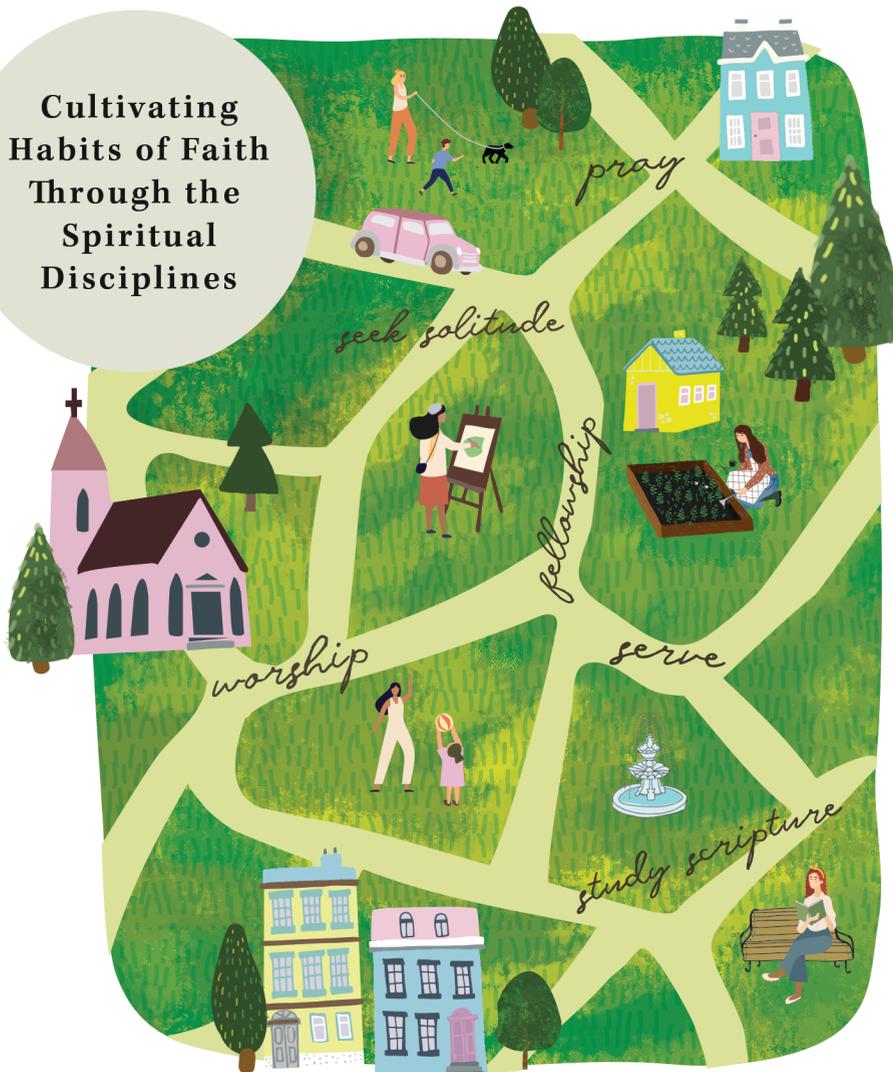


7-SESSION BIBLE STUDY

ENCOUNTERING GOD

Cultivating
Habits of Faith
Through the
Spiritual
Disciplines



KELLY MINTER

ENCOUNTERING
G O D

Cultivating Habits of Faith
Through the Spiritual Disciplines

KELLY MINTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	ABOUT THE AUTHOR
6	A WORD FROM KELLY
8	SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION
10	SESSION TWO: STUDY
42	SESSION THREE: PRAY
78	SESSION FOUR: EXPRESS
112	SESSION FIVE: QUIET
142	SESSION SIX: SIMPLIFY
172	SESSION SEVEN: ENGAGE
<hr/>	
206	LEADER GUIDE
210	RECIPES
216	ENDNOTES



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly is passionate about God's Word and believes it permeates all of life. The personal healing and steadfast hope she's found in the pages of Scripture fuels her passion to connect God's Word to our everyday lives. When she's not writing or teaching, you can find her tending her garden, taking a walk with friends, cooking for her nieces and nephews, riding a boat down the Amazon River, or walking through a Moldovan village with Justice & Mercy International (JMI).

Kelly's love for teaching Scripture led her to create her Cultivate Event, an event centered around Scripture, worship, prayer, and mission. She is also the host of the *Cultivate* podcast, a weekly podcast where she teaches the Bible in a conversational and approachable setting.

Kelly's past Bible studies include *Finding God Faithful: A Study on the Life of Joseph*; *No Other Gods: The Unrivaled Pursuit of Christ*; *All Things New: A Study on 2 Corinthians*; *What Love Is: The Letters of 1, 2 & 3 John*; *Nehemiah: A Heart That Can Break*; and *Ruth: Loss, Love & Legacy*. Kelly is also a singer-songwriter whose latest project is "Hymns & Hallelujahs."

Don't miss accompanying Kelly down the Amazon River on an unforgettable journey in her memoir, *Wherever The River Runs: How a Forgotten People Renewed My Hope in the Gospel*. Kelly partners with Justice & Mercy International, an organization that cares for the vulnerable and forgotten with the love of Jesus in the Amazon and Moldova. To find out more about JMI, visit justiceandmercy.org/cultivate. And to learn more about Kelly's Bible studies, books, music, and speaking schedule, visit kellyminter.com.

A WORD FROM KELLY

Here we are. At the beginning of a study on spiritual disciplines. Perhaps just the word *discipline* makes you want to sprint for the hills. Don't we all have enough to do already? Can't we just breathe? I understand this. We're absurdly busy, and life is a world-class jockey making us gallop to the pace of its whip. We want a nap, not more disciplines. But what if we discovered that practicing the spiritual disciplines can create more margin in our lives? What if we find that they're designed to instill peace, communion, and rest for our souls? What if we're not out of time—our priorities are just out of whack?

