

# 52 WEEKS THROUGH THE BIBLE

J A M E S M E R R I T T



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## 52 WEEKS THROUGH THE BIBLE

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*I dedicate this book to Cross Pointe Church—  
for their love for God's Word,  
and their desire for their pastor to preach it.*



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## Introduction: Going by the Book

The year was 1970. The place was Stetson University in sleepy Deland, Florida. The malady was homesickness. I was a newly minted college freshman seven hours and 465 miles from a home I had never been away from. I grew up in Georgia's version of Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*. My dad wasn't the sheriff, but I was Opie. And Opie *never* left Mayberry.

The mossy-backed gnarly oaks at this idyllic campus were a far cry from the Georgia pines I was used to. The humidity and heat were stifling, and except for the library, the main academic buildings lacked air-conditioning. I knew nobody and had not even seen the campus until the first day I arrived.

The first time I ever saw my gruff, rough dad cry was when he hugged his baby boy goodbye. This meant I was seventeen years old when I realized how much he loved me. I remember the knot in my stomach and the hot tears flowing down my cheeks as my dad, mom, brother, and aunt drove over the hill looking back and waving a final farewell. Mid-August and I wouldn't see them again until Thanksgiving.

I turned to walk into a dormitory that felt more like a prison and went into my room to unpack what few clothes I had. Then I sat down and looked at my roommate—a weirdo who I split from after one semester (that *really is* another story for another time)—and the dorm that would be my home for the next nine months and learned for the first time that no sickness is like homesickness. For the first time in my life, I also learned what it meant to cry yourself to sleep.

But God intervened that first semester and drove me to the Bible.

I have never been a social animal. I didn't date in high school and was always shy around females. I went to one fraternity rush, and after seeing the biggest beer keg ever and drunk frat boys all over the floor, I rushed out the door, never to enter a frat house again. My days began at four in the morning when I rose to work the breakfast shift in the cafeteria. From there, my life was classes until early afternoon, study for a couple of hours, and then dinner.

Lost and alone.

With nothing else to do, I picked up the hardback Living Bible New Testament my mother gave me and started reading it. At first, seeing how much I could read in one sitting became a challenge. I could go for up to three hours straight. I have always been a fast reader, and it wasn't long until I had completed the New Testament.

I repeated the process until I lost track of how many times I'd read it after I hit ten. But by then it was more than a game. The parables, the teachings, the lessons were encouraging me, growing me, and drawing me closer to God than I had ever been. I was amazed how I would learn something new, seeing things I had never seen before. Still, it seems odd that a college freshman would read a book two thousand years old non-stop for an entire semester.

My story is nothing compared to another young man who lived four hundred years before. William Hunter was fifteen years old when he was burned at the stake in 1555. Like me, he had an insatiable thirst for the Bible, but he had a hurdle I didn't. Possessing Bibles was illegal for commoners in England. The priests had a monopoly on this book and kept it under lock and key from nonclergy. Other than one Bible chained at the church altar, no other Bible was permitted in William's village.

So why was he burned at the stake? Because he was so determined to read this book for himself, he walked into the church, opened the chained Bible, and freed its truth into his heart and soul. William was caught, arrested, and imprisoned for nine months.

At his trial, he was given the chance to go free if he would recant his "deed of evil" and promise never again to attempt to read the Bible. The bishop of the church even offered him the princely sum of forty pounds and the funds to start his own business in exchange for never again

reading the Bible. The brave teenager refused and accepted his fate. On March 27, 1555, William Hunter was burned at the stake for one crime: refusing to refuse to read the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Two teenagers, centuries and countries apart. What book would compel one to spend night after night on a college campus reading it for hours on end? What book would compel the other to give his life just trying to read it at all?

To say that out of the billions of books that have ever been published that the Bible is “the greatest” smacks of Muhammad Ali like braggadocio. But scholars agree that the Bible is the world’s best-selling and most widely distributed book. Conservative estimates put the total number of Bibles sold at more than five billion. (The second best-selling book, the Koran, has sold eight hundred million.)

It is also by far the most read book in history. The whole Bible has been translated into 349 languages, and an astounding 2,123 languages have at least one book of the Bible in that language.

