

How to Study the Bible

Lesson #6—The Summit of Bible Study

After the Reformation and with the advent of the printing press, thankfully personal Bible study became a practical reality. Now all Christians can access, read, and study the Bible. However, this does not mean that all Christians know how to study the Bible.

A typical Bible study in America consists of a group of Christians sitting in a circle. One of them is the leader or facilitator. Together they open up the Bible because they believe it is God's word and that they can learn something from it. God has something to say to them through His word. But how do they go about finding that message? They read a text and then go around the room, with each person sharing what the verse means to him or her. They say, "This is what I think this means...this is how this verse speaks to me...this is what this passage means to me." This is commonly known as the pooled ignorance approach to Bible study and hopefully you can see the problem with it. No one really knows the intent of the text; no one has actually studied. They are just relating what they think it might mean on a whim, which can be very misleading and often times wrong.

This approach however does highlight the fact that there is a disconnect between the Bible and life today. In other words, the Bible usually does not directly carry over into modern life. Some interpretation is needed to discover what the Bible means to Christians alive today. Granted the pooled ignorance approach is not the way to go. So how should you go about finding the contemporary message of the Bible?

Don't be mistaken; this is a real and significant issue. The Bible is an old book. What does it have to do with 21st century life? Take directly, the answer is very little. You could disregard almost the entire Bible if taken in a historical sense only. Everything the Bible says about genealogies, ancient wars, judgments on extinct nations, laws for eating, and even life in the early church has no direct bearing on life today. What do 3,500 year old animal sacrifices in the Middle East have to do with life today? This is a very important question and if no answer is provided, people feel that disconnect from the Bible. It becomes an irrelevant historical document.

However, Scripture is not an irrelevant historical document.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

¹⁶ *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

The Bible is a divine book. Humans held the pen, but God is the ultimate author. It is literally God-breathed. When Paul was writing this, the Old Testament Scriptures were already up to 1,500 years old. Yet he says they are profitable for contemporary life at the time and this still holds true today. God has infused His truth and His will into the Bible and that doesn't change down through the ages. The Bible is filled with timeless truths that still inform and guide Christians no matter the time or place. The Bible is in part a historical document, but unlike the rest, it is also living and active, inspired and useful for life before God today.

Going back to the typical Bible study in America, all Christians instinctively understand the disconnect between Bible times and modern times. And most people can think up some explanation to bridge that gap and apply the Bible to life today. But this is not good enough, for the goal is to find God's truth and will, not man's.

So this is the real task: to study the Bible in order to discover its meaning according to God. You're not interested in pooled ignorance, you're not interested in subjective spiritualization, you're not interested in what it means to you—you want to know what the Bible means to God as written through the original author to the original audience. You want to capture the intended meaning of the text. This is the first and great goal of Bible study.

However, it's insufficient to stop here, because the Bible does need to be made to speak to modern life and times. Therefore, another essential step of Bible study, after capturing the intended meaning of the text, is to extract the timeless truth from the text. After finding what the text meant "then," it's time to discern how the text applies "now." How does it impact believers today? What is God's message through this passage for Christians today?

Both capturing the intended meaning of a passage and then extracting its timeless truth is not something that can be done on a whim. It does not happen by accident or without labor. It takes work; it takes Spirit-illuminated study. But so far, through this guide, you have done that study. You have been in the text, reading, observing, questioning, answering. You have labored to bridge the gaps and mine the data. By this point, a lot of study has been done.

Now then, you are hopefully ready to initiate the final steps of Bible study. The first is to capture and declare your passage's meaning. In a word, this is interpretation. You are summarizing and stating what the text means. Then you are after the timeless truth. After finding the meaning, you must discover what God wants all Christians of all ages to know from it. In this lesson, both of these crucial Bible study steps will be covered in greater detail.

Step #9—Interpret

Absolutely every piece of literature must be interpreted, including the Bible. That's because words inherently can mean different things. There is a spectrum of interpretation. On one side, words are taken at their normal, plain meaning. On the other side, words are taken with some special, spiritual, or allegorical meaning.

When studying the Bible, although it is a spiritual book, you are seeking the normal, plain meaning of the words. This is often called the "literal" approach. However, the key is to remember that you are always after the meaning of words as determined by the author, whether that's literal or figurative.

Hopefully, through study, you are prepared to do that now. All of the steps of Bible study so far have led you up to this point. Now is the time to interpret by stating the meaning of your text. So far, in the reading, observing, and even studying phase, you have been concerned with what your passage *says*. Now though you want to connect this with what your passage *means*. This is interpretation.

