

# HOW TO READ AND STUDY THE BIBLE

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Think for a moment about a trip you have taken. You left home, traveled to your destination, and had various memorable experiences. Perhaps you experienced a culture different from your own and found that the greater the cultural differences between home and destination, the greater the effort needed to communicate and to learn in your new environment. Yet you persevered, experienced new people and places, and were enriched by it all.

The Bible is God's Word to us; we are not simply "reading someone else's mail." Yet, Bible study can be like taking a trip to another culture. The language at times seems foreign. You might have difficulty finding your way around the history or the literature. You see new things that are beautiful or even strange. You then gather up what you have gained from your study time and hopefully you grow by the experience.

Since reading the Bible is a crosscultural experience, we need a vehicle that can take us to where we can hear what God is saying to us through those experiences, and I suggest that the right vehicle is a sound process of listening to the text of Scripture. Through a sound process of Bible reading, we see "the sights" God wants us to see. We learn to navigate the unfamiliar territories of biblical history and literature, read the "road

signs” that mark the main points to which we must pay attention, and understand the language of the Bible.

After we have lived in the world of the biblical text for a while and become familiar with what is going on there, persevering through challenges and hearing what God wants us to hear, we then “travel back home” to our life contexts, bringing with us changed hearts and minds. The vehicle that can bring us home is discerning the principles and significance of what we have encountered in the Bible and then finding specific ways to apply God’s truth to our lives. Using this word picture, let’s look at five main stages for doing a more thorough study of a Bible passage.

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Choose a passage	Study the broad historical context of the book	Read the passage in several translations	Choose key words to study	Identify the main points and principles of the passage
Gather your tools	Study the literary genre	Look for key dynamics in the passage	Consult word study tools	Identify how these address original and modern contexts
Pray	Study the immediate literary context of the passage	Make a provisional outline of the passage	Consult a concordance	Make a specific application for your own life

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## Stage 1: Pack Your Bags

One of the most important aspects of a trip is what happens before the trip. Preparation and packing can make all the difference.

**Choose a Passage:** Just as when traveling you need to start out with a destination in mind, when studying the Bible you must first decide what specific passage you will address. Be sure to choose a passage that you can cover well in your designated period of time. For instance, if you are doing a detailed study of a passage from one of Paul's letters, four to seven verses (e.g., 2Co 2:14-17) are plenty to tackle in one session. If you have a longer passage you want to study (e.g., all of Romans 8), break it down into smaller segments and study the whole of the chapter over an extended period of time. Trying to study too large a section all at once will lead to frustration. However, if you are studying a section of biblical narrative, your passage can be longer since narratives do not depend on detailed argumentation.

As you attempt to do Bible study over the coming weeks, you will get a sense of how much ground you can cover in a week's time. Over time you will become more familiar with your tools and processes, allowing you to study more efficiently. But remember, just as you would not want to hurry past important historical sites just to get to the end of a trip, the key in Bible study is not speed but rather an approach that takes you deeper into God's Word and transforms you in the process.

**Gather Your Tools:** In addition to this study Bible, which includes a variety of features to take you deeper into the Word, it helps to have several types of translation on hand. Some translations are more "formal," following the patterns of the original words as closely as possible, even if the results are not always readily understandable to modern readers. Others are more "functional," trying to communicate the author's meaning even if that means departing from the exact pattern of words in the passage. Still other translations attempt to strike a balance between these two approaches, which is the tactic taken in the CSB.

A strong Bible dictionary has much to offer, including an outline and introduction to each book of the Bible, plus entries on people, places, culture, theological issues, and key events mentioned in the Bible. It is also helpful to have dictionaries specifically covering the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. These show you the range of possible meanings a given word can have. There are many Bible study software programs available. Some may be had for free on the internet. While the internet can be

an amazing resource for Bible study, not all web sites are created equal. Therefore, do your best to assess the quality of the site. You might ask a minister or mature Christian to help you discern a site's trustworthiness. Also, while free internet sites can be helpful, they often use outdated tools that are public domain. These tools still have value but need to be used in conjunction with tools based on recent study by evangelical scholars.

