

Opening the Letter

A Study of the Bible as God's Love Letter

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The Author

Have you ever received a love letter? If you receive a love letter, how does it make you feel? How do you read it? What do you do with it? What difference does it make in your life? The answers to those questions depend on who it's from, of course. But if the writer is someone you care about, you will pour over each word of the letter, soaking up every detail, maybe looking for meaning between the lines. You will read it again and again, treasure it, save it, and think about it even when you're not reading it. Not only that, but the words can have impact and make a difference in your life.

What is your impression of the Bible? An oppressive list of dos and don'ts? Simply a collection of history, stories, teachings, and parables? Or perhaps a directions-for-living manual?

Have you ever considered that it may be the greatest love letter ever written?

As a love letter, the Bible is meant to enthrall us, to woo us. It invites us not only to read it again and again, but also to put energy into understanding what it means, to hide the words in our heart, to have it change our lives.

Now consider these opening questions about love letters in regards to the Bible:

Who is it from? Someone you've never heard of? Someone you've seen around but don't know? Perhaps someone you are a little suspicious of, or don't even like at all? Someone you love & long for but who is away? Or maybe the love of your life, leaving you sweet notes throughout the day?

What do you do with this letter? Toss it out? Burn it? Put it in a drawer and forget about it? Store it in a treasure box to take out and reread occasionally? Carry it with you in your pocket always? While it's still in your hand, run to the one who wrote it to you and embrace?

Of course, the answer to the second set of questions (what do you do?) depends a lot on the answer to the first (who sent it to you?). The Bible is God's word to us. What is your understanding of God? In case we don't really know Him, God tells us and shows us a great deal about Himself in His letter.

Who wrote the Bible?

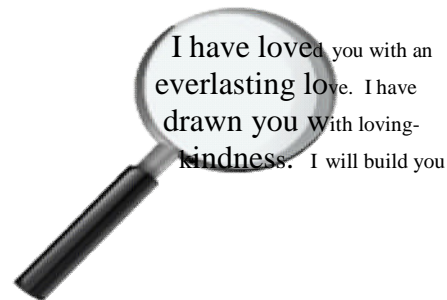
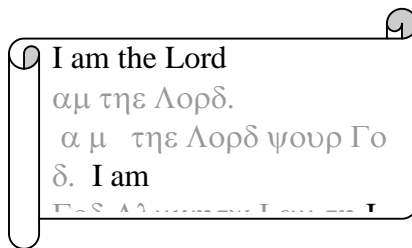
The Bible is actually a collection of books¹; some describe history, some contain poetry, some are letters. It was written by many human authors during a period of well-over a thousand years. However, ultimately, God is the author of the Bible, inspiring the writers who each wrote in their own language and style.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. II Timothy 3:16 (NASB)

OK, so God is the author of this letter. Well, who is God? He wants us to have an understanding of who He is, so He reveals Himself to us. The Bible tells us a lot about God's attributes and His character as we see how He acts in certain situations. It also includes some different names people use for God that offer insight into who He is.

The focus for this chapter is to look at who God calls Himself. It includes a representative list of passages where God says, "I am He who..."

One important note about our study: it is usually important to interpret each phrase of the Bible in context. This study, however, is a broad overview of the Bible. Imagine the Bible as being written on a scroll. Sometimes we will be quickly scrolling along and summarizing huge sections with only a sentence or two. Most of the time we will be focusing in on a passage, examining it in more detail. It is my prayer that this overview will help you better understand the framework of the Bible. That being said, be aware that this first lesson does pull verses out of context. The purpose here is not to understand the exact circumstances of the passage, but to get a general feel for how God defines Himself.



¹The books of the Bible each have a name, such as Genesis, Isaiah, or Philippians, which indicate what the book is about, who wrote it, or to whom it was written. The books are broken up into chapters and the chapters into verses. So, for example, the very first verse of Genesis is called Genesis 1:1. The 16th verse of the 3rd chapter of the book of John is John 3:16. The Old Testament contains the books written before the birth of Jesus Christ, and the New Testament contains those written after his birth.

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The Bible expresses a God who is very relational. In it, we see God as Father, healer, judge, betrothed/lover, deliverer, teacher, provider, creator, master, and more. Jesus is our friend, brother, betrothed, servant, master, teacher, and healer. And we, who once were aliens and slaves, are friends, servants, children of God, saints, brides of Christ, spiritual letters, and Christ's ambassadors.

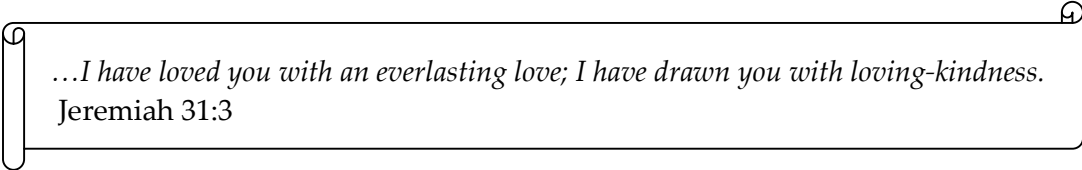
One aspect of God's character that He reveals to us is that He is a jealous God. "Jealousy" is not usually considered a good trait, but God doesn't use it in the petty way we often understand it to mean. Instead, it is a measure of His love and passion for us, in that He expects faithfulness, like monogamy between a husband and wife.

