

How to Study the Bible

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Every Christian wants to understand the Bible. Yet many feel intimidated when they sit down to study it. They wonder: *"Where do I begin?"* or *"Am I doing this correctly?"* The good news is that faithful Bible study isn't reserved for pastors or seminary professors. With prayer, careful observation, and a willingness to learn, every believer can grow in understanding God's Word.

This guide provides a practical, step-by-step framework to help you study Scripture with greater confidence, deeper insight, and a heart ready to obey what God reveals.

1. Begin with Prayer

Before you open your Bible, open your mouth. Bible study that begins with prayer is fundamentally different from Bible study that relies solely on human technique. The Bible isn't merely an ancient literary text to be dissected; it is God's living Word. We need the Holy Spirit's illumination to understand it rightly and apply it faithfully (John 16:13–15).

Three core biblical truths explain why prayer is indispensable:

- **Revelation:** God initiated communication, making His truth known to humanity (Heb 1:1–2). This work is complete.
- **Inspiration:** God superintended the human authors to record His exact truth without error (2 Pet 1:21). This work is complete.
- **Illumination:** The Holy Spirit enables believers to spiritually comprehend, embrace, and apply that revealed truth today (1 Cor 2:12–14). Illumination continues every time we open Scripture.

"We think of prayer as a preparation for work . . . whereas prayer is the essential work."

— Oswald Chambers (1874–1917), Scottish evangelist and teacher

A foundational prayer to begin every study session is Psalm 119:18: *"Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law."*

2. Reading Isn't the Same as Studying

Bible reading and Bible study are related disciplines, but they serve different purposes. Reading feeds your soul through broad, regular exposure to Scripture. Study slows down to examine the mechanics and context of a passage so you can understand it accurately.

Feature	Bible Reading	Bible Study
Frequency	Daily / Routine	Weekly / Dedicated
Scope	Broad (Chapters / Books)	Focused (Verses / Paragraphs)
Primary Goal	Refreshes the heart & soul	Deepens clarity & doctrine
Tone	Devotional & Reflective	Investigative & Analytical
Primary Fruit	Builds habit & familiarity	Equips for teaching & ministry

Both disciplines are essential. If you only read, your understanding will remain superficial. If you only study, your walk with Christ can become overly academic. Healthy spiritual growth requires cultivating both habits.

Start small. Don't feel pressured to study an entire book at once. Select a short New Testament letter (such as Philippians, James, or 1 John) or a single chapter in Gospel accounts. Work through a few verses at a time, take notes, and ask thoughtful questions.

3. Choose a Good Translation and Study Tools

Selecting the right translation is crucial for effective Bible study. Translations fall along a spectrum based on their translation philosophy:

- **Formal Equivalence (Word-for-Word):** Translates the original Greek and Hebrew structures as closely as possible into English. Outstanding for detailed study and sentence tracking. Examples include the NASB, ESV, and NKJV.
- **Functional / Dynamic Equivalence (Thought-for-Thought):** Translates the meaning of original thoughts into natural English phrasing. Excellent for balancing accuracy and readability. Examples include the CSB and NET.
- **Paraphrase:** Restates text into contemporary expression (e.g., *The Message*, *The Living Bible*). Helpful for fresh devotional angles, but should *not* serve as the primary text for close Bible study.

Invest in a quality Study Bible. A reliable study Bible provides book introductions, historical background, cross-references, and scholarly notes. Excellent choices include *The ESV Study Bible* and *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*.

4. Study the Context

The single most common cause of biblical misinterpretation is ignoring context. **Context determines original meaning.** As a foundational principle: Context is the difference between what the Bible actually says and what we wish it said.

The 5 Dimensions of Context

- **Historical Context:** When was the book written, and what historical circumstances were the author and original audience facing?
- **Political Context:** Who was in power? What imperial, regional, or local authorities influenced daily life?
- **Social & Cultural Context:** What cultural norms, customs, family structures, or economic realities shaped the audience?
- **Religious Context:** What religious beliefs, temple practices, or pagan influences surrounded God's people?
- **Literary Context:** How does the passage fit within its surrounding paragraph, chapter, book, and genre?

