The Biblestudy HowTo

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by Bob Harman and The BibleTime Team
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Abstract

The Biblestudy HowTo is a guide for studying the Bible.

It is the hope of the BibleTime team that this HowTo will provoke the readers to study the scriptures to see what they say. This particular study guide has been chosen as it takes care not to advocate any particular denominational doctrine. We recommend you to read and study the scriptures to understand what they say. If you start with the attitude that you want to have the Lord sow his word in your heart He will not disappoint you.

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Scripture quotes are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

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Chapter 1. Importance of God's Word

Understanding God's word is of great importance to all who call on God's name. Study of the Bible is one of the primary ways that we learn to communicate with God.

A Book that is Unique

The Bible stands alone in many ways. It is unique in:

- popularity. Bible sales in North America: more than $500 million per year. The Bible is both the all-time and year-to-year best seller!
- authorship. It was written over a period of 1600 years by 40 different authors from different backgrounds, yet reads as if written by one.
- preservation. F. F. Bruce in *Are New Testament Documents Reliable?* compares New Testament manuscripts with other ancient texts:

Table 1.1. Comparison of New Testament manuscripts with other ancient texts.

Work	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Lapse	Number of Copies
Herodotus	448-428 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 years	8
Tacitus	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1000 years	20
Caesar's *Gallic War*	50-58 B.C.	900 A.D.	950 years	10
Livy's *Roman History*	59 B.C. - 17 A.D.	900 A.D.	900 years	20
New Testament	40 A.D. - 100 A.D.	130 A.D. Partial manuscripts 350 A.D. Full manuscripts	30 - 310 years	5000 Greek & 10,000 Latin

Ten copies of Caesar's *Gallic War* exist, the earliest of which was copied 900 years after Caesar wrote the original, etc. For the New Testament we have full manuscripts dating to 350 A. D., papyri containing most of the New Testament from the 200s, and a fragment of John's gospel from 130 A. D. How many manuscripts do we have to compare to each other? 5,000 in Greek and 10,000 in Latin!

> "In the verity and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among other ancient prose writings."
>
> —Textual critic F. J. A. Hort, "The New Testament in the Original Greek", vol. 1 p561, Macmillan Co., quoted in *Questions of Life*p. 25-26

A Book that God Breathed

Heb.4:12 "*For the word of God is living and active...*" Jesus said *(Mt.4:4)*," *It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds [lit., is proceeding] from the mouth of God.*" As we read the Bible, God's Spirit is there to speak it to our hearts in a continually-fresh way.

2 Tim.3:16 declares, " *All scripture is inspired by God [lit., God-breathed].*" Do you believe this? Before you answer, consider Jesus' attitude toward the Scriptures.

> He referred to the human authors, but took it for granted that behind them all was a single divine Author. He could equally say 'Moses said' or 'God said' (Mk.7:10). He could quote a comment of the narrator in Genesis 2:24 as an utterance of the Creator Himself (Mt.19:4-5). Similarly He said, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written', when what He went on to quote is the direct speech of the Lord God (Mk.7:6 & Is.29:13). It is from Jesus Himself that the New Testament authors have gained their conviction of the dual authorship of Scripture. For them it was just as true to say that 'God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets' (Heb.1:1) as it was to say that 'men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God' (2 Pe.1:21). God did not speak in such a way as to obliterate the personality of the human authors, nor did men speak in such a way as to corrupt the Word of the divine Author. God spoke. Men spoke. Neither truth must be allowed to detract from the other. ...
>
> This, then, was Christ's view of the Scriptures. Their witness was God's witness. The testimony of the Bible is the testimony of God. And the chief reason why the Christian believes in the divine origin of the Bible is that Jesus Christ Himself taught it.
>
> —John R.W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, InterVarsity Press 1978, pp.93-95

2 Tim.3:16 goes on, " *and profitable for teaching, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*" If we accept that the Bible really is God speaking to us, it follows that it will be our authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

A Book that Works

What will studying the Bible do for you? 1 Thess.2:13 says that the Bible " *performs its work in you who believe.*" Beside each scripture, write down the work the Word performs.

Table 1.2. What does Bible study do for Christians?

