

BUTS OF THE BIBLE

**Biblical Characters and
the Crossroads of Life**

Booklet 1

**Genesis -
Deuteronomy**



BUTS OF THE BIBLE

BIBLICAL CHARACTERS AND THE CROSSROADS OF LIFE

BOOKLET 1

This study booklet for the *Buts of the Bible* small-group study is published by the Biblical Counseling Foundation, Inc. (BCF), a non-profit, non-stock corporation founded in 1974 and incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia, USA, in 1977. A *Leader's Guide* is also available as a companion to this study booklet.

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	<i>content</i>	<i>page</i>
	INTRODUCTION	VII
LESSON 1	“BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY” Where It All Starts (from Ephesians 2:4)	1
LESSON 2	“BUT FROM THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL” Dealing with Temptation (from Genesis 2:17)	9
LESSON 3	“BUT FOR CAIN AND HIS OFFERING” A Lesson on False Spirituality (from Genesis 4:5)	17
LESSON 4	“BUT NOAH FOUND FAVOR” Living Righteously When It’s Not Popular (from Genesis 6:8)	27
LESSON 5	“BUT THROUGH THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH” When Our Faith is Tested Like Abraham’s (from Romans 4:13)	35
LESSON 6	“YET THE CHIEF CUPBEARER DID NOT REMEMBER JOSEPH” A Lesson on Unfairness (from Genesis 40:23)	45
LESSON 7	“BUT GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD” A Lesson on Forgiveness (from Genesis 50:20)	53
LESSON 8	“BUT MOSES SAID TO GOD, ‘WHO AM I?’” How God Gets Our Attention (from Exodus 3:11)	61
LESSON 9	“NEVERTHELESS THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE LAND ARE STRONG” A Lesson on Conquering Fear (from Numbers 13:28)	71
	The <i>Leader’s Guide</i> for Booklet 1 is available as a free download from the BCF website	

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF THE *BUTS OF THE BIBLE* SERIES

Welcome to the *Buts of the Bible* small-group study, published by the Biblical Counseling Foundation. BCF has been producing biblically-based discipleship and counseling materials and training since 1974. Like BCF's other materials, the *Buts of the Bible* study is designed to provide churches and individuals with in-depth life-application of God's Word.

Buts of the Bible is BCF's first series of character studies. Here we focus on individuals from both the Old and New Testaments, looking at their circumstances, struggles, temptations, spiritual defeats, and victories. This study does not examine every detail about a biblical character. Instead, the emphasis is on major events, decisions, or crossroads in their lives. From this, we will draw practical application for our own lives.

Whether they are regarded as spiritual giants or lesser-known figures, these biblical characters were still human and remarkably similar to us. We are separated by thousands of years, and the context of their situations may be different. Yet we share the same struggles and temptations, and face similar decisions. That's what makes this study so powerful. The biblical lessons they learned (or didn't learn) are relevant and applicable to our lives today.

There are three studies in this series: two sets of "buts" for the Old Testament and one set of "buts" for the New Testament. Each booklet contains nine lessons designed to span nine weeks. However, some lessons have additional material, so you can go longer if you choose.

The lessons are a fill-in-the-blank format, with descriptive background information, Scriptures to look up, and questions to answer. While this study was designed for small groups like home Bible studies, Sunday School classes, or discipleship groups, you can easily go through it on your own as well.

WHY IS IT CALLED *BUTS OF THE BIBLE*?

When we read through an account in the Bible, we can often overlook a small word like “but.” However, in many cases, this little word can be an indication that something big is happening. For the biblical characters we will study, the word translated “but” (or similar phrase) often marks a turning point or a choice the character made. This word can be revealing in our own lives as well. Let’s look at a few examples of how we use the word “but” today. We might use it:

- As a statement of resolve (“Charlie lost a leg, but he never complained.”)
- To express a choice (“I know I would save money if I didn’t report my tips, but I have to be honest.”)
- To justify our behavior (“But Johnny did it to me first.”)
- To procrastinate (“It’s getting late, but I can play one more game before I start studying.”)
- To make excuses (“I know it was due, but you didn’t give me enough time!”)
- As a warning (“This pill will help you, but only take one a day”)

The word “but” helps us to see change of direction or contrast in circumstance, in character, or in action. To illustrate, let’s look at one contrast in *Ephesians 2*.

