

How to Study the Bible

A guide for gaining a deeper understanding of God's Word



The Bible is the most remarkable, most influential volume ever produced in 5,000 years of writing. On this fact people must agree, despite what they may think of the message and authority of the book. Children worldwide sing: "Jesus loves me, this I know—for the Bible tells me so." Preachers cry out, "The Bible says" Why is the Bible so important? Because it has authority. It is the Word of God!

If the Bible is God's authoritative Word, then it is the expression of God's will for our lives. And if the Bible is the authoritative expression of God's will for our lives, it must have priority in our interest and study. When we remain ignorant of what the Bible has to say, then we remain ignorant to God's will for our lives. Our chief concern must be to understand this book.

Yet why do so many Christians not get much joy and satisfaction—that extra *something*—from their Bible study? Because they've failed to learn how to make studying the Word a feeding process that results in spiritual nourishment and growth. Most Christians read a portion of Scripture each day as a devotional exercise. This is good; it's necessary and profitable. But too many believers follow the practice of merely reading Bible portions. They never read the Bible in any other way.

The Bible requires study. Its hidden depths will not be revealed to the superficial reader. Jesus urged us to "search the Scriptures" (John 5:39, NKJV). The word *search* is a strong word indicating the use of energy, diligence and application to the task. The prospector searches for treasure; the hunter

searches for prey; the police search for the lawbreaker; the parent searches for a lost child. In like manner, we must employ a law of thoroughness in our searching of the Scriptures.

A greater use and deeper understanding of God's Word by believers is essential to a living, dynamic church. Evangelist D.L. Moody said: "I never saw a useful Christian who was not a student of the Bible. If a man neglects his Bible, he may pray and ask God to use him in His work, but God cannot make much use of him, for there is not much for the Holy Spirit to work upon. We must have the Word itself, which is sharper than any two-edged sword."

We know little about God until we study the Bible. There we learn who God is, what He is, what He's done, what He's doing and what He shall yet do. Man comes to the end of his search for truth when he sees the manifestation of God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in God's written Word.

How then do we delve into such an important source of truth? There are at least two distinct methods to studying God's Word: *synthetic* and *inductive*. Both are useful for growing in the Word each day.

Chew on This

- 1. What prevents you from delving deeper into the Bible? List three common obstacles.*
- 2. What have been your biggest struggles in studying the Bible? How have you tried to overcome these?*
- 3. Why is Bible study so imperative for your everyday life? (Be specific—and honest.)*

Synthetic study: Understanding the Bible as a Whole

Synthetic study simply means the study of the Bible as a whole, each book of the Bible as a whole and each book as seen in its relation to the other books. This is one of the best approaches to understanding the entire Bible.

Synthesis is the opposite of analysis. By analysis we take an object apart to examine its parts; by synthesis we put it together and consider it as a whole.

Many people believe you can open the Bible anywhere and it will reveal its storehouse of truth. Though that practice will reveal some truth to the casual reader, it won't provide the full message. To understand the Bible properly, you must grasp a comprehensive picture of its fundamental purpose.

Similarly, when you read the Bible for purposes of study, it isn't enough to read one book and just move on to another. The same book must be read repeatedly—possibly half a dozen times—until the message grips you and begins to reveal its secrets to you. Many people read the Bible, even study it, but fail to gain a working knowledge of its contents. To avoid this frustration, adopt a plan of reading, re-reading and reading again a specific Bible book until its message permeates your spirit.

Selection of the book to be studied is important. It may be better to try to master a few books at first, such as Genesis, Exodus, Joshua and Judges in the Old Testament, and the Gospels and some of the easier epistles in the New Testament. Almost every book was written because of some special need or circumstance. Thus it has a particular background and serves a given purpose.

For example, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) lays a foundation of historical fact for the books that follow. In similar fashion Romans lays a foundation for

the church and its doctrines. A grasp of Romans with its development of the great doctrine of justification by faith—the foundational truth of all Christian dogma—makes it possible for the believer to have victory daily.

After you've chosen which book to study, begin by prayerfully reading it through. All the New Testament epistles except Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Hebrews can be read in less than half an hour. If you keep this in mind, you won't be discouraged by the task.

Give Bible reading a fair chance, and it will become fascinating as the Holy Spirit begins to illumine the Word. Bear in mind that your reading shouldn't be hurried. Many times our study will involve much time poring over a few verses or even just a word or two. But here we are discussing reading for the purpose of grasping a book's key information.

