

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

## **A Guide for Christians**

By Dan Paterson

### **Exploring...**

What is the Bible? What do Christians believe about the Bible?  
How should the Bible impact my life? How do I make sense of the Bible? What are the different methods for Bible study? Which version of the Bible should I use? What resources will be helpful?



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*“A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone  
that isn’t...”*

~ Charles Spurgeon

## Getting Started...

Every year the Bible is unparalleled at the top of the best-seller list, and is the biggest impacting and most translated book in all of human history (nearly three thousand languages). The influence that the Bible has exerted upon the canons of western history, literature, and culture is singularly incalculable.

The average Christian in the Australian pew, however, is growing increasingly illiterate when it comes to the Bible. Being able to walk chronologically through the Bible's storyline, or name the major figures, or categorize the biblical books into genre or even testament, is quickly becoming a rare quality.

So what is this ancient book? Is this really the book that God wrote? Why is it so important in the life of the Christian? And is there any hope for me to be able to make heads or tails of it? That is what this booklet is designed to help with...

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## What Is The Bible?

The Bible (lit. *book*) is a library of books written over 1600 years by 40+ authors spanning 3 continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa). Within this library you'll find all manner of literary genres such as historical narrative, national chronicles, sermons, letters, songs, poetry, architecture designs, travel diaries, inventories, geographical surveys, family trees, population statistics, biographies, and legal documents. The authors of these books wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and spanned all social strata as fishermen, shepherds, doctors, priests, historians, warriors, philosophers, statesmen, scholars, and even kings. Their writings are divided into 1189 chapters and 31,102 verses.<sup>1</sup>

Despite such diversity the Bible tells one BIG story with Jesus as the central character. It's all about Jesus. The Old Testament points towards Jesus (John 5:39; Luke 24:27), and the New Testament flows out of how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus change everything. Scripture is a story *for* you, but it is a story *about* Jesus. Although it covers literally hundreds of controversial subjects, it interprets them through the lens of this gospel. When the Bible's BIG story is ordered thematically it boils down to four major scenes...



**THE OLD TESTAMENT** ... is the first volume of the Bible and is comprised of 39 books that the Jews call the *Tanach*. These books are often divided into three parts: (1) The Torah (the Law of Moses/Pentateuch); (2) The Ketuvim (the Writings or historical and poetic books); and (3) The Naviim (the Prophets). Written from 1500-400BC, the OT serves to foreshadow the coming of Jesus.

**THE NEW TESTAMENT** ... is the second volume of 27 books beginning with 4 biographies of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), an account of the spread of the gospel after Jesus' ascension (Acts), and a series of letters written to churches and individuals in the first century. Written between 48AD and 95AD, the NT reveals Jesus' central place in God's plan to restore creation.

<sup>1</sup> **NB:** Chapters and verses are later additions. Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, added the chapter divisions used today in around 1227AD. Robert Estienne added the system of verses used today in 1551AD. Like someone's street address, chapters and verses serve to aid the reader in navigating God's word. Since they are not inspired by God, however, they can be distracting in studying the Bible since the chapter breaks often suggest a cessation of thought when in fact there is a continuation of thought.



## What Do Christians Believe About The Bible?

Christians and non-Christians have radically different views of Scripture. The former believe that this is the book that God wrote by supernatural inspiration, whereas the latter regard it merely as a human product.

Although some Christians disagree on the extent to which the Bible is inspired or what that even means, the orthodox evangelical position is what theologians call **verbal plenary inspiration**.<sup>2</sup> This is the doctrine that the Holy Spirit, probably unwittingly to the authors, sovereignly orchestrated the writing of Scripture such that, without undermining the freedom, idiosyncrasies, literary style, or natural situations of the authors, every word recorded in the original autographs forms part of the coherent whole intended by God, and thus carries His seal of divine authority.

This belief is indeed a *faith* position in that it is arrived at *deductively*. Because Christians believe from the compelling evidence of Jesus' resurrection in history (amongst other evidences) that he is indeed the God-man, they are warranted to adopt the same attitude towards Scripture that Jesus displayed in his first-century Jewish context. Even in the face of some complexities like proposed contradictions in the Bible or scientific inaccuracies, the Christian is warranted to believe God inspired the Bible if in fact this was Jesus' belief.<sup>3</sup> Here are a few things Jesus said about the authority of Scripture:

*"Scripture cannot be broken"* (John 10:35).



*"For truly I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished"* (Matt 5:18).

An *iota* was the smallest of Greek letters, and a *dot* likely refers to a tiny stroke or breathing mark used to distinguish between Hebrew letters. Jesus confirmed the authority of the OT as God's words even down to the letters themselves. This is vastly different, however, from the dictation notions of the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon, for the biblical authors retained their own style, voice, perspective, and cultural distinctive, writing to and addressing real situations in their world. Stated simply, *the Bible wasn't written to us, but it was written for us*. God, then, has chosen to anchor his self-revelation in history, telling an unfolding story of salvation that needs to be interpreted within the frame of the culture to which it was originally written.

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<sup>2</sup> For a brief survey of views see: [http://www.theopedia.com/Inspiration\\_of\\_the\\_Bible](http://www.theopedia.com/Inspiration_of_the_Bible)

<sup>3</sup> The claim of the biblical authors that the Bible is inspired is bolstered by such *inductive* evidences such as fulfilled prophecy, the coherence of the single message, and the 'ring of truth' in Scripture's diagnosis of the human condition.

Christians also take the lead from how Jesus' first followers—the *Apostles*—treated both the OT and their own writings that went on to comprise the NT...

