

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one's life;
the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy,
making the inexperienced wise.

The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad;
the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up.

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are reliable and altogether righteous.

They are more desirable than gold—
than an abundance of pure gold;
and sweeter than honey, which comes from the honeycomb.

(Ps 19:7–10)

The Importance of Bible Study

Imagine this scenario. A person is given the responsibility of teaching a Bible class but without any guidance about what exactly to teach. Obviously this teacher now faces the dilemma of what content is essential to convey to the students.

Unfortunately, this situation is common for many teachers who want to serve their churches even though they lack the training they need to communicate God's Word effectively to the learners. In many cases teachers look for popular books or Bible curricula to serve as their teaching notes. Although these materials may be helpful, these teachers tend to teach *about* the Bible, not necessarily *the* Bible itself. Since God's written revelation is the central content of Christian education, we need to know how to study the Bible by ourselves before we attempt to teach it. Further, since we teach Bible-centered content to people, it is imperative that we appropriately understand our audience. Other chapters in this book deal with the

Pause for a moment and think about your favorite food. Imagine someone offers you the most delicious meal you can dream of. You can eat whatever you desire and as much as you want. Are you hungry now? The conditions are that you can only eat this meal twice a week and you are forbidden to eat anything else. Now the offer does not sound attractive, does it? If you only eat two wonderful meals a week, you will probably develop anemia. To eat only twice a week is not enough to satisfy the needs of our bodies, regardless of the food quality.

The Need for Biblical Hermeneutics

However, the Bible is also a human book that needs to be read and interpreted like any other. The Bible uses human language for the purpose of communicating information to its readers. Regarding the

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human aspect of the biblical text, Roy Zuck provides six corollaries that help us in our study efforts:

1. Each biblical writing—that is, each word, sentence, and book—was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language.
2. Each biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical, geographical situation for a specific purpose.
3. The Bible is affected and influenced by the cultural environment from which each human writer wrote.
4. Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.
5. Each biblical writing took on the nature of a specific literary form.
6. Each biblical writing was understood by its initial readers in accord with the basic principles of logic and communication.²

Hermeneutics, *exegesis*, and *exposition* are key terms essential for studying, understanding, and teaching the Bible. All three are important and should work together when one prepares to teach or preach the Word of God. The word *hermeneutics* comes “from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* that means ‘to explain, interpret or to translate,’ while the noun *hermeneia* means ‘interpretation’ or ‘translation.’”³ Through exegesis, we determine the meaning of Bible passages in their literary and historical contexts. Through exposition we communicate the “meaning of the text along with its relevance to present day hearers.”⁴ Therefore, the science of hermeneutics (interpretation) provides guidelines to Bible teachers to help them determine the meaning of the text as the original author intended it (exegesis) so they and their students can apply the text in modern-day situations (exposition).

During their time in seminary, students learn how to write exegetical papers. The objective of these projects is to discuss a Bible passage considering its structure and original context. Although

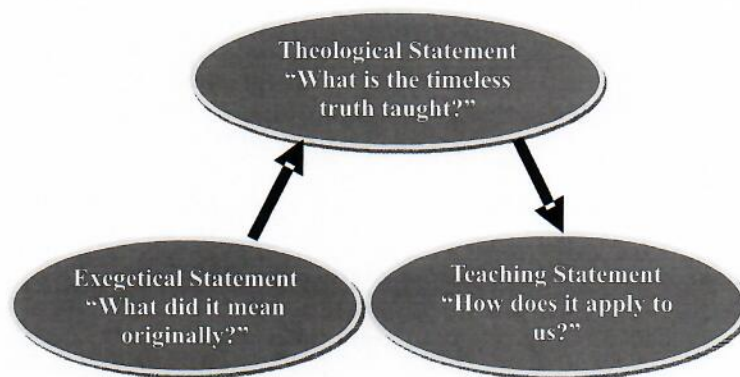
² Ibid., 61–66.

³ W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 4.

⁴ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 20.