Somewhat surprisingly, I've found the spiritual disciplines to be liberating instead of cumbersome. We naturally think that piling on additional activities will only burden us further, yet practicing the spiritual disciplines daily reminds us that it's God we submit to, not life's relentless demands. This will require some effort on our part, but anything of value typically does. While absolutely nothing can be accomplished outside of God's grace and His Spirit, I sense we've adopted the misleading notion that we're supposed to work hard for all the "normal" things in our natural life, but our spirituality is supposed to just somehow happen. You know, by the power of the Spirit. We want God to transform us into His image. We want to sin less and serve more. We want to live generously and let go of our anger and cease worrying and have more peace, but we want God to snap His fingers and will it into existence.

We have little idea how to participate with Him or where to begin. We hope to achieve spiritual maturity the way Elisha scooped up Elijah's mantle that had literally fallen out of the sky (2 Kings 2:1-13). But when we go to Scripture, when we go to church history, we see that God very much invites our effort, our activity, our doing certain things in order to participate in our transformation. I fear that in our desire to rightly emphasize a godly posture of being, we have left out the biblical necessity of doing. This is where the spiritual disciplines come in.

Simply put, a discipline is "any activity I can do by direct effort that will eventually enable me to do that which, currently, I *cannot* do by direct effort."¹ Like a piano player who routinely practices her scales or a marathon runner who daily trains, eventually a run of

notes turns into a recital of Beethoven, and 5 miles turns into 26.2. This is also true as it relates to being followers of Christ. The spiritual disciplines of solitude, prayer, Bible study, simplicity, worship, celebration, and more train us to do what we previously could not do as it relates to being conformed into the image of Jesus. The spiritual disciplines invite us, by God's grace, to change. They give us hope in our place of stuckness.

As we begin this adventure together, the key is to not get overwhelmed. Not all the spiritual disciplines can, or should be, practiced all at once. If we rested all the time, we'd never serve anyone. If we only studied Scripture, we wouldn't have time for prayer. And if we focused only on simplicity, when would we ever celebrate with a five-course meal we made from scratch? So there are times and places for each of the disciplines. Some will be daily habits such as Bible study, Scripture meditation, prayer, and worship. Others will be practiced at special times or in certain seasons, like when we fast, serve on a mission trip, or enter into solitude. Most of the spiritual disciplines are so closely related it's hard to know where one stops and the other begins. As we move in and out of the disciplines, it's less like turning off one road and onto another and more like a road changing names in the middle of the one you're already on. They're all part of the same path, and they all lead to the same Person, Jesus.

My hope is that through this study we'll learn what the Bible has to say about the spiritual disciplines. This understanding will give us the why behind these life-giving practices, which will inspire us toward implementing them into our daily lives. Above all, we'll discover that all those things about ourselves we think are impossible to change really can change. We're not stuck. Being transformed into the image of Christ is a practical reality—if we're willing to participate with Him through the blessing of discipline.

Kelly Minter

SESSION ONE

Introduction



SESSION TWO

Study



JOURNALING THE SESSION

Use this page throughout your session of study. We've given you some prompts, but feel free to write other thoughts and questions to help you learn and process the spiritual discipline of Bible study.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Before you start your work this session, journal some of your thoughts about the discipline of Bible study. How have you practiced this discipline in the past? What has hindered your study of Scripture? What do you hope to get out of this session?

DURING THE SESSION

What are some key things you're learning this session about the discipline of Bible study?

REVIEWING THE SESSION

What are your biggest takeaways from this session, and how will you put them into practice?

Session Two Introduction

When it comes to studying the Bible, one of the first things we can get awfully excited about is that the God of the Bible is a speaking God. Since God is a speaking God and has spoken to us through His Word, studying the Bible is a thrilling endeavor. I did not say an easy one or even always a happy one—when I was in high school I flung my King James Version of the Bible across my bedroom because I was so mad at God for what He was saying to me. (Incidentally, the Bible also addresses anger, which ratcheted me up even more.) When we recognize that God still reveals Himself to us in our current day and speaks to us personally, studying the Bible becomes less of a dry discipline and more a living, breathing relationship where we commune with the living God. I can say without hesitation that meeting God through the pages of Scripture has been a dynamic journey that has touched every corner of my life. It has left no part of me alone.

So it is my highest honor to invite you to begin our study on the spiritual disciplines with perhaps the most foundational discipline of all, the study of Scripture. It's not that studying the Bible is more essential to our spiritual growth than say, prayer or worship, as much as it's the window through which God's light shines on all the other disciplines. Because understanding the Scripture is so foundational to every other spiritual discipline, we'll give our first full week to Bible study.

Though the Bible is a single book, it's also a collection of inspired writings. The canon of Scripture includes sixty-six books written over thousands of years by a variety of authors who lived in different places at different times, many of whom spoke different languages. While hundreds of stories are found within the books of the Bible, they all contribute to a single story: the grand narrative of God's creation, humanity's rebellion against Him, and His promised redemption of His

people and our world through Jesus Christ. It is within this story that our own stories find meaning.

But meaning doesn't necessarily mean all about me—though I've often wished it were so. For the longest time, I approached the Bible looking for a word for the day or an answer to a pressing need. Should I say yes to this opportunity? Should I buy this house or that? The mountains or the beach for vacation? (Of course, the mountains.) While I believe God speaks to us in specific and sometimes downright unexplainable and supernatural ways, the Bible's meaning isn't up for grabs. There may be many ways to faithfully apply certain passages and the meaning of such passages may be layered. But when we read through the Bible, one thing is clear: God spoke, and we were meant to understand His message. We're not to make His message into what we want it to be or what our current culture thinks it should be or what social media posts say it means. This is enormously freeing.

