

HELP!

My Bible
is Alive!

*30 days of learning to love
and understand God's Word*

Nicole Unice

The Bible is not alive if it's not alive for you! The tool you're holding in your hand will lead you to a life-transforming relationship with the Bible and its Author. Go for it!

ROY L. PETERSON, president and CEO of American Bible Society

Nicole brings to bear her remarkable skills as a communicator to address the most fundamental question of Christian living: How can I hear, experience, and understand God through reading the Bible? As you read *Help! My Bible Is Alive!*, you will think to yourself, *Surely some accomplished Bible teacher has already undertaken this crucial project*—and you will be wrong, because no one has. It's odd, but no one thought to tell us, in practical detail, how to meet with God through the Scriptures and how to approach the Bible with a posture of faith-seeking understanding.

RICK JAMES, PhD, director of Cru publishing and author of *Watch and A Million Ways to Die*

A lifetime in ministry with a passion for helping new believers learn how to grow in Christ has convinced me that there is nothing more important in the life of a Christ follower than time spent regularly in Scripture. Nicole knows how to help Bible readers turn the key. I have personally sat in groups as she taught this material and have witnessed its effectiveness. It is an indispensable tool for those desiring to grow in their relationship with Christ.

DR. DAVID "TUCK" KNUPP, pastor and Young Life trainer

"Help! My Bible Is Alive!" Like a zombie, the once-perceived-dead compilation of Scripture is brought back to life for readers by Nicole's fun (yes, fun) and practical application for individual reading. No longer is Bible reading for the few: With Nicole's latest book, it's for you more than ever. This is the book I've been needing for the countless people in my church plant who are scared—but hungry—to engage with this beautiful compilation we call the Bible.

STEPHEN POORE, MDiv, visionary pastor of Center Church

The frustrations my students (and the rest of us) often experience when trying to understand the Bible can suggest that Scripture is at best boring, at worst irrelevant—and unknowable regardless. What lies these are! And what a gift we have found in Nicole's book, which allows anyone willing to jump in to see for themselves that the Bible—when faithfully engaged on its own terms—is unsettlingly powerful, scandalously relevant, beautiful beyond belief, and very much alive.

REV. RACHEL TOONE, dean of spiritual formation at Montreat College

Whether you've tried a hundred times to get into a rhythm of reading the Bible or this is your first time picking it up, *Help! My Bible Is Alive!* will prove to be an invaluable resource in your journey. With charm, levity, wisdom, and all-too-real examples, Nicole Unice will give you the tools and courage that can help you find the fun and life-changing joy of consistently being in God's Word. I will definitely hand out this book to the people of my church!

DAVE CARTWRIGHT, ThM in New Testament studies, associate pastor at Epikos Church

Nicole Unice has a gift for teaching the Bible in a way that everyone can understand. *Help! My Bible Is Alive!* is the perfect guide for ordinary people who want to experience God in this extraordinary book!

ARON GIBSON, lead pastor at Lake Forest Church—WestLake

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with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



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INTRODUCTION

HELP! My Bible is Alive!

MAYBE THAT SOUNDS A LITTLE DRAMATIC, but it is what the Bible says about itself. Hebrews 4:12 says the Word of God—what we know as our Bibles—is “*alive and active*.” But let’s be honest. If you’ve tried to engage with your Bible and found it confusing, irrelevant, boring, or altogether *foreign*, then maybe “alien” is a better word than alive!

Here’s how I’ve seen it play out. Imagine this scenario: You’ve just come home from a camp, a weekend retreat, or an especially meaningful church service. You’ve listened to moving music—maybe even sung along. You’ve heard an energetic speaker who’s told you how important it is to know God’s Word, about how the Bible is God’s primary way of speaking to you. The pastor made it sound easy—even fun. You find yourself actually wanting to read your Bible, so you make a commitment to start spending time with God.

Monday comes, and you follow all the guidelines the speaker laid

out. You have a Bible, you have a journal, you have a place to sit and read. You open the Bible near the middle. You begin to read—and falter. You find yourself reading about weird stuff like this:

*I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hid from me: for now,
O Ephraim, thou committest whoredom, and Israel is defiled.
They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God:
for the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them, and they
have not known the LORD.¹*

You scan the chapter quickly. *Wait a second*, you think. *What in the world? Weird language—and did my Bible say whoredom? Is this the right book? Is this really the same book that the pastor was so excited about?*

All the emotions you felt at that retreat or camp or worship service dissipate. You are left with yourself, some confusing and archaic language, and a niggling sense that you must be deficient in some way, because the Bible sure doesn't seem alive to you. You put the Bible down and pick up your phone, scanning for some inspiration elsewhere.

One definition of *alien* is “differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility.”² And that's the truth for many of us: Our Bibles feel less alive and more alien. The language, the wording, the culture—too much is too different, and when it comes to our everyday problems and questions, it just doesn't seem to help.

The problem is, when many of us get a great emotional high and gear up to get serious about our faith, that emotion fizzles as quickly as a firecracker when we actually try to read the Bible. We've got all the crackle and pop when we are in the moment, but there's no sustaining fire for our daily lives. We lack the tinder and fuel to fan those sparks into flames. But the problem isn't with us, and it isn't with our

Bibles. It's that we've lacked the practical tools and habit-forming patterns to engage deeply in an experience with God in which his Word comes to life in us. If you've stopped and started in the past, let's go ahead and leave that in the past. Today is a new day, and you can do something about it! You can decide to commit to the process of turning that strange Bible into a friend.

Here's a big promise for your next thirty days: *Understanding the Bible can change your life*. After working through *Help! My Bible Is Alive!* you will be able to pick up the Bible, read a passage, and understand how it applies to you. You can discover your purpose in a way that impacts the way you think, feel, and act every day. Applying God's Word will help you with your attitude, your perspective, and your decisions. But before you can change, you have to know how.

In the next thirty days, you are going to discover a simple method for reading the Bible, which I've named the Alive Method, that you can immediately apply to Scripture. You will discover how this ancient text has incredible relevancy to your current questions and concerns. You'll figure out your way around the Bible, and I believe it will change the way you understand God, yourself, and all the things that matter in your life.

It's a strong promise—but that's how much I believe what the Bible says is true. The Bible contains what God wants us to know to thrive in the world he's made. It's a life-changing, living, breathing experience with the incredible and personal God of the universe. All you need to begin is thirty days—fifteen minutes each day—to begin the journey.

Why Alive?

After spending the last twenty years teaching Bible studies, I've found the greatest need for people today is not more Bible studies!

The men, women, and students I serve are smart people who really want to hear from God about their lives and who care about spiritual things—but who struggle to connect his words to their daily concerns. They need help learning how to read the Bible for themselves. Bible studies are great (believe me, I write them!), but they are no substitute for the confidence and desire to open up the Bible and hear from God directly.

