

# **How** *To* **Study** *the* **Bible**

/ Take Your Bible Studies Deeper /



virtual**DISCIPLEMAKER**

# How *to* Study *the* Bible

## **Gain the Ability to Understand**

You can only understand God's Word if you have a proper relationship with Jesus. When you are spiritually born again, the Holy Spirit will teach you God's thoughts (I Cor 2:13-14; Eph 1:13-14). Each time you open your Bible, though, you should confess your sins and ask God to guide you (Ps 66:18; Ps 119:33-40).

## **Begin With the Proper Mindset**

**Believe that the Bible is God's Word.** It is inspired by God and therefore without error; it never contradicts itself or truth revealed in nature. In it, God reveals himself, his works, and his requirements. Through it the Holy Spirit guides, convicts, comforts, and strengthens us so that we will experience the fullness of God that comes from obedience. We must, therefore, submit ourselves to obey the Bible quickly and diligently.

**Understand your position in Christ.** You should study the Bible, not to be accepted by God, but rather so that you can get to know him and his will for you. If you are in Christ, you are already fully accepted and loved by God; he will not reject you because you miss a day of Bible reading.

**Embrace the value of Bible study.** Intently looking into the Word of God and obeying it brings blessing, guards against sin, protects your life, guides you in God's will, and builds you up so that you will be thoroughly equipped for every good work (Jam 1:22-25; Ps 119:1,2,9,11,72,105; 2 Tim 3:16; Ps 1:1-3; Matt 4:4; John 6:68).

Bible study will help you experience life transformation that will conform you to God's good (gratifying), pleasing (satisfying), and perfect (completing) purpose—see Romans 12:2. God's Word will restore you and keep you from corruption (2 Pet 1:3-4; Eph 4:20-24). It will help you live life to the full both here and after you die (John 6:68; 10:10b). It will also teach you prudence, which means knowing the future results of your present actions (Prov 22:3).

**Recognize the difficulty.** You must search the Scriptures as if you were hunting for hidden treasure (Prov 2:1-5). It is hard work. You will face fatigue, opposition from the enemy, and frustration. But the treasure of knowing God is worth the effort.

**Long to know and glorify God.** Crave God's Word and guard against a "ho-hum" callousness toward spiritual things (1 Pet 2:2-3; Heb 5:11).

## Use a System for Reading

Strive to gain the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) by organizing your Bible reading according to the following suggestions:

**Read systematically** (i.e., in an organized way) through the New Testament (NT) three times and then begin to read the Old Testament (OT).

**Read a Proverb and a Psalm each day** in addition to NT or OT reading.

**Read a single book several times in a row.** When you get to a short book like Philippians, try reading it several times in one sitting. This will help you get the big picture and better understand the details. Write down your observations. Look for themes. Construct an outline. Figure out what it means. Apply it to your life.

**Don't** let other studies (such as word studies, character studies, devotional guides, etc.) replace systematic reading of the Bible.

## Use a System for Remembering

Have you ever read your Bible, closed it, and within fifteen minutes forgot what you read? Yes?! Well, you're not alone. That's why you need to record what the Lord is teaching you.

**Keep a spiritual journal in a spiral notebook.** Write down the day's date, the references of the Scripture you read, and any insights God gave you. At the end of the week, review what the Lord taught you and evaluate how well you are practicing the truth.

## Interpret the Bible Properly

Follow the O.I.A. method: Observation, Interpretation, Application. You must follow these steps in order if you want to correctly apply God's Word today. But don't follow them stiffly and scientifically as if you were in a chemistry lab. Remember to talk with God as you study his Word. The Bible is his love letter to you.

### **Observation:** ("Just the facts, ma'am!")

Before you can properly understand how the Scriptures apply to your life, you must understand what the divinely-inspired biblical author meant to communicate to the people who first received God's Word. Imagine yourself as a spiritual detective. You must first gather the facts before drawing any conclusions.

Ask: What do I see?

#### **Guidelines:**

- *Read carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully.*
- *Ask questions.* Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- *Look for historical clues.*
- *Watch for key words.* Key words stand out because of repetition, position, or other forms of emphasis.
- *Notice things that are alike and unlike.* Ideas, cultures, words, actions, commands, and many other things will have similarities or differences.
- *Look for relationships* between people, places, ideas, and words.
- *Use resources* such as a Bible dictionary, handbook, and atlas to find information on the culture, geography, and history in which the passage of Scripture originated.
- *Summarize your observations* by writing them in your spiritual journal.

