

Church Planter Network Resource

# Some Guidelines for Effective Bible Study



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Note: The following paper and study guides were developed over a number of years from a wide variety of resources. It began during a church plant in Springfield, Colorado, when several new Christians who responded to exhortations to read the Bible said, "I am trying but don't know how to read it or understand what I am reading." It was a regular part of teaching in following new church plants. It has also been taught in Association level conferences to church leaders as a follow-up to MasterLife.

For individual reading, this paper is best approached in a casual fashion with a Bible in hand and a pencil to write a few notes (or a computer for Bible search and notes). In group settings, the presenter in a one- or two-session overview to Bible study can use this paper. Then introducing the study guides and using them one at a time can follow it. In the last two church plants where this was used, the paper was presented on two consecutive Sunday nights followed by several weeks using the study guides. The plan was to spend two Sunday nights per guide. The first night the guide would be presented, and the planter then presented a study he had done based on the guide. All participants were encouraged to do a study the next week using the guide and two or three persons volunteered to present their study the second week.

Introduction: The Bible is an essential resource for spiritual growth and the health of believers. The Bible needs to be read regularly, studied systematically and obeyed to have the desired impact in a person's life. Pastors and church leaders are often guilty of encouraging people to read and study the Bible but offering no suggestions or training on how to do it. There are a variety of reading plans that can be adjusted or adapted based on an individual's age, reading ability and level of personal and spiritual maturity. It may begin with reading daily a few verses to a paragraph or a chapter. A simple plan is to read the Bible through each year. There are many reading plans published to accomplish this goal. One simple way is to divide the number of pages in the Bible being read by 365 and read that number of pages daily. For most Bibles that will require reading three or four pages a day. Some persons struggle because they hit long sections that seem confusing or not as inspirational (such as Leviticus or Jeremiah). The *One Year Bible*, published in various translations, is a very helpful tool for systematic Bible reading because it has daily readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Proverbs and the New Testament.

## I. Some Suggestions for Personal Reading Plan:

1. **Read daily.** These simple steps will help you develop a daily pattern of reading the Bible. Set a regular time to read the Bible. Most people find value in spending time in the Bible before the day's activities begin. That may require adjusting some schedules to get to bed in time so you can get up earlier and have time for this. Have a regular place for Bible reading. If not using a computer, keep your Bible, a pencil and journal or notebook there so that you do not have to gather them each time you begin to read. Keep a spiritual diary, journal or notebook so that you can make notes from reading or record questions that arise for further study. Make notes on things you hear the Spirit speak about, such as commands to be obeyed, promises to be claimed, sins to be confessed, habits to be broken, attitudes to be changed, et cetera.

2. **Plan your daily reading.** Do not just sit down and open the Bible and read randomly. Read for personal growth and nourishment of your spiritual life. For a new Christian or a person not familiar with the Bible, repeated reading of a book is a valuable practice. You will be surprised how many new things will surface on the fourth or fifth reading of a book. Patterns, repeated words or phrases begin to immerge during multiple readings. Try the following reading pattern:

- John, 5-7 times
- 1 John, Mark, 2-4 times
- The shorter letters of Paul, 2 times
- Luke, Acts, Romans, 2 times
- The entire New Testament, 2 times

## II. Some Guidelines for Effective Study:

1. **Decide to study.** You will not study the Bible until you come to a personal decision that this is important enough to make time to do. There are always pulls on our time. You must carve out a block of time to read God's Word regularly and then make time to do the more detailed studies as need arises. In addition to making time, many people find it helpful to have a set place where they do their reading. The time and place become part of a habit. Having the Bible, a notebook for notes, pencil and other study tools at that place allows the study to begin without interruption or distraction.

2. **Let your study grow out of your reading,** your personal needs, or questions that arise from time to time. Often as you read, you will find yourself wondering, "What does this mean?" or "What else does the Bible have to say on this topic?" Sometimes people will ask you, "Does the Bible really say that \_\_\_\_\_?" As those questions are asked, write them down and begin to build a catalogue of studies you can or need to do.

3. **Learn to ask questions.** Someone has said that the secret to effective study is learning to ask the right questions. The one-page study guides that comprise Part V of this material are basically a series of questions to ask as you engage in various types of studies.

4. **Realize that the Bible is a spiritual book** and is only spiritually perceived. The Holy Spirit is our primary teacher. When beginning any study, pray for His guidance (John 16:12-15).

5. **Apply the sound principles of interpretation** as you seek to understand the Bible's message.