The best Bible commentaries provide a treasure trove of information, including an introduction to the book, an outline of the book, theological reflection, deep word studies, thoughtful interpretive insights, and application. Ask a trusted Christian or minister to help you evaluate the usefulness, trustworthiness, and accessibility of the commentaries that are available.

Pray: Once you have chosen your passage and gathered your tools, begin your time of study with prayer. You might begin by praying something like this: Lord, thank you for your Word. I pray that you will give me the discipline to study this passage carefully. Please also give me the discernment to understand the details. Lord, please guide me by your Spirit and lead me into your truth. I am committed to applying what I find here, and I pray that you will change me by your Word, bringing my life in line with your will and ways of thinking. Thank you for this time.

## **Stage 2: Read the Maps**

Maps are vital to navigation—you must know where you are to understand how to get to where you want to go.

In Bible study, knowledge of the historical and literary contexts provides orientation. Like maps, they give us the layout of the biblical “neighborhood.” The historical context can give us a clearer backdrop in terms of historical events or cultural dynamics of the time, and the literary context can help us understand how these words function, given where the author placed them in the book.

The Broad Historical Context of the Book: In studying the historical context of a book, you want to understand the following facts:

- Who authored the book?
- Who were the original recipients?
- Where were the author and the recipients located?
- When was the book written?
- What is the purpose of the book?

You can find this kind of information in the book introductions in this study Bible. You can also find it in Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and Bible handbooks. The *Holman Illustrated Bible Handbook*, for instance, gives general background information on the city of Philippi and the church there, including the following:

Philippi was an important city in the province of Macedonia....The city had a privileged status as a colony of Rome, so its citizens were considered citizens of Rome....According to Acts there were not enough Jews in the city to support a synagogue, so the city and the church were primarily Gentile.

The Literary Genre: Another aspect of the context of a passage has to do with “genre,” or the kind of literature with which we are dealing. The kind of literature of a given passage will determine how we approach the text and what kind of questions we might ask of it. If I pick up a novel, I understand that its purpose is not primarily to communicate historical facts. If, however, I read a book detailing the history of America, the purpose is to communicate and interpret historical facts.

Different parts of the Bible reflect different literary genres and, therefore, are intended to accomplish different purposes and must be interpreted by different rules. Our goal with each is to understand what God intends to communicate through the human author, but to do so we must understand how the author intended his writing to communicate with his original audience.

This brings us to vital questions we must ask of the text. For narrative literature, for instance, we want to ask, “What is the significance of this part of the story? How does it fit into the grand story of God in the Scriptures?” The biblical authors had much material from which to choose, and they chose to include the stories they did for a reason.

Psalms and other poetic literature, on the other hand, often communicate emotions expressed in worship. These might include celebration, thanksgiving, sadness, reflection, or anger. Therefore, an important interpretive key when studying a psalm is to ask, “What is the emotion expressed?” and “How is the emotion being expressed?” The Psalms often use figurative language, for instance.

Finally, proverbs are meant to communicate general guidelines for living. Consider the following passage from Proverbs 4:10-12 (CSB): Listen, my son. Accept my words, and you will live many years. I am teaching you the way of wisdom; I am guiding you on straight paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hindered; when you run, you will not stumble. Some mistakenly take this passage as a promise that an obedient child will be guaranteed a long life free of impediments. There are many wonderful promises in Scripture that are intended to give comfort and hope to God’s people, but neither the human author nor the Divine Author intended for proverbs to be promises. This proverb is saying, in effect, that the best way for a child to live is by seeking out wisdom; this is the path of success in life, and, generally speaking, will lead to a long and effective life.

The Immediate Context of the Passage: By the immediate literary context we mean how the passage under consideration fits into the overall development of the book. Words need a context to have a specific meaning. Think about the English word “hand.” It has more than a dozen possible meanings. It can be used for your physical hand, “give him a hand” (meaning either “applause” or “help”), the hand of a clock, etc. Yet, you normally have no trouble following the meaning of the word in specific contexts. Someone might say, “I cut my hand with a knife,” and you know they are not talking about the “hand” on a wall clock.