*“Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but **men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**” (2 Pet 1:20-21)*

*“**All Scripture is breathed out by God** and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17)*



*“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but **as what it really is, the word of God**, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13)*

*“... our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the **other Scriptures**” (2 Pet 3:15-16)*

The Apostles as the authors of the NT clearly believed that God inspired the writing of Scripture through the hands of men. They also were convinced that what they were passing on were the very words of God, and attributed to each other's writings the same status as the OT Scriptures.

### **Questions & Contributions...**

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## How Should The Bible Impact My Life?

Given what Jesus and his Apostles believe about the Bible, it should be the most precious possession to the Christian. Perhaps far better than the words of theologians, the biblical authors capture in poetic images exactly how the Bible should impact our lives.



1) *A Compass that Points you to Jesus...* “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39). All Scripture either foreshadows the coming of Jesus or diagnoses our need for Jesus.

2) *A Lamp to Guide your Path ...* “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 109:15). Many new Christians get caught up in an esoteric search for God’s will, hoping to receive some dream or a vision. God has already revealed His will for all Christians in Scripture as to how we should live in response to the gospel. When we learn to obey His general will as revealed in Scripture, with time God’s specific will unfold in your life as you follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the wisdom of godly counsel, and the gifts and opportunities that come to light. An ancient lamp only illuminates a step or two ahead, and never the whole path. God desires our *trust* (Prov 3:5-7).

3) *Nourishment for your Soul ...* “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). In the same way our physical bodies are nourished by food, so too is our spiritual nature nourished by reading God’s words. Abiding in them enables us to grow up in our salvation (1 Pet 2:2) and bear spiritual fruit (John 15).



4) *A Sword to Fight Spiritual Battles ...* “and take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, his defence was to quote Scripture (Matt 4). The truth of God’s word is the most powerful weapon we have against the lies and spiritual attacks we face (2 Cor 10:3-5). As with any weapon, however, we need to be well trained to be able to use the truth of the Bible in a way that is helpful and not harmful.

5) *A Story we inhabit ...* “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2). Scripture tells God’s big story and offers a gospel lens through which we must reinterpret all of life. We are to take captive other perspectives (2 Cor 10:4-5), to challenge other philosophies (Col 2:8), and to contend for God’s story (Jude 1:3).



## How Does The Bible Point To Jesus?

Whether you're studying the OT or the NT, all Scripture somehow points to Jesus (John 5:39; Luke 24:25-27). After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said, "*These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled*" (Luke 24:44). Jesus then "*opened their minds to understand the Scriptures*" (Luke 24:45). This perspective is what we need. All Scripture either foreshadows or flows out from the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus. Any diligent student of the Bible, to rightly divide the word of God, needs to learn how to connect its various themes, verses, and events of the biblical books to Jesus. In the NT this is more obvious, but in the OT there are numerous ways this plays out...

**1) Prophecies** ... 25% of the OT is prophetic in nature, foretelling the future. Unlike any other founder of a world religion, the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is predicted in varying detail from hundreds to over a thousand years in advance. The prophet Isaiah, writing 700 years before Jesus, is sometimes called the fifth gospel for the amount of prophecies he nails such as Jesus' virgin birth (Isa 7:14; 9:6-7), his supernatural ministry (Isa 61:1-2), his substitutionary death with the wicked (Isa 53:6-8), his burial with the rich (Isa 53:9), and his resurrection from the dead (Isa 53:10-11).

**2) Christophanies** ... Several times in the OT Jesus makes appearances in his pre-incarnate form. These are called *christophanies*. Jesus walked with Abraham (Gen 18), wrestled with Jacob (Gen 32:30), appeared to Moses (Exod 3:2-6), confronted Joshua (Josh 5:13-15), appeared in the fiery furnace (Dan 3:24-25), and called Isaiah into his prophetic ministry (Isa 6:1-5; cf. John 12:41).

**3) Types** ... These are representative figures and institutions that foreshadow the significance of Jesus. Adam's headship foreshadows Jesus as the second Adam. Aaron's priesthood foreshadows Jesus as our Great High Priest. David reign foreshadows Jesus as the King of Kings. Moses' prophethood foreshadows Jesus as our ultimate prophet. In each type Jesus is *greater* than the shadow.

**4) Events** ... Various OT events prepare us for the coming of Jesus. In Exodus, the blood of the lamb in the Passover symbolised God's covenant with the people to pass over them in judgment. So too, through the sprinkling of Jesus' blood of the new covenant, God's judgment passes over the Christian (1 Pet 1:2).

**5) Titles** ... Many OT titles reserved for God are used of Jesus in the NT to reveal his person and work. Jesus is the *First and the Last* (Isa 41:4; Rev 1:17), the *Light* (Ps 27:1; John 8:12), the *Rock* (Ps 18:2; 1 Cor 10:4), the *Bridegroom* (Hos 2:16; Eph 5:28-33), the *Shepherd* (Ps 23:1; John 10:11), the *Redeemer* (Hos 13:14; Rev 5:9), the *Saviour* (Isa 43:3; John 4:42), and the *Lord of Glory* (Isa 42:8, 1 Cor 2:8).

# What Are The Different Stages Of Bible Study?

Before diving into complementary methods for Bible study, it's helpful to describe 5 non-linear stages people experience as they engage with Scripture.

**1** *Devotional & Naïve.* The first stage a new Christian goes through in Bible reading is as the *naïve and devotional* reader. In this stage they tend to treat Scripture as though it was directly written *to* them, and engage it as you would a magic 8-ball to get answers to their pressing life questions. It's common in this stage for them to feel as though God is speaking into their life personally through every word (which they probably highlight)!

**2** The second stage is where a growing Christian still senses God is speaking through Scripture personally, but they are becoming more sophisticated in their reading. This is where they learn basic principles of interpretation, giving attention to Scripture's literary, cultural, and historical contexts.