So, what is your response to God? It could vary from withdrawal, to irritation, or to elation that you're loved, and to transformation. What difference will His letter make in your life? My prayer is that you will read it with an open mind and heart. Honestly engaging with the Bible, especially in the healthy small group setting, can be a source of life transformation.

The Bible includes words of love and affirmation, exhortation and encouragement, correction and calling. It is a story of history (the past) and hope (the future), and speaks to us in the present as well.

God knows all about us and loves and accepts us anyway. He knows (even if we don't) what our shortcomings are and what we lack, and He can provide what is deficient, even to the point of saving our lives from the consequences of our rebelliousness. God is faithful even when we are not.

God is excited about you! And He wants you to know Him and love Him, too. My prayer is that you will get to know Him better through this study.



...I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.
Jeremiah 31:3

The Chosen

The first five books of the Old Testament are called “The Law” or “Torah.” They tell the history of God calling a people to be His own and include the Law that God gave Moses. The subsequent books continue narrating the history of God’s people. These are followed by poetry and proverbs. The last part of the Old Testament is “The Prophets” which includes more history as well as prophecy.

The first four books of the New Testament, called “The Gospels”, give historical accounts of the life of Jesus by four different authors and are followed by the book of Acts, a history of the early church. Most of the New Testament consists of Epistles, letters written to various churches or individuals. Finally, Revelations is a book of prophecy written by the apostle John in the first century.

Genesis 1-11 starts at the very beginning of time and sets the stage for God calling a people to be His own.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." Genesis 1:26

Man was created to be in loving relationship with God. However, as Genesis 3 relates, rather than living in obedience to God, man chose independence from Him (this is sin). Man’s rebellion resulted in him hiding from God in fear and in his separation from God.

Man’s wickedness leads to the story of Noah’s ark (Genesis 5) and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Genealogies in these first chapters indicate there were those who “walked in wickedness” but there were also those who “walked with God” and “called upon the name of the Lord”.

This brings us to Genesis 12, “The call of Abram.” Study questions are on the next page.

A note on this study: as you answer the “Questions for the text,” be sure to look to the text for the answers. Start with the actual words in the text, and then add additional observations from the passage, if appropriate. You may make note of other passages of scripture that speak to the question, but focus on the assigned passage. Try to avoid answering these questions based on what you have heard before or what you think the answers might be.

However, as you answer the “Questions for you,” allow yourself to reflect on the passage and the questions, and give your own personal answers. In Bible study, it is important to let the Bible speak for itself (as in the “Questions for the text”) and then to let it speak to you (as in the “Questions for you”).

You are Chosen
Genesis 11:26-12:9
Study Questions

Read Genesis 11:26-12:9. It may be helpful to underline repeated words and phrases.

Questions for the text:

1. Abram is first mentioned in Genesis 11:26. Carefully read Genesis 11:26-12:3. According to the passage, what qualifications did Abram have – why would God chose him?

2. List the elements of God's command to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.

List the elements of God's promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.

3. According to Genesis 12:4-9, which of these elements happened soon after God's command and promise?
4. What was Abram's response according to 12:4-9?
5. What was the problem (11:30) Abram faced regarding one of God's promises (12:2)?
6. Read Genesis 21:1-7 and Exodus 1:8-9. Consider the time frame of the fulfillment of part of God's promise.

Questions for you:

1. Do you ever feel undeserving of God's favor? Do you ever feel you are deserving of His honor? In what ways? How does His apparently unmerited choosing of Abram affect your attitude?
2. Have you experienced God's promise of blessing?
3. When have you experienced the fulfillment of God's promise? When have you had to wait for God? Does seeing the delay in the fulfillment of the promise to Abram frustrate you?
4. What is your response to God's promise? If you were Abram, how would you feel?
5. What problem are you facing now that makes your situation seem hopeless or impossible?
6. How does the story of Abram receiving God's promise and faithfully waiting for its fulfillment encourage you?

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country...and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

God changed Abram's name to Abraham when He established His covenant with Abraham expanding on His previous promise.

"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." Genesis 17:5-7

Lesson 10 will cover this covenant in more detail.

Look at all the mentions of Abram up to God's original promise (Genesis 11:26-12:9). What does it say about Abrams' accomplishments or character? Nothing! Nowhere here is there any indication that he deserved any special treatment from God. God chose Abram out of his own volition, not because of any merit on Abram's part. He chose him for a purpose (to father a people to be a blessing, who would be a witness of God to the world, and from whom would come the Messiah).

What does this have to do with us?

In addition to telling the history of a people, the Old Testament is a often picture of New Testament spiritual realities. The New Testament tells us:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:26-29

Paul tells us that all those who believe in Christ are adopted into God's family. All God's promises to the Israelites are therefore promises for those of us who believe as well.

What does it mean that we are chosen? Not because of any qualifications on our part.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

What is the purpose indicated for God's choosing Abram? *"I will bless you... you will be a blessing."* For what purpose are we chosen? We are blessed, but it's not all for our own benefit! We too are called to be a blessing and a witness to the world.

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
1 Peter 2:9*