

How to Study Your Bible

1. Pray for Help

Prayer is the first step in effective Bible study. This begins with an attitude of humility that acknowledges the Bible is God's Word and as such is without error, contradiction, or confusion. We need God's help in understanding and submitting to his Word (1 Cor 2:14).

What should we pray before we study God's word? First, we should *ask for clear thinking*. Our minds are full of life and busyness. We want to be able to read and think clearly without distractions. This involves our minds being spiritually-oriented. Maybe we are struggling with a sin or some difficult situation. We want to pray so that we are focused in our study of God's word:

- Incline my heart to your testimonies (Ps 119:36).
- Unite my heart to fear your name (Ps 86:11).

Second, we should *ask for spiritual insight*. We want to know this book as more than any other book. Many non-Christians study the Bible, but they don't believe it. They may know the contents, but it does not have significance for their lives. We want to know it because we understand that the Bible is God's word. So, we are looking for more than information. We want insight into the mind and heart of God and his purpose for our lives. We want to be able to wisely interpret and apply his truth. We want to delight in God himself. So, we can pray:

- Open my eyes to behold wonderful things in your Word (Ps 119:18).
- Satisfy me with your steadfast love (Ps 90:14).
- Please show me your glory (Ex 33:18; cf. 2 Cor 3:18).

2. Consider the Context

As we approach the passage for study, we need to think about the context. The Bible is not a random collection of wisdom. God has given it to us in specific ways. It was written by specific people, at specific times, with specific reasons. We need to consider these things as we approach the text.

So, we think about *what kind of literature is this?* The way I read the Psalms will be different from how I read Paul's letters. How I read Old Testament narrative will be

different from Revelation or Proverbs. The kind of literature I'm reading will affect how I read and understand it.

Then consider *who wrote this and what were the circumstances of their life*. Was the author living a life in ancient Israel, with other exiles in Babylon, or in Jesus' day under the authority of the Roman empire? Did they have an easy life or a difficult life? What was their station in life? Were they well-educated or from the lower rung of society? This will help us understand what the human author wrote.

It's also important to ask, *what do the surrounding passages say about this?* Many times, what comes before or after the passage you will preach affects how we should understand the passage we are studying. Consider how Romans 8 comes as a direct result of the questions and concerns Paul expresses in Romans 7. Or, think about the whole book of Judges. There is a spiritual decline across the book so that every judge God raises up is generally worse than the earlier ones. Othniel is a great example. But Samson only truly honors God in his final moments. When thinking about context, don't allow the chapter and verse numbers to artificially break up the Bible. They were not inspired by God. Often, they are helpful. But sometimes they make it hard to see the flow of the book.

Finally, we want to know *how the whole Bible help me understand this passage*. Here we want to remember the big picture of God's history of redemption. The Bible is one big story that God is writing. Where does my passage fit into that story? An easy way to begin to think about which covenant the people are under when they first received this passage. If you're in Israel, consider if this is before or after the exile.

3. Observe the Text

Essential to Bible study is looking at a specific passage and asking, 'What is God saying? Why did he put this in word? This means spending time actually *looking* at the text. We want to consider it from all angles, thinking about how. We need to make observations about what we see.

Our most fundamental task is simply to see what's there. And this isn't complicated. We're just taking the time to slow down and really look at the text. Some specific elements to look for include:

- The audience who is receiving this for the first time.
- The main "characters" of the passage.
- Where and when the events are taking place.
- Any repeated words or ideas.
- Contrasts or comparisons.

- The grammar—subjects, objects, verb tense, conditional statements, etc.
- The logical progression of an argument.
- Divisions and transition words (but, and, therefore, etc.).
- Figures of speech.
- Metaphors or analogies.

Be sure to observe anything you don't understand, key words that need to be defined, or other passages in the Bible that come to mind and seem connected to the one you are studying. You may consider outlining or phrasing the passage to make it clearer.

4. Interpret the Meaning

Now it's time to prayerfully think over what you observed. The goal with interpretation is to discern the *meaning* of the text. Remember, there may be many applications of a passage (more below), but there is only one meaning because God is the ultimate author and he inspired this passage with that meaning in mind. So, we try to understand why God put this passage in the Bible.

To get at the meaning, it is helpful to think about the theology of the passage. We start by seeing how the text shows us *God's being or character*. What can be learned about him from the passage? Is there an example of his actions or attributes? We can also consider *what spiritual need is being presented*. This involves sin—either the sin in our own hearts or the suffering that comes to us as a result of sin in others. For example, does this passage show that we need righteousness, hope, or contentment? What do we need because of our circumstances? What do we lack which only God can provide? More specifically, *we can ask if there is a sin being confronted?* It's helpful if we think beyond obvious sins. Read through lists of vices and sins in Paul's letters. Read through Proverbs. Consider sins we may not be thinking about. Think about sins of the heart, not just sinful actions. This is getting to the root of the sin. Think about idolatry—what might the Bible be pointing out that is a substitute for God?

We should also consider what the passage says *about Christ's person and work*. Jesus taught that *all* of Scripture were about him. He told his enemies that Old Testament Scriptures bear witness to him and he gives life (John 5:39, 45–47). Jesus' own disciples had failed to grasp God's plan for the promised Christ. So, after his death, they did not expect his resurrection and were distraught. Yet Jesus visited two disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened their eyes to understand the gospel from the Old Testament (Luke 24:13–35). He later appeared to the apostles and taught them the same (Luke 22:44–47).