Several years ago, I began teaching a class on how to study the Bible for yourself. The class was a mash-up of things I learned in seminary, through my own reading, and through trial and error with Bible studies throughout my ministry life. What I learned from teaching that class is that church leaders—myself included—have done a terrible job equipping people to encounter God for themselves. I realized that unless you were involved in a serious Bible study somewhere growing up, or you discovered God through a college ministry (hopefully, but that's not true for many), or you went to seminary (probably not), then you haven't encountered a basic method that can help you read and understand and *enjoy* the Bible on your own.

What most of us need is a simple, sticky method to apply to Scripture. We need the basic tools that help us get started, and we need a little push in the right direction to open the Bible and go for it. Just as you wouldn't be able to bake bread without a recipe or unclog your garbage disposal without a YouTube video (I should know), you need a guide on how to get going in the Bible. The book you are holding today was born out of that need. I am indebted to the learning I've experienced since my teenage years through Kay Arthur's Precept method, a host of Bible studies, and Duvall and Hays's *Grasping God's Word*, among other tools. I'll be sharing more along the way, but these next thirty days are your entry point into a whole world of tools and tips that can help you as you take this journey into experiencing God.

Why This Book?

In a world full of shifting opinions, where everything seems relative and nothing seems steady, we need truth we can rely on. We need promises we can believe in. At the end of the day, I think we all want to believe in something greater than ourselves—something that is steadfast and stronger than the shifting winds of our own emotions and circumstances. The Bible is full of promises like that, including what it says about itself. In the book of Hebrews, God’s Word is described as “alive and active” (4:12). For many of us, the Bible has seemed “dead and stagnant.” That verse goes on to describe God’s Word as sharp, with the ability to cut deeply into our “soul and spirit.” The idea here is that Scripture has the ability to cut through the confusion, the ambivalence, and even the apathy of our hearts to expose our true attitudes and motives. In doing so, God’s Word becomes the vehicle to God himself—to his presence, where we are transformed into becoming more like Christ. That’s why his Word is alive—it interacts with us, it challenges us, and it changes us. This thirty-day challenge is designed to help you experience life breathed into your Bible, and breathed into you through your Bible. It’s a big promise—but it’s the promise God makes to us about what his Word can do. Our job is to do the work to actually receive it.

The Tools

Here’s what you need to get started:

- 1. This journal.**

Yes! You’ve got it. Win!

- 2. A study Bible.**

I recommend an *NIV Study Bible* or an *NLT Study Bible*, but there are others that can also be good starting points. If the

only Bible you ever read is from an app on your phone, or is left over from your First Communion, or looks like a Bible from a pew in a church built in the 1800s, then it's time to make the investment. It'll be worth it.

If you want more information on Bible translations and choices, go to NavPress.org/AliveDay1 to get my personal

CHOOSING A BIBLE

The Bible is the most purchased book in the world. Just in the last fifty years, there were 3.9 *billion* Bibles sold!³ However, what's inside your Bible varies widely. In addition to the sixty-six books of Scripture, Bibles now contain notes, cross-references, maps, and devotionals. You can buy a special Bible for your child, your student, your mom, your friend who loves journaling. It's awesome to have so many choices—but it can also be confusing. Here are some tips to help you find a Bible with the right tools so it can come alive in your life:

1. **Choose a translation.** I recommend the New International Version or New Living Translation for this study. To learn more about translations, skip ahead to Day 19 for a quick overview.
2. **Choose a study Bible.** A study Bible will include study notes, a concordance, book introductions and outlines, and a variety of other features designed to bring the Bible to life.

Study notes are comments on historical context and principles about God from some of the leading Bible scholars of our day. Study notes are like having a Bible tutor walk with you through every verse. Look carefully at the details on your Bible selection—a recent Internet search showed one version of a study Bible with ten thousand notes—and the next version included twenty thousand. More extensive notes will be helpful to you in the long run.

recommendations and links to ordering. And hey—if you don't have the Bible yet, don't let that stop you from starting this journey today. You can get through the first ten exercises without it—but go get that Bible! *Make it a priority.* I know if you were having a hankering for a cheeseburger and fries, you would find yourself a cheeseburger and fries.

Cross-references are text notes connected to a verse, which help connect you to other verses that speak of the same word or idea. As you are reading a passage, they will help you interpret what it means.

A concordance is a list of important words in alphabetical order, located in the back of the Bible. Concordances vary in their depth and are very helpful when trying to connect themes throughout the Bible. For instance, you can look up the word *peace* in the back of a study Bible and find its most relevant uses throughout the Bible, all listed for you in one place.

Book introductions and outlines give you a high-level overview of the book of the Bible you are reading. These are also written by Bible scholars and can orient you to the historical time of the book and its important highlights, as well as who wrote it and the important themes.

Other features of most study Bibles include maps, charts, and articles that bring various elements of the Bible story to life. We won't use those directly in this study, but they are helpful to have.

I know it can be overwhelming to wade through all the choices. So if you are new to this, I've selected a couple of good Bibles that you can find out more about here:

NavPress.org/AliveDay1.

If you desperately needed a latte, you would find a latte. So you can find a Bible in the next ten days. Order it online, or head to your local bookstore (I know, vintage!) and get your hands on a good Bible.

One more word on Bibles—there are a million out there, and it can be confusing to know whether the one you have will provide the kind of tools you need to discover God’s Word for yourself. Particularly, there is a difference between a *study Bible* and an *application Bible* such as a *Life Application Study Bible* or a journaling Bible or a student Bible. If you feel even *more* confused now, take heart! On pages xiv and xv, you will find some guidelines to help along the way—and remember to visit the website for some specific recommendations.

3. A time and place.

We are creatures of routine, following well-worn patterns for when we sleep, eat, and brush our teeth. We are habit-forming people. Establishing a time and place for your Bible study can help you create a new and transformative habit . . . your bedside table, a special chair—even your closet if it’s the only place you can find peace and quiet. I find it particularly helpful to keep my Bible study routine in the morning. I am least likely to be disrupted, and I am giving God the first part of my day—a way that I am saying, “You are my priority.” Spending time with God in the morning isn’t more holy—it just might be more helpful!

4. Breath prayer.

Psalm 119:18 says, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” We will not experience the transforming power of God’s Word by brainpower alone. Each day, we must humble ourselves to receive from God, asking him to give us

spiritual eyes, discerning minds, and open hearts. A breath prayer is a short phrase of Scripture or truth that centers our minds and hearts as we inhale and exhale deeply. Centering on God and asking the Holy Spirit to give us insight before we begin our studies is a necessary way of preparing to encounter him in Scripture. I'll prompt you each day to remember your breath prayer.

