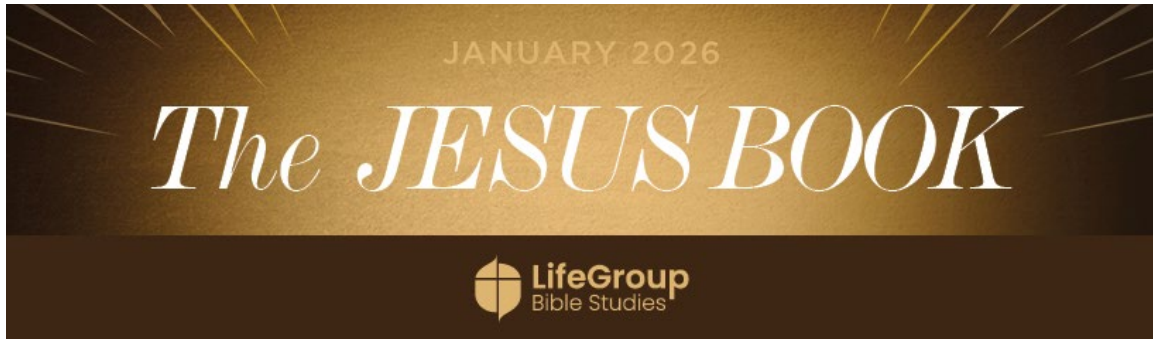


Week 3: Reading the Bible Well

Hook



Main Point: The Bible shows us God's will when we interpret it faithfully.

Have you ever been certain you remembered something correctly – only to find out it never actually happened? That's the "Mandela Effect." For example:

1. **True or False:** The Monopoly man wears a monocle.
(False – he never has!)
2. **True or False:** The famous children's book series is called *The Berenstein Bears*.
(False – it's actually spelled *The Berenstain Bears*.)
3. **True or False:** In *Star Wars*, Darth Vader says, "Luke, I am your father."
(False – the real line is, "No, I am your father.")
4. **True or False:** The colorful and circular cereal is spelled "Fruit Loops"
(False – the correct spelling is "Froot Loops")

It's amazing how confidently we can believe something false just because it sounds or feels familiar. Many Christians believe ideas that *sound* biblical but aren't – such as "God helps those who help themselves" or "follow your heart." These beliefs spread easily when we haven't studied Scripture carefully for ourselves.

Transition: This week, we'll learn that the Bible shows us God's will when we interpret it faithfully. We'll explore how to seek His will through Scripture and prayer, how to protect ourselves from false or shallow teaching, and how to study the Bible in its historical and literary context. When we know God's Word well, we can recognize what is true, reject what only *sounds* true, and walk confidently in the center of His will.

RECAP: This is a four-part series based on *The Jesus Book* by Dr. Jack Graham. The heart of *The Jesus Book* is that the purpose of the Bible is to bring us to know Jesus so we can live in fellowship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the first lesson, we learned about the Bible itself. We learned that the Bible is trustworthy and true, the only authority for life and faith. We learned that the Bible is living and active, that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through it, and that reading it is a supernatural experience for the believer. We learned the big-picture story of the Bible. It is the story of God's relationship with humankind from creation, to the Fall, to redemption in Christ – how the world was made, how it was broken, and how it will be redeemed. We learned that the point of the Bible is for us to come to know Jesus so we can be saved and live in fellowship with Him.

In the second lesson, we learned we can read the Bible as a lens to see the world and to find hope and reassurance. We also see that reading the Bible is a daily discipline leading not only to spiritual growth, but also that it is a joy and a pleasure for those who love Jesus.

In the third lesson, we will learn how we can know God's will through Scripture, how to protect ourselves from inaccurate Bible reading, and how to study the Bible faithfully.

*This third lesson covers the chapters 7–8 of *The Jesus Book*. All page numbers listed below are from *The Jesus Book* unless otherwise noted.

Week 3: Reading the Bible Well

Book

Main Point: The Bible shows us God's will when we interpret it faithfully.

Proverbs 3:5–6; Romans 12:1–2; and 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8; 5:16–18 [Read]

Talking Point 1: If you want to know the will of God, start with the Bible and prayer.

Q: Romans and Proverbs: How can we discern the will of God?

