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## Bible Study as Journey

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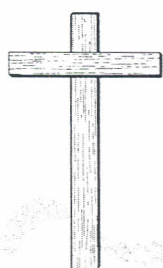
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## *Bible Study as a Journey*

By Morris Yates

Not long ago a preacher friend of mine asked me if I had any suggestions for new Christians as they begin to study the Bible. How should one respond to such a sincere, honest, and meaningful question? Have you ever noticed how much of the Bible is in narrative, or story, form? Since we all have a story and are going “home,” I began by couching my response in the form of a kind of travelogue narrative, with journey as the controlling metaphor, and then ended by making some suggestions related to the journey. Forty years ago I could have used these suggestions; I still can.

Start by considering the study of the Bible as a lifelong endeavor. Think of it as a journey to another place, a place that is far away and distant. They do things differently in that place, and you will never quite arrive, but you will always be in the process of going. On your journey

God speaks to you, and as you travel his voice can be heard more clearly at some times than at other times. On this journey God asks that you act in accord with what you understand him to be saying. As you travel you will always see less than there is to see, and another traveler’s vantage point may offer a different view that is worth your seeing—but remember, you will never see it all. It may be that as time passes, your own vantage points will change and new vistas will open that will correct, supplement, compliment, augment, or confirm your views of an earlier time. Change always comes with a journey of a lifetime, but it does not come about all at once. On this journey it will be necessary to live by faith in God while experiencing the limited views and understandings of a finite traveler in a foreign and distant land. When your view is blocked by some obstacle or by the

crowd, find some friendly giant who has been down this road before and stand on her or his shoulders. These giants will be glad to help you, for they live only to serve those on the journey who come after themselves. When you have seen all that you can on your own, you can often “hire” the giants as tour guides. They can lift you up and help you see the wondrous landscapes and marvelous people who have heard God speak before you began your trip. If you can hear what God said to another traveler in a distant time and place, you may well have the ticket to begin to hear what he is saying to you on your trip. Mark it well, for what you hear can never mean what it never meant. On such a long journey, you must remember that the hearing is for being or doing rather than merely for the enjoyment of a curious and pleasant side trip into antiquity’s dusty land. Most important of all on

this trip is the understanding that when you come to the river, the ticket across will be not what you know, but who you have come to know as friend and leader while on your journey.

### Suggestions for the Journey

1. Consider the study of the Bible as a lifelong, never-ending privilege. A gift ticket home.

2. Learning is about changing. Try not to fall into the habit of thinking that your current understandings are permanent and unchangeable, because we have not yet arrived but are always going until we cross that last river. Remember that clay is more easily shaped than granite, and on this journey we are spinning on a potter's wheel. Hold conclusions as tentative. For example, think in this way: "This is what I believe, know, understand about this subject at this time, and I reserve the claims to God's promise and admonition to grow, so tomorrow or in the future I may well change my views as I learn more or differently."

3. The Bible cannot be mastered. It is designed to master us. Learn to live with ambiguity, or with less than perfect understandings, while always striving to learn more. There is value in the struggle to learn. The struggle itself can help us learn to ask better questions of the text.

4. Study on a regular basis. Reading is not the same thing as study.

5. Study in such a way that you are trying find to out what the original writer was saying to the original target audience. Once you think you have a handle on *that*, decide what that would mean for you today and put that into effect in your life.

6. Get expert professional help. Read good books, like the ones listed below, until you understand what and why they say what they do. Climb up on the shoulders of those giants. If and when you need help with what you are reading, simply ask others in the family of faith to help you. It will give them

pleasure to be helpful, for giants of any time or locale love to help.

### A Few Friendly Giants

Fee, Gordon F. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

Holladay, William L. *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

Stein, Robert H. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Willis, John T., ed. *The World and Literature of the Old Testament*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1979. (Especially the introduction and chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, and 10.)

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