

For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only “go through the motions,” or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you’re looking for during this study.

Second, remember the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship. For this reason, seek to make your group a “safe place.” This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else’s opinion. Third, resist the temptation to “fix” someone’s problem or correct his or her theology, as that’s not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

In between your group times, you can maximize the impact of the course by checking out the personal exploration exercises. This individual time will help you personally reflect and actively respond to the lesson. For each session, you may wish to complete the personal exercises in one sitting or spread it over a few days (for example, working on it a few minutes per day on four different days that week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start!) your between-session exercises, you should still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don’t have your “homework” done.

Keep in mind this study is an opportunity for you to train in a new way of seeing the difficult and confusing parts of the Bible. The videos, discussions, and exercises are simply meant to kick-start your imagination, so you are open to what God wants you to learn about complex passages and how to apply the messages to your life.



SESSION ONE



Never Read a Bible Verse

(Or You Will Have to Believe
in Magical Unicorns)

*God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were
the strength of an unicorn.*

NUMBERS 23:22 KJV

And the unicorns shall come down with them . . .

ISAIAH 34:7 KJV

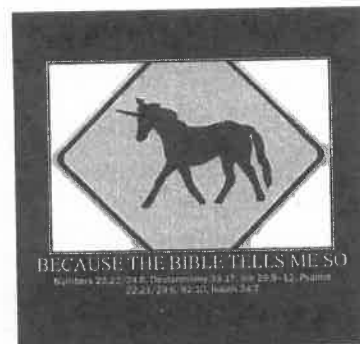
Welcome

When I first tried to read the Bible as a teenager, it seemed more like a work of fiction than anything else—a book filled with epic battles and angels, stories of demons, and even a red dragon.* That’s why it was placed on a bookshelf between my fantasy and horror books. It fit right in with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. As I read and studied

* 1 Samuel 11:1–11; 2 Samuel 10:10–19; Isaiah 37:36; Revelation 16:12–16; 12:3

more of the Bible in college, I was still disturbed by some of the oddities I found, namely, talking animals. These oddities didn't bode well for someone like me who was trying to make a serious attempt at considering the claims of the Christian faith. The Bible didn't make sense and I was surprised there was so much violence, even in the life of Jesus. I knew that if the Bible was the foundation of Christianity, I had to make sense of these passages.

But making sense of the disturbing passages of the Bible gets complicated in a world full of memes. In addition to seeming anti-women and pro-slavery, it's not hard to find Bible verses that seem to endorse violence, even against babies and small children. And it's not hard to find websites and YouTube videos dedicated to calling out these sorts of Bible verses. What was once known as "The Good Book" is now considered "The Evil Book" by so many. To make matters worse, it's becoming more commonplace to see people quote Bible verses all over the internet and on memed-merchandise to illustrate how strange, crazy, and primitive sounding the Bible is.



If I were reading these bizarre verses for the first time, seeing them in isolation like this, I would feel the same way.

But here's the good news: *there are ways to better understand these crazy-sounding Bible verses.* We must learn how to, and how *not* to, read the Bible. If you are willing to look beyond the visual image and explore beyond a literal, out-of-context reading of a verse, you'll discover the Bible is not "sheer nonsense." The Bible is an amazing, fully inspired, life-changing collection of writings by people who were directed by God through God's Spirit. When we read, interpret, and understand the Bible accurately—not just individual verses, but how they fit into the Bible as a whole—our questions and concerns are answered, and we come to better know the author of the Bible. We come to know God.



Watch

Play the video segment for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Video Notes

Questions people are asking about the Bible:

- Is God pro-violence?
- Is the Bible anti-women?
- Is the Bible anti-science?
- Does God endorse slavery?



The Good News: there are reasonable responses to these questions.

Four basic ways to look at the Bible to make sense of these disturbing Bible passages:

1. The Bible is a library, not a book.

It is a library of books. *It was written by over forty different authors, over 1,500 years, on three continents, in three languages, many different cultural settings, and many different genres.*

The Holy Spirit is the Author who *guided* the human authors (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

Examining the genres. *The poetry of Song of Solomon 4:15.*

2. The Bible is written for us, not to us.

Understanding the author's intent and for whom the passage was written. *The dangers of misinterpreting Scripture.*

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK:

Who was the book or letter of the Bible originally written to?

Why was it written?

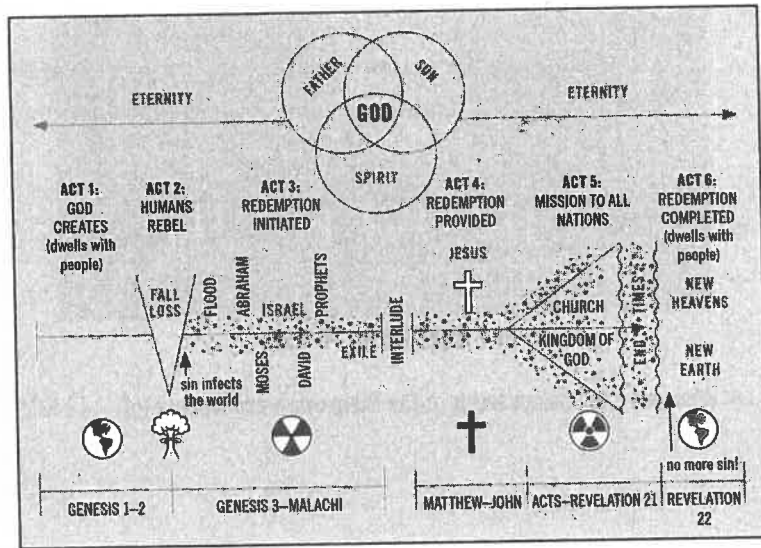
What was happening in the world of the original recipients?

What questions were they asking that God was answering to them?

6 · How (Not) to Read the Bible

3. Never read a Bible verse in isolation.

Understanding the storyline, the timeline, and the context. *Bible scrolling.*



Genesis 1:29 and Genesis 9:3.

4. All the Bible points to Jesus.

The storyline is about Jesus from Genesis to Revelation.

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

LUKE 24:44 NIV

What about the unicorns?

Group Discussion

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. What stood out to you from listening to Dan today? How can you identify with the stories or memes he shared?
2. What questions or concerns do you have about the Bible? Which verses or stories have tripped you up because you don't quite understand the original context?

Reflection

Briefly reflect on the teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down your most significant takeaway from this session. Also, consider what discussion question or Bible passage you plan to explore as a result of today's session. If time permits, share it with your group.

Wrap-Up

Pray as a group before you close your time together. Be honest with God about the questions and concerns you have about the sacred text of the Bible. Thank God for creating a library of content written for us even when it's not written to us. Ask God to give you the courage and discipline to explore the context of passages and places in the Bible that seem strange to you. And ask God to give you the vision to see the story of Jesus throughout the entire lens of the Bible.

8 · How (Not) to Read the Bible

3. Have you ever considered the Bible as a library of books, rather than a book in the library? How does this shift in mindset change things for you regarding the Bible?

4. Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. How does Paul encourage Timothy to use the Bible? Why is it worth studying all of the Bible, even with the challenging passages?

5. Placing the challenging verses of Scripture within their proper context is vital to understanding the meaning of these verses. What practices or tools do you use, or could you start using, to make sure you understand the context of a verse or story?

6. Read Isaiah 7:1–17 and Luke 24. What does it mean when Dan says all the Bible points to Jesus? How do we know this to be true?