The Bible is not only the best-selling book of all time, but also the best-selling book of the year. Which year? Pick one. It is the best-selling book of *every* year by at least double whatever the second best-selling book may be. Many people own Bibles—the average American household contains more than four Bibles—but the world keeps buying them. In any given year, about twenty-five million copies are purchased.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of the Bible is unprecedented. As former Yale professor William Lyon Phelps stated, “Our civilization is founded upon the Bible. More of our ideas, our wisdom, our philosophy, our art, our ideals, come from the Bible than from all other books combined.”<sup>3</sup>

The makeup of the book is without peer. It is a book of books, which is what the name “Bible” means. The Bible contains sixty-six books in one volume written by about forty different authors living on several continents. They hailed from such diverse places as Palestine, Babylon, Greece, Rome, Asia Minor, and perhaps Arabia. These authors wrote in three different languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic—and the first author was separated in time from the second author by some sixteen centuries. Despite this disparity, there is a unity of theme, an invisible seamless thread, connecting these books together that seems, well, divine.

The belief that this book is the word of God is the major explanation of its immense popularity and exposure.<sup>4</sup>

Liberal Bible scholar Bart Ehrman begins the first day of each semester's class by asking students, "How many of you would agree with the proposition that the Bible is the inspired Word of God?" Hands shoot up across the auditorium. He then asks, "How many of you have one or more of the Harry Potter books?" Hands again fire upwards. A third question: "And how many of you have read the entire Bible?" Only a few hands raise. Ehrman then laughs and says, "Okay, look. I'm not saying that I think God wrote the Bible. You're telling me that *you* think God wrote the Bible. I can see why you might want to read a book by J.K. Rowling. But if God wrote a book... wouldn't you want to see what he has to say?"<sup>5</sup>

As much as I hate to admit it, I couldn't agree more with Ehrman's logic. Why don't more people who own a Bible and believe its divine origin read it? Owning the Bible is not the same as believing or even reading the Bible.

A recent survey showed 88 percent of Americans own a Bible, 80 percent think the Bible is sacred, 61 percent wish they read the Bible more, and the average household has 4.4 Bibles. Yet of the ones who do read it, the majority read their Bibles only four times a year or less. Only 26 percent of Americans said they read their Bible regularly.<sup>6</sup>

So if people are still buying the Bible, keeping the Bible, and looking at the Bible, why don't people make a habit of reading the Bible? And why do people find the Bible hard to understand?

First, chronological and cultural differences exist. Depending on what part of the Bible you are reading, a 3,400-year and a 1,900-year gap exists between when the Bible was written and today. The culture of Bible days was different from all twenty-first century cultures.

Beyond that, the Bible contains many different types of literature. In the Bible you have history, law, poetry, songs, prophecy, wisdom, and letters. Different genres must be interpreted and understood in different ways. No wonder that when more than five million students from around the United States were asked why they weren't reading the Bible, they said:

1. I don't know where to begin.
2. I don't see its relevance.
3. I don't know how to find things.<sup>7</sup>

But does this mean we should wave the white flag and make the Bible a dust catcher on a bookshelf or coffee table? Not at all, as I hope this book will show.

If the average American life spans 4,097 weeks, why not devote a meager 52 of them to exploring this world-changing book? You don't have to know where to begin; that has been selected for you. You don't have to distill the relevance on your own; the signs will be marked. And by the end, you'll know better where to find what you're looking for.

Ever since my lonely college days, I've spent 365 days each year scouring the Bible. It has been a stalwart companion in times of celebration and defeat, clarity and confusion, peace and tumult, prosperity and wanting. While you may not be stranded in an empty dorm room, you too can find power in the Bible's pages for whatever life stage you're in.

Be warned. The Bible is a fresh wind to fill your lungs, a hot coal to inflame your mind, and water to quench your parched spirit. Turn back now if you wish to remain the same.



## How to Read This Book

You may have guessed that this book is designed to be consumed over the course of a year. If you choose, you can digest the book more quickly, but the yearlong span is intended to provide time for reflection and let the material sink in. When you pour rich maple syrup over a stack of pancakes, it takes a few moments for the amber liquid to soak deep into the flapjack. Similarly, exploring the depths of the Bible is often best done over time.

You'll find fifty-two chapters, one for every week of the year—and each chapter is divided into five short segments. You can read one segment per day beginning Monday or you can read them all in one sitting and then revisit them throughout the week.

