

# **A Basic Guide to Personal Bible Study**

© Rodney Combs, Ph.D., 2007

*“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,  
a workman who does not need to be ashamed  
and who correctly handles the word of truth.”*

2 Timothy 2:15

## **Why Study the Bible?**

Personal Bible study has the potential to be the most important and life-changing activity of your life. Why? There are numerous reasons. Here are three primary ones: (1) the Bible contains God's thoughts and will for your life (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Ps. 119:105); (2) it is the only source of absolute divine authority for you (John 17:17); and (3) it is necessary to understand and apply God's Word in order to grow spiritually (1 Pet. 2:2).

God wants to bring us into intimacy with Himself. He wants to be a Father to us. In order to have that relationship, however, God has to talk to us. He wants to explain to us who He is and how we can be brought into a close, wonderful relationship with Him. He also wants us to understand the blessings of a life of obedience to His Word and the consequences of disobeying Him. And He wants us to know the truth about life and what is going to happen in the future. The Bible tells us everything we need to know about life. That my friend, is why you need to study it for yourself.<sup>1</sup>

## **Who Can Study the Bible?**

Of course, *anyone can read* the Bible. *Understanding* it is another thing. Unless you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, you are unable to understand the truth of God's Word. Until you have invited Jesus to be your personal Savior, Satan blinds your mind to God's truth (2 Cor. 4:4), and you are unable to accept that which comes from the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14-16). When you become a Christ-follower, however, you then receive the Holy Spirit who helps you understand the depths of God's Word (John 14:26).

## **How Do You Study the Bible?**

What has been said of the Gospel of John is true for the entire Bible: It is compared to "a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim."<sup>2</sup> Bible study, at the core, is relatively simple, and, yet, it is intricately complex. It is simple because it is words written on paper that God gave with the purpose of us understanding them. On top of that, he gave you the Holy Spirit to teach you the meaning of His Scripture. The Bible was given for the common person. God intends for those who want to know His Word to be able to understand it. He does not hide truth from most and reveal it only to elite, scholarly people. The Bible is, first of all, relatively simple to understand. That being said, it is crucial to admit that the Bible is also intricately complex. It is complex because of the depth of the content and the gaps that have developed between the original setting and us.

---

<sup>1</sup>Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible: Precept upon Precept* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., NICNT (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), 3.

## Gaps to Close

Since the Bible was written many centuries ago, you cannot understand its meaning until you close certain gaps that have developed over time. There are four of these types of gaps and two additional ones that are contemporary creations. The six gaps are the following:

1. The *Language* Gap: The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The original text must be translated into English accurately in order to close this gap. Often, proper understanding is only possible when a word, phrase, or a semantic structure is understood in the original language. Without knowing the original languages you can close this gap by comparing several English translations and reading reference works produced by those who are skilled in the original languages.

2. The *Cultural* Gap: The events of the Old Testament and the New Testament occurred in a culture much different than today's culture. You cannot understand the meaning of the Word without first understanding the culture of the Bible. The Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the culture of the time period being studied. The Gospels must be studied within the context of a first-century Jewish culture. Acts and the epistles must be read in light of the Greek and Roman culture. A Study Bible's background sections as well as biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias can provide quick help to close the cultural gap.

3. The *Geographical* Gap: Many of the events and allusions in the Bible make little sense until you know where they happened. The geographical gap must be closed. A good biblical atlas is a necessary tool in order to get a grasp of the geography of the Bible.

4. The *Historical* Gap: Every event and saying recorded in God's Word occurred during a specific point in history. To best understand the Bible, you must understand biblical and world history so you can place the Bible text in its proper historical perspective. Again, a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia is useful to help close this gap.

5. The *Literary* Gap: Not every section of the Bible is the same type of literature and, therefore, each section must be read differently. The Bible contains many different types of literature (genres), for example: narrative, exposition, parables, poetry, prophesy, apocalyptic, proverbs, etc. You must read each appropriately so a new gap is not created.