So we must take care to interpret God's Word faithfully and accurately. This practice is sometimes referred to as *hermeneutics*. The term “describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message—written, oral, or visual—is endeavoring to communicate.”¹ Simply put, hermeneutics means faithfully interpreting what the Scriptures mean. To do this well, we ask certain questions: *Who is the author of the book we're studying (if known)? Who was it written to? When was it written? What was the culture like at the time?* Asking these questions to understand the Bible's original context can help us best know what it means in our own context. This is one of the

When we read through the Bible, one thing is clear: God spoke, and we were meant to understand His message.

beautiful and timeless aspects of Scripture—understanding the original context doesn't lessen its meaning or application in our modern day; rather it bolsters it by opening our eyes to how others experienced the living God in their time.

Another important question to ask as we go along is: *What kind of literature is the book I'm studying?* For instance, the Old Testament includes books of Law, History, Poetry, Wisdom, and Prophets. The New Testament includes the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation. We read each of them differently for the sake of interpreting them most accurately. If we take the metaphors of Psalms literally, we may find ourselves “making our beds in hell,” which I really don't want anyone to try. If we're looking in the history books for a step-by-step approach to a healthy marriage, Solomon with his thousands of wives may not be the place to search. Knowing the Epistles are letters written by specific authors to specific individuals or churches helps us know that certain exhortations need to be contextualized—in our culture, for instance, greeting one another on a Sunday morning with a “holy kiss” might be a bit of a problem for pretty much . . . everyone.

While at first the contents of this introduction seem like a lot to consider, these principles will serve as aids and guardrails to make studying the Bible easier and clearer. We'll actually get to practice a little hermeneutics this week as we study what the Bible has to say about itself. We'll let Scripture interpret Scripture. We'll take into account the type of literature we're studying, depending on the passage. I'll employ a few simple tools like word dictionaries and commentaries to deepen our insight. And, most importantly, we'll look at every passage in its own context and within the larger context of Scripture. If you're overwhelmed, don't be!

The whole purpose of this week's study is to further acquaint you with God's Word and give you more tools in your belt to study it. This week isn't about how much you already know or how sharp your Bible skills are. It's about incorporating the tried and true practices of centuries of Christ-followers who found that certain disciplines created the best conditions for drawing close to our Savior. As we begin this adventure, we'll continually keep in mind that Bible study is not an end in itself. Listen to what Jesus said to some of the religious leaders of His day who knew the Scriptures inside and out, “You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me. But you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Ultimately, we practice the spiritual discipline of Bible study so we might know, love, and serve the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Whether you're a Bible study veteran or brand new to Scripture's pages, its treasures are inexhaustible.

A Speaking God

I think a new world will arise out of the religious mists when we approach our Bible with the idea that it is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is *now speaking*.²

A. W. TOZER



Early this morning I took a walk around my neighborhood. Redbud trees line several of the streets, and they delight me so, especially when they bloom purple megaphones announcing to the world that spring is here. The strip of grass on the street-side of my sidewalk isn't wide enough for me to plant my own. Otherwise I'd have a row of waving redbuds greeting you upon arrival. That skinny sidewalk strip of grass is the one downside to my street.

Today on my walk I noticed a single languishing redbud in a row of thriving ones. The ones flanking it were several feet taller and vibrantly stretching upward; the flagging tree had a mere two branches growing mostly sideways. Cast in the shade of towering branches whose leaves blocked the sun, I realized the struggler was failing because it didn't have the light it needed to thrive. *Hmmm*, I thought to myself, *nature is hitting close to home today, and trees aren't supposed to meddle like that*. When other activities and busyness crowd out the time I need to hear from God, my growth is stunted, spiritually and otherwise. After all, God's Word is more glorious and penetrating than the sun, said the psalmist in Psalm 19. And when God's light transforms our hearts, I like to think we bloom like redbuds.

As we begin this session's homework on the study of God's Word, I can't help but start with a foundational passage in 2 Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he listed various things for which Scripture is useful or profitable (v. 16). What are they?

Who inspired or "breathed out" Scripture, and why should this cause us to prioritize studying the Bible (v. 16, ESV)?

The New Testament hadn't been compiled in Paul and Timothy's day. So when Paul referred to "all Scripture" (v. 16) what must he have been referring to?

What did Paul tell Timothy the "sacred Scriptures" (v. 15) are able to do?

So this is really interesting. When you consider that our New Testament didn't exist in Paul and Timothy's day, you realize the reference to the "sacred Scriptures" is a reference to the Old Testament. Yet here Paul attached the Old Testament to Jesus.

PERSONAL TAKE How do you think the Old Testament gives us wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus?

This passage reminds us that studying the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament is as important as studying the twenty-seven in the New. This doesn't mean the Old Testament gives us everything we need to know, but understanding it is vital to fully grasping the messages and promises of the New Testament.

Today we'll look at a portion of the "sacred Scriptures" Timothy knew well, the ones Paul urged him to continue in. We'll begin in Exodus, the second book of the Bible. But first a little context: In the Book of Genesis, we see that God spoke to Adam and Eve, and later to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. After God delivered Israel from Egypt, He spoke corporately to His chosen people through His servant Moses. As we consider the spiritual discipline of Bible study, beginning with God's instructions to Israel is an important and foundational place to start. (This is also a principle of hermeneutics: going to the early pages of Scripture to see what is said about a given matter.)

Read Exodus 19:1-6.

In this instance, what did God want the Israelites to do before anything else (v. 5)? (Circle the correct answer.)

Act

Listen

Worship

Repent

Sometimes we speak for trivial reasons, but God spoke because He had something vital to say to His people and wanted them to listen.

Read Exodus 20:1-2.

How did God reveal His personal nature to the Israelites before giving them the Ten Commandments?

What does this tell us about God’s heart behind His commands?

If you thought the Ten Commandments were a lot to keep up with, God followed them up with an additional 603 laws for a grand total of 613—and I thought growing up in a strict private school was rough at times. The whole of these laws is referred to as *Torah*, the Hebrew word for *law*, and is contained in the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Pentateuch. (Note: When you see words in Scripture like law, precepts, instruction, or commands, more than likely the author is referring to the whole of the Torah.)