In the same way, the words of the Bible often could be understood to mean different things, but the authors used their words to communicate in specific contexts. So reading

a Bible passage in its correct context is foundational for understanding what a given word means. One way to identify the context is to track the themes in a section of Scripture. Write in the margins the main topics covered, and constantly reflect on these as you progress through the passage.

When we consider the immediate context in a narrative passage, we are looking for any aspect of a historical situation indicated by the passage itself. What do we mean by the immediate historical situation? In studying the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:1–46, for example, the immediate historical situation has to do with Ahab as king of Israel, a time of punishing drought, Elijah the prophet, and the location of Mount Carmel. The historical situation of the book as a whole, on the other hand, would have to do with when and why 1 Kings was written and the fact that the book spans from the reign of Solomon down through the death of the wicked king Ahab.

## **Stage 3: Read the Road Signs Carefully**

When you travel, it is critical that you read the road signs well.

As we study the Bible, there are many clues to the author's intentions built right into any given passage. So, one important aspect of Bible study is slowing down and reading the passage carefully.

When you are driving down a road at 65 miles per hour, how many roadside details do you catch? Not many. You might be able to see interesting objects on roadside, but they blur and then fade quickly as you speed by.

Many of us are “drive by” readers of Scripture, never slowing down to explore and enjoy the details of God's Word; consequently there is much that we miss in the process. Choose to slow down and read with care. Read a passage repeatedly if you sense you've yet to catch all the elements. One way to ensure that you are reading slowly

enough to catch the details is to underline key phrases or words, or write notes in the margin.

Read the Passage in Several Translations: Doing a comparison of modern English Bible translations can be a helpful way to highlight key interpretive issues in a passage. Why? Because translation, by its nature, requires interpretation. With almost any verse of Scripture, translators have to choose, given the context and grammatical constructions, between various possible word meanings. Therefore, the differences reflected in the various translations represent various interpretations of the passage.

Look for Key Dynamics in the Passage: Now read through your chosen passage again in your main translation. Look for the features listed below and circle, underline, or highlight them, perhaps using different color pens. This exercise will give you a much clearer picture of the passage. Common features to look for include:

- Subject—who or what is the passage focusing on?
- Verb—is it a statement, an exhortation, a question or answer, an action, explanation, or illustration?
- Conjunctions—and, but, or, so, for, both...and, neither...nor, either...or, not only...but also
- Time—after, before, when, while, since, until
- Cause—because, since, in order that, so that
- Condition—if, in case, even if, unless
- Concession—although, even though, whereas
- Means—how is the action accomplished?
- Agent—who does the action?
- Result—what is accomplished?
- Purpose—why was the action done?

When reading narrative material, identify the following:

- Introduction and Conclusion—the author often tips off the intended impact of a narrative in his introduction and conclusion



- Setting—details on place, time (historical era and duration of the event), and social situation (who is involved?)
- Character Information—identify the protagonist and antagonist, note prevailing emotions and actions, and pay close attention to dialogue and character descriptions
- Narrative Dynamics—identify the conflict, its escalation, and eventual resolution
- Teaching Forms and Figures of Speech—look for the presence of allusions to or quotations of the Old Testament, plus figures of speech such as hyperbole, simile, metaphor, riddle, pun, parable, object lesson, illustration, parabolic act, paradox, irony, amen formula, and prophecy

Don't get overwhelmed with searching for these dynamics. Take a few at a time, reading the passage with those dynamics in mind. Then read again, looking for a few more of the dynamics listed above. "Filtering" the passage in this way will give you great insight into the passage. If when reading the passage you see just two or three features that you had not seen before, you are making progress!

Make a Provisional Outline of the Passage: The outline is provisional since you still have a good bit of study to do on the passage. However, it is helpful to make a tentative outline at this point to begin to assess the general structure of the passage.

## Stage 4: Learn to Speak Like a Local

One of the most interesting aspects of traveling has to do with learning how people in different places use words.

