

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

The Bible is the greatest book that has ever been written. In it God Himself speaks to men. It is a book of divine instruction. It offers comfort in sorrow, guidance in perplexity, advice for our problems, rebuke for our sins, and daily inspiration for our every need.

The Bible is not simply one book. It is an entire library of books covering the whole range of literature. It includes history, poetry, drama, biography, prophecy, philosophy, science, and inspirational reading. Little wonder, then, that all or part of the Bible has been translated into more than 1,200 languages, and every year more copies of the Bible are sold than any other single book.

The Bible alone truly answers the greatest questions that men of all ages have asked: "Where have I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Why am I here?" "How can I know truth?" For the Bible alone reveals the truth about God, explains the origin of man, points out the only way to salvation and eternal life, and explains the age-old problem of sin and suffering.

The great subject of all the Bible is the Lord Jesus Christ and His work of redemption for mankind. The person and work of Jesus Christ are promised, prophesied, and pictured in the types and symbols of the Old Testament. In all of His truth and beauty, the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed in the gospels; and the full meanings of His life, His death, and His resurrection are explained in the epistles. His glorious coming again to this earth in the future is unmistakably foretold in the book of Revelation. The great purpose of the written Word of God, the Bible, is to reveal the living Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ (read John 1:1-18).

Dr. Wilbur M. Smith relates seven great things that the study of the Bible will do for us:

1. The Bible discovers and convicts us of sin.
2. The Bible cleanses us from the pollutions of sin.
3. The Bible imparts strength.
4. The Bible instructs us in what we are to do.
5. The Bible provides us with a sword for victory over sin.
6. The Bible makes our lives fruitful.
7. The Bible gives us power to pray.

You do not need a whole library of books to study the Bible. The Bible itself is its own best commentator and explanation. And together with all of the wonderful helps that you have in this new Bible, you have a whole lifetime course of Bible study.

I. PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

A. DEVOTIONAL BIBLE STUDY

The Bible is not an end in itself but it is a means to the end of knowing God and doing His will. The apostle Paul said, "study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing (handling aright) the Word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). God has given us the Bible in order that we might know Him and that we might do His will here on earth.

Therefore devotional Bible study is the most important kind of Bible study. Devotional Bible study means reading and studying the Word of God in order that we may hear God's voice personally and that we may know how to do His will and to live a better Christian life.

A great scientist and a great medical doctor, Dr. Howard A. Kelly (Professor of Gynecology at Johns Hopkins University from 1889 through 1940) was also a great student of the Bible. He once said: "The very best way to study the Bible is simply to read it daily with close attention and with prayer to see the light that shines from its pages, to meditate upon it, and to continue to read it until somehow it works itself, its words, its expressions, its teachings, its habits of thought, and its presentation of God and His Christ into the very warp and woof of one's being."

For your devotional reading and study of the Bible, here are several important, practical suggestions:

1. Begin your Bible reading with prayer. (Ps. 119:18; John 16:13, 14, 15).
2. Take brief notes on what you read. Keep a small notebook for your Bible study (see no. 4), etc.
3. Read slowly through one chapter, or perhaps two or three chapters, or perhaps just one paragraph at a time. After reading, ask yourself what this passage is about. Then reread it.
4. It is often very helpful in finding out the true meaning of a chapter or passage to ask yourself the following questions, and then write the answers simply in your notebook:
 - a. What is the main subject of this passage?
 - b. Who are the persons revealed in this passage: Who is speaking? About whom is he speaking? Who is acting?, etc.
 - c. What is the key verse of this passage?
 - d. What does this passage teach me about the Lord Jesus Christ?
 - e. Is there any sin for me to confess and forsake in this passage?
 - f. Is there any command for me to obey in this passage?
 - g. Is there any promise for me to claim?
 - h. Is there any instruction for me to follow?
 - i. Is there any prayer that I should pray?

Not all of these questions may be answered in every passage.