Reference	Action
Eph. 5:26	cleanses -- "...having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word."
Acts 20:32	builds up -- " ...the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. "
Rom. 15:4	encourages -- "that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."
Rom. 10:17	gives faith -- "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."
1 Cor. 10:11	instructs -- "Now these things happened to them for an example, and they were written for our instruction"
Mt. 4:4	nourishment -- "But He answered and said, 'It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"

A Book that Liberates

Jn.8:32 " *and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*"This is usually quoted by itself. Is this a conditional or unconditional promise? Would it apply to all kinds of knowledge? Find the answers

by examining the first half of the sentence, in v.31. " *If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine...*"

We see that this is a conditional promise, specifically speaking of the truth of God's word.

The Greek word for "wind" used in Eph.4:14 means a *violent wind.*" *As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine...*"One thing studying the Bible does for us is to ground us in the truth, with the result that we won't be easily "blown away."

But Jesus answered and said to them," *You are mistaken [KJV Ye do err], not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God.*" Mt.22:29

What 2 things do we need to know to be kept from error?

- God's word
- God's power

A Book that Wars

Eph.6:10-18 is one picture of our spiritual armament.

Table 1.3. Spiritual Armor

Question	Answer
How many of the weapons listed here are defensive weapons?	5
How many are offensive?	One
Which one(s)?	the word - *rhema*

Exhortations

2 Tim.2:15 (KJV) " *Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*"

Col.3:16 " *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you; with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*"

If you're rich in something, how much of it do you have?

Not a little!

Eccl.12:11-12 " *The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.*"

Appendix: "Once for All"

> The truth regarding the finality of God's initiative in Christ is conveyed by one word of the Greek Testament, namely the adverb *hapax*and *ephapax*. It is usually translated in the Authorized Version once, meaning once for all. It is used of what is so done as to be of perpetual validity and never need repetition, and is applied in the NT to both revelation

> and redemption. Thus, Jude refers to the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), and Romans says, " *Christ also died for sins once for all*" (Rom.6:10, see also 1 Pe.3:18; Heb.9:26-28).
>
> Thus we may say that God has spoken once for all and Christ has suffered once for all. This means that the Christian revelation and the Christian redemption are both alike in Christ complete. Nothing can be added to either without being derogatory to Christ... These are the two rocks on which the Protestant Reformation was built -- Gods revealed word without the addition of human traditions and Christ's finished work without the addition of human merits. The Reformers great watchwords were *sola scriptura*for our authority and *sola gratia*for our salvation.
>
> —John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist,*InterVarsity Press 1978, pp.106-107

Supplement: Bible Reading Programs

Here are some easy programs to systematically read your Bible. You can do more than one at a time if you like, for instance #1 with #4, or #2 with #5. Vary the program from year to year to keep it fresh!

1. New Testament in a Year: read one chapter each day, 5 days a week.
2. Proverbs in a Month: read one chapter of Proverbs each day, corresponding to the day of the month.
3. Psalms in a Month: read 5 Psalms at intervals of 30 each day, for instance on the 20th you read Ps.20, 50, 80, 110, & 140.
4. Psalms & Proverbs in 6 months: read through Psalms and Proverbs one chapter per day.
5. Old Testament without Psalms & Proverbs in 2 years: if you read one chapter a day of the Old Testament, skipping over Psalms & Proverbs, you will read the Old Testament in 2 years and 2 weeks.

Chapter 2. Bible Study Basics

Our Purpose as we Approach the Bible

> You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life.
>
> —Jn.5:39-40

The chief purpose of the book is to bring us to the Person. Martin Luther said “we go to the cradle only for the sake of the baby”; just so in Bible study, we do it not for its own sake but for fellowship with God.

> The Jews to whom Jesus spoke [...] imagined that to possess Scripture was tantamount to possessing life. Hillel used to say, "He who has gotten to himself words of Torah has gotten to himself the life of the world to come." Their study was an end in itself. In this they were grievously deceived. [...]
>
> There is neither merit nor profit in the reading of Scripture for its own sake, but only if it effectively introduces us to Jesus Christ. Whenever the Bible is read, what is needed is an eager expectation that through it we may meet Christ.
>
> —John R.W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, InterVarsity Press 1978, pp.97, 104.

Approaches to God's Word

Hearing and reading provide a telescopic view of the scripture while study and memorization provide a microscopic view of scripture. Meditating on the scriptures brings hearing, reading, studying and memorization together and cements the word in our minds.

Hear

Lk.11:28 “blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it.”

Read

Rev.1:3 “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy [...]”

1 Tim.4:13 “give attention to the public reading of Scripture [...]”

Study

Acts 17:11 “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.”

