

A God's Eye View: Survey for Yourself the Bible's Big Picture

Isaiah 55:10-11

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish...
so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Hebrews 4:12

For the Word of God is living and active...

Colossians 3:16

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly...

Intentionally blank

For Kevyn,
whose thirst for God's Word was palpable,
and all those like her,
seeking the spring of God's words in a land of drought.

May this study both slake and increase that thirst!

Acknowledgements

"Why do you care about the Bible?" Lisa panted as we jogged between rice paddies outside our small, northern Japanese town of Misawa. She knew that I went to Officer Christian Fellowship and that sometimes I mentioned what Jesus had done in the twists and turns of my life and how the Bible felt like my lifeline even though much of it was mysterious to me. Lisa admitted wanting to know more about the Bible, because even though she'd grown up with it, it was still an intimidatingly big book. I felt the same and since there were several other women interested in meeting weekly, we began to study the Bible – all of it. All that to say, many thanks to Lisa, Kath, Betsey and Amy for starting this venture. And to Kevyn for catalyzing the reformat of this study.

Preparing to lead that first Bible study, I meandered through a bookstore somewhere in the US and came across the study guide called Cover to Cover, Getting the Bible's Big Picture by Gerry Matheson. Credit for the initial structure of this study goes to that helpful little book.

Thanks also to Ashley, Mary, Lexie and Tanja for showing me that even today, young folks are willing and able to read an hour of Scripture each day and learn from what they've read. You all are impressive! Same to Wendi, Julie, Laura, Kori, Meghan, Anna, Tricia and Alicia. I so much appreciate all of you investing your time and research into this study, and being willing to share with imperfect strangers from around the globe.

Above all, thank you to my husband for ruthlessly editing and keeping me theologically honest, not to mention (along with Zoe, Matti and Gwendi) putting up with far too many late dinners and absent-minded forgetfulness as my brain meandered through every last corner involved in finishing this study. I appreciate you all more than you know.

Contents

Introduction

Why do this study?.....	1
Why NOT do this study?	3
I'm in! Now what?.....	5
How do I use this workbook?	6
Can I get a sneak preview of what's in the Bible?	8
What can I expect from our group meetings?	9

Intentionally blank

Why do this study? Let me ask you some questions first.

- Do you want to know more of what's in the Bible?
- Are you ready to take the next step in your spiritual journey but aren't sure what that is?
- Do you wonder what those old Bible stories have to do with today?
- Have you been wanting to establish a daily habit of Bible reading but haven't gotten there yet?
- Do you want to understand the Bible's Big Picture, but don't know where to start?
- Are you looking to increase your biblical literacy?
- Are you ready to step away from books that guide Bible study and dig into your Bible for yourself?
- Maybe you feel called to teach, but fear you know too little?
- Are looking for material to study with your mentor or mentee?
- Do you want to focus your next small group study on the Word itself, rather than a good Christian book?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, this study just may be the next step in your journey with Jesus.

What is this study? This is an overview of the Bible's Big Picture. While I provide some additional information and questions to ponder, you will read your own Bible to discover the overarching story contained in its pages. You won't read all of it, just enough to comprehend the overall story and to understand the Author just a little better.

With readings each day for six days of the week, it will help you develop your habit of daily time in the Word. As you read, you'll summarize each section. Then you'll consider what that day's reading has taught you about God and how it impacts your life today.

What is the purpose of this study? I will admit to having a three-fold purpose for this study.

First and most important, I want to help you develop a habit of daily time with God, ideally in the morning. There is no more foundational habit you can develop as you seek to mature spiritually.¹ If you already meet with Jesus daily, wonderful. Please consider putting on hold what you are reading now for these few weeks in order to fully engage with this study during your morning quiet time six days each week. Consider reading a psalm on the seventh day.

My second goal is to help you develop a habit of always digging into the Word for the purpose of life change. To do otherwise, God says, is *deceiving yourself*.² If we act in response to what we read, however, He says we will be *blessed* in what we do.³ I don't know about you, but I'll take blessing over self-deception any day!

¹ Many surveys by a wide variety of organizations have found the same fact: daily Bible intake (reading or listening and reflecting on it) is the single greatest catalyst for spiritual growth. These organizations include Christianity Today, the Willow Creek Association, Back to the Bible, Lifeway and the American Bible Society, not to mention the many books on spiritual disciplines that also agree. If you want to grow spiritually, read the Bible. Daily.

² James 1:22

³ James 1:25

The final purpose for this study is for you to view the Bible's **Big Picture** in such a way that you are drawn to it and understand your part in it.