5. Keep a spiritual diary. Either in your Bible study notebook mentioned above (no. 2), or in a separate notebook entitled, "My Spiritual Diary," write down daily what God says to you through the Bible. Write down the sins that you confess or the commands you should obey (etc.) that are mentioned above.
6. Memorize passages of the Word of God. No one is ever too old to memorize the Word of God. Write verses on cards with the reference on one side and the verse on the other. Carry these cards in your pocket

and review them while you're waiting for a train, standing in lunch line, etc.

Other persons prefer to memorize whole passages or chapters of the Bible. A small pocket Bible will help you to review these passages when you have spare moments. One of the best ways is to spend a few minutes every night before going to sleep, in order that your subconscious mind may help you fix these passages of God's Word in your mind while you're asleep. (Ps. 119:11).

To meditate means "to reflect, to ponder, to consider, to dwell in thought." Through meditation the Word of God will become meaningful and real to you, and the Holy Spirit will use this time to apply the Word of God to your own life and its problems.

7. Obey the Word of God. As Paul said to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16, "All scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." The Bible has been given to us that we may live a holy life, well-pleasing unto God. Therefore God says, "be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22).
8. The Navigators, a group of men banded together just before World War II to encourage Bible study among Christian servicemen, has developed a splendid plan for a personal, devotional study.
 - a. After prayer, read the Bible passage through slowly once silently, and then read it again aloud.
 - b. In a large notebook divide the paper into columns and head each column as follows: Chapter title, Key verse, Significant truth, Cross-references, Difficulties in this passage (personal or possible), Application to me, and Summary or outline of the passage. In each of these columns write the information desired.

Do not try to adopt all of these methods at once, but start out slowly, selecting those methods and suggestions which appeal to you. You will find, as millions of others have done before you, that the more you read and study the Word of God, the more you'll want to read it. Therefore the following suggestions of Bible study are made for those who wish to make a more intensive study of the Bible truths.

B. STUDY FOR BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

There are many valuable methods of Bible study. One may study the Bible, as it were with a telescope, to see the great truths which stand out in every book. Or one may study the Bible with a microscope to find all of the marvelous details which are in this mine of spiritual riches. In this section there are several proven methods by which a person may do more intensive Bible study. The most important thing is to follow faithfully some systematic method of Bible study.

1. Bible Study by Chapters.

In the Bible there are 1,189 chapters in the Old and New Testaments. In a little over three years a person could make an intensive study of the whole Bible, just taking a chapter a day. It is usually a good practice to start your Bible study in the New Testament.

- a. Read through the chapter carefully, seeking to find its main subject or subjects.
- b. As you read each chapter, give it a title which suggests its main content. If you are reading the gospel of John, for example, you might give each chapter titles like this:
 - ch. 1 "Jesus Christ, the Word of God"

