



HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Key Principles For Studying The Bible

Lesson #1

In this series¹, you will be introduced to beginning-level techniques of Bible study. Our goal is to give you a practical framework for approaching and understanding God's Word. To do this, we will explore the field of Hermeneutics—the art and science of interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutics provides the tools you need to rightly understand and apply Scripture, helping you grow in both knowledge and obedience to God's truth.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Why is God's Word important? **Deut. 8:3** says, *"And He humbled you and let you be hungry and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of Yahweh."*
- B. Why is the precise study of God's Word important? **2 Tim. 2:15** says, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."*

"The health of a man's body may generally be known by his appetite. The health of a man's soul may be known by his treatment of the Bible." – JC Ryle

- C. Why is it important for you to study the Bible? **Rom. 12:2** says, *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect."*
- D. What is wrong with teaching truth but from the wrong texts of Scripture?

II. THE ROLE OF HERMENEUTICS

The study of Hermeneutics is sometimes called "the science and art of biblical interpretation." It is an art, because we must learn how to apply the right principles wisely to different passages. It is also a science, because those principles are fixed and unchanging. At first, applying hermeneutics can feel mechanical — like learning the steps to a new skill. But with practice, it becomes second nature. Don't give up! Persevere in training yourself to handle the Word correctly, and soon it will become a lifelong habit.

¹ Material adapted from Dr. Jack Hughes, *How To Study the Bible* class available at www.drivennails.com

III. SALVATION AND SPIRITUAL READINESS

A. Salvation: Why is salvation the first mandate for understanding the Bible?

1. **2 Cor. 4:3-4** - *Unbelievers are blind.*
2. **Eph. 2:1-4** - *Unbelievers are dead.*
3. **1 Cor. 2:12,14** - *Unbelievers don't have the Spiritual power to understand.*

B. Prayer: When we pray, we speak to the God who authored Scripture and reveals all truth. It is always better to study with God than by yourself. Don't get so caught up in "hermeneutical principles" that you forget the God who imparts wisdom, truth, and knowledge through His Spirit.

1. **Ps. 119:18** - *the Believer's inadequacy and the Divine Author's sufficiency.*

"Read the Bible with earnest prayer for the teaching and help of the Holy Spirit. Here is the rock on which many make shipwreck at the very upset. They do not ask for wisdom and instruction, and so they find the Bible dark, and carry nothing away from it. You should pray for the Spirit to guide you into all truth. You should beg the Lord Jesus Christ to 'open your understanding,' as He did that of His disciples."
- JC Ryle

2. **Eph. 1:15-18** - *Paul prayed for Believers to understand God's Word.*

C. Spiritual Walk: Another important issue in Bible study is our spiritual walk. If we are living in unconfessed sin, we need to deal with that first. It is the hypocrisy of the worst sort to approach God's holy Word while entrenched in sin. Sin grieves the Holy Spirit who reveals the truth. To live in sin is to live in the flesh which is antithetical to the Spirit's working. We must confess our sins before approaching God and His Word. (

1. **Eph. 5:18** *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but **be filled** with the Spirit,*
2. **Gal. 5:16** *But I say, **walk by** the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.*
3. **Ps 66:18** *If I see wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear;*
4. **1 Jn. 1:9** *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*

D. Observation Time: This is a very basic step, but one many overlook: spend time. The more time you invest in study, the more you will draw out of the passage. You cannot skim the Bible and expect to mine its deep truths. Don't expect to get as much out of a passage as someone who has spent 5, 10, or even 100 more hours wrestling with the same text. (see **Prov. 2:1-6; 1 Tim. 4:13-16**).

"The Scriptures are shallow enough for a babe to come and drink without fear of drowning and deep enough for theologians to swim in without ever touching the bottom" – Jerome

"If you have read your Bible, you are in a small minority of Christian people. If you have studied the Bible, you are in an even smaller minority."² – RC Sproul

- E. Training:** An essential factor to consider is the training you have. A person with no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek cannot glean as much from the Scriptures as one who has mastered the Biblical languages. Just like someone who has never read through the OT will not be able to understand the OT references in the NT as well as an OT. (see **Acts 20:20, 27, 31; 2 Tim. 2:2-6**)

IV. APPROACHING THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

A. Determine the Literary Type or Genre of the Book

1. **Genre** means kind, sort, or style. We must first determine what kind or style of book we are studying.
2. Examples of major classifications of Biblical literature:
 - a. **Historical Narrative** - These are books that tell of historical events, and the historical sequence is *usually* in chronological order. These are not normal history books but theologies that contain *selective historical accounts*. God chose specific events in history to relay theological truths to those in the present. The narratives, though largely contain historical features, they also have other literary types as well (ie. parables, figures of speech, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, etc.). **The Biblical historical books are Genesis - Esther, the Gospels, and Acts.**
 - b. **Poetical Books** - (often called wisdom literature) These books are written in Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry uses word repetition and synonyms. If you could read Hebrew, you would recognize rhythms, similar sounding words, and acrostics that would help to memorize/recall what was written. The Psalms are poetry, songs of worship, and praise that contain much theological content. **The major poetical books are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.**
 - c. **Prophetical Books** - These books contain mostly prophecy that is they predict God's future plan (can contain other literary styles) as well as restating previously proclaimed truths. Prophecy books are also theological, emphasizing God's plan. **The major prophetical books are Isaiah - Malachi, and Revelation.**

² RC Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, p. 21.

