

How to Study the Bible

Lesson #2—Getting Started

Types of Bible Study

Now that you understand the importance, benefits, and requirements of Bible study, it's time to get started. First, you have to decide what you want to study. The Bible is a large book and there is plenty to cover. Of course, the goal is to study all of Scripture, to know the whole counsel of God, but this takes time. Knowing the word must be done in piecemeal over time.

Studying Scripture for all its worth is like the children's poem *Melinda Mae* by Shel Silverstein. The story tells of a little girl who wanted to eat a monstrous whale, so she started in right at the tale. No one thought she could do it; she was much too small. But she took little bites and by 89 years of age, she ate it all. The lesson learned—how do you eat a whale? One bite at a time. Hopefully though, it won't take you 89 years to know the Bible.

That said, even in ten lifetimes you could not exhaust the treasury of Scripture. Even after 2,000 years, there is still fresh insight to be had in the Bible. But if you let the magnitude of the task deter you from ever starting, only one thing is certain—you will never get anywhere! Sure, your days may come to an end before you master 2 Chronicles, but how much did you grow and please God from what you did learn? That is what counts.

Remember, the goal of Bible study is not just head knowledge, but heart knowledge, and that is not something which is ever meant to be finished. Mathematics, for instance, is head knowledge. Once you learn it, you are "done." Once you grasp the Pythagorean Theorem, once you understand that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ it's time to move on to other things. There is nothing left to learn there. However, once you grasp the doctrine of justification, once you understand it in Scripture, there is no moving on. The heart needs to feed on that truth for a lifetime. So it is with all of God's word.

Again, the desire is to study all of Scripture, but practically it must be broken down into smaller units that can be digested. Smaller studies must be tackled, which assembled together produce great understanding.

Along these lines, there are several different ways to study the Bible. There are several different types of Bible study. Before getting into the steps of Bible study, you should be familiar with the different ways to study the Bible.

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| Textual Study | The purpose of a textual study is to understand the meaning of a single text of Scripture. A “text” can range from a single verse to several verses which are held together by a central thought. | E.g. Titus 2:11-14 |
| Book Study | The purpose of a book study is to become acquainted with an entire book of the Bible. Textual studies are the building blocks of book studies, however book studies aim to see the forest above the trees and look for the overall purpose and themes. | E.g. The Epistle of Titus |
| Topical Study | The purpose of a topical study is to explore a specific topic in all or some portion of Scripture. | E.g. “Love” in 1 Corinthians |
| Doctrinal Study | The purpose of a doctrinal study is to understand and define a key doctrine according to Scripture. Very similar to a topical study, a doctrinal study exhaustively studies every text where the doctrine is mentioned and goes further by trying to synthesize these texts into a systematic theology. | E. g. The deity of Jesus |
| Historical Study | The purpose of a historical study is to acquire information about historical subjects in the Bible. These would include historical people, places, practices, beliefs, religions, customs, languages, laws, societies, etc. | E.g. The Jewish sacrificial system |
| Biographical Study | The purpose of a biographical study is to profile a character in Scripture. The focus of biographical studies usually centers on who they were, what they did, and how they related to God. | E. g. The life of Peter |

Understanding that there are several different types of Bible study, this guide will mostly focus on how to prepare a textual study. This is the simplest, most straight-forward approach and will serve you well in preparing more advanced studies. Being able to study and understand a single text of Scripture is the building block to all other types of Bible study and the principles you will learn in this guide will prove valuable for all types of studies.

Choosing a Text

Moving forward with a textual study, the next step is an obvious one—choose a text. You must of course choose some passage of Scripture that you would like to study. If you are doing a book study whereby you are methodically going through, passage by passage, an entire book of the Bible, your choice is made for you. Simply choose the passage that comes next. If, however, you are simply preparing an isolated Bible study, then the choice is entirely up to you. Perhaps choose a passage that has been helpful to you in the past or addresses an especially relevant topic.