For instance, the German phrase "Guten Tag" literally means "good day," yet it is normally used as a greeting only in the afternoon, and thus is equivalent to an English speaker saying, "good afternoon."

To understand the biblical text, we need to have an accurate understanding of how words are used. Word meanings are determined by the contexts in which they are used.

When studying a word in the biblical text we want to (a) know the possible meanings for that word in the ancient world, (b) determine, based on the context, which meaning the author most likely intended, and (c) see whether insight on an author's use can be gained by noting how the same word is used elsewhere in the Bible.

**Choose Key Words to Study:** Identify key words in the passage. These may be terms that are repeated, terms that are unclear or puzzling, or terms that seem to be theologically important.

**Consult Word Study Tools:** Get at the Hebrew or Greek words behind our English translations by using an exhaustive concordance, Bible software programs, or various types of expository dictionaries. Once you have accessed the range of possible meanings for the Hebrew or Greek word, consider those possible meanings in the context of the passage you are studying. This gives you a look at the various nuances of the Greek or Hebrew word behind the translation you are using, deepening your understanding of what the biblical author might have been trying to say.

This is also an excellent point in your Bible study to consult good commentaries. They will discuss the key words of the passage against the backdrop of literary context, background issues, the author's theology, and other factors.

**Consult a Concordance:** You can use a concordance to look for other uses of the same Hebrew or Greek term you are studying. Identify places where the word is used similarly to the way it is used in the passage you are studying. Such cross references can provide you with greater understanding of the passage on which you are doing your word studies.

Word studies can be very helpful, but they can also be abused, and there are word study fallacies we want to avoid. A few of the most common fallacies include:

**Cross reference fallacy**—Insisting that a word as used in one passage must be used the same way in another passage, simply because the same word is being used.

Root fallacy—Insisting that a word’s true meaning is tied to its root meanings, or the parts of the word. But this is not always how language works.

Multiple meanings fallacy—Insisting that all the possible meanings of a word occur in a given use in a particular passage. Most of the time, an author had a particular meaning in mind.

## Stage 5: Head Home

As with any trip, there comes a time to travel home.

Bible study is analogous in that applying the Bible to our lives is “bringing it home.” We were never meant to read and study the Bible simply to learn a list of facts. Rather, we were meant to experience transformation by the Word (Rm 12:1–2), and transformation takes place as we embrace the Word, applying it to our everyday lives. Commenting on the command to love one’s neighbor, James says:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? In the same way faith, if it doesn’t have works, is dead by itself (Jms 2:14–17).

Faith without deeds, without application, is dead. James was addressing those who had disconnected belief in the Christian life from active obedience.

At times the application may be a right belief, the adjusting of one’s understanding to fit what God says is true. At other times, application might be to worship God. Often application will involve active obedience that puts into practice what has been learned. But the movement from understanding the Word to its application in obedience is nonnegotiable from the Bible’s standpoint.

How then can we apply the things we learn in the Bible to our lives in responsible ways?

Identify the main points and principles of the passage: What truth claims is the Scripture passage making? Identify them. Search for the principles as well. A principle is a “universal truth” that applies in all places at all times.

Identify how these address original and modern contexts: Notice how the principle is applied to the situation dealt with in your passage and think through parallel situations in your life.

Make specific applications to your life: Work at moving beyond vague generalities like, “I need to love people more!” Write down who you need to love and how you need to express love to them. As noted above, applications might be an action to do (e.g., “wash the dishes”). Yet, they could also involve the change of a belief, or even to respond to God’s Word by worshiping Him.

## A Simple Plan

I hope you have enjoyed the “trip” as we have discussed how to read and study the Bible more effectively. Begin your new commitment with a definite reading plan. Commit to taking 15-30 minutes per day, and read through the Bible over the next year or two. Take one or two longer blocks of time per week to study the Bible in greater depth.

Bible reading and study can give us great joy and fulfillment as we open our lives to God’s Word. May you be blessed as you pursue being a “Word person” led by the Spirit, transformed by the Scriptures, and effective in advancing God’s agendas in the world.