- d. **Personal Epistles** - These are letters (some call them books) written specifically for the church and address specific places or people. They instruct, rebuke, encourage, correct, and admonish and they are theological. Just like the other types of genres, they also contain different literary types. The epistles lend themselves to verse-by-verse exposition. **The letters that fall under the category of "epistles" are Romans - Jude.**³

When you come to any part of Scripture, the first thing you need to do is determine the literary type or genre. This way you know which tools from your belt you'll need to pull out and use in order to determine the meaning. Each literary type will use different Bible study techniques (hermeneutical principles), so it is important that you first understand what *kind* (literary type or genre) you are studying.

B. Discover the Historical Setting or Background

It is also important to determine the historical context of a book. We need to ask and answer the who, what, when, where, why, questions:

- "Who was the book written to?"
- "What were the recipients of the book going through at the time the book was written?"
- "When was the book written?"
- "Where was the book written?"
- "Why was the book written?"

Some texts you can't understand their meaning without first understanding the historical context and setting. It will provide you with layers of knowledge, helping you understand the situation or culture of the audience receiving the writing.

Where can you find the historical settings and backgrounds? Study Bibles, Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, Commentaries, Manners and Customs books, and books focused on special introductions (see APPENDIX B - Recommended Resources).

1. **Example:** When studying **1 Cor. 1:17-2:16** it is important that we understand the historical background of Greek culture at Corinth. One must understand Greek thought and the role of logic, rhetoric, reason, and philosophy at the time Paul wrote the book. **Greeks wanted to argue, debate, and loved worldly wisdom.**
2. **Example:** When studying the letter to the church of Laodicea in **Rev. 3:14-19** it is important to understand that Laodicea was the richest commercial city in the entire region and their three major industries were 1) banking, 2) black wool, and 3) medicinal eye salve. **Why are knowing these things this important?** The city did not have a good water supply, so they

³ Note: There are many other literary types (ie. parables) but the above mentioned are the most prominent in the Bible. You will be trained on how to study parables later in the course.

built an aqueduct to carry water from nearby hot springs, but by the time the water reached the city, it was lukewarm.

C. Find the Theme

Another step in studying a passage is to ***discover the book's theme***. When you know the theme of a book, it helps you get to the correct interpretation of the passage. Themes are topics that build from the parts to the whole.

1. **Example:** Genesis has a twofold theme. **Beginnings and the sovereignty of God.**

- a. In **chapters 1-11** the basic theme is *beginnings*. The beginning of creation, the beginning of sin, murder, sacrifice, judgment, flood, the tower of Babel leading to the beginning of the different languages, the beginning of the genealogy of the father of Israel - Abram, etc.
- b. In **chapters 12-50** we have *the sovereignty of God* working to preserve the line of Abraham through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Each person's life is a building block of how God began to produce a line of people who would become a nation, who would receive His word, who would produce the Messiah.

2. **Example:** You are studying the book of **1 Peter**. You look up the theme in a study Bible, a Bible Dictionary, a commentary, or a book that specializes in giving an introduction to specific books of the Bible and you discover that the theme of **1 Peter is suffering**.

3. **Warning:** In some books, the theme is stated or is so clear that there is little disagreement among students of the Bible as to what the theme is. In other instances, such as in the book of **Philippians** there are several possible themes that might be emphasized. You will have to read the book yourself and choose what theme you think is best.

D. Study the Outline of the Book

It's helpful to know the outline of the book that contains your passage. This way you can visually see the progression of thought and how the text you are studying fits into the whole of the book. Commentaries and special introductions are the best places to find good detailed outlines.

1. **Example:** You are studying the book of Ephesians and you look in a scholarly commentary and find the outline of the book. You notice the book has two main divisions. **Chapters 1-3** deal with the Christian's position or possessions *in Christ* and **chapters 4-6** deal with the Christian's walk or obedience *in Christ*. Equipped with this information, you can determine immediately if the text you are studying addresses the Believer's *position* or *walk* in Christ.

2. **Example:** You are studying **Isaiah 40:31** and you discover in any study Bible, Bible dictionary, commentary, or introduction book that there are three major sections in the book of Isaiah. **Chapters 1-35** speak primarily of judgment. **Chapters 36-39** are a historical narrative of the reign of King Hezekiah and **Chapters 40-66** emphasize God's salvation for His people. You discover that your text is at the beginning of the "salvation" section of Isaiah's prophecy.