To simplify this step, for beginners, it's useful to follow a little formula for interpreting any given passage. With your passage, write out a **single past tense sentence** that tells what the **original author** wanted his **original audience** to know.

This is to be a single sentence because the meaning should be simple, straight forward, and not overly complicated. This is to be a past tense sentence because you are after the original meaning in its original setting. This is to concern the original author because you want to know his intent in the writing, which is going to be the same as God's intent. And this is to concern the original audience because you want to take into consideration the specific target of the text. Overall the goal is to come up with a one sentence description of the text's intent. Remember, you are not concerned about the present day audience and application yet. The meaning of the text never changes, but applications and connections will be different. First through you must arrive at the original meaning.

Obviously, you are trying to focus on the main point or main argument of the passage. Usually this is attached to the main verb, but not always. Sometimes the paragraph itself will have a self-contained purpose, but other times, you will need to include information from the context to arrive at the passage's purpose. This is where you are bringing to bear all the study work you have done, so take time to review your notes and even check with other resources. This may be one of the most challenging steps, but it is also the most important.

Examples will be given after the next Bible study step.

Step #10—Principlize

Scripture has an important meaning for you, but that meaning is not going to be the same as its original, direct meaning. This is because you are not an ancient Israelite, you are not a new Christian in Colossae, etc. Since the audience has shifted, in some way, the meaning for you has shifted as well. Therefore, after arriving at the original meaning of the text, you now need to uncover the universal truths or principles contained in the text.

The need for this step is not new. The New Testament writers understood that they were living in a new time now that Jesus had died and resurrected. This event changed everything. Even though many of them had Jewish backgrounds, so much of the Old Testament no longer directly applied to them. But this did not mean they tossed the Old Testament out. Rather, they too worked to extract the timeless principles taught in the Old Testament, even though they were no longer theocratic Israel. For instance:

Romans 15:4

⁴ *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.*

1 Corinthians 10:11

¹¹ *Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.*

2 Timothy 3:16–17

¹⁶ *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

This being the case, the question now becomes how you arrive at the timeless truths of a text. In the typical pooled ignorance Bible study of America, each individual is engaging in principlizing the text. The problem however is that their conclusions are simply wrong. Or perhaps they are stating a truth, but it just does not come from that text.

For example, when studying the classic story of David and Goliath, people feel the need to make this ancient story apply today, but they go off track by creating timeless truths that are found nowhere in the text. So when they learn that David picked up five smooth stones to fight Goliath, they say there is a great lesson for us to learn today from this, for these five stones represent courage, confidence, preparation, trust, and victory.

Now, these are timeless truths. God wants His people to display courage, confidence, preparation, trust, and victory. But absolutely nothing in the text of 1 Samuel 17 suggests this meaning for the stones. Anyone could say these stones represented anything and it would be just as correct as this interpretation. The point is this—Scripture does need to be principlized, but those principles must be grounded and rooted in the proper interpretation of the passage.

To find the timeless truth or principle taught in any Bible passage, you must first look at the text's intent as discerned in step #9. Then the process is simply a matter of contemporizing the biblical names, terms, and circumstances. You still want to capture the timeless truth in a single sentence, but no longer use past tense or proper names.

When dealing with the New Testament, this is often rather straightforward, since the audience is still Christians under the new covenant. But be careful in the Old Testament where you must take into account the progress of revelation and the original audience of Israel. The better your grasp of Scripture in general, the better you will be able to discern what in Scripture is universal and what is limited to a specific audience.

Text	Text's Intent	Timeless Truth
Ephesians 5:22-33	Paul instructed the Ephesians that there is a reciprocating relationship between marriage and the gospel.	There is a reciprocating relationship between marriage and the gospel.
1 John 1:5-7	John is writing to Christians so that they may have fellowship with the God who is light, which depends on having an accurate view of and response to sin.	To have fellowship with the God who is light, you must have a biblical view of and response to sin.
Joshua 1:1-9	Joshua writes concerning himself how he was to lead God's people in obeying God, yet with strength and courage because of God's promises and faithfulness.	The people of God can have strength and courage to serve Him obediently because of His faithfulness.
Job 1-2	Moses writes to Israel to show how Job's righteousness kept him from sinning, but not from suffering, and to show that the servant of God will accept both good and bad from God, yet still worship Him.	God's righteous sovereignty uses perceived evil.