6. The *Poor Interpretation* Gap: Once you have heard a portion of the Bible interpreted wrongly (and believed it), it becomes difficult to overcome. You must allow yourself to study the Bible fresh and be aware that what you find when you diligently interpret on your own may be different than a poorly prepared teacher once led you to believe. Do not let this gap grow.

With all that in mind, you are now ready to engage in the joy of life-changing personal Bible study.

To study your Bible accurately and effectively, you need to take three actions in the proper order: (1) thoroughly observe—"What do I see?" (2) diligently interpret—"What does it mean?" and (3) practically apply—"How should this change my life?" These three actions are explained below.

## Here are three major actions that will guide you in studying every portion of the Bible:<sup>3</sup>

### **ACTION 1: Observation– Looking at the text to see what you can see.**

Your goal at this stage is to answer the question, "What do I see?" Begin by reading the passage over and over. As you read ask and answer the basic six questions in as thorough a manner as possible: who?, what?, where?, when?, why?, and how? Take notes of all your answers. Get into the text. See what you can see. Peer into every corner. Turn over every leaf. Notice what is there and what is not there. If you have a question and cannot answer it, write it down and find the answer later. You are not simply reading now, you are studying the text.

“The difference between reading and studying is like the difference between drifting in a boat and rowing toward a destination.” (Oscar Feucht)

#### Here are a few things to look for as you observe:

- o *Things that are emphasized.* Emphasis is sometimes seen by the about of space that is given to a subject, by a clearly stated purpose, by the order of material, or, by emphatic personal pronouns (i.e., "Jesus himself").
- o *Things that are repeated.* Terms, phrases, clauses or even the names of people that are repeated are important to notice. Repetition is intentionally used in the Bible to teach you. Therefore, you should notice those things.
- o *Things that are related.* Look for things that are connected in some manner or are interacting with each other. This is a great time to begin looking for the structure of the passage. Since ideas and statements are related in one of several ways, see if you can see how they are connected in your passage (i.e., comparison, general-specific, question-answer, cause-effect, foundation-purpose, action-manner, action-result, idea-explanation, promise-condition, point-illustration, etc.). Seeing these relations is a key part of understanding what is being said.
- o *Things that are alike.* Keep your eyes open for any similes (“as” or “like”) or metaphors (“is”).
- o *Things that are unlike.* Keep a look out for obvious dissimilarities. These are seen in the use of "but" or "however" as well as with metaphors pointing out contrasts and the use of irony.
- o *Things that are true to life.* As you observe, take special note of the events or character qualities that relate closely to your own life (i.e., fear, lack of faith, the need for encouragement, practical issues).
- o *The main thing.* If the passage is in a letter, try to find the main verb and you will find the main idea of the passage. If the passage is a narrative, see if you can determine the main message the author is trying to get across.
- o *The little things.* Little words often carry big ideas. Determine the meaning of all prepositions and conjunctions and you can often easily trace the argument of a passage.

---

<sup>3</sup>These actions for study are useful for studying a specific passage of Scripture. There are other important ways to study the Bible. For instance, sometimes you may need to study a specific topic, theme or doctrine found in many passages of Scripture. At other times, you may need to study a biblical character whose story is found in several different biblical books. These methods will require different techniques to find all the various passages, but each passage will then need to be examined with the actions presented here.

- o *The confusing things.* Whenever you come across a word, phrase, or activity that you don't understand, mark it for further study. You must understand it all in order to understand it all.
- o *The mood of things.* Is this a passage of joy or of sorrow? Is the writer encouraging an activity or is he rebuking one? The author's intention here will be key to understanding his meaning. He wrote for a specific purpose.
- o *The form thing.* While reading, take a look around and determine in which literary form (genre) this passage was written. The four main forms are narrative (a story), discourse (ideas presented logically and directly), poetry (word pictures for expressing feelings, emotions, and ideas), and prophecy (symbolic language to reveal future events or truth). Meaning, obviously, is conveyed differently within each genre.

