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A Modern Girl's Guide to Bible Study

**A Refreshingly Unique
Look at God's Word**

JEN HATMAKER



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

Sample from *A Modern Girl's Guide to Bible Study* / ISBN 1576838919

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Contents



Preface	7
Acknowledgments	9

PART 1

1. I'm Less Intimidated Reading <i>Shape</i> Magazine <i>Common Insecurities About Studying God's Word</i>	13
2. Nair, Diet Pills, and Other Things That Don't Work <i>Ineffective Strategies for Connecting with Scripture</i>	25
3. Codependency That Doesn't Require Therapy <i>Learning to Lean on the Holy Spirit</i>	39
4. The Container-Store Theory <i>Every Mess Can Be Organized</i>	53

PART 2

Introduction	79
5. The Forest and the Trees <i>Grasping the Main Idea and Inspecting the Details</i>	81
6. Tweezers, Velcro Rollers, and Other Tools for Girls <i>Bible Study Tools You Have to Know About</i>	93
7. It's Not Just for Nerds <i>How Understanding Relevant History Makes All the Difference</i>	113

8. It's All About Me <i>Discovering Your Amazing Personal Connection with Scripture</i>	131
Afterword	149
Journaling Strategies	153
Study Guide	159
Leader's Guide	193
Optional Reading Schedules	201
Notes	205
About the Author	207

* * * *Preface* * * *

Welcome! I already feel as if I know you. We're that generation who raise our kids while running businesses and keeping the church afloat. (You know we do.) And, as for me, I feel more like a "girl" than anything else. Girls snort when they laugh, and they sometimes watch reality TV. My mom and her friends are "women."

I've prayed and prayed for this moment for you: a new beginning. I hope by the end of this trip you will have learned, been freed, grown, gained confidence, laughed out loud (because I'm a bit off), fallen in love with Scripture, and been changed forever.

Just a quick note: If you will be using the study guide with a small group, partner, or on your own, turn to it first before you begin reading. It paces your reading out over the course of five weeks. If you're the lucky girl who got roped into leading a small group, there's a leader's guide back there, too.

This is for us Modern Girls. I won't call you "beloved." I don't use phrases like *flying on the tender wings of angels*. I might have even used words like *boobs* or *loopholes to submission* (both of which have problems). But I do love God's Word desperately, and I pray that you will, too. Let's link arms like modern girlfriends do and walk together.

* * * *Acknowledgments* * * *

For my Favorite God: Thank You for using a silly girl to champion Your Word. I love You so dearly. My heart overflows with a good theme.

To my Girlfriends, my special companions on this journey. Thank you for teaching me, laughing at me, cheering me on, ingesting Benadryl at Christi's every Thursday, loving the Word, driving with me (and sending me) to New Mexico, editing without cutting my favorite stories, test-driving all this material when you didn't have time, enduring my self-absorption, and allowing me to flaunt your lives in print. As my mom always tells me, "You have exceptional friends. Don't run them off." I love you as much as any girl has ever loved her friends. You know I do.

Thank you, husband of mine. You've been a believer since the beginning when I was a swirling vortex of uncertainty. That mattered so much. And thanks for genetically endowing our three kids with much insanity, as they will be an endless source of material for both of us. (I suppose we collaborated on the DNA buffet: You gave them impossible cowlicks and OCD tendencies; I gave them a propensity for drama and road rage.) I love you forever.

I am so grateful to my Lake Hills Church family. You have been my safe place to learn, to sprout wings, to crash and burn, and to grow. For your patience, support, unconditional

love, and countless opportunities for me to make or break your various events, I love and thank you.

And thanks to Rachelle Gardner, who set this thing in motion based on an “instant connection” that was neither proven nor safe. I’m clearly high risk. To Karen Lee-Thorp, Terry Behimer, and my new friends at NavPress: It’s a true pleasure to work with the varsity team. This JV writer thanks you for a fabulous initiation.

Part One

I'm Less Intimidated Reading Shape Magazine

Common Insecurities About Studying God's Word

I've never cared to spend large quantities of time with people smarter than me. It's so annoying. I have enough problems to worry about without trying to manage adult academic peer pressure. I mean, really. Life is too short for that kind of stress.

