

How to Study Your Bible

by Kay Arthur

Part 1

When it comes to Bible study, where do you begin? It's good to observe the text as a whole. By the text, we mean whatever portion of Scripture you want to study. We suggest you study the Bible book by book, because each book of the Bible is a complete message in and of itself that in turn relates to the whole Word of God. Here are some steps to get you started.

1. Begin With Prayer

You're about to learn one of the most effective methods of Bible study there is — an inductive study. Yet apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, that's all it will be — a method.

John 16:13-15 tells us that the One who guides us into all truth, the One who takes the things of God and reveals them to us, is the Holy Spirit, our resident Teacher. So ask God, by His Spirit, to lead you into all truth and to open your eyes that you may see wonderful things out of His Word (see Psalm 119:18). Begin with prayer and continue with an attitude of prayer.

2. Identify the Context

One of the most important principles of handling the Word properly and studying the Bible inductively is to interpret Scripture in the light of its context. Context is the environment or setting that goes with the text. Context is the words, phrases and sentences surrounding a particular word, phrase or sentence. It gives meaning to the particular word, phrase or sentence and helps you understand what the author is saying. Context can also be expanded to paragraphs, chapters, books and eventually the whole Bible. Because context determines the interpretation of the passage, it's important for you to know the context of any passage you're studying.

To illustrate how context gives meaning to words, let's look at the word *trunk*. Suppose someone asked you, "What does the word *trunk* mean?" To give an accurate answer, you'd first have to ask, "How's this word used?" because the word *trunk* can mean different things.

A trunk could mean the luggage compartment of a car, the flexible snout of an elephant, a large rigid piece of luggage used for transporting clothing and personal items, the main stem of a tree or shorts worn for swimming. Therefore, the only way to know the intended meaning of the word *trunk* is to examine the context in which the word is used.

To determine the context, look for what's repeated in the text and see how it all relates.

3. Observe the Obvious

When you observe the text, begin by looking for the obvious, such as repeated facts about people, places and events.

For example, if you decide to put together a rectangular jigsaw puzzle, where do you start? The four corners, of course! Why? Because they're obvious: There are only four of them, and they're easy to find because they have two straight sides.

Naturally, the next pieces you look for are the straight edges. By the time you've connected the straight edges, you have a framework within which to put the other pieces together.

Likewise, looking for the obvious facts, details or ideas establishes the framework in studying a book, chapter or passage of the Bible.

4. Deal With the Text Objectively

Observing the text to establish context must be your primary objective, so let the text itself show you its repeated emphasis.

So often I fear our only reason for being in the Word is subjective — simply to get something for ourselves, to look for something that “ministers to our heart” or to find a verse we can use to help someone or set someone straight.

How grievous this must be to God, who wants us to truly know Him and to be sanctified (set apart) by truth — and His Word is truth (John 17:17). Our driving passion should be to know truth and then adjust our beliefs and our lives accordingly.

Now granted, there might be Scriptures that minister to you more than others, but the truth and context never change. The message of the Book itself will always be the same. It is truth — absolutes on which you can stake your life, your character and your lifestyle.

5. Read With a Purpose

You must interrogate the text as a detective would a witness.

To get the whole story, journalists are taught to ask the “5 W’s and an H” (*who, what, when, where, why and how*) in their reporting.

To read the Bible with purpose you also should ask the 5 W’s and an H.

Who wrote it? *Who* said it? *Who* are the major characters? *Who* are the people mentioned? To *whom* is the author speaking? About *whom* is he speaking?

What are the main events? *What* are the major ideas? *What* are the major teachings? *What* are these people like? *What* does he talk about the most? *What* is his purpose in saying that?

When was it written? *When* did this event take place? *When* will it happen? *When* did he say it? *When* did he do it?

Where was this done? *Where* was this said? *Where* will it happen?

Why was there a need for this to be written? *Why* was this mentioned? *Why* was so much or so little space devoted to this particular event or teaching? *Why* was this reference mentioned? *Why* should they do such and such?

How is it done? *How* did it happen? *How* is this truth illustrated?

If you rush into interpretation without laying the vital foundation of observation, your understanding becomes colored by your own presuppositions — what you think, what you feel or what other people have said. And if you do this, you distort the Scriptures, which is something we’re specifically warned against (2 Peter 3:16).

The more you ask these questions, the more it’ll become a habit, until it becomes second nature to you as you study God’s awesome book. Don’t think you have to find all 5 W’s and an H every time you question a passage, because they’re not always going to be there.

As you begin to use the inductive method, you’ll be excited by what you learn. And you’ll probably find yourself saying, “I can’t believe what I’ve seen all by myself!”

