

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR BIBLE STUDY

There is a considerable difference between reading and studying the Bible. One who studies the Bible follows an established order and procedure, endeavoring to learn from Scripture rather than impose one's own ideas into the text. As a baker carefully follows a cooking recipe to produce a tasty dessert, so a wise Bible student must follow certain steps to insure an accurate interpretation and application of the biblical text. Believers are commanded by God to be good students of the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15), and are given the assurance that such an endeavor is profitable (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

These notes may be used to guide a careful student of Scripture in asking the right questions about a biblical text and to follow a logical procedure in studying that text.

Hermeneutics can be defined as the science and skill of interpreting Scripture. It is a science in that we follow careful procedures to discover what is there (*exegesis*) rather than imposing our own opinions and ideas on the text (*eisegesis*). It is a skill in that we can improve our abilities with practice and experience. And the discipline of careful study is always dependent upon the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27, 1 Cor. 3:10-13).

The three basic steps of this inductive method of Bible study are (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) application. These three-fold steps are beautifully illustrated by the observations made by Solomon in Proverbs 24:30-34. And since Bible study is a spiritual exercise, we must always ask the Lord to guide our thoughts and teach us through His Word. "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things from Your *Torah*" (Psalm 37:18).

I. OBSERVATION - WHAT DOES A TEXT SAY?

The Bible student must begin by setting aside all preconceived notions about what a passage may or may not teach. Careful study is inductive (asking questions as to the meaning) rather than deductive (looking for proofs of a certain interpretation or doctrine).

A. Background Questions

1. What is the historical setting?
2. Who are the persons involved?
3. What place names am I unfamiliar with?

B. Composition Questions

1. What is the literary form used in this text?

Discourse - a speech; Sermon on the Mount
Narrative - a historical development; Acts
Poetry - parallel ideas, figures of speech; Psalms
Legal - specific commands, case law; Exodus 20-24, Deut. 22:22-29
Proverb - wisdom for life expressed by analogy; Proverbs
Parable - teaching kingdom truth by analogy; Matthew 13
Prophetic - confronting God's people for breaking the covenant; Isaiah
Apocalyptic - visionary literature ("I saw . . ."); Ezekiel 40-48

2. What do the figures of speech mean? Explore the nature of the figure.

3. What does the grammar indicate? Is the writer describing past, future, accomplished, or presently occurring events?

C. Content Questions

1. Ask the six interrogatives:

Who? - persons	Where? - places
What? - facts	Why? - reasons
When - time	How - means

2. What words don't I understand?

Consult a dictionary, Bible dictionary or concordance.

II. INTERPRETATION - WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Interpretation is the important step in Bible study which helps the student bridge the linguistic, cultural, geographical, and temporal gap between the biblical writers and 20th century Christians. Faulty interpretation is the basis for the doctrines of the cults, making the Bible a book of confusion rather than a source of light.

The basis of our interpretation is faith in the verbal (Exod. 20:1, 1 Thess. 2:13), plenary (full in all respects), inspiration of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:15-16). This doctrine may be expressed like this: "God so directed the human authors of Scripture that using their own individual personalities, His complete revelation to mankind was recorded without error in the words of the original manuscripts." The aim of our interpretation is to discover the *one* true meaning of the text.

A. Literal Interpretation

1. Am I interpreting the word or sentence according to its' normal, customary,

and basic meaning.?

2. What is the meaning of the figure of speech?
 - a. Look for the plain literal meaning behind the figure.
 - b. Note the inherent contradiction (Gal. 2:9).
 - c. Look for the explanation in the context (John 3:37-39).
 - d. Look for the lesson taught by the figure (Jer. 2:13).
 - e. Recognize the literal meaning behind the figure.

B. Cultural Situation

1. What is the spatial background? Bible geography
2. What is the temporal background? Bible history, political history
3. What is the social background? Bible culture and institutions

C. Contextual Setting

1. What is the immediate context? Examine the book, sections, paragraphs
2. What is the parallel context? Note the parallel gospel accounts or parallel teachings of Paul.
3. How does my text advance the flow of thought in the immediate and extended context (the whole book)?
4. How would the message of this book be diminished if this text were absent?

D. Biblical Message

1. How does this little story or event advance the big story of Scripture, namely God's purpose to redeem the human race through the Promised One, Jesus?
2. How do the prophets, priests, and kings in the Hebrew Bible point to and anticipate Jesus, the one who ultimately fulfills these offices for Israel?
3. How does the story or text contribute to our understanding of the great themes of Scripture—kingdom, redemption and judgment?

III. APPLICATION - HOW DOES IT APPLY TO ME?

Application is the final and most important step of Bible study, yet it is often the most neglected. Ezra set an example of being one who studied and *practiced* the law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). Christ warned of the inevitable defeat of the one who fails to act upon the truth of God's Word (Matt. 7:24-27). James commands believers to be "doers"

of the Word and not “forgetful hearers,” for it is the “doer” of the Word that is blessed (James 1:22-25).

A. Evaluation Look for the principles, the timeless truths

1. Is the passage addressed to Israel, or to a specific Old Testament situation?
To evaluate the Old Testament passage, look to the New Testament.
 - a. Does the NT nullify the OT teaching? (Israel’s dietary laws)
 - b. Does the NT modify the OT teaching? (Sermon on the Mount)
 - c. Does the NT verify the OT teaching (truths about God; life principles)
2. Is the passage addressed to a specific New Testament situation or specific individuals? Acts 18:9-10, 1 Cor. 11:1-16, Jn. 16:13
3. Is the passage addressed to a historical situation *and* to others as well?
This would include the timeless truths like the truths Jesus told Nicodemus.

B. Application to My Life (theoretical)

1. Is there a fact I should know? (Cognition) Galatians 1:17
2. Is there a truth I should believe? (Persuasion) John 10:10
3. Is there something I should do? (Action) 1 John 1:9
 - a. A sin to confess?
 - b. A promise to claim?
 - c. A command to obey?
 - d. A temptation to avoid?
 - e. A truth to apply?

C. Application to a Contemporary Situation (practical)

1. Develop a principle from the passage.
2. Observe a need in an area of your life.
3. Develop a plan to do something in application of the passage.
4. Give proof of the application in some tangible way.

IV. RECORD - PRESERVE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

The final step of Bible study is to record your discoveries, interpretation, principles and applications so that you will have this information for future reference. What you don’t record will eventually be forgotten.

V. REVIEW - BIBLE STUDY IS AN ON-GOING PROCESS

Bible study is an on-going process not a one-time event. The Apostle Peter recognized and emphasized the importance of review (1 Peter 1:12-13). Moses taught this principle as well (Deut. 6:7-9). Repetition with variety is the key to learning!

V. BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

Study tools and reference works can help the careful student answer many of the questions raised in the process of Bible study. Keep these to a minimum since you want to develop your own study skills, not simply feed off someone else's plate.

Suggested study tools include a Bible dictionary, Bible encyclopedia, a Bible concordance, Old Testament and New Testament word books, a dictionary of theological terms, a Bible atlas, a history of the biblical world, a book on the cultural background of the biblical period, and a Bible handbook or introduction to provide background for the book or passage being studied.

Resist the temptation to grab a commentary as your first step when studying a biblical text. Explore the text yourself. Do your own work first! Then as you complete your own study you may want to consult a commentary to see if there is anything you missed or if your own conclusions need correction.

Commentaries allow you to interact with scholars in the field of Biblical studies, but don't deprive yourself of the joy of discovering the truth on your own. You will have a greater sense of conviction and enthusiasm in your teaching and counseling ministry when you are presenting what you yourself have discovered.