The first reading of a book should be done steadily—not so quickly that you can't properly understand, but read without stopping to deal with any questions that arise. On a second or third reading certain things will become evident. It may be certain expressions, often repeated, that come to your attention.

For instance, the Gospel of Mark often uses the terms *straightway* and *immediately*. These words are keys to understanding. These two characteristic expressions are the words of a servant, and Mark portrays Jesus as the servant. The servant character of the Son of God is pictured everywhere.

Apply Here

To practice finding characteristic expressions in Scripture, trace the usage of the word precious by Peter in his two epistles. Jot down the verses and find the various ways Peter used this word.

In pursuing the synthetic method of Bible study, try first to discover the scope of a particular book. You'll want to see the ground it covers and get a bird's-eye view of the subject it deals with so you can discover the purpose for which it was written.

Every book has a theme and a purpose. The discovery of a key word or phrase can be a clue to understanding the purpose of the book. For example, the key phrase of Romans is "the righteousness of God." Paul wrote this epistle for the purpose of making it plain to all that righteousness comes by God and from Him alone. The church must ever guard against the error of salvation by works.

After repeated readings of any book of the Bible, you can begin to see the aim of the author, and the contents begin to form an orderly pattern in the mind. It's helpful to look for the author, scope, occasion, theme, time, place and form. For example, a synthetic study of Matthew might include the following:

Matthew intended his message primarily for the Jews. He presents Jesus to us as He is revealed in His words. His Gospel shows Christ to us through the Lord's speech, words, sayings, discourses and doctrines. As Matthew writes, he refers to and unfolds the significance of the past.

The book's purpose and scope are indicated in the first verse: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." As the Son of David, Jesus is shown as *King*; as the son of Abraham, He is "obedient unto death." The word *kingdom* occurs 56 times, "kingdom of heaven" 32 times and "son of David" nine times.

The key idea is the word *fulfilled*, or the phrase "that it might be fulfilled." Matthew makes at least 60 references to the Old Testament writings of being fulfilled in Christ.

After repeated readings, an outline of the book will develop. George Henderson, in *The Wonderful Word*, has given the following sample outline of Matthew's Gospel:

1. The Person of the King (1-4:16)

(a) His relation to earth: true but sinless man (ch. 1-2)

(b) His relation to heaven: beloved of the Father (ch. 3)

(c) His relation to hell: conqueror of the devil (ch. 4)

2. The Preaching of the King (4:17-16:20) "From that time Jesus began to preach" (Matt. 4:17).

3. The Passion of the King (16:21-28) "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must ... suffer ... and be killed" (Matt. 16:21).

Your Turn Now

Apply what you've learned about the synthetic study method by looking at Genesis.

1. Who wrote Genesis? When was it written?

2. What is the purpose for Genesis? What is its main theme?

3. What are the key words or phrases in Genesis?

4. Write out a brief outline of Genesis.

Inductive Study: Taking a Closer Look



In the inductive method of Bible study, you carefully examine a particular passage for the purpose of understanding its content, meaning and application. This involves observation, interpretation and application. You discover what the author

intended to say, recognize what he meant, and then receive his message by submissiveness and obedience of spirit. You observe, then conclude.

This requires analysis, which tells you what a passage actually had to say. At first you notice only what is obvious, but continued study will train you to discover deeper truths.

Bible analysis places emphasis upon the thread of truth. This thread can be found in a book, a chapter, a paragraph, even a verse. Finding the thread points to the essential unity of the Bible.

Use the following steps of inductive study as you search the Scriptures for a deeper revelation of the mind of God.

1. What does the passage say? To analyze a given passage properly and understand the intent and meaning of the author, give attention to the content and form. All that God authors has order, form and purpose. Discipline yourself to see this picture in the Scripture—it isn't enough to study some parts and bypass others. We must let the Bible speak for itself.

Every passage of Scripture contains a principal truth. In addition to the primary meaning, there often is a less obvious truth. A certain truth in a given passage may be very evident; on the other hand, there could be a less apparent gem to be dug out by the observing student.

How do you determine the true meaning of a passage? What is literal? What is symbolic? Before you can correctly interpret a portion of Scripture, you must correctly observe these features.

Diligent application of five steps is required to observe Scripture properly: read, record, search, relate and recall.

Bible study begins and ends with *reading*. Paul writes, "Give attention to reading" (1 Tim. 4:13). The diligent Bible

student will make notes as he pursues his study. He will want to record his observations and be able to recall through meditation what the Holy Spirit has made real to him.

Someone has said that a pencil is the third eye for seeing scriptural truth; the other two are the eye of the Holy Spirit and the physical eye. To study with pencil and notebook at hand cultivates the powers of observation, orderly thought and memory.

