

CAROLINE SAUNDERS

BETTER

THAN

LIFE

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE
AND LIKE IT

LifeWay | Girls

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Ministry Publishing*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CAROLINE SAUNDERS is a writer, pastor's wife, and mother of three who believes in taking Jesus seriously and being un-serious about nearly everything else. She loves serving women through writing, through her church, and through a parachurch women's ministry she started with her best friends (StoryandSoulWeekend.com).

Find her writing, resources, and ridiculousness at WriterCaroline.com and on Instagram @writercaroline.

HOW TO USE

This (very cute) book contains nine weeks of group sessions, eight weeks of personal study wedged between them, and a leader guide. You'll start each week with your group, learning together through video teaching and group discussion. It's my prayer that the group sessions will spur you on to connect with God's Word and with one another in an energizing, meaningful way! Then, on your own, you'll complete four days of personal study before coming together again for the next week's group session. I hope that you'll flex your spiritual muscles as best you can to faithfully complete the personal study days! They're designed to be engaging, interesting, and informative, and I think you'll discover that learning to study God's Word over the next nine weeks is a solid investment of your time. Here's a breakdown of the elements of the study:

BIBLE STUDY BOOK

In addition to the confetti on the cover (a very important element), this book features:

Group Discussion

Video listening guides and group discussion questions are provided to help your group engage with each week's content.

Personal Study

Four days of personal Bible study each week will help the group discussion content soak into your heart and will expose you to new layers of learning. I'll also share weird and funny tidbits and stories, because I like to pretend we're hanging out each day.

Leader Guide

In the back of the book, we placed a leader guide to help support leaders as they support you. (Hi leaders! We love you!)

THE FLOW

Design your group sessions to fit the space, time, and needs of your girls.

Learn with Your Group

Launch each week with a group session. You can begin the session with a short icebreaker and then settle in for the teaching video. As you listen, use the Watch guide to help you stay on track and to give you that satisfying "fill-in-the-blank" feeling. When the teaching video is done, use the discussion guide to talk about what you've learned and to dig in deeper.

Learn on Your Own

Ideally, you'll leave your group session energized to continue learning! If you don't, you can use your spiritual muscles to press on anyway, knowing that delight lives on the other side of discipline. Keep an eye out for opportunities God's given you to study His Word. Sometimes we don't think we have the time because we aren't watching for it!

HEY, GIRL.

I might as well begin this study with a confession: When I graduated from college and found myself responsible for my own dinner (Ugh!), I tried to cook based on instinct. This went great! (No, it didn't.) My husband still remembers something I made called "Biscuit Chicken Cheese Casserole," which isn't a creative name at all, just a list of the literal ingredients. I plopped chicken, cheese, and a can of biscuits in a pan, cooked it at 350 degrees, and acted like I was a genius. Yikes! My husband said, "Please stop inventing food and maybe try to follow a recipe." I responded, "Recipes are oppressive! I am a free woman!" He loves me.

I resisted recipes because they seemed so bossy. (Don't tell me to use a half teaspoon of salt! I do what I want!) But do you know what crucial piece of information I was missing? I didn't realize the structure of a recipe is what supports a dinner's potential for deliciousness and delight. I thought I was choosing the more fun path by opting for less structure, but I was actually setting myself up for less fun.

A few years after this light bulb kitchen moment, I realized the same concept applied to Bible reading. You see, I'd been coming to the Bible for years with no recipe, reading whatever I felt like reading so I could check the box and feel like a good Christian girl. Even with the bit of structure a reading plan provides, I wasn't gobbling up the words like a delicious piece of cake but was hazily watching them go by, like an uninteresting Netflix binge. The result wasn't delight but drudgery.

Armed with this new realization, I began to seek information wherever I could, and I soon found that reading the Bible in a meaningful, transformative way involves more than just watching the words go by. There are tools we can use and recipes we can employ to really sink our teeth into what God is saying. When I learned how to study the Bible, I found that I truly liked to study the Bible. Once again, structure led to delight, and I have not been the same since.