HINT: If you will work at observation, you will see a passage better. Take your time at this step. It can be beneficial to read your passage in several different translations: literal, word-for-word (NKJV, NASB, NRSV), dynamic equivalent (NIV, TLV, GNB, JB), or paraphrase (Living Bible, The Message). The purpose of answering, "What do I see?" is to make sure you know what a passage says before you try to determine what it means.

SPECIAL HINT: Each time you come to a passage that you need to understand, you always need to begin by observing. Your observation skills and your understanding will increase, however, if you develop a habit of reading through the entire Bible regularly. The more you "see" each passage and its entire context, the better the lines of communication for God to teach you His Word.

## **ACTION 2: Interpretation— Applying the rules by which the meaning and message of a biblical text is determined and understood.**

Your goal at this stage is to answer the question, "What does it mean?" You cannot read and immediately jump to an accurate application. You must first interpret the passage to determine the original author's meaning. Unless you understand the *meaning* of God's Word, you don't understand God's Word.

You only know what a biblical passage means when you know what it would have meant to the original writer and hearers. Be careful! You are not interested in determining "what it means to you" or "what you feel it says." Such thinking leads to various and sporadic misinterpretations. There is only one meaning of each biblical text (excluding some prophetic sections), and that is whatever the original author intended to be communicated.

If a colorblind person looks at a red dot and says that it is a brown dot to him, does it make the dot brown? No, he is wrong. No matter what it looks like to him, the dot is still red.

The Bible contains truth and has meaning. It is not subjective nor is it open to people's "feelings." In other words, it is not relative. You are seeking truth, and it must be found by following the logical, normal rules of interpretation of literature. You should always seek to understand and interpret a passage in its normal, literal, historical, grammatical sense (just like you would any other piece of literature you read today). At this stage you are ready to determine what God was saying through the human author who was being guided by the Holy Spirit. You are, in other words, after the answer to the question, "What does it mean?"

It is at this stage that you must close the gaps (see above). Some may ask, "Why can't I simply read the text and understand it?" The answer is, "Because of the gaps." Interpretation is the science

and art of gap-closing. Once you have thoroughly observed a passage, you are now ready to work through the steps to interpret the passage.

### **Here are five steps to interpreting a biblical passage accurately:**

#### **STEP 1– Determine the Context.**

Every phrase of the Bible was written in a specific context, and it must be interpreted in its context.

Determine the following four aspects of context:

- o *Literary Context: note how the passage you are studying fits into the words before and after it.* Place it in the context of the paragraph, then the chapter, and then the book as a whole. To ignore the literary context is called "proof-texting" which results in determining a meaning that is unrelated to the original author's intent.
- o *Historical Context: note how the passage fits into history.* Find the date of the events and the writing. See how this passage relates to other parts of the Bible chronologically. Determine what was going on in biblical and secular history at this time. Never read the Bible for just a "devotional thought" outside of understanding the historical setting, otherwise, your "devotional thought" will be void of truth.
- o *Cultural Context: note the kind of culture in which these events happened.* Never assume the biblical culture is like your culture. When you come across cultural events or issues you don't understand, find a biblical dictionary or encyclopedia to lend you some help.
- o *Geographic Context: note on a map where the events happened and where the places are that are being discussed.*

#### **STEP 2– Determine meanings of words.**

You must figure out the meaning of any words you do not understand. Most meanings can be determined in context. Use a concordance to find other places where the same word is used and compare meanings. If necessary, look up the word in a Bible dictionary or in a source that provides insight into the shades of meaning in the Greek or Hebrew word behind the English translation. Focus your energy on "heavy" words that obviously are important to the meaning of the passage.