If you are just getting into this venture of Bible study, then try choosing a text in a New Testament epistle (letter). Why? Because New Testament epistles are already presented in a didactic or teaching form and therefore are easier to study. They are also often more familiar to people. Additionally, try starting with a small, manageable book so that you can more easily see the big picture. Consider, for instance, Philippians, Titus, 1 Peter, or 1 John.

As you start to narrow in on a passage to study, another consideration must be made—how small or large of a text should you study? What is a suitable unit of thought? Should you study one verse at a time, one chapter at a time, or somewhere in between? One common pitfall among beginners is to choose far too large of a passage, thinking there’s not much to see in smaller passages. But this can get overwhelming. Your best bet is to choose a “paragraph” of Scripture (or “pericope”).

The question then becomes how do you identify a paragraph of Scripture? The original Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible was not divided into units of thought, but most English translations have done so. Paragraphs can range from a single verse to over a dozen verses, although keep in mind, these paragraph divisions are not inspired. In most Bibles, a new paragraph will be indicated by a verse number given in **bold**. The paragraph lasts until the next bold verse number. This can be considered a “paragraph” of Scripture and choosing one paragraph at a time is a good way to start. Alternatively, some online resources can help you see paragraph divisions in a visual format.



Online Toolbox

 <http://www.biblegateway.com>

Enter in the search bar an entire chapter of Scripture and choose the NASB Bible. So, for example, type in “Titus 2” and hit search. You will notice that the chapter comes back already divided into paragraph format. Verses 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-10, 11-14, and 15 are all separate paragraphs, for instance.

Related to the topic of choosing a Bible text is choosing a Bible version. Which Bible translation should you use? Chances are, you don’t read Hebrew and Greek fluently, so you will have to rely on an English translation. But if you have been a Christian even for a short time, you have learned that there is a massive selection of English Bible translations. So which should you choose? Which should you use?

Briefly, there are different philosophies behind Bible translations, namely how to translate the original languages into English. Some versions try to translate word for word (formal equivalence). Their goal is to stick as close to the original languages as possible, believing this reduces the chance for the original message to be corrupted. Translators do not aim to add any of their own beliefs or interpretations to the text, but purely translate the text. The downside to word for word translations is that they can produce blocky English that is harder to read, but word for word translations are much better for Bible study. Examples include the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the English Standard Bible (ESV), and the King James Bible (KJV).

Other versions are described as thought for thought (dynamic equivalence) because they try to convey the thought or intention of a text. They are not trying to reproduce or represent every word in the English, but rather to capture and transmit the basic thought of every verse. This results in an easy to read Bible in flowing English. Thought for thought translations are great for bedside devotional reading, but they are not as good for Bible study because original words and thoughts can go missing and the translators are forced to subtly add their interpretation into the text. Examples include the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT), and the Contemporary English Version (CEV).

Finally, today there are paraphrase Bibles. These try to convey key concepts of a text with little effort to represent specific thoughts, let alone original words. Many versions add or subtract large sections of text to better explain the big picture. In reality, paraphrase Bibles function like one person's commentary on the Bible rather than a Bible translation. These Bibles should only be used with this in mind and should not be trusted as Bible translations. They should not readily be used for Bible study. Examples include The Living Bible (TLB), The Message (TM), and The Street Bible (TSB).

For the sake of serious Bible study, you want a translation that will represent the original as best as possible. Go with one of the word for word translations. Also, for the sake of consistency, once you pick your translation, stick with it. Use that translation for all of your studies.

This guide will be using the NASB translation.

How to Study the Bible

Now it's time to really get started and dig in. The remainder of this lesson will cover the first two essential steps of Bible study and lesson 3 will pick up from here. For now, after choosing a Bible, a book of the Bible, and a text to study, you can't get around the basics of praying and reading. These are the first two steps of all Bible study.