## III. Principles of Interpretation:

1. **Interpret the passage in light of the words used.** Like any book, the Bible is made up of many words. Because of our belief in the inspiration of the Bible, the words are not there simply by choice of the human writers. The words used were chosen in a process of inspiration. It is important to seek to understand the individual words, not just a general idea or the flow of words.

a. Realize that some words have changed meaning over the years. This is especially true if you are reading from the *King James Version*. An example might be the word charity. In contemporary language it is defined as public provision for the relief of the needy or a gift for public benevolent purposes. In 1 Corinthians 13 the word translated charity is most often translated love in the rest of Scripture. In Peter's letters you will find the word conversation used 8 times. We normally think of conversation as talk, but the word more appropriately refers to a person's walk. If you look up "conversation" in Vines, you will be referred to "behavior." The definition says, "indicating one's manner of life and character, rendered 'behave'" (from Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*).

b. Some words don't mean the same today as they did in Bible times. An example is found in Matthew 25:15. When we hear the word "talent" today, we often think of ability, such as "She is a talented artist." In Jesus' day a talent was a measure of money equaling six thousand days' wages or between seventy-five and ninety pounds of gold. Using either measure it converts to about one-third to one-half million dollars in today's U. S. currency.

c. Some words were used in a particularly meaningful form. Read 1 John 3:6, 8-9 in the *King James* and also in a contemporary translation. Based on the *King James*, it may sound that if you ever sin after salvation, you don't know God and are born of the devil. It might

sound as if John teaches what some call sinless perfection. But the verb tense used here speaks of continued action or a habitual pattern, not the periodic failure. Look at the following quote:

1 John 3:6: “Whosoever sinneth” (present linear active articular participle) “the one who keeps on sinning” (lives a life of sin, not mere occasional acts of sin)

1 John 3:9: “And he cannot sin” This is a wrong translation, for this English naturally means “and he cannot commit sin.” A great deal of false theology has grown out of a misunderstanding of the tense of *hamartanein*. Paul has precisely John’s idea in Rom. 6:1: “shall we continue in sin” (present active linear subjunctive) in contrast with Rom. 6:15: “shall we commit a sin” (first aorist active subjunctive)—Robertson’s *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Copyright © 1985 by Broadman Press).

d. Some words are unique expressions to the culture: It may be the culture of the Bible times or the culture of the time of translation. Look at Genesis 31:35 as Rachel speaks to her father. “Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me” (*KJV*). Was it the custom of women in Rachel’s day not to stand in the presence of a male? She was not talking about social customs but a more personal issue. “Don’t be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I’m having my period” (*NIV*).

In the parable of lost things, it is reported “And not many days after the younger son gathered all together” (Luke 15:13, *KJV*). The phrase “gathered all together” carried the idea to convert assets into cash.

2. **Interpret in light of the kind of language uses.** The Bible is to be taken literally. Literal interpretation does not mean wooden literalism. The safest approach is to take a passage literally unless there is clear evidence that a figure of speech is intended. You interpret

a figure of speech literally by asking the question, “What did the writer seek to communicate when he used this literary device?” The language of the Bible uses a variety of figures of speech. Five of them are:

a. **Simile:** A simile is a direct comparison of similarities or differences using key words such as like, as or so. The following passages contain similes: Psalms 1:3, 4; 103:11; Prov. 26:1; Matt. 10:16; 1 Cor. 13:1.

b. **Metaphor:** Like the simile, a metaphor compares or contrasts objects but the comparison is implied. No use is made of like, as or so. Some metaphors are found in Psalms 22:12-13; Isaiah 40:7, 8; Matt. 5:13, 14; Luke 22:19-20; John 15:5; Eph. 2:20.

c. **Hyperbole:** Hyperbole is the exaggeration of an idea for emphasis. Some examples are Deut. 1:28; Matt. 5:29-30; 7:3; 16:26; Acts 27:34.

d. **Personification:** This figure of speech ascribes personality or human capabilities, activities or emotions to animals or inanimate objects. Some examples of personification are Psalms 114:3-4; Prov. 1:20-23; Isaiah 55:12.

e. **Anthropomorphism:** An anthropomorphism speaks of God in human terms, ascribing to Him human characteristics or emotions. Some examples are found in Exodus 8:19 and Psalms 91:4.

3. **Interpret in light of the kind of literature used.** The Bible is a book of books. The Old Testament contains books of law, history, poetry and prophets. The New Testament contains a particular form of biographies, history, letters and apocalyptic literature. You understand that you do not read a newspaper editorial, a sports report or the want ads in the same way. Nor do you read the prophets like the Psalms.