#### **STEP 3– Trace the argument of the passage.**

Determine the flow of the paragraph by determining how each phrase or sentence is related to the other. Try to outline the passage. Once you see the flow, try to write out the main point (the main idea the author was trying to get across) in one concise sentence. That will be God's Word, His truth, what it means. This is your goal.

Here are a few good questions to ask as you trace the argument:

- o How are these ideas logically related?
- o What does this mean?
- o What is the significance of this?
- o Why would God have included this passage in His Word?
- o What is the purpose of this passage in the scheme of this chapter (of this book, of the Bible)?
- o How did the original author intend these words to be understood?

#### **STEP 4– Compare this passage with other biblical passages.**

The best interpretation of Scripture is Scripture. Look for cross-references for specific words or the main theme. Let other passages throw light on this passage.

The Bible never contradicts itself. That truth helps in several ways. First, once you determine the meaning of the passage, you should look for other passages that support the meaning. If you can't find any, or, especially, if you find one that conflicts, then you may need to do some more work. Second, when you come to a tough passage, let an easier to understand passage on the same theme help you. If your Bible's cross-reference system provides no leads, use a topical Bible, a concordance, or a theology book to help find other related passages. The best helps are passages within the same book you are studying. See if you find help there first. Then look for additional passages from the same author and finally from other portions of the Bible.

#### **STEP 5– Compare your interpretation with other students' interpretations.**

Never begin a Bible study by first reading what others teach is the meaning of your passage. You should be determined to learn the Bible on your own for that is when it truly comes alive to you and God speaks. Research has shown that people learn more and remember better when they enter into the discovery process on their own.

Once you have done your work, however, you then need to dip into the work of others. God uses great teachers to help you understand Him and His Word. You never want to be so arrogant as to assume others cannot teach you. So, once you have interpreted, read what others say they have found (in your Study Bible's notes, biblical commentaries, Bible study books, tapes, etc.). If you see something you missed or misunderstood, revert back to your study and adjust it. Once you are done, you will want to finalize your one concise sentence stating the meaning of the passage. You may also want to formulate sub-points that the text is teaching (as found in your outline) that support this main point.

Here is a summary of a few rules that help as you engage in the interpretation process:

- o *Interpret Scripture literally by taking words, phrases and sentences in their normal, natural sense.*  
Remember, a literal meaning can be communicated plainly (normal, non-figurative language; i.e., "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground," Gen. 2:7), or, figuratively (figures of speech or symbolic language used to communicate a literal idea; i.e., "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD," Prov. 21:1). This rule calls you to resist "spiritualizing" or "allegorizing" the text. Some people allegorize the book of Esther by assigning secret meanings to the characters (Esther represents the church, Haman is the devil, and Mordecai is the Holy Spirit). Some "spiritualize" passages like John 3:30, "He must become greater; I must become less." They interpret this to mean something like "in my heart God must get greater importance than myself." That is true, but this passage does not teach that. Interpret literally. Resist "spiritualizing" and "allegorizing."
- o *Context rules.* Always understand the different types of context and find the meaning of the passage there.
- o *Let Scripture interpret Scripture.* The Bible is a whole; let it work together. If there is conflict, your interpretation needs more work. Of special help here is to check what you have interpreted as the main point of a narrative section by finding that point in a direct teaching in the New Testament. If you can do that, your interpretation carries more clout.

- o *Find the original author's meaning.* If he could not have meant what you determined he said, then he didn't, and you need to keep studying. Truth lies in what was originally meant.

### **ACTION 3: Application– Determining how the meaning of the passage applies to you.**

Your goal in this final step is to answer the question, "How should this change my life?" Or, more bluntly, "So what?" This is the ultimate goal in Bible study. You should never approach God's Word simply to gain information. The goal is always to allow the Bible to transform your life and assist you in developing a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ.