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (verse 1) “... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ ...” (verses 4-5)

The “but” in *verse 4* highlights the stark contrast between our helpless state and God’s character of love and mercy. We will observe many more of these types of “buts” in this series, and you will be amazed at how much we can learn in looking at these pivotal moments. How did the biblical characters respond to what God commanded? What does this show us about God Himself and our relationship with Him today? What set these characters apart from the people around them? The answers to these questions will supply practical applications for the situations we face in our own lives.

Note on translation of the word “but”: In the Old Testament, the Hebrew language did not use a specific word for “but.” However, the idea is conveyed and translated for us in English (or whichever language you are using). In the New Testament, the Greek words *alla* and *de* are often translated “but,” though other versions might translate them as “nevertheless,” “however,” “on the contrary,” “rather,” “yet,” “now,” or “and.” No matter how it is translated, the contrast is still conveyed. It is the idea the “but” represents that we will focus on. The dilemmas encountered and the choices these biblical characters made can be understood in the same way.

May God use His timeless Word to help you walk more closely with Him.

LESSON 1

“BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY” - WHERE IT ALL STARTS - (FROM EPHESIANS 2:4)

Before we give some background on the *Buts of the Bible* study, take a few minutes to ponder the following question:

In what ways do you think people today are similar to or different from the way they were in biblical times? Your answers can cover a range of topics, but make sure you include differences or similarities in attitudes and actions. Your group may also discuss the reasons for your answers.

HOW DO YOU THINK THEY ARE SIMILAR?	HOW DO YOU THINK THEY ARE DIFFERENT?
1.	

We will address this question a little later in this lesson.

ABOUT THE *BUTS OF THE BIBLE* SERIES

The *Buts of the Bible* series is a small-group or personal study of both Old and New Testament characters. Each lesson will focus on one character (or group of characters). Rather than looking at their entire story, this study focuses on particular events or crossroads in their lives. We will look at their examples with a view toward practical application to our lives today.

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

The study is in workbook format with Scripture passages to read and questions to answer. These will lead you through the biblical characters' circumstances and will challenge you to think about similar decisions or situations in your life. If you are new to studying the Bible, your group leader and fellow participants will help you. The questions are easy to answer, so don't be intimidated.

If you are studying as a group, normally you will go through each lesson together, taking turns reading Scripture passages and answering questions. As an option, you can study the lessons individually before gathering, and focus on the highlights when you meet as a group. The lessons are designed to be a little over an hour long, but could last longer, depending on how much discussion you have.

Following Lesson 1, the first Old Testament booklet contains the following lessons:

- Lesson 2 — “But from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” — Dealing with Temptation (from Genesis 2:17)
- Lesson 3 — “But for Cain and His Offering” — A Lesson on False Spirituality (from Genesis 4:5)
- Lesson 4 — “But Noah Found Favor” — Living Righteously When It's Not Popular (from Genesis 6:8)
- Lesson 5 — “But through the Righteousness of Faith” — When Our Faith is Tested Like Abraham's (from Romans 4:13)
- Lesson 6 — “Yet the Chief Cupbearer Did Not Remember Joseph” — A Lesson on Unfairness (from Genesis 40:23)
- Lesson 7 — “But God Meant It for Good” — A Lesson on Forgiveness (from Genesis 50:20)
- Lesson 8 — “But Moses Said to God, ‘Who Am I?’” — How God Gets Our Attention (from Exodus 3:11)
- Lesson 9 — “Nevertheless the People Who Live in the Land Are Strong” — A Lesson on Conquering Fear (from Numbers 13:28)

INTRODUCTION

But

Just read through any book or magazine, and you will find liberal use of that potent little word. We use the word “but” throughout our daily conversations and usually don't even think about it. Yet that little word speaks volumes. It reveals a great deal about our view of the world, our view of God, of others, and of ourselves.

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

Think of different ways we use the word “but.” Write down at least two example statements and describe how the word “but” is used. Your group leader will ask for volunteers to share their examples.

2.

