



# How to Study a Bible Passage

| *A basic process to study any Bible passage*

## Introduction

There are many ways to approach studying a Bible passage. This session will introduce several basic steps to take and basic resources to use to study a Bible passage. At the end of this session you should be able to read and study any Bible passage with increased confidence and with the expectation that you will learn something new each time you approach a passage.

For more than two millennia God's people have believed the words of Scripture to be a means by which God reveals divine truth to generation after generation. When we turn to Psalm 78:1–8 we discover reasons the psalmist believed it was important to learn about God's "glorious deeds" and "his might." Permit me to paraphrase the psalmist in the words of the *Contemporary English Version* of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The reasons we study the mysteries of what happened long ago are so that the next generation will learn them in order to pass them on to their children so they will trust God, obey God's teachings, not forget what God has done, and be more faithful than their ancestors who were rebellious and unfaithful. We read and study the Bible not for our sake alone but also for the sake of our children and grandchildren.



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## How Do I Study the Bible?

There are multiple answers to the question of how to study the Bible, a few of which are these:

- *Approach your reading and study prayerfully.* Begin your study with a brief prayer in order to be reminded that you are reading something greater than just another interesting book. You are coming into God's presence to be inspired by the truth you discover within God's word.
- *Read and study with an open mind and heart.* Try to approach the Bible without preconceived ideas of what you will find. Even veteran Bible scholars are surprised by what they discover as they read and study more carefully.
- *Set aside a time and place for study* so that you will be in a frame of mind that is intentional about the task and expectant of productive learning.
- *Gather a few basic, simple tools.* Obtain some colored markers that are specifically designed for use on the thin paper used in Bibles. It is okay to mark up a Bible that you use regularly for study. Use a notebook or journal to capture some of your thoughts, discoveries, and prayers as you read and study.
- *Purchase a study Bible* if you want to get the most you can from Bible study. Then, to dig deeper you will find a *single-volume Bible dictionary* and a *Bible commentary* to be useful study tools.
- *Read and study your Bible expectantly.* Be assured that when you approach the Bible prayerfully, with an openness of spirit, and with helpful tools you will receive many blessings.

# How Does the Bible Read Me?

In his book *Experiments with Bible Study*,<sup>2</sup> Hans Rudi Weber tells a story of an African woman who carried her Bible everywhere. She was teased about always being seen with her Bible and was asked the question, “There are so many other books to read, why are you always reading your Bible?” Her reply to the taunting was, “Yes, there are many other books I could read, but the Bible is the only book that reads me.” What did the woman mean by “the Bible is the only book that reads me”? Here are some ideas:

- We find in the Bible not only the stories of God’s people of long ago but also examples of encounters between God and humans with which we can identify. When we delve into the biblical narratives we discover personal connections with Abraham’s trust, Moses’ reluctance, David’s sin, Jonah’s disobedience, Mary’s surprise and faithfulness, Peter’s devotion and denial, and Paul’s excitement to share good news.
- The words of Scripture arise from an ancient context. The language, culture, knowledge of the universe, political realities, and social mores of the world of the Bible are very different from the world we know. Yet, if the Bible is to become a living word from God, we must build bridges of understanding between our world and the world of the Bible. Those bridges are built by our awareness that at the human, emotional, experiential level we are not that much different from the characters we read about in the Bible.
- The Bible is the *big story* of the divine and human encounter with examples of every human circumstance and emotion.
- It is when the Bible “reads” us that we discover who we are in relation to God and what God desires for our lives. In this way we grow in faith and in faithfulness as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.

## Which Bible Should I Use?

The simplest answer is to use the Bible you have available. It may be a Bible given you by the church when you were a child, one you received as a gift from a family member or loved one, or one you purchased recently. Whichever Bible you have available or is your favor-

### EXAMPLES OF WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE CONTEXT OF A BIBLE PASSAGE

#### 1. Luke 4:16–30

This narrative of Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath appears immediately after his temptation in the wilderness. After Jesus declares that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing, the people of Nazareth are quite pleased. Then Jesus cites two narratives about Elijah (1 Kgs. 17) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 5) in which the two prophets were ministered to by persons who were “unclean,” outside the boundaries of what was acceptable to the chosen ones. It is not possible to fully understand the people’s anger against Jesus to the extent of their desiring to kill him if you do not read the two narratives from the Old Testament.

#### 2. Isaiah 52:13–53:12

This familiar passage is one of the four Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah that is referred to several times by New Testament writers: Matthew 8:17, Acts 8:32–33, and 1 Peter 2:18–25. Read the three examples to determine how the writers employ the Isaiah passage, and you will discover that even in the days of the writing of the New Testament the writers had particular ways of interpreting and applying the sacred texts from the Hebrew Scriptures.

#### 3. Matthew 4:1–11

After his baptism and before he begins his ministry, Jesus is in the wilderness and is tempted three times by the devil. To each temptation Jesus responds by quoting passages from Deuteronomy (8:3; 6:16, 13). One’s understanding of the narrative increases when one sees in Deuteronomy that the passages are part of Moses’ farewell address to the people. They too are in the wilderness, have faced many temptations, and are about to cross the Jordan to embark on a new journey of faith, not unlike what Jesus is about to do.

ite is the one to start with. Whether your favorite Bible is the traditional King James Version, the popular *Living Bible*, or the New Revised Standard Version, you will find using another translation or two alongside your favorite will increase the insights and inspiration you gain from your reading and study (consider also using the Thoughtful Christian study “Which Bible Should I Buy?” to determine the best translation for your needs).