Getting Started

Help! My Bible Is Alive! is here to help you experience the Bible differently, but the Bible presents challenges. It was written thousands of years ago, so it can be hard to understand, and most of us don't even know where to start! Whether it's exercising, eating right, or changing life patterns, we humans can be stubbornly resistant. We need measures in place to keep us going when we don't get immediate gratification. So before you even begin, I'm inviting you to examine your commitment and decide if now is the time to change your life with the Bible. This thirty-day challenge is designed to get you from a place of frustration/confusion/boredom to a place of actually looking forward to spending time with God through his Word. The Alive Method is simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy. This is not a spectator book—it is a get-moving kind of journey. It will require you to focus your energy and attention for fifteen to twenty minutes a day. You are going into new territory, and it will take some learning. That's why this is a challenge—but one that's worth taking.

Because of the effort required to get to the point where you can feel comfortable hearing from God through the Bible, I've built in some behavior-changing motivators along the way.

Making the Commitment

You are signing up for a thirty-day experience, giving fifteen to twenty minutes every day. Writing down your own name as a commitment is a huge start. This is an agreement you are making with yourself to engage with God through the Bible every day:

I am committing to thirty exercises over the next thirty days. I will endeavor to do all I can to open my heart and mind to God's plans for my life. I will come expectantly to the Bible each day and with the will to believe God speaks through his Word.

Signed: _____

(sign and date here)

(almost as official as a notary)

Actually, I asked my friend who's a notary to sign as your witness:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Mitchell". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.


Breaking It Down

In order to develop a habit, I recommend committing to completing this Bible study in thirty days straight. One thing I've learned after twenty years of Bible study is that it's not good for my heart to take a day off from hearing from God. I need him every single day! However, if you are with a group, you may prefer studying five days a week for six weeks and using the weekend for catching up and worship. Either way, the point is to commit to a plan and stick with it.

Every five days, you'll unlock a reward within this journal, and/or if you prefer, you can unlock it online too! (See the box on page xix.) Consider this study a treasure hunt with some fun motivators

along the way. Now, if you want to skip to Days 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25 and find out the rewards—well, that’s between you and Jesus. But because I know you love a challenge and you respond to accountability, I bet you’ll stick with it each day and let the rewards come when you make it to that milestone. You’ll be glad you did.

So here we go! If you are ready to change your relationship with the Bible, to open your mind and heart to what God wants to say to you, then you are in the right place. We are taking this trip together over the next thirty days, and it’s going to be awesome.

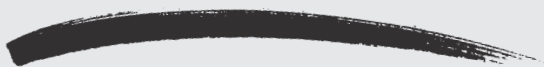


I want you to succeed! *To stay on track, you can sign up to receive weekly encouragement via texts that will follow you through all thirty days. Sign up by texting the word ALIVE to 63566 from your phone.*

Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” May God illuminate your path forward as you endeavor to understand his Word! Here we go . . .

PART 1

Why You Need Your Bible



SO WHAT'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIBLE?

C'mon, let's be honest. I hear things like . . .

ancient
INTIMIDATING
confusing
overwhelming
irrelevant
boring

The Bible makes people uncomfortable. It's a place where we feel unsure, and most of us hate that feeling. We come to the Bible for answers, but often we only get more questions. We come to the Bible for comfort, but often we are confused about how to interpret what we read. So it's no wonder that many people give up on looking to the Bible as a place for direction and purpose.

In a recent, completely unscientific study from my home church, out of 1,500 people polled, almost 30 percent said they “rarely” read the Bible, with about 17 percent saying “once or twice a month.” This was a survey done by people actually sitting in church—these are the church people! That means that if we line you up with three people at church, one of you hardly reads the Bible at all, and my guess is that more than one of you isn't really applying it to daily life. It also means that we might all be faking it a little bit, when really, we could use some basic help on knowing how to hear from God's chosen form of communication.

But here's the real problem with dusty Bibles on everyone's shelf.

If you are human, you have questions that you can't get answered anywhere else. I truly mean that. If you are a human being, walking this earth, with a heart and a mind and a soul, you have questions. You have longings. You look back on your life to things that don't add up. You look forward in your life with hopes and fears. And if you are holding this journal right now, you have an interest in knowing more about God—but perhaps, like most of the people I talk to about the Bible, you haven't (yet) found the Bible to be the place to meet those needs of your heart.

Does this sound like you? Then you are in exactly the right place. Especially if you are a grown-up, because as adults we've often forgotten the fine art of learning. We just know stuff because we already went through school. It's been a long time since we worked an algebra problem or diagrammed a sentence, and frankly, most of us don't want to do either one ever again. But unfortunately, most of us have approached the Bible as if we are already supposed to know how to use it. We come to it with these predisposed notions that if we know how to read, we should know what to do with it. Then, when we actually find the Bible . . .

Overwhelming
irrelevant
 CONFUSING
 INTIMIDATING

or (fill in the blank below)

. . . we give up and put it right back on the shelf.

It would be easy at this point to just jump in and start solving the problem. But all change takes time, including change in our hearts. So in this first section, we are going to tackle head-on some of those obstacles that have kept us from Bible study up to this point, and begin to hope again (or hope for the first time) that we can encounter God through his Word in new, relevant, and fresh ways for our lives. Let's get started!

DAY 1

HURDLE #1:

But It's So Confusing!

As we get started, don't forget to have your place, your set-aside time, your pen, and your Bible ready!

Breath Prayer

*God my Father,
Open my eyes to you.*

Take a few moments to settle yourself in God's presence. Remember, this is not busywork or another of your endless to-dos. You are entering the incredible and awesome reality that our majestic and holy God invites you into to meet with him. You are grounding yourself in your spirit and asking God to open your mind to the wonders of his presence. Your breath prayer for this week is a simple request for the Spirit of God. Inhale slowly on God my Father, and exhale slowly on open my eyes to you. Continue this practice for as long as it takes for you to settle in and be present with God.

Opening Thought

If you've grown up in church, you've probably vowed to read the Bible all the way through. Like anyone would, you have opened to the beginning and started reading in Genesis. If you got through the



Don't forget to sign up for special encouragement and other surprises throughout your thirty day journey! Just text the word *ALIVE* to 63566 to get started.

first chapter without wondering how all the days add up, you might have stumbled by chapter 3:

Wait a second! I thought God was a loving God! Why is he cursing Adam? Why is he banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden? Where is that Garden anyway? Did the snake actually talk out loud? If the Garden is perfect, how'd the serpent get in there? What is this, Jurassic Park?

When this is our experience with Bible study, it's no wonder we freak out and give up, or return to the comfort of devotionals and sermon podcasts that interpret the Bible for us! If we've stopped and started a few times like this, we begin to believe that the Bible will always be confusing and contradictory. We distance ourselves from the practice of reading God's Word because the confusion brings discomfort, and the world is confusing enough already!

