

Studying The Bible

Psalm 119:105 “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

Our hearts and minds are transformed by God’s word. Therefore we must spend time reading it. Knowing how to read and study the Bible can bring renewed excitement to our time in the Word. All of us have struggled with making the effort to read our Bible from time to time. One of the core issues often leading to a lack of Bible reading is not knowing “how.” This can make Bible reading feel like a dry, lifeless activity. The focus of this article is to give a few guiding principles for studying the Bible.

Authored By God. *2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”*

When we read the Bible, we must first remember God is the author. We read His Word to more fully know Him. The Bible captures who He is, what He desires, and how He has designed life. From His Word, we understand our need and how He has met that need. Anytime we consider reading, studying, and understanding the Bible, we must start with the awareness that we are dealing with the very words of God. Think of a time when you were apart from someone you loved. If you were to receive a letter from them, what would their words do to your heart? How often would you read the letter? You would likely cherish their words and try to get as much as possible from their letter. The Bible is God’s letter to you; if we can approach it as such, it will captivate our hearts and minds.

Big Picture, Small Picture. *2 Timothy 2:15 “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”*

As you study the Bible, it is very important to keep the big picture in mind. In part, this means we must have some knowledge of the Bible as a whole to help us understand the passage we are reading. All of us have an idea of what we believe to be true about God, man, Satan, and the world we live in. We must be aware of these beliefs and let the Scripture refine our beliefs. These overarching beliefs give us understanding on how to interpret specific Bible verses. For example, *Deuteronomy 4:24* says, “For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.” If this were the only information we had about who God is, we would have a skewed perception of Him. This verse is true and describes God but does not give us the entire picture. We also know Scripture describes God as “. . . merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,” (*Exodus 34:6*). It is vital to read and understand portions of Scripture within the larger context of the entire Bible. This protects us from drawing wrong or incomplete conclusions from one verse or passage. Knowing the general teachings and overall narrative of the Bible can also help us discern difficult passages of Scripture. When reading unclear verses in the Bible, we must interpret them in light of clear passages of the Bible. The more we read and develop a more complete framework for who God is and how He works, the easier it will become to understand other passages.

In addition to reading Scripture within the context of the entire Bible, it is also important to read verses within their immediate context. For example, *John 10:7* states, “Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep.” We know from the larger context of the Bible that Jesus is not a literal door. The immediate context of verse 10 shows us that Jesus is the only way through which eternal life comes.

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Meditate. *Psalm 1:1-2* “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”

Meditation for Christians is focusing our minds on God and His Word. Meditation starts by dwelling on the words we read and asking questions that stir our curiosity. For example, “What does this passage mean? How do the surrounding verses help me understand this passage? What does this teach me about God? What does this teach me about man? How does this passage fit in the context of the entire narrative of the Bible?” Meditation includes, but is not limited to, memorization. Meditation requires that we slow down and seek to understand the meaning of the passage by letting the Scriptures teach and change us. This is in contrast to using Scripture to confirm what we already think or desire. Meditation is about letting the Scripture rule us and conform us to be more like Christ and the Word. We see God more accurately while coming to grips with who we are apart from His mercy.

An example of Meditation: Take five minutes to slowly read *Psalm 1* as many times as possible. Then take five minutes to ponder these verses. Consider asking basic questions, such as, “What are these verses teaching?” or, “What distinguishes the godly from the ungodly?” Finally, take an additional five minutes to read and pray through the *Psalm* once again. Read each verse and then turn to the Lord in prayer. Keep the prayer focused on the thoughts, desires, and questions the verse creates. At the end of this exercise 15 minutes will have been spent meditating on *Psalm 1*.

Application. *James 2:18* “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.”

It might be difficult to see this aspect of Bible study come last, but it is essential application of the Word does not come before the previous concepts. While application is necessary, it is not first. We can quickly misapply Bible verses if we have not taken the time to first understand them. With many Bible passages the application is abundantly clear while some other passages require more diligent study to understand how to appropriately move into action. If we jump too quickly into action, we can move into application of what we thought a verse was teaching only to find out later we misunderstood the verse or did not take into account other passages of Scripture.

First, we must understand the verse, and then we must seek wisdom to apply appropriately. For some passages (the Ten Commandments, et. al.) the application is universal for all situations in all times. However, there are other teachings such as *Galatians 6* where we are instructed both to “Bear ye one another’s burdens . . .”(v.2) and “For every man shall bear his own burden”(v. 5). Discerning the difference between these verses and how to apply these two instructions in our current situation takes studying the Scripture and seeking wisdom to know when and how to do both.

Studying the Bible is a wonderful privilege. It is meant to change us and help us more fully see, worship, and know our great God. Be encouraged to study the Word! The Bible is so rich and deep the simplest mind can understand its teachings and yet the most sophisticated mind can never exhaust it.

Psalm 119:97 “O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day.”

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