The last thing I need is for the intellectuals to pat my cute, simple head while making mental notes to spend more time with me, hoping I might soak up a fraction of their scholarly aura. You know the ones—they have the word-of-the-day flip cards on their desks so they can drop impressive vocabulary such as *parturient*. I'd rather play Barbie Rapunzel with my daughter because, quite frankly, there is a possibility I am smarter than she is, although the verdict is still out on that one. (Don't ask her.)

Let's not even talk about spending time with people more spiritual than me. I've got enough on my plate trying to sound smarter. I can't lace that with wisdom and Scripture and godliness, too. I get dizzy, and my throat starts constricting. That can't be normal.

Have you ever listened to a More Spiritual Friend talk about the complexity of her relationship with God? While she explains how she hears His voice every time the wind blows through the trees and a new flower blooms in her garden, have you hoped He doesn't tell her how you went on a psychotic rampage that morning when your two-year-old smashed an entire box of Lucky Charms into your living room carpet and you actually looked up the phone number for your local foster care rep? Me neither, of course, but I know people like that. It's sad, really.

If you're wondering if my average portion of the universal dispersion of giftedness bothers me, let me reassure you—it doesn't. Regularness suits me. I am not an academic scholar or a spiritual giant, which I'm fine with because it probably means more people like me. It's hard to love the perfect ones; they make us look so bad. It's telling that I have many good friends.

I am flawed on many obvious levels, and truthfully, I erroneously report my zip code at least two out of every ten times. So why would I write about pursuing a rich understanding of the Bible? Isn't that material reserved for the upper echelon of the church hierarchy? The ones who have "arrived"?

The answer is fundamental: The insights of the Bible are not reserved for pastors, their wives, and Billy Graham. Psalm 119:130, one of the most beautiful passages concerning God's Word, says,

The unfolding of Your words gives light;
It gives understanding to the *simple*.

Well, my stars—that's me. Maybe it's you, too. There's just the matter of unfolding what's in there. The Bible is tightly packed sometimes, isn't it?

I recently spent an entire day doing laundry. The “entire day” part should tell you we were all wearing our last pair of clean underwear. There had been a sustained neglect of domestic duties, which, apparently, I'm in charge of. My bed was filled with neatly folded piles of clothes. All the stacks were straight and arranged by subcategories (I have a lot of issues).

I brought the last load into my bedroom to fold, although I certainly wasn't planning on putting them away for at least another day, which is a charming habit my husband adores. But instead, I found my three kids on the bed jumping on, hiding under, and tossing up every piece of clothing I'd spent all day folding.

While I was trying to remember where I put that foster care number, I yelled, “What possessed your three little minds to mess up everything I just folded?” My oldest son, Gavin, looked at me as if I sometimes don't understand this life at all and said, “It was fun.” (My daughter—with leggings and underwear draped on her head—answered, “I didn't do it,” but sometimes she lies, and that's a different book on parenting and/or anxiety management.) Unfolding was fun.

Indeed.

The last word most of us would use to describe Bible study is *fun*. Unfolding Scripture is at best intimidating and at worst drudgery. Now, I wanted my stacks to remain folded

until they magically transferred themselves into drawers, but my kids discovered the sheer joy of the unfolding process. They also discovered maternal domestic wrath, but they can work that out with their therapists later. God's desire is for us to encounter His Word truth by truth until there isn't a folded piece left. He wants to find us covered in Scripture and loving every minute of it.

God never intended for His Word to be a tidy, hands-off package with crisp edges and a wealth of mysteries that we set aside until Sunday morning. Unlike me, He's hollering at us, "Get in there! Turn My Word upside down and inside out. It's all for *you*." Or, even better (and possibly more accurate),

"I am the LORD,
and there is no other.
I have not spoken in secret,
from somewhere in a land of darkness;
I have not said to Jacob's descendants,
'Seek me in vain.'
I, the LORD, speak the truth;
I declare what is right." (Isaiah 45:18-19, NIV)

But there lies a great chasm between God's intentions and the way most of us feel about Bible study. I liken it to how I feel about running, which is best described as a long-distance love affair. Runners are so intriguing. They banter back and forth, "I have to run every morning, or my mind stays cloudy all day." I thought murkiness was normal, but I nod as though clarity is something I, too, achieve on a daily basis. They gush about their feet hitting the pavement ("It's so therapeutic!") and their lungs filling up with fresh air. I

wonder why when I run, I resemble a cat with arthritis and my lungs feel less “filled with fresh air” and more “searing flames exploding through my chest cavity.”