What's the big deal about the Big Picture? Once upon a time a boy stacked wood and cared for the family garden so his dad could go to work. The dad drove a truck full of gravel day after day. The two of them, along with hundreds of others doing tiny parts, accomplished President Eisenhower's vision of a vast interstate highway system which continues to benefit the US in countless ways today. Many small stories lie inside the big story. Both are important.

Understanding the **Big Picture** and its Artist, the Story and its Author, not only helps us understand the smaller stories in the Bible, it also enables and motivates us to play our little parts well. It gives us purpose, perseverance and clarity which together result in peace, fulfillment and joy. Without the Big Picture, we meander through life or zing off in some random direction. With it, we can take our place in that great *cloud of witnesses*⁴ who together form the exquisite tapestry God is weaving throughout all time.

How can you be sure what the Bible is saying anyway? Doesn't it have all sorts of figurative language and allegories? This is a great answer to know up front! Jesus seemed to think that the Old Testament (OT) accurately recorded factual history in plain human language understandable by all.⁵ Since there's no better example than Jesus, this study makes the same assumption. Without error and unchanged through time,⁶ the Bible contains all God wanted us to know about having a relationship with Him forever.⁷ Though it contains a variety of genres, some of which contain imagery and figures of speech, it never contradicts itself and is clearly written by One Person, the Holy Spirit, albeit through many human authors. I would stake my life on the truth of the Bible as proven through science, studies of ancient manuscripts, fulfilled prophecy and my own experience. In fact, I am staking my life on it. My *eternal* life.

If you need more proof, consider the writing of Josh McDowell ([Evidence that Demands a Verdict](#)) or Lee Strobel ([The Case for ... Series](#)). Websites like those of Answers in Genesis, Focus on the Family, Crosswalk, the Gospel Coalition and Got Questions.org also present solid cases for the truth and trustworthiness of the Bible you read. The evidence is out there!

⁴ Hebrews 12:1

⁵ We now call this ability for everyone to understand the Bible the doctrine of Clarity of Scripture.

⁶ That the Bible is without error is called the doctrine of the Inerrancy of Scripture.

⁷ The fact that the Bible contains all God needs us to know about having a relationship with him is called the Sufficiency of Scripture.

Why NOT do this study? Before you begin, I have several warnings for you.

Warning 1: To do this study in 13 weeks, you'll need 30-45 minutes each day. Plan twice that for the eight-week version. Yes, that is a lot.

Warning 2: This study goes *very* fast. It is an overview of the entire Bible. For many people, it is uncomfortable to read large sections of the Bible and to pass by some of the detail. There is a place for a study that digs deep into details and moves slowly. And there is a place for this type of study, which moves quickly in order to see the larger story.

Let me clarify. Picture the calm, azure ocean on the scuba diving hotspot of Palau in the South Pacific with its myriad shades of blue and green surrounding each of the hundreds of islands. Snorkel the shallows to view vibrant coral and finely detailed fish. Change into your scuba gear to deep sea dive in one location and encounter creatures and rock formations that reveal a creativity beyond human imaginings. Both views of the ocean are full of wonder, but they are different.

Now hop on a plane and cruise over those shallows a few thousand feet up. Again the beauty and vastness touches the heart and opens the mind even though the perspective is different.

Studying a book of Scripture is like snorkeling. Digging deep into a verse or a word is like scuba diving. This study is the flyover. Flying may take some adjustment, but it is well worth the view!

Warning 3: In the western world today, we like things to be chronological. Because this study goes from "In the beginning" to "Amen" in order of the books in the Book, it will deviate some from a strict timeline. (There is a timeline in the appendices to help navigate the deviation.)

Now let me address some other questions you may have.

Do I have to do this with a group? To get the most out of this, I'd recommend doing it with another person or small group and meeting weekly to review and *spur one another on*.⁸ You'll get a lot more out of it, and so will the other person, if you do.

Can I just go to the group meeting and skip the daily readings because _____? (Fill in your reasoning.⁹) Sure. You'll get something out of it that way, but not nearly as much as if you take this opportunity to get to know your very own Bible. Just think of having a good grasp of what lies in each section of that thick volume, of it being a comfort instead of intimidating, of seeking in it wisdom for tough decisions instead of avoiding it because of the judgment you feel from it. Imagine hearing a pastor talking about a biblical character or story and you knowing how it fits into the **Big Picture**. Even more important, *the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and*

⁸ Hebrews 10:24-25

⁹ Your excuse, really. Don't get me wrong. Some excuses really are valid. Is yours?

*wander off into myths.*¹⁰ If you're not sure of what is in this Book, how will you know myths from truth?

What if I can't finish all the reading each day? One reading each day is **bold**. If you only have time for one, read that one. Better to establish the daily habit with just a few verses than to burn out trying to read all of each section. And always determine your take away, that is, what God is telling you about Himself and what He is asking you to change as a result.

