

How to Study the Bible

Find Good Study Tools

There are many great study tools out there, but for the lay person let me suggest two:

Study Bible. Find a Study Bible in a good, modern English translation. Be sure you are using an actual translation of the Bible. Paraphrases such as the Living Bible (or ones similar such as The Message) are fine for supplementing your study, but translations are best and most accurate. A Study Bible contains helpful articles and notes throughout the text giving insight into difficult passages, key words/phrases, historical references, etc. Good Study Bibles are: ESV Study Bible, HCSB Study Bible, NIV Study Bible, The MacArthur Study Bible, and Life Application Bible to name a few.

Bible Dictionary. These dictionaries define many words and theological concepts found in the Bible. They also give background information on names, places, objects, measurements, cultural practices, etc. Bible dictionaries actually function more like an encyclopedia. Everything in these dictionaries is listed in alphabetical order and is incredibly helpful and easy to use in study. A good Bible dictionary is the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.

Ask Good Questions

Simply taking out a pen and paper and writing questions you have of the text along with your observations is an essential aspect of good study. A Study Bible will “mark off” passages of Scripture according to the central idea conveyed by its author. You will notice this demarcation by the bold font of the numbers that begins a new thought/passage. Take one of these passages and start asking questions (the article in Study Bibles at the beginning of each book will help answer many of these):

- Who is the author of this text and where was he writing?
- Who are the recipients of this text and what was the author’s purpose for writing to them?
- What is the genre (type) of this text? (e.g. epistle, apocalyptic, parable, etc.). The genre of the book/text often helps determine interpretation (i.e. if a statement is literal or figurative)
- Who is speaking and/or acting in this text?
- What is the central idea of this text? In one sentence, write out the main idea the author is conveying in the text.
- When is this occurring?
- Where is it happening?
- Why did the author record this and how can I live it out?

Follow a Good Study Method

Once you have the initial groundwork of study established for your passage, try and follow this fourfold approach to digging deeper in your study:

1. Grammatical principles

This looks at the key words and phrases in a text. It is important that we understand what the author intended to say, not just what the word/phrase seems to say to us today. I always tell my hermeneutics students, "A text cannot mean what it never meant." What should we look for in word study? Study Bibles and Bible dictionaries will help with most of these.

First, the meaning of the word. For example, what was a "talent" given to servants in one of Jesus' parables? What does the word "Raca" mean?

Second, what is the context of the word? Jesus referred to the "kingdom of God" in the Model Prayer (Matt. 6:10). What does this phrase mean? Jesus defined it Himself: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The context defines the term.

Third, what is the history of the word? How was this word used in Jesus' or Paul's day? How was it used in an even earlier day? How is the English word related to the Greek word in its etymology? For example, Jesus began each Beatitude with "Blessed are..." The English word "blessed" is from an Old English word "bliss" meaning "joy." That word came from the word "blod" meaning "blood sacrifice." So, something was blessed if it was atoned by blood sacrifice. However, the Greek word for "blessed" is "makarios" which was a word that meant "joy beyond one's circumstances." The history of a word is important.

Fourth, what are the other biblical uses of the word? A concordance or the cross-reference list on each page in your Bible can help with this. Jesus said in Matt. 5:22 that calling someone a "fool" put you in danger of the "fire of hell." Why is calling someone a fool such a big deal. Psalm 14:1 uses the word "fool" also- "the fool has said in his heart there is no God."

Fifth, what is the cultural background of this word/phrase? When Jesus said in Matt. 5:41 "if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two" what did he mean?

Within grammatical principles are other considerations such as sentence structure and Greek/Hebrew rules of grammar. These can get complicated for someone who doesn't have proficiency in the original languages. Finally, look for figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, etc. to help determine the right interpretation/application of the word/phrase.

2. Historical Principles

Determine the historical background of the text. What is going on in this region of the world at the time this passage was written and/or at the time the events being described occurred? Ask questions like: why was this war being fought? Why did these two countries hate each other? What was the city of Corinth like and how might that explain the sexual sin in the church there?

Consider the geography of the land/place of the passage being studied. Joseph and Mary travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem was a journey of 90

miles- tough for Mary on the back of a donkey while 9 months pregnant. Another example is Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan where He describes the religious leaders going "down" on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and ignoring the man in need. This is significant because Jerusalem is quite a bit above Jericho in sea level. The fact they were going "down" the road meant they had already been to the temple to worship, but it must not have affected them much since they ignored the injured man.

Also consider social context and customs of the day. Why would it have been scandalous for Jesus to talk to a Samaritan woman? Why was it out of place for her to be at the well in the middle of the day? Another example is why Jesus refused the wine offered him on the cross. History tells us the wine offered to crucifixion victims was laced with a narcotic to dull the pain. Jesus wanted to be in his right mind all the way through the crucifixion.

3. Theological Principles

Theology can get very complex quickly, but just consider these two rules of thumb in your Bible study.

One, Scripture interprets Scripture. What do other passages in the Bible say about the passage you are studying? A classic example is James 2:21 where James says that Abraham was justified by his works. The problem is that there are a myriad of biblical passages that teach we are justified by grace through faith, not our works. So, here we must look for some reason as to why James would have stated this. The Bible does not disagree with itself. James is writing to persecuted Christians who clearly understood justification by faith and his statement is made with this in mind emphasizing the importance of works that are derived from the basis of faith.

Two, watch for general theological concepts. What does the passage you are studying say about:

- God
- Humanity
- Creation
- Sin
- Salvation
- The future
- Missions

For example, you are studying Matt. 5:13, "You are the salt of the world..." Your word study has revealed that salt was used as a preservative of food in the ancient world. Theologically, this means that God uses us in His saving work on earth. Believers work like a preservative as we stand for truth and share the Gospel. If we lose our saltiness and become like the fallen world, we lose our purpose in life and fail to accomplish our mission.

4. Practical Principles

It doesn't do any good to study the Bible and then not go out and obey/live out what you have learned. God gave us the Bible and wants us to study it so that we can apply its truths in our daily lives. After studying a passage, look

again at the central idea of the text. How does that apply to you? To your current situation? Write down how you can specifically apply the meaning of the text in your life. How can you be a good neighbor to some you know? How can you be salt? How can you bring your thoughts captive to Christ? Pray and ask God to show you specific ways you can put into practice what He has taught you through His Word.

**Adapted from James Denison's, 7 Crucial Questions About the Bible*