The Holy Spirit has caused Scripture to be *recorded* in a manner to challenge the student. The secrets of the Word are as “silver” and “hidden treasures” that are to be sought after (Prov. 2:4). Sanctified effort is needed for *searching* the Word. Again, Jesus commanded us to “search the Scriptures” (John 5:39).

A next step in finding the meaning of a passage is to *relate* it to other passages. The Bible doesn’t contradict itself. Truth is many-sided. Both Paul and James draw their respective arguments regarding faith and works from the same Old Testament patriarch—Abraham.

Paul writes of obedience in faith, and James writes of obedience in action. They deal with complementary aspects of one truth. The better things of Christ as recorded in the epistle to the Hebrews take on enriched meaning as we become acquainted with the tabernacle of Moses and the Old Testament offerings.

The first four steps of observation require concentration and effort. The next, *recall*, requires something else—meditation. The word *meditate* is from a Greek word meaning “to attend.” To meditate is to give attention, to ponder prayerfully. This is what the book of Proverbs admonishes us to do: “Incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding” (Prov. 2:2).

Chew on This

- 1. In what ways do you search Scripture? Do you use a specific method for recording your thoughts? How does that help?*
- 2. Besides Abraham and Moses, what other Old Testament personalities are referenced in the New Testament?*
- 3. What does meditating on God's Word mean? How do you practice meditation when it comes to reading and studying the Bible?*

2. What does the passage mean? To know what the author says puts us well on the way to understanding what he means. A passage may have only one interpretation but several applications. Paul wrote: "These things became our examples. ... They were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). In this instance Paul makes application of the things that happened to the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. Many Bible passages could be cited as having but one meaning, but their moral principles may be used for many applications.

You should determine the meaning of a passage, not verify your prejudices or traditions. Martin Luther advised that effort should be made to find the meaning of a passage, not import one into it. It's wrong to use verses as hooks upon which to hang doctrinal beliefs. For example, the mention of the word *water* in John 3:5 does not give license to teach baptismal regeneration. Passing references are not to be used for establishing doctrine.

Not all Scripture is easily understood. We may even grasp a Bible truth and yet never understand all the implications of that truth. One of the enriching experiences of Bible study is the constant discovery of fresh truths. When two interpretations can be proposed for a given passage, the

clearest should be accepted. The clear passage should interpret the obscure, not vice versa.

Essential truth isn't veiled by obscure and incidental passages; biblical essentials aren't hidden mysteries. Everything necessary to salvation and Christian living is set forth clearly.

3. How does the passage apply to me? You may know what God says and how He says it. You may know what the Bible says and what it means, but it becomes of personal value only when you make a personal application. Application is the purpose of Bible study.

The will of the student is central to making Bible study relevant to life. J.H. Jowett wrote, "Get a will behind the eye and the eye becomes a searchlight, and the familiar is made to disclose undreamed-of treasure." We must will to study, and as we study we must will to obey. If we do not assimilate and appropriate Bible truth, spiritual atrophy will result.

Bible study must not be an end in itself. God has given us the Bible; it is to do something *in* us and *through* us.

Your Turn Now

Take a look at Ephesians 1:13–14 and practice applying the inductive study method. As you study this passage, ask yourself the following questions:

- *What does the Scripture say? (content)*
- *What does the Scripture say to me? (personal application)*
- *What does the Scripture say to me today? (relevant personal application)*
- *What will I do about it today? (immediate personal*

action of God's Word to me)

Fuchsia Pickett wrote the best-selling *The Next Move of God*, as well as *Stones of Remembrance*, *Presenting the Holy Spirit*, *Receiving Divine Revelation*, *The Prophetic Romance* and *How to Search the Scriptures*, from which this article was adapted.

Synthetic Study Guidelines

- Read the Bible book of your choice.
 - Read it as a total unit, without observing its divisions into chapters and verses.
 - Read it repeatedly until you have a grasp of its outline.
 - Read it independently at first, without the aid of any commentary or other Bible help.
 - Read it prayerfully, relying upon the Holy Spirit who wrote it to enlighten its pages to your understanding.
-

General Tips for Bible Study

- Approach your study time with a fresh mind. Your best study won't be when you're mentally and physically weary.
- Choose the passage. Read it several times. Get a bird's-eye view of the whole and then explore the parts.
- Keep a record of all your observations, whether you think they are significant or not.
- Throughout the entire process of studying, depend upon the Holy Spirit; without Him we cannot understand the

Word of God.