Every version of the Bible in English is a translation from the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and Greek of the New Testament. All translations attempt to interpret the original languages in ways that relate best to the modern usage of English. There is a difference between a *paraphrase* and a *translation* of the Bible. Paraphrases are usually the work of an individual, who may or may not be a biblical scholar, who seeks to craft the words of the Bible into the common vernacular of the day. Those who create paraphrases of the Bible are inclined to incorporate their own personal theological understandings in their presentation of the biblical text. Translations, on the other hand, are the products of teams of biblical scholars who have expertise in ancient languages, cultures, and religions. Translations are much more reliable in terms of capturing the essential meaning of the original writers’ words. Paraphrases are not as reliable in terms of dealing with the original languages, but they do serve as a good resource for devotional reading.

One of the most helpful resources to use is a study Bible because of the built-in resources it contains. Several recommended study Bibles are *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, and *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Study Bibles are expensive, but they are well worth the investment because of the additional resources they provide.

## What Questions Should I Bring to My Study?

Intentional Bible study begins with some key questions we ask of the passage we intend to study:

- What type of literature is the passage? For example, we read a parable differently than a historical narrative and a psalm differently than a letter.



The Bible “reads” us.

- What is the context of the passage? We need to notice what precedes and what follows the passage we are studying.
- Are there any other passages similar to the one I am reading? Searching for parallel or similar passages will help us to understand more of what we are reading.
- Given the period in which the passage was written, what meaning might it have had at that time? It will be difficult to answer this question without additional resources.
- I live in the twenty-first century. What meaning might the passage have for me? What is the underlying truth of the text that I can apply to my faith and life situation?

Reflecting on such questions will help us gain more understanding of the passage we are studying.

## How Will My Bible Help?

Depending on the particular translation, version, or edition of the Bible you are using, you may or may not have some of the following built-in resources to use in your study of a passage.

Most Bibles have *footnotes*, which will suggest alternative meanings of words or rendering of the text based on ways of translating the original text. When a footnote states, “other ancient authorities read,” it tells us that there are alternative ancient texts of the same passage. In addition to the preferred rendering of a text, the translators provide one or more alternative ways of reading it.

Many Bibles provide *cross-reference citations* in a center column, in footnotes, or in parentheses that point to other places where the same events, words, or concepts are presented. It is illuminating to compare similar passages. A good example is to read the three Gospel texts

## SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

For whichever reason you are studying, the following suggestions may be a helpful strategy for doing your Bible study:

- Gather resources: Bible, study Bible, dictionary and/or commentary, marking pencils, pen, and paper.
- Read the passage in your favorite translation or version.
- Read the passage again in a second Bible.
- Read the passage a third time, and write down questions to explore.
- Identify the type of literature the passage represents.
- Notice what comes before and after the passage.
- Read the notes in a study Bible.
- Look up key words in the Bible dictionary.
- Read the comments in a Bible commentary.
- Reflect on what the writer was seeking to communicate.
- Reflect on the meaning of the passage that applies to faith and life today.
- Check to see if your questions were answered, and if not, search a little more.

of what is referred to as “the Great Commandment” (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28). When we compare the three texts, we discover some startling differences. Also, the cross-references will lead us to texts in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

We noted earlier the value of using a study Bible. Every study Bible will have numerous *interpretative notes* for every chapter that help explain meanings of words and concepts. *Introductions* to each Bible book provide background information. *Brief essays* present additional interpretations or explanations of general topics or themes. For some readers *maps* will help orient them geographically regarding locations of important sites or journeys. Some study Bibles include a *glossary* and/or *sidebar notes* that provide additional interpretation of key biblical

concepts. If you purchase a study Bible, you will find it well worth the investment.

## Additional Questions

In your in-depth study of a passage you may come across questions or concerns that are not addressed by the resources you used. Your church’s library may have a series of Bible commentaries on each book of the Bible that will have more to offer than a single-volume commentary.

When study of a passage raises questions in your mind, this may be a good occasion to make an appointment with your pastor to discuss the passage and your questions. The Internet is another good source of information. There are dozens of sites with multiple translations, extensive commentaries, and sermons on Bible texts. However, one must be very cautious about how much credibility to grant various sites. Just because someone has created a Web site to share his or her perspectives on biblical interpretation does not mean that what is shared is accurate, reliable, or believable. The Internet is a wonderful resource, but use it judiciously and with caution.

## Putting New Knowledge to Work

After a period of disciplined Bible study where you have gained confidence in reading and studying the Bible, you will have increased knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Hopefully you will feel called to use this new knowledge in the ministry of your church. If you are not already a member of a Bible study class or group, consider joining one, or invite some of your friends to form a small Bible study group.

May God grant you many blessings as you engage in the wonderful journey of exploring the Bible!

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. *Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995).
2. Hans Rudi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), vii.