But I've already read the whole Bible. Why do I need to do this study? If you have a good grasp of the story and the nuances running through it, you'll have a lot to offer others! When I was a child, I rarely read a book more than once because once you know the story, what's the point? Now after half a century of interaction with it, the Bible has become even more alive, more real and more relevant to me. In Thailand, a friend once had to pick up his chin off the floor when he realized that in my backpack, packed with as few belongings as I could manage for two weeks of rock climbing, there was a fat study Bible weighing several pounds. I just couldn't go without it. I hope and pray your Bible becomes attached to you like that!

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 4:3-4

I'm in! Now what? Great choice! First, gather your materials:

1. Bible - obviously! Your own Bible. If you don't have one yet or you want a new one, I'd recommend the ESV Study Bible or the Reformation Study Bible.
2. Notepad or sticky notes - for all the things that pop into your mind as soon as you start to read. Write them down so you don't have to keep them in your head for later.
3. Notebook - There will be times when you want to journal more than the space in this workbook permits. Sometimes it takes some processing to find the specific take away for the day. Consider noting what you learn about the character of God as He methodically unveils it. Write down any hints of Jesus that you see in the OT. Jot down ideas or words that are repeated throughout the Bible. Use different colors for each of these, if you want. Think of your notebook as a sort of sketch pad. Considering starting a prayer journal in the back of your notebook as well.
4. Pen (and/or pencils, highlighters, etc.) - whatever you like to write with!
5. This workbook.
6. Quiet place and necessary comforts - hot tea and a foot rest at my desk, please!

With all that in hand, begin by **praying** that God would open your eyes to what He is saying. Then read the passages with these questions in mind:

1. What happens? Look for major characters, events and places.
2. What does it say about God? About Jesus? This is God's story. Therefore, we learn a lot about Him as we read it. And God points everything toward Jesus and the good news Jesus brings (the Gospel). So no matter what you read in the Bible, it reveals something about God and more often than not, about Jesus and/or the Gospel.
3. What questions does it raise? Write down at least one.
4. How should I respond? Write down at least one practical, tangible and specific adjustment to *your* thinking and/or life. This is your "take away."

Journal and write as much or little as you want, but *if you write nothing else, record your answer to Question 4*. Be specific and make it personal to you. Remember that choice between blessing and self-deception a few paragraphs back? Our response to God's Word opens the door to blessing. To make your take aways even more effective, share with your study group. There is no motivation like inviting someone to ask you how it's going!

How do I use this workbook? On the top right of some pages, you'll find an *overview box* to keep us oriented to the **Big Picture**.

Sample Overview Box
Where are we?

1. The Law
2. History
3. Poetry
4. Prophecy
5. Gospels
6. Acts and Letters

On the notes pages you'll find the "assignments" and space for your notes in tables like this:

Section 1. The chart on the notes pages (See the following page for an example.)		
<i>The first column will have the readings for each day in the left column, numbered by section.</i>	In the center column jot down your title or summary for the passage - what is it about? Be as detailed, general or creative as you want: this is <i>your</i> workbook.	The right hand column is for notes about the passage, verses that stood out, cross references you thought of or anything else that comes to mind.
<i>There may be multiple readings for each section.</i>		Sometimes you will find questions to consider in this column as well.
Date: Write the date.	Key verse: What verse or passage stood out?	
Take away: How will your thinking change in response to today's readings? Be <i>specific</i> .		

NOTE:

- For the 13-week version of this study, do ONE *section* each day.
- For the eight-week version, do TWO sections each day; skip the Date, Key verse and Take away for the first section continue reading the next section. Choose only ONE Key verse and Take away for each day.
- If you only have time to read one passage each day, read the one in **bold**.
- For more information, see Page 9, What should our group meetings cover?

Summary: Review your take-aways from each day during this Section. Are there any themes that stand out? What has God been teaching you about Himself? How does that impact your life?

Near the last page of each chapter is a **summary box**. Read back through all your take-aways for that chapter and summarize what God is teaching you. What stands out? For example, based on the take-aways on the next page:

Find the balance between rest and work that draws people toward God

Can you give me an example of a notes pages and some notes? Absolutely!

