



How to Study the Bible

**Adapted from “How to Study the Bible” in *The MacArthur Study Bible*.
Copyright 1997, Grace to You. All rights reserved.**

From the moment I sensed the call of God into full-time ministry, the driving passion of my life has been simply to understand God’s Word and then make it understandable to others. I have never aspired to be known as either an academic theologian or a distinguished clergyman. I simply want to know what the Word of God means and to make it known to others. All my pastoral energies—my preaching, shepherding, teaching, writing, and even visitation—are focused on that one goal.

It is my conviction that the Bible is not difficult for the believing heart to understand. And the more I understand, the more unshakable is my conviction that the Bible is the living, authoritative, inerrant Word of God. It has this remarkable effect on me: the more I study it, the more I hunger to know. So God’s Word not only satisfies my appetite, but also arouses an even deeper hunger for more. I want you to experience that hunger too. I want you to live in the joy of a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ that comes only through knowing the meaning of Scripture. Here’s a simple process to get you started.

Step 1 – Reading

Begin by developing a plan on how you will approach reading through the Bible. Just by reading the Bible you become familiar with its themes, history, and contexts. There is simply no replacement for Bible reading.

Unlike most books, you will probably not read it straight through from cover to cover. There are many good Bible reading plans available (like *The MacArthur Daily Bible*). Here is what I recommend:

Read through the Old Testament at least once a year. As you read, note in the margins any truths you particularly want to remember, and write down separately anything you do not immediately understand. Often as you read you will find that many questions are answered by the text itself. The questions to which you cannot find answers become the starting points for more in-depth study using commentaries or other reference tools.

Follow a different plan for reading the New Testament. Read one book at a time repetitiously for



a month or more. That will help you retain the New Testament so you will not always have to depend on a concordance to find things.

If you want to try that, begin with a short book, such as 1 John, and read it through in one sitting every day for thirty days. At the end of that time, you will know the book. Write on index cards the major theme of each chapter. By referring to the cards as you do your daily reading, you will begin to remember the content of each chapter. In fact, you will develop a perception of the book with your mind's eye.

When you come to longer books, divide them into short sections and read each section daily for thirty days. For example, the gospel of John contains twenty-one chapters. Divide it into three sections of seven chapters. At the end of ninety days, you will finish John. For variety, alternate short and long books, and in less than three years you will have finished the entire New Testament—and you will really know it!

Step 2 – Interpreting

In Acts 8:30, Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Or put another way, “What does the Bible mean by what it says?” It is not enough to read the text and jump directly to the application—you must first determine what it means, otherwise the application may be incorrect.

As you read Scripture, always keep one simple question in mind: “What does this mean?” To answer that question requires the use of the most basic principle of interpretation called the analogy of faith—interpret the Bible with the Bible.

Letting the Holy Spirit be your teacher (1 John 2:27), search the Scripture He has authored, using cross references, comparative passages, concordances, indexes, and other helps. For passages that remain unclear, consult your pastor or godly men who have written on the issues involved.

Step 3 – Evaluating

You have been reading and asking the question, “What does the Bible say?” Then you have been interpreting, asking the question, “What does the Bible mean?” Now it's time to consult others to ensure that you have the proper interpretation. Remember, the Bible will never contradict itself.

Read Bible introductions, commentaries, and background books that will enrich your thinking. As you evaluate, be a true seeker. Be one who accepts the truth of God's Word even though it may cause you to change what you have always believed, or alter your life pattern.

Step 4 – Applying

Jesus made this promise to those who carry their personal Bible study through to this point: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17).

Having read and interpreted the Bible, you should have a basic understanding of what the Bible says, and what it means by what it says. But studying the Bible does not stop there. The ultimate goal should be to let it speak to you and enable you to grow spiritually. That requires personal application.

You must let God’s truth penetrate and change your life. Studying Scripture without allowing it to penetrate to the depths of your soul would be like preparing a banquet without eating it. The bottom-line question to ask is, “How do the divine truths and principles contained in any passage apply to me in terms of my attitude and actions?”

If there is a command to be obeyed, obey it. If there is a promise to be embraced, claim it. If there is a warning to be followed, heed it. This is the ultimate step: submit to Scripture and let it transform your life.

Step 5 – Correlating

This last stage connects the doctrine you have learned in a particular passage or book with divine truths and principles taught elsewhere in the Bible to form the big picture. Always keep in mind that the Bible is one book in sixty-six parts, so its truths and principles are taught over and over again in a variety of ways and circumstances. By correlating and cross-referencing, you will begin to build a sound doctrinal foundation on which to live.

Now, get to work! As you dig in to God’s Word using those five simple steps, you’ll be amazed at the rich treasure your study yields. My prayer is that the Lord will use this plan to revitalize your Bible study, increase your appetite for knowing and understanding His Word, and further conform you to the image of His beloved Son.