**3** This third stage is where Bible study moves from devotional to technical. Instead of understanding the Bible as being written *to them*, the reader begins to respect the distance between our world and that of Scripture, seeking to bridge the gap by studying biblical languages and commentaries. This can be a spiritually disorienting time, because as your zeal to describe biblical history and theology grows in the pursuit of what it *meant*, you tend to neglect the devotional and personal question of what it *means*.

**4** This fourth stage is a step back towards spiritual edification as you read technically and teach functionally. As a professional reader, now, God's word seems to remain somewhat detached, as you tend to store up what you learn technically in order to teach God's word to others. You present God's truth to others, while blocking his word to you. People in this stage tend to gravitate towards becoming the doctrine police.

**5** This fifth stage is the goal of Bible study where the reader develops to become technical *and* devotional. Here every exegetical skill remains, yet we also read like children, letting God's word speak to our hearts again. We are both technically astute and spiritually receptive (Acts 17:11). Our study allows us to explain and apply God's word to those we disciple *and* to ourselves.

***How would you describe what stage you are in?***

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## Why Is The Bible So Hard To Understand?

Let's be honest. *The Bible is hard to understand*. If you've found the Bible confusing, if you've been discouraged, or if you've had period of joyless engagement with Scripture, you are not alone. Even the Apostle Peter wrote this about his fellow Apostle Paul's letters in the NT...



*"He writes some things that are hard to understand..."* (2 Pet 3:16)

We're even one more step removed from the world of the Bible than Peter, so it's helpful to be aware for us *why* the Bible may be hard to understand...

**1) Scene Confusion...** The Bible represents an unfolding story of God's rescue mission to restore humanity through Jesus. Each book represents a different scene in this script. Just like the parent changes the boundaries as a child's ability and role changes, so it is with God's interactions with us. As salvation history unfolds across the Bible, the way God relates to people changes. Not knowing the BIG story, then, is like trying to fit a piece of a puzzle onto a blank slate with neither the pattern nor the frame of the other pieces to find its place.

**2) Literary Barriers...** The Bible represents a library of genres. Any student of literature knows you don't interpret poetry according to the rules of historical reliability. Likewise, wisdom literature like Proverbs deals in general truths—the natural consequences of a certain path—that cannot be universally applied as formula. Not knowing the genre or the tools to hear its message can leave you confused as to *how* each book should contribute to your faith.

**3) Cultural Distance...** Even though the Bible is God's word *for* you, we need to first read it through the eyes of its original audience. Being removed from the events, experiences, and expectations of these ancient cultures, this is not always an easy task. Far from the scientific 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, God condescended to the language and thought forms of the ancient world.

**4) Language Changes...** The OT was written in Hebrew and the NT was written in Koine Greek, with a splash of Aramaic spread throughout both. In the NT, some 11,958 words in Greek and Aramaic are translated into 6,000 English words. Although translators do their best, and although surveying many translations gives a *good* sense of the original languages, often something is lost. Nuance, subtlety, idiom, and sarcasm are all hard to translate.

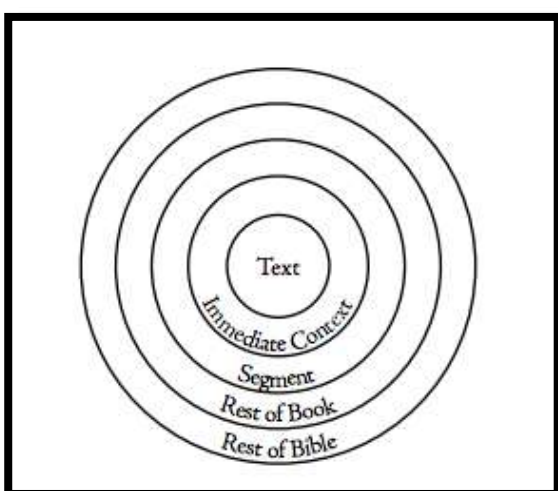
The meaning of any text is tied up with what the author intended it to mean. In Scripture, knowing the Holy Spirit inspired the writers, God may give *added* levels of meaning to supplement this principle, though Scripture never means *less* than what the human authors intended. So how do we make sense of this?

## How Do I Make Sense Of The Bible?

Moving past the honest stage is all about gaining confidence that you can get better at reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible so that it has the promised life-changing impact. Like playing a game, reading the Bible well has certain rules to learn and skills to master if we are ever doing to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Hermeneutics (science of interpretation) and the Holy Spirit are the keys to Scripture’s treasures. Beyond prayer, here’s a list of some hermeneutical keys you can start practicing to make sense of the Bible.

**1 Search for the truth...** As far as the Bible is concerned, truth is not determined by the postmodern relativism of the reader. Truth is whatever corresponds to reality. Neither the biblical authors, nor the Holy Spirit who inspired them, intended readers to twist the Bible by asking *what does it mean to you?* There is an *intended* meaning that we are meant to pursue. Since Scripture is God’s self-revelation, it is intended as a window for us to get to know the God who made us in His image, not for us to twist and fashion a God in our own image. Furthermore, too often we come to the Bible with our own pre-conceived ideas only to, lo and behold, confirm what we already believed. The technical terms for this are *confirmation bias* or *eisegesis*, where we fall into the trap of trying to make the Bible say what we want instead of drawing out what the author—and God—intended. We need to work hard to distance ourselves from biases and ask the right questions to do good *exegesis*.