Sadly, the English translation *law* doesn’t give us the most accurate impression of God’s commands because it tends to steer our minds toward rules, prohibitions, and restrictions. However, the Hebrew word *Torah* is full of positive connotations about how God intended His people to thrive in the promised land.³ Dr. John Sailhamer described it wonderfully, “What the man and woman lost in the Garden is now restored to them in the Torah, namely, *God’s plan for their good*” (emphasis mine).⁴ Did anyone need to hear that today? God’s laws are for our benefit and blessing.

PERSONAL REFLECTION Describe a specific way that God’s instruction in your life has been for your good, especially if that instruction went against the grain of your natural inclinations.

When we study God's Word and walk according to it, through the power of His Spirit, we're literally restoring the abundant life that was once ours in the garden. Sailhamer's words remind me that God's Word is not static but transformative in its power to change us (2 Cor. 5:17; Col 3:10)!

PERSONAL REFLECTION When you think of the Old Testament and God's Law in particular, do you have a positive or negative view? Explain.

How has what you've learned so far caused you to think differently?

Read Deuteronomy 4:1-14.

Deuteronomy begins with Moses addressing the people of Israel before they crossed the Jordan River into the promised land. He rehearsed the commands God gave them at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20), because at this point, the Israelites had spent the last forty years wandering in the wilderness as a result of their disobedience. As they prepared to enter the promised land, God had a lot to tell them through Moses.

What did Moses do with the commands God had given Israel (vv. 1,5,14)?
(Circle the correct answer.)

Hid them

Passed them out

Recited them

Taught them

PERSONAL TAKE If it was important for Moses to teach God's Word to the people, what does that tell us we'll need along the way as we study Scripture?

PERSONAL REFLECTION Moses told the Israelites not to add or take away from God's commands (v. 2). How do you see these errors happening today?

Taking away from God's Word:

Adding to God's Word:

God's people were to listen to and follow God's words so that they might _____, _____, and _____ (v. 1).

What other reason did Moses give for keeping God's commands in verses 6-7?

What does verse 8 infer about the laws of Israel's surrounding nations?

It's natural to think of the Ten Commandments and the subsequent 603 laws as out of touch and antiquated. But we often don't realize how ahead of their time they were and to a large degree still are. While other ancient nations were lawless and hopelessly lived at the mercy of their false gods, God had given His people instruction for flourishing. The Law revealed how Israel could live at peace with God, each other, and even the foreigner in their midst.

PERSONAL REFLECTION As Israel was to stand apart from other nations, so we're to be set apart today. This doesn't mean we're to be distant from people who don't know Christ but rather distinct in how we live. When we live by God's Word, what differences do others see in our lives that might draw them to Jesus? Name some specific differences.

Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don't forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don't *slip from your mind* as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

DEUTERONOMY 4:9 (EMPHASIS MINE)

Some translations use the word *mind* and others *heart*. That's because the Hebrew word encompasses all of our being. It's the "source of the life of the inner person . . . with a focus on feelings, thoughts, volition, and other areas of inner life."⁵ Moses was clear: We're to know what God has told us, hold onto it with intent and care, and teach it to those coming behind us.

PERSONAL REFLECTION What excites you most about adding a regular discipline of Bible study to your life? What are your fears or concerns?

I can't wait to continue to trace the importance of God's Word throughout the pages of Scripture. I'm already looking forward to tomorrow where we'll take a look at the heart behind knowing the Word.

A Law of Love

Of one thing I am perfectly sure: God's story never ends with "ashes."⁶

ELISABETH ELLIOT



My friend Hollis was in the neighborhood and did an old fashioned drop in. I love when people spontaneously pop by (unless my house is a wreck or I'm still in my workout clothes and my hair is up in a clip!). Goodness, when did everything get so structured? Not surprisingly, I was perched on my front porch when Hollis pulled up. It's become my central office during the spring and summer, though I will say it's not a great setup if you're trying to focus. It seems that every twelve minutes or so I absolutely must water those barrels of roses in the back, steep another cup of tea, or drop everything for someone as remarkable as Hollis. Eighty-four years old and as charming as can be, Hollis reads the Scripture focus at our church on Sunday mornings. When the churches we separately attended merged together, he and I became fast friends, which led to him coaching me on how to swing a golf club (though that is an entirely different story).

Sitting lazily in outdoor chairs, we caught up in the afternoon air. I shared some uncertainties about the future, questions about things I have no control over. He crossed his legs and adjusted his sunglasses. Silence hung between us for a brief moment. "T and O," he finally said. I nodded my head and smiled. I'd learned his abbreviation for "trust and obey." "That's all you can do," he shrugged. At eighty-four, he's let that truth play out through bliss and trial. It was just the reminder I needed. And today it's the shorthand for much of what we'll be studying in the Book of Deuteronomy. While it doesn't have nearly the ring to it, for our purposes I'm changing his acronym to, "T and O because we L." I'll explain the L part in a moment.

Quick review from yesterday. What does the word *Torah* refer to?

Thoughtfully read Deuteronomy 6:1-9.

Verse 2 shows the correlation between fearing God (revering and respecting Him) and doing what He says. How does obeying God's Word reflect how much you revere Him?

In what place are God's words to dwell (v. 6)? How is this significant to your life today?

Verses 7-9 are gripping descriptions of how God's words are to thread through our daily lives. When my nieces and nephews are in my home, when I'm having dinner with friends, when I'm catching up with family, I want God's view of life and His guidance in my relationships to spill into every crevice of my day. Memorizing a list of rules doesn't accomplish this; having God's instructions live in my heart does.

Based on verse 3, what was promised if the Israelites obeyed God?

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is known as the Shema, which literally means "Hear!" and is to be taken as a command. In ancient Israelite tradition, the Shema became a daily, recited prayer.⁷

Here's the CSB version:

Listen, Israel: The LORD our God,
the LORD is one. Love the LORD
your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all
your strength.

