

How to Study the Bible

Learning the Heart and Mind of God

“Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” 2 Timothy 2:15 KJV

Students of Holy Scripture are enrolled in God’s school of study for a lifetime. Indeed, learning the Word of God is not a onetime exercise of memorizing facts or even meditating on Bible verses, rather the scripture seeps into the soul over time. Like an X-ray machine illumines the skeletal structure of the body, so God’s truth exposes ignorance and sin, and seeks to renew it with wisdom and righteousness.

There is a freshness that follows our faithful engagement in the eternal truths outlined in the Bible. Yes, our spirit bathes each day with the cleansing soap of scripture, so we are attractive to our soiled and sinful culture. Purification from the Word is a sweet aroma to Jesus. He looks for His servants who are saturated in the application of Scripture, because He knows they can be trusted with His blessings and burdens. Yes, the written word of God is where He changes us into the image of His son Jesus to be holy and blameless.

“Just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Ephesians 5:25-27

This carefully maintained collection of 66 individual books was penned over 1,000 years. The Lord used His holy servants to hear His heart and then under the Holy Spirit’s direction write the Holy Scriptures. Servant leaders, kings, farmers, prophets, warriors, businessmen, religious leaders, fishermen and a doctor all make up the unique profile of writers. The Trinity in Their infinite wisdom used a cross-section of culture to give us the whole counsel of God. The Bible is practical because holy, real, people wrote His words.

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” 2 Peter 1:20-21

Yes, there are times in reading Scripture that it doesn’t make sense, or that we have not matured to the point of truly understanding the Lord’s intent. Indeed, there were ideas I embraced as a new believer that I later learned were legalism laced with truth. We grow over the years from digesting the milk of the Word to feasting by faith on the meat of the Word. It’s like taking a walk and closely observing our surroundings, versus rushing by in a car. God reveals Himself in a beautiful display when we are still and know Him.

“He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His

letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” 2 Peter 3:16

Study Scripture, so you are not cavalier with the context, and so you can hear Christ calling. Study Scripture to grow in humility and grace. Study scripture, not for information and ego’s sake, but for instruction, inspiration and intimacy. Sin can keep you from this Book or this Book can keep you from sin. Study to know His story for you!

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Luke 24:27

Below is an outline for developing a regular routine of studying God’s Holy Word:

1. **SELECT A BIBLE TRANSLATION:** “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” Psalm 119:105

The New International Version is reliable, easy to understand and accurate to the ancient writings of Scripture. Other helpful versions are the New American Standard (very literal), The Message (modern language) and the New King James (beautiful images).

2. **CHOOSE COMMENTARIES AND STUDY RESOURCES:** “When you come, bring the cloak that I [Paul] left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.” 2 Timothy 4:13

Scripture study aids are critical in gaining an understanding of the cultural context during Christ’s era and the meaning of Biblical words and phrases. Paul was a scholar who never stopped learning and relied on books and resources outside of God’s word for his growth and understanding in spiritual matters. Excellent resources are Matthew Henry’s Commentary of the Bible (the App is outstanding), Vine’s Expository Dictionary (Greek word studies) and Unger’s Bible Dictionary (gives a good cultural understanding).

3. **CROSS REFERENCE RELATED SCRIPTURE:** “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” Romans 15:4

The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. Jesus came to fulfill the Law not to destroy the Law, so ask as you are studying, “What’s another Scripture verse that might bring clarity to a passage I am seeking to understand and apply?” Biblegateway.com lists related verses under the verse you searched for on your screen.

4. **DEFINE THE CONTEXT:** “Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times.” Esther 1:13

Context is critical to understanding the world of those the Bible is addressing. Customs, traditions and the mores of the culture bring clarity to what is being said. For example, agrarian illustrations and Jewish traditions both bring out nuances in occupational and religious concepts. Cultural familiarity is necessary for an accurate interpretation of the text of the Scripture. Also the style of writing defines the context: poetry, prose, historical narrative, prophecy, praise and parables each describe a unique purpose for the reader.

5. OBSERVE: “I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw.” Proverbs 24:32

After you learn the context of the passage and it’s meaning—read the passage with fresh eyes and an open heart. Look closely for a pattern or contrast in thinking (the happens a lot in Proverbs). Why are certain details described and others left out? Begin to build a mental bridge from what the Lord was saying then to what He is saying for today.

6. GAIN UNDERSTANDING: “I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.” Psalm 119:104

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you exactly what He is saying; ask Him for wisdom and discernment. Your Bible study is a spiritual transaction of truth. His word is a love letter to you, for you in your time of need. His precepts pulsate with life that gives you life.

7. APPLY: “We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself.” Job 5:27

The Bible is worth a lifetime of study and application. Because we are all in the process of growing in grace, the Holy Spirit is able to teach us at our own pace and perception. He reveals the truth, as we are able to live it out with grace and for God’s glory.

Below is an example of following this process with the Mark 12:10-12 passage:

“For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.” Mark 7:10-12

1. Select a Bible translation: New International Version

2. Chose Commentaries and Study Resources:

Vine’s Dictionary definition of “honor”- “to value at a great price, the same word used to

honor Christ.”

Matthew Henry Commentary- “Where will men stop, when once they have made the Word of God give way to their tradition? God’s statutes shall not only lie forgotten, as antiquated obsolete laws, but they shall, in effect, stand repealed, that their traditions might take place.”

Unger Bible Dictionary- Definition of “Corban”- “Literally an offering, common to any sacred gift; the term is used to denote sacrifice. All things or persons consecrated for religious purposes become Corban and belong to the sanctuary. The gift giver was relieved from using this gift to God for their parents. This Jesus declared to be contradictory of the command that taught children to honor their parents.”

3. Cross Reference Related Scriptures:

Mark 7:10... Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16- “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

Mark 7:10... Exodus 21:17, Leviticus 20:9- “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.”

Mark 7:11... Isaiah 9:16- “Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray.”

Mark 7:11... Exodus 28:36-38- “Make a plate of pure gold. Engrave on it as on a seal: 'Holy to God.' Tie it with a blue cord to the front of the turban. It is to rest there on Aaron's forehead. He'll take on any guilt involved in the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate, no matter what they bring. It will always be on Aaron's forehead so that the offerings will be acceptable before God.” The Message

4. Define the Context: Jesus is speaking to powerful religious leaders—the Pharisees—who were jealous of His popularity and who did not like for their authority and teachings to be questioned, must less dismissed. Jesus challenged the most influential institution.

5. Observe: Jesus refers to a trusted resource and leader, Moses, who His audience would respect and consider as valid and reliable. Christ challenges the motivation of public offerings to God that justifies the private neglect of a parent’s needs.

6. Gain Understanding: Religious pride is a temptation for any of us who are serious about our spiritual walk. We need to make sure Scripture validates our traditions, so our religious assumptions do not void the commands of Christ.

7. **Apply:** How can I honor God and at the same time honor my parents? Perhaps, I pray and look for ways to be generous toward the Lord with my time and money, and at the same time be generous toward my parents with my time and money.

Conclusion

There are a variety of ways to study the Bible, find one that fits your style and season in the faith. Though not perfect, this process is one I have used and modified over the years that has kept my approach to Scripture, sacred, simple and applicable. Enjoy the journey!