PART 2

Last month you learned how to observe biblical text, and in doing so, you laid the essential foundation for understanding what the book you’re studying is all about. But you still have questions about the passage at hand. You want truth — nothing less. Plus, you know life is best when it’s lived in truth.

To help you get the most out of the Bible and out of life, here are more basic principles to follow when you're interpreting the Word of God.

1. Remember that context rules.

When you interpret anything — a word, a verse, a teaching — it must always be considered in the light of

- the surrounding verses and chapters.
- the book in which it's found.
- the entire Word of God.

Therefore, as you seek to know what something means, ask yourself:

- Is my interpretation of a particular section of Scripture consistent with the theme, purpose and structure of the book in which it's found?
- Is my interpretation consistent with other Scriptures about the same subject, or is there a glaring difference?
- Am I considering the historical and cultural context of what's being said?

Never take a Scripture out of its context to make it say something that's contrary to the text. Discover what the author is saying — remembering that the ultimate author is God — and don't add to His meaning.

2. Always seek the full counsel of the Word of God.

When you know God's Word thoroughly, you won't accept a teaching simply because someone has used one or two isolated verses to support it. Those verses could've been taken out of context, or other important passages might have been overlooked or ignored — passages that might have led to a different understanding.

For example, in John 15:7 Jesus says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . . ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Does that mean you can ask anything at all from God and He will give it to you? The answer is no. The Bible has much more to teach about prayer than just that one statement.

3. Remember that Scripture will never contradict Scripture.

The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. Remember, all Scripture is inspired by God; it's God-breathed. If it appears to be contradicting, then your interpretation of at least one passage is incomplete or wrong.

The Bible contains all the truth you'll ever need for any situation in life. Sometimes, however, you may find it difficult to reconcile two seemingly contradictory truths taught in Scripture — for example, the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. It's hard to reconcile these two teachings in our minds; they don't seem to fit together. Yet the Bible clearly teaches both.

When two or more truths that are clearly taught in the Word seem to be in conflict, remember that you — because you're human — have a finite mind. Simply humble your heart in faith and believe what God says, even if you can't understand or reconcile it at the moment.

4. Don't base your doctrine on an obscure passage of Scripture.

An obscure passage is one in which the meaning isn't easily understood. Because these passages are difficult to understand even when proper principles of interpretation are used, they shouldn't be used as a basis for establishing doctrine. Your doctrine should be based on the clear repeated teachings in Scripture.

5. Recognize when to interpret Scripture literally.

The Bible isn't a book of mysticism. God has spoken to us through His Word that we might know His truth. Therefore, take the Word of God at face value, in its natural, normal sense. Look first for the clear teaching of Scripture, not some hidden meaning. Understand and recognize figures of speech and interpret them accordingly.

Consider what's being said in light of its literary style. For example, you'll find more similes and metaphors in poetic and prophetic literature than in historical or biographical books.

Proverbs are wise sayings that are generally true to life. We read them and say, "Yes, that's life." However, these maxims cannot be interpreted as prophecies, nor can they be held as absolute promises for all people for all times.

6. Look for the author's intended meaning of the passage.

Always try to understand what the author had in mind when you interpret a portion of the Bible. Don't twist verses to support a meaning that's not clearly taught. Let the passage speak for itself.

Judges 6, for example, tells the story of Gideon's fleece. However, this particular chapter isn't teaching us that the way to know God's will for sure is to "put out a fleece."

The book of Judges records events that happened during a certain period in Israel's history, and this chapter is simply a historical account of what Gideon did when he was afraid. There are no instructions anywhere in the Bible that suggest that putting out a fleece is the proper procedure to follow in determining what the will of God is.

When we ascribe meaning to a passage that the author didn't intend, we're assuming an authority equivalent to that of the author. And the author of all Scripture is really God.

7. Check your conclusions by using reliable commentaries.

Commentaries come in several varieties. Some are strictly devotional and probably aren't what you want to use for in-depth Bible study. Some commentaries are analytical and, therefore, more helpful in this type of study.

It's vital to use commentaries that examine the text with integrity and give explanations and comments that are in keeping with the context. Also, you'll want to use commentaries that have been written by scholars who are known to hold to the inerrancy of the Word. If possible, check out more than one commentator on the book you're studying so you can weigh various interpretations. Remember that no one person has a corner on all the truth. You may disagree with the writer on one thing and agree on another, but don't discount all an author says just because you don't see everything the same way.

Bring all you read up against all you've seen as you've observed the text yourself. If you'll do this, then you can properly handle the teaching of others.

Are you excited about what you're learning about Bible study — or a little overwhelmed because of the work involved? Remember, this method isn't easy, but it's more than worthwhile for those who are willing to discipline themselves for the purpose of godliness.

