

# How to Study the Bible

## Lesson #5—Consulting a Tour Guide

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Imagine that you are on vacation in Italy and you are visiting the Coliseum. You have read about it and studied it and always dreamed of visiting it to learn more, and now you finally get the chance. As you show up, you realize that the structure is rather dilapidated. You've seen pictures showing much of the building missing, but you didn't realize so much was gone. As you walk into the interior, you expect to see a classic amphitheater, but there are no seats and there isn't even a floor. Instead you see an array of tunnels and pillars where the floor should be and you don't know why. But the building is massive and you estimate that it could hold about 40,000 people.

You already know that the Coliseum was used for gladiatorial bouts and executions and you now picture what that would have been like. You imagine a sense of excitement but also the horror, especially if you were one of those thrown to wild animals while the crowd cheered on. This makes you wonder if Peter and Paul visited the Coliseum during their imprisonment in Rome. Did they die here? Certainly many Christians did and you come to appreciate their sacrifices more. In all, you leave the Coliseum, having learned a lot just by being there. You now can attach a feeling, a smell, and some sights to everything you know about the Coliseum.

Was this a profitable visit for you? Certainly. You learned a lot just by being there. However, how much more could you have gotten out of your visit if you paid the price for a tour guide? The answer is a lot. These tour guides are experts on the Coliseum. They have devoted serious time to studying ancient Roman history. Could you become an expert, research all the source documents, and study the history yourself? Sure, if you had the time, desire, and opportunity. But you don't, so there is a special value in hearing from those who do. You can learn a lot from them above and beyond what you can get on your own with the limited time you have.

For instance, on the tour, you find out the Coliseum wasn't finished until AD 80, so you already know Peter and Paul never visited it, for they both died before then. But many other Christians did indeed die in the Coliseum. However the mass Christian executions took place nearby at the Circus Maximus, not the Coliseum. You are also surprised to learn that the building of the Coliseum was funded largely by the spoils taken from the Jewish temple after the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. The structure was originally made of stone, concrete, wood, and overlaid with bronze and some gold, but anything valuable had since been stolen over the ages. The wood was burned from fire and much of the stone was crumbled by earthquakes. In its original glory, it would have looked much different and it truly was a wonder of the ancient world.

You also learn on this tour that the Coliseum had many more uses, from a marketplace to animal hunts to reenactments of famous sea battles. The Romans actually flooded the arena floor with water, brought in ships complete with crews, and recreated noted battles. The arena itself is massive and originally had a wooden floor. But the floor is gone now and all that's left is the elaborate underground structure, filled with tunnels and chambers where gladiators and animals were held.

By viewing the Coliseum with a tour guide, you can learn so much more than by going alone. If you had the time and resources, you could technically learn all that on your own, but you don't. You're simply on vacation, you have just a few hours, so if you want the fuller experience, get the tour guide.

Well, in a way, this applies to Bible study. Tour guides are available who can help you learn more and dig deeper than you are able to do on your own. The next step in the Bible study process, after you have already put in considerable time on your own, is to consult commentaries and other resources to see what more you can learn from those who have spent even more time with your text. Granted, unlike the vacation tour guide, with Bible study you must do significant work first. You don't want to merely rely on the commentary. There are many pitfalls to avoid. But even though you are putting in hours to study a passage, others have put in years and you can definitely learn from them.

So far in the Bible study process, you have read your passage over and over again, as well as the near context. You have done some background studies and made several critical observations. Many questions turned up though, so you have started to dig deeper, bridging any historical, grammatical, or contextual gaps that you encounter. Through all this work, you are close to arriving at the intended meaning of your passage, which is your first goal. But it is at this point where consulting the work of others can be of great benefit.

## **Step #8—Consult**

The next step in Bible study is the consult. But what exactly are you consulting? The answer is any special works or resources that deal with your passage. Mostly this will involve commentaries. Commentaries are special works devoted to a single book of the Bible with verse by verse notes. You of course would be looking up the commentary corresponding to your passage. Other resources include study Bible notes and journal articles.

