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# How to Use *Threshold Bible Study*

Each book in the *Threshold Bible Study* series is designed to lead you through a new doorway of biblical awareness, to accompany you across a unique threshold of understanding. The characters, places, and images that you encounter in each of these topical studies will help you explore fresh dimensions of your faith and discover richer insights for your spiritual life.

*Threshold Bible Study* covers biblical themes in depth in a short amount of time. Unlike more traditional Bible studies that treat a biblical book or series of books, *Threshold Bible Study* aims to address specific topics within the entire Bible. The goal is not for you to comprehend everything about each passage, but rather for you to understand what a variety of passages from different books of the Bible reveals about the topic of each study.

*Threshold Bible Study* offers you an opportunity to explore the entire Bible from the viewpoint of a variety of different themes. The commentary that follows each biblical passage launches your reflection about that passage and helps you begin to see its significance within the context of your contemporary experience. The questions following the commentary challenge you to understand the passage more fully and apply it to your own life. The prayer starter helps conclude your study by integrating learning into your relationship with God.

These studies are designed for maximum flexibility. Each study is presented in a workbook format, with sections for reading, reflecting, writing, discussing, and praying. Space for writing after each question is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for their discus-

sion. The thirty lessons in each topic may be used by an individual over the period of a month, or by a group for six sessions, with lessons to be studied each week before the next group meeting. These studies are ideal for Bible study groups, small Christian communities, adult faith formation, student groups, Sunday school, neighborhood groups, and family reading, as well as for individual learning.

The method of *Threshold Bible Study* is rooted in the classical tradition of *lectio divina*, an ancient yet contemporary means for reading the Scriptures reflectively and prayerfully. Reading and interpreting the text (*lectio*) is followed by reflective meditation on its message (*meditatio*). This reading and reflecting flows into prayer from the heart (*oratio* and *contemplatio*).

This ancient method assures us that Bible study is a matter of both the mind and the heart. It is not just an intellectual exercise to learn more and be able to discuss the Bible with others. It is, more importantly, a transforming experience. Reflecting on God's word, guided by the Holy Spirit, illumines the mind with wisdom and stirs the heart with zeal.

Following the personal Bible study, *Threshold Bible Study* offers a method for extending *lectio divina* into a weekly conversation with a small group. This communal experience will allow participants to enhance their appreciation of the message and build up a spiritual community (*collatio*). The end result will be to increase not only individual faith but also faithful witness in the context of daily life (*operatio*).

Through the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, study, reflection, conversation, and prayer, you will experience God's grace more abundantly as your life is rooted more deeply in Christ. The risen Jesus said: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20). Listen to the Word of God, open the door, and cross the threshold to an unimaginable dwelling with God!



**Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.** 1 PET 3:15–16

# Missionary Discipleship

**T**he mission of the church is to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ. As disciples of the Lord, each of us have been invited to play an active part in this mission. By word and witness, we are called to contribute to spreading the gospel, the good news of Jesus, to the world. If we are to be true to our identity as disciples, then we must be evangelizers, witnesses of the gospel to others.

There is an intimate connection between the word of God and the call to missionary discipleship. As we learn to listen to Scripture, we learn how to witness to the word of God. The more we receive that divine word into our hearts, the more our lives will reflect that word to the world. Discipleship is a call to go inward, to experience an ever-deepening encounter with Jesus Christ, and a call to go outward, to witness the good news to others.

The church is missionary by its very nature. Carrying on the mission of Jesus to the world, the church bears witness to the kingdom of God. Like Jesus, his community of disciples is called to continually make all things new, embodying the presence of Jesus through his Spirit in the world. A church that always looks inwardly, to its own internal issues and struggles, is a church that has forsaken its missionary vocation. A renewed and vibrant church must be outward-looking, evangelizing with zeal, living the gospel with joy and hope for the sake of the world.