At the beginning of each chapter you'll find Scripture passages to be read and explored every day. At the end you'll discover a prayer and a question for consideration. Journaling as you go may be helpful.

If you miss a week—you accidentally leave the book on your nightstand and leave for a family vacation or experience an unexpected death of a loved one—don't worry. You can pick back up the following week. My hope is not to add one more obligation to your already packed life, but rather to provide you with a resource that has the power to transform it.





## SECTION ONE

### **Like No Other**

Even the most jaded critic of the Bible cannot deny the impact of this magnificent book on our culture, our nation, our world, and history itself. Its truths and teachings led to two of the greatest social movements in history—the abolition of lawful slavery throughout the Western Hemisphere and most other countries and the American Civil Rights Movement.<sup>8</sup> What the Bible has done for the world, it can do for your life. Read and be changed.

## Let's Take It from the Beginning

### Scriptures for This Week

- John 18:20-21
- John 16:25-28
- Genesis 1:26-27
- Genesis 1:28-31
- John 1:16-18

### There Is a *Why* to My *Who*

The people who ask questions are the ones who get answers.

I was a seventeen-year-old freshman mama's boy who was now five hundred miles from friends and family, and I was suffering from one of the worst maladies known to the human race—homesickness. The one anchor I knew I could find for the stormy seas I was sailing was a church. So, one Sunday I made my way into one, walked into a group for college kids, and sat down. I wasn't given answers that day. Instead three questions penetrated my heart:

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Where am I going?

In order to figure out my *who*, I needed to address my *why*.

Everything is designed. Every car has a manufacturer, every building has a builder, every structure has an architect, every arrangement has a plan, every plan has a designer, and every design has a purpose. The first component of the grand story of the Bible tells us the same thing. We were put here for a purpose. We are not here by evolutionary accident—we are here by divine appointment. No one knows *when* the human race began, but the first two chapters of Genesis leave no question as to *why*. It is all about a personal relationship with the God of creation. Scripture

devotes more space to describing the creation of the first human than any other facet of creation. God wants all of us to know why we are here.

### **Relate Your Heart to God**

Genesis 1:26 is a watershed moment in the creation narrative. “Let us make man in our image after our likeness.” This is the first time personal pronouns are used in Scripture. A personal relationship is established between God and the first human being, a relationship that does not exist with any other aspect of creation. God introduces himself for the first time with plural personal pronouns. He doesn’t say, “Let me create,” but he says, “Let us create.” Who is the “us”? Biblical scholars recognize this as a reference to the Trinity.

God has always existed in a relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit in one. Out of that, God created us—you and me and everyone you know—*in* a relationship and *for* a relationship. That is why when God created the first human, he said it is not good for this human to be alone. It is not good for *you* to be alone either. Therefore, God gives us himself. He is a God of relationships, and he wants us to be in a personal relationship with him.

When God created Adam it was the first time in all of creation that God gets his hands dirty. Up to this point, everything was verbally spoken into existence, but humanity was a hands-on operation. Humans are special, and are to be specially and specifically related to God. The number one reason you are on this earth is to relate your heart to God.

### **Reflect the Image of God**

We are told four times that we are created in the image of God. Something makes humans different from every other created being. We have a unique identity. *You* have a unique identity. This is why God got his hands dirty. Unlike any other part of creation, we alone have been created in his image and in his likeness.

The word for *image* comes from a root that refers to a carving. We were carved into the shape of God to reflect him. That is not true of anything else in the universe. No other created being has a mind to know God, a heart to love God, or a will to obey God. We are different

mentally, morally, and spiritually. Only humans can have a relationship with God and God only has a personal relationship with humans.

The heavens may declare the glory of God, the moon, the stars, and the planets may reveal the greatness of God, the mountains and the oceans may show us the beauty of God, but only humans reflect the image of God. Plants have a body, animals have a body and soul, but only humans have a body, a soul, and a spirit. That spirit is part of the difference. The spirit is our reflection of the image of God.

### **Rule Over the Creation of God**

God did not put us on this earth to do nothing. From the first moment that the first man took his first breath, he was given work to do that was exciting and fulfilling. Genesis 2:15 tells us, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” That is a general job description of the human race. We were given this creation to tend and to keep. We are to manage it and take care of it. How is that to be done?

