

3 Simple Steps for Studying the Bible



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One of the noblest pursuits a child of God can embark upon is to get to know and understand God better. The best way we can accomplish this is to look carefully at the book He has written, the [Bible](#), which communicates who He is and His plan for mankind. There are a number of ways we can study the Bible, but one of the most effective and simple approaches to reading and understanding God's Word involves three simple steps:

Step 1: Observation—What does the passage say?

Step 2: Interpretation—What does the passage mean?

Step 3: Application—What am I going to do about what the passage says and means?

How to Study the Bible in 3 Steps

Step 1: Observation

Observation is the first and most important step in how to study the Bible. As you read the Bible text, you need to look carefully at what is said, and how it is said. Look for:

- *Terms, not words.* Words can have many meanings, but terms are words used in a specific way in a specific context. (For instance, the word *trunk* could apply to a tree, a car, or a storage box. However, when you read, “That tree has a very large trunk,” you know exactly what the word means, which makes it a term.)

- *Structure.* If you look at your Bible, you will see that the text has units called paragraphs (indented or marked ¶). A paragraph is a complete unit of thought. You can discover the content of the author’s message by noting and understanding each paragraph unit.

- *Emphasis.* The amount of space or the number of chapters or verses devoted to a specific topic will reveal the importance of that topic (for example, note the emphasis of [Romans 9](#) and [Psalms 119](#)).

- *Repetition.* This is another way an author demonstrates that something is important. One reading of [1 Corinthians 13](#), where the author uses the word “love” nine times in only 13 verses, communicates to us that love is the focal point of these 13 verses.

- *Relationships between ideas.* Pay close attention, for example, to certain relationships that appear in the text:

—Cause-and-effect: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things” ([Matthew 25:21](#)).

—*Ifs and thens:* “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land” ([2 Chronicles 7:14](#)).

—Questions and answers: “Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty” ([Psalms 24:8](#)).

- *Comparisons and contrasts.* For example, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...” ([Matthew 5:21](#)).

- *Literary form.* The Bible is literature, and the three main types of literature in the Bible are discourse (the epistles), prose (Old Testament history), and poetry (the Psalms). Considering the type of literature makes a great deal of difference when you read and interpret the Scriptures.

- *Atmosphere*. The author had a particular reason or burden for writing each passage, chapter, and book. Be sure you notice the mood or tone or urgency of the writing.

After you have considered these things, you then are ready to ask the “Wh” questions

Who? What? Where? When?

Who are the people in this passage? What is happening in this passage? Where is this story taking place? When in time (of day, of the year, in history) is it?

Asking these four “Wh” questions can help you notice terms and identify atmosphere. The answers will also enable you to use your imagination to recreate the scene you’re reading about.

As you answer the “Wh” questions and imagine the event, you’ll probably come up with some questions of your own.

Asking those additional questions for understanding will help to build a bridge between observation (the first step) and interpretation (the second step) of the Bible study process.

Step 2: Interpretation

Interpretation is discovering the meaning of a passage, the author’s main thought or idea. Answering the questions that arise during observation will help you in the process of interpretation. Five clues (called “the five C’s”) can help you determine the author’s main point(s):

- **Context**. You can answer 75 percent of your questions about a passage when you read the text. Reading the text involves looking at the near context (the verse immediately before and after) as well as the far context (the paragraph or the chapter that precedes and/or follows the passage you’re studying).
- **Cross-references**. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. That is, let other passages in the Bible shed light on the passage you are looking at. At the same time, be careful not to assume that the same word or phrase in two different passages means the same thing.

- Culture. The Bible was written long ago, so when we interpret it, we need to understand it from the writers' cultural context.
- Conclusion. Having answered your questions for understanding by means of context, cross-reference, and culture, you can make a preliminary statement of the passage's meaning. Remember that if your passage consists of more than one paragraph, the author may be presenting more than one thought or idea.
- Consultation. Reading books known as commentaries, which are written by Bible scholars, can help you interpret Scripture.

Step 3: Application

Application is why we study the Bible. We want our lives to change; we want to be obedient to God and to grow more like Jesus Christ. After we have observed a passage and interpreted or understood it to the best of our ability, we must then apply its truth to our own life.

You'll want to ask the following questions of every passage of Scripture you study:

- How does the truth revealed here affect my relationship with God?
- How does this truth affect my relationship with others?
- How does this truth affect me?
- How does this truth affect my response to the enemy, Satan?

The application step is not completed by simply answering these questions; the key is putting into practice what God has taught you in your study. Although at any given moment you cannot be consciously applying everything you're learning in Bible study, you can be consciously applying something. And when you work on applying a truth to your life, God will bless your efforts by, as noted earlier, conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ.