My people will tell you I love my Bible with my whole heart, and I want to help you love the Bible with your whole heart, too. I want you to know "it is no empty word for you, but your very life" (Deut. 32:47) because it tells you what God is like and that will compel you to worship and give Him everything you have. That's the heart behind this study, which functions kind of like an interactive recipe book. Everything centers

on a basic recipe constructed from methods and tools Bible lovers have employed in one way or another for a long time in their pursuit to know and love God. This recipe is COIA, or, more specifically C (5Ws + H) + O (DTR) + I (SGC) + A. Confused yet? Don't worry, sister, I'm going to walk you through it bit by bit like a quirky cooking show, and by the end of it, I think you'll know how to study the Bible and like it.

I am so excited for you to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8) and genuinely proclaim, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:103).

Forks up!

COIA METHOD

CONTEXT **WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE WORLD WHEN THIS WAS WRITTEN?**

5 Ws & H **WHO** **WHAT** **WHEN** **WHERE** **WHY** **HOW**

OBSERVATION **WHAT DOES IT SAY?**

DTR **DEFINITIONS** **THEMES** **REPETITION**

INTERPRETATION **WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

SGC **SCRIPTURE** **GOSPEL** **CURIOSITY**

APPPLICATION **HOW DOES THIS CHANGE THE WAY I THINK AND LIVE?**

PSALM 63

1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;

my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory.

3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,

my lips will praise you.

4 So I will bless you as long as I live;

in your name I will lift up my hands.

5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,

and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,

6 when I remember you upon my bed.



and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

⁷ for you have been my help,

and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.

⁸ My soul clings to you;

your right hand upholds me.

⁹ But those who seek to destroy my life

shall go down into the depths of the earth;

¹⁰ they shall be given over to the power of the sword;

they shall be a portion for jackals.

¹¹ But the king shall rejoice in God;

all who swear by him shall exult,

for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

Use this copy of Psalm 63 to take notes for the entirety of the study. Mark it up and make it your own!

THE RECIPE: COIA



SESSION ONE

PSALM 63

¹ O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth
will praise you with joyful lips,
⁶ when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.
⁹ But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
¹⁰ they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.
¹¹ But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

WATCH

Watch the video and fill in the blanks before transitioning to the Discuss section.

The point of Bible reading is not to kindle God's affection for _____. It's to kindle our affection for _____.

Delight must be propped up by _____.

The Recipe: COIA

C _____

O _____

I _____

A _____

CONTEXT: 5Ws and H

_____, _____, _____, _____, _____, and _____.

OBSERVATION: What does this _____?

The goal is _____.

INTERPRETATION: What does it _____?

APPLICATION: How does this change the way I think and feel?

There are two marks of being a follower of Christ:

1.

2.

DISCUSS

What's something that delights you? (Think "normal person delight," not "spiritual delight.") What's something that's easy for you to do because you like it?

■ READ PSALM 119:97, 103, 127.

How does the psalmist feel about God's Word?

Take a few minutes for private reflection and consider honestly: What's your relationship like with God's Word? Do you understand how to read it in a meaningful way? Do you enjoy it? Journal your thoughts. Afterward, share your reflections about your relationship with God's Word with your group.

(And psst—there's no shame here! God has searched you and knows you (Ps. 139:1), so He has already discerned your honest position here. You are safe to be honest!)

List some reasons you've heard stating why we should study the Bible.

Why do you think we should study the Bible? How did the video help your understanding of this question?

When it comes to Bible reading, whose delight needs work? God's delight in us, or our delight in Him? Explain.

READ EPHESIANS 3:18-19 BELOW.

"And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God" (NLT)

How might this prayer be a helpful one for us to borrow as we seek to learn how to study the Bible and like it?

If you read the intro to this study, you know all about "Biscuit Chicken Cheese" casserole, an unfortunate result of my refusal to be bossed around by recipes. I followed my instincts rather than structure, and let's just say, it didn't do my taste buds any favors.

It can feel backward for a serious thing like structure to be the catalyst for something unserious, like delight, but that's exactly how God designed the world to work. The structure of a recipe is what supports a dinner's potential for deliciousness and delight.

Can you think of something delightful that requires structure?

Have you ever tried to cook without a recipe? How did it go?