Sound familiar? So let's step back for a minute and get back to the basics. Let's turn a new page and choose a different starting line for our Bible study. Whether you've never set foot in a church or you took your first baby steps between the pews, let's start over together and ask some basic questions of the Bible.

The first question of the day is this: Given that the Bible can be confusing and there are so many resources out there I can use to get some Jesus in my life, why should I work to understand it myself? Here's our first promise for our first obstacle to Bible study:

Promise #1

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

First, let's find the promise in that little sentence. It starts after "so." Now underline what comes right after "so that." (I mean it! Actually underline it.)

Okay, servant of God! That's you! The Bible is talking about you! If you are in this journal, seeking the things of God, you are serving him. You could just write your name in right now. Look, I'll make it easy for you.

Write your name into the passage:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that _____ may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

Everyone loves personalized items! Your name right there in the book! Now that hits a little closer to home, I bet. So what is the promise? The promise is that *you*, yes *you*, will be "thoroughly equipped for every good work." Not kinda equipped. Not dazed and half-equipped. Not intimidated and equipped. Thoroughly. Equipped. Okay, that's a pretty strong promise we are getting up front. So let's look at *how* that's going to happen.

Back to that verse. (Yep, still looking at the same one!) See that list up there of things the Bible is useful for (the list starts right after "useful")? Underline those words. (Really, go underline them.)

Did you underline them? (Go underline them.)

That wasn't too hard, was it? I know, I know, you are a grown-up, you don't need silly underlines and fill-in-the-blanks—except that you do, because that's what makes stuff stick in our minds. Actively

engaging—not just passively receiving—is what we remember. (You can underline that if you want!)

Okay, so you underlined. Now here we go: The promise from 2 Timothy is that we can be totally, completely, thoroughly equipped for this life. And the way God uses is this:

- teaching
- rebuking
- correcting
- training

Hopefully you are interested now. Most of us see those words and think, *WHOA. Slow down this train, because I'm on board for teaching and maybe some training, but rebuking and correcting? Let me off.*

Haha! Do you know what just happened? You got interested in the Bible. You (hopefully) got hooked by a personal promise, but now you've read something that requires interpretation, which is a fancy way of saying, "Now we've got to dig in and see what's here for us." But I'm getting ahead of myself. It's only Day 1!

If we were going to restate the promise of 2 Timothy in our own words, it might sound something like this:

If I want to be equipped as a believer in God to actually live out a God-centered life, I need to use all of Scripture to teach me what's important, turn me around when I'm going the wrong way, adjust my direction as needed, and get me prepped for God-life.

In some ways, that sounds to me like the job of a coach. God explains here that his Word is our coach, that through the Holy Spirit, the Word watches our lives closely and provides vision, direction, and correction.

What we've just done in these minutes together is look closely at one passage and really allow it to sink into our souls. These verses are promises for you and for me. They are bold promises about the power and position the Bible can hold in our lives.

Will it be confusing at first? You bet. Will it be worth it? Absolutely. The question for you is, Are you ready to receive it? Consider this short prayer from Psalm 119:34 as we wrap up Day 1:

*Give me understanding so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart. Amen!*

DAY 2

HURDLE # 2 :

But It's So Irrelevant

Breath Prayer

*God my Father,
Open my eyes to you.*

Don't rush this part! Get to your spot, get your pen and Bible, and settle yourself. If you find yourself distracted by your phone or the garbage truck or your dog deciding now is the time to jump on your lap, embrace the distractions and then let them go. If needed, move your location to get behind a closed door (I wasn't joking about the closet). A few minutes of preparation will yield much more fruit than twenty hurried minutes when you are just trying to "get it done." Prepare yourself to enjoy being with your heavenly Father, who loves you and desires to be with you.

Opening Thought

A few summers ago, I took a trip to England with my oldest son, who was eleven years old at the time. When we landed in England, many things felt the same as America. We could read the signs, we could understand the language (and enjoy the accents!), and we felt confident to embark on our trip together.

But then we got in the rental car. The car felt different. The

If you haven't signed up yet to receive your weekly rewards, it isn't too late! Get your phone out now and text the word *ALIVE* to 63566. Each week I will send something new that builds on what you're already learning.

driver's seat was in a different place. Instead of driving on the right, we were to drive on the left. When I pulled out of the airport garage, we were severely reminded that we were not at home anymore when I almost rammed into a car coming the “wrong” way. Although things appeared similar at first, they were actually quite different, and it took time and effort to assimilate to the culture.

In some ways, our relationship with the Bible is similar. We approach the words and think, *I know how to read* . . . We can read the signs and interpret the language. But in reality, the Bible is a different culture. Although we can read it in our first language, the language and culture it was written in is quite different. It takes time and effort to assimilate to the culture—but it's time worth spending. Bible teacher Beth Moore is often quoted as saying, “You will never waste time in God's Word.” When we put our time and effort into understanding the culture that is the Bible, we come another step closer to hearing and understanding God speaking into our lives. Today we are going to spend our fifteen minutes getting comfortable with some Bible basics that will speed your assimilation process—and we'll have some fun doing it!

Got your Bible? (Or Bible app if you don't have your study Bible yet.) Let's go!

Start with Why

Just in case yesterday's promise hasn't stuck, let's review and add on. Remember your first one? Copy the verse here and on the next page, or write it in your own words.

2 Timothy 3:16-17:

That takes us to our next hurdle:

Isn't the Bible just a set of old rules? So much of it doesn't seem to connect to my daily life AT ALL.

Let's examine our next promise and see how it connects.

Promise #2

The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. HEBREWS 4:12

Okay, now let's break down the action in this verse. We know at the beginning that the whole verse is talking about the "Word of God." (Side note: "Word of God" here is a synonym for Scripture or Bible. We'll talk more about how the "Word" is used later.)

I can find *six* words that describe the characteristics and actions of the Word of God from Hebrews 4:12. I gave you the first letter of each, just in case you need a little more warming up! Complete the list:

1. A_____

2. A_____

3. S_____

4. P_____

5. D_____

6. J_____

Good! (Want to make sure you got it right? Check the answer key on page 183 in the back of this journal.)

Now go back and look at the verse again. There are four *ands* in this verse. List the pairs joined by *and* here:

- _____ and _____
- _____ and _____
- _____ and _____
- _____ and _____

Go ahead, you can check your answers in the back. Got 'em all right?

Here's your star: ★

So let's review promise #1 in our own words:

If I want to be equipped as a believer in God to actually live out a God-centered life, I need to use all of Scripture to teach me what's important, turn me around when I'm going the wrong way, adjust my direction as needed, and get me prepped for God-life.

If we were to break down promise #2 in our own words, it might be something like:

The Bible isn't just any book. It's completely unique. It's living and breathing. It reads me deeper than I can read myself,

in my thoughts, in my heart, and in my attitudes. It slices right through all the clutter and the confusion with surgical precision.