Christian teachers do not need to write formal research papers, the following steps used in such papers will help any teacher study the Bible better:

1. Read the passage several times in various translations.
2. Map the boundaries of the passage by observing format markers (headings, paragraphing, and punctuation) in the translations.
3. Construct a structural analysis of the passage and display it in graphic form (a diagram showing how sentences relate to one another).
4. Create an outline from the structural analysis of the passage.
5. Focus on syntax (main verbs and clauses), semantics (key words and repeated themes), and summation (trace the argument from one paragraph to another).
6. Conclude with a focus on significance (application).⁵



As we have said, finding the original meaning of the text (exegesis) is the first task of a Bible student.⁶ Warren proposes the following paradigm for sermon preparation: exegesis, theological process, and homiletical product.⁷ Bible teaching follows the same process during its preparation and delivery. Bible study allows us to state the original meaning of the text (exegesis) and to state the universal principles

⁵ B. Corley, "A Student's Primer for Exegesis," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 13–18.

⁶ G. D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁷ T. S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October–December 1991): 463–86.

Inductive Bible Study Approach

Observation

Cautious observation requires that we read the passage as if it were the first time. While this is especially hard for people who are familiar with the Bible, it is crucial that we let God speak to us in a fresh way every time we read His Word.

⁸ For a complete discussion about the history of biblical hermeneutics and recent literary and social-scientific approaches for Bible study and interpretation, see W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

writing and understanding of the field. One of the important rules I learned was that competent journalists engage in careful observation before they write their stories. Six questions guide the observation of reporters: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Journalists are not alone in the use of these questions. Good detectives also discover basic information by using these same questions. Every time we read a Bible passage, let's ask: "Who is talking or being talked about? What is the subject being discussed? What comes before the passage, and what follows after? When and where is the action taking place? Why is the action taking place (purpose)? How are the people involved responding?"⁹

During the observation step we take into consideration four elements in the passage: terms, grammatical structure, literary form, and atmosphere.¹⁰ Terms are key words, usually nouns and verbs, that define the meaning of the text. Terms are often repeated throughout the passage. For example, the word *Spirit* is a key term that appears repeatedly in Romans 8.

Observe the gender and number of the nouns, as well as the verb tenses. John writes, "The one who has the Son has life. The one who doesn't have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). There are four nouns: one, Son, life, and God. One refers to any person. Notice the direct connection between anyone having (or not having) the Son and, therefore, having (or not having) life. The verb "has" is in the present tense. The life that the Son gives starts the moment we receive the Son.

Second, the grammatical structure of a passage helps us derive meaning from it. Structure reveals how the elements of a passage are put together and is created through the use of objects, verbs, prepositional phrases, modifiers, and connectives.¹¹

For example, the connective "therefore" introduces a logical conclusion derived from previous statements. In each of the following examples, writers use "therefore" to shift from doctrinal arguments to life application for believers:

⁹ D. J. Mock, *Bible Study Methods and Rules of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Bible Training Centre for Pastors and Church Leaders, 1998). This book forms part of a curriculum designed to train church leaders worldwide. More information at www.btcp.com.

¹⁰ H. G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 36–38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116–17.

Therefore since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that lies before us. (Heb 12:1)

Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

I, *therefore*, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)

Therefore, it becomes imperative to be a good grammar student in order to become a better Bible student.

Third, Bible passages also present a literary form that organizes their argument. Books may present their arguments around people (biographical outline in Genesis and Acts), places (geographical outline in Exodus), events (historical outline in Joshua), ideas (theological outline in Romans), or times (chronological outline in 1 and 2 Kings).¹² Passages use the literary structures of comparison (Matt 6:28–30), contrast (Matt 6:25), repetition (Ps 136), cause and effect (Rom 1:18–32), problem and solution (Rom 1–3 with 3–5), or questions (Matt 22:15–46).

Fourth, the atmosphere of a passage is the “underlying tone, mood, or spirit of a passage and the emotional response which it causes.”¹³ The biblical context provides the tone or mood by which we can experience the emotions of the passage. Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 describe the magnificence and splendor of the God of the universe. As we read these passages, our hearts are drawn into their atmosphere, which evokes deep spiritual responses. In Exod 18:18–20, the people’s reaction after receiving the Ten Commandments describes an atmosphere of fear and awe in the presence of the Holy God. As we enter into that atmosphere, we taste their awe of God.