- ch. 2 "The Wedding at Cana"
 ch. 3 "The New Birth"
 ch. 4 "The Woman at the Well"
 ch. 5 "The Healing of the Man at the Pool of Bethesda"
 ch. 6 "The Feeding of the 5,000"
- c. Reread the chapter again and make a simple outline of it which will include its main thoughts. For example in John 1, you might make an outline like this:
 "Jesus Christ, the Word of God":
 (1) Jesus Christ was the eternal Word of God, vss. 1-9.
 (2) Jesus Christ came into the world, vss. 10-18.
 (3) John witnesses that Christ is to come, vss. 19-28.
 (4) John says that Jesus is the Lamb of God, vss. 29-37.
 (5) Jesus Christ calls His first disciples, vss. 38-51.
- d. Concerning each chapter, ask and answer the questions suggested in item number 4 of devotional Bible study hints above. Especially take note of any practical or theological problems in this chapter. Then using your concordance look up the key words in those verses and find out what other portions of the Bible will have to say about this question or problem. Compare Scripture with Scripture to find its true meaning. Very often to understand an important Bible chapter, one must study it together with the preceding or following chapters.
2. **Bible Study by Paragraphs.** A paragraph is a unit of thought in writing, usually containing several sentences. When an author changes his subject of emphasis in his writing, he usually begins a new paragraph. If you wish some help on this, you may look at an American Standard Version of the Bible, or the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which prints the Bible text in paragraphs. Studying the Bible by paragraphs like this is often called analytic Bible study.
- a. Read the paragraph carefully for its main thought or subject.
- b. In order to find the relation of the important words and sentences in this paragraph, it is often helpful to rewrite the text. For example, if you were going to study the paragraph on prayer in the wonderful Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 6:5-8, you could rewrite the text so that it would look like this:
- And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.
 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.
 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father
- knoweth what things ye need of, before ye ask him.
- c. From the text which you've now rewritten so that you can see the relationship of the various parts of the paragraph, it is easy to make a simple outline. For example, again using Matthew 6:5-15, your outline of this passage would be something like this:
 "Jesus Teaches Us How to Pray"—Matthew 6:5-15
 (1) How not to pray: Mat. 6:5, 7, 8.
 (a) Hypocritically in public, vs. 5.
 (b) With useless repetition, vss. 7, 8.
 (2) How to pray: Mat. 6:6, 9-13.
 (a) In private to your heavenly Father, vs. 6.
 (b) Following the pattern of Jesus' model prayer, vss. 9-13.
- d. It is helpful also to look up important words in the concordance that occur in this paragraph. For example, the words: "hypocrites," "heathen," etc. By comparing other passages of the Bible which teach about prayer, you'll be kept from making any mistakes concerning the true nature, conditions, and results of prayer according to the will of God.
3. **Bible Study by Verses.** In studying the historical passages of the Bible, such as much of the Old Testament or parts of the gospels, each verse may have only one simple meaning.
 But many verses in both the Old and New Testaments are rich with many great Bible truths which will demand more detailed study. There are many ways that you can study a single Bible verse.
- a. Study it by the verbs in the verse. For example, if you were studying John 3:16 you would find the following verbs: "loved, gave... should not perish... hath..."
 You could make a comparative list like this:
- | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|
| God loved | Man believes |
| God gave | Man shall not perish |
| | Man has everlasting life. |
- Or simply take the nouns in this wonderful verse: "God... world... only begotten Son... whosoever... everlasting life."
- b. Study a verse through the personalities revealed. For example, once again taking John 3:16, these very simple but significant points are brought to light: "God... only begotten Son... whosoever... Him."
- c. Study a verse by looking for the great ideas revealed in it. Let us look at John 3:16 again as our example. We might title this verse, "The greatest verse in the Bible." The following ideas are found in it:
- "God"—the greatest person
 - "So loved"—the greatest devotion
 - "The world"—the greatest number
 - "He gave"—the greatest act
 - "His only begotten Son"—the greatest gift
 - "That whosoever believeth"—the greatest condition
 - "Should not perish"—the greatest mercy
 - "Hath everlasting life"—the greatest result
- d. Sometimes a combination of these various ideas applied to a verse will bring the richest results. For example, take Rom. 5:1:

"Therefore"—This verse depends on ch. 4, vs. 25. Our justification is based on and is guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection.

"Justified"—Made righteous.

"By faith"—Method of our justification (see also verse 9 and ch. 3:24).

"Have"—Not future, but present tense—we have this *now*.

"Peace with God"—We were enemies but now we have peace between us and God because of what Christ has done.

"Through our Lord Jesus Christ"—The way of peace of God is only through Jesus Christ, etc.

4. *Bible Study by Books.* After you have begun to study the Bible by chapters or paragraphs or verses, you will be ready to study the Bible by books.

a. There are several methods of Bible book study.

(1) One is called the inductive method. This is a method of studying in detail the contents of a Bible book and then drawing from these details general conclusions or principles concerning the contents and purpose of the book.

(2) Another method of book study is called the synthetic method. By this method, one reads the Bible book over several times to receive the general impressions of the main ideas and purpose of the book without attention to the details. (It is sometimes hard to distinguish these two methods.)