Step #1—Pray

2 Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is “inspired by God” or literally God-breathed. This means that the Bible is a divine book and therefore can surpass ordinary human understanding. In other words, you will need God’s help (cf. 1 Cor 2:11). Anyone can read God’s revelation, but only those assisted by God’s Spirit can come to a true understanding of God’s revelation. This assistance God gives is referred to as “illumination” and can be defined as “the ministry of the Holy Spirit whereby He enlightens those who are in a right relationship with Him to comprehend the written Word of God.”¹

Knowing that there is a divine element to understanding God’s truth, you should be quick to conclude that prayer is step one. When approaching Scripture, since you need God to lift the veil from your eyes that you may see clearly, you must appeal to Him in prayer for help. As you approach God’s Word with a holy reverence, ask God to cleanse you from any sin and give you clean hands to handle His Word. Pray specifically that the Holy Spirit would mightily assist you in arriving at the true meaning of Scripture.

Step #2—Read

After prayer, the next step is to read the text. You can’t get around this step. You may be tempted to jump right into a commentary and look up what someone else has said about your passage, but don’t do it! That defeats part of the purpose of personal Bible study. Remember, the aim is not just gaining knowledge, but feeding the heart and that comes through the inspired word, not the uninspired commentaries.

Where do you begin though? If you have a passage in mind, read that. When you’re done, read it again. After that, read it again. Then, read it again. You get the point. You should read through your passage several times. Read slowly and carefully, already making observations and asking questions in your mind. But for now, you are not taking notes, but simply reading.

When you become familiar with your passage, it’s time to read the context. You will learn later that context is the most important factor in determining a passage’s meaning. All languages have words, phrases, and sentences that can mean more than one thing. Context, then, is the nearby subject matter or flow of thought which helps define the word or sentence in question.

For example, consider the word “bar.” What does “bar” mean? Well, bar has a plethora of meanings: a long piece of some solid substance like metal or wood (e.g. prison bars); an oblong piece of some solid substance (e.g. bar of soap or candy); an ingot of gold or silver; anything that obstructs or impedes (e.g. a bar to legislation); a service counter (e.g. liquor bar, snack bar); a tavern (e.g. bar); the practicing members of a legal profession; a band or strip (e.g. bar of light); in music, the line dividing two measures of music; in typography, a horizontal stroke of a

¹ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997), 175.

character; in military, one of a pair of metal or cloth insignia worn by certain officers; and more. So if you read the phrase, “He is holding the bar,” you could rule out some of the above definitions based on the word “holding.” But without more information, without the context, you won’t be able to know the exact meaning of the phrase. If the context, however, was a prisoner in a jail cell, you would understand “bar” to mean the prison bars. But even then, the prisoner could be eating a candy bar! Either way, the context will make plain the meaning.

We will learn later that if you take a verse out of context and make it say what you want it to say, this is called proof-texting and it is one of the greatest violations of Scripture. Richard Mayhue, in his book *How to Study the Bible*, gives a perfect illustration of this. Imagine reading a newspaper with the headline “Redskins Scalp Raiders.” You then run and tell everyone that a group of Native Americans has killed some people on their land. This would cause quite a stir. But you failed to take into account the context of this headline and therefore got its meaning wrong. The headline is referring to a football game. Your error could have serious consequences.

When it comes to Bible study, there are different levels of context to take into account. Like the concentric circles of an onion, you want to work from the inside out. Consider the following:

1. The paragraph context—the verses before and after forming one paragraph
2. The thought context—the surrounding verses dealing with the same thought
3. The chapter context—the chapter your verse is in
4. The subject context—the greater subject unit your verse is in, which may span several chapters
5. The book context—the book your verse is in
6. The author context—the other books written by the same author
7. The Bible context—the entire message of Scripture

Example using the verse Matthew 5:48:

1. Matthew 5:43-48
2. Matthew 5:21-48
3. Matthew 5
4. Matthew 5-7
5. Matthew
6. None
7. The Bible

For now, start off by reading the expanding layers of context. Begin with the text itself several times and then move to the nearer layers of context. Continue to branch out and if the book you are in is short, read the entire book, even several times. Read your passage all week.