

How to Study Your Bible

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<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-study-bible/>

1. Observe: What Does It Say?

The first step is observation (or perhaps better, comprehension). Whenever we open God's Word, our most fundamental task is simply to see what's there.

The good news is that observation isn't complicated. It mainly consists of reading slowly and carefully in order to gather the basic facts of who, what, where, and when. Good questions to bear in mind include:

- Are there any repeated words or ideas?
- Who is speaking or writing?
- To whom are they speaking or writing?
- Who are the main characters?
- Where is this taking place?
- Are there words that show chronology?
- Are there contrasts, comparisons, or conditional statements?
- What is the logical progression in the author's argument?
- Are there words that indicate atmosphere, mood, and emotion? Figures of speech?
- What are the section divisions and linking words?
- What don't I understand here?

Biblical observation doesn't have to be some drawn-out, laborious process. You don't need to consciously ask and answer each question. The more you engage the Bible, the more alert you'll become to such things. (By the way, it's best to work through whole books of the Bible from beginning to end, rather than adopting a "popcorn" approach that ignores context and bounces randomly from one passage to another.)

2. Interpret: What Does It Mean?

The next step is interpretation. You've considered what the passage says, but what does it *mean*? It may help to ask questions like:

- Does the surrounding context clarify any confusing words or phrases? (It's wise to examine the "nearest" context—other verses in the same chapter or other chapters in the same book—before consulting "farther" passages or outside resources.)
- How would I paraphrase this passage in my own words?
- Why did the biblical author write this particular passage? Why did he feel it necessary to include?
- Is my interpretation consistent with what I noticed in the observation stage, or is it too dependent on a few details?
- Do other passages of Scripture fill out my interpretation? (The saying "Let Scripture interpret Scripture" reminds us to let clearer passages shed light on more complex verses.)
- Where does this passage fall in redemptive history? How does it fit within the Bible's teaching as a whole?

Shortly after his resurrection, as described in Luke 24, Jesus encounters two men and explains the most vital secret to Bible study: the entire thing is about him:

Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

But it wasn't just after his resurrection that Jesus spoke this way. During his earthly ministry he explained to the local "Bible experts" his central place in the great story:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. . . . If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. (John 5:39–40, 46)

It's one thing to know Bible stories; it's another to know the story of the Bible. It's one thing to be aware of the story's many heroes; it's another to know the Hero himself.

It's been stated that the Old Testament is "Jesus Christ concealed," and the New Testament is "Jesus Christ revealed." From beginning to end, the storyline of Scripture looks forward to and finds its final resolution in God's redeeming Son (John 1:45; 8:56; 12:16; 2 Cor. 1:20; 1 Peter 1:10–12; Acts 13:27; 13:29; 28:23).

Here is a simple framework, gleaned from a pastor named Tommy Nelson, that has helped me interpret all of Scripture with the Savior in view:

- Old Testament: Anticipation
- Gospels: Manifestation
- Acts: Proclamation
- Epistles: Explanation
- Revelation: Consummation

No matter where you turn, your Bible is about Jesus.

It's worth noting that once you've interpreted as best you can, it's often useful to consult an outside study aide such as a commentary or Bible dictionary. Though never replacements for Scripture, such tools can be great supplements. (To start I'd recommend the ESV Study Bible, the New Bible Commentary, and the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology.)

3. Apply: How Should I Respond?

After observation and interpretation comes application. This is the ultimate goal of Bible study. In the first two stages you study the text; now the text studies you. To quit prematurely, before applying what you observe and interpret, is like chewing without swallowing.

The Bible itself is clear about the importance of moving through understanding to obedience (Matt. 7:24–27; John 13:17; James 1:22; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Helpful questions to ponder at this stage include:

- What's something I learned about God—his character, his plan, his priorities, his promises, his desires, his ways?
- What's something I learned about myself? My neighbor? The world?
- What's the "fallen condition" on display in this passage (i.e., what aspect of human sin or brokenness is most evident)? How about the "redemptive solution" (i.e., what aspect of God's grace is most evident)?
- How does the gospel—the stunning news of what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to reconcile rebels to himself—affect my understanding of this passage? Conversely, how does this passage illumine my understanding of the gospel?
- How do I need to change my thinking or living based on what I've learned?
- How should I be praying in light of this passage?
- Is there an encouragement or promise here that I need to meditate on?
- What implications does this passage have for the way I engage my unbelieving friends?
- How does this passage apply to my brothers and sisters in Christ? How does it speak to our life together as a church?