

**ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN**
BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

ANCIENT SCRIPTURE... MODERN STUDY

JASON J. BARKER

YOU CAN READ THE *BIBLE*

AN ORTHODOX GUIDE TO BIBLE STUDY



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A ministry of the Department of Youth Ministry - Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America and the Orthodox Christian Network.

YOU CAN READ THE BIBLE AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO BIBLE STUDY

This booklet was written and designed by Jason J. Barker. It was published through a partnership between the Department of Youth Ministry - Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America and the Orthodox Christian Network.

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Read the four Gospels, as well as the Acts of the Apostles.

ISRAEL

THE LACK OF BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE

The Bible has been called “the most widely-owned book that no one reads.” This unfortunately is not an entirely inaccurate statement. Researcher George Barna has noted that, while 92 percent of American homes have at least one Bible, and 60 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches, only a small percentage of people — in fact, only approximately 25 percent of American teenagers — read the Bible at least once per week. Furthermore, another study found that 21 percent of Orthodox Christian teens who are active in the Church say that they *never* read the Bible.

An email making the rounds aptly depicts the problem. Listing “Ten Hints You Need to Be in Sunday School,” it includes “when you open your Bible, your allergies explode because of all the dust;” “you think the minor prophets were a rock group in the 1960s;” and “your favorite Bible verse is, ‘Jesus went about doing good and casting out deacons.’”

The problem, as Fr. Georges Florovsky states, is that we have lost our “scriptural mind.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

The “scriptural mind” — reverence for, and knowledge about, Holy Scripture — is essential to the Orthodox spiritual life. Orthodox Christians believe, in the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, that in the Bible “one finds the self-revelation of God and can come to a true and genuine knowledge of Him and His will and purpose for man and the world. In and through the Bible, human persons can enter into communion with God.”

The Orthodox belief that Holy Scripture is a self-revelation of God, and through it we can come to know about God and His will for us, is based on several important factors clearly stated by St. Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness.”

“Holy Scripture is Inspired

The phrase “given by inspiration” in 2 Timothy 3:16 is translated from one word in koine Greek: *Theopneustos*, which is literally translated “God-breathed.” This tells us that the truths contained in Holy Scripture are given directly by God, as St. Paul confirms in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

This inspiration is important because God’s word is the only written standard that stands the test of time, and thus is a firmer foundation for our beliefs than our constantly changing opinions and emotions. The Holy Apostle Peter dramatically



all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24–25).

The inspiration of the Bible does not mean that the biblical writers were merely secretaries who wrote the text as dictated to them by God. Instead, as St. Peter informs us, “Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The Holy Spirit conveyed to the biblical writers the truths to be expressed in Scripture, but the details of the writing itself reflects the emphases and personal style of the individual writers. It is for this reason that each book in the Bible reflects the concerns of the age in which it was written and the viewpoint of the respective authors.

Holy Scripture Teaches Doctrine

Orthodox Christian doctrine — the teachings and beliefs of the Church — are rooted in Holy Scripture. This fact is so foundational to Orthodox Christianity that Blessed Augustine tells us, “What more shall I teach you than what we read in the Apostle? For Holy Scripture fixes the rule for our doctrine, lest we dare to be wiser than we ought.”

In teaching doctrine, Holy Scripture becomes our main written authority in all areas of life, as Fr. Thomas Hopko explains:

Once the Bible has been constituted as the scripture of the Church, it becomes its main written authority, within the Church and not over or apart from it. Everything in the Church is judged by the Bible. Nothing in the Church may contradict it. Everything in the Church must be biblical; for the Church, in order to be the Church, must be wholly expressive of the Bible; or more accurately, it must be wholly faithful to and expressive of that reality to which the Bible is itself the scriptural witness.

Holy Scripture Corrects Us

The Bible not only teaches us doctrine, but it also corrects us when we err. Like a good priest, Holy Scripture will “Convince (or correct), rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2).

