

How to Study the Bible Without a Degree in Theology

Sermon Companion Guide

Jesus at the Center Bible Conference

September 7, 2016

- 1. Begin with prayer** - Prayer is always the starting point for Bible study because according to Scripture we don't have the ability to really understand the things of God without the aid of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV). The Bible is a spiritual book and therefore needs to be read with spiritual eyes.
 - Pray for spiritual vision: *"Open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things from Your law"* (Psalm 119:18, NKJV).
 - Pray for wisdom/understanding: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should asked God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you"* (James 1:5, NIV). *"Give me understanding, and I shall live"* (Psalm 119:144, NKJV).
 - Pray for a humble heart: *"My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise"* (Psalm 51:17, NIV)
- 2. Familiarize Yourself with the Bible** - knowing how the Bible is laid out and where certain Bible books are found can be very helpful to Bible study.
 - Know the difference between the Old and New Testaments.
 - The Old Testament was written before the birth of Jesus and tells about the people of Israel and their anticipation of the coming Messiah, Jesus the Christ.
 - The New Testament was written about Jesus the Messiah and chronicles His birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. It also writes about the years that follow His time here on earth and explores the growth of the Christian church.
 - Memorize the order of the Books of the Bible. This will help you to find passages of Scripture more quickly.
 - Learn how to read Bible references. For example: 2 Corinthians 4:16
 - 2 = Second letter or book
 - Corinthians = name of the letter or book
 - 4 = chapter
 - :16 = verse
- 3. Select with care** - Before you study you should select both your Bible version and your passage of focus. You may even want to employ the use of Bible tools.
 - Select a Version: There are many good Bible versions that one can use in Bible study: King James Version (KJV), New King James Version (NKJV), New International Version (NIV), New Living Translation (NLT) and New American Standard Bible (NASB) are just a few. In fact, it's often a good idea to read your passage in several versions so that the range of meaning can be discovered even though you don't know Greek or Hebrew.
 - Select a Passage: It is important to determine where the passage begins and ends (*pericope* or unit of thought). This is not always very obvious, but in most Bibles there are subject headings or bolded numbers to suggest that a new unit of thought is beginning. This step plays a pivotal role in helping you to avoid proof-texting (using isolated, out of context Bible verses to establish a position).
 - Select Bible Tools: You may use study Bibles, commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, etc. to aid you in your study of the Bible.

4. **Let the Bible Speak** - Here we allow the Bible to be its own interpreter by comparing parts of the Bible with other parts. This step requires faith to know that God's Word does not contradict itself. Therefore, we can trust that by comparing Scripture with Scripture we can come to a sure understanding of what the Bible means.
 - Observe the text - read and reread the passage several times. Then, observe words and expressions. Notice synonyms (words with similar meaning) and antonyms (words with opposite meanings). Pay attention to reoccurring words.
 - Compare Scripture - this is where a good reference Bible or a Bible concordance comes in handy. If you are having a difficult time understanding the meaning of a text you should compare that text with other things the Bible has to say on the subject or simply follow the reference guides in the middle of the page. It will often lead you to another text that will help to clarify the original passage you were confused about.
 - Detect the context - context is *"the circumstances that form the setting for an event."* In literature it is *"the parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning."* By observing what comes before and after the passage of study we can often rule out certain erroneous interpretations of said passage. Ask questions like, "Who is talking?" "Who is listening?"
 - Discern the Historical Setting - answering questions about the historical setting of your passage can aid in getting a deeper meaning from the text being studied. So answer questions like, "When was the passage written?", "Where was the passage written?", "Who is the author?" and "What is the original purpose for his writing?" A good study Bible will include this information in the introduction section of the particular book you are studying.
 - Notice Language - since the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek in the Old and New Testaments respectively, we must be careful that we understand the meanings of each word that we read. This is where comparing Bible versions can come in handy. When reading the same text in different versions sometimes the translators' word choice can help to illuminate the range of meaning. Sometimes knowing the genre (poetry, prophecy, narrative, Gospel, parable, Epistle, etc.) of writing helps as well.
5. **Apply to real life** - Bible study is not just to increase our knowledge, but is also meant to have a positive effect on our lives for our salvation. If we don't apply what we learn to real life we aren't really getting the benefit of Bible study. This step is of the utmost importance.
 - Contemporary Life - How do we apply what we just studied to the assumptions, goals and value systems of this world? What principles found in this passage can be applied to our contemporary situation? How does this passage speak to issues of social justice, racism, justice, poverty or money?
 - Personal Life - How does this passage relate to my family, close friends, personal needs, personal goals, moral decisions?
 - The Final Question - How am I going to apply this passage to my life?
6. **End With Prayer** - if we want to successfully apply anything that we study to our personal situation, we must always end with prayer. If we neglect this step we run the risk of making our head knowledge puff us up and cause us to feel superior. We must pray to God that He would transform us by the power of His Word so that we can be truly converted.