Q: Thessalonians: What does the will of God for us include?

Most believers have a desire to know God's will for their lives. We trust that God has a plan for our lives and that the safest place to be is in the center of His will. Dr. Graham said one of the most common requests he receives as a pastor is help in discovering God's will. He is always happy to give counsel, because godly counsel from other believers is good when seeking God's will. But when people ask that, he always asks first if they have sought the Lord's will in prayer (p. 105) and recommends that if we want to know God's will, we start with the Bible (p. 103).

Seeking another godly believer's advice, especially a mentor who has been following Jesus longer than you, is a great help to discovering God's will for your life. But we have direct access to the Lord ourselves through His written Word and by spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation. As Dr. Graham wrote, "Prayer is not just talking to God; it's also listening to God. Prayer is two-way communication" (p. 106). Like Jesus, we can seek God's will for our lives through prayers of "your will be done" – submitting to His will and listening for His voice to guide us (Mark 14:36).

But prayer isn't the only way we can hear from God. The primary way we hear God speak today is through His written Word. It's there in the very name; if we want to *hear* what God has to *say*, there is no better place than His *Word*. Just as prayer is available to us 24/7, so is the Bible. We can pick it up any time of the day or night and hear from God. Though the Bible may not give us specific directions for our individual lives, it always gives us broad guidance that will lead us in the right direction to discover His will for us, both generally and individually.

Generally, Scripture tells us it's God's will for us to live in sexual purity (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8). To rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). To silence the ignorant talk of foolish people by doing good (1 Peter 2:15). It may be God's will for us to suffer for doing good (1 Peter 3:17; 4:19).

Though these verses explicitly say it is God's will, many other passages describe God's general will for us, meaning the way all God's people should live – serving others, speaking truth in love, welcoming strangers, seeking justice, and so on.

The Bible also tells us that by growing in our knowledge of God and His ways, we will be able to discern both His general will and even His specific will for our individual lives. As our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit, we will be able to discern what the will of God truly is. This comes by offering our lives as living sacrifices, submitting ourselves to His sanctifying work in our lives (Romans 12:1–2). As we trust Him and lean on what He says as truth rather than our own understanding, He will direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5–6). The more we trust in God, listen to His Word, and follow His ways, the more we will be able to discern His will.

God can also show us His will by opening and closing doors in our lives. But it takes wisdom and discernment to recognize the path He wants us to take. Proverbs says God will clear a path for us, but only when we trust in His Word with all our heart and lean on His wisdom rather than our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5–6). Dr. Graham writes, “When you obey the Word and walk in the flow of God's Spirit, you'll find that you can easily follow and fulfill God's good and perfect and acceptable will for your life.” And when you do, you “will experience a sense of abiding, assuring peace, a deep confidence that is consistent and continual” (p. 115).

If you want to know God's will, start with the Bible and with prayer. Start by walking in the general will of God as described in Scripture – loving and serving others, living in purity, living with gratitude, rejoicing always, etc. And as you walk in the general will of God, He will show you His specific will for your individual life, step by step, day by day.

Q: What is the connection between God's will and worshipping God? In other words, how does knowing who God is and what He has done inspire you to worship Him?

Q: Share any times in your life you *knew* you were walking in God's will. How did you know? How did you feel? What impact did it have on your life, family, and community?

Q: Share any times in your life you *knew you were NOT* walking in God's will. How did you know? How did you feel? What impact did it have on your life, family, and community?

Q: What questions do you have right now about God's will for your life?

2 Timothy 4:1–5 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Many Christians don't recognize heresy because they don't know the Bible.

Q: Why do people sometimes want to hear false teaching?

Q: What kind of culture did Paul describe here? How is it similar to our own?