First we are told, “Be fruitful and multiply.” We have a job to develop the *social* world that we live in. Building families, churches, schools, cities, government, and making laws—all of that is a part of what God put us here to do.

Then we are told to “fill the earth and subdue it.” This is how we learn about and develop the *natural* world. We were put here to investigate and discover, innovate and invent, to plant and build, design and compose. All are part of the cultural mandate that God gave us in the beginning as we create culture and build civilizations.

Remember, every design has a purpose, and God created man and woman with a perfect physical and genetic compatibility. When we reproduce, we live into part of our design, so part of our work is to procreate. And part of our work is to labor. That means that work is more than just something you do to put food on the table. Work is a divine calling for which we were all created. Work is the plan through which we give glory and honor to the God who entrusted us with his creation. When we work we fulfill our design.

## Receive Grace from God

After God created the first man and the first woman, we read again in Genesis 1:28 that “God blessed them.” The word *blessed* was more than God just waving his hand over them and saying, “I bless you.” It means he put them in a state of being happy in the right way. At that moment, Adam and Eve were the most blessed couple who have ever lived. They were in a perfect environment in a perfect relationship to God.

What had Adam and Eve done at that point to deserve God's blessing? Absolutely nothing. They received it because of grace. From the first breath that Adam and Eve drew, they were recipients of and the beneficiaries of the grace of God.

There was perfection. They were perfectly related to the God of perfection. There was perfect peace, perfect happiness, perfect contentment.

When we look at the world we live in today with weeds, pests, viruses, murder, rape, war, hatred, and violence, we must ask, “What's wrong with this picture?” The answer to that is found in chapter two of the Bible's big story.

The beginning of God's big story tells us the hole in our soul can be filled only by the One who created us. Jesus the creator came to earth to live among his creation, die on a cross, and then be raised from the dead to fill that hole with grace, forgiveness, and love.

When you understand not only that you were created but why you were created, and when you realize that the Christ of creation wants to personally relate to you both now and forever, that is when your life begins.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, thank you for creating me with a purpose. Help me to reflect you in my work and in my relationships and to expand your grace to the world.*

**Question for This Week:** What does your heart connect most to? How can you get your hands dirty to create a closer connection to God?

## Paradise Lost

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 37:23-24
- Deuteronomy 12:28
- 2 Kings 17:1-14
- 3 John 11
- Genesis 3:1-13

### Watch Your Step

Vesna Vulović made history on January 26, 1972, and landed herself in the *Book of World Records*. It is not an honor she wanted or was seeking.

She was a flight attendant on a DC-9 that was flying over what is now the Czech Republic when a bomb exploded and decimated the plane. She fell 33,330 feet inside a piece of the fuselage and landed on the side of a mountain. Though she suffered a fractured skull, three broken vertebrae, two broken legs, and was in a coma for twenty-seven days, she made a complete recovery. She holds a record that might never be broken; she survived the longest fall in history.

There was another fall, even longer and harder, which not only caused the death of the first victims but of the entire human race to this day. The account is found in Genesis 3, one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible. If you don't understand this chapter, the rest of the Bible doesn't make any sense. The world likely doesn't make sense.

The advancements of our day have made life better, but is the world better? We aren't riding horses, traveling by ship, or untangling cassette tapes much anymore. Life is better. But we lock our doors, escort our children to school, monitor Internet access, and have incorporated "terrorist attack" into our vocabulary. We each have within us a desire to

improve this world because we know deep down it is not what it was meant to be. Paradise was lost.

### **Don't Doubt God's Word**

As the story begins, Adam and Eve had been living a life we know nothing about in a garden called Eden. They knew nothing of crime, murder, road rage, war, credit card debt, or sickness. Everything was coming up roses when the first question ever asked in the Bible takes place in Genesis 3:1, “Did God actually say that?”

The serpent, otherwise known as “the devil” or “Satan,” crafted his question to make Eve question God: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” The answer was no. God said eat from *every* tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

*The devil is never looking out for your best interests.* Anytime he tells you to do something, he is not trying to help you; he is trying to hurt you. He will try to get you to doubt the word of God and he will lie in the process.