2 Tim.2:15 “Be diligent [KJV `Study'] to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

Memorize

Ps.119:11 “Thy word I have hid in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee.”

Meditate

Ps.1:2-3 “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.”

The Navigators illustrate this by saying that as the thumb can touch all the fingers, we can meditate on the Word as we do any of the first four. Meditation is a key to revelation. A new Christian needs to hear and read the Bible more than they need to study and memorize it. This is so that they become familiar with the overall message of the Bible.

Types of Bible Studies

Topical Study

Pick out a certain topic and follow it through, using cross-references or a concordance.

Character Study

Studying the life of a Bible character, e.g. Joseph's life in Gen.37-50.

Expository Study

Studying a certain passage: paragraph, chapter, or book.

Basics of Correct Interpretation

Content

What does it say? What does it say in the original language? Be careful with definitions. Don't read into it what it doesn't say.

Context

What do the verses around it say? "Context is king" is the rule -- the passage must make sense within the structure of the entire passage and book.

Cross-reference

What do other verses about this subject say through the rest of the Bible? God doesn't contradict Himself, so our interpretation needs to stand the test of other scriptures.

An Expository Study of Matthew 6:1-18

Let's study together Mt.6:1-18. Read it to yourself, first looking for the key verse, the verse that sums up the whole passage. Think you have it? Test it by picking different places in the passage and asking yourself if they relate to the thought of the key verse. Once you find it, write it as Roman numeral One of your outline:

I. Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed

What does “practicing your righteousness”mean? Does the passage give any examples? What area of our lives is being addressed? *Our motives!* What sub-headings develop this thought?

A. When you give

B. When you fast

C. When you pray

Now fill in the outline with specific instructions of how to avoid wrong ways of practicing our righteousness:

A. When you give

a. don't sound a trumpet. (how might someone “sound a trumpet”today?)

b. do it secretly.

c. etc.

Worksheet: How to Use a Concordance

To Find a Particular Verse

1. Pick out a key word or most-unusual word of the verse.
2. Turn to this word alphabetically.
3. Go down the column of listings until you find your verse.

Find these verses:

1. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend”
2. “We are ambassadors of Christ.”
3. The story of the rich man and Lazarus.

To Do a Topical Study

Let's say you wanted to do a study of the word "redemption." First you would look up that word in the concordance and look up references listed for it. Then you could look up related words and references listed for them, e.g. "redeem, redeemed, ransom," even "buy" or "bought."

To Clarify Word Meanings in the Greek and Hebrew

What if you noticed a contradiction in the KJV between Mt.7:1 “Judge not lest you be judged”and 1 Cor.2:15 “He that is spiritual judgeth all things.”Maybe there are two different Greek words here, both being translated "judge" in English? (We're using Strong's from here out.)

1. Look up "judge".
2. Go down the column of entries to Mt.7:1. To the right is a number, 2919. This refers to the Greek word used. Write it down.

3. Now look up "judgeth".
4. Go down the column to 1 Cor.2:15 . . . . . 350.
5. Turn in the back to the Greek dictionary. (Remember, you're in the NT so the language is Greek, while the OT is Hebrew.) Compare the meaning of 2919 with the meaning of 350 and you have your answer!

To Find Meanings of Names

By the same process we can find the meaning of a name in the Greek or Hebrew.

Look up these names and write down their meaning:

- Nabal
- Abigail
- Joshua
- Barnabus

Chapter 3. Rules of Bible Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

We already learned about the "3 Cs": content, context, cross-reference. We want to expand that now by delving briefly into biblical hermeneutics, whose goal is to discover the meaning intended by the original author (and Author!). While many applications of a passage are valid, only one interpretation is valid. The scripture itself says this by saying that no scripture is of any private interpretation (2 Pe.1:20 KJV “Knowing this first, that no prophesy of scripture is of any private interpretation.”). Certain rules are helps toward discovering the correct meaning; by ignoring these rules people have brought much trouble on themselves and their followers. 2 Pe.3:16 “...in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

How do we go about discovering the intended meaning of a passage? Let's say your attention has been drawn to a particular verse whose meaning is not clear to you. How do you study it out? Keep these rules in mind:

Rule 1 - Interpret according to the exact meaning of the words.

The more precise we can be with the exact, original meaning of the words the better our interpretation will be. Try to find the exact meaning of the key words by following these steps:

1. **Definition.** Look up the definition in a Greek or Hebrew dictionary. For verbs, the verb tense is also crucial.