Okay, this does not directly answer the question of the feeling we have that the Bible isn't relevant to our lives. But the Bible is instructing us about what the Bible is for, and since we are starting fresh together, we are starting with what the Bible actually promises. So far, we know that the Bible is essential to understanding how to order our lives around God's way, and provides this living, active, piercing ability to speak into our souls. That's the promise of what our *end result* will be from committing to Bible study.

Now let's look together at a passage that illustrates the power of Scripture.

I'm printing it below, but it's better to go find it in your Bible. The reference is Acts 8:29-38.

Public Service Announcement: If you don't know what these words and numbers mean, they are the reference within the Bible, which I explain on the next page. Skip this section if you've learned this already!

Feel free to read Acts 8:29-38 in your own Bible.

I like to underline words or phrases that catch my eye, or questions that I have. You'll find as you begin to grow in understanding your Bible that you may want to use it as a way to mark your spiritual journey. Underlining, highlighting, writing notes in the margin, or capturing important dates when God spoke with you through a verse are some of the ways you begin to build your spiritual life. Okay, enough diversions! Let's get to our study for the day.

REFERENCES

I'm going to break down this reference so you know how it works.

- **Acts.** This is the name of the book of the Bible where the passage is located. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six different “books” or pieces of writing. The reference begins with the name of the book. If you don't know where to find the book, you can locate the table of contents at the beginning of your Bible. “Acts” may seem like an odd name for a piece of writing, but it originally had a longer name that has been shortened to one word for ease of use in a reference.
- **8.** The first number after the name of the book is the chapter number. Each book of the Bible is broken into chapters, and the chapters are broken into verses. The chapter number is to the left of the colon.
- **29-38.** The number (or set of numbers) after the colon is the verse (or set of verses). If there are two numbers separated by a hyphen (29-38), they refer to all of the verses from 29 to 38. If verses are separated by commas (as in Acts 8:29, 31, 35), then the reference refers to verses 29, 31, and 35 of chapter 8. Sometimes there might be a lowercase “a” or “b” after a verse number (as in Acts 8:26a). This just means the first portion of the verse, rather than the whole verse.

Incidentally, the original Bible manuscripts didn't have chapter and verse numbers. They were added centuries later to help us find our way quickly to specific sentences and paragraphs. That's why a new verse sometimes picks up in the middle of a sentence.

So if you are going to the reference Acts 8:29-38, you'll locate the book of Acts and then follow the notation to this specific passage.

There! You did it! Back to the story!

²⁹*The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”*

³⁰*Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.*

³¹*“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

³²*This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:*

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

³³*In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”*

³⁴*The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

³⁶*As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

ACTS 8:29-38

Okay, there is so much here for us to learn, but today we are only doing a quick flyover of this passage. As you get comfortable using your Bible, we'll come back to this passage and dig into treasures here, but for now, let's just start with the big idea. Let's investigate:

Underline what/who the man in the chariot was reading.

Now turn in your Bible to Isaiah 53:7-8. (It's near the middle of the Bible if you are flipping around. Find it with your table of contents.)

Record the similar phrases in Acts 8:32-33 and Isaiah 53:7-8:

Whoa! Do you see that? The man in the chariot was reading Scripture—from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. And here comes Philip, led by the Spirit (more on that later), and he has this crazy opportunity to talk to this man about Jesus. Now let me ask you: If you had the crazy opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus, would you be prepared like Philip was? Let's see what happens next:

Underline the three questions the man asks of Philip. (We'll find out more about Philip later. Right now all you need to know is that he knew about Jesus.)

What three things does Philip do for the man in the chariot?

1. He explains _____.
2. He tells _____.
3. He _____.

So Philip was in a position to do three important things: recognize Scripture, explain Scripture, and—led by the Spirit into a situation—he was able to help this man come to know Jesus.

Now here's the real question: Are you ready for that?

Sure, you are probably thinking, *I'm not in a position to do that. I'm just a kid/stay-at-home mom/corporate guy/teacher/new Christian/not-sure-I'm-a-Christian.* Maybe you are thinking: *Hold your horses! I just learned how to use a reference three minutes ago!*

But here's the thing. This story is just one of millions of stories of how God uses his people to reach people. That's kind of the whole deal of our faith. When Jesus left the earth, he imparted to his friends and followers the job of spreading the Good News of his life. It's God's Plan A, and there is no Plan B. It's ridiculous that God would use us—yes, you and me—as confused and screwed up and unsure as we are. Yet he still says that his plan is to use *us* in the world. He isn't waiting for you to memorize in order the books of the Bible or sin less or learn more worship songs. He's urgently and actively working in your life and in the lives of the people you encounter every day—but it's up to *you* to get equipped for the task.

So to answer the obstacle of *irrelevancy*—it depends on what's relevant to you. If relevancy means that God is padding your wallet or landing a hot date for you or making your life more comfortable and easy, then yeah, the Bible isn't going to feel very relevant. But if the promises of the Bible reading your heart and directing your

decisions, if the promise of being used by God the way Philip was, if the promise of getting to come to God your Father in a daily, active, personal relationship with him—if you are interested in that kind of *relevancy* for your life, then you are in the right place.

We'll come back to Philip tomorrow, but for today, let's close with a word from Psalm 16:11 to take with you.

*You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

Dear heavenly Father, help me to experience this three-part promise from Psalm 16 as what relevant really means—that I would step into life, be filled with joy, and experience pleasure that extends to eternity.

Amen!

DAY 3

HURDLE # 3 :

But Only SuperChristians & Crazy People Hear from God

Breath Prayer

*God my Father,
Open my eyes to you.*

Opening Thought

- *God told me . . .*
- *God laid on my heart . . .*
- *I felt the Lord saying . . .*

These are phrases that you might hear Christians say and wonder, *What in the world are they talking about? How does God speak to us? Is it an audible voice? Is it an impression? How will I know if I've heard it? Can I miss it?*

These are all questions I've had (and continue to have!), and I'm guessing you do too. You've decided to embark on this challenge because you are looking for something—purpose, direction, comfort, challenge—and I truly believe the only one who can give you

what you are looking for is God. And that's a problem if you have no idea how to hear his voice!

So how do we hear from God? Today we are going to find that answer as we look at how the Bible speaks to us as God's authoritative and inerrant voice for the world.

Here's our promise to believe in:

Promise #3

This thirty-day challenge is about my knowing how God is speaking to me, but it's also about my knowing how God works—and he is going to work through me!

Let's go back to Philip in the chariot as our starting point for the day:

²⁹*The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

³⁰*Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.*

³¹*"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

ACTS 8:29-31

Our focus today is on the first four words of the passage. Write them here: _____.