The first is secularism: living as if there were no God or any need for God. This secularism fosters a mentality in which God is simply left out of human consciousness and culture. Today we have crossed from a neutrality toward religion to hostility toward religion and denial of the transcendent truths upon which traditional society has been based. Divinely revealed truth is something that believers today are encouraged to experience within their own private lives but to leave out of the public domain. Anything that is above or beyond the present, practical world is not a matter for consideration in public life. Ultimate human purpose and destiny are beyond the purview of the secular culture. This increasing secularization has resulted in a declining capacity for people to listen and understand the words of the gospel as a true and life-giving message.

A second obstacle to missionary discipleship is rationalism, which holds that human reason is the sole arbiter and the final test of all truth. Of course, Christian theology has always defended the importance of reason, in alliance with faith, in seeking truth. But human reason, divorced from faith, cannot know the highest forms of truth, which are knowable only through divine revelation. The supernatural gift of faith permits us to experience God in ways that reason alone cannot.

A third obstruction to hearing and witnessing God's word is relativism, which holds that there is no absolute truth or value. All ideas have only relative, subjective value according to personal differences in perception and judgment. In today's culture, the truths of faith tend to be viewed as merely personal opinions. But Christian faith rests in the certainty of God's revealing word. It is a faith that does not follow the waves of trends and the latest novelties. It gives us the knowledge to judge truth from deceit. We cannot truly hear God's word unless we trust that it expresses divine truth, and we cannot witness to God's word unless we know that it is not subject to changeable opinion and personal whim.

A fourth obstacle today is individualism. Human life no longer has a purpose that is commonly agreed upon or a conception of the good toward which human life ought to aim. So individuals are free to choose their own personal values and live life in a way that leads to their own satisfaction. Such individualism obstructs the revelation of a higher source of authority than one's self about the meaning and goal of human life. Judeo-Christian faith is

entirely incompatible with today's individualism. The two dominant biblical images of the church—the people of God and the body of Christ—present Christianity as a community filled with the presence of the risen Lord and animated by the Holy Spirit. Christians cannot be isolated individuals, but are a community of disciples doing the work of justice and love as a tangible expression that the reign of God is upon us.

And a fifth cultural obstacle to God's word being implanted in the minds and hearts of individuals and society today is consumerism. Global capitalism has replaced the Roman Empire as the context in which the word of God must be proclaimed. The focal point of cities is no longer the cathedral spire topped with the cross, but the skyscraper topped with the corporate logo of its owner. Rampant consumerism has perverted human desires by redirecting them from their natural end in God to an artificial objective in material objects and temporary pleasures. In this environment, the ancient call to evangelize becomes distorted. Churches who want to increase their share of the market must ask themselves what will attract customers and meet their needs. What is called evangelization often looks more like church marketing. Offering multiple social choices and options for self-improvement becomes the first goal while less marketable aspects of Christian faith are removed.

Yet people eventually become discontent with our civilization of gadgets, entertainment, trends, and novelties, and they seek lasting meaning and purpose. In spite of all the obstacles of today's culture, we still profess with conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ answers the truest needs and the deepest longings of the human heart. Today's challenge for the church is how to offer the authentic good news of God's reign to a world staggering under the weight of so many unanswered questions and unfulfilled longings.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What are some of the signs of these cultural obstacles in my own life today?

- What are some ways that communities of faith can help to overcome these five obstructions?

### **The Bible Communicates the Mission of God**

All of Scripture witnesses to God's mission for the sake of the world. This mission springs from the reality that humanity has rebelled against God's original desire for creation and experiences the darkness of ignorance and despair. God's mission is to redeem the world, to restore the broken relationship, to bring light to the nations, and to bring about a new creation. It is a mission that embraces the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. By inserting our own lives into the grand narrative of the Old and New Testaments, we unite our lives with God's mission, establishing within us a confident hope.

In order to fulfill the divine mission for the sake of the world, God calls forth Abraham and promises blessings to all the families of the earth through his descendants. The people of Israel become the bearers of God's mission for the world, as God makes them his own people and the instruments of his saving will on the earth. God desires to bless one people so that through them he can in turn bless all peoples. This is the message that Paul describes as the good news preached in advance, "the gospel beforehand" (Gal 3:8), the proclamation of God's overarching will, expressed throughout Scripture, to bring blessings to all the nations.