Recipes, though they can seem a little bossy at the onset, are actually a wonderful foundation for yummy stuff. This extends beyond food into all kinds of things, particularly Bible reading. When we read the Bible without a recipe, we can wind up with the spiritual equivalent of Biscuit Chicken Cheese Casserole, and though I don't think it will kill you, it may keep you from truly delighting in God's Word.

Do you remember the Bible reading recipe we learned today? Write it here:

Delight
is always
propped up by
STRUCTURE

LET'S TALK ABOUT EACH ELEMENT

CONTEXT

Why does context matter in Bible reading?

Has something you've said ever been repeated to another person out of context?

How did you respond?

OBSERVATION

What's the main goal of observation?

Observation seems simple, but we often skip over it. Why do you think that is?

INTERPRETATION

What's the main goal of interpretation?

Have you ever received a confusing text and spent time wondering, "What does it mean?"

Have your words ever been misinterpreted? What did you do in response?

APPLICATION

What is the main goal of application?

Do you ever notice yourself rushing to application when you read the Bible? Why is it important that this is the last part of the recipe and not the first?

■ READ EPHESIANS 2:8-10. ■

How do these verses help us navigate that justification/sanctification stuff?

Hint: “not a result of works” in verse 9 and “created in Christ Jesus for good works” in verse 10.

■ READ JAMES 1:22. ■

Why does application matter?

Based on what you know about the difference between justification—Jesus exchanging our guilt for His righteousness—and sanctification—God’s active, daily work in moving us to be more like Christ—what’s a good way to apply James 1:22 to daily living?

CLOSING PRAYER

DEAR GOD,

You are our God. We want to earnestly seek You. Thank You that we can seek You through Your words in the Bible.

AMEN.

CLOSING RHYTHM

Read the entire passage aloud together. (I KNOW THIS IS WEIRD. Just be weird.)

DAY 1: CONTEXT

When I choose a book or a passage to study, I like to spend the first day researching context because it sets a great foundation for the rest of the Bible reading process. There are several things you can do to research context, but I like to look in the text itself first. So, let's do that.

Scan Psalm 63. Do you see any clues that help you understand the context? Use the space below to start collecting context information on the 5Ws and H. Don't feel like you have to find everything, and feel free to be as messy as you like on this page. (We'll use the Context Chart on page 28 next week when we deep-dive into context, and you may end up copying a few answers over.) As you search, here's a pro-tip: don't forget the italicized information just below the psalm's title. This is called the superscription, and often the superscription can provide helpful context.

W
WHO

Who wrote it and to whom are they writing?

W
WHAT

What was the world like when it was written (cultural norms, big events, and so on)?

W
WHEN

When did they write it?

W
WHERE

Where was the author when he wrote it? Consider more than just his literal location—perhaps his position in the culture.

W
WHY

Why was it written? What was the purpose for writing it?

H
HOW

How was it written? What genre did the author write it in?

Based on the 5Ws, take a moment to think: Would you read a note from a teacher differently than you'd read a note from your best friend? Would you read a note from a person in prison differently than you'd read a note from a person at Disney World? Would you read a note differently if it was written to someone else versus written specifically to you? Why is it important for us to pay attention to the author, the author's circumstances, the audience, and the audience's circumstances when we read?

This superscription says, "A psalm of David." Most of us have never looked up the word "psalm" because for anyone who has been in church for a while, the word probably seems commonplace. But use an online dictionary like Merriam-Webster to look up this word. Let the definition inform your answer for H.

Why is it important for us, as Christians, to pay attention to when something is a poem or song versus when something is law, like the Ten Commandments?

CLOSING PRAYER

DEAR GOD,

You are our God. We want to earnestly seek You. Thank You that we can seek You through Your words in the Bible. Give us wisdom today as we learn from what David wrote about You thousands of years ago.

AMEN.

CLOSING RHYTHM

Consider David's physical location—a wilderness. Reread Psalm 63 (out loud if you can), and try to understand what it would be like to pen these words in a literal wilderness.

DAY 2: OBSERVATION

Do you ever open your Bible and think, "Okay, it's time to be transformed! Time to be a better human! Time to morph into a super spiritual person! Time to check this off my list so I can avoid guilt! Time to learn a nugget of truth so I won't have a terrible day!"