Dr. Graham opens chapter 8 with a quote from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "Sometimes the Bible in the hands of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of [another]." Then he said, "The Bible can be a moving target. One can strip it down, twist it, misread it, add to it, supplement it, and even overrule it, and unfortunately, 95 percent of the average congregation will not realize it. Why? Because many Americans no longer know the Bible. The evidence is overpowering that contemporary Christianity is Bible-*ish* at best, and some cases, Bible-*less*." Dr. Graham goes on to say, "Most Christians know enough about the Bible to be dangerous" (p. 119). Many factors in our culture make it easier than ever before to misuse and twist the Word of God:

- Information Overload: On the Internet and in social media, we receive so much information so quickly and so constantly that trying to evaluate or discern it is like drinking from a fire hose.
- Sound-bite Culture: The media, Internet and social media have created a sound-bite culture that gives us short, catchy phrases, video clips, or memes instead of in-depth examination, making it easy for false, shallow or oversimplified ideas to circulate quickly.
- Everybody Has a Platform: Because of social media, anyone can post anything on TikTok, Instagram or Facebook and make it sound true. Some churches don't have high standards for whom they allow to preach and teach, so it's hard to know which online posts to trust.
- Influence of Popular Voices: Celebrities, athletes, politicians, influencers and other popular voices quote, misquote, or twist Scripture to support their own views.
- Moral Relativism: Our culture teaches people to "follow your truth" or "do what feels right," so they often read Scripture through a personal lens instead of seeking what God actually meant. Then they twist God's Word to support their personal choices or views rather than allow it challenge or correct them.
- Comfort over Conviction: People often prefer messages that make them feel good over ones that call for repentance, obedience or sacrifice.
- Misunderstanding of Blessing and Success: Our culture prizes tolerance, success, wealth and self-fulfillment, so some people reinterpret the Bible to fit those values.

- Distraction: There are so many things to distract us and consume our time – TV, sports, work, hobbies, social media. It’s easy to waste two or three hours a day mindlessly scrolling through TikTok reels instead of reading our Bibles and growing in knowledge and spiritual maturity.

But the biggest reason it’s so easy for people in our culture to distort Scripture is that so many Christians don’t really know their Bible. Researchers tell us biblical illiteracy is at crisis level in the American church. Statistics tell us there is a huge gap between what the average American Christian *believes* about the Bible (that it’s sacred, that it contains important moral teachings, etc.) and their *knowledge* of the Bible or their *engagement* with it.¹

Having a Bible doesn’t necessarily mean regular use of it. Bible ownership is fairly high, but consistent reading or recall of its content is much lower. If we believe the Bible is really God’s Word and our guide for how to live the best life, why don’t we study it?

Second Timothy was Paul’s final letter to his “spiritual son” before Paul believed he himself would be martyred. In this last chapter, his parting words, Paul even said his charge to Timothy, the duty with which he was entrusting him, was to teach God’s Word diligently at all times, to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience.” Why? Because the day would come when people would not endure sound teaching but would surround themselves with teachers who tell them what they want to hear. This is where we are now. We live in a world where many people, even church people, don’t know or even want to know sound teaching. How do we combat that? By digging into Scripture, teaching sound doctrine, correcting those who misinterpret it, and rebuking those who distort it or flat out speak falsehoods.

Q: Which one of the factors listed above are you most influenced by? How do you combat that negative influence?

Q: How have you seen people misuse God’s Word in our culture, intentionally or not?

Q: Why does God call us to exercise “complete patience” when we correct people’s wrong understandings of the Bible? How do we do that?

Q: How can we evaluate what we hear online or in the world to know whether it’s true?

Acts 8:29–35 and Matthew 19:1–12 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Understanding Scripture requires studying both historical and literary context.

Q: Acts: Why didn't the eunuch understand what he was reading? How did Philip help?

Q: Matthew: How did Jesus draw out the intended meaning of the law about divorce? Hint: what Scripture did He reference?

There are people who intentionally distort the Word of God, but there are also many Christians who want to understand Scripture but just don't know how. Dr. Graham said the biggest reason is that people read the Bible without understanding the context. The Bible is a unique book because it's both simple and complex at the same time; its overall message is simple enough for a child to understand, but to really dig into the Scripture takes great skill in interpretation. Scholars have long said the Scriptures are at the same time shallow enough for a child to wade in its waters without fear of drowning and yet deep enough for a theologian to swim in without ever touching the bottom.²

When we read Scripture, we need to consider things like metaphor, symbolism, tone, language and genre as we would with any other literature. We don't read poetry the same way we read narrative or prophecy the same way we read wisdom literature. Because the Bible is an ancient document originally written in a completely different time, culture and language, it takes some work to understand it properly. Like reading Shakespeare or anything from another culture or time period requires us to consider the historical context – what their world was like – to really understand what it is saying, we have to apply the same principles to reading the Bible.

