

# How to Study the Bible

As Christians, we are often told that we should read and study our Bibles. Unfortunately, most Christians don't know how to properly study the Bible. These pages will hopefully begin to solve that problem. Please keep in mind that what has been written is not the absolute on how to study the Bible, it is just a method that will hopefully set us on the right track to properly learn and apply scripture.

The principles and guidelines that follow were adapted from David Platt's series of messages titled "How To Study The Bible" and can be heard in its entirety at:

<http://www.brookhills.org/media/schurch/secret-church-how-to-study-the-bible/>

David Platt used a helpful metaphor as he taught his congregation about studying the Bible. He compared Bible study to taking a trip and staying with a family in a very different country. As you arrive to their house you will OBSERVE their customs and culture and, as you stay longer, you will begin to UNDERSTAND these customs. Then as you leave their home, you might IDENTIFY parts of their culture to bring back to your home and in turn, APPLY them in your home.

## 1. Observe Their Home: What Do I See?

Your goal is to discover what the text is saying. To do this we need to learn to LISTEN and to LOOK.

- **Learn to LISTEN:** We can't just hear the Word, we need to learn to listen for the Word. We often take a fast food approach to Bible Study; we read a passage for a few minutes and expect to understand what the author was trying to say. That won't work. Instead, we need to be patient as we read the scripture.

We should listen...

... **THOUGHTFULLY**- this means that we look at everything. Don't just look over verses that you have heard before. For example, just because you know John 3:16 don't skim over it.

...**THOUROUGHLY** – Ask: Who, What, When, Where and Why. Bombard the passage with questions.

- Who- Who wrote this book, who read this particular passage?
- What- What problem is the author addressing in this passage? What is the author saying ? etc.
- When/Where-When/where did these events take place?
- Why- Why is this passage included in the Bible?

...**REPEATIDLY**- . It wouldn't make sense to read a novel by starting in the middle of a chapter. In the same way, we lose a lot of what the author meant when we take chapters of the Bible out of the context of their individual books and also out of the context of the entire Bible. Read the passage over and over again. Read what comes before it and what comes after it.

...**IMAGINATEVLY**- Put yourself in the text.

...**MEDITATIVELY**- Accept the words of scripture and think about them.

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...PURPOSEFULLY – If you are reading the Bible to check off a box some spiritual checklist or if you are reading the Bible in order to impress God or make yourself feel less guilty, you are reading it for the wrong reason. We read the Bible to have our hearts changed by the God of the Universe. It is helpful to remind yourself of this before you start reading and to ask God to give you the right desires.

- **Learn to LOOK:** The art of Bible reading is “seeing.” One of the most critical skills in studying the Bible is the ability to see details like the ones below.

Look for things like:

- **Emphasis-** One way it emphasizes things is through its verb tenses. Look how the author depicts the action of the text. Is the verb past, present or future? Is the verb an imperative? Is the verb “active or passive”?
  - Example: *“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,”* (Ephesians 1:11, NIV) “Chosen” is past tense but “works” is present tense. From this we can see that we have a God that is currently working in our lives to fulfill a plan that he has had from the beginning.
- **Space-** What does the author spend a lot of his time on in the book. Is the author devoting concentrated attention to a certain theme, character, event, etc.?
  - Example: In the book of Genesis, the author only spends 11 chapters on creation/start of the earth. The author spends the next 48 chapters to take us through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc. This shows us that we have a God who loves to be glorified through working in people’s lives. People are important to God.
- **Purpose Statements:** Does the author describe why he said something or why something happens. He usually does that through words like: that, in order that, so that, to, or for.
  - Example: “For God so loved the world THAT he sent his only son...” He gave his only son because of his incredible love for us.
- There are so many more things that can help you SEE what the scripture is saying. A larger list is given in pages 10-22 of David Platt’s “How to Study the Bible” Study guide which can be found here: [http://www.brookhills.org/files/650/SecretChurch3\\_SGB.pdf](http://www.brookhills.org/files/650/SecretChurch3_SGB.pdf)

## 2. Understand Their Home: What Does It Mean?

Context. Context. Context.

The definition of context is “that which goes with the text.”

The Bible communicates eternal content through specific contexts. To fully understand the content, we need to understand the context the Bible was originally given in.

Never forget that Scripture was God’s Word to other people before it became God’s Word to us.

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## Literary Context:

- Grammar-Individual words, phrases, clauses all find meaning in context.
- Is the passage you are reading in a poem? Or is it a letter? Or is it a parable? Etc. Etc. In each case, there are important things to keep in mind. For the purpose of saving space in this handout they are not included here. To learn more, check out David Platt's seminar and also check out pages 33-64 in the study guide:

Seminar: <http://www.brookhills.org/media/schurch/secret-church-how-to-study-the-bible/>  
(download part 4)

Study Guide: [http://www.brookhills.org/files/651/SecretChurch3\\_SGF.pdf](http://www.brookhills.org/files/651/SecretChurch3_SGF.pdf)

## Historical-Cultural Context

This is the time and culture of the author and his readers, including the social, geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting.