If you have any of these thoughts when you open your Bible, you're not alone. These are all really normal thoughts.

Take a moment and consider the thoughts you generally have when you open your Bible. Write them below.

Okay, now mentally wad those thoughts up into a ball and toss them in the trash can. For some reason, Bible reading can seem more intense than normal reading. In a way, this demonstrates our conviction that the Bible is special, but it can also get squirrely and prevent us from effectively interacting with the Bible. As I've learned from one of my favorite Bible teachers, Jen Wilkin, the Bible is certainly more than a book, but it's at least a book.¹ I love this thought, because it feels like an invitation to settle down a bit.

For today, I want us to keep all the weird thoughts in the trash, settle down, and simply read a passage of the Bible like we'd read any other passage of writing. Observation means paying attention to the text and asking, "What does this say?"

Read Psalm 63 (out loud, if possible) and make five observations. Don't overthink it—just find things you observe that the text says, such as David is satisfied by the Lord (v. 5).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Guess what? That's it! We'll talk more about observation as we dig deeper into Psalm 63, but for now, remember this: Observation means paying attention to the text and asking, "What does it say?"

CLOSING PRAYER

DEAR GOD,

You are my God. I want to earnestly seek You. Thank You that I can seek You through Your words in the Bible. When I open my Bible, open my eyes and sharpen my mind so that I can pay close attention to Your words and know You better.

AMEN.

CLOSING RHYTHM

Read the entire passage aloud, or listen to a Psalm 63 song. (You can find some of my favorites in the back of this book. I love the way music that includes some or all of the verses helps me effortlessly memorize Scripture!) If you find a song you love, add it to your favorite playlist!

DAY 3: INTERPRETATION

I was once making blueberry muffins, and the recipe said, “Fold the blueberries into the batter.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t know how to fold food unless it’s a taco or something. Blueberries and batter are inherently not foldable, and this conundrum made me want to scream. How does one fold non-foldable food? The question I yelled at the cookbook was, “WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?” (Are you guys getting concerned about me in the kitchen? Prayers up.)

Once again, I was the victim of misinterpretation. I interpreted “fold” to mean the same thing it means when I’m faced with a giant heap of laundry. But in the kitchen, “fold” means “to incorporate (a food ingredient) into a mixture by repeated gentle overturnings without stirring or beating.”² (Side-note: See how context is everything? How “fold” means one thing in the laundry room and another thing in the kitchen?)

Here’s the point: The interpretation part of the recipe is where things can get a little tricky. It’s like detective work. You have to get out a magnifying glass and examine the footprints, searching each one for clues, like “What does this mean?”

Bible interpretation is even stickier than recipe interpretation, because while the distance between a “kitchen fold” and a “laundry room fold” is significant, at least the two rooms share a house and a culture and a language. But the Bible was originally written in a different language than ours by a writer with a different culture than ours to an audience with a different culture than ours. You can see how that might complicate things.

Here’s the thing: I’ve been explaining the COIA recipe as if it’s really simple, but simple doesn’t necessarily mean easy. Scripture often requires some heavy lifting. You will feel the discomfort that a detective must feel before she cracks the case, and you might even feel dumb sometimes, like I did when I thought the cookbook asked me to fold food like laundry. The discomfort and the dumb feeling—those are totally normal. However, in those moments, we get to remember the good news of the gospel—Jesus bore our shame on the cross! God’s affection for us is not wrapped up in how quickly we can understand the Bible. Through the encouragement of the gospel, we get to decide to persevere through the tough stuff.

Close your eyes and picture yourself wearing one of those weird British detective hats like Sherlock Holmes. You are a detective now, except, thank goodness, this is an invisible hat and will not cause you any deep embarrassment.

Now, while you're wearing your imaginary, terrible hat, read Psalm 63 like you'd scan a crime scene and collect evidence. Put a tiny question mark above any place in the text that looks like it needs further investigating. What fingerprints and footprints do you see?

Jot some notes below of the places that intrigue or confuse you:

What verse are you most looking forward to investigating further?

What verse makes you go "HUH?"