**2 Read in context ...** Context is essential to interpretation. Study Bible introductions to each book and the footnotes can be immensely helpful in this stage, as can other resources such a Bible dictionaries and

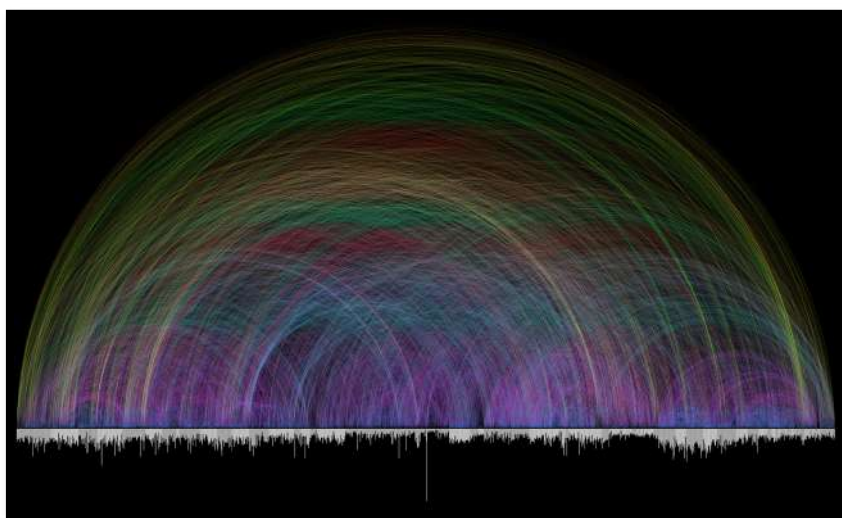


commentaries. The key is to start big and hone in. First, where does this book fit into the BIG story of the Bible? Who is writing? Who are they writing to? To which culture to they belong? Second, how does my passage fit into the rest of the book? What is the genre of the book? Is there a line of main argument? Third, do the verses I’m reading fall into a particular segment of the book? Do they serve a purpose as part of a theme? Finally, what is the immediate context of the paragraph or passage in question? Are they before, during, or after

a flow of ideas? How do I divide up the sentence to see how the words relate according to the principles of grammar? How does the author use these words and ideas in other parts of their literature?

**3** **Recognise Literal and Figurative Language** ... Language has various vehicles to conveying meaning. The biblical authors use literal and figurative language in the process of revealing God's truth. We can fall into interpretive error when we either mistake figurative language for literal language or literal language for figurative language. When Jesus states, "I am the door..." he is obviously not intending to communicate that he is made of wood and has hinges. Context helps to determine whether the language was intended to be taken as literal or figurative.

**4** **Let Scripture interpret Scripture** ... The Bible is a collection of divinely inspired writings written by a number of authors, living in different geographical areas in some cases, and written over a long span of history, yet it retains an amazing unity. The rainbow graphic below traces the 63,779



cross-references, where each coloured arc represents a later chapter referring to an earlier one. Because the many voices of Scripture make up God's unified revelation, we want to let Scripture interpret Scripture. This involves examining what the Bible has to say on a topic as a whole rather

than just picking stray verses here and there and coming to a conclusion.

The reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century argued for the *perspicuity* of Scripture, believing that the Bible is clear on the closed-handed matters of crucial doctrines (Trinity, Bible, Jesus' Divinity, Sin, Salvation, Judgment), and where it is less clear on secondary or open-handed issues, we should let the more clear passages interpret the less clear passages as we pursue convictions.

**5** **Learn Theology Charitably in Community** ... Christians have a tendency to take sides quickly and listen slowly. No Christian is a monolithic entity. Our beliefs and attitudes are largely shaped by those around us and the spirit they embody. Although Scripture may be clear on the fundamentals of faith, what lies beyond that closed-handed category must be discerned cautiously as not to do harm. By humbly recognising our finitude, embracing the wealth of tradition as helpful resources to interpret Scripture, and engaging with wise believers in the process of reading Scripture, we can learn to honour not only the content but also the Spirit of Scripture as we mature. This skill is one of having a receptive heart to the community around you but also a discerning stance as you test everything against Scripture (Acts 17:11).

## 6 Different Methods for Bible Study

There are many ways to study the Bible as it is in every sense *inexhaustible*. Scripture is shallow enough for the newest Christian to paddle in and deep enough for the spiritual giant to dive much deeper. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “*Nobody ever outgrows Scripture; the book widens and deepens with our years.*” Here are six methods for Bible study to help you grow over time.

### **1** *The Devotional Method* ... How to apply Scripture to life!

This is the most common method of regular Bible study, where the Christian is looking to find how God’s word applies to them today. Simply put, this method can follow the easy to remember acronym of SOAP.

**S**cripture: read a chapter, paragraph, or verse meditatively.

**O**bservation: what does this teach about God? Our identity? Our mission?

**A**pplication: how I can live this out personally, practically, and provably?

**P**ray: give thanks to God for revelation and commit to his purposes.

Hints: It would be a good idea to keep a journal with all of your observations, applications, and prayers recorded. That way you can look back for insights, track progress, and see how God has answered your prayers.

*You will need:* (1) Study Bible + (2) Journal & pen

### **2** *The Chronological Survey Method* ... How to trace the Bible’s BIG story!

Reading the Bible straight through chronologically can give a new student of the Bible a fantastic overview of how the stories and themes that unfold in each piece of the puzzle all fit together to paint the portrait of Jesus. With such a biblically illiterate generation, this method comes highly recommended. How?

Pick up a chronological study bible (books ordered by timeline) or download a chronological reading plan.<sup>4</sup> If you can’t stick to the dates, just print out the plan and tick off which day you are up to. In this way you can easily read through the Bible in under a year and see how the whole story fits together.

*You will need:* (1) Chronological Bible  
or (1) Study Bible + (2) Chronological Reading Plan

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.chronological.pdf>

### **3** *The Book Survey Method* ... How to get an overview of a biblical book!

This is a great way to get a better handle on the individual puzzle pieces that make up the Bible. There are three complementary ways to do this...