(3) In some cases the study of a Bible book becomes a historical study, if that book relates the history of a nation or a man in a particular period of time. For example, the book of Exodus tells the history of the children of Israel from the death of Joseph in Egypt until the erection of the tabernacle in the wilderness under Moses. This covers approximately 400 years.

The principles for Bible book study, whether inductive or synthetic, are very similar. Such study will require more time than the previous methods mentioned, but it will be amply rewarding to you.

b. Here are some methods for Bible study by books:

(1) Read the book through to get the mood, the sweep, and the general emphasis of the book.

(2) Reread the book many times, each time asking yourself one main question and jotting down the answers you find as you read. Here are the most important questions to ask:

First reading: What is the central theme or emphasis of this book? What is the key verse in this book?

Second reading: Remembering the theme of the book, see how it is emphasized and developed in the book. Look for any special problems or applications to this theme.

Third reading: What does this book tell me about the author and his circumstances when he wrote?

Fourth reading: What does the book tell me about the people to whom the book was written and their circumstances, need, or problems? (These questions

are particularly important when one is reading the Epistles of Paul.)

Fifth reading: What are the main divisions of the book? Is there any outline apparent in the logical organization and development of the book? During this reading, it is now time to divide the text into the paragraphs as you see them and then give a title to each paragraph. Draw a line down the right side of the outline and on the other side write any problems, questions, words, or ideas that require further study by comparison with other passages in the Bible, etc.

Sixth and successive readings: Look for other facts and/or information that your earlier reading has suggested. By now certain words will stand out in the book. See how often they recur. (For example, as you read the book of Philippians, you will soon find that the word "joy" occurs many times. This is one of the key words of the book, so note its occurrences and the circumstances surrounding it.)

As you read and reread a book, you'll find soon that you begin to see its structure and its outline very clearly. It is true, however, that there are many more than one possible outline for any given book. It depends on the principle of division that you select. For example, as you study the book of Romans, you might adopt the outline that Dr. G. Allen Fleece, President of Columbia Bible College has written:

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Subject: "The Gospel," 1:16

I. The Gospel for the lost sinner, chs. 1-5.

II. The Gospel for the Christian, chs. 6-8.

III. The Gospel for the whole world, chs. 9-11.

IV. The Gospel applied to daily living, chs. 12-16.

Of course, each of these great sections of this remarkable book can be divided into smaller subjects with great profit.

This method, applied to a book which is mainly historical, will also enable you to find a clear outline. In the case of a historical book, the outline will be largely chronological. The book of Acts lends itself very wonderfully to this kind of study and outline:

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Subject: "The Gospel Witness in the First Century"

Key verse: 1:8

Outline:

I. Introduction: The Apostles receive power, 1:1-2:4

II. The witness in Jerusalem, 2:5-7:60

III. The witness in Judea and Samaria, 8:1-11:18

IV. The beginning of the witness to the uttermost, 11:19-28:31

Once again more careful study will give the details and further subdivisions of each one of these great units of gospel history in this inspired record of the origin of the Christian Church.

5. *Bible Study by Words.* There are two profitable and helpful ways of studying great words or subjects in the Word of God.
- Word study by Bible books. Certain words have special significance in certain Bible books. For example, after studying the Gospel of John as a book and by chapters, you'll find it instructive and inspiring to trace the word "believe" or "belief." It occurs almost 100 times. By reading the book hurriedly and underlining each passage where the word "believe" or "belief" occurs, you'll understand why Bible scholars contend that the purpose of the Gospel of John is expressed by the author in 20:31.
 - General word study. The fine index and concordance which you'll find in this Bible will be a great help. By the study of great Bible words anyone can soon become familiar with the great doctrines of the Bible and understand the great theological principles which the Bible reveals.

With your concordance you might begin with the study of the wonderful word "grace." By tracing the occurrences of this word through the Old Testament and then into the New Testament, you will come to see that God has always dealt with His people in grace, and you will find in a concrete way the great truth of Ephesians 2:8.

