

How to Read the Bible

God reveals himself generally in his creation. But he reveals himself specifically in his word, which is contained in the Bible. The Bible is an owner's manual to the human condition. It tells us something about God, something about us, something about our world, and something about God's will in regard to both. It prescribes a proper relationship between the Creator (God) and the creature (us) – Job 38 is a reminder of this fact. As believers, we are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). This transformation takes place by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). And our minds are renewed by learning and proving that the word of God is true and effective, every day. To put it another way, we identify ourselves as Christ's brothers and sisters by applying God's word to how we live (Lk. 8:21).

God's word is powerful and efficacious (2Pet. 3:5). It is a living thing that discerns our thoughts and motives (Heb. 4:12). We are not to distort the word of God (2Cor. 4:2). And so we are to handle it correctly (2Tim. 2:15). If we do, it will effectually change us. It is our food and our sustenance (Jn. 6:35-54). It is the wisdom of God (Prov. 8, 9) and the standard of his righteousness (Ps. 119). Jesus is the living word of God, the source of life to us (Jn. 1:1-4).

In other words, God's Word is not to be treated lightly. It is not a source of knowledge alone, but of the wise application of the knowledge that it reveals. Knowledge alone puffs up, but love, which is knowledge wisely applied, builds up (1Cor. 8:1). We cannot apply or exercise the love of God if we do not first know what the love of God and his will entails (that takes us back to Rom. 12:2). With that in mind, we begin to read God's word as if it were luscious food, and we have been starving up to the point we open its pages. We come to it with a voracious hunger.

Steps to Understanding the Bible

1. Set aside any study tools. We don't want anyone else's opinion or insights until God has given us those insights directly. So commentaries, study Bible notes, handbooks, and Bible dictionaries, are the *last* things we want to look at, and only *after* we have wrestled with a passage ourselves. That wrestling may take days or even weeks of mulling it over in our mind, of meditating on it, and considering its application and scope, for ourselves. If we reach a dead-end, or if we have already established its meaning for ourselves, then we go to the notes of our study Bible, or perhaps a commentary on the book we're reading, to gain *additional* insights. We may find that we have perhaps misread or misinterpreted the passage. That's OK. But here's where we need to be wary. Commercial Bibles have commercial notes. That means they are not always accurate or consistent, doctrinally speaking. They are intended to satisfy the broadest audience possible. There is something for everyone. The *Scofield Reference Bible* of 1909 was the first widely published study Bible. Its doctrine, contained in the editor's notes, was questionable. But because it was so widely read, the opinions and interpretations of the editor became widely accepted doctrine, independent of the traditional teachings of the church. It altered the understanding of those teachings for generations of Bible students. It found its way into many of our seminaries, reproducing its errors exponentially. That was true of the *Darby* translation of 1890, as well. The *Jerusalem Bible* was an outstanding translation, but its notes were Catholic. A study Bible is extraordinarily helpful. But you need to be cautious of the notes you find there. Use what you can, what conforms to the doctrine you were taught, and leave the rest behind.

2. Wash your hands. This may sound silly, but we need to set up an environment in which to appreciate God’s word as something that is holy, sanctified, and precious in his sight. The Old Testament talks a lot about purifying ourselves before coming into the presence of God (Gen. 35:2; Ex. 19:10; 29:4; 30:18-21; Num. 8:7; Isa. 1:16). This is a small ritual to prepare ourselves; it reminds us of the holiness of God, and the corruption of our flesh. No, this is *not* a literal exercise of Ps 24:3-4 “**Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has *clean hands* and a pure heart**” NKJV. Washing our hands is simply a physical way to establish a mental attitude of awe. Obviously this is easier to do at home than at church. But even so, you might want to bathe or shower before going to church, (rather than doing it the night before) as part of that preparatory ritual. In keeping with this idea, it might be suggested that you don’t put the Bible in the bathroom for reading material; it should not be treated as entertainment to while away the time.