*Step #1 The 30,000 Foot Flyover* ... pick a book and read it all the way through in one sitting. Do this five times, preferably five days in a row. Picture a plane flying 30,000 feet over mountains in order to get a general idea of what the book is about.

*#2 Boots on the Ground* ... after you've got the big idea from the plane above, go deeper on the ground paragraph-by-paragraph. Write a single descriptive sentence for each made up of a subject and a complement. The subject is the biggest idea in the passage while the complement is what the text says about that big idea. As we begin to look for connected themes between paragraphs, an outline appears.

*#3 Creating a Map* ... Knowing the terrain better, now we need to create a map. Write a summary statement capturing the big idea of the whole book.

*You will need:* (1) Study Bible + (2) Journal & Pen

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### **4** *The Word Study Method* ... How to explore the meaning of special words!

The word study method takes a microscopic look at the origin, definition, occurrences, and uses of a particular word, especially as it relates to the context of a passage of Scripture. The purpose is to learn as precisely and comprehensively as possible what the biblical writer meant by key words. Irving Jensen writes, "Just as great doors swing on small hinges, so the important theological statements of the Bible open depend upon even the smallest of words, such as prepositions and articles."<sup>5</sup> So many central Christian doctrines revolve around words like *grace*, *atonement*, *faith*, or *love*. To get at their meaning we need to study the use of the word. How?

Step #1 Choose a word and compare English translations

Step #2 Check concordance for different occurrences in the Bible

Step #3 Find the origin and root meaning from a Bible dictionary

Step #4 Discern various usage across the different parts of the Bible

Step #5 Write out an application that involves the biblical definition

*You will need:* (1) Study Bible + (2) Various Translations + (3) Exhaustive Concordance + (4) Bible Dictionaries or (1) Bible + (2) Inductive Bible Studies

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<sup>5</sup> Irving Jensen, *Enjoy Your Bible*, World Wide Publications, pg. 96.

## **5** *The Biographical Method* ... How to trace a character's life story!

This method allows someone to connect with or step into the life story of a major biblical character. Scripture in many respects serves as a mirror when the human feelings, experiences, and challenges of others speaks to our own stories. Personal application of the character qualities discovered is a major emphasis in this method. How?

- Step #1 Choose an individual from the Bible
- Step #2 Use a concordance to list all biblical references
- Step #3 Note your first impression of the person
- Step #4 Make chronological outline of the person's life
- Step #5 Search for deeper insights and list character qualities
- Step #6 Show how biblical truths are illustrated in their life
- Step #7 Summarise main lessons and write out personal application

Hints: not all references will use their proper name.

*You will need:* (1) Study Bible + (2) Exhaustive Concordance + (3) Journal & Pen

## **6** *The Topical/Thematic Method* ... How to trace a topic through Scripture!

This involves selecting a biblical subject or theme and tracing it through a single book, or through the entire Bible, in order to discover what God says about the topic. It uses extensive cross-referencing and near limitless questions. This method is great for four reasons: (1) allows us to study the great doctrines of the Bible; (2) allows us to study topics of interest and immediate relevance; (3) helps promote balance of biblical truth, and not just proof-texting; and (4) enables us to study God's word systematically and logically.

- Step #1 Compile a list of words relating to topic/theme
- Step #2 Use concordance to collate bible references
- Step #3 Consider each reference individually in context
- Step #4 Compare and group the references
- Step #5 Condense your study into an outline

Hints: biblical authors are not univocal in how they use words, and topics often have varying imagery or application at different times in redemptive history.

*You will need:* (1) Study Bible + (2) Exhaustive Concordance + (3) Journal & Pen



## 5 Tips for Life-Changing Devotions

Too often the Christian's good intentions to engage in life-changing Bible study are undermined by poor planning. Here are a few tips to change that...



***Schedule your Bible study time ...*** Half the battle to engage in Bible study involves moving beyond the *desire* to the *discipline*. Start by making a plan. As to *when*, this really depends upon the person for there is no “sacred hour” prescribed by Scripture.

Choose a time where you are at your best physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and when you can be undistracted and unhurried. Like any discipline, start small and increase with time.

***Choose a space ...*** Environments can be conducive or caustic. If you're prone to falling asleep, the bed isn't a good option. If you're prone to distraction, the kitchen bench covered with laptops, mobiles, or newspapers won't work. Perhaps set up a sacred space (distraction free zone), and keep a pad handy to write down anything that comes to mind that you need to deal with later.

***Keep a Journal ...*** As humans we're prone to forgetfulness. Recording observations and prayers isn't merely a discipline aiding memory retention, it also gives us a record to look back upon to see how God has matured us, what he has taught us, and how he has answered prayers we have long since forgotten.

***Get the Right Tools ...*** Beyond a helpful Study Bible and journal, there are a bunch of helpful study tools to help you go deeper (see page 20). For the new believer, systematic devotionals written by seasoned believers can help draw out life-changing applications from God's word.

***Pray Unceasingly ...*** The Holy Spirit is God's gift to indwell and change the believer. He is the one who illuminates God's truths to us (John 14:24; 1 Cor 26-14)), who convicts us as we stare into the mirror of God's word (John 15:8-11; Gal 5:16, 18), who intercedes for us when we don't know how to respond (Rom 8:26) and who applies God's word in our lives to equip and transform us (2 Tim 3:16-17). Studying Scripture is a divine-human encounter, so recognise who you're dependant upon.

### ***Making a Plan...***

*When is the best time for me?*

*What space can I create for my time with God?*

*What approach will I adopt for my devotions with God?*

## Which Version Of The Bible Should I Use?

Before 1881 there was only one Bible in English, the KJV. Now with so many translations available, how do I know which version to use?