6. *Bible Study by Topics.* Closely related to the method of study by words, is the study according to great topics or subjects: Bible prayers, Bible promises, Bible sermons, Bible songs, Bible poems, etc.

Or one might study Bible geography by reading rapidly through and looking for rivers, seas, mountains, etc., highlighted in Scripture. For example, the mountain top experiences in the life of Abraham are a thrilling study.

Another challenging study is to read rapidly through the Gospels and epistles looking for the commands of the Lord to us. The list of Bible topics is unlimited.

First, for a topical study on prayer, look up the word "prayer," "pray," etc., in your concordance. Look up every form of these words and such related words as "ask," "intercession," etc. After you have looked up these verses, study them and bring together all the teaching on prayer that you find. You will find: conditions of prayer, words to be used in prayer, results to expect from prayer, when to pray, where to pray, etc.

7. *Bible Study Through Biography.* The Bible is a record of God's revealing Himself to men and through men. The Old Testament as well as the New is rich in such biographical studies. Here are a few:

The life of Noah: Gen. 5:32-10:32
 The life of Abraham: Gen. 12-25
 The life of Joseph: Gen. 37-50
 The life of Deborah: Judges 4, 5

Let us summarize various methods for studying the great Bible biographies:

- Read the Bible book or passages in which this person's life is prominent, e.g., Abraham in Gen. 12-25, plus references to Abraham in Heb. 11 and Rom. 4.
 - Trace character with your concordance.
 - Be careful to note indirect references to the man or his life in other portions of Scripture.
8. *Conclusion.* There are many other methods of studying the Bible: the psychological method, the sociological method, the cultural method, the philosophical method, etc. However, the methods given above largely include all these other methods.

Use all the Bible study methods suggested above. From time to time change your method so that you'll not become too accustomed to any one method, or tired from delving too deeply into one type of study.

The great thrill of Bible study is discovering these eternal truths of God's Word for yourself and embarking on the adventure of obeying them and experiencing the blessing in your personal life.

II. FAMILY BIBLE STUDY

Nothing is more important in a Christian home than the family altar. At a convenient time when all members of the family are home, father or mother should lead them in worship of God and in reading His Word. A simple program for family worship includes singing a hymn, an opening prayer by a family member, a brief Bible study, and a concluding period of prayer in which all members take part.

The family altar and Bible study will bind the family together, eliminate juvenile delinquency, foster deeper love, and enable each member to become a stronger, better Christian.

Since family Bible study usually includes small children, it is wise to avoid deep, difficult topics and study something of interest and help to all. Such subjects might be Bible biographies as outlined above, stories of miracles and deeds of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels, miracles in the Old Testament, and other narrative portions of the Bible. It is wise to keep the study brief and concentrate on a short passage of Scripture. For example, if the family is going to study the life of Moses, it could be divided into units like this:

- First day: The birth of Moses: Exodus 2:1-10
 Second day: Moses' great choice and great mistake: Heb. 11:24-27; Ex. 2:11-15
 Third day: Moses' wilderness training: Ex. 2:16-25
 Fourth day: Moses' call to serve God: Ex. 3:1-22
 Fifth day: Moses' argument with God: Ex. 4:1-17
 Sixth day: Moses' return to Egypt: Ex. 4:18-31, etc.

Here are several practical hints on how to make your family Bible study interesting and profitable to all:

- Keep your family Bible study reasonably short: one brief chapter or several paragraphs a day.
- Have each member read a verse.
- Appoint one family member to lead in worship each day and select the passage to read. This one may appoint others to help in the family worship.
- Read through a Bible book, a chapter or several paragraphs each day. As you read, together decide on a name or a title for each chapter and memorize this.