You know what? The Bible is hard. God made it that way so we'd lean in close to Him and ask, "What did You mean by that?" He is so awesome that way. We'll take a closer look at every part of this passage in the weeks to come, but for now, you can take off your invisible and unfashionable detective hat. You did it! How do you feel? Confused? Overwhelmed? Itchy because the fake hat is made of wool?

CLOSING PRAYER

DEAR GOD,

You are my God. I want to earnestly seek You. Thank You that I can seek You through Your words in the Bible. Thank You for making everything a little mysterious so that I have to depend on You. I want to know You more!

AMEN.

CLOSING RHYTHM

Read the entire passage aloud, or listen to the Psalm 63 song you found yesterday. (If you didn't have chance, check out some of my favorites listed in the back.) Either way, this repetition is a great way to get the text deep into your bones.

DAY 4: APPLICATION

Congrats! You've gotten to the very last part of the recipe, and we have set approximately zero fires in the proverbial kitchen. The end of the recipe is A, and A is for Application. That means we come to it and ask, "How should this change the way I think or live?"

Because we live in a world addicted to New Year's Resolutions, self-help books, and social media accounts so shiny they hurt our eyes and wither our souls, I want to always remind you of the gospel when we get to the application part of the recipe. Remember: God is more concerned with our true nearness to Him than with our outward appearance of nearness to Him. He is a good parent, who is always going to simultaneously invite you deeper into relationship as He invites you into deeper obedience. Think about this:


What would it be like to have a parent-child relationship that requires obedience but does not invite relationship?

What would it be like to have a parent-child relationship that invites relationship but does not require obedience?

Darling girl, you are loved by the God of the universe who, unbelievably, offers us a sacred thing: membership into His family. Family is just about the most precious thing that God created, and that's what He extends to you through Jesus!

Here's how I like to think of it: God is so all-knowing that it's as if our entire souls have been scanned like a carry-on bag at the airport. He's seen every nook and cranny of our souls, every sin, every desire, every yucky thing about us that even we aren't aware of. He knew we could never make our way to Him on our own—our sin was too heavy. So He came to us. He took on flesh and entered the world the same way we did: as a baby. He endured trials and temptations but responded differently than we did: sinlessly. Then He took our sin and shame and died like a criminal on our behalf. We were the true criminals. But when Jesus died on the cross, this sacrifice was sufficient payment for our criminality—every big and small sin hiding in the crevices of our souls, spewing from our mouths, lurking in our hearts. But Jesus' death did more than pay for the sins—it was also an invitation from the Lord: Be my daughter.

Do you see? We obey not because God is a meanie who likes to control us. We obey because He is our good Father who spared nothing to save us, who knows we are criminals in our hearts, but insists upon offering us a seat at His table. Can you believe it? Is there anyone else like Him? No!



As you consider what change a passage should bring about in your life, always remember this gospel story. Otherwise, you are at risk of reading Scripture and thinking you can save yourself by hustling and making yourself into God's image using your own strength. That's not how this works. We read God's Word and humbly ask, "God, how do You want this to change me?" And we let God have access to whatever He wants. We work in partnership with Him by surrendering our wants for His will, day by day, in millions of tiny choices. Then we look in the mirror one wonderful day and we think with joy, "Hey, I'm more like Jesus than I was."

For today, let's do a small but mighty bit of application. Read the first part of verse one, and fill in the missing words below:

"O God, you are _____ God."

The first several times I read this passage, I overlooked this small word. But thanks to the "O" part of the recipe, I remembered to slow down and pay attention. When I noticed the "my," my brain immediately went into the second part of the recipe "I" and thought, "Wow! That is such an intimate phrasing. Why did David start his psalm this way?"

We'll wrestle with that more in the days to come, but for now, I want you to remember the gospel story and ask yourself a crucial application question:

Is God your God? Do you relate to this personal relationship that David clearly has with God?

Take some time to process your relationship with God, and share a bit about it in the space below.

CLOSING PRAYER

Write your own closing prayer today. Feel free to borrow language from Psalm 63 if you can't find the words.

DEAR GOD,

AMEN.

CLOSING RHYTHM

Read the entire passage aloud, or listen to the Psalm 63 song you found earlier this week. Either way, this repetition is a great way to get the text deep into your bones.

If you didn't have a chance, check out some of my favorites at the back of the book.