**Understanding Translation ...** Anyone from a foreign country knows the challenges of translation. Truth be told, translation is more of an art than an exact science. Idioms, metaphors, and colloquialisms are often culturally bound, such that the nuance and meaning they convey is impossible to translate to an English equivalent. This is why people *think* in a certain language, for words shape how we think and process reality,

not just how we communicate our thoughts to others.

**Choosing a Translation Depending on the Task ...** As demonstrated from the chart on page 19, various translations fit into three (or four) buckets:

- 1** The *formal equivalence* or *word-for-word* translations ... seek to carefully translate each word from their original languages into English. These translations take seriously God's divine authorship and authority in the very words chosen by the authors. Written for a high-school level of reading, the accuracy and detail of these translations make them ideal for the systematic study of Scripture, especially of key doctrines. This style of translation, however, often loses the poetic nuance and beauty of the original languages, and can be more difficult for the new student to be able to read and understand. As the most recent of these translations, the ESV is a great option for a Study Bible.
- 2** The *intermediate equivalence* ... stands between the first and third categories, seeking to retain the shape of the text whilst not compromising its function or meaning. This requires some degree of *interpretation* according to theological assumptions when translating certain disputed passages. These translations, however, are ideal to engage with the broad sweep of Scripture in chronological fashion, and the NIV's clarity has made it exceptionally popular.
- 3** The *functional equivalence* or *meaning-for-meaning* ... seeks to convey the *thought* of the passage. Treating the actual words themselves as less important, these translations take more liberties in interpreting the theological assumptions of the original text, making them less reliable for deeper study. The strength of these translations lies in their ability to retain and convey the beauty, nuance, and emotion of the text, and can make for good devotional reading.
- 4** *Corruptions* ... are translations that seek to clearly undermine the teaching of Scripture by adding or omitting certain parts of the original text. The Jehovah's Witness *New World Translation* is an example of a corruption.



## What resources will be helpful?

History has never known a time where such helpful tools for effective Bible study at whatever level have been so readily available. Digital platforms for engagement are increasing exponentially.

### **Online Bibles & Study Software:**

LOGOS Bible Software ... (<http://www.logos.com/>)

ESV Bible Online ... (<http://www.esvbible.org/>)

Bible Gateway ... (<http://www.biblegateway.com/>)

Chronological Reading Plan ...  
(<http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.chronological.pdf>)

McCheyne Reading Plan ...  
(<http://www.esv.org/assets/pdfs/rp.one.year.tract.pdf>)

### **Resources for Mobile Device Platforms:**

YouVersion ... (<http://www.youversion.com/>)

Logos ... for iOS (<https://itunes.apple.com/app/bible!/id336400266?mt=8>), for Android (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.logos.androidlogos>)

### **Recommended Study Bibles:**

ESV Study Bible:  
<http://esvstudybible.org/>

NIV Archaeological Bible:  
<http://www.zondervan.com/niv-archaeological-study-bible-4.html>

NIV Apologetics Bible:  
<http://www.bhpublishinggroup.com/products/the-apologetics-study-bible-mahogany-leathertouch-indexed/>

### **Recommended Bible Study Tools:**

*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (ESV or NIV)*  
Online version: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/strongs-exhaustive-concordance/>

*The Bible Speaks Today Commentaries* ... are application level treatments of books of the Bible and help give historical context for interpretation. These are available individually or as a NT and OT set.

Online set: <http://www.ivpbooks.com/BSTSeries>

**Devotional Books:**

*Through the Bible, Through the Year* (John Stott) ... John Stott writes small daily reflections for the year on key passages tying the biblical story together.

*The Daily Discipler* (Neil T Anderson) ... working from key passages in Scripture to thematically address the Bible story and the Christian's identity.

**Books about the Bible, Translations, Interpretation, and Difficulties:**

*The Bible in Translation* (Bruce Metzger)

*The Indestructible Book* (Ken Connolly)

*Hard Sayings in the Bible* (Walter Kaiser, F F Bruce // editors)

*Exegetical Fallacies* (Don A Carson)

*When Critics Ask* (Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe)

**Bible Study Methods:**

*Bible Study Methods: 12 Ways You Can Unlock God's Word* (Rick Warren) ... tracks 12 approaches to Bible study, such as chapter summaries, character studies, thematic studies, and word studies.

*How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart) ... a classic text for the technical yet devotional approach to applying Scripture.

*How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart) ... helping to trace the thought and genres of the different authors as you read technically.

*One to One Bible Reading* (David Helm) ... a small book encouraging the reading of Scripture communally, and methods to do so effectively.

## **Appendices**

### **Exploring...**

- 4 Unhelpful Approaches To Bible Study
- 6 Misconceptions About The Bible
- Who Put The Bible Together?
- A Guide To Interpreting Old Testament Law

## 4 Unhelpful Approaches To Bible Study

Having spent some time explaining *maturing* approaches to the Bible, here are a number of *unhelpful* approaches to Bible study that will not lead to life-change.<sup>6</sup>

**The Xanax Approach** ... This is where you turn to the Bible solely as a means of dull his or her anxiety. Here you have a sticky tab at Philippians 4:6 and hope to turn away from the Bible with the thought, "I feel better!" **The problem?** This makes the Bible all about *you!* You ask how God can serve your needs rather than how you can serve God and the gospel. Sometimes the Bible isn't meant to make us feel better, but rather should convict us, lead us to repentance, and call us to take up our cross. Although God's promises and purposes should bring *ultimate* comfort, the Xanax approach will leave huge sections of your Bible unread as they don't deliver an immediate dose of emotional satisfaction.

**The Pinball Approach** ... This is where, without sustained discipline or guidance, you tend to just flip randomly and read whatever Scripture opens. **The problem?** The Bible wasn't written to be read this way. This pinball approach gives no thought to cultural, historical or textual context, or the authorship and original intent of the passage in question. When we read this way, we treat the Bible with less respect than we would give to a simple textbook. Imagine trying to master algebra by randomly reading for ten minutes each day from whatever paragraphs in the textbook your eyes happened to fall on.