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5. After reading the passage, have each member in the family explain one verse or one paragraph.
6. Let the leader (or the father or mother) prepare five or ten questions on the Bible passage and ask various members of the family to answer these questions after the passage has been read.
7. Study the beautiful maps in your Bible together and trace Pauls' journeys, or the wandering of the children of Israel in Egypt.
8. Study Bible topics together. Assign verses concerning a topic or great word to each member of the family. Let each read his verse and tell what his verse teaches about his topic or word.
9. After the Bible reading, have each member tell what this verse means to him or how he believes it can be applied to his life.
10. Make up Bible games by having each member make up questions to try to stump the others.
11. Study a Bible book together, using the hints given above. There are many wonderful ways to make the Bible the heart of your home.

III. PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Since the Bible was written by many men over a period covering 1,500 years; and since the last author of the Bible has been dead 1,900 years, there are definite problems in understanding the exact meaning of certain passages of the Bible.

There is a need to interpret clearly certain passages of the Bible because there is a gap between the way we think and the words we use today and the way of thinking and the words that these Bible writers used thousands of years ago. Bible scholars have pointed out that there are language gaps—differences in words that we use; there are cultural gaps—different customs were in vogue then. There are geographical gaps—certain rivers that are spoken of in the Bible have long since dried up. Some places that are spoken of frequently in the Bible are not on our modern maps. And then there are historical gaps—the Bible speaks of kings and empires which existed years ago.

Therefore there is a need for Bible interpretation. This is a fascinating study in itself, but I want to give you just a few principles of interpretation of the Bible that will keep you from error and help you to understand the difficult passages of the Word of God.

1. Always remember that the Bible is God's infallible, inerrantly inspired word. There are no mistakes in the Bible. God has included everything in the Bible that He wants you to know and that is necessary for you to know concerning salvation and your Christian life.
2. The second principle of interpretation is to interpret the Bible in the light of its historical background. There are three aspects of this:
 - a. Study the personal circumstances of the writer. In studying the book of The Revelation, it is important to understand where John was and what he was doing when God gave him this marvelous revelation. See Rev. 1:1-10, etc.
 - b. The second aspect of this principle is to study the culture and customs of the country at the time that

the writing or story was taking place. For example, to understand the book of Ruth, it is important to study the customs concerning widows, redemptions of property, etc., as they are explained in the books of Leviticus (ch. 25) and Deuteronomy (ch. 25).

- c. A third aspect of this principle is to study and interpret the Bible in the light of the actual historical situation and events that were taking place at the time of the story. For example, in studying the gospels it is important to realize that the entire land of Palestine and all of the Jews were being governed and oppressed by the Roman Empire at that time.
3. Interpret the Bible according to the purpose and plan of each book.

Every Bible book has its specific purpose intended by the Holy Spirit to bring some special message to man. For example, it is important to remember that I John (see I John 5:13) was written to Christians. Therefore the promise in I John 1:9 is specifically applied to Christians.
4. One of the most important principles of interpretation is always to interpret according to the context of a verse.

The "context" is the verses immediately preceding and immediately following the verse you are studying. If you do not take care to interpret the verse according to the context, you could make the Bible teach atheism. For the Bible itself says, "there is no God" (Psalms 14:1). But the context makes very clear what this verse means: The immediately preceding sentence says, "the fool hath said in his heart, 'there is no God.'"

Always study the passage immediately preceding and immediately following any verse, word, or topic to make sure that you see this truth in the setting which God intended.

5. Interpret always according to the correct meaning of words. You can find the correct meaning of a word in several ways. First of all look up the usage of the word in other parts of the Bible to find how it was used in that generation. Another way is to look up its background or its root. You could do this with the use of a dictionary. Still another way is to look up the synonyms—words that are similar in meaning but slightly different: for example, "prayer," "intercession," "supplication."
6. Interpret the Bible also according to all of the parallel passages which deal with the subject, and according to the message of the entire Bible.

The more you read the Bible, the more you will understand that in it God is revealing His way of salvation to men from beginning to end. And when you come to a difficult passage, think of it in the light of the overall purpose of the Bible. For example, the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament are meant to be a picture of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

If you will follow these simple rules you will be kept from error and extremes, and you will be helped to understand correctly the teachings of even the more difficult passages in God's Word.