

10 Tips for Getting Started with Inductive Bible Study

1. Set aside consistent, undistracted time to read the Bible.

Two of the most acute challenges to effective personal Bible study are *busyness* and *distraction*. Many Christians feel too busy to study the Bible. We know it's important, but we often rush through our Bible reading rather than creating space to linger over God's Word. Moreover, we are often easily distracted by our smartphones, which deliver emails, texts, social media, and news updates to our eyes constantly throughout the day. Our hurried schedule and divided attention conspire to hamstring our morning or evening devotional times.

Those who desire to get started (or restarted) with studying the Bible would do well to set aside regular time each day when the Bible is open and the smartphone, laptop, and TV are powered off. We need to remember—and believe—that we need to hear from God's Word each day and other things that seem urgent can wait.

2. Read the Bible with a plan and purpose.

The phrase “inductive Bible study” has various connotations. In this brief article, it refers to purposefully and systematically studying God's Word on its own terms, observing what the text says in its context, interpreting Scripture with Scripture, and applying the truth of God's Word to our lives. I like to explain this process using three L's: *Look*: (What does this passage say?), *Learn* (What does it mean?), and *Live* (How must I respond?).

I find it most helpful to study inductively through entire books of the Bible, to see how each verse, paragraph, and chapter builds upon on each other and contributes to the biblical author's flow of thought and theological message. While it's possible to work through the inductive Bible study process with a short book like Philemon or 3 John in one day, we need a plan to study longer books over a period of days or weeks. Whether we follow a daily Bible reading schedule or choose to study through one book at a time, a plan gives order and direction to our personal study and helps us develop good habits for consistent, purposeful time in God's Word.

3. Prepare to read the Bible by praying.

Once we have set aside consistent, undistracted time and space in our schedules and have a plan for what we will read, we need to pray that God will focus our restless hearts and illuminate His Word. (2 Tim. 3:16-17) We believe that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” So, we need supernatural help to read this supernatural book (John 14:26) But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things...

Consider beginning your regular time of Bible reading with some of these prayers from Psalm 119:

“Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.” (119:17)

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” (119:18)

“Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.” (119:34)

“Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.” (119:35)

“Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.” (119:37)

Even with consistent time and a deliberate plan, our personal Bible study will not produce lasting spiritual fruit in our lives if we do not pray and ask for God’s help to understand, believe, and obey his Word.

4. Read the Bible patiently and precisely.

We’ve already addressed several obstacles to effective personal Bible study: busyness, distraction, aimlessness, and prayerlessness. One other subtle challenge we face is *familiarity*. Many seasoned Christians have read the Bible for years and heard numerous sermons or Sunday school lessons. It’s easy to fall into bad habits or allow personal Bible reading to become routine because we are already familiar with the story and content of the Bible. We need to slow down and read *patiently*, lingering and meditating on God’s Word. We must also read *precisely*, noticing the details, logic, and nuance of the text. We need to be stirred up and reminded afresh of what God’s Word says as we seek to believe God’s promises, fight against sin, and follow Christ each day (2 Pet. 1:12). When we “look” or observe what Scripture says, we want to know exactly what the text says and to see more than we’ve seen before.

5. Ask good questions when you read.

Breakthroughs in personal Bible study often begin by asking questions and looking carefully at the text and surrounding context for answers: *Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?* For example, if we are studying Philippians we could ask several questions about the opening verse. *What biblical genre (type of writing) am I reading?*

Philippians begins like most NT letters by mentioning the writer and recipients, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving. *Who is sending this letter?* Verse 1 offers us an initial answer: Paul and Timothy. Yet beginning in verse 3, the author writes using the first-person singular (I, my, and me), which suggests that Paul is the letter’s principal author.

If we continue reading, we discover that Paul writes from prison (Phil. 1:12–14) and plans to send his trusted colleague Timothy to visit these believers soon (2:19–24). *How are the senders described?* They are “servants of Christ Jesus” (1:1), which anticipates the reference to Jesus himself as “a servant” in

2:7. *Where is Philippi?* According to Acts 16:12, it is “a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony,” where Paul and Silas traveled on their missionary journeys and were arrested and imprisoned.

The people of Philippi were proud of their leading city and Roman citizenship, but Paul calls the church to “behave as citizens worthy of the gospel” (1:27, ESV note) and reminds them of their heavenly citizenship and ultimate allegiance to Jesus (3:20). *Why does Paul give thanks to God?* The conjunction “because” in verse 5, introduces the reason for Paul’s gratitude in verse 3: “I thank my God ... *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*” The apostle later explains how the Philippians were the only church to share Paul’s trouble and partner with him “in giving and receiving” (4:14–15). Paul exudes love and affection for these dear saints (see 1:7–8) and constantly and joyfully thanks God for them.

Asking good questions helps us to be active readers and helps us discover fresh insights even in familiar passages.

6. Study repeated words and key themes.

One of my favorite inductive Bible study strategies is color-coding repeated words and key themes in a biblical book. Reading with colored pencils and a notecard in hand has several benefits. First, it makes us slow down and be more attentive and careful as we study the text. Second, it prompts us to look for new words and themes that we’ve not previously highlighted each time we work through a book. Third, color-coding repeated words, phrases, and themes help us to better appreciate a biblical author’s emphasis.

