FOLLOWING JESUS

BOOK 2

Establish

Strong Foundations



Pastor Richmond Kobe

FOLLOWING JESUS

Book 2: Establish

Strong Foundations

Chapters 9–18

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The stories in this book are composites. Names and details have been changed, and they do not describe any one real person.

This book is not a substitute for emergency, medical, legal or professional help. If you or someone else is in danger, see "Safety and Support: Start Here" at the back of this book.

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Starting Book 2: Establish

Welcome to the second stage of the pathway. Book 1 helped you begin: the gospel, new life in Christ, and first steps in Scripture, prayer and church. Book 2 asks a deeper question:

> **What do Christians believe, and how does that truth shape life?**

Over the next ten chapters, we will look at the Bible, God, creation and sin, Jesus, salvation, the Holy Spirit, baptism and the Lord's Supper, prayer and worship, the church, and Christian hope.

Some subjects return from Book 1, but now we go further. You will be told where you first met them. In Book 1, Chapter 6, for example, you began reading the Bible each day. In this chapter, you will learn to understand and apply it more carefully.

If you are starting with Book 2, you are very welcome. Please read Book 1, Chapter 1 first; it explains the gospel, which everything else builds on. Each chapter works the same way as in Book 1: one real question, four central truths, one main passage, a short story, simple practices and a seven-day reading plan. As before, every practice is an invitation, not a test, and no one will ask you to read aloud, pray aloud or share your personal story. Support Pages for urgent help are at the back of this book; Life Guides, which go deeper into particular situations, are in a separate Life Guides booklet.

CHAPTER 9

The Bible: Understanding and Applying God's Word

> *People quote the Bible to prove very different things. How can I understand what a passage really means?*

You may have noticed something confusing. People who all say they believe the Bible sometimes use it to prove very different things. One preacher quotes a verse to promise wealth; another quotes the Bible to warn against loving money. Someone sends you a verse on social media that seems to say exactly what they already believed. How can you tell what a passage really means?

In Book 1, Chapter 6, you learned a simple daily method: **Pray · Read or listen · Notice and ask · Pray it back.** This chapter slows down the "Notice and ask" step. It gives you four questions to help you understand a passage carefully and apply it faithfully.

The short answer

Read carefully, read in context, read with Jesus at the centre, and read with God's people.

> **The Bible is God's trustworthy word. We understand a passage by noticing what it says, asking what it meant in its original setting, seeing where it points in the whole story that leads to Jesus, and then asking how we should respond today.**

The four questions	In a few words
1. What It Says	Observe carefully before deciding what it means
2. What It Meant	Ask what it meant in its original setting
3. Where It Points	See how it fits into the whole story that leads to Jesus
4. How We Respond	Ask what faithful response looks like now

What Christians believe about the Bible

Before learning how to study, it helps to know what the church has believed about Scripture through the centuries.

The Bible is **breathed out by God** (2 Timothy 3:16) and written by human authors. Peter says that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). So the Bible has real human writers, with their own languages and styles, and it is also God's word.

Because Scripture is God's word, it is **trustworthy** and carries God's authority for what we believe and how we live.

Its main message, salvation through Jesus Christ, is **clear enough for ordinary people** to understand. "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). This does not mean that every passage is equally easy. Peter admitted that some things in Paul's letters "are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). And sincere Christians do not agree about every interpretation.

So we read the Bible **with prayer**, asking the Holy Spirit to help us, as Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). And we read it **both personally and with God's people**.

Read it for yourself: Nehemiah 8:1–8

Read or listen to Nehemiah 8:1–8, preferably twice.

About five hundred years before Jesus, many of God's people returned to Jerusalem after years of exile in Babylon. They rebuilt the city walls. Then they gathered in a public square to hear God's law read aloud. Ezra the priest read "from early morning until midday", and "the ears of all the people were attentive" (Nehemiah 8:3).

But reading alone was not enough. Teachers called Levites moved among the crowd:

> "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8)

Notice two things that belong together: **the word itself**, read clearly, and **help to understand it**. God gives his people teachers and a community in which Scripture can be examined carefully (Ephesians 4:11–14). We read the Bible personally, but not as though no other believer could ever question or correct our understanding.

Later, in the book of Acts, the believers in Berea were praised because "they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). They listened eagerly to Paul, and then they checked what he said against Scripture. That is a healthy pattern for us too.