As you faithfully read the Bible there will be occasions when a biblical passage will call to mind a sin of which you are guilty. The Holy Prophet Isaiah explains, “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ Whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left” (Isaiah 30:21). St. John Chrysostom similarly states, “Even one parable can help the soul to have contrition for a sin, to find a little rest from the concerns of the world. Reading Scripture each day will accomplish some great and noble good in us.”

Holy Scripture Instructs Us in Righteousness

Many people know that the Bible warns us against things that we should not do; in fact, it seems that the knowledge many people have about biblical content is limited exclusively to the first words in some of the Ten Commandments: “Thou



JERUSALEM
Read the four Gospels, as well as the Acts of the Apostles.





shalt not..." While Holy Scripture does contain many necessary warnings against sin, and provides much-needed correction, the point is not simply to rail against our failings: the focus of biblical teaching about humanity is to instruct us in righteous living. .

St. Paul exhorts us to "exercise yourself toward godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7), and that we can do so by being "nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed" (4:6). Holy Scripture is inseparable from living a godly life; we can only grow in godliness by being nourished by the words of faith and good doctrine contained in the Bible.

St. John of Damascus presents us with a wonderful image of what it is like to be instructed in righteousness by Holy Scripture:

All Scripture, then, is given by inspiration of God and is also assuredly profitable. Wherefore to search the Scriptures is a work most fair and most profitable for souls. For just as the tree planted by the channels of waters, so also the soul watered by the divine Scripture is enriched and gives fruit in its season, viz. orthodox belief, and is adorned with evergreen leafage, I mean, actions pleasing to God. For through the Holy Scriptures we are trained to action that is pleasing to God, and untroubled contemplation. For in these we find both exhortation to every virtue and dissuasion from every vice. If, therefore, we are lovers of learning, we shall also be learned in many things. For by care and toil and the grace of God the Giver, all things are accomplished.

Now that we have an understanding of why we should read the Bible as part of our spiritual discipline, we need to learn how to read the Bible. The foundation of biblical interpretation for Orthodox Christians is the Tradition of the Church.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Orthodox Christianity — based on Holy Scripture itself — believes that the Bible can only be fully understood within the context of the Church and its Tradition. This belief is of the utmost importance for Orthodox

In his second epistle to the Thessalonians the Holy Apostle Paul exhorts, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). St. Paul's statement clearly implies two inseparable elements of Orthodoxy: the oral word, and the written word. It is impossible to fully understand the meaning of Scripture without also understanding the teaching of the Church. The reason for interpreting Scripture within the context of the Church can be clearly seen in 1 Timothy 3:15, in which St. Paul says the Church is "the pillar and ground of the truth." Because the Church — rather than the individual — is the pillar of truth, it is impossible to glean the truth of Scripture apart from the teaching of the Church.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov forcefully makes this point, "Do not consider it sufficient for yourself to read the Gospel alone, without the reading of the Holy Fathers! This is a proud, dangerous thought. Better, let the Holy Fathers lead you to the Gospel,



Read chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles.

ATHENS



as their beloved child who has received his preparatory upbringing and education by means of their writings.”

The points we have studied so far — the reasons for reading the Bible, the necessity of conforming our lives to the Bible, and the reasons why the Bible cannot be interpreted outside the teachings and practices of the Church — are clearly reflected in the words of St. Philaret of Moscow: “First, one must read (Scripture) with reverence, as the word of God, and with prayer for understanding of it; second, one must read it with pure intention, for establishment in the faith and motivation to good works; third, one must understand it in accordance with the interpretation of the Orthodox Church and the Holy Fathers.”

We can now move on to methods for reading and studying the Bible as a spiritual discipline.

METHODS FOR BIBLE STUDY

Personal study of the Bible within the context of Orthodox Christianity does not compromise the methods we can use to understand Scripture — it in fact increases the accuracy and vitality of our study by guaranteeing that our interpretation will be guided by the Holy Spirit through teachings and interpretations the Orthodox Church over two millennia. Within this context there is a wealth of methods we can use to maximize our study of Scripture.