When you see *LORD* in small caps in the Old Testament, it's referring to Yahweh, the personal name by which God revealed Himself to His people

Why do you think it was important for the Israelites to know that their God was the one and only God of the universe? (Look back at Ex. 20:3-4 for clues.)

I want God's view
of life and His
guidance in my
relationships to
spill into every
crevice of my day.

When I skim social media feeds or catch the daily headlines on my phone, I'm reminded that there are a lot of gods out there. To claim with certainty that you serve the one and only God of this universe is increasingly polarizing. Yet this is exactly who God reveals Himself to be in the Shema. Yahweh is the single, one true God.

What is the first word of the Shema, and why is it important?

The interesting thing about the word *listen* or *hear* in this context is that it's virtually synonymous with *obey*. The expectation was that tuning in to God's Word naturally meant you were preparing to respond to His leading. In other words, if you've really heard the one, true God, you'll obey Him. Put another way, if you say you've heard God but you don't actually obey Him, then you haven't really heard Him.⁸

PERSONAL REFLECTION Is there something you've heard God say through His Word but haven't obeyed? If so, be honest with yourself and reflect on what's holding you back. Then briefly note your plan of action, such as removing a specific obstacle in the way of obedience or taking a step of obedience you've been neglecting.

According to Deuteronomy 6:5, with what three parts of our being are we to love the Lord our God?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The word *heart* here "constitutes the mind or reason, which directs the rest of the person."⁹ The word *soul* identifies "the life desire of the person . . . [it] is the element of the person that desires life, seeks it out, and experiences it."¹⁰ The word *strength* is "tied closely with the physical strength of the person and so enables the performance of tasks prescribed by God's will."¹¹

PERSONAL TAKE Based on these three definitions, write a specific way you love the Lord with your heart, soul, and strength beneath each word in the previous activity.

Many of you are familiar with Jesus' command to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37). What doesn't seem as well-known or obvious is why this would be at the heart of God's law for Israel.

Put another way, what does keeping 613 commands have to do with loving God? Or maybe I should ask, what does loving God have to do with obeying 613 commands? Any stabs?

As we've discovered today, to truly hear Him leads to obeying Him, which is the essence of what it means to love Him. "T and O because we L" stands for trust and obey because we love God. This may be one of the least sophisticated things I've ever written, but I hope it's memorable. Trusting and obeying God and His Word is rather incomplete—according to Deuteronomy 6:1-9—without it being attached to our loving the Lord. Bible knowledge combined with love results in changed hearts and lives. And isn't that what we so desperately want?

PERSONAL RESPONSE How does studying God's Word as a means to loving Him and others change your perspective of Bible study? Be specific. If studying the Bible has become mostly an academic pursuit for you, ask the Lord to inspire in you a love for Him and others.

I'm grateful that from the Bible's earliest pages we see God's instructions are meant for our flourishing and also as a means to a deeper relationship with Him. As we move through this session, we'll see how God's Word unfolds to us in and through the person of Jesus. I pray it compels us to T and O because we L. Don't judge me.

The Glory of the Word

STUDY

The noise of the modern world makes us deaf to the voice of God, drowning out the one input we most need.¹²

JOHN MARK COMER



After spending the first two days looking at God's Word through His law, we'll now view it through song and poetry. (I can hear the applause.) When I was younger and in need of direction or a quick fix to a problem, I'd poke around the Book of Proverbs for an immediate road sign or answer. (I'm not saying this is a best practice.) I could readily apply a proverb to most any situation without too much expertise, which is one of the reasons I spent so much time in this book of wisdom. The psalms drew me in as well. When I was in high school, in the depths of despair over a season-ending basketball sprain or not being asked to prom until the bitter last minute, I would lament in Psalms. Its poetry gave wings to both my heartaches and hallelujahs, and Proverbs' wisdom grounded me in understanding. Both books are rich with history, theology, literary devices, and of course, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In addition to Psalms and Proverbs, the poetic and wisdom books of the Bible include Job, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Because portions of these writings are readily applicable to our modern lives, we tend to access them often. Today we're going to look at Psalm 19. It was one of my favorites growing up and has maintained that status into my adulthood. It describes the nature of God's Word and swells with poetry and metaphor. C. S. Lewis wrote this about Psalm 19: "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."¹³

Read Psalm 19. Note that the first six verses describe how God speaks to us through His creation and the rest of the psalm deals with how He speaks through His Word.

How does God "speak" to us through His creation (vv. 1-4)?

What two metaphors did David use to describe the sun in verses 4-5?

Verse 7 appears to abruptly jump from descriptions about the sun to a new section about God's Word. It would be natural to assume that these are two disconnected segments, but look closely at verse 6. It ends with the phrase, "nothing is hidden from its heat."

PERSONAL TAKE How might this transitional statement about the reach and power of the sun connect to what David said about the Word of God in verses 7-11?

Using trusted tools (commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, and so forth) to study the Bible is particularly meaningful because they help us see the authors' intentions that aren't always obvious. Before studying this psalm, I would have thought the transition between the content in verse 6 about the sun and the content in verse 7 about God's Word was merely David changing gears to a brand new topic. But the *Word Biblical Commentary* tells me that the reality of there being nothing hidden from the sun's heat is a powerful analogy of God's Word: "The clause marks the transition between the two parts of the psalm and at the same time links them intimately together. Just as the sun dominates the daytime sky, so too does Torah dominate human life."¹⁴ Okay! Now we're onto something that makes both parts of the psalm even more remarkable and meaningful!

Notice another subtle but important shift. In verse 1, David said creation declares the glory of God. But what different title did David use when referring to God in verses 7-9?

As we noted yesterday, *LORD* (with small caps) is the word for *Yahweh*, God's personal name given to the Israelites.

PERSONAL REFLECTION If creation declares the glory of God to all people, how does God's Word reveal His personal nature to His people? To use another of David's analogies, if the sun gives physical light to everyone, how does His Word give spiritual light to believers?