So, we need to ask, ‘How does this passage anticipate, reveal, or explain Jesus’ work in the Gospels?’ However, it is essential that we do not skip the *original context* to see. Here are seven pathways to look for:

- *Pre-incarnation Appearances of Christ*. Properly called theophanies or Christophanies, we’re talking about any appearance of Christ before he takes on flesh (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Often, he is called the Angel of the Lord, and is distinguished from other angels by receiving worship.
- *Prophecies about Christ*. These are seen in God’s specific words about how, where, when, why Christ would come into the world (Acts 10:43).
- *Promises fulfilled in Christ*. The Bible is driven by God’s promises. Sometimes these are formal promises, called covenants. Other times, these are informal promises to specific people. And Paul makes clear that “all of the promises of God find their Yes in Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). Sometimes, there may be an immediate fulfillment to those promises. But Christ is always the fuller or final fulfillment (Gal 3:15–4:7).
- *Problems resolved in Christ*. Humanity has faced many problems and experienced many needs because of sin. Those things can only be finally resolved in Christ (e.g., Rom 5:12–21; Rom 3:21–26; Luke 4:18; 1 Cor 15:20–26).
- *Patterns fulfilled in Christ*. By pattern we mean any repeated theme, event, or institution found in the Old Testament (e.g., the priesthood, temple, and sacrifices, Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-5:10; 7:11-10:18; kingdom, covenant, sonship, marriage, reconciliation, exile, rest, and more).
- *People superseded by Christ*. God has accomplished great things through men and women. But their character and work points to the greater work of Christ. We see in people all throughout the Bible, examples of what Christ did and will do in better ways (e.g., Matt 12:42). Sometimes the supersession comes by way of contrast as well (Rom 5:14).
- *Purposes realized in Christ*. Why has God done what he has done in history? To prepare for the coming of Christ (Eph 1:3–10; 3:11). Creation (Col 1:16), marriage (Eph 5:22–32), the law (Rom 10:4), and the Sabbath (Col 2:16–17) all point to, and have their purpose realized, in Christ.

There are also *several key themes* that run throughout the Scriptures from beginning to end. Consider how your passage may contribute or explain one of these themes: glory of God, creation, sin, covenant, law, temple, priest, sacrifice, exile and exodus, kingdom of God, sonship, city of God, prophets and prophecy, death and resurrection, people of God, wisdom, holiness, justice, wrath, love, grace and mercy, the gospel, worship, mission, peace, and consummation.

By the end, we should be able to summarize the main point of a passage in a sentence or two. This meaning should be checked against the surrounding context and the Bible as a whole to see if it fits well. If not, then go back and see where you may have taken a wrong turn. This is also the time to employ mature believers or trusted resources to verify your thoughts or be humbled corrected by theirs.

5. Apply the Text

Once we know what the passage means, we can think about how to apply it to our lives. As believers, we stand between two worlds—the world of the Bible and the world in which we live. Application is the means by which we take the eternal truths of the there and then and bring to bear in our lives in the here and now.

The bible provides some basic categories for application by calling us to faith, repentance, praise, thanksgiving, obedience, and mission. We can go deeper into each of these categories and find specific directions for our lives. Consider some examples.

- *Faith.* Trust God to be with you during times of sorrow or suffering. Believe about yourself what God believes about you when others condemn you.
- *Praise.* Praise God for his attributes seen in the passage (love, mercy, holiness, etc.). Praise God for keeping his promises (think about specific promises he has made to you in Christ).
- *Mission.* Talk to your neighbor about the gospel. Give money to support those going to tell others about the gospel.

As we try to develop applications of the text, we are aiming to get to the specifics of our life situation while remaining true to the meaning of the text. So, if the passage highlights the power of Scripture to change lives, a basic application would be to read them more. But we can get more specific. We can think about how and when to read it more—setting aside specific times, making a point to read it in faith, etc.

We can also use other parts of Scripture to help us apply the passage. If we continue the example of allowing Scripture to change us, we can move to an application of allowing God to change other through us with his Word. We might share the truth that's encouraged or challenged us by sharing with it others, fulfilling the command of Hebrews 3:13—"exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Again, the goal of studying is knowing God and, by faith, living more consistently in his ways to glorify him (Rom 12:1-2). It's not enough to simply know his truth. We must live it out daily. The more specific we can make it, the better it will serve us.

6. Share in Context

We all live in a certain context. We have a local church and likely are a part of a small group within that church. We have neighbors, friends, family, and coworkers. All of them need God's Word as much as you do. This is why the Bible talks much about sharing the Word with others. We just saw one example of this from Hebrews 3. There

are many other examples that could be given. The key to this, though, is knowing your context. Consider your circle of relationships and ask *who* needs to hear *what*? What should you say to the:

- Hardened unbeliever
- Unaware unbeliever
- Curious unbeliever
- New believer
- Suffering believer
- Wayward believer
- Growing believer

This consideration could happen on the fly in the midst of daily life. But, while the text is still fresh on your mind, it's helpful to take a few minutes and think about this question. Think about who would benefit most from what you have learned. Jot down some notes, then pray and look for an opportunity to share.

7. Pray for Yourself and Others

Bible study is really only complete when you respond in prayer. Prayer is what allows the truth you've learned to take flight back to God in rejoicing, repenting, and requesting his work in your life and the lives of others. It's the process full circle—you began with prayer, asking for God's help to understand and believe. Now you're ending with pray, asking for God's help to submit and obey.

We should also look beyond ourselves and pray for others as well. Paul said that we ought to be “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph 6:18). That's a massive prayer list! But it begins with the people closest to us. It begins with the same people we mentioned when it came to sharing the word. Pray for the people God's has ordained be in your life. Keep track with a stack of physical or digital prayer cards and be diligent to continue in prayer. Whatever gift of grace is promised or applied from the text, ask God to bring it about in their lives.

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! ² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, ³ who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! ⁴ You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. ⁵ Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! ⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules. ⁸ I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me! (Ps 119:1–8).