

How to Study Your Bible, Part 2

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The words of the Bible have life-changing power (1 Thess. 2:13) and can accomplish God's purposes. It is His Word that produces new life (1 Pet. 1:22–25), combats sin (Ps. 119:9–11), causes spiritual growth (1 Pet. 2:2), reveals our true motives (Heb. 4:12), and conforms us to the image of Christ (James 1:22–25). As such, it is important to learn how to study the Word. The main points for inductively studying the Word are Observation, Interpretation, Correlation, and Application.

The Holy Spirit enables our study to be effective. He teaches us the truths of God, guides us into truth, enables us to discern error, illuminates our minds with insight to understand truth, and empowers us to obey.

In beginning a study of the Scriptures, there are several basic truths to keep in mind. The Bible is divine in origin. It is the supernatural, progressive revelation of who God is and man's relationship to God. The Bible is a unique collection of sixty-six books written by men under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20–21). It is unified in all its parts and will never contradict itself (Ps. 119:160). It is inspired and therefore inerrant and authoritative (Ps. 18:30; 2 Tim. 3:16; John 17:17).

Observation

Observation is learning to see what the text says.

Use the six basic questions in observation.

- **Who?** Who is talking? Who is being talked about? Who is being talked to?
- **What?** What is the subject being discussed? What happened? What are the results? What comes before? What follows after? What ideas are expressed?
- **Where?** Where is this taking place? (A Bible handbook is helpful.)
- **When?** When is this activity or discussion taking place?
- **Why?** Why or what is the purpose of this activity or discussion?
- **How?** How are things being accomplished? How quickly? How are the people responding?

Discover the form, structure, or arrangement of the passage.

- Note natural breaks, divisions, and subgroups in the text.
- Is the passage poetry, narrative, a parable, a logical argument, a discourse, practical advice, history, drama, question and answer, a list, a command, a declaration, a contrast, a comparison, an illustration, a question, repetition, cause and effect?

Find the key words in the passage.

- Are they literal or figurative?
- What part of grammar is the word? (noun, verb, preposition, conjunction)
- Look for gender, numbers, tense.
- Determine what the key word means in context. (Helpful tools include a concordance, a dictionary, a Bible handbook, word studies, various translations.)

Look for comparisons and contrasts.

- Watch for words like “even so,” “as,” “likewise,” “but,” “nor,” “not.”

Investigate the use of Old Testament references.

Note the progression of an idea or chain of thought.

Record repetitions.

- Are there words, phrases, or expressions that are repeated?
- Why are they repeated and how are they related?

Visualize the verbs.

- Discern the action or movement of the passage.
- What is being done?

Picture the illustrations.

Examine the explanations.

- An explanation is anything that is used to illustrate, clarify, illuminate, describe, or demonstrate.
- To understand an explanation clearly, you must follow the logic of the writer.

Be sensitive to connecting words and conjunctions (if, therefore, because, or for, then, but, in order that).

Be willing to change your viewpoint.

- Eliminate preconceived ideas.
- Read the passage as though you were an impartial observer.
- Put yourself in another person's shoes.
- Learn to observe from different perspectives.

Take notes as you study.

Interpretation

After observing what the text says, we move into interpretation, which seeks to **discover what the text means**. The rules below form the grid for biblical interpretation of Scripture.

- Work from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.
- The Bible interprets itself—Scripture best interprets Scripture.
- Saving faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary for us to understand and properly interpret Scripture.
- Interpret personal experience in the light of Scripture and not Scripture in the light of personal experience.
- Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command.
- The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, not to increase our knowledge.
- Each Christian has the right and responsibility to investigate and interpret the Word of God for herself.
- Church history is important but not decisive in the interpretation of Scripture.
- The promises of God throughout the Bible are available for believers of every generation.
- Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally.
- Interpret words in harmony with their meaning in the times of the author.
- Interpret a word in relation to its sentence and context.
- Interpret a passage in harmony with its context.
- When an inanimate object is used to describe a living being, the statement may be considered figurative.
- When an expression is out of character with the thing described, the statement may be considered figurative.
- The principal parts and figures of a parable represent certain realities. Consider only these principle parts and figures when drawing conclusions.

- Interpret the words of the prophets in their usual, literal, and historical sense, unless the context or manner in which they are fulfilled clearly indicates they have a symbolic meaning. Their fulfillment may be in installments, each fulfillment being a pledge of that which is to follow.
- Scripture originated in a historical context, so it can be understood only in the light of biblical history.
- Though God's revelation in the Scriptures is progressive, both Old and New Testaments are essential parts of this revelation and form a unit.
- Historical facts or events become symbols of spiritual truths only if the Scripture so designates them.
- You must first understand the Bible grammatically before you can understand it theologically.
- A doctrine cannot be considered biblical unless it sums up and includes all that the Scriptures say about it.

Correlation

Since the Bible is truth, and all truth due to its divine origin is unified, it is important to **relate various truths to one another**. This helps you to make conclusions that are consistent with what the rest of the Bible says on the subject.

Word cross-references

Discovering how a word is used in other passages.

Parallel cross-references

Verses or thoughts that say virtually the same thing. The different wording and context give fresh insight on the subject.

Corresponding cross-references

New Testament writers frequently quote from the Old Testament. A study of the context of the passages quoted is often helpful in understanding the point the author is making.

Idea cross-references

Capturing the thought of the passage and comparing it with a similar thought elsewhere in the Bible.

Contrasting cross-references

Contrasting examples in the Bible help bring into proper understanding what the Bible teaches on a subject.

Application

Application is answering the question, "What should I do?"

The dangers of NOT applying God's Word:

- You deceive yourself into believing that knowing is enough.
- You will not grow into spiritual maturity.
- You will not retain what you don't practice.
- Your life will contradict what you say you believe.
- You compromise your ability to teach effectively.

General rules of application:

- Application must not be attempted before observation and interpretation.
- Application must be a decision rather than an emotion.
- Application must take place over an appropriate period of time.
- Application must be complete, not partial.
- Application must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Application must include a plan to put into action which is:
 - Significant enough to commit to
 - Simple enough to be understood
 - Short enough to be followed
 - Specific enough to be measured
 - Spiritual enough to make a difference.

Specific rules for effective application:

- State the teaching of a passage in the form of a timeless principle or truth that is consistent with God's Word, relevant to today, clear enough to be specifically followed.
- Examine how the application can be useful in specific relationships.
- Ask yourself if the passage has:
 - A principle to apply
 - A command to obey
 - A sin to confess and forsake
 - A habit to start or stop
 - An attitude to correct
 - A truth to believe
 - A promise to claim
 - An example to follow
 - An area to release to God
 - A specific action to take
 - A condition to meet
 - A person to forgive

- A danger or error to avoid
- A change to make in my character, conduct, or conversation.

Put the application into practice depending on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Concepts drawn from *A Layman's Guide to Interpreting the Bible* by Walter A. Henrichsen.