For more help on the "observation" step, read **"The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz."**

## **Interpretation:**

Facts on their own don't mean much. They must be seen as part of a bigger, unifying picture. That's why interpretation comes next. This is when the detective "puts the pieces together" and comes up with an explanation of how everything happened.

Ask: What did this mean then?

### **Guidelines:**

- *Understand the historical context.*
- *Pay attention to the literary context.*
  - **Give priority to paragraphs.** Words need sentences to give them meaning. And sentences need paragraphs. You, therefore, should pay careful attention to paragraphs—the basic unit of thought. Of course, paragraphs link together to paint the big picture, so read the paragraphs before and after a text you are studying in order to properly interpret it.
  - **Identify the genre and figures of speech.** Even though the Bible is one book, it contains many different types (or genres) of literature, such as poetry, narrative (or stories), letters, prophecies, and proverbs. The Bible also contains many figures of speech. Jesus, for instance, used a metaphor to talk about himself in John 6:53-58 and used hyperbole (exaggeration) in Matthew 5:29 (look up these verses). If you don't recognize literary genres and figures of speech you could end up confused and in a lot of pain!
  - **Notice grammatical details.** In Galatians 2:20 the Apostle Paul used a verb in the past perfect tense: "... I have been crucified." This meant that Paul did not have to crucify himself again and again to live God's way. He already had been crucified. Instead, Paul lived every moment by faith ("live" is a present tense verb in the text).
- *Understand the theological context.* God has progressively revealed over a long period of time more and more about himself and his redemptive plan. When you read the OT, therefore, remember that the people to whom it was originally given did not know all the details about God's plan that we know now. The gospel is a "mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints" (Col 1:25-27).
- *Keep asking and answering questions.* If necessary, consult a commentary or ask a respected student of the Bible for their perspective on the passage.

## Application:

Finally, we arrive to the part that transforms our lives. After all the detective work, we reach conclusions about how we should think and live. Apply God's Word to yourself first and then to your world (family, church, school, government, etc.).

*Ask: How does this apply today?*

### Guidelines:

- *Know the text!* Remember, there is only one correct interpretation. But there are many correct applications.
- *Keep Christ at the center.* Always look through the lens of Christ's life, death, and resurrection when you apply Scripture. As a Christian, you are "in Christ." In him you released your sin (and its eternal consequences) and became righteous in God's sight (1 Cor 5:21). In him you can live a holy life in obedience to God's commands (2 Pet 1:3-4; Titus 2:11-14).
- *Find the principle* that lies beneath the meaning communicated to the original recipients. How? Look for similarities between "us" and "them"—between the original recipients and us today.

**You try it!** Read 1 Corinthians 8:10-13 and find the principle that applies today. What did it mean in 57 A.D. (that is the "interpretation" step)? Answer: Don't eat what was sacrificed to idols if it will cause a former idolater to sin by eating such food against his conscience—he thinks it is wrong even though it isn't. What principle can we apply (this is the "application" step)? Don't drink alcohol in front of an alcoholic and thus encourage him to drink what causes him to fall into sin.

- *Ask and answer questions.* How should I respond to God? Who does the Scripture say that I am? How does the Scripture say I should live? What privilege or promise should I claim? What responsibilities do I have? What examples are given for me to follow? Is there a sin to avoid?
- *Meditate.* This is one of the most neglected areas of the Christian life. You must meditate on Scripture in order to gain the most from it. This involves prayerful, focused reflection on the meaning and significance of the text. You can only meditate on small portions at a time—a single paragraph, sentence, phrase, or even word.
- *Make changes.* Immediately put into practice what God teaches you (Jam 1:25). Make a plan of action and follow through on it. Ask God to help you obey.

## Start Practicing!

Invest fifteen minutes of each day studying the Bible for five days per week. On Saturday or Sunday read for an hour.



## Resources for Further Investigation

R. A. Torrey, *How to Study the Bible* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1985).

Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991).

Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994).

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994),