1. What It Says

The first question is simply: **what does the passage actually say?** It is surprising how often we decide what a verse means before we have read it carefully.

Slow down and notice:

- Who is speaking, and to whom?
- What happens, or what is being said?
- Which words or ideas are repeated?

- What comes before and after?

That last question matters most. A single verse lifted out of its paragraph can be made to say almost anything. Read the whole paragraph, and if you can, the whole chapter.

2. What It Meant

The second question is: **what did this passage mean in its original setting?** Who first received it? What was happening? What would its words have communicated then? The Bible was written in real places, to real people, long ago. Before we ask what it means for us, we ask what it meant there.

Two things help here.

Notice the kind of writing. The Bible contains stories, poems, laws, prophecies, wise sayings, letters and parables. We read each kind differently. A poem may use pictures that are not meant literally. A proverb tells us what is usually wise, not what is guaranteed in every case. A story may report what people did without saying it was right.

Tell apart description, command and lasting significance.

- **Description:** what happened. The Bible honestly records sin, failure and cruelty. Not everything it describes is approved by God or meant to be copied.
- **Command:** what God told particular people to do, in a particular covenant and setting.
- **Lasting significance:** what this passage teaches God's people beyond its original setting, especially as we read it in the light of Christ and the whole Bible. It may reveal something about God's character, human sin, God's promises and their fulfilment, wisdom, warning or hope, not only a rule to follow.

For example, God told Israel to build a wooden ark for his covenant (a command for them at that time). We do not build arks, but we learn that God was present with his people and that they were to treat his presence with reverence (lasting significance).

3. Where It Points

The third question is: **how does this passage fit into the whole story of the Bible?** As we saw in Book 1, Chapter 6, the Bible tells one great story that finds its centre in Jesus. After his resurrection, Jesus explained to his disciples "that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

This does not mean forcing Jesus into every detail of every verse. It means asking: How does this passage connect to God's promises? How does it relate to the gospel? What does it show about life as God's people in Christ?

Asking this question also protects us from mistakes. Paul writes that the Old Testament was "written for our instruction" (Romans 15:4), but we read it as people who live after Jesus has come.

4. How We Respond

Only after the first three questions do we ask: **how should we respond?** James warns against hearing without doing (James 1:22). Bible study is not finished until it shapes how we trust, think, speak and live.

A response might be:

- one truth to believe;
- one action to take;
- one prayer to pray;
- or one question to carry.

The key is this: **application flows from the meaning, not from what we wish a verse said.** If we skip the first three questions, we often end up using the Bible to support what we already wanted. Paul urged Timothy to be "a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Christians differ

- **Words used to describe the Bible.** Some churches use words such as "inerrant" or "infallible" to describe the Bible, and they define these words in different ways. This course does not build its teaching on any one of these terms. It keeps to what the Bible says about itself: it is "breathed out by God" (2 Timothy 3:16); "your word is truth" (John 17:17); and God's word "shall not return to me empty" (Isaiah 55:11).
- **How Old Testament law applies today.** From Scripture, Christians agree that the Old Testament is God's word; that Jesus came "not to abolish… but to fulfil" the law (Matthew 5:17); that some commands, such as the food laws and the animal sacrifices, are fulfilled in Christ (Mark 7:19; Hebrews 10:1–14); and that the Old Testament still instructs God's people (Romans 15:4). Churches differ over how some particular commandments apply today. In each case, ask what the passage meant in its original setting and how it is fulfilled in Christ.

Ask a trustworthy church leader how the church approaches these matters, and compare what you hear with Scripture.

See it in real life: Rosa's story

Rosa's story is a composite drawn from the experiences of many people. It is not a documented testimony.

Rosa runs a small sewing business in Lima and attends a women's Bible group at her church. For years she kept a card on her sewing machine with Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." She believed it promised that her business would grow if she had enough faith. When sales fell, she felt confused and ashamed.

One evening, the group leader asked them to read Philippians 4:10–13 using the four questions. Rosa noticed verse 11 for the first time:

> "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." (Philippians 4:11)

The group talked about the setting. Paul was writing from prison, thanking a church for a gift. He had known both plenty and hunger.

"So 'all things' includes being hungry," Rosa said slowly. "It's about strength to be faithful in any situation. It isn't a promise of success."