In my own personal study, I’ve chosen to focus on words and themes particular to each biblical book. For example, for Isaiah, I use one color for “holy” and “the Holy One of Israel” and another for “salvation.” In Jeremiah, I trace the imagery of judgment and restoration introduced in the prophet’s commission “to pluck up and to break down. . . to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). In Ezekiel, color-coding led me to identify the seventy-two times that God declares that people will “know that I am the LORD.” In Daniel, I highlight the themes of “wisdom” and “understanding” as well as “kingdom” and “dominion.” In Hosea, I underline the repeated references to “whoredom,” “adultery,” and related expressions.

I like to mark up my *ESV Study Bible* and Greek New Testament. Other readers may prefer to print out clean copies of the biblical text to study or a Bible software program. Whatever your preference, color-coding is a simple yet effective strategy for studying the Bible inductively.

7. Trace the flow of thought of the biblical authors.

Inductive Bible study requires us to be good readers, who seek to follow the biblical authors' flow of thought. The words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs in each passage do not come to us as isolated statements of truths, but they are linked together in a clear logical order. Good readers must distinguish between main clauses and supporting clauses and must pay particular attention to conjunctions in order to locate the author's main point and supporting points.

For example:

- *And* links two parallel statements together.
- *But* introduces a contrast with the previous statement.
- *For* and *because* introduce reasons for what precedes.
- *Therefore* introduces an inference based on earlier material.
- *If* introduces a conditional statement.
- *As* introduces a comparison.
- *In order that* or *that* introduce purpose statements.

8. Consult cross-references to interpret Scripture with Scripture.

The column of cross-references printed in many Study Bibles is an incredibly helpful resource for inductive Bible study. These cross-references, signaled by superscript letters before a word or phrase in the text, point readers to one of four possible connections between biblical texts: (1) a quotation of the OT in the NT, (2) a reference to specific words or phrases, (3) a reference to the same theme, or (4) a less direct reference to a similar theme.

For example, if we are studying Mark we see a number of cross-references in the opening verses. Verse 1 refers to Jesus as "the Son of God," and a cross-reference directs readers to Matt. 14:33, where 11 additional Scriptures are listed that inform our understanding of this important title. The cross-references in verses 2 point out parallel passages in Matthew and Luke and indicate that Mark is citing the OT (Mal. 3:1). The cross-references in verse 3 signals to the reader that Mark is citing Isaiah 40:3 and highlight two additional parallel passages in John and Luke. These cross-references help us to interpret Scripture with Scripture.

9. Connect each text to the gospel and the larger story of the Bible.

To properly interpret and apply a biblical text, it is crucial to keep in mind where it fits in the larger story of the Bible. In the beginning, God created His world and it was very good. Then sin brought disorder, devastation, and death for God's world and humanity. The OT portrays God's patience with His rebellious covenant people and His promises to rescue sinners and restore His broken world. The NT announces that God has fulfilled His ancient promises by sending Jesus Christ, our Savior. The Gospels narrate the life, death, and resurrection of the Savior and King Jesus Christ. Acts records how Jesus's followers continue His mission by proclaiming the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit among all nations. The Epistles provide apostolic instruction for believers living between Jesus's first and second comings.

I believe that careful inductive Bible study and Christ-centered biblical theology belong together. When we situate each book within the Bible's overarching narrative, we see that the whole of Scripture is profitable and relevant for believers today. For example, well-intended Bible reading plans have often derailed in Leviticus. This book seems to many contemporary Christians (at least in North America and Europe) to be far removed from our lives. However, Leviticus provides the essential biblical context for understanding Christ's sacrifice to make atonement for our sins, his priestly intercession for his people, and the foundational commands to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; Rom. 13:9) and "be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45; 1 Pet. 1:16).

I suggest asking three questions to interpret and apply each text in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

- How does this passage of Scripture prepare for the gospel of Jesus Christ or draw out its implications?
- How does this passage help me to understand and believe the gospel?
- How does this passage call me to live as a follower of Jesus?

10. Turn the text you are studying into a prayer.

Prayer is essential to effective personal Bible study because our goal is not simply to learn new information but to be transformed by the Word of God. Prayer is probably the most basic way that we rightly respond to and apply what we read. We can turn a passage of Scripture into prayer back to God:

- *Praise God for who He is and what He has done.* Father, you are the Holy Judge of all people. Yet you have not treated us as our sins deserve, but you have ransomed us by the precious blood of your own son. Thank you, Lord! (1 Pet. 1:17–19)
- *Confess your sins that His Word reveals.* Lord, your word calls us to be holy in all our conduct, but we have fallen short in our actions, our words, and our thoughts. Forgive us, Father. (1 Pet. 1:14–16)
- *Ask God for fresh mercies and help.* Lord, we want to believe the good news that was preached to us. We need your help to put away hypocrisy, envy, and other sins that dishonor you. Give us power to proclaim your excellence, that others may know your saving mercy. (1 Pet. 1:25–2:10)

Praying through Scripture helps us avoid shallow or self-focused petitions. It helps us to internalize and meditate on God's truths and guides us to pray in accord to his will. And praying Scripture moves us into deeper communion with, delight in, and obedience to our glorious God who has graciously given us His Word.

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Resources: Blue Letter Bible: <https://www.blueletterbible.org>
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