V. HOMEWORK

1. Read the entire book of **1 Timothy** and pick a favorite verse.
2. Determine the literary type or genre of the book.
3. Determine the historical context/setting of the book.
4. Determine the theme of the book.
5. Write a basic outline of the book and how your favorite verse fits into it.

USE APPENDIX B - Recommended Resources

APPENDIX A

The Importance of Observation in Bible Study
"The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz"⁴

Observation should be careful. Traina relates the following story to illustrate the importance of exactness in observation:

Sir William Osler, the eminent physician, always sought to impress upon young medical students the importance of observing details. While stressing this point in a lecture before a student group he indicated a bottle on his desk. "This bottle contains a sample for analysis," he announced. "It's possible by testing it to determine the disease from which the patient suffers." Suiting actions to words, he dipped a finger into the fluid and then into his mouth. "Now," he continued, "I am going to pass this bottle around. Each of you taste the contents as I did and see if you can diagnose the case." As the bottle was passed from row to row, each student gingerly poked his finger in and bravely sampled the contents. Osler then retrieved the bottle. "Gentlemen," he said, "Now you will understand what I mean when I speak about details. Had you been observant you would have seen that I put my index finger into the

⁴ John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, Pages 211-215.

bottle but my middle finger into my mouth.”

Observation also needs to be systematic. Martin Luther likened his Bible study to gathering apples: “First I shake the whole tree, that the ripest may fall. Then I climb the tree and shake each limb, and then each branch and then each twig, and then I look under each leaf.”

Observation must also be persistent. To repeat, extended time in observation is a must for an expositor. He must resist the temptation to plunge immediately into commentaries and other study helps. Nothing can replace firsthand observation. At the risk of seeming to violate my own guideline of keeping illustrations short, I offer the following lengthy story about the great nineteenth-century scientist Louis Agassiz and how he taught one of his students an unforgettable lesson about the importance of observation. The principles it teaches can be applied to our Bible study.

The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz

By the Student

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well,” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

“Take this fish,” said he, “and look at it; we call it a Haemulon [pronounced Hem-yu-m lon]; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly.

Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks half eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had “a very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the

odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters' view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

"That is right," said he; "a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked."

With these encouraging words he added,— "Well, what is it like?"

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the fringed gill—arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment,—

"You have not looked very carefully; why," he continued, more earnestly, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!" and he left me to my misery. I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired,— "Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," he said earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities. The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

“That is good; that is good!” he repeated, “but that is not all; go on.” And so, for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. “Look, look, look,” was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the museum black board. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately crawl-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was as amused as any, at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.

“Haemulons, every one of them,” he said. “Mr. _____ drew them.”

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz’s training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

“Facts are stupid things,” he would say, “until brought into connection with some general law.”

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

The same kind of prolonged pondering of the Scriptures will eventually pay even longer dividends, stretching into eternity.

APPENDIX B

Recommended Resources

A. How to Study the Bible/Hermeneutics Resources

- Basic Bible Interpretation, (Roy B. Zuck)
- Living by the Book, (Howard and William Hendricks)
- Protestant Biblical Interpretation, (Bernard Ramm)
- Interpreting the Bible, (Robert L. Plummer)
- Knowing Scripture, (RC Sproul)
- The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers (Abner Chou) ADVANCED

B. Free Online Bible Study Resources

- Precept Austin www.preceptaustin.org
- Blue Letter Bible www.blueletterbible.org
- Got Questions www.gotquestions.org
- Bible Study Tools www.biblestudytools.com
- www.Bible.org
- Bible Gateway www.biblegateway.com
- Christian Classics Ethereal Library www.ccel.org

C. Study Bibles

- MacArthur Study Bible (multiple versions)
- ESV Study Bible, Crossway Books
- Reformation Study Bible, Ligonier Ministries.
- New Open Bible, Thomas Nelson (Multiple versions)

D. Whole Bible Commentaries

- The MacArthur Bible Commentary, (1 volume on the whole Bible)
- The Bible Knowledge Commentary, (2 volume commentary on the whole Bible by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck).
- The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, (it comes in one and two volume set)
- Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, (Get the unabridged version)

E. Special Books for Bible Introduction

- Talk Thru the Bible, Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa

F. Introductory Resources for Theology and Doctrine

- Essential Christian Doctrine, (MacArthur)
- Moody Handbook of Theology, (Paul Enns)
- Systematic Theology (Wayne Grudem)
- Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, (Baker Books)
- Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, (Baker Books)

G. Expository Preaching Sermons Online

- Anchor Bible Church www.abcfindlay.org, preaching of Karel Castro.
- Grace to You www.gty.org (also has an app), preaching of John MacArthur
- Renewing Your Mind (also has an app), the preaching of RC Sproul.
- Countryside Bible Church www.countrysidebible.org, the preaching of Tom Pennington
- Truth for Life, www.truthforlife.org (also have an app), the preaching of Alistair Begg.
- Anchor Bible Church of Louisville www.anchorbiblechurch.org (also has an app), preaching of Jack Hughes.