2. **Cross-reference.** Compare scripture with scripture. Seeing how the same Greek or Hebrew word (not the English word) is used in scripture may clarify or throw new light on the definition. How does the same author use this word elsewhere? Other authors? Your reference tools may give you uses of the word in non-biblical documents, as well. Why do we have to go to the original languages; why isn't the English word good enough? *Because more than one Greek word may be translated into the same English word, and the Greek words may have different shades of meaning.*

Example 1A

Jn.20:17 *"Touch me not"* (KJV) sounds harsh, doesn't it? Sounds like Jesus doesn't want to be touched now that He is risen, that He is too holy or something. But that doesn't seem right, so let's look it up in Spiros Zodhiates' *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (AMG Publishers, 1991).

Definition: Turning to John 20:17, above the word "Touch" we see "pim680." The letters give us a code for the part of speech, and the number refers to Strong's dictionary reference. Let's look up the definition (p. 879). "680. Haptomai; from hapto (681), touch. Refers to such handling of an object as to exert a modifying influence upon it... Distinguished from pselaphao (5584), which actually only means to touch the surface of something. " Now look up "pim." The grammar codes in Zodhiates come right after Revelation; on p. 849 we see that pim stands for "present imperative active (80)". On p.857, "Present Imperative. In the active voice, it may indicate a command to do something in the future which involves continuous or repeated action or, when it is negated, a command to stop doing something. " This is a negative command, so it is to stop doing something that is already occurring. So, what have we found?

Mary is already clinging to Jesus, and he is saying to stop holding him!

Example 1B

In James 5:14, *Elders are told to pray and anoint someone who is sick.* What is this anointing?

Definition of aleipho (218) - "to oil" (Strong's); but we also have another Greek word translated "anoint", chrio (5548) - "to smear or rub with oil, i.e. to consecrate to an office or religious service" (Strong's). Since it's a verb, consider the tense also, "apta" aorist participle active. "The aorist participle expresses simple action, as opposed to continuous action...When its relationship to the main verb is temporal, it usually signifies action prior to that of the main verb." (Zodhiates p.851)

- Cross-references for aleipho:

  1. Mt.6:17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head
  2. Mk.16:1 [the women] brought spices that they might come and anoint Him.
  3. Mk.6:13 And they were...anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.
  4. Lk.7:38 [...] kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume
  5. Jn.12:3 Mary [...] anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped them with her hair

- Cross-references of chrio:

  1. Lk.4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach [...]”
  2. Acts 4:27 Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed
  3. Acts 10:38 God anointed Jesus with the Holy Ghost and power
  4. 2 Cor.1:21 Now He who...anointed us is God

So what's the difference between aleipho and chrio? Look back over the cross-references and the definitions, and sum up the difference: *"aleipho" is a practical use of oil and "chrio" is a spiritual*

As an illustration (although the word is not used) of the practical use of oil at that time, when the good Samaritan cared for the man beat up by robbers he poured oil and wine in the wound. So oil had a medicinal use in Jesus' day.

Now let's apply what we just learned by this word study to James 5:14 *"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."*Is "anointing" spiritual or practical? Practical!

And the tense in Greek, the aorist participle, would be better translated "having anointed," so the order is the anointing first, then the prayer ("in the name of the Lord"refers to the prayer, not the anointing). James 5 is saying that the elders should give the sick person medicine and pray for him in the name of the Lord. Doesn't that express a beautiful balance of practical and spiritual in our God!

Rule 2 - Interpret within the biblical context

Interpret scripture in harmony with other scripture. What do the verses on each side say? What is the theme of the chapter? The book? Does your interpretation fit with these? If not, it is flawed. Usually, the context supplies what we need to correctly interpret the passage. Context is key. If confusion remains as to the meaning after we have interpreted the text within its context, we have to look further.

Example 2A

In a previous lesson we considered Jn.3:5 *"born of water and the Spirit."*In context, what is the water under discussion here?

Water baptism is not under discussion here, which would be a big switch from the subject being discussed by Jesus and Nicodemus. Watch out for a sudden change of topic, it may be a clue that your interpretation has been derailed! The water is the amniotic fluid, "born of water" = natural birth.

Example 2B

1 Cor.14:34 “Let the women keep silent in the churches”has to be taken within the biblical context of 1 Cor.11:5 “every woman [...] while praying or prophesying [...]”