When Jesus said, "I am the door," He was referencing the way shepherds would sleep in the open doorway of the sheep pen to protect the sheep from predators.³ That's just a small example of something that just adds to the meaning. There are many passages where we *cannot* understand the meaning of the text without knowing the historical context – the political scene of Assyria, all the Herods, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, the geography of Dan and Bethel, the topography of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, what a covenant ritual ceremony was like, how heavy a millstone was, the difference between slavery in the ancient world and slavery in early America, etc. We also can't understand the meaning of passages without understanding the literary context – interpreting the passage in light of the surrounding texts, its place in the book, section, and the overall message of the Bible as a whole.

Dr. Graham writes, “We must be better Bible students by 1) reading the Bible through first-century eyes, 2) understanding the intent of the biblical authors, and 3) applying the timeless truths from each passage to our lives today” (p. 125). The process of studying a passage to understand its original meaning for its original audience is called *exegesis*, “to draw out” the meaning. Once we have found the original meaning, we can draw a timeless principle from that meaning. Take, for example, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” A kiss was a custom in their culture, but the *timeless principle* is the love, affection and care of a family-like bond in the church. It can be expressed in our culture through a hug, handshake or pat on the back, but the *principle* of authentic love, care and community is the point. Essentially, the process is:

- **Exegesis** – studying the context to discover the original meaning of the text. *What did the passage mean for its original hearers?*
- **Interpretation** – discovering a timeless principle from the meaning of that text. *What does it mean for all people everywhere at all times?*
- **Application** – applying that principle to our lives. *How does that timeless meaning apply to my life and situation?*

Sometimes the timeless principle is the same as the exegesis. A passage such as “flee sexual immorality” or “love your neighbor as yourself” already is a timeless principle. But many, many times, the “interpretation” step involves translating the original meaning into a modern context, the same as if you would have to translate words from another language into English.

Q: Share examples of times your understanding of a biblical passage changed because you studied the historical and/or literary context.

Q: Share some examples of Bible passages that people take out of context. What do those Scriptures actually teach when we understand their context?

Q: How can we help each other study responsibly without having to go to seminary?

Week 3: Reading the Bible Well

Took

Main Point: The Bible shows us God's will when we interpret it faithfully.

A cherished tradition each fall at Prestonwood Baptist Church is the First Grade Bible Presentation. During this special event, 6-year-old boys and girls receive their very own copy of God's Word and are encouraged to make it the authority of their lives and to treasure it. The beauty of the Bible is that it is just as life-giving and relevant for a 6-year-old as it is for someone 106. As British Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said, *"Nobody ever outgrows Scripture; the Book widens and deepens with our years."*⁴

Q: In what ways has your appreciation for the Bible grown over time?

Q: What has God taught you through His Word recently? How has that applied to your walk with Him?

Q: How are God's Word and His will so closely intertwined?

Q: What Bible reading plan do you use, and what tools help you with Scripture memory?

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on God's will for your life. What questions do you have about His will, both general and specific? What things do you want to know? How can you discern His will for your life? How can walking in His will generally lead to His showing you His specific will for your life? What doors is God opening and closing for you? What can you do while you wait for His plans to be made clear? How can you encourage others to follow His will?

PRAY again for God to give you wisdom in studying His Word. Ask Him to show you how to study the Bible faithfully. Ask Him to give you good resources and people to help you study and interpret His Word faithfully. Pray for His Holy Spirit 1) to guide you as you read and study and 2) to continue to renew your mind and transform your heart. Ask Him for His wisdom and His guidance in understanding His Word.

ACT: Study. This week, choose one Bible story or passage you have always been interested in learning more about. Write out every question you can think to ask about the literary and historical context of the passage. Do a deep dive study into the passage.

Use several commentaries to read different theologians' interpretations of the passage. Discuss the passage with friends, family and mentors. Share your findings with your class next week.

¹ <https://www.americanbible.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SOTB-2025-04-Final.pdf>

² This "quote" has been commonly attributed to St. Jerome, but it's not found exactly like this in his writings. It's really more of a paraphrase of what he taught, so I didn't put it in quotes.



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⁴ "The Talking Book," Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. 17 (Oct. 21, 1871).