**The Magic 8 Ball Approach** ... You remember the Magic 8 Ball—it answered your most difficult questions as a child. But you're an adult now and wondering if you should marry Bob, get a new job, or change your hair colour. You give your Bible a vigorous shake and open it to a random page. Placing your finger blindly on a verse, you then read it to see if "signs point to yes." **The Problem?** The Bible is not magical, and it does not serve our whim. The Magic 8 Ball Approach misconstrues the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Word, demanding that the Bible tell us *what to do* rather than *who God is* and *who we are to become in Christ*. This approach is dangerously close to soothsaying. No Magic 8 Ball.

**The Personal Shopper Approach** ... You want to know about being a godly woman or how to deal with self-esteem issues, but you don't know where to find verses about that, so you let [insert famous Bible teacher here] do the legwork for you. **The Problem?** The Personal Shopper Approach doesn't help you build "ownership" of Scripture. Much like the Pinball Approach, you ricochet from passage to passage, gaining fragmentary knowledge of many books of the Bible but mastery of none. Topical studies serve a purpose: they help us integrate broad concepts into our understanding of Scripture. But if they're all we ever do, we're missing out on the richness of learning an entire book of the Bible.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from TGC's article on "Why Bible Study Doesn't Transform Us" by Jen Wilken <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-bible-study-doesnt-transform-us/> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014

## 8 Misconceptions About The Bible

Before being willing to engage in Bible study, many objections and misconceptions need to first be addressed.<sup>7</sup>

***“You can’t trust the Bible because it has been translated too many times!”*** ...

This misconception ignores the abundance of manuscript evidence (some 25,000+ copies/fragments) in both the original languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic) as well as the earliest translations (Coptic, Syriac, Arabic, Latin, etc). The misconception that our modern translations represent the process of Chinese whispers from Greek to Latin to German to Old English to contemporary English is exactly that, a misconception. The Bible you read in English is critically translated from what NT scholars are over 99% certain was exactly the text recorded in the first century.

***“The Bible is Full of Mistakes and Contradictions”*** ... This misconception is usually just thrown out without any supporting evidence. Always ask for a specific example. Be prepared, however, because some people may have specifics or even several examples, and you’ll want to know how to respond. In reality, though, to say the Bible is full of mistakes and contradictions usually stems from a lack of understanding of principles of biblical interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Even if there are genuine contradictions across the historical accounts, this does nothing to disprove the divinity and resurrection of Jesus. Contradictions in secondary details actually enhances the historical weight of the primary claims since these accounts would be examples of multiple, independent testimony. To the person giving this misconception it could be asked, “Why is this bad?”

***“You Can Make the Bible Say Whatever You Want!”*** ... This only applies if one takes a relaxed view of Scripture, such as a relativistic attitude that rejects that the author had real intent and meaning. Also, if we treat the Bible fairly in our interpretation, following the basic principles of hermeneutics, then we can’t make it say what we want it to say. I once heard a seminary professor say that the Golden Rule of interpretation is, “*Seek to interpret a text just as you would like others to interpret your words, whether written or spoken.*”

***“The Bible Says”*** ... This misconception claims the Bible says something specific, when it really doesn’t. Some will claim the Bible supports the abuse of women, that it encourages slavery, or some other major allegation. There’s a long list of things people say the Bible supports when in reality it doesn’t. Again, when interpreted according to standard hermeneutical principles, this objection fades.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from the Resurgence article “8 Misconceptions About the Bible” by Mark Driscoll <http://theresurgence.com/2013/08/14/8-misconceptions-about-the-bible> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014

<sup>8</sup> <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/ten-principles-when-considering-alleged-bible-contradictions/>



***“Power-Hungry Church Councils Decided What to Include in the Bible”*** ... The idea is that at some point, usually much later than the time of the New Testament, church councils met and included whatever books and ideas in the Bible would best help consolidate their own power. This is simply false. Church councils formalized and officially recognized writings that God’s people had already accepted and used as inspired Scripture for hundreds of years. Some of these councils include the Council of Laodicea (AD 363), of Hippo (AD 393), and of Carthage (AD 397). Church councils simply acknowledged the Scriptures that were already known and trusted by Christians everywhere.

***“The NT was Written Hundreds of Years After the Time of Jesus”*** ... The suspicion of this misconception is that so much time passed between the writing of the Bible and the actual events it records that there’s no way it could be accurate. Supposedly, the gap between the reality and the writing allowed ample time for corruption, legends, and even myths to develop. In actuality, the time between the NT events and when they were recorded is very short, especially when compared with other ancient documents. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, for instance, within about 25 years of Jesus’ life. That’s not enough time for myth or legend to develop, because eyewitnesses were still living and would have objected to what the church taught if it was historically inaccurate. The earliest surviving manuscript fragment of the New Testament, from the Gospel of John, dates to about A.D. 130. That’s very close to when John actually wrote his Gospel, between A.D. 70–100. And although it’s still being verified, New Testament scholar Daniel Wallace reports that a fragment from Mark may very well be dated to the first century, making it our earliest fragment.

***“The Bible is an Old, Outdated List of Rules That No Longer Apply!”*** ... While the Bible is old, it is definitely not out-dated. Not only is it filled with practical wisdom, but also it lays out God’s plan of redemption for humanity. Its insights are timeless, relevant, and useful in everyday life. A quick reading of Proverbs, for example, will yield much wisdom and timeless advice.