You should have some questions about these first four words! Write down two questions here about that phrase:

Here are the two questions that I have:

- What/who is the Spirit?
- How does the “Spirit” talk?

Okay, we have some questions that we need answered before we can know how to apply this passage to our own lives. Pay attention, because this is where many of us completely jump the tracks in Bible study. We begin to read a passage, we don’t understand something—and instead of looking for answers, we just glaze over, feel like failures, and move on to something more tangible. We settle for a bite-size snack of truth instead of actually getting into the real meat. And then we are starving, cranky, and unsatisfied. We *must* push through the questions so we can get to the other side to understand and apply God’s Word to our lives.

Still with me? Remember, we are only on Day 3—we have a lot more to learn together! We are still laying the foundation for *why* and *how* we are going to find our purpose in God’s plan.

So here’s the truth for today, another simple but crucial statement:

The best way to learn about the Bible is by looking *in* the Bible. It’s hard to hear God’s voice if I don’t know what it sounds like.

As you work through this journal, you’ll be bringing *your* questions to the Bible. Rather than consulting a bunch of other books or podcasts or wishing that your pastor would address these questions, you’ll be able to take your questions into the Bible. You’ll get help along the way with your study Bible notes and some other tricks we’ll learn together, but the primary way you’ll get answers about the Bible will be *in* the Bible.

I know this truth sounds obvious and simple, but let’s get

real. When was the last time you thought, *I have this problem/sticky situation/confusion. I'll go to my Bible to find the answer.* No. We go to all kinds of other places to find the answer. We vent to our friends, we call our moms, we consult social media. We read articles written by people who may or may not be experts. We get distracted, we pray half-heartedly, we give up. And then we wonder why we don't have clarity! We wonder why our lives lack meaning and why we spend most of our time feeling overwhelmed and disoriented.

Can you relate? I have some good news and bad news. The good news is: This is not a new problem. God addressed it through an ancient leader thousands of years ago. The bad news is: The problem is worse than we even thought. There are many distractions that want to give us comfort and direction without truth—and they tempt us to follow them. They might look and sound like they are smart and wise, but God says otherwise. He calls these people—people who claim to have truth—false prophets. Take a look at what the book of Jeremiah (named after the prophet) had to say about his people looking outside of God's voice for direction:

¹⁶“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you;
they fill you with false hopes.

*They speak visions from their own minds,
not from the mouth of the LORD.*

¹⁷They keep saying to those who despise me,
‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’

*And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts
they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’*

¹⁸But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD
to see or to hear his word?

Who has listened and heard his word?”

The passage goes on:

28 “Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. 29 “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” JEREMIAH 23:28-29

Tomorrow we are going to dive into those two questions we have from Philip’s story:

- What/who is the Spirit?
- How does the “Spirit” talk?

But for today, take the words from Jeremiah as a warning for our modern times. There are many, many voices that try to tell you they hold the truth. Notice your inputs today—social media, images, news, friends, email, work, school—yet there is only one source of ultimate truth: God’s Word.

Underline what the following verses say *about God’s Word* from this selection of Psalm 119. You can write key words in the margin:

9 How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

10 I seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

11 I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you. . . .

32 I run in the path of your commands,

for you have broadened my

understanding.

33 Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees,

that I may follow it to the end.

³⁴ *Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.*

³⁵ *Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.*

³⁶ *Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.*

³⁷ *Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word. . . .*

⁸⁹ *Your word, LORD, is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.*

⁹⁰ *Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures.*

⁹¹ *Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.*

As we close, here's a promise for today:

*Continue to spend time with God faithfully and you will be
changed.*

***You will seek me and find me when you seek me with
all your heart.*** JEREMIAH 29:13

DAY 4

HURDLE # 4 :

God's Too Hard to Figure Out

Breath Prayer

*God my Father,
Open my eyes to you.*

Opening Thought

You've probably guessed by now that answering our Bible hurdles involves understanding what God actually says about himself. Today is going to be a little theology 101.

I hope by now you've established your time and place, you've given yourself time to breathe and invited your spirit to settle and hear from God, and maybe (just maybe) you are starting to enjoy being a "student" again!

Remember, we are merely building a case right now for *why* we need to study God's Word. The *how* we do it and the *what* we'll be learning for our own lives will come later. Let's continue to lay a solid foundation.

Yesterday we left off with two questions from our passage in Acts. We were wondering about the phrase that says, "The Spirit told Philip." Our questions were as follows:

- What/who is the Spirit?
- How does the “Spirit” talk?

Let’s work these out together. First: “What/who is the Spirit?” When you see the capital-S Spirit, the Bible is referring to the Spirit of the Lord, or the Holy Spirit. Understanding God’s nature can be difficult because he is so much more than we are, but we know what he’s told us about himself. The Bible tells us that God is one indivisible being, but also that he is three persons who are all fully God. The Bible calls them the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christians refer to them as the Trinity.

This means that when the Spirit speaks, it’s the same as God speaking. Whether the voice is Jesus, God the Father, or the Spirit or Holy Spirit, this is your clue in Scripture that God is speaking. You’ll learn amazing things about the triune (threefold, united) nature of God as you continue to seek him with your life and through his Word—discoveries that can last a whole lifetime! When we think about God being hard to figure out, it’s kind of true. His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Put another way, he’s not on our level. Think of the smartest person you’ve ever met, the one who understands quantum physics or speaks six languages or can explain how electricity works. That level of intelligence is absolutely *laughable* compared to the thoughts of God. So yes, we will not “figure him out.” However, God has made it clear that he wants us to be able to know him. He reveals himself to us out of his delight and joy at us knowing him. Bible study allows us to access the ways God desires for us to know him—and to be known by him. This is one of the greatest gifts and pleasures of our earthly lives. We *can* know God as he reveals himself to us!

Which leads us to our second question: How does the “Spirit” talk? But this one *you* are going to find. Let’s start with Hebrews 1:1-2:

¹In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

1. Underline how God spoke in the past.

2. Circle how God speaks to us now.

Bing-bing-bing! An important principle has just been discovered here. This one verse gives us a crucial road marker on the journey. The “past” spoken of here is going to be everything in the Bible BC—before Christ. This is the entirety of the Old Testament. The “now” is going to be AD—anno Domini—which means “in the year of the Lord” in Latin.⁴ So the now is AD, which means everything in the New Testament.

The first four books of the New Testament are called the Gospels, which means “Good News.” These books tell us the story of Jesus Christ. Let’s look at how earth-shattering this really is for our understanding of God and how he speaks.

The first verse of the Old Testament says,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

GENESIS 1:1

Now read the first verse of the book of John, a Gospel:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. JOHN 1:1*

Do you think John was trying to make a point here? The first three words are the same in John and in Genesis. Alongside of our understanding that God “in the beginning” used words to create, we now

have an “in the beginning” with the Word. “Word” is used three times in this verse.