Get to know:

- The author
- The audience
- Geographic Conditions
- Social Conditions
- religious conditions
- economic conditions
- political conditions

A Bible Handbook is very helpful to provide this information. Many Study Bibles have introductions of each book that can give lots of this information to you. There are also many commentaries online, one free commentary can be found at:

<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm>

## Theological Context

- Every passage we study in scripture fits into the overall picture of scripture.
- We shouldn't read different texts in isolation to each other. We read them in the broader context of the whole Bible.

## Basic Principles of Biblical Interpretations

- Remember that Context rules
  - We can't make the Bible say something that it isn't saying in its original context.
    - Example: Matthew 18:20 says: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Many people pull this out of context to talk about how in any church gathering God is there because there are more than two or three gathered. But it is also true that God is with us when we are spending time with God alone. Jesus said Matthew 18:20 in the context of conflict among brothers in Christ. It is a picture of church conflict and Jesus is reminding his followers that he will be there when the "going gets rough."
- Always seek the full counsel of the Word of God

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- The more familiar you are with all of scripture, the easier it will be to understand particular parts of scripture.
- Remember that Scripture will never contradict Scripture
  - Compare scripture with scripture... **use cross-references.** The best interpreter of scripture is scripture. When you are struggling to understand a passage, let other parts of scripture help you understand.
    - Example: The book of 1 John opens up very similarly to the way the gospel of John opens. Therefore, you can use the introduction to the gospel of John to help you understand the introduction to 1 John. Also, Paul will use many of the same words in his letters. You can use cross-references in a study Bible to see how he used the same word in a different situation to help you understand what the word means
    - Note: Everything in the Bible doesn't clearly connect. While there aren't contradictions, there are some parts of the Bible that cause tension and mystery. This is because our finite minds can't fully comprehend an infinite God.
- Avoid basing your doctrine on an obscure passage of scripture.
  - Some passages in scripture are hard to understand. But find confidence in the fact that the things God wants us to know the most, he has made very clear in his Word.
- Interpret Scripture Plainly
  - Use the literal sense unless there is a good reason not to.
  - Use a figurative interpretation when the passage tells you to do so.
  - Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.
- Conclude the process of interpretation by describing the author's intended meaning in the passage.
  - The major question is "What's the point?"
  - In a couple sentences write out what the author is saying to the original readers
  - Check your conclusions with the church. Have others in the past got the same point from that particular passage?

### 3. IDENTIFY The Items To Bring Home: How Does It Relate?

Identify Timeless truths

Timeless truths are

- Biblical
- Compatible- they won't contradict other scriptures
- Eternal- Not tied to a particular situation
- cross-cultural
- applicable
- Example:
  - Acts 1:8* "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

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*Timeless Truth:* The holy spirit empowers followers of Christ. The Holy Spirit wants the world for Christ. The effect of the Holy Spirit in us is witness to Christ.

## 4. Apply It In Your Home

Bible study ends with application. Interpretation focuses on meaning while application focuses on action. There is a singular meaning to a text but there are many applications to a text. Interpretation asks what does this text mean? Application asks what does this meaning mean to my life? To help see how a timeless truth applies to today you can take 3 STEPS.

### 3 STEPS

1. Meditate on the timeless truths.
  - Let them soak in.
2. Relate the timeless truth to today
  - See the timeless truth in its original situation. Ask “how was this timeless truth applied in that day”?
  - Identify a modern situation that parallels the original situation. To do this, look for key elements (people, places, relationships, ideas, items, etc.) that parallel the original situation.
3. Practice the timeless truth

To help apply the timeless truth, you can ask 5 QUESTIONS.

### 5 QUESTIONS For Application

Who should I be?	how does my character need to change?
What should I think?	How does this text change the way I perceive things?
What do I do?	Be doers of the word, not just hearers
Where should I go?	The text should propel us to go out and share the gospel.
How does this text cause me to go?	The best way to learn the Bible is to teach the Bible. This person could be to a friend or anybody.

*NOTE:* It is alright if the timeless truth does not answer all of these questions. The questions are there to help direct your thoughts toward practical applications.

## Summary

Being able to study the Bible is a skill that is important for every follower of Christ to develop. While the guide above is by no means the authority on the topic of studying scripture, it is hopefully a starting point from which we can further our knowledge of who God is and in turn change our hearts and draw us closer to Him.

Remember that learning how to study the Bible is a process. You will get better at it the more you do it but it may be a little rocky at first. Studying the Bible starts with **OBSERVING** what is written. You do this by both listening and looking. Secondly, you attempt to **UNDERSTAND** what you have observed in the previous step by learning the context the passage was written in and also by applying basic principles of biblical interpretation. Next, you **IDENTIFY** the timeless truths. Finally, you **APPLY** the timeless truths by applying 3 steps and asking 5 questions. God bless.

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