“But” also serves as a descriptive word in the Bible, as it can reveal a pivotal moment. There is a great deal we can learn from both Old Testament and New Testament characters when we look at these points in their lives. They may not have used the same wording, but the idea is conveyed to us from the original languages to show:

- A contrast in attitude or action,
- Choices that biblical characters faced,
- The resolve they had in difficult situations, and
- Excuses that they sometimes gave.

We will observe biblical characters as they struggled with whether to choose a godly path, as they sought to overcome difficult circumstances, and as they interacted with others. When we look at the contrasts and pivotal points in their lives, we will see that *they were very much like us*. Their situations and responses will teach us about the decisions we face in our own lives and how we can apply God’s word within those situations.

This is why there is great value in biblical character studies. *Romans 15:4* sums this up very succinctly: “*For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*” We trust that you will truly be encouraged and see the hope that these biblical lessons from earlier times can bring. So let’s get started.

MAN’S CHARACTER AND GOD’S WISDOM

Let’s go back to that first question about similarities and differences between biblical times and today. Certainly, there are cultural differences. We have also seen dramatic advances in transportation, communications, agriculture, medicine, technology, and many other aspects of life. But God’s Word shows us that people’s struggles, weaknesses, and responses to the situations of life have not changed. This is true regardless of culture, historical timing, age or gender. The circumstances and situations might look a little different, but the human heart is remarkably still the same.

For example, read the passages listed below. As you read, identify the characteristics (attitudes and behaviors) that are similar to what we see today. The first one is done for you, but you should look it up so you can understand the situation.

LESSON 1

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

BIBLICAL SITUATION	ATTITUDE OR BEHAVIOR EXHIBITED IN THE SITUATION
3. <i>Joshua 7:1</i>	<i>Greed, stealing, deceit</i>
<i>Numbers 14:1-4</i>	
<i>2 Samuel 11:2-4</i>	
<i>James 2:2-4</i>	

All of these are the same things we deal with today. Pride, selfishness, lust, hate, fear, anger, murder, and many other sins and temptations have been with us from the beginning. None of them is a surprise to God. Just as He knew the biblical characters we will study, He knows our hearts and He knows exactly what we struggle with (for additional background on this, read *1 Samuel 16:7*, *Psalms 139:23*, *Jeremiah 11:20*, and *Romans 8:27* on your own). In fact, since He is our Creator, He knows us even better than we know ourselves.

Read *Hebrews 4:12-13*. What does this tell you about God and His Word?

4.

Many people might think that having nothing hidden from God's sight is a scary thing, and it can be. But why should this also give a believer hope?

5.

Because God made us and knows everything about us — our character, our hearts, our thoughts — this gives us all the more reason to seek His wisdom and insight. This study is not about our own opinions or collective human wisdom, but rather about what we can learn from God Himself, as He has revealed through the Scriptures. What does God say in *Isaiah 55:8-11* about God's thoughts, His ways, and His Word?

6. *His thoughts:*

His ways:

His Word:

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

Everything God wants us to know about living is recorded in the Bible. God's Word is the most powerful source of wisdom available to us; so in seeking answers to the questions of life, we must always ask, "What does God say about that?"

THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL "BUT" OF ALL

Before we look at biblical characters starting in Lesson 2, let's first cover the most important "but" in our spiritual lives. It has to do with our relationship with the Lord, as this relationship is foundational and necessary before we put anything else into practice.

God wants to have a loving father/child relationship with each of us. However there is a problem. Every single one of us has gone our own way. Our sin separates us from Him. But God gives us hope — a way to restore that relationship. Let's look at a couple of verses that illustrate this further. Turn to *Romans 6:23*. What does the first part of the verse tell you?

7.

Think about the word "wages." What picture is it giving here?

8.

In the next phrase we see one of the great "buts" of the Bible, contrasting death with eternal life. What else does it contrast?

9.

The result of our sin is a spiritual separation from God. We deserve death, but God freely gives us eternal life through Jesus Christ. To do this, God had to deal with the issue of our sin. To see how He did this, turn to *Isaiah 53:6* and summarize the verse below.

10.