3. Pray beforehand. Ask God for wisdom and guidance. Ask him to give you understanding of what you are about to read. Tell him you want to know more about him, so that you may properly glorify him. Ask him to fill you with his Spirit, to guide you in all truth. Ask him to reveal to you whatever is displeasing to him *in you*. Ask him to convict you of your sinfulness through the mirror of his word. Ask him to show you his ways, so that you might walk in them. Ask him to show you his great love for you, and his trustworthy promises. And then ask him for the willingness, strength, and determination to be conformed to the image of his son in both thought and deed. You are asking for all of this so that the seed of his word in you might be fruitful, having fallen on good soil, soil properly prepared to receive it (Lk. 8:11-15).

4. Select your text. A reading program can be as simple as reading the Bible from cover to cover, a book at a time. It is the way I will suggest you read it. If you are a new Christian, or you haven’t read the whole Bible yet, then begin with the NT. When you finish, continue into Genesis, complete the OT and then return to the NT. The NT is the fulfillment of the OT; the OT is the foundation of the NT. One cannot be fully understood without the other. Some reading programs take you through the whole Bible in a year but not in sequence. You may be moved about topically, or the Psalms may be interposed with the reading of the other portions of Scripture. It is a good way to read the Bible for **devotions**, but it is not a good way to **study** it. *These are two separate activities.*

In moving towards spiritual maturity, Christians should learn to study the Bible with both our hearts *and* our minds. In the practice of devotions, Christians read the Bible and seek to meditate on it in such a way as to understand its practical significance for their relationship with God and the world around them; devotions reflect the passion of our heart to know God through a message to us. But Christians are also called to meditate on the Bible with their mind and so seek to increase their overall ability to understand the language, meaning, form, genre, and structure of the Bible; this type of study reflects our passion to know God through the message as it was originally given. By applying the mind to concentrated study of the Bible, Christians inevitably support and strengthen their devotions because they improve on the intellectual skill set through which the Holy Spirit can guide their reading and understanding of the Bible. *Kenneth A. Ristau;*
<http://anduril.ca/christian/devotions.html>

5. Outline the selected text. Normally the selected text is an entire book of the Bible. This works well in the NT, but in the OT it can be a problem. The books of Genesis, Chronicles, and Kings, are difficult to outline, and outlining may be less useful in them. The Psalms are best done individually rather than trying to follow a train of thought through all of them. And that's the point of outlining. We are trying to establish a train of thought. We want to organize the material so that we have a feel for the overall message, and where each part fits into it: the progression. I have never found an outline that I agreed with 100%. So don't be concerned with getting it right.

In interpreting the bible, we have an author, an audience, a setting, and a message for the audience. And so our outline begins with identifying each of those elements. Try doing it without using the study bible or a commentary. See if the text itself reveals these things to you. Are there historical figures or events mentioned that can help you place the text in a historical setting? Does the author reveal his identity or his background? Who is he talking to? Does he mention them by name, location, or activity?

- *What are the main points he makes?* These don't always break in the same place as the chapter and verse breaks, so be watchful.
- *Are there any repeated phrases or words?* List them in the outline.
- *Is there an overall theme?* Do those points all address the same issue? What is it? There may be multiple themes. What is the primary theme, and which are the secondary themes? Describe the theme(s) in your own words.
- *What is the key verse in the passage?* Usually, there is a one-liner that drives home the main point that the author is trying to make. Which verse is it? Mark it as the "Key Verse."

If you don't have a study bible that already includes these things, or if you disagree with what you find in your study bible, then you may want to include what you have discovered at the beginning of the book. Write directly in your bible. Then it is available to you next time you read it. You might want to mark the outline topics in the margins of your bible, so you know where the break in the train of thought begins. Sometimes your bible may include topical headers for you. If it hasn't, or if you disagree, put in your own. Don't be afraid to mark up your bible. But keep in mind that what God says to you today regarding this passage, may change in time. So date your insights. If you write insights from teachers and pastors in your bible, mark down who said it and when. You'll appreciate having done that in a few years. Give credit... and thanks.