My Runner Friend Shelley tells me, “I’m sorry I’m grouchy today. I haven’t run.” On my off days, I say, “I’m sorry I’m grouchy today. I just am, so try very hard not to annoy or bother me in any way.” What is it with these people? What do they know that I don’t? How can they love this activity that is sheer punishment to me? I toss my head and blather, “You people are crazy! Run your slim little legs off. I’ll be watching *Seinfeld* reruns.”

Truthfully, I’d love to be a runner. I want to join their secret society and learn their fancy lingo and wear their special shoes. My Runner Friend Leslie says I have to do it more than twice a year. My other Runner Friend Stephanie asks me if I’m doing “interval running.” You know what? Save the fancy talk for the other Club Members. I’m just trying to get some oxygen to my brain.

But I get it: My methods—or lack thereof—are hindering my progress. The runners lie and say anyone can do it if she learns a few guidelines and develops the habit. They urge me to come to their side and promise me I’ll love it over there. I say, “Thank you for your kind input. I’ll put that information in the ‘I’ll Really Consider This’ file” (which is a misnomer for the “As If” file).

But this is how many believers perceive authentic Bible study. Sure, it’s great for those who have the mystery figured out. We marvel at others who love God’s Word and spend hours in it, only to emerge with insights that have never darkened the corners of our minds. We notice that Bible study causes them to ooze clarity and fulfillment, and we watch as

they come alive through Scripture.

What is it with these people? Why does God speak to them through Scripture, but all we come out with are more questions and a migraine? Thousands of us dug our heels in at one point and proclaimed, "Attention! I am going to read the Bible this year from start to finish," only to get hopelessly sidetracked in Leviticus between the laws about sacrifices to the goat demons and the 57,400 sons of Zebulun. So we throw our hands up and put personal Bible study in the "I'll Really Consider This" file, knowing it will inevitably gather dust and become permanently shelved.

Chicks with Codependency Issues

So what seems to be the problem here? For most of us, it's simple. We've never learned how to study the Bible. We have two approaches: poor or none. We assume that reading the Bible equals studying the Bible, and we spiral down in frustration when it doesn't work.

It's like my kids' first trip to the dentist (three years late) when she pulled out floss and asked if they used it at morning or night. They said, "What's that?" and thereby firmly secured my place on the Dentists' List of Bad People. It was definitely something they needed to know, but they had never been taught because sometimes we're just trying to make sure everyone has on underwear and two of the same shoes, and we can't be worrying about dental floss.

Likewise, many of us have been believers for years but have never been taught how to study God's Word on our own. Most of the formats we encounter the Bible through are created or presented by someone else. An assumption

emerges that the deep waters of the Bible can be explored only by the “enlightened,” so what do we do? We become totally dependent on them to teach us God’s Word.

How many of us have survived spiritually from Sunday morning to Sunday morning or from packaged Bible study to packaged Bible study with caverns in between? We pace and wring our hands in the gaps, and we mourn our fill-in-the-blanks and leading questions. We ask, “What am I supposed to read? When is the sign-up for the next study?” We allow the mysterious to remain folded until hopefully someone will tell us what it all means.

Now, before you yank out your laptops to send me scathing e-mails about the biblical principles of sound teaching, hear me out. The Bible is indeed clear about the designation of teachers uniquely gifted to build up the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul writes, “And God has *appointed* in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third *teachers*, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.” Teachers are placed by the will of God for the common good.

I am not proposing that we collectively hold our hands up to our teachers and declare, “I’m done with you! Apparently I can figure this thing out on my own. Be gone with your knowledge and wisdom.” Mercy, no. Jesus was our prime example as the Ultimate Teacher. He told His students in John 13:13, “You call Me *Teacher* and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.” Where would our dearest disciples have been without their Teacher? Still schlepping fish and dozing off in the tax-collector booth, no doubt.

Likewise, packaged Bible studies we buy at the Christian bookstore or work through in a small group are powerful and

create new layers in our spiritual growth. These are wonderful places to learn how to navigate the Bible and become exposed to God. My Bible Study Friend Christina says this is where she had her hand held in Scripture until she was ready to walk on her own.