BUT

In the Old Testament, the Jewish people expressed their faith in God's forgiveness of sin through animal sacrifices. The sins of the people would be symbolically placed on an animal such as an unblemished lamb. This animal became the substitute for the people. Following the same pattern, *Isaiah 53:6* says that God would cause our sins to be placed on Jesus, who is the Messiah spoken of in this passage. While the animal sacrifices were temporary, Jesus would be the ultimate and permanent substitute for us. For further study about Jesus as our sacrifice and substitute, you can read *John 1:29*, as well as *Hebrews 7:27; 9:12, 28*, and *10:10* on your own.

LESSON 1

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

We find another great contrasting “but” in *Romans 5:6-8*. Summarize the contrast expressed by the “but” in *verse 8*.

11. *We were*

But God

This is a powerful example of love. God had to deal with our sin completely; He couldn't just brush it aside. So when He provided a permanent substitute, the substitute had to die in our place. When Jesus died on the cross, He accomplished everything we needed to restore our relationship to God. He offers the way to remove the penalty and power of sin from our lives. He offers us forgiveness and a new life to live on earth, victory over death, and the promise of an eternal life with the Father. When we receive the gift referenced in *Romans 6:23*, we are no longer separated from God, but are brought near by Jesus' blood (*Ephesians 2:13*). Jesus' sacrifice accomplished all these things once and for all.

God's gift of salvation is freely offered to all of us. If we believe this and receive Him as that sacrifice for our own sin, then we have eternal life. We do not earn it, and we do not deserve it. We can never be good enough to meet God's standards on our own or to pay the penalty for our own sin. We just gratefully receive the forgiveness that Christ paid for.

So each one of us must ultimately answer the question: have I received the gift of eternal life that is freely available to me? If you are not sure about whether you have responded to the “but” in the middle of *Romans 6:23*, be sure to talk with your group leader or with another believer about it.

OUR RESPONSE

So let's personalize this idea of a substitute. Has anyone ever been a substitute or made a sacrifice for you in some way? Maybe someone attended an event/meeting in your place. Perhaps you received an organ transplant. Maybe someone took a consequence that you deserved. Think of an example from your own life. How did someone sacrifice or substitute for you?

12.

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

What was your response to that person?

13.

Most likely, your response involved love and appreciation. If the act was something significant, you probably feel like you can never repay it. Their sacrifice might have changed your life in some way. You may have gained a different perspective. Or you might have taken on the same causes as the one who sacrificed for you. The same is true about our walk with the Lord.

Read *1 John 4:19*. How does God's love change us?

14.

Our response to God's tremendous sacrifice should be that we accept that gift and live for Him out of gratitude. Love becomes our motivation — not fear, not appeasement, not somehow trying to carry out our part of a bargain. God's love is the motivation for us to love Him in return.

Now look at *verses 20 and 21*. What *should* and *should not* be a characteristic of a believer?

15.

Notice that there are no exceptions to God's command to love our brother. And there are no restrictions or conditions on whom we are supposed to love. Just in case there is any doubt, Jesus gave us a broad definition of our neighbor in the parable of the good Samaritan. He also commanded us to love our enemies (*Matthew 5:43-46*). Our brother may be inconvenient to love or hard to love. People may be indifferent or even do evil toward us. Nevertheless we are to love, even as Jesus loved (read *John 13:34, 15:12, and Ephesians 5:2* for background on your own).

You might be having struggles right now. You might have relationship problems with others. You might be discouraged. But you are most fulfilled when you continue to love others (even in the difficult circumstances) out of gratitude for God's forgiveness. You start by accepting God's gift of salvation. When you do, God gives you the power to live His way by His Holy Spirit. He is the one who gives you the ability to love the way God loves. This is why receiving the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ can be so transformative in a person's life.

BUT GOD, BEING RICH IN MERCY

As we close, think about something that you have learned or been reminded of in this lesson and note that in the space below.

16.

In light of all that you have learned so far (or have been reminded of), thank the Lord for His amazing love, grace, and mercy. Then ask for His strength and wisdom to live for Him out of a loving response to what He has already done. And finally, think about practical ways you can love your family, acquaintances, and even strangers.

In the next lesson, we'll see how Adam and Eve dealt with the original "but" and how their situation applies to our own responses to temptation. So prepare to be challenged spiritually and to be encouraged. Although your circumstances may not be the same, the biblical principles that apply are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.