Understanding Biblical Genres

Scripture comprises diverse literary genres, each requiring tailored interpretation rules:

- **Epistles (Letters):** Expository doctrine and personal instruction; requires logical sentence tracking (e.g., Romans, Ephesians).
- **Old Testament Narrative:** Historical accounts revealing God's character through real events; norm vs. description must be evaluated (e.g., Genesis, Samuel).
- **Poetry & Wisdom Literature:** Uses parallelism, figurative imagery, and emotional expression; principles rather than ironclad guarantees (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs).
- **Prophecy & Apocalyptic:** Covenant warnings, symbolic imagery, and future hope; requires distinguishing symbolic fulfillment from literal description (e.g., Isaiah, Revelation).
- **Gospels & Acts:** Theological biography and early church expansion; pay attention to narrative arcs and Jesus' parabolic teaching.

5. The Inductive Study Method (3 Core Questions)

Effective Bible study follows three sequential questions in strict order: **Observation**, **Interpretation**, and **Application**.

Step 1: Observation—What does the text say?

Slow down and look carefully at the details of the text before drawing conclusions (Acts 17:11). Ask: Who is speaking? Who is receiving the message? What repeated words, key themes, contrasts, or logical connectors (such as *"therefore," "because," "so that"*) appear?

Step 2: Interpretation—What did the text mean to the original audience?

Discover the single, authorial-intended meaning for the original readers (Neh 8:8). After discovering original meaning, perform **Principlization**: extract the timeless, universal truth that bridges the ancient context to modern times (Rom 15:4).

Step 3: Application—How should I respond today?

Translate timeless principles into practical personal obedience (Jas 1:22). Ask diagnostic questions such as:

- What does this passage teach me about God's character or actions?
- Is there a timeless truth or principle to guide my thinking?
- Is there a promise to trust or a warning to heed?
- Is there a sin to confess or a command to obey?
- Is there an example to follow or avoid in my relationships?

Inductive Study Case Study

Case Study: Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

Common Misinterpretation: Treating this verse as a guarantee for athletic victory, business success, or personal ambition.

Proper Contextual Interpretation: In Philippians 4:11–12, Paul explains that he has learned the secret of contentment whether in poverty or abundance, hunger or plenty. The "all things" refers to enduring any circumstances—favorable or adverse—through Christ's strength.

6. Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Ignoring Context: Isolating a verse from its paragraph or book. A verse taken out of context becomes a pretext for false teaching.

2. Misreading Genre: Failing to recognize poetic or symbolic language. (e.g., treating Jotham's story of talking trees in Judges 9:7–15 as a historical event rather than a fable).

3. Reading Assumptions Into the Text (Eisegesis): Forcing your preexisting political or cultural opinions onto Scripture rather than letting Scripture shape your beliefs (Exegesis). (e.g., reading personal prosperity into Jeremiah 29:11).

4. Chasing Hidden Allegories: Searching for obscure codes rather than resting in the plain meaning. (e.g., allegorizing every detail of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29).

7. Pursue Transformation, Not Information

Paul reminded Timothy that Scripture is *“profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim 3:16–17). Notice the outcome: not mere accumulation of facts, but a life equipped for good works. Bible study without transformation leads to spiritual pride (1 Cor 8:1; Jas 1:22).

Two Disciplines to Accelerate Growth

- **Take Notes & Journal:** Writing forces clarity. A vague thought remains vague until you put it into a sentence. Maintain a digital document or paper notebook organized by biblical book.
- **Teach What You Learn:** One of the fastest ways to solidify what you study is to explain it to someone else. Share insights with your spouse, mentor a friend, teach a Sunday school class, or lead a small group.

Quick Reference: The Inductive Study Checklist

1. **Pray:** Ask the Holy Spirit for illumination (Ps 119:18).
2. **Read:** Read the passage repeatedly in a solid translation (ESV, NASB, CSB, NET).
3. **Observe:** Ask Who, What, Where, When, and Why? Note keywords and connectors.
4. **Check Context:** Examine surrounding verses, historical setting, and literary genre.
5. **Interpret:** Determine the author’s intended message to original readers.
6. **Principlize:** Extract the timeless, universal truth.
7. **Apply & Journal:** Formulate concrete, actionable steps of personal obedience.
8. **Share:** Teach or discuss your findings with someone else.

8. Conclusion

The best Bible study plan is the one you will consistently follow. Start small, select a book, pray for divine help, observe, and obey what God reveals. Over time, you will discover that the ultimate goal of Bible study isn't simply knowing God's Word—it is becoming like the God who gave it (Rom 8:29).

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