



How to Read the Bible

A discipline that becomes a delight

Reading the Bible can feel like a daunting task. There are parts that are hard to understand. But reading the Bible is not like reading any other book. It is an interaction of your mind and spirit with the Holy Spirit.

The Goal of Reading the Bible

We should read the Bible to better know and love God and His will for our lives so that we might walk in obedience to Him. (Psalm 119:105; Matthew 22:37; Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 2:15-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21)

Foundations

When reading the Bible do your best to:

1. **Have a long-term view of your Bible Study.** Jen Wilkin helpfully encourages us:
Think of Bible study as a savings account rather than a debit card. Rather than viewing it as a declining balance you draw on to fill an immediate need, allow it to have a cumulative effect over weeks, months and years. You may not reach understanding of a passage or be able to apply it well after one day's exposure to it. That's OK. Keep making deposits into your account, trusting that in God's perfect timing, He will illuminate the meaning and usefulness of what you've studied, compounding its worth. What if the passage you study today is preparing you for a trial 10 years from now? Study faithfully now, trusting that nothing is wasted, whether your study time resolves neatly in 30 minutes or not.
2. **Understand the message and structure of the Bible.** The Bible is the story of God as a holy and merciful God who saves people through His covenant. It is about Jesus. We read it so that we might know, worship, and enjoy Him. One way to understand the structure of the Bible is:
 - a. **The Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy):** In response to our sin, God makes a covenant to save His people.
 - b. **History (Joshua - Esther):** Despite God's faithfulness to His covenant, His people continually prove to be unfaithful.
 - c. **Wisdom (Psalm - Song of Solomon):** Living in light of God's covenant.
 - d. **The Prophets (Isaiah - Malachi):** Like prosecuting attorneys, the prophets use the books of history to show that God's people have not kept the Law and are under God's wrath.
 - e. **The Gospels and Acts (Matthew - Acts):** Because Jesus fulfilled God's covenant as law keeper and our substitute payment for sin, we can be made right with God.
 - f. **Epistles (Romans - Jude):** How we are to live in light of God's covenant fulfillment in Christ. Like defense attorneys, the epistles demonstrate the basis of our freedom from sin in Christ.
 - g. **Revelation:** God's covenant with His people is fulfilled in the second coming of Jesus.
3. **Gather the right tools.**
 - a. A good study Bible, such as the ESV Study Bible, is highly recommended.
 - b. Get a translation that suits you. Some recommendations:
 - i. Beginner or struggle with reading: the New Living Translation
 - ii. Advanced reader: New American Standard Bible.
 - iii. For most people: Christian Standard Bible or the English Standard Bible.
Read several translations when studying a passage in depth, as no translation is perfect.
 - c. Download a Bible app (like Olive Tree or Logos) that allows you to search the Bible text.
4. **Read whole books of the Bible** rather than topical studies **and read across all of the Bible.** This helps you understand a passage by honoring its context and will give you a well-rounded understanding of God through His Word.
5. **Don't be discouraged by what you don't know.** Don't rush too quickly to a study Bible, commentary, devotional, or sermon. Instead, sit with the question for a while and let it motivate you to pray and seek

out your answer through your study of the Bible. In doing so, you honor the command to love God with all your mind, not someone else's.

Preparation

1. **Make time in the Bible a daily priority.** Give God your best time when you are sharpest within the constrictions of the responsibilities of your life.
2. **Find a quiet place.** Strive to find a place where you will not be distracted or interrupted. A physical Bible, rather than a digital one, is recommended in order to reduce distractions.
3. **Prepare your heart and mind.** Start with a brief prayer asking God to give you clarity and understanding and confessing any sin you are aware of. These can impede your ability to hear the Holy Spirit.

Study

Organize your study with these three questions:

What?

What is the intended message of the author to his original audience? Try to be able to write it down in a clear and succinct sentence or two. To arrive at this:

1. Write down initial thoughts and questions about the text that you are unclear about. Meditate on them.
2. Look for linking (but, for, therefore), repeated, and loaded (with apparent significance) words. These often give you a clue about what the author thinks is important.
3. How does the message of this passage fit within the context of the chapter, section, book, testament, or the whole Bible (consider the question in that order)? This is difficult when you are starting out, but becomes easier the longer you study the Bible.
4. What about passages that are difficult to understand?
 - a. Let the Bible interpret the Bible. Interpret difficult passages through more clear passages. Follow the same pattern as above: What does the author have to say about this idea in this chapter or book? What does this genre have to say about it? What does this testament or the whole Bible have to say about it? A good concordance or Bible app search feature is helpful here.)
 - b. Remember that the main thing is the plain thing. Often people try to overinterpret parables or prophecies and get into trouble. They are typically communicating one clear point.

So what?

How does the author's intended meaning apply to your life? To arrive at this:

1. Pray asking God to help you apply the author's intended message to your life.
2. Ask yourself how the topic, theme, or ideas touch on universal issues that are true today.
3. Get personal. Writing things out forces you to think through them more fully. This is not a diary, it is you doing business with God. What is God challenging you to repent of, trust in, or do?

Now what?

What is my response to what God is saying to me? Some people write it out as a prayer. Others write it out in bullet points. Once you are done, this should be something you return to and meditate on throughout the day and week.

The most important way to read and understand the Bible is to just do it!