Devotional Reading

If you engage in no other form of Bible study, you should at least engage in devotional reading. Devotional reading is an excellent way to develop the practice of study because it does not require any additional research tools; it involves only prayerfully meditating on a biblical passage. While this of course should occur in all the methods we will examine, it is the only activity in devotional reading. The purpose of devotional reading is aptly expressed by Staretz Nikon of Optina: “Read the Holy Gospel, be penetrated by its spirit, make it the rule of your life, your handbook; in every action and question of life act according to the study of the Gospel.”

There are several practices you can utilize to make your devotional reading beneficial. First, you can consider what essential truth God is communicating in the passage. An obvious example would be reading the Gospel according to St. John. What do these passages tell you about Christ? How are they reflected in the theology of the Church, and notably in the hymns sung in the Divine Liturgy? These are ways in which you can meditate upon the truth in the Bible.

Secondly, you can apply the passage directly to ourselves. As Bishop Kallistos Ware states, “We are to say to ourselves, ‘(These are not just distant places, events in the remote past. They belong to my own encounter with the Lord. The stories include me.’” For example, all the Gospels present the episode in which St. Peter betrayed Christ (Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; John 18), and John presents the subsequent episode in which our Lord reconciles Peter to Himself (John 21:17).



ROME
Read Acts 28 and the Epistle to the Romans.





Bishop Kallistos suggests that these passages can inspire us to reflect upon our acts of betrayal to God and others, as well as our need to forgive the betrayals of others.

In order for devotional reading to be effective in changing your life, it is necessary to read the Bible every day. It is likely impossible for us to follow the practice of St. Seraphim of Sarov, who read a Gospel book each day (i.e., Matthew on Monday, Mark on Tuesday, etc.), but we need a firm schedule to which we can adhere. Many Christians attempt to read one chapter each day, while others read a predetermined number of chapters each day that will enable them to read the entire Bible in one year. Many Orthodox Christians find it particularly helpful to read the passages from the Old Testament, psalms, epistle and Gospel assigned for the day.

Topical Study

A topical study can be one of the most exciting forms of Bible study as you select a subject and examine what the Bible says about the subject. A topical study can reveal many themes and nuances that are both extremely interesting and very valuable to our spiritual growth.

The first step in a topical study is creating a list of words related to the topic — a particularly useful tool when compiling this list is a thesaurus. For example, if you are studying the subject of “peace,” you might create a list including such terms as brotherhood, friendship, and unity.

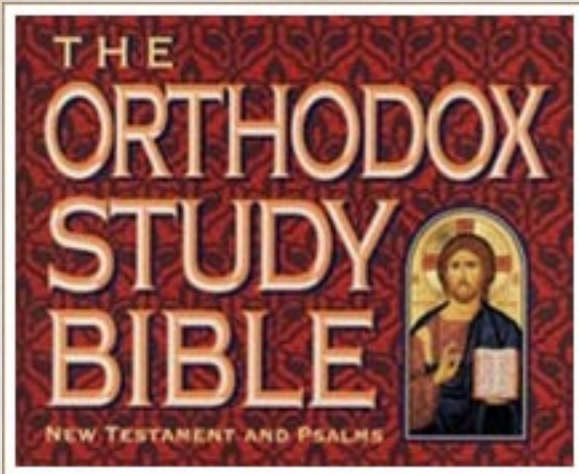
After creating a list of terms related to your topic, you would then use a concordance to find occurrences of the subject in the Bible. If you want to really dig into your topic, you could then look up the passages you’ve found in an interlinear Bible, which gives the text in both the original Hebrew or Greek and an English translation. After finding the Hebrew or Greek words for your topic, you would look these up in Hebrew or Greek lexicons — this would let you learn the definitions for the original words, thereby allowing you to appreciate all possible meanings of the topic.

