

How to Improve Your Personal Bible Study

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Bible Reading vs. Bible Study

First, recognize that Bible reading and Bible study are both important, but different. In order to grow, you need to read the Bible every day as part of your time with God -- your devotions or Quiet Time. During this daily time with God I recommend prayer, wide Bible reading, praise, thanksgiving, confession, and meditation -- these are ways to reach out to God with your spirit.

When reading the Bible, it's best to read broadly rather than narrow. Read larger portions of text to embrace the full context of the passage.

Blocks of Time for In-Depth Bible Study

Bible study, as opposed to reading, concentrates on a **single topic**, *Bible character*, or *book* of the Bible for closer study.

Bible study takes a longer block of uninterrupted time. Perhaps you'll set aside 30 to 45 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday nights for in-depth Bible study, or an hour on Saturday mornings before the family is up -- or perhaps longer. Blocks of time are important to Bible study.

Learn to Ask Questions

The real key to Bible study is being inquisitive, learning to ask questions of the text. First, read the passage. Then be a detective; look for clues. What's going on? What stands out to you? What don't you understand? Look for anomalies -- things that you might not expect to find here. Consider, for example, the familiar dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus:

¹ *"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.'*

³ *In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'*

⁴ *'How can a man be born when he is old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!'*

⁵ *Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to*

spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:1-8, NIV)

Several questions are possible here:

- Where does this incident take place?
- What did members of the Pharisee party typically believe? How were they viewed in society?
- What does it mean that Nicodemus is a member of the "Jewish ruling council" or Sanhedrin? What does this tell me about him?
- Why did he come by night?
- Why does Jesus respond as he does to Nicodemus' introductory remarks in verse 2? Isn't Jesus a bit abrupt or rude in verse 3?
- Is Nicodemus' response in verse 4 mocking or is it a sincere question?
- What does "born of water" mean in verse 6? What does "born of the Spirit" mean? What does "born again" mean in verse 3?
- What does the wind analogy in verse 8 teach us about the Holy Spirit?

You get the idea. Your questions of this passage might be different than mine, but that's okay. There are no right or wrong questions. But questions are vital, since they provide direction to where you're going in your Bible study. Give yourself freedom to follow some "rabbit trails," to explore one theme and then another as you get acquainted with a passage.

The questions will vary depending on the passage you're studying, but here are some typical questions:

- **Who** wrote or said this?
- **When** was it written or said?
- **Where** did this happen?
- **To whom** was it written or said?
- **What** circumstance or event prompted this incident or teaching?
- **Why** did the person act as he did? Or say what he said?
- **How** can I apply or emulate or obey what I learn in this passage?

You'll be able to think of more questions. The key is to develop a questioning mind, and you'll learn. You won't find answers to all your questions, of course, but over time many will be answered.

Take Notes on What You Learn

One main difference between reading and studying is writing down what you learn. This isn't just so you'll remember it later. The very act of writing requires you to formulate your thoughts clearly.

It's also good to begin a notebook in which to record your observations or research.

Start small but take notes in a way that can be expanded easily. Another approach is to get a bound book that you can take notes in -- a kind of journal. You could also take notes on a computer, naming the files in such a way that you can find them again or search an entire folder for a word or phrase. It's probably a good idea to print out your notes when you're finished and file them, however, since computer files have a way of getting lost after a few years.

Learning to Use a Study Bible

After you've decided what translation to use, I encourage you to access a study Bible, since it will contain a number of tools in one volume that can help you dig deeper. Nearly every Bible publisher offers a study Bible.

Here are some of the features that's in a study Bible that you'll come to appreciate:

- **Cross References.** In a column next to the text, a study Bible lists several other verses with a similar idea or theme. For example, for "Nicodemus" in John 3:1, my Bible refers me to John 7:50 and 19:39 where he appears again. For "Rabbi" in verse 2, the cross references send me to Matthew 23:7 which has nine more references on this topic that I can explore. These cross references won't be comprehensive, but will point out the main passages that discuss this idea.
- **Bible Book Introductions.** It's important to know something about the author, date, themes, circumstances, and intended audience of the Bible book or letter you're studying. In most study Bibles you'll find one to three pages of introductory comments for each book with a brief outline.
- **Study Notes or Annotations.** Study Bibles have footnotes at the bottom of the page to help explain some of the more obscure ideas you'll run across -- a kind of mini-commentary. Remember, these aren't part of the Bible itself, but can often point you in the right direction in your study. These notes are usually indexed for easy reference.
- **Concordance.** You've had a verse on the tip of your tongue, but don't know exactly where it is. A concordance helps you find a Bible passage if you can think of a key word or two that the verse contains. A concordance can also help you find other verses that teach a concept or use a word found in the passage you're studying.
- **Topical Index.** In addition to a concordance, some study Bibles have a separate topical index that helps you find scripture references on a particular topic.