#### Remember this rule:

- o *Each passage of Scripture has one meaning, but many applications.* The one central truth that you wrote out after doing thorough observation and diligent interpretation can be applied in many ways. For example, Rom. 12:2 teaches the truth that you are not to be influenced by the world to be like the world. That is one truth. It can be applied many ways depending on your situation. You may need to stop watching certain T.V. shows. Or, you may need to change your financial priorities. You may need to apply this truth by resisting the pressure to dress in certain name brand clothing. One meaning can be lived out with many applications.

#### Remember these truths:

- o *Whatever you know of God's Word, you will be accountable for living* (James 1:22-25).
- o *The Word of God will never benefit your life until you allow it to change your life* (John 13:17). You want to get into the Word so that the Word can get into you.
- o *It is crucial for you to have interpreted correctly before you try to apply.* Wrong interpretation will always lead to the wrong application, no matter how good it seems.

Once you have the meaning of a passage squarely in hand, follow the steps to move to a proper application of that meaning for your life.

### **Here are four steps to applying a biblical passage accurately:**

#### **STEP 1– Pray for insight on how to apply the passage.**

You should have been seeking God's help all along, but now pray specifically about application. You already know God wants you to obey His Word and to share it. Therefore, pray saying that you are ready to obey and that you are willing to share the application with others if He will show you how.

#### **STEP 2– Meditate on the passage you are studying and the meaning you have discovered.**

Meditation is simply thinking and rethinking on a subject. Think specifically about how this applies to your life in the area of *belief* or *behavior*. This verse tells specifically how God intends all of His Scripture to be applied:

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16)

Notice, from this critical verse, that the goal of all Scripture is for you to be completely prepared and equipped to do everything God wants you to do. God's Word is given to prepare you for action. This occurs when Scripture is applied the way it was intended to be. This verse explains how all of God's Word should be applied. Application comes in the form of *belief* or *behavior*.

- o "Teaching" relates to what God says about a subject or doctrine. Scripture helps you know what to *believe*.
- o "Rebuking" relates to correcting false teaching. It literally means "to make straight again." Scripture helps you see when you are *believing* wrongly.
- o "Correcting" relates to rebuking those in sin. Scripture helps show you when you are *behaving* wrongly.
- o "Training in righteousness" relates to teaching that leads to good behavior. Scripture helps show you how you are to *behave*.

Therefore, God says all application of Scripture will impact either your *beliefs* or your *behavior*, positively encouraged or negatively corrected. When you are meditating on the truths you are studying, ask yourself these big questions:

- o Do I need to change my *thinking* in some way? How?
- o Do I need to change my *behavior* in some way? How?

As a further help for determining accurate application, you can ask and answer these questions:

Is there any...

- o Sin to confess?
- o Promise to claim?
- o Attitude to change?
- o Action to take?
- o Truth to believe?
- o Something to praise God for?
- o Change to make in character, conduct, or conversation?
- o Habit to begin or stop?
- o Area to release to God?
- o Command to obey?
- o Example to follow?
- o Error to avoid?

### **STEP 3– Write out an application.**

Writing helps you be specific and remember it! While writing, make sure your application is *personal, practical, possible* (with God's help), and *provable* (i.e., I need to memorize 10 verses within the next three months). Otherwise, it will sound good but be of no real use.

A good test for your final application point is to answer these two questions:

- o If I do this will I be living in line with the meaning of this passage?
- o Does this application help me become more like Christ?

### **STEP 4– Put into practice the application.**

Bible study and application are like eating. It is unhealthy to eat without exercise and it is unhealthy to exercise without eating. God wants to communicate with you to help your life grow deeper and to prepare you for greater works. Get the truth and then get busy living it immediately with the power and grace of the Holy Spirit!

The Bible is God's inspired and authoritative Word to you. You can understand it! If you will work to thoroughly observe, diligently interpret, and practically apply the Bible, His Word will bring light to your way and life to your soul. May God bless you richly as you experience Him through His Word!

To learn more about various Bible translations, click here  
(<http://www.bible.com/community/biblebasics.php>).