Rosa's business is still struggling, and she is still praying and working hard. But she has a new card on her machine, with Philippians 4:11–13, and she now encourages the other women to read verses in their setting.

Her experience is common in every culture. Many believers have been taught favourite verses without their context, and learning to read carefully brings both truth and freedom.

Pause and seek help

Be careful of any group or leader who claims that only they can interpret the Bible, that it has secret meanings only they can unlock, or that you must not read it for yourself or ask questions. Healthy teachers help people read Scripture for themselves and welcome questions (Acts 17:11). If this is happening to you, seek help outside that group, and see the Support Page "I am being controlled through prophecy, spiritual language, money or church authority" (at the back of this book).

Some Bible passages describe violence, abuse or great suffering, and reading them can bring painful memories to the surface. Do not assume that every violent act recorded in Scripture is approved by God; much of it is reported as a warning. You may pause, leave a passage for now, and talk with someone you trust. If a verse keeps frightening you about your salvation, return to Book 1, Chapter 5 and speak with a wise pastor.

What understanding the Bible is not

- **"Bible study is only for scholars."** The four questions are for everyone. Listening counts fully.
- **"Every verse is a personal promise for me to claim today."** Some promises were made to particular people. Ask what the passage meant first.
- **"Everything the Bible describes, God approves."** The Bible honestly records sin. Tell description, command and lasting significance apart.
- **"If I pray, my first interpretation must be right."** Prayer is essential, but test your understanding by the passage itself, the rest of Scripture and wise counsel.
- **"I don't need anyone else to help me understand."** God gives teachers and a community. Read personally, but not alone.
- **"Only our leader can tell us what the Bible means."** Healthy teachers help people read for themselves and welcome questions.
- **"Hard passages should be hidden or ignored."** Name them honestly, and seek wise help.

If you are still exploring

Studying a passage carefully is one of the best ways to examine what Christianity actually teaches. You are welcome to use the four questions on any passage, ask hard questions, and see what you find. No one will ask you to say publicly whether you have become a Christian.

Remember

Read carefully, read in context, read with Jesus at the centre, and read with God's people.

1. **What It Says:** observe carefully; read what comes before and after.
2. **What It Meant:** ask what it meant in its original setting; tell description, command and lasting significance apart.
3. **Where It Points:** see how it fits into the whole story that leads to Jesus.
4. **How We Respond:** one truth to believe, action to take, prayer to pray, or question to carry; application flows from the meaning.

Practices

Practise it now. Read or listen to Philippians 4:10–13. Study it with the four questions, and write one short line for each. You can use the book to help.

Question	My words
What It Says	
What It Meant	
Where It Points	
How We Respond	

Private reflection (optional). Think of one verse you have heard used often. Read the whole chapter around it. Does its meaning change when you see its setting?

Live it this week. Read or listen through Philippians using the seven-day plan below, so that you meet each verse in its setting. Each day, use the four questions on one paragraph. If you miss a day, continue with the next passage or return when you can.

Talk about it (with your group, a mentor or a friend, if you wish)

1. Why do people sometimes use the same Bible to prove very different things?
2. In Nehemiah 8:7–8, what did the Levites do, and why did it matter?
3. Which of the four questions do you think people most often skip? Why? Share your own experience only if you wish.

Look outward. If it is appropriate and safe, share with a trusted person one thing you discovered by reading a passage in its setting. If sharing is not safe, think about what you would say, or talk about it privately with your mentor.

Looking back. In Chapter 11, Chapter 14 and Book 3, Chapter 20, you will look back at What It Says, What It Meant, Where It Points, How We Respond, and use the four questions on that chapter's main passage. Use the book if you wish. This is a learning exercise, not a test.

After each practice, choose one response: I completed this · I will return to it · This is not appropriate or safe for me · I need support.

If you are still exploring: you are welcome to take part in every practice. When you share, you may begin, "This is how Christians read the Bible." No one will ask you to say publicly whether you have become a Christian.

Seven-day reading plan (read or listen): the letter to the Philippians

Day	Passage	One paragraph: what I noticed
☐ 1	Philippians 1:1–11	
☐ 2	Philippians 1:12–26	
☐ 3	Philippians 1:27–2:11	
☐ 4	Philippians 2:12–30	
☐ 5	Philippians 3:1–11	
☐ 6	Philippians 3:12–4:1	
☐ 7	Philippians 4:2–23, then look back over the whole letter	