The first step over the cliff of the fall was the step labeled “doubt.” Anytime doubt about God’s word is planted in the minds of a home, a marriage, a family, a society, or a nation a free fall from God takes place that always ends in a crash landing. So never put a question mark where God has put a period. You don’t have to like what God says in his word, but don’t ever doubt what God says in his word.

### **Don't Distrust God's Motives**

Everything that Eve had been enjoying up to this point—day and night, the sun, the moon, the stars, the beautiful garden, the flowers, the singing of the birds, and even her beloved husband—had all come from God’s good word and God’s good heart. But then the serpent suggests that God is holding out on her.

Doubting the ignorant or misinformed accuracy of someone’s word is different from distrusting their motive. This is what the serpent does here. It is a pivotal point in the Garden conversation and where the battle for the human race will be won or lost.

The serpent knows that in order to get Eve to do what she shouldn’t do, he’s got to get her to distrust God’s goodness and God’s motives. He

was trying to convince Eve that God was keeping back something that she ought to have.

God's expectations are clear. From the beginning, God built into the universe a law that dictates for every action there is a reaction. Though the consequence for disobedience is death, the serpent is still crafty enough to get us to begin to doubt God's design and question God's motives.

Haven't you found yourself thinking the same thing? That spouse, that child, that job, that position, that house, that privilege—they are all within your rights to have. Right? Not necessarily. *God has given you all you need to become all that you need to be.* If God says don't go to a place or don't do an action, you can trust it is for your health, holiness, and happiness. Remember, God doesn't want what is good for you; God wants what is best for you. Now comes the moment of decision.

### **Don't Disobey God's Command**

Now we witness the single greatest tragedy in the history of the human race. Just as we have learned how it all began, now we are going to see how it all came apart. The woman ate the fruit, and the first nuclear bomb of sin was detonated whose shock waves are still being felt today.

They got what they wanted, but they didn't want what they got. Adam and Even now know some things God never intended for them or any other human to know. Now they know *shame*.

Before they were naked without shame and now they are naked with shame. What do they do? They sew fig leaves of denial and deception to cover their failures, faults, and flaws.

We cover our shame in similar ways. We lie on our tax returns, cheat on exams, and steal from employers in order to cover up hidden income, lack of preparation, and debt we can't repay. This "fig leaf mentality" goes back to the Garden of Eden.

Now they also know *fear*. They hid themselves in the trees, away from the presence of the Lord as he walked along their usual path. He called to them, "Where are you?" and Adam said, "I am here, afraid and naked and ashamed."



And they know *guilt*. Just hours before, Adam had been naked and it didn't bother him or God. For the first time we see a human haunted by the ghost of guilt. Guilt is an emotion God never intended for the human race to know, but it is the inevitable baby born from sin and denial delivered by a healthy conscience. It all results from disobeying God's commands.

### Don't Deny God's Goodness

Have you ever played hide-and-seek with God? Adam thought he could play games with God. When hide-and-seek didn't work, he tried the blame game. Genesis 3:12 tells us he said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

First, he blames God. "Hey, I didn't ask for this woman. You gave her to me. If you hadn't, I wouldn't have this headache on my hands, so it's your fault." Then, realizing that isn't going to get him anywhere, he throws Eve under the bus. This is the first case of "victim mentality" in history.

When God turns to Eve, she plays the same game. "The serpent deceived me and I ate." Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake, and the snake doesn't have a leg to stand on.

But only God knows how to play the blame game correctly and he puts the blame where it belongs—on everybody. All suffer the consequences, whether it's eating dust, experiencing painful childbirth, or living a sweaty life of toil and trouble.

Of course the ultimate consequence for all involved, including us, was death. From that moment until now, everything has been infected and defected by sin. Roses now have thorns. Cities need policemen. Nations need guns and bullets, and the world needs cemeteries to bury the dead. *The world that we live in is a result of the world that we lost.*

With a broken heart and tears of sorrow, our God acts on our behalf. He didn't want us to live forever in our sinfulness, but the gate was shut. The only way forward is toward the cross of Jesus Christ. Thus begins God's pursuit of humanity to rebuild the relationship that was broken, to restore us to the garden that was forfeited, and to rescue us from the sin that is killing us. The story continues.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, work in my heart in those areas where I doubt you and question your motives. Keep my hands away from the bad fruit that tempts me.*

**Question for This Week:** What games do you play with God in order to hide your own shame, fear, and guilt?