6. Have a Topical List. I have a fixed number of topics that I want to isolate in the Bible. These are themes or ideas or doctrines that cross over the boundaries between books. It is a personally developed topical concordance. I wrote them down in the back of my bible so I'd have them handy. Some study bibles include a topical or subject list. As with outlines, I seldom find them useful. That's why I maintained my own. This activity lets me *own* God's word for myself.

Here are a few topics I have been interested in over the years –

My major purpose in life; End Times: signs of the end; what happens at the end; final signs; Christ *revealed* at the end; trees as symbols of God's sovereignty, grace, or providence; saints as

trees; my interim mission; Judgment; Double Judgment; Who goes to heaven; Israel is the Church; kingdom of heaven; total depravity; predestination; election; particular atonement; perseverance; sanctification vs. salvation; irresistible grace; prayer; Trinity; trials; God’s sovereignty; knowledge; power; wisdom; word of God; love; grace versus works; atonement; missing books (mentioned but not found in the Bible).

As I came across verses related to each topic, I marked its reference beside the topic in the back of my Bible, leaving room for multiple lines of verse references, of course. For some, I marked the definitive passage (the “big gun”) with an asterisk (*).

7. Read it with Purpose. We have a purpose in reading God’s word. That purpose includes the things we prayed for before we opened the bible. And so, as we read, we are constantly asking questions regarding those purposes. *What does it tell me about,*

- God: his attributes, his holiness, and his love for me?
- God’s word: what is its importance and value to me?
- Jesus Christ: what example, faithfulness, devotion, and love does he reveal to me?
- the Holy Spirit: what is his role in sanctification, and what help does he offer me?
- my sinfulness: how would I be seen in God’s sight without Christ as my cover?
- my value: how does God treasure and provide for me? What price did Christ pay for me?
- my relationship to **God**: what does he expect of me? What is my debt to Christ? What comfort does he afford me through his Spirit?
- my relationship to the **world**: what is my attitude toward and response to the world?
- my relationship to the **church**: what table do I share, burdens do I bear, gifts do I bring?

8. Cross-Reference. As with outlines and topical concordances, I took to cross-referencing verses myself. This first became useful as I read the Synoptic Gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke). I referenced both forward and back so I could find my links regardless of the book I was reading. Some of the commercial bibles only reference forward, and so you have to know where it first begins. Thompson Chain Reference bibles do that; they include a topical list to identify the first link in the chain. Of course, just because I remembered that I read something similar someplace else didn’t help me find it again. This is where a **concordance** for your version of the bible is invaluable to find that other passage. Once you find it, mark the verse in the margin.

9. Confess your sins to God. What we read normally convicts us of our sin. It’s like chewing those red pills that identify the plaque on our teeth so we can brush better. Sin may simply be failing to honor God or glorify him correctly or completely (which is a sin of omission) rather than what we have done to break his law (a sin of commission). But having had our sin revealed to us, we confess it openly and verbally, out loud. Only if we confess our sins may we be rid of them; and we will surely be rid of them. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”* NIV (1John 1:9). And then tell him how grateful you are that he has forgiven your sins, and washed them away. They will not be held against you on the Day of Judgment. Our corrupt nature remains with us, distorting our understanding of God’s word and coloring our behavior. But this constant reminder of just how sinful we are is a blessing nonetheless. It makes the covering of Christ more precious, the love of God more wonderful, and the fellowship of the Spirit more desirable to us.