What three things are we told about the Word in this verse?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Yes, this is easy—but I know you love to be right, and I know you love to make sure you are right—so the answers are in the back on page 183!

Okay, so we know three things about this mysterious, capital-*W* Word. But how do we know what John is talking about? Now we are on the hunt to try and figure out what this means for us, and we only have to go a few more verses for our next clue:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. JOHN 1:14

Aha! There’s that capital *W* again! This verse sheds more light on the mysterious Word—and makes it much more clear. The Word is Jesus. Jesus, the one the author of Hebrews said is the medium through whom God speaks to us. Bible scholars speculate that perhaps Jesus is called the Word because he is God’s Word, not only in the words he speaks but also in the life he lives. So when we read the words of Jesus, when we experience his life through the Gospels, we are actually receiving the Word—the Word of God.

So now we have our answers. How does the Spirit speak? Well,

the Spirit (being God) speaks through his Word (the Bible) and through his Word (Jesus' life). The Spirit will "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). It is through the Spirit that God speaks specifically to you. Hearing God is somewhat mysterious. We don't know exactly how the Spirit "spoke" to Philip on that day. We don't know if it was an impression in his mind or a leading or even a voice. But we do know that the Spirit does speak, and we know that in our time, God has made it clear that he speaks through his Word and uses our understanding of him in his Word to interact with us in our world. Beginning a relationship with his alive and active Word is how we begin to know how God speaks, what he cares about, and how he interacts with humans—with us.

Ah! I have to stop myself from jumping full force into an investigation into the work of the Spirit—all the ways and means he has to reach us—but that's what happens when we fall in love with Bible study. A whole world of understanding is open to us—with just a little bit of curiosity and perseverance! For now, let's address one more elephant in the room.

The final foundational matter comes in the form of a question people often ask: How do I know the Bible is reliable and true? There are many other resources that can help you understand the incredible history and accuracy of the Bible—the way it was put together, preserved, and passed down through generations. You can find some of those resources at NavPress.org/AliveDay4. What I'd love to ask you to do is go on faith for the next thirty days. Just decide to believe it's true and accurate. If, at the end of this study, you don't believe it, then very well. At least you gave it a shot. Don't go halfway with your study for the next twenty-six days. Just go all in and then see what you think. When you really read the Bible—really read it and believe it—you are going to be confused, disturbed, uncomfortable, surprised. That's what truth does. It can

rattle us a bit—and it's the sign that God is shaping you in his image, rather than you shaping a god into the image that works best for you. As the prophet Jeremiah said earlier—God's Word is like fire. It is powerful and strong and true. So bear with me! We can do this together.

Theologians describe the Bible in two ways:

- **Authoritative:** The Bible is the final authority on everything it talks about. If it's mentioned in the Bible, then it is the highest and final word on the subject.
- **Infallible:** It is without mistake. Because it is the inspired and supernatural work of God, it is perfect. That doesn't mean that it doesn't need interpretation and historical context (we'll get to that later), but it *does* mean that we accept, in faith, the words in the Bible as correct.

This is how I view the Bible, and how I invite you to view it during our study together. I believe that God will prove himself faithful to you and will speak to you through his Word, but you must also take that step of faith to believe and take him at his Word. Our study today helps us understand the fourth and fifth promises about God's Word:

Promise #4

The best way to learn about the Bible is by looking *in* the Bible. It's hard to hear God's voice if I don't know what it sounds like.

Promise #5

God speaks through the life and words of his Son, Jesus, and also specifically to us through the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the authoritative and infallible Word of God to the world.

Let's close with some powerful truth for your day, taken from 2 Samuel:

- ³¹*As for God, his way is perfect:
The LORD's word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him.*
- ³²*For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?*
- ³³*It is God who arms me with strength
and keeps my way secure.*

2 SAMUEL 22:31-33

*Go into your day confident in the knowledge that
the Lord,
the Rock,
our God—
arms you with strength,
secures your direction,
and shields you with his perfect love!*

DAY 5

HURDLE # 5:

I Can Only Understand if a Bible Expert Teaches Me

Breath Prayer

*God my Father,
Open my eyes to you.*

Opening Thought

Okay, it's been a big week of learning! We had some foundation to cover, but as we go into our second part, the work will shift from reading into practicing as I walk you through studying the Bible for yourself. Our last hurdle to overcome is our deep insecurity that we simply don't have enough intelligence, knowledge, or insight to be able to interpret God's Word for ourselves. Let me be clear: *This is a lie.*

First, I hope you've experienced a glimmer of confidence in your ability to navigate God's Word through these last few days alone. I hope you've begun to crack that spine on your Bible and wrinkle those pages. I hope you've started to get comfortable with some of the basics, perhaps a little more settled on the solid foundation of why we read the Bible in the first place.

Second, this hurdle will only be cleared with experience. As

you work through this journal on your own—or even better, with a group, you’ll discover something incredible. People are awesomely and uniquely wired, which means that when a kindergarten teacher, a sales executive, and a military retiree come together around the Bible, they will bring their own color and knowledge to the table in a way that is richer for *everyone*. Take it from me, pastors can be kind of boring. (I know, I am one.) If the only people interpreting the Bible are pastors and scholars, it’s gonna get real dull, real quick. Now, for sure, there are some basics to learn, and there are some great tools from people gifted in Hebrew and Greek, who study theology and church history in a way that absolutely informs the way we read the Bible.

However, the color, the vibrancy, the application—all of that comes from *you*. It comes from ordinary people encountering our wonderful Father in heaven, revealing himself in a myriad of ways. The body of Christ—God’s term for the church—is less colorful, less vibrant, and less majestic without your participation as a fellow believer and child of God. You might not believe that now. But hang with me for the next few weeks, and you just might discover that your Creator wired you to see him in a unique way that not only blesses your life, but increases the faith and wonder of those around you. How’s *that* for a promise?

It’s time to wrap up with an overview of our study method. I’ve termed it the Alive Method because of what God has told us about Scripture—that it is “*alive* and *active*” (Hebrews 4:12, emphasis added). This method simply gives you the tools to experience the Bible coming alive so that you can experience God in exciting and deeper ways. The Alive Method takes the Bible from dull to dynamic—from irrelevant to irreplaceable in your life.

Enough from me—let’s get to work (time to switch on your brain)! We are going to move quickly, but remember, the rest of the month

we will spend breaking down each and every part of this learning. You haven't given up yet, right? Remember that commitment you made: Be faithful, one day at a time, and God will begin opening your eyes to his Word.

Let's apply the Alive Method to one verse together as our launch point:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. JOHN 3:16

This one's probably familiar to you—maybe on a sign held up at a football game, or a billboard, or in your Sunday school memory, which is a great place to start. No matter what the passage, no matter how familiar or obscure, we will ask these questions in four steps of Bible study:

Step 1: What does it say?