When it comes to consulting these resources though, there is a reason this is not step #1. There are several reasons actually. You can't really call it cheating, but jumping straight into commentaries definitely short circuits Bible study. *You* aren't really studying the Bible. Someone else is and you are just taking the fruit of their labor. By doing this, you miss out on the personal benefits that come from doing your own work. Also, you don't want to bias your thinking from the get go. If you begin with commentaries, they can send you down paths and give you tunnel vision, preventing you from just looking at the text with a fresh pair of eyes.

Still, however, consulting these resources is an important step. Commentaries can really help fill in your gaps. They will make some observations you did not see. As these authors spent more time with the text, they will see more. They will also pull in relevant observations from other parts of the Bible, providing critical cross references that you didn't even think of. You will also find many of your questions answered in commentaries. Commentaries are great places to check for some of those questions you felt were beyond your reach. Also, commentaries will often ask and answer questions of the text that again you did not think of. They will add historical, grammatical, and contextual details and often give solid outlines of the text. All of this leads to a greater understanding of your passage.

As you read, take notes under each verse and stay organized (see step #4). Expand your observations and questions notes, as well as the notes you had for bridging gaps. Now is a good time to start verse by verse notes and you can write what you learn from some commentaries under each verse.

But try and avoid simply copying commentaries. You still must be critical, because commentaries are written by men, and men are fallible. It's good to find favorite commentators, trusted men with proven Bible study methods and sound doctrine, but even good men can be wrong at times, so be discerning. Never give any single man too much credit, and never take a commentators word for it. Rather you should be able to trace their study (i.e. exegesis) before you agree with their conclusions. Sometimes it's even useful to consult clearly disagreeing commentaries to sharpen your critical thinking.

Again, this step should be more of a check point than an answers guide. Check with several resources (5-10). Are you on track with a consensus or way off? If you are way off, that doesn't necessarily mean you are wrong. Ten commentaries could all say the same thing, but all be wrong. Rather, if you find yourself disagreeing with a consensus, use that as an opportunity to return to the text and dig deeper. Commentaries one way or another can and should spark your own thinking, enabling your own further digging and discovery.

As a practical note, realize there are three basic types of commentaries: exegetical, expositional, and devotional. Exegetical commentaries are very technical and detailed. They will almost always interact with the text in the Greek or Hebrew and contain references to dozens of other scholarly works. These commentaries are for advanced students and scholars. Expositional commentaries also delve deep into the text, but they are not quite as technical. They may or may not interact with the original languages and are more geared toward explaining the passage as a whole than getting bogged down with minute details. Finally there are devotional commentaries, which do not trouble themselves with technical or critical matters at all. They are simply concerned with extracting the basic meaning of the text and applying it to modern life in a very practical way.

It is best to invest in a handful of good commentaries from each of these categories, as they have their unique strengths and weaknesses. As always, you must be discerning with whomever you read. Scripture is infallible; commentaries are not.



## Online Toolbox

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org>

After searching for your verse, click on the “L” next to it. This will bring up a drop-down menu where you can navigate to several commentaries. Audio sermons are available as well as text commentaries.

Or you can go here for a listing of all the free commentaries on this site:

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/commentaries/#instructions>

 <http://studylight.org/com/>


Another good list of free online commentaries. You can also simply search for your verse on this site and it will bring up relevant commentaries on the right hand side under “Study Resource List.”

 <http://www.monergism.com>

A large number of commentaries. Click on the “Old Testament” or “New Testament” link as needed.

 <http://biblebb.com/>

Click on the Bible book for some old sermon transcripts by men like Spurgeon or Ryle. These expositions can help shed light on a text.

 E-Sword

This is probably your best bet for commentaries. Simply click on the corresponding tab for commentaries like Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible, John Darby’s Synopsis, Scofield Reference Notes, John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible, Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Entire Bible, Keil & Delitzsch’s Commentary, or James, Fausset, and Brown’s Commentary.