Verses 7-9 use different terms to describe the Torah (God's good Law for His people). Each term highlights a different facet of Torah, but together they form the diamond that is God's Word. Translations differ slightly, but I've listed and italicized the words used in the CSB on the following page.

VERSE 7

The *instruction* of the LORD is
What does it do?

The *testimony* of the LORD is
What does it do?

VERSE 8

The *precepts* of the LORD are
What do they do?

The *command* of the LORD is
What does it do?

VERSE 9

The *fear* of the LORD is
What does it do?

The *ordinances* of the LORD are
What are they more desirable
and sweeter than?

PERSONAL REFLECTION Which of these six statements about God's Word means the most to you, and why?

Just as the sun gives light and heat that is essential to survival and enjoyment, God's personal revelation through His Word is also indispensable to our lives. Without it, how would we know the Lord and His purposes for us? Where else would we discover that we're made in His image? And how would we know who Jesus is, what He did for us on the cross, and His desire to be in relationship with us?

Read verses 12-14 again.

PERSONAL TAKE After writing about God's Word being a powerful light to our souls, why do you think David ended with confession and forgiveness?

Verse 14 says, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer."

This is one of my favorite verses to pray whether I'm beginning to pray or if I've run out of words at the end of my praying. It covers a thousand confessions and keeps me from as many future sins. If the words I speak and the thoughts and reflections of my heart are acceptable to the Lord, how can I sin against Him and His Word? Praise be to our rock and our Redeemer!

PERSONAL PRAYER Write out a prayer based on verse 14. Add your personal pleas to it. To prompt you: What of your words need to change? What heart-reflections need to be different? What does "acceptable" (some versions say "pleasing") to the Lord look like? How is He your personal Lord, Rock, and Redeemer?

You're already more than halfway through our first session. I'm proud of you for sticking with the discipline of Bible study. Tomorrow, we'll look at God's Word through the pages of the New Testament, studying the perspective of James, the brother of Jesus. I think you'll find his understanding of the Word to be most practical and inviting. We're in this together.

Hearing and Doing

We have the presence and the promises of God. We are meant to march to that great music.¹⁵

AMY CARMICHAEL



One compelling aspect of writing this study is seeing each of the spiritual disciplines through the lenses of the Old and New Testaments. Today, we'll look at God's Word through the New, which incidentally is built upon the Old. If you needed more coffee for that opening thought, or heaven forbid, you don't drink coffee, let me give it to you straight—today is an exciting transition that will take on even more meaning after having studied God's Word in Deuteronomy and Psalms.

Read James 1:19-27.

What did James say is necessary before we receive God's Word?
List everything he mentioned in verses 19-21.

In what posture are we to receive the Word?

What word did he use to describe the "word" in verse 21?
(Circle the correct answer.)

Implanted

Fruitful

Prolific

Cultivated

When studying Scripture—especially when reflecting on it, which we'll get to later in our study—it's important to notice and contemplate individual words. For instance, James suggested the adverb *humbly* is significant to our being able to receive God's Word. If we come to Scripture with a prideful attitude, we won't be able to receive it in the way God intends. Similarly, notice the word *implanted*. You don't have to do a formal word search to ponder what that word means in this context.

PERSONAL TAKE What does *implanted* tell us about how the Word of God works in our lives? List everything you can think of. (Questions to ask yourself: *Do planted things grow immediately? Do they require patience? Are strong roots and cultivating needed?* You get the idea.)

If you want to further study the meaning of a word or discover the other places it's found in Scripture, you'll need a concordance. (Go to blueletterbible.org or check out the resources listed on pp. 38–39.) *Implanted* means to be “marked by being deeply fixed or set within something.”¹⁶ It also means to “grow or spring up” or to be “inborn.”¹⁷ Interestingly, the only time the Greek word for *implanted* is used in the New Testament is here in James.¹⁸ With that being the case, we're unable to see how other New Testament authors might have used the word. On the other hand, this onetime usage highlights James' desire to uniquely describe the way God's Word plants itself in our hearts.

What did James say the implanted word is able to do (v. 21)? (Note, the word here is most likely “referring to the word of the gospel.”¹⁹ In this instance, it's probably not a call for unbelievers to “accept the word” as much as it's for believers to “allow the word to influence them in all parts of their lives.”²⁰

In your own words, sum up James' instruction in verse 22.

Explain the illustration James used in verses 22-25 to describe a hearer of the Word who's not also a doer.

I can't think of a more natural response to being a hearer of the Word than being a doer as well. And yet somehow I always need to be reminded of James' instruction. If I'm not careful, I can substitute hearing, even studying the Word, for putting it into practice. Like reading a book on the importance of exercise but never moving or like making a salad and eating a pizza instead (I participated in this exercise yesterday), our knowledge and understanding of the Word counts for little if it doesn't express itself through corresponding action. Filling up on knowledge may give us a sense of righteousness, but it hasn't done its job if it doesn't bloom into obedient action.

PERSONAL REFLECTION What one truth do you know about God's Word that you're not putting into action? What specific steps can you take to change that?

James's illustration about looking in a mirror but then forgetting what one looks like is a brilliant image. How often do you look in the mirror without fluffing your hair or flossing a bit of spinach out of your teeth? When we obtain knowledge about the way we look by seeing our reflection in a mirror, we make a change. It's pretty simple.

What is the spiritual "mirror" James wanted us to intently look into?
(Circle the correct answer.)

Our heart

Our feelings

The perfect law of freedom

Our friends

So far, James has referred to the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word, but here he referred to the Law in particular. While he may be using these words interchangeably, James had a keen interest in showing Jesus as the One who perfectly interprets and lives out the Law.²¹ On the first day of this session, we studied the Law in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Today, we'll very briefly see how the Law takes on new meaning in the New Testament.

Read Matthew 5:17-18.

True/False: Jesus came to abolish the Law.

In Matthew 22:34-40, how did Jesus sum up the Old Testament Law?