God has given teachers experiences and wisdom they obediently steward. They lead us down paths they've journeyed and create opportunities for new paths to be cleared in our lives. Bravo! I stand up and applaud them. I whistle. I blow kisses. We should always be learning from our teachers because that is God's design. Don't drop out of your Bible study group or stage a book burning on the front lawn of your church. Books and Bible studies will forever be tools by which we are stretched spiritually.

But what about when they're over?

As My Son Used to Say, "I'm Afeared!"

For many of us, the problem with personal Bible study is rooted in fear. Trying something we have no skill at is intimidating and overwhelming—like the day I brought my first-born home and realized I was supposed to be a parent. What? Who thought I could do this? Does anyone know for sure that I qualify to manage another human? And why won't this baby stop crying?

In the Word, we're often plagued by the sheer weight of the unknown before we encounter step one. Fear manifests itself in many ways: fear of lacking knowledge, fear of failure, fear of weird Bible lingo (what's with "propitiation"?), fear of that fine print on the sides and bottom of the pages.

There's also a fear of clipping along at a decent pace only

to get tripped up by something confusing. What on earth do I do then? Can I plug my pastor's cell phone number into speed dial? Do these intrusions annoy him? This often becomes "a good stopping place," never to be voyaged through again.

As my Bible Study Friend Erin pointed out, there also lurks the fear of being changed. It's safer to secure salvation and then simply coast in complacency. Even at a fundamental level, most believers realize that God's Word is a powerful place, and no one who enters will emerge the same. What if the Bible requires more than we want to give—or give up?

My Bible Study Friend Amy voiced her fear of commitment. Digging into Scripture doesn't have the feel of a three-minute-a-day effort. In her sixteen-hour day, she averages forty-two minutes of unaccounted time. She can squeak out forty-five if she hits green lights. How is real Bible study going to fit into real life? It would be a luxury to sit down with God's Word for as long as we need, pouring undistracted energy into understanding Scripture, but this is a reality for exactly . . . no one I know.

One thing is sure: These are not just the concerns of new believers. My Girlfriend Trina found Christ as an adult, a situation that came with a built-in set of insecurities. The questions outnumbered the answers, and even worse, it appeared that everyone else already had it figured out. But I went to church three times a week as a fetus and gave my heart to Jesus when I was six, and I also spent years of unsuccessful time in the Word. Same fears, same insecurities. I never learned *how* to embrace the Bible; I just heard, "Read it." As a minister's kid, I assumed there was some genetic coding that hadn't kicked in. All I could figure was that I would just grow up one day and it would all be clear.

Wonderful modeling doesn't necessarily transfer either. My Bible Study Friend Christi grew up watching her mom fill volumes of journals while memorizing most of the Bible, yet that magic connection eluded her when she dug in. Why do we genetically receive the propensity for stretch marks, but we can't inherit what our moms understood about Scripture? On many levels, life is unfair.

I believe it is the conspicuous minority in our churches that are accomplished students of the Bible. It seems like "everyone" has it under control only because the ones in the spotlight are confident in the Word. In truth, most run-of-the-mill believers would admit that personal Bible study is a puzzle on one level or another. We'd love to get more from Scripture, but we don't know how to get it.

What about you?

What about in the quiet of your bedroom when it's just you and God? When the small group is over and it is early morning before the family wakes up. What do you do? You might ask the same questions I asked for years: What do I read? Where do I start? Where do I stop? What happens when I don't get it? Is this just face-value meaning, or is there more? How is this going to affect me? Did I turn the coffee on? (I often got distracted.)

Most of us bring insecurity to the table when we meet with God. We're not sure what to do with the Bible when it's all by itself without a workbook or a devotional or a teacher. We scratch our heads at the psalmist's words:

O how I love Your law!

It is my meditation all the day.

Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,

For they are ever mine.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts. (119:97-100)

What? Where is this confidence coming from? And what's with this "all the day" talk? I was lucky to hammer out ten minutes of reading and even luckier if I could remember four words of it by lunch. "More insight than all my teachers"? That's just crazy talk, isn't it?

In short: No.

Every woman who says "I believe" has the opportunity to fall in love with the Bible and understand its beautiful layers just as God intended. Let's learn to unfold the perfect stacks of truth God has set forth in His Word until we're covered in them.

And I promise it will be fun.

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you *the word of God in its fullness*—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them *God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles* the glorious riches of this mystery. (Colossians 1:25-27, NIV)