Through the Torah, prophets, and psalms, we come to know God and the kind of blessings he has in mind for the world. The whole of the Old Testament is oriented toward the future and impelled by hope. Through increasing revelation, manifested by the words and deeds of God among his people, we come to realize that, from the beginning to the end of God's mission, God desires to heal the world by calling it to ever-greater justice, beauty, goodness, and truth.

With the people of ancient Israel, we must look backward, forward, and outward. God's people must look backward to God's original intention for human life and forward to the end of time, to God's goal of a renewed humanity in a restored creation. And we must face outward to the nations, confronting idolatry, seeking justice, and embodying God's will so that all people might come to know and worship the true and living God. Facing outward as God's people, we join in his mission so that all people might experience his saving grace.

The word "evangelize," to declare good news, first occurs in the Old Testament in the context of Israel's imminent release from their exile and captivity in Babylon. Isaiah evokes the imagination and hope of his hearers with the image of a single messenger, an evangelizer running with the good news. Speeding across the mountains, he carries the news, announcing that God's promises are being fulfilled: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'...The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isa 52:7, 10).

The good news that God returns, redeems, and reigns will ultimately benefit "all the nations." This good news spreads from a single messenger to "all the ends of the earth." The word of God opens outwardly from a word directed to Israel to a word with universal scope. God's word becomes good news for all people, a promise of salvation to the world.

But as the Old Testament period ends, Israel has failed in its mission to the nations. Languishing in the darkness, under the successive occupation of the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, Israel longed for its Messiah, but was torn apart by factions—Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes—each with a different vision of the coming kingdom and how God will bring it about. Each vision manifested a profound misunderstanding of God's purpose in choosing Israel. They developed attitudes of separatism from other peoples and affirmed their own privilege over other nations. Their history of being exploited manifested itself in bitter hatred for the Gentiles and a desire for vengeance toward the peoples of other nations.

The prophetic image of the coming kingdom of God looked nothing like the historical situation in which Israel found itself. By the time of Jesus, Israel



Peter addresses us in his first letter, “The word of the Lord endures forever. That word is the good news that was announced to you” (1 Peter 1:25).

Through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God became flesh, and the word of God became Scripture. This word of God has been entrusted to the church, which then hands it on through the apostles and its apostolic tradition. The mission of the church is to proclaim the word of God to the world. Because Scripture is God’s self-revelation and divinely inspired, we hear, read, experience, and share it with others as the word of God. And as the word of God, Scripture forms us into missionary disciples.

The more each of us engages in a prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible and thereby deepens our relationship with Jesus Christ, the more we are able to participate in the church’s mission of evangelization—proclaiming the word of God to the world. We cannot keep to ourselves the hope that is within us. Peter continues in his first letter, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15–16).

We become missionary disciples by first being evangelized ourselves by the word of God. Through prayerful, faith-filled, reflective reading of Scripture, we become people who communicate the gospel to others by the witness of our lives. By becoming missionary disciples, we become ready to offer to others the reason for the hope that lies within us, the gospel that animates our lives. But, as Peter suggests, we must never use pressure or overwhelm others in our efforts to evangelize. Our motivation must always be love for others and a desire to help them remove whatever obstacles block the word of God from their lives. The work of missionary discipleship must always be done with gentleness, respect, reverence, and love.

The truest incentive for missionary discipleship comes from contemplating God’s word with love, lingering over its pages, and reading it with the heart. Approached in this way, the beauty of Scripture will amaze and continually excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to listen to the word with a contemplative spirit, recognizing that we have been entrusted with a precious treasure that leads us to a new life. There is nothing more valuable that we can give to another.



## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1**

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide nametags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
  - What drew you to join this group?
  - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
  - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

*Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of missionary discipleship. You inspired the biblical authors to express your word as manifested to the people of Israel and most fully in the life of Jesus. Motivate us each day to read the Scriptures and deepen our understanding and love for these sacred texts. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.*
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don't feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week's group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.