Step 2: What's the backstory?

Step 3: What does it mean?

Step 4: What does it mean for me?

Step 1: What Does It Say?

This one seems super obvious, but it's the most important time we will spend on any passage. To answer this first question, we need to be able to paraphrase the verse in our own words. Think of starting your paraphrase with, "In other words . . ." Or, "Another way to say it is . . ." Most likely, when you actually try to state a verse or passage in your own words in a way that makes sense to you—without skipping over any of the content—you will quickly find you have questions

that need to be answered before you can restate the words. Let's apply this question to John 3:16.

Write your own paraphrase of the verse here:

How'd you do? Hmmm . . . Sometimes it's tough to get going, so let me give you an important hint: You should always have questions about every verse. Here are my questions that come from trying to restate John 3:16:

- What does it mean that “God gave” his Son?
- How does someone “believe in him”? What does that mean?
- “Shall not perish”—does that mean not physically die, or something else?
- “Eternal life” is what? Heaven?

Ah, yes! *This is the work of Bible study.* You may have had some of the same questions I did, or many others of your own. Let's use the questions listed here as a jumping-off point for some insight:

- “*For God so loved the world.*” We know that because the verse starts with “For,” we are learning the motivation behind the actions of the rest of the verse. *For* is a synonym for *because*. So God gave his Son because he loved the world. The motivator is love. Okay, got one good truth to start with!

Let's move on to the second phrase:

- “*That he gave his one and only Son*” indicates the unique nature of Jesus as God's Son, who came to the world with a purpose.

All right, now we are humming along! As we begin to restate, we are likely to find ourselves hung up on a phrase or word that isn't as easy to restate. “*That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” feels familiar to us if we have been around the Bible, but it's not actually that easy to know exactly what that's supposed to mean. So for our purposes today, let's move to Step 2 as we continue.

Step 2: What's the Backstory?

The backstory is the background we need to understand the passage—anything that is not right there in the passage itself. We discover the backstory through the tools of our study Bible and research. Study notes, cross-references, book introductions, and online tools are all part of the way we get our questions answered—I'll show all of that to you throughout our journey together. Many Bible passages need context; we need to know the audience, the kind of literature we are reading, the culture surrounding the moment, and the differences between the audience then and us now. We will also want to understand a little bit of what's going on in the verses or paragraphs around our verse. Today for John 3:16, I decide to take my next step by checking in my study Bible for related verses—and holy moly! My study Bible gives *fourteen additional verses* that connect back to John 3:16! If I wanted to get all my answers, I would start by reading those other verses for clues that will help me answer question 1. (I'll show you how later this month.)

Before I can restate “that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,” I want to know more about what the word “believes” means, and also more about “eternal life.” With a quick study (I'll teach ya later), I find out that “believe” here is the Greek word *pisteuo*,⁵ which means

- (a) to think to be true
- (b) to be persuaded
- (c) to place confidence in
- (d) to entrust a thing to one

By looking at additional verses connected to John 3:16, I discover the following other verses about eternal life.

Highlight or underline each “eternal life” in these three verses:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. JOHN 5:24

Those who have eternal life will not _____.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

JOHN 5:39-40

Who is speaking in this verse? _____ (Hint: The answer is in John 5:19.)

Eternal life is found in _____.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. ROMANS 6:23

Eternal life is a _____.

Are you hanging in there with me? Remember our foundational promises—the best way to find the answer to your questions about the Bible is by actually using the Bible. You may have had your Sunday school or vague, wimpy, Jesusy answer prepared, but with a little bit of study, this one familiar verse is a treasure trove to learn

many important principles about God, about us, and about what matters.

Armed with our backstory knowledge, let's circle back to Step 1: What does it say? Using my observations, cross-references, and definitions, here's what I would say about the verse now:

Motivated by love, God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. And everyone and anyone who is persuaded by, or confident in Jesus, who entrusts himself or herself to Jesus, will not be judged, even though sin makes us deserve it! Instead, they cross over to full and free life for all time.

Write your own paraphrase here:

Step 3: What Does It Mean?

We edged our way toward Step 3 when we rewrote the verse. Answering “What does it mean?” is answering the bottom line of what we've learned about people, about God, and/or about the world through the passage. It's a principle that we can apply across all people and all situations. In essence, it's the truth statement that we get out of the passage. For today, we could select a few different principles for this question:

- God's motivation for sending Jesus was love.

- Everyone and anyone who believes in Jesus is included in this promise. No one is excluded.
- Jesus is the key to eternal life.

Step 4: What Does It Mean for Me?

Now we've made our way to the final step. *Drumroll, please!* This is where we take all of that good knowledge and actually *put it to work*. This is where Bible study isn't about knowing more facts, but about actually being changed in our very core by the truth of God. This is where we get up from our study and actually live differently because of it—where we experience the deepest movement in our soul, in our joy, in our comfort, and in our purpose because of God speaking to us. When I think about why John 3:16 matters to me, I am overjoyed by the truth of God's love. All of it—the whole Bible story—is about a God who is love. Even when I don't understand. Even when he feels far away. Even when I can't make this whole faith thing line up—he is *still* love. I get up from my Bible study today asking myself, *Am I living like God loves me this much?*

So what's he saying to you today? Take your last few minutes to write out why John 3:16 matters to you. It might be one word, a simple phrase, or a short prayer.

You did it! Part 1 is complete! That might have felt like a Bible blitz at the end—but just like any new thing, we are often overwhelmed at first and then settle in with practice. The next weeks will be about that practice—learning the Alive Method, beginning to approach God and his Word with questions, and expecting insights and answers. Here’s a wrap-up on the promises of God’s Word (these could be good to write for yourself on cards or to cut out and post somewhere to remind you daily):

Promise #1

If I want to be equipped as a believer in God to actually live out a God-centered life, I need to use all of Scripture to teach me what’s important, turn me around when I’m going the wrong way, adjust my direction as needed, and get me prepped for God-life.

Promise #2

The Bible isn’t just any book. It’s completely unique. It’s living and breathing. It reads me deeper than I can read myself, in my thoughts, in my heart, and in my attitudes. It slices right through all the clutter and the confusion with surgical precision.

Promise #3

This thirty-day challenge is about my knowing how God is speaking to me, but it's also about my knowing how God works—and he is going to work through me!

Promise #4

The best way to learn about the Bible is by looking *in* the Bible. It's hard to hear God's voice if I don't know what it sounds like.

Promise #5

God speaks through the life and words of his Son, Jesus, and specifically to us through the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the authoritative and infallible Word of God to the world.

Enjoy Your First Reward!

Way to go! You've made it through your first five days! Head to the center of this journal to the special insert section and claim Reward #1. Tear it out and display it somewhere you'll see it every day—your bathroom mirror, dashboard, locker, or desk.