The Bible is a literary work and as such displays various literary genres. We will understand more clearly when we read any particular passage in light of the peculiarities of its literary genre. The Bible includes works of narrative (Joshua), epistles or discourse

¹² D. J. Mock, *Bible Study Methods*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

(Ephesians), poetry (Song of Songs), proverbs (Proverbs), parables (sections of Luke), and prophecy (Revelation). Since different hermeneutical principles are applied to the various genres, a careful analysis of a passage's genre will be extremely helpful during the process of interpretation.

Interpretation

Clear biblical interpretation builds on careful observation. The purpose of interpretation is to discover the meaning of the biblical passage as the author intended. Interpretation is commonly used as a synonym of hermeneutics and “the various methods used to examine texts.”¹⁴ John Stott in his classic book, *Understanding the Bible*, argues for three basic principles of biblical interpretation: simplicity, history, and harmony. First, one should look for the natural sense of the biblical passage. This is simplicity. Second, one should look for the original sense of the text. This is history. Finally, one should look for the general sense of the Bible. This is harmony.¹⁵

The principles of simplicity, history, and harmony help us build a bridge between our (modern) world and the biblical (ancient) world. The Bible was written, as we just noted, using different literary genres. Furthermore, it was written in different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), in different geographical contexts within various cultures, and with specific historical conditions. Consequently, the grammatical-historical method of interpretation that considers all these circumstances is the key approach for understanding the Bible.¹⁶

Mock proposes several rules to interpret the text. By following these rules, we gain clearer understanding of the grammatical and historical context of any Bible passage.¹⁷

1. Interpret the passage literally. We read the text considering its words and sentences in their usual and customary way. The literal meanings of words are determined in three ways: (1) by their basic definitions, (2) by the way the term is used elsewhere in the

¹⁴ W. R. Tate, “Interpretation,” in *Interpreting the Bible* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 180.

¹⁵ J. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

¹⁶ W. Tolar, “The Grammatical-Historical Method,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 217.

¹⁷ D. J. Mock, *Bible Study Methods*, 50–61.

Scripture and in other contemporary writings, and (3) by the context in which the word is used.

Literal interpretation includes figurative language like that in Psalm 1. These figures of speech (e.g., “tree planted beside streams of water,” “chaff that the wind blows away”) produce mental images to communicate concrete meaning. Lexicons and Bible dictionaries serve as helpful tools for interpretation because they explain the meaning of the biblical words. These tools “provide the reader with etymologies, an identification and discussion of irregular grammatical forms, possible meanings, and the usage of a word within a given context.”¹⁸

2. Interpret the Bible passage considering its immediate context. The context of a passage determines the meaning of a particular text. To interpret a passage correctly, we need to consider the paragraph in which it is located, its chapter, its book, and the entire Bible. Some critics argue that the Bible is vague, that we can make the Bible say anything we want. This is true only when readers take verses out of their context. A text out of context becomes a pretext to present ideas contrary to what the Bible is really saying.

The meaning of Paul’s expression in Phil 4:13, “I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me,” for example, could be used to say that in Christ Paul became a superhero with invincible powers. However, the immediate context tells us that the word “all” refers to Paul’s economic and social situation. In Christ, Paul can face economical hardships because he had learned to be content in plenty and in want.

3. Interpret the passage in view of history and culture. Bible authors faced particular social and cultural conditions under particular historical settings that influence the content of their books. Culture affects everything human beings do because it is “a system of symbols, attitudes, behaviors, relationships, beliefs, and responses to the environment shared by a particular human group in contrast to others.”¹⁹ A proper biblical interpretation requires that we pay attention to the geographical, religious, topographical, social, and political

¹⁸ W. R. Tate, “Lexicons,” in *Interpreting the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 192–93.

¹⁹ J. L. González, “Culture,” in *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 42.

factors surrounding the biblical text. The occasion and purpose of each biblical book is central for a proper understanding of the historical context.²⁰ Bible commentaries and books dealing with manners and customs of biblical times offer insights into the historical and cultural background of biblical passages. However, their use should follow a careful observation of the Bible passage.