4. **Interpret in light of the background of the passage.** To do this, ask questions like: Who was the author? To whom was the passage written? What were the conditions of the time? What cultural peculiarities are revealed? An example can be to look at Philippians or Titus using the preceding questions. Read 1 Cor. 8:1-13 and 9:23-27. What is the background of each of these passages? Look up Eph. 6:10-17. What is the picture Paul uses?

5. **Interpret in light of the context.** This is possibly one of the most important principles. The general context is that the Bible is a book of faith, written by people of faith to inspire faith. The specific context is the location in a book or chapter of the Bible. Look closely at the setting of a passage. An example of this principle can be seen when you study Jesus' parables. What was it that prompted the telling of the parable of lost things in Luke 15?

6. **Interpret in light of the rest of the Bible.** The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible. The Bible is a united piece. It does not contradict itself. When confronting a difficult passage, ask, "Where else is this topic addressed?" Read John 3:14. What is the meaning of "the Son of Man must be lifted up"? Where else is the phrase used? It is found in John 8:28; 12:32-34. Is there any clear explanation of the phrase? Yes, John 12:33 gives a specific explanation of the phrase, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."

Three common rules are:

- a. Interpret complex passages by simple passages.
- b. Interpret unclear by clear passages.
- c. Interpret historical by teaching passages.

7. **Interpret in light of the place occurring in the history of God's revelation.** God's revelation is progressive. It does not move from error to truth but from "the seed to the

flower.” All that is in a flower is present in the seed. God did not expose his full revelation to Abraham. Abraham was not ready for it (Hebrews 1:1-3).

8. **Interpret in light of Jesus.** Herschel Hobbs interpreted this principle, “The Bible is the written Word about the living Word. Therefore, any interpretation of a given passage must be made in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and his teachings and redemptive work” (*The Baptist Faith and Message*, p. 30). Jesus is God’s ultimate, final, complete word. “God said it all in Jesus.” He tells us what God wants us to know. Is that what Paul was saying “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 1:19-20, *NIV*). Tim LaHaye writes, “Jesus Christ revealed God to man in everything He did; that’s why if you want to know about God, then study the life of Christ” (*How to Study the Bible for Yourself*, p. 61).

9. **Interpret the Bible, planning to use it in daily life.** Read 2 Timothy 3:15-17. The Bible is not a “code book” to be decoded. It is to be studied for the guidelines to live godly lives. When a passage is understood, it is to be made part of our daily life. We are to put it into practice. Search out principles in the Scriptures and apply these to your life and setting.

To help in applying the Bible to life, ask the following questions about a passage:

- a. Are there sins I need to confess?
- b. Is there a promise I need to claim?
- c. Is there an action I need to avoid?
- d. Is there an example I need to follow?

Develop personal goals from the study to help apply the passage to your life. Make the goal statement—

- a. Personal. Begin with a personal phrase such as “I need to ...”

- b. Make it practical and specific.
- c. Make it measurable by using dates and numbers.

An example of a poor goal statement is, “We should be better Christians.” A good example is, “I need to witness to my lost friends; therefore I will talk with Ron and Vicki about Jesus tomorrow,” or “I need to pray more, therefore I will get up ten minutes earlier than normal to meet God in prayer.”

#### **IV. Use Good Tools for Study:**

There are several tools you need for Bible study. The following are some basic tools the Bible student needs. Some people prefer to use computer resources for their Bible study. For these individuals there are a number of good computer-based Bible resources. *PC Bible*, *Quick Verse* and *Logos Bible Software* are some popular programs. Additionally there are several Internet-based and shareware tools available for the Bible student who uses the computer. Two sites that access online search programs are [www.bible.gospelcom.net](http://www.bible.gospelcom.net) and [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com). Both of these sites have multiple languages and multiple translation search tools as well other research tools. (These are shared as information and not endorsement.)

Other Bible students prefer more traditional tools. Books. The following are some books the Bible student may select from. It is not recommended that a student goes out and buy these all at one time. Begin to gather them over a period of time. Request them as gifts for birthdays, anniversaries, or Christmas. Some of the tools needed are:

1. **A good study Bible:** *Life Application Study Bible*, *The Open Bible*, *Scofield Reference Bible*, and *Thompson Chain Reference* are some popular study Bibles. They are available in a variety of translations. In addition to a good study Bible, it is helpful to have several translations to use for comparison. *The Amplified Bible*, *New American Standard*

*Version*, and *The New International Version* are popular translations. A parallel Bible is another tool that fills the desire to look at several translations.

2. **A concordance:** *Strong's Concordance* and *Young's Analytical Concordance* are known as the best. *Cruden's Complete Concordance* is adequate for most people's study. After a good study Bible, the concordance will be the second most important book for the Bible student.