Read...	Summarize...	Notes, comments, questions
<i>1. Creation, Fall, Flood</i>		
<i>Gen 1:1 - 2:3</i>	<i>Creation</i>	<i>God created everything. He told man to fill the earth and subdue it. (What does that mean?!) He rested on the 7th day. It was very good.</i>
Date: <i>Feb 24</i>	Key Verse:	<i>Gen 2:2 - God rested</i>
Take Away: <i>If God rested, it's okay for me to take appropriate rest also</i>		
<i>2. The nations descended from Noah</i>		
<i>Gen 10</i>	<i>Noah's descendents</i>	<i>Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth Egypt and Canaan came from Ham Everyone else on earth came from this family</i>
Date: <i>Feb 25</i>	Key Verse:	<i>Gen 10:32 lists of genealogies</i>
Take Away: <i>God will still be here in 100 years - point people to Him</i>		

What if I have questions? Questions mean you are using your mind. Using it is a step toward *renewing your mind* which is the key to spiritual growth and change.¹¹ It is also necessary for *loving God with all your mind*.¹² So don't be afraid to ask questions: if God is Who He claims to be, then He can handle them all!

Jot down your questions in the questions boxes, keep reading and journaling and come back to them when you can or work through them with your mentor. For example, from the readings above:

What questions do you have?

What does it meant to "subdue the earth"?

From which son of Noah did the Israelites come?

(I found this later in Luke 3:36 - Shem!)

¹¹ Romans 12:2

¹² Matthew 22:37

Can I get a sneak preview of what's in the Bible? Yes! Let's look at a quick *overview*.

1. The Law (or the Law of Moses or the Pentateuch or the Torah or the Books of Moses)
 - a. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
 - b. Describe historical events and people
 - c. Timeframe runs from Creation to Israelites' wilderness wanderings

2. Books of History
 - a. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job
 - b. Describe historical events and people
 - c. Timeframe runs from the Promised Land until the return from exile

3. Books of Poetry
 - a. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Job
 - b. Songs and poems with figurative language and passion
 - c. Mostly written at the same time as the Books of History
 - d. Note: Segments of Poetry can be found in many other books as well

4. Books of Prophecy
 - a. Prophecy are Isaiah through Malachi and Revelation
 - b. Messages from God to the people
 - c. Written at the same time as the Books of History; Revelation written after Jesus
 - d. Note: Segments of Prophecy can be found in many other books as well

5. Gospels
 - a. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
 - b. Describe Jesus' earthly life from four different perspectives
 - c. Timeframe is the 33 years of Jesus' life

6. Acts and Letters
 - a. Acts through Jude
 - b. Letters from Apostles and others close to Jesus and the Apostles
 - c. Timeframe runs from about 15 years after Jesus' ascension until about AD 95

What else can I do while I wait for the study to start? For further study, you might research dates for when books of the Bible were written, by whom and when the events occurred. A good study Bible provides this information at the beginning of each book. If you choose the internet, be careful to select reputable websites such as GotQuestions.org, BlueLetterBible.com, BibleGateway.com and similar sites.

What can I expect from our group meetings? Here is how the 13-week and the eight-week options of this study might be run. Plan for meetings to be 60-90 minutes long in addition to any social time before or after the actual discussion. Readings for each week are divided into *sections*. There are 12 sections in every chapter except for Chapters 3 and 7, in which there are only six.

13 Week Version: Read one section each day.

<u>What is read during the week</u>	<u>Meeting #</u>	<u>Chapter #</u>	<u>What will be discussed at the meeting</u>
	1	Intro	What to expect from the readings and the meetings, answer questions
Genesis 1 to Genesis 32	2	1 The Law	Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Babel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob
Genesis 35 to Exodus 20	3	1 The Law	The twelve tribes, Joseph, Israel in Egypt, the Exodus, the ten Commandments
Deuteronomy 34 to 2 Samuel 12	4	2 History	Conquest of Canaan, the Judges, the Kingdom United
1 Kings 2 to Nehemiah 8	5	2 History	The Kingdom Divided, Exile and Return
Job to Song of Solomon	6	3 Poetry	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
Isaiah to Habakkuk	7	4 Prophecy	Books of Prophecy from Isaiah to Habakkuk
Zephaniah to Malachi Prophecy about Jesus Prophecy about end times	8	4 Prophecy	Books of Prophecy from Zephaniah to Malachi, prophecy about Jesus and prophecy about end times
Parts of the gospels	9	5 Gospels	John the Baptist, Jesus' miracles, parables and actions
Parts of the gospels, harmony of the Passion of Christ	10	5 Gospels	Jesus' teaching, passion and resurrection
Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians	11	6 Letters	Acts, Romans and 1 Corinthians
Philippians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James, 1 John	12	6 Letters	Philippians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James, 1 John
Summaries and testimonies	13	7 Summary	Summary, your story, your testimony, next steps

Eight week version: Read two sections each day, except for Chapters 3 and 7 in which you should read just one section each day.

When you meet together, simply talk about one whole chapter each time. Begin with an introductory meeting to set expectations and answer questions and end with the discussion on Chapter 7. This eight-week version is best done in smaller groups, like one-on-one or one-on-two. It tends to be too much information for larger groups to work through.