4. Interpret the passage in view of literary form. As we have discussed, the literary genre of Bible books affects the interpretation of their meaning.²¹ The Bible uses six major literary genres: epistles, narrative, poetry, proverbs, parables, and prophecy.

Epistles. The New Testament letters follow a logical flow of ideas with the goal of communicating a specific message to a specific audience. Since the epistles were intended to be read in public, it is important to read them in their entirety to discover their structure and how the argument develops. This kind of literature uses a straightforward language to develop an argument. The epistles follow a relatively fixed form containing conventional aspects of Hellenistic letters but with distinctive features:

- Opening (sender, addressee, greeting).
- Thanksgiving (prayer for spiritual welfare and remembrance or commendation of the spiritual riches of the addressee).
- Body.
- Paraenesis (exhortation).
- Closing (final greetings and benediction).²²

Narrative. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is full of stories. The plot is the key element of any story. In order to have a good story, something needs to happen to someone somewhere. Therefore, the plot (action), setting, and characters form the essential elements of biblical narrative. Bible stories are descriptive, not prescriptive because they share the lives of people, including their achievements and mistakes. We can learn from their experiences. They do not, however, provide a model of behavior in every instance. Several narrative elements guide the proper understanding of this genre:

²⁰ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 23.

²¹ L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 12.

²² L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 434.

- Physical, temporal, and cultural settings of the story.
- Characters of the story, with special emphasis on the protagonist.
- Plot conflicts and their resolution.
- Aspects of narrative suspense (how the story arouses curiosity about outcome).
- The protagonist's experience in living as an implied comment about life.
- Narrative unity, coherence, an emphasis.
 - † Elements of testing and choice in the story.
 - † Character progress and transformation.
 - † Foils, dramatic irony, and poetic justice.
 - † The implied assertions about reality, morality, and values.
 - † Repetition and highlighting as clues to what the story is about.
 - † Point of view in the story—how the writer gets a reader to share his attitude toward the character and events.²³

Poetry. Biblical poetry paints images with words to express human experiences. The New Testament includes several poetic sections, and many books in the Old Testament are poetry. The capacity of unfolding the possibilities of images, metaphors, and similes is essential for proper interpretation of the Psalter and other poetic books.²⁴ Poetry is an emotional and intimate way of communication. Therefore, we need to “feel” the text as we read it to grasp the author's experience.

Hebrew poetry uses parallelism as a structural technique to organize the verses. Parallelism consists of “two or more phrases that express an idea in different words but in similar grammatical form.”²⁵ In most occasions the second line (or verse) relates to the first one in different ways. For example, it can restate the same truth expressed in the first line (synonymous parallelism); it can contrast the ideas

²³ Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 68–69.

²⁴ R. Jacobson, “Imagery and the Psalms,” in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, ed. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 197.

²⁵ L. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 442.

presented on the first line (antithetic parallelism); or it can complement the idea shared on the first line (synthetic parallelism).

Four key questions should guide our reading and interpretation of biblical poetry: What is the overall effect of the poem? What is the structure of the poem? What are the figures of speech of the poem? What are the themes and theology of the poem?²⁶

Proverbs. The Bible contains many aphorisms or proverbs, including a complete book that bears that name. Proverbs “are moments of epiphany—high points of human insight.”²⁷ The biblical wisdom literature includes the book of Proverbs. Wisdom in biblical perspective refers to godly living because correct behavior is a manifestation of an accurate understanding of God. Although proverbs are statements of truth, they should be considered as principles, not promises. Consequently, a proverb presents a general statement of the way life *should* be, not necessarily the way it *will* be. “A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath” (Prov 15:1). This statement reflects a desired outcome, not a promise that our kind answers will always turn away anger.