10. Meditate. Now we are ready to meditate on what we have read. We need to thank God for what he has shown us in his word. Then we need to pray for illumination – this is more than just the ability to understand the text, as we prayed before we began. It is not simply admiring the wisdom of God abstractly. It is asking God to light the path before us, to show us the way. It is an assessment of, and a correction to, our current walk. We are intentionally conforming who we are to whom God intends us to be, using God’s word as the pattern. This is not a passive process. We won’t go to the next passage of Scripture until we have illumination on the passage we have just read, and we begin to act on it. Otherwise there is no point in studying God’s word. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” NKJV James 1:23-25

11. Commit to obedience. What makes us grow over time is not our successes, but our failures. We will sin, overcome sin, and then sin again, our entire life. Sanctification is the process in which our sin is mortified in us more and more. The sinless perfection of Christ is an ideal that we establish in our heart, mind, and soul. We commit to grow towards it. But we are not Christ. We are followers of Christ. “No student is above his teacher. It is enough that one who is fully trained is like his teacher.” (Lk. 6:40). Don’t get depressed and frustrated by your seeming inability to completely or even adequately mirror Christ to the world. We aren’t leading people to ourselves, but to the Lord (Jn. 1:41,42). It is not *our* perfection but *his* that they must be confronted with. Our sin reminds us of our continuing need for grace, producing contrition and humiliation in us; and so God’s strength is perfected in our weakness (2Cor. 12:9).

12. Record your thoughts. The final step is to write down your thoughts in a journal. An excellent description of journaling may be found in chapter eleven of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, by Donald S. Whitney. What you are doing is making a record of the “works and ways of God in your life.” There is no right or wrong way to do it. It is a record of the progress we are making toward Christ-likeness. By writing it down, just as we did when memorizing verses, we are forced to focus our thoughts and express them. It is a very practical way to renew our minds. Treat it as a letter that you are writing to God. He has spoken to you through his written word, and now you are responding to him. Tell him about your day, what you learned or experienced, and how you feel about it. It is your spiritual diary.

A Note on Obedience

We are not obedient to merit God’s favor, but to please him, and to glorify his holiness. We obey, because we want to demonstrate that it is our *new nature* to be obedient, for the Spirit lives in us to will and to work for God’s pleasure (Phil. 2:13). We are in training. Our goal is to be built up until we are all fully mature in Christ (Eph. 4:13). That’s a *corporate* goal more than an individual goal. It is a *mutual* endeavor. The church is God’s means to build us up, to fill us with gratitude and thanksgiving (Col. 2:7). Keep this in mind: **there are no Lone Rangers in the church.** Therefore, feel free to ask for help and encouragement. It is part of our fellowship.

What to Study

What do we study? Whatever interests us at the time. I find that I do a combination of *incidental* and *systematic* study. I may hear a sermon on the radio, or a debate about the meaning of a passage, or perhaps someone asks me a question that I don't know the answer to. I do a topical study on it. I may encounter a word or a phrase that intrigues me during my daily bible reading. I write it down so that I can do a word study in the original language later. Both of these are incidental bible studies, meaning I do them on-the-fly. I learn and retain a lot of information this way for several reasons:

- First, because it's something that *interests* me right now: I *want* to learn it.
- Second, I get instant feedback, so my *excitement* is maintained as I search.
- Third, and most importantly, I *own* the answer because it's the fruit of *my* labor.

My answer may not be right, but it's mine until someone disproves it. And so I begin testing what I've found against commentaries and systematic studies. I challenge other believers with it to see whether they came to the same conclusion, or if they can reasonably refute it. What I am doing is "seeking counsel" – but I do it after the fact. That's another important aspect of bible study. It may be bad policy to get counsel after we've already acted on a decision, but it's a good policy when we're doing bible study. We can always change our conclusions about biblical truth after getting additional information. Our "theory" holds until disproved, like science.