- **Maps.** Part of understanding what's happening in narrative passages of Scripture is learning the geography, the location of cities, battles, mountains, valleys, enemies, etc.

Other features you may find include articles on various topics, a brief Bible dictionary, outlines of topics and Bible books, index of place names, time lines, and so on.

Obtaining a study Bible is the place to begin. But as your Bible studies increase, you may want to invest in some more specialized books. Some to explore:

- **Bible Handbook.** Provides a great deal of information about each book of the Bible, life in Bible times, history of the English Bible, etc.
- **Bible Dictionary.** Brief articles on each significant subject, word, and person in the Old and New Testaments. You'll often find helpful summaries of Bible teaching.
- **Bible Concordance.** While study Bibles provide an abridged concordance, you can find an unabridged concordance that helps you find every occurrence of a particular word in the Bible. The best-known of these is *Strong's Concordance* (based on the KJV) which identifies each Greek and Hebrew word, and gives it a brief definition and a number. Now concordances are available for the NIV and NASB containing Strong's numbering system.
- **Bible Commentary.** Bible commentaries provide an overview and running explanation of each book of the Bible. A good place to start might be with a fairly recent one-volume commentary on the whole Bible. There are also a number of inexpensive commentary series available that cover each book in the Bible, if you want to study a particular book in greater depth.
- **Word Study tools** include an interlinear New Testament that shows the Greek text on one line and a literal English translation below it. A Greek-English Lexicon provides clear, precise definitions for each Greek word in the New Testament. Some of these are keyed to Strong's numbers so they can be used by students who haven't learned to read Greek letters. Similar resources are available for Hebrew as well.
- **Topical Bible.** A topical Bible will give a great many scripture references listed by topic. Great if you're doing a topical or thematic Bible study.
- **Bible Atlas.** An atlas contains more than detailed maps. It also describes the geography and places of the Bible, usually with fascinating illustrations and archeological details.

Note that most Bible study tools are available online at no cost such as Crosswalk Bible Study Tools (bible.crosswalk.com).

Don't Forget the Most Important Step

It's possible to be so engrossed in Bible study that you forget the most important purpose of Bible study. It's not Bible knowledge for its own sake nor being able to quote

verses and recite orthodox doctrine. Ultimately, the purpose of Bible study is to learn exactly what the Bible teaches so that you can *apply its teachings to your life*.

Perhaps the simplest approach to Bible study is to use the S.O.A.P. Bible Study method.

S.O.A.P. Bible Study Method

Scripture:

Choose your verse or passage.

Observe:

1. What does it say?
2. Who was the intended audience?
3. Why was it written?
4. What did it mean to those reading it in Bible times?
5. What was the main point the author was trying to get across?

Application:

Applying God's Word to your life helps make it personal. Is God using this verse to speak to you? What is He saying? Is there a change you should consider making in your daily routine, or maybe in your thought patterns? Is there a sin you need to confess and repent for.

Prayer:

Pause and pray; you can say your prayer out loud or write it in your notebook. Has God revealed something to you in this verse? Ask for the Holy Spirit's help and guidance. Make your prayer personal and heartfelt. Pray the Scripture itself, if possible (this depends on the verse), inserting your own name into the verse. This is really helpful if you're struggling to find the words to pray.

1. (www.jesuswalk.com/ebooks). Copyright © 2006, Ralph F. Wilson <pastor@joyfulheart.com>. All rights reserved.

2. *The Glorious Kingdom: A Disciple's Guide to Kingdom Glory and Authority*. Jesus Walk Bible Study Series. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/SermonNotes_Jhn/Jhn_39.cfm