PERSONAL TAKE How does loving God with our entire being and our neighbor as our self fulfill the entire Law?

James had the interesting privilege of being both an apostle and half-brother of Jesus. He was deeply acquainted with the teachings of Christ and therefore viewed God's law as one of love and freedom rather than a list of stringent rules that could only bring condemnation. He understood that when Christ fulfilled the law He empowered us to implement its commands from a new heart.

Look back at James 1:26-27. Here, James gives us some examples of what our lives will look like if we persevere in studying God's words while acting on what He tells us:

We'll control our _____. (Goodness, I need help with this every day).

We'll look after both _____ and _____. (We do this in different ways. Some adopt; some support; some serve; some give. We need to be doing something.)

We'll keep ourselves _____ from the world. (We'll desire holiness over the values of the current culture.)

James has so much more to say about what a doer of God's Word looks like. I encourage you to read the entire letter when you have the time. For the purpose of today's study, though, I want you to come away with how transformational and practical the words of Scripture are. It thrills my heart to write this because, frankly, I get so tired of my repetitive thoughts, my default ways of seeing the world, my go-to habits, my sin. I need a fresh word from the Word every day. Without the life and teachings of Jesus, it just would never occur to me to love my enemy or humble myself in a disagreement or stand up for justice when it might cost me or be generous when times are lean or simply say, "I'm sorry."

My land (as my grandmother used to say), I'm thankful I can look into the priceless law of liberty and then go do something about what I see. I'm ever grateful the Lord gives us an accurate mirror to look into, one that tells us the truth but doesn't leave us where we are. What a joy to know we are free to change! What a gift to be able to study the Bible so we can gain knowledge about Christ, be changed by what He teaches us, and impact the world around us. This is what the spiritual discipline of Bible study does for the person who, by God's grace, is willing to not just be a hearer but also a doer.

PERSONAL REFLECTION What's one truth about God's Word that today's study has shown you?

The Word Made Flesh

The Word becomes flesh and walks among us, and so we have in our history not just the propositional Word of God, but the personal, lived-out Word of God, breathed by the Spirit, spoken by the Father, expressing fully His nature and purpose. God has spoken in His Son!²²

REUBEN WELCH

I grew up in a Christian home. Actually, I grew up in a pastor's home, so it was sort of double-Christian. From birth to high school graduation, I hardly ever missed a Sunday service. I could recite verses from the King James Version like it was my job, and I could knock your socks off in a sword drill. (For those who didn't grow up in a Bible church in the 80s, a sword drill is a game that tested your ability to quickly find a Scripture reference. Have no fear if you missed out—we've got apps for this. You're totally fine.) My point being, even with as much Bible study as I had as a child, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I first came across John 5:39-40.

Read John 5:39-40.

Who do the Scriptures testify about?

Place a checkmark by the correct statement:

- We have eternal life by knowing the Scriptures.
- We have eternal life by knowing Jesus.

While studying the Bible is essential to knowing who Christ is, it's possible to know what the Bible says without actually knowing Jesus. The religious leaders of Jesus' day knew the Old Testament better than anyone, yet they missed the One the Scriptures were all about. They missed Jesus. This is the last thing you and I want to have happen. So we'll close our session by studying the Word that was made flesh. If the spiritual discipline of Bible study has been a stiff and dry practice for you, I pray you'll gain a fresh perspective as we see Jesus as the embodiment of God's Word.

Read John 1:1-18.

From when was the Word (vv. 1-2)?



Fill in the blanks:

The Word was _____ God and the Word _____ God (v. 2).

What did the Word create (v. 3)?

Many of you may be familiar with this passage. You may have even memorized some of these verses about the Word. However, if we're honest with ourselves, these are not easy concepts to understand. What does it mean that the Word was at the beginning, that the Word was with God and was actually God Himself? How did it create, and how did it take on flesh and dwell among us? How is the Word a person?

If you look up the word *Word* in a concordance, you'll find the Greek word is *logos*. It simply means "word" or "message."²³ Because *logos* was a broad and widely used word in Jesus' time, the definition doesn't help us all that much. For a better understanding of what John is talking about, we need to go back to the Old Testament and see how its Hebrew equivalent, *dābār*, was used.²⁴

Read Genesis 1:1-3,6,9,11.

How did God create? (Circle the correct answer.)

Thought

Prayed

Touched

Spoke

Read Psalm 33:6.

How were the heavens created?

PERSONAL TAKE How do these Old Testament passages help you better understand Jesus' involvement in creation according to John 1:1-3?

The heavens
were made by
the word of the
LORD, and all
the stars, by
the breath of
his mouth.

Psalm 33:6

We don't have time to look up the other ways God's Word was documented in the Old Testament, but His Word accomplished even beyond creation. God's Word came as revelation, deliverance, judgment, rescue, and wisdom.²⁵ I want you to see something else His Word accomplished—something especially dear to me.

Read Psalm 107:17-21.

What did God's Word do when He sent it forth (v. 20)?

When I think of all God's Word has done for me over the years, its healing power is at the top of the list. Nothing binds up wounded hearts, repairs broken thinking, or sometimes cures physical illness like His Word.

Throughout the Old Testament, God's Word created, revealed, delivered, judged, rescued, gave wisdom, and healed. Turn back to John 1 and read verse 14 again.

What did the Word do?

Who does John say is the Word that became flesh?

What was He full of? _____ and _____

PERSONAL REFLECTION When you think of all the things God's Word accomplished in the Old Testament (see list above), describe what it means for the Word to have become flesh in Jesus.

The Word having "dwelt among us" is one of the most powerful phrases in all of Scripture (v. 14). The literal meaning is that the Word pitched His tabernacle among us.²⁶ The word *tabernacle* probably hasn't popped up in any of your recent texts or conversations—it's not a concept that has much meaning in today's culture. But if you were a first-century Jew, your mind would have immediately raced to the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, found in the Book of Exodus.

Read Exodus 25:1-9.