3. **A Bible dictionary:** This resource not only defines but also gives some background material for the Bible student. Some of the more popular have been *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, *The New Compact Bible Dictionary*, or *Unger's Bible Dictionary*.

4. **Some introductory books:** There are a variety of general, introductory resources to help the Bible Student.

*Hailey's, Holman or Unger's Bible Handbook*

*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* by Freeman or Matthews or Wright

*Heart of Hebrew History* and *Heart of the New Testament* by H. I. Hester

*New Testament Survey* by Merrill Tenney

**V. Use the study guides as resources to begin various types of Bible studies.**

### Study of the Parables

A parable is described as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Jesus was a master in using parables. He used them to reveal truth to sincere followers and obscure it from the idle curious. It is important to see the story in light of the social customs of the time in which it was told.

Questions to ask when studying parables:

1. What occasion provoked the telling of the parable?
2. What are the details, customs, and practices that form the natural part of the story?
3. To whom was the parable told?
4. What other passages teach the same truth? Is the parable interpreted in Scripture?
5. Are there clues for the interpretation of the parable in its context?
6. Remembering that a parable sets forth one central truth, what is that central teaching?
7. How can you apply this truth to your own daily experiences this week?

To see if you can make the parable live, write a modern parable, using present-day situations and customs to teach the same truth.

Some parables:

Judges 9:8-15; 2 Samuel 12:1-4; Isaiah 6:1-7

Sower (or Four Soils) (Matthew 13:3-23; Luke 8:5-13)

Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30)

Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24)

The Lost Things (Luke 15:3-32)

The Wicked Husbandmen (Matthew 21:33-43)

Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)

## Character Study

The study of Bible characters can be informative, inspirational, and instructive. The study of how others met and overcame, or were defeated by the circumstances of life can help prepare us for those things we will face. The objective of character study is to discover what made a person a success or failure and incorporate that into our life. Look for the person's attitude:

1. Toward self, God, family and home.
2. Toward failure or discouragements and success, victory, or praise.
3. Toward the little things of life.
4. Toward friends or enemies.
5. Toward job (faithful, dependable).

Also note:

1. When alone with God, how did the person act?
2. What events were going on during the person's life that may have impacted him/her?
3. Were there any great crises that changed or shaped the person's life or revealed aspects of the person's character?
4. How did God deal with the person's weaknesses?
5. What did God have to say about the person?
6. What is told about the person's prayer life?
7. What is told about the person's family and background?
8. How did he/she influence others for good or evil?
9. What were the desirable or undesirable traits in the person's life?
10. Did the person have any significant faults or failures? How did he/she deal with it?
11. What are the primary lessons from this person's life for you?

List some practical and personal applications from this study.

Some persons to study:

Absalom, Asa, Barnabas, Caleb, Eli, Esther, Hannah, Hezekiah, Mary of Bethany, Nehemiah, Philip, Ruth, Stephen, Timothy, Titus

## Book Study

The Bible is a library of sixty-six separate books. Bible study must bring one to an understanding of the particular theme and content of each book. The following steps help to get the whole picture of a book.

1. Read the book: Read the book through in one setting from a readable translation. Then read it through several times more slowly. Read prayerfully with a pen in hand to make notes or questions. Look for words, phrases, and ideas that are repeated.
2. In one sentence write the theme of the book.
3. Do some background study to answer the following questions.  
Who wrote the book?  
When and where was it written?  
To whom was it written?  
Did some problem or emergency prompt the writing?
4. Prepare some notes on the content by doing one or more of the following:  
Outline or summarize the book either by content or chapter.  
Identify the main theme and key passages.  
Identify the major divisions of the book.  
Note unique expressions and repeated ideas.  
List any words that need to be defined or require further study.  
Identify key people, locate geographic references, and study any particular customs or cultural details.
5. List the conclusions and applications from the study as they may apply to your personal faith and conduct.

## Study of Bible Prayers

Great profit can be derived from the study of the prayers of the Bible. Over one hundred prayers are recorded. These questions help in studying these prayers.

1. Who was praying and why?
2. What circumstances led to the prayer?
3. What are the physical aspects involved?
4. What word indicates the act of prayer?
5. To whom was the prayer directed?
6. What is the order of the prayer? (Formulate an outline, giving verse references for the major points of the prayer).
7. What is the main subject of the prayer? What elements are found (worship, thanksgiving, confession, petition, etc.)?
8. Note the relation of the prayer to the promises of the Bible. Did the one praying have the right to expect an answer to his prayer?
9. Is there recorded an answer to the prayer? When and how was the answer given?
10. What were the results of the prayer? On the one praying? On others?
11. What does this teach for our prayer life?