Parables. Our Lord Jesus Christ made parables an active ingredient of His teaching. A parable is a short story based on real-life events with the purpose of teaching a central truth. A parable develops only one key truth. Thus we need to concentrate on the main focus of the parable instead of spending time on the details of the story. Robertson McQuilkin suggests six basic guidelines for understanding parables: “Begin with the immediate context, identify the central point of emphasis, identify irrelevant details, compare parallel and contrasting passages, and base doctrine on clear literal passages.”²⁸

Prophetic literature. Fully one-fourth of the biblical text deals with prophetic literature. Although a common aspect of this genre is the prediction of future events, prophetic books also focus on God’s messages of judgment, warning, and calling to repentance. The Lord called biblical prophets to proclaim His messages, to “forth-tell” His truths more than just merely foretell the future. Prophetic material is filled with symbols and figurative language. Thus we need to be care-

²⁶ M. E. Travers, “Poetry,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 596.

²⁷ L. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 315.

²⁸ R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 186.

Compare all related and parallel passages, realize that there may be a long time (hundreds or thousands of years) between the announcement of the prophecy and its fulfillment, distinguish between already fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled prophecy, identify figures of speech and symbolic language and interpret accordingly, and make certain the interpretation does not conflict with other Scripture.²⁹

Even though the Bible was written by many authors in different times and places, it presents a thematic unity that brings together all books. The three main Bible themes are creation, fall, and redemption.³¹ The first two chapters of the book of Genesis explain the story of God's good creation. However, in Genesis 3 the first human beings sinned against the Creator, and consequently all humanity became alienated from the Lord. From Gen 3:15 to Revelation 22 the Bible tells the story of redemption. The Old Testament, especially through the covenants that represent the backbone of biblical narrative, deals with the promise of redemption. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ consummates the redemption of humanity. The Bible ends with the promise of the second coming of Christ and the new heavens and new earth.

²⁹ D. Mock, *Bible Study Methods*, 72–73.

³⁰ C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 28.

³¹ D. K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

original intended meaning. Dockery and Guthrie suggest seven steps that summarize biblical interpretation for Bible teachers:

1. Choose a text and prepare spiritually.
2. Study the backdrop for the text.
3. Work on translations and general observation.
4. Perform word and concept analysis.
5. Study the broader biblical and theological contexts.
6. Apply the text.
7. Proclaim its truths.³²

God has the goal of transforming us to be more like Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29). Application helps us to change our behavior, attitude, and way of thinking so that we please God and live according to His will. In the Bible we find the parameters for our renovation. The key question we need to ask ourselves when we read a text is, How does God want me to change in light of this passage? Observation and interpretation prepare the way to application, which is the most important aspect of Bible study (Matt 7:24; Jas 1:22).

An accurate application of the biblical text has to be practical, personal, and precise. Application is more than good desires and general principles. The dedicated practice of biblical truths in daily experiences, every day, all the time, is a central desire of every serious believer. God speaks to us through His Word, and we should individually respond to His message. We are effective as Bible teachers when we live out what we teach and then lead our students to do the same. Good applications are concrete, attainable, and measurable. For example, the statement, “We studied today about the importance of Bible study; now let’s go and spend more time in the Word,” only conveys good intentions. It lacks the three characteristics of application. A better application would be able to answer the following: When should I read the Bible? How much? Where do I start? How long? Where? At what time?

Hendricks suggests nine questions to ask during the application process of a particular biblical text: Is there an example for me to follow? Is there a sin to avoid? Is there a promise to claim? Is there a prayer to repeat? Is there a command to obey? Is there a condition

³² D. S. Dockery and G. H. Guthrie, *The Holman Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2004), 47.

to meet? Is there a verse to memorize? Is there an error to mark? Is there a challenge to face?³³

Conclusion

A popular maxim says, “You can only give what you possess.” This saying also applies to Christian teaching. By carefully observing the Word, interpreting its meaning, and applying its message to our lives, we raise a solid platform from which to teach it to others. As Christian teachers, we should follow Ezra’s example:

*The gracious hand of his God was on him,
because Ezra had determined in his heart
to study the law of the LORD, obey it,
and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel.
(Ezra 7:9b–10, emphasis mine)*

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to study the Bible?
2. What is the connection between exegesis, hermeneutics, and teaching or exposition?
3. Explain in your own words the inductive Bible study approach.
4. Describe the general rules of biblical interpretation.
5. What can we learn from Ezra’s example of studying and obeying the Word before teaching it to others?

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³³ H. G. Hendricks and W. D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 304–9.

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