According to verse 8, what was the purpose of building a tabernacle for God?

Though the presence of God dwelling among the Israelites was an astounding gift, often His glory was so great it was a consuming fire in which they couldn't draw near (Ex. 24:17). Even Moses couldn't enter the tabernacle when it was filled with God's glory (Ex. 40:34-35). And when the temple Solomon built was dedicated, the priests were kept from ministering there by God's glory (1 Kings 8:10-11).

PERSONAL TAKE Imagine you're a first-century Jew hearing for the first time that God's Word was made flesh to dwell among you. You're just now understanding that His Word became a person, His very Son, to be with you. How would this have changed your perspective of God and His love for you?

In the fifth grade I had a teacher who banned the phrase "I don't get it" from the classroom. I was a repeat offender. She much preferred we incorporate the grammatically superior response, "I do not understand." Despite my misgivings at the time, this has served me well. But when I think about Jesus as the actual Word of God, the very expression of God Himself, the only thing that comes to mind is, "I don't get it!" (Sorry, Mrs. Shoaff.) And yet at the same time, I'm bowled over by the parts I do get. John, after having personally known and walked with Jesus, recognized that Jesus is God's ultimate expression of Himself!²⁷ Jesus Christ, the Word that was from the beginning, the Word that creates, delivers, heals, and saves has dwelt among us, is accessible to us, is with us.

Read Hebrews 1:1-3.

By whom did God speak to the Old Testament fathers?

How does He speak to us today?

Through what is Jesus sustaining all things?

PERSONAL REFLECTION How does Jesus as the Word made flesh reframe your understanding of Bible study? Does it inspire you to listen more intently to the words and teachings of Jesus? Explain.

PERSONAL RESPONSE As we close our session on the spiritual discipline of Bible study, what was the single most important truth you learned? How will it affect your study of the Bible in the future?

Dear friends, I'm so grateful for your presence on this journey. The spiritual disciplines really are a road we travel because they lead us along paths of growth and understanding. As we commit time to each discipline, we're spending it with our Savior. I think of Mary of Bethany who chose to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to what He said (Luke 10:38-42). Perhaps Mary understood even before John that she was in the presence of the Word made flesh and she best put down her pots and pans so she could partake of the portion that could never be taken from her (v. 42). I think that's what Bible study is. Spending time in the presence of Christ for that which nourishes us now and lasts into eternity.

Study

There are many different ways and means to study the Scripture. Here are a few tips to help you thrive in your study:

- 1. Be consistent.** Make it a practice, hence the word *discipline*. But don't bite off more than you can reasonably chew. I tend to go overboard on everything, like the time I wanted to try my hand at gardening and built and planted five raised beds. It was too much too soon. Commit to what you can handle and then get after it.
- 2. Give yourself grace.** If you miss a day, or days, don't get down on yourself. Pick back up where you left off. Remember, God isn't keeping a spiritual scorecard on how many days in a row you studied the Bible. He delights in our studying His Word because it's through His Word that we come to know Him more deeply. The Bible also reveals wisdom and knowledge about our lives, relationships, and what's important to the heart of Christ. Studying is for our blessing and benefit, not to curry favor with God or earn status with Him.
- 3. Use available resources.** Choose a version of the Bible you enjoy reading. The CSB, ESV, and NIV are wonderful translations with easy-to-understand modern wording. The Message is an additional version that can be helpful alongside your main translation. I would encourage you to download the YouVersion Bible app. It gives you access to several versions of the Scripture, plus other helpful guides, like reading plans. Use Bible study tools such as concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries. Some of these you may want to purchase, such as Logos Bible Software (logos.com), but you can also find some of these tools for free online (blueletterbible.org and biblegateway.com).
- 4. Always be sure to start with your own study of Scripture before you jump to using resources.** Ask the Spirit to speak to you about what the Word says before you see what others say about it. This takes restraint, especially in these days of being able to quickly Google a scholar's opinion or run to a word search. In all my years of being in God's Word, nothing sticks with me quite like the insights and truths I discover on my own through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For those just getting started (and those like me who can always use a refresher), here are some specific ways you can study the Scripture:

- 1. Choose a Bible study that will lead you through a book of the Bible or a topic that can be traced throughout Scripture.** A study will keep you on track and will also guide you in your understanding not only of the passage you're studying but also how to study the Bible. We are blessed with countless resources that address every book in the Bible and just about every topic or theme there is to study in Scripture. Choose one that resonates with you. If you don't want to use a guided study, choose a book of the Bible to study on your own. (Check out Lifeway Women's Bible studies at lifeway.com/women.)
- 2. Do a character study.** Choose an Old Testament character, like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Hannah, David, Daniel, and so forth. Or a New Testament character, like Peter, Paul, Mary, Elizabeth, or the women who followed Jesus in the Gospels. These are just a few of the many notable people in Scripture. And as you study certain individuals, always be looking for how God is working in their lives, how they respond to Him, and what you discover about His character.
- 3. Read through the Bible in a year or two.** There are many reading plans, some of which guide you to read the Scripture cover to cover, while others are chronological. You can find Bible reading plans online. A daily reading plan helps with consistency—you know exactly what you need to do each day to finish in a specific amount of time. It also helps give you the big picture of Scripture. I like to use a journal when I'm reading through Scripture so I can write down anything that stands out to me.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What's something that really stood out to you in the video teaching?

How do the teachings of Scripture help us see the world as God sees it? To see things as they really are as opposed to how culture defines reality?

What is your history with the Bible? Was it a part of your growing up years? If so, how? If not, when did you first encounter the Scriptures?

How would you explain or describe the Bible to someone who knows nothing about it?

What are some recent things God has taught you through the Scriptures?

What does it mean for God to rebuke us through His Word, and how has He done that in your life?

How has God's Word corrected you and restored you to an upright position?

How has God used Scripture to nurture and train you?

What does it mean to be equipped for every good work? How is God accomplishing that in your life through His Word?