PART 3

Bible study is much more than an intellectual, classroom exercise, of course. It's a life-transforming process. Thus, we come to the very critical part of the inductive process — application. Once you know what a passage means, you're responsible to live what you've learned.

Application flows out of thorough observation and correct interpretation. Application begins with belief, which then results in doing. It takes place as you're confronted with the truth and respond to it in obedience, and the glorious end result is transformation. You're made more like your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

No matter how much you know about God's Word, if you don't apply what you learn, Scripture will never benefit your life. To be a hearer of the Word and not a doer is to deceive yourself (James 1:22-25). This is why application is so vital. Observation and interpretation are the "hearing" of God's Word. Application is the embracing of the truth, the "doing" of God's Word.

Application answers the questions:

- How does the meaning of this passage apply to me?

- What truths am I to embrace, believe or order my life by?
- What changes should I make in my belief or in my life?

Second Timothy 3:16-17 gives us a listing of the various means of application:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Thus, we must apply Scripture in the light of its teaching, rebuking, correction and training in righteousness. This is the key to application — the key to its instructions for our life.

Teaching (doctrine) is what the Word of God says on any particular subject. That teaching is always true. Therefore, everything that God says in His Word about any given subject is absolute truth.

Step 1: The first step in the application of truth is to find out what the Word of God says on any particular subject through accurate observation and correct interpretation of the text.

Step 2: Then, once you understand what the Word of God teaches, you're obligated before God to accept that truth and to live by it.

Step 3: When you've adjusted any false concepts or teaching you may have believed and have embraced the truth revealed in God's Word, then you've applied what you've learned.

Rebuking exposes areas in your thinking and behavior that do not align with God's Word. It's finding out where you've thought wrongly or where you haven't been doing what God says is right.

The application of rebuking is to accept it and agree with God, acknowledging where you're wrong in thought or behavior. This is how you're set free from unbelief and sin.

Correction is the next area of application, and often the most difficult. Many times you can see what's wrong, but perhaps you're reluctant to take the necessary steps to correct it.

God hasn't left you without help or without answers in this step of correcting what is wrong. Sometimes the answers are difficult to find, but they're always there. The Spirit of God will show any child of God who wants to please her Father how to do so. Many times correction comes by simply confessing and forsaking what is wrong. Other times, God gives very definite steps to take.

When you apply correction to your actions and attitudes, God will work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). Joy will follow obedience.

Training in righteousness is the final area of application. Although God's Word is profitable for reproof and correction, the Bible was also given to you as a handbook for living. As you spend time studying His Word, God equips you through:

- teachings
- commands
- promises
- exhortations
- warnings
- the lives of biblical characters
- accounts of God's dealings with man.

As you get into the Word of God and get to know God, you see how He intends for you to live. To live the way God says to live is to live righteously.

Scripture has everything you need to meet any and all situations of life so that you “may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). This, *Brio* girls, is why you must study to show yourself approved unto God.

The Bible is your textbook for life. Don't fail your exam!

In other words, don't neglect the process of application. But remember: Application must be based on correct observation and accurate interpretation of the Word of God. Otherwise, you'll slip into legalism, tradition that overrides truth or some aberrant lifestyle that has an air of religion but is contrary to a correct relationship with God. The most effective application takes place as you go before the Lord and talk with Him about those things you have read, seen, heard and carefully studied.

In applying Scripture, the following questions may be helpful.

1. What does the passage teach?

- Is it general or specific?
- Does it apply only to specific people? To a cultural problem of the day? To a certain time in history?
- Has it been superseded by a broader teaching?

For example, in the Old Testament the children of Israel were not allowed to eat certain foods. This prohibition isn't applicable to Christians today because it was superseded by the teaching in Acts 10 and the account of Peter and his vision of the unclean animals.

2. Does this section of Scripture expose any error in your beliefs or behavior?

- Are there any commandments that you've not obeyed?
- Are there any wrong attitudes or motives in your life that the Scriptures bring to light?

3. What's God's instruction to you as His child?

- Are there any new truths to be believed?
- Are there any new commandments to be acted upon?
- Are there any new insights you're to pursue?
- Are there any promises you're to embrace?

When applying Scripture, beware of:

1. Applying cultural standards rather than biblical standards.
2. Attempting to strengthen a legitimate truth by using a Scripture incorrectly.
3. Applying it out of prejudice from past training or teaching.

And don't forget that observation, interpretation and application lead to transformation.

Ultimately the goal of personal Bible study is a transformed life and a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. Through it you're changed from glory to glory into the image of Jesus. Go for it!