You could extend your study by identifying factors related to the topic. For example, when studying “peace” you could examine what the Bible says about some of the ways in which humans futilely pursue peace, as well as the thoughts and behaviors of biblical persons and saints that resulted in peace in their lives.

The final step is to examine the importance of the subject in our lives. You could begin by examining situations discovered in the previous step to determine how you should respond in similar situations.

Book Study

In a book study you attempt to discover the central themes of a biblical book. A book study allows you to examine in detail the ways in which God dealt with His people in a specific historical context, as well as the way in which the eternal truths of the book are applicable to us.



If you are going to read the Bible, there is a very important question you will need to answer: “What Bible translation and version should I use?”

The Orthodox Study Bible - available from Conciliar Press - uses an English translation of the Holy Scriptures, and includes helpful cross-references, study notes and articles for Orthodox readers.

The Orthodox Study Bible is also the official translation for the Bible Bowl competitions in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.



There are a number of things I study and discuss when creating my online studies of New Testament books. This list is not exhaustive — there is an almost endless list of things that can be examined in a book study — but I have found them to be useful in gaining a working understanding of a biblical text.

I begin by looking at the background of the book. Who is the author? Under what circumstances — religious, political, and cultural — was the book written? Who was the intended audience of the book? These factors can greatly assist you in understanding the content and emphases of a specific biblical book.

After studying the background of the book, I then begin to look at the content of the book itself. I start with a broad overview, and then increasingly study individual details. I therefore begin by surveying the general content of the book, outlining its development and identifying some of the main themes of the writing. I then look at each individual chapter, identifying first the main message of the chapter, the way in which the writer develops this message, and the way this chapter relates to other chapters in the book. I then look at the key words and ideas the writer uses to develop his message in this chapter. I finish by identifying and studying biblical cross-references, other verses in the Bible that also discuss the points made by the writer in this biblical chapter.

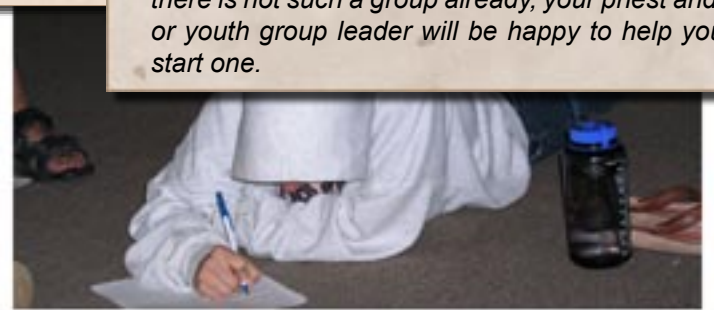
Finally, I think about ways in which I can live out the truths revealed in this biblical chapter. As with every method of Bible study, we should be changed by what we have read. Understanding how we should understand and apply to our lives the message of the biblical chapter and book is one of the central functions of most Orthodox Christian commentaries on the Bible. Reading Orthodox commentaries will not only enable us to appreciate how the Church interprets the biblical passage we are studying, but it will also equip us to better incorporate into our lives the spiritual significance of the passage. Commentaries are indispensable tools for Orthodox Bible study.



Look closely at a number of the photographs in this booklet. What do you see?

*You see people studying the Bible as **part of a group**. While it is important to engage in personal Bible study, Orthodox Bible study is not exclusively a private practice - it is also an activity in which you engage as part of the Christian community.*

In addition to engaging in the private study we discuss in this booklet, get involved in a Bible study group at your local Orthodox church. If there is not such a group already, your priest and/or youth group leader will be happy to help you start one.



CONCLUSION

St. John of Kronstadt wonderfully expresses the importance of Bible study in the spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian: "I especially love to read the Holy Scriptures, both Testaments. I cannot live without this reading. They contain so much. So many laws for the life of man's soul are revealed there! A person striving for spiritual renewal can obtain so much guidance in being reborn from evil to good." You will be able to express the same sentiment as you continue to engage in the transforming spiritual practice of Bible study.