***“The Bible Excluded Other More Accurate Manuscripts!”*** ... Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* popularized the idea that there were originally numerous competing “gospels” and church leaders chose their favourites. You’ll hear about the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Barnabas, the Gospel of Philip, or even the Gospel of Judas. Occasionally these “other gospels” get a burst of media attention, as though they somehow seal the doom of the New Testament. There are three lines of evidence that argue against their reliability. First, the manuscript evidence for them is terrible, especially compared to the NT Gospels. Second, all of these other writings were written down much later than the NT (between 130-250 years after Jesus). Third, the ideas they present are often completely foreign to what the New Testament Gospels are about, sometimes offering up advice that is just plain bizarre.

## A Beginner's Guide to Interpreting OT Laws

Anyone who reads the OT as a new believer becomes deeply confused as to how the 613 laws (365 don'ts, 248 do's) should apply today.<sup>9</sup> Sceptics of the Bible love to point out the supposed "cherry-picking" that Christians must do to live out the Bible's commands. So how should Christians make sense of the OT laws?

**CONTEXT IS KEY ...** The problem with this "cherry-picking" objection is that it cries out ignorance as to *how* Christians have always treated the Old Testament (OT) and made sense of its divisible parts in the whole sweep of Scripture. Simply put, it misses the significance of Jesus. The tension between the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant began with Jesus and the Pharisees (Matt 5:17; , was picked up by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), hashed out by Paul, Peter, and the Judaizers (Gal 2:12; 5:12; 6:12), and emerged throughout church history in varying degrees.

The OT is not a 2D uniform landscape of instructions that carry the same intent and are all equally binding. Its shape has contours that match its context. God's revelation and relationship with the nation of Israel is *different* to that of the church. When Jesus came he declared of himself, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt 5:17). Jesus has come not come to discard the Law as nonsense from a bygone age, or to police it. Nor has he come to fulfil just bits of it, sifting through the whole with a pair of tweezers and picking out the occasional commandment that might still work for us. What Jesus has come to do with the Law, he's come to do with all of it. But as we follow Jesus' life and ministry it become apparent that he fulfils the various elements to the Law in a variety of ways...

- 1) Jesus *eclipsed* the ceremonial laws (Jn 2:21; Mk 14:36).
- 2) Jesus *ended* the civil laws (Mk 7:19; 10:9-16).
- 3) Jesus *embodied* and upheld the moral laws (Rm 8:4; 13:8).

**3 CATEGORIES OF LAW ...** For hundreds of years, church tradition taught that the Old Testament law was comprised of three different categories: ceremonial, moral, and civil. Though this view is far from comprehensive, it helps us to understand, interpret, and apply the law to our lives.

**1 CEREMONIAL ...** God gave the ceremonial laws to the people of Israel as a means of guiding them in their worship. These laws include the various sacrifices for sin, circumcision (Gen 17:10), priestly duties (Lev 7:1-37), rejection of certain foods (Lev 11:7-8), and the cleanliness code. The ceremonial laws served a temporary purpose and foreshadowed the coming of Jesus (Dan 9:27; Col 2:17; Heb 10:1) until they were fulfilled and abolished in him. Today,

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from the article "A Beginner's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Law" <http://theresurgence.com/2013/08/13/the-beginners-guide-to-interpreting-old-testament-law> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014

we are no longer required to follow them and are free to eat bacon wraps and wear clothes made with multiple fabrics. In other words, we don't have to ceremonially purify ourselves for God; he does that for us through faith in Christ.

**2 CIVIL** ... God gave the nation and theocracy of Israel civil laws to guide their daily living, political affairs, and judicial system (Exod 21:1-23:9; Lev 19:35; 24:17-23). Today, these civil laws and their punishments are no longer applicable. They expired when the people of God were no longer determined by their ethnicity or geographic location, but rather through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:7-9, 29). Today, God's people assemble together as a church from every nation, tribe, and language (Rev 7:9). His church is not a nation-state like Israel or identified by a particular political party. Today the church does not deal with sins the same way as Israel once did. The penalties have changed. The church deals with sin by exhortation and, at worst, exclusion (1 Cor 5), not death.

**3 MORAL** ... God not only gave us moral laws like the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17), but he wrote them on our heart (Rom 2:14-16). And these laws have not been abolished in Christ (Matt 5:17-19). While the moral law of God does not provide salvation, it does continue to be used as a mirror reflecting the perfect righteousness of God, a means of restraining evil, and a way to reveal both what is pleasing to God and what is good for our flourishing. Today the moral law of God is still in force and it has much to say about loving our neighbour (Lev: 19:18; cf. Matt 19:19), taking care of the poor (Deut 15:4; cf. Acts 4:34), and staying sexually pure (Exod 20:14; cf. 1 Cor 6:9).

**INTERPRETING MOSES ACCORDING TO JESUS** ... We do not honour all the OT texts in the same way. We take our cue from Jesus. Since the Old Testament law points to Jesus and is fulfilled in him, we need to ask some basic questions:

- 1) How does this passage complement the entire Bible?
- 2) What does this passage mean in light of Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection? How does Jesus fulfil it?
- 3) Is this law directly varied over into the NT? If not, why not? If so, how? Is it reinforced or reinterpreted?

Tim Keller sums it up neatly: *"In short, the coming of Christ changed how we worship, but not how we live. The moral law outlines God's own character—his integrity, love, and faithfulness. And so everything the Old Testament says about loving our neighbour, caring for the poor, generosity with our possessions, social relationships, and commitment to our family is still in force. The New Testament continues to forbid killing or committing adultery, and all the sex ethic of the Old Testament is re-stated throughout the New Testament (Matthew 5:27-30; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 1 Timothy 1:8-11). If the New Testament has reaffirmed a commandment, then it is still in force for us today."*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/07/09/making-sense-of-scriptures-inconsistency/>



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