Example 2C

Acts 2:38 “And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins [...]"”. Is this teaching baptismal regeneration? If this was the only verse of scripture we had, we would have to conclude that. But in the light of the clear teaching elsewhere that regeneration happens by faith in Christ, we have to interpret it otherwise. Peter is urging baptism as a way for his hearers to respond to the gospel. If baptism were the pathway to being born again, how could Paul write 1 Cor.1:17 *"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel"*?

Rule 3 - Interpret within the historical and cultural context

At first we are not asking “What does it mean to me?”but “What did it mean to the original readers?”; later we can ask, “What does it mean to me?”. We have to take into account the historical and cultural background of the author and the recipients.

Example 3A

“3 days & 3 nights”(Mt.12:40) have led some to come up with a "Wednesday crucifixion theory," esp. the cult of Armstrongism. How could Jesus die on Friday afternoon and rise Sunday morning yet "be raised on the third day" (Mt.16:21)? Exact meanings of "three" or "days" won't help explain the apparent contradiction.

We need an historical tidbit: Jews counted any part of a day as a full day, as we would count buckets of water (if there were six and one-half buckets of water, we would say there were 7 buckets of water even if one was only partly full). So to the Jewish mind, any part of a day counted as a full day, and days started at 6 p.m. and ended at 6 p.m. Friday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. = day 1. Friday 6 p.m. to Saturday 6 p.m. = day 2. Saturday 6 p.m. to Sunday 5 or so a.m. = day 3. Interpreting within the cultural context keeps us out of trouble.

Example 3B

Gen.15:7-21. The historical context is that cutting animals in two and then walking between the pieces was the normal way of entering a contract in Abraham's day. Both parties walked between, taking the pledge that dismemberment would happen to them if they didn't live up to their part of the contract. But in this case only God goes thru, making it a unilateral covenant.

Rule 4 - Interpret according to the normal usage of words in language

Let literal language be literal and figurative language be figurative. And watch out for idioms, which have special meanings.

Example 4A

“evil eye”in Mt.6:23.

Rule 1, definition of "evil" and "eye" - no help here. Rule 2, context: seems to confuse us even more. It doesn't seem to fit with what goes before and after! This should tip us off that we aren't understanding it rightly!!

What we have here is a Hebrew idiom, “evil eye”. Let's look up other uses of this idiom: Mt.20:15 " *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious [lit."evil"] because I am generous [lit. "good"]?*" We find that having an "evil eye" is a Hebrew idiom for being stingy or envious. Now go back to Mt.6 and notice how this understanding ties in so perfectly to the context.

Example 4B

Is.59:1 “The Lord's hand is not short;”

Deut.33:27 “Underneath are the everlasting arms.”

References to body parts of God are used by Latter-Day Saints to prove that God was once a man just as we are. Once they convince people of that, they go on to teach that we can become God just like He is! At a lecture he was giving, a group of Mormon elders challenged Walter Martin (author of *Kingdom of the Cults*) with an enumeration of verses like these. Dr. Martin then asked the Mormons to read one more scripture: Ps.91:4 “He will cover you with His feathers; And under His wings shalt thou trust”. W.M. said, “By the same rules of interpretation that you just proved God to be a man, you just proved that He is a bird”. The Mormons had to laugh as they realised the ridiculousness of their position.

Rule 5 - Understand the purpose of parables and the difference between a parable and an allegory

An allegory is: *A story where each element has a meaning.*

Every parable is an allegory, true or false?

Some parables are allegories, for instance, the parable of the sower is an allegory: the seed is the word of God, the thorns are worries and greed, etc. But most parables are not allegories but simply stories to illustrate one point. It's dangerous to get our doctrine from parables; they can be twisted to say all sorts of things. We need to get our doctrine from clear scriptures that lay it out; then if a parable illustrates that, fine.

Example 5A

The parable of the widow with the unrighteous judge in Lk.18:1-8. This story illustrates one lesson: boldness in prayer. If we draw it into an allegory, what do we have?

All sorts of violence happens to the meanings: God is reluctant to protect the rights of widows, prayer "bothers" Him, etc.

Example 5B

The parable of the unrighteous steward in Lk.16:1-9. What is the point of the parable? Is it an allegory?

The steward is commended for only one thing, his shrewdness in using what he had to prepare for a time when he wouldn't have it. But he is not commended for his unethical behavior in cheating his master.