### Suggested Prayers to Study:

Acts 4:23-31	2 Kings 19:14-19
Matthew 6:9-15	Romans 1:9-12
Philippians 1:8-11	John 17:1-26
Psalms 51:1-19	Daniel 9:4-19
Exodus 32:11-14	Ezra 9:5-15
1 Kings 8:22-53	1 Kings 18:36-37
Ephesians 1:16-23	Nehemiah 1:5-11
Ephesians 3:14-21	Genesis 18:39-46
Colossians 1:9-14	Luke 23:39-46

## Word Study

The Bible is one book made up of sixty-six books and thousands of words. Someone has reported that in the English translation of the Bible there are about six thousand different words used. But in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, there are fourteen thousand, three hundred and eighty-eight different words. In seeking to understand the message of the Bible, it is often necessary to do some word study.

The objective of word study is to find out what the author intended to say when he used a particular word. It is essential to pay attention to the context of the word. The following steps are helpful:

1. Select a word from reading that needs further study.\*
2. If possible, note the word used in the original language.\*\* Check a Bible Dictionary for the root meaning of the word. Possibly notice the use of the word in other ancient literature. Compare several English translations of the same word. Also look for other ways that the same word is translated.
3. Find the occurrences of the word in the Bible by use of a concordance. Study these passages.
4. Summarize your findings on the word.

\*Suggested words: disciple, praise, hope, baptize, fellowship, peace, conversation

\*\*Vines' *Expository Dictionary*  
Robertson's *Word Pictures*

## Topical Study

Study of Bible topics, themes, or doctrines is very similar. Therefore, they will be considered together. Topical study seeks to understand all that God's Word has to say on a broad, general subject. It uses a cross-reference and/or a topical study book.\* Theme study deals with a narrow aspect of a subject. (Example: prayer, postures, hindrances, answers). "By doctrine we mean 'that which is taught,' the orderly statements of particular truths." These guidelines will aid in this type of study:

1. Be systematic: Do not study at random. Do not limit yourself to a few pet topics.
2. Be open: Do not approach the study with a set of foredrawn conclusions of what you will find.
3. Be thorough: As far as possible, study all that the Bible teaches on a subject.
4. Be exact: Notice the exact words used and their content.
5. Write out your conclusions from the study in terms of what it says to your life.

The selected theme is approached with predetermined questions in mind. The basic journalistic questions: What? Who? Where? Why? and How? Ask three or four questions about your topic. An example might be to study the prayers of the New Testament writers by asking:

1. Who did they pray for?
2. What did they pray?
3. What was their method of prayer?

*\*Nave's Topical Bible  
Thompson's Chain Reference  
New Topical Textbook*

## Study of the Prophets

Over a quarter of the pages of the Old Testament are prophets. In every prophetic text there is at least two and sometimes as many as four distinct messages. The messages can be classified as:

- 1) The contemporary message is the message to a prophet or his contemporaries. Prophets were messengers for their time. The contemporary message sometimes had two elements. First, it always involved the forthtelling of God's Word to the people. A second part of the contemporary message was found in some, but not all passages. It is a foretelling of what will happen if people fail to respond in faith and obedience to the forthtelling.
- 2) The Christ 1 message is an expectational message that looks forward to the first coming of Christ. These Christ 1 messages were often unclear until they found their fulfillment in Jesus.
- 3) The Christ 2 message deals with the end of time, the day of the Lord's judgment, the second coming of Christ.
- 4) The church message speaks to all people of all ages but is best understood for its words to the church and the Christian living between Christ 1 and Christ 2. In every passage there are at least the contemporary (specifically the forthtelling) and the church messages. In a few passages all four messages can be identified.

To understand the forthtelling element of the contemporary message, ask:

1. To whom was the prophet speaking?
2. What events prompted the prophet's sermon?
3. What was going on in the audience's existence that called forth the "Word of the Lord"?
4. What did the message mean in its setting to the prophet and his contemporaries?

To understand the foretelling element of the contemporary message, ask,

5. Is there a predictive element in this message?
6. Is there a record of the fulfillment of the prediction?

To understand the expectational element of the Christ 1 message, ask

7. Is there a reference to the Messiah in the passage?
8. Where and how was this fulfilled in the New Testament?

To understand the eschatological element of the Christ 2 message, ask,

9. Is there a message for the end of times, the day of the Lord's judgment?
10. Is the message repeated/reinforced in the New Testament?

To understand the eternal message to the church, ask.

11. What timeless, eternal truth was spoken then that needs to be heard now?

Study Isaiah 5-7; 35 and 52 asking the previous questions at the end of each chapter.