I suggested earlier that resorting to a commentary, which is someone else's labor, is the last thing we want to do. We don't want easy, pre-digested, or slanted answers. We want the struggle. We want to wrestle with God himself to gain a blessing for ourselves. Hard-won answers are not easily forgotten; they are ready answers. We'll have them at hand when we need them. Why? Because they're answers to our own questions, obtained through diligent study. We are eager to show ourselves to be workmen approved by God, who are unashamed, and who can rightly divide his word of truth (2Tim. 2:15). It takes time and effort to become skilled at it.

Systematic Study

Systematic study is more difficult and comprehensive. It systematically organizes the teachings of Scripture, across all books, along a particular line of teaching. This is not easily accomplished. You can't find all the passages on a given teaching by doing a word-search in your computerized bible program or concordance. That's just the start. You have to know what you're looking for. That means you need to be pretty familiar with the whole bible. If you've haven't read it cover to cover, doing a systematic study on your own will be difficult. In the meantime, resort to a book on *Systematic Theology*, like the one by Wayne Grudem.

As a new Christian, it took me three times through the bible, and three years of my life, to get enough knowledge under my belt to begin organizing what I had read. I did word studies and topical studies as I went. I began to cross-reference passages in my third year, because I started to recognize the similarity in teaching with other passages. I also saw phrases repeated in different books or chapters. I marked cross references in the margins. To help me find verses on

doctrinal issues, I listed references by topic on the blank pages in the back of my bible, as I said earlier. Those became the verses I memorized, because they answered my questions.

What about using a study bible with cross-references and a concordance instead of trying to re-invent the wheel? I encourage you to use one. In fact, I used a number of them. But I found only some of my cross references and topics were included in them. The editors had “missed” what I had seen, and they included things that made no sense to me at the time. What this shows is another characteristic of bible study. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear, and not before. Bible study is personal, and it is progressive in depth and breadth. God’s Spirit is our tutor. He will not teach us everything at once. There are incremental lessons we need to learn to prepare us for harder lessons down the road. There are things we cannot see until our eyes have been trained to look for them in that area of our walk. I often make comments in my margins and headers, insights given to me by God, and by my bible teachers, as I progress in my walk. I date the insight. If it was something I heard, I also write down the name of God’s servant who taught it to me. It is a testimonial to him, and a road marker along my journey.

The Tools of Bible Study

On your Resources CD, there is a folder named *Studying*. You will find a document titled *Bible Resources* which some tools to help you study the bible. That’s good news and bad news. The bad news is that there are more tools available than you can read in your lifetime. The good news is that there have been thousands of scholars over the past 2000 years who have labored a lifetime to provide you and the church with such excellent study tools. You’ll also be glad to know that you don’t need to buy or read all of them. However, some of the reference tools are indispensable. You may never read a dictionary from cover to cover, but if you need the meaning of a particular word, it enables you to get the definition quickly and easily. Many of the reference tools are like a dictionary. Ones you ought to own are a good bible dictionary, and an exhaustive Strong’s concordance with Greek and Hebrew lexicons in the back. What is better and faster is bible study software, like *e-Sword* or the *Online Bible* (in the *Bible* folder on your CD).

In the *Hermeneutics* folder on your CD, there is an excellent text titled *Basics of Biblical Interpretation* by Bob Smith. You will learn everything you need to know to get a firm grasp on God’s word, short of going to seminary. It would serve little purpose to repeat here what he has said. He offers good, sound, practical techniques and methods. He also provides useful exercises to help you learn. I heartily encourage you to read it in its entirety. He even teaches you how to study the Hebrew and Greek without becoming a linguist. It’s fascinating and informative. One of the larger benefits of his book is that he will show you how to properly use a few of the tools I mentioned.

For the purposes of this course, we will take a NT book and study it in depth together as a way to learn the techniques and methods that Bob Smith describes. As we practice Bible Study each week, I encourage you to refer to his text for greater insight and detail. Feel free to share with the group what you have learned from him. He is an excellent teacher. The best advice he offers to those who would be teachers themselves, is to ask lots of questions about meaning. You could say that good teachers are good students, who ask lots of questions...