



You Can
Study the
Bible!

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SPOILER: THIS IS NOT A BIBLE STUDY

A bible study typically takes a book of the Bible, or a specific topic, and leads you through it by asking pointed questions, assigning certain passages, and helping you come to a specific conclusion about those texts. Don't get me wrong, Bible studies can be wonderful, but perhaps you have felt like you don't have the tools or ability to study the Bible on your own? I've heard countless people express how time in the Word is a struggle for them, and assume they just need a new devotional or study to tell them what to do. I've seen those same people giddy with excitement when they acquire a few simple tools and realize they don't need to always be fed by others, they can grab a fork themselves and dig in! So here you go. I'm not perfect at this, I'll be the first to admit that consistency is not my strong point. I struggle in this area too, but over the years I've added some things to my toolbox that help me approach the Bible with a plan, and the confidence to study it on my own. There are many ways you can do this, I'm sure many of you could give me so many more things to add, but my prayer is that some of these tools and approaches will help you feel empowered to take your study of God's Word into your own hands! After all, "The heart cannot love what the mind does not know."*

So here's my approach in a nutshell. I prefer to pick one book of the Bible at a time, dive into it, and study it over a longer period of time. I'll give a quick list here of all the steps, but don't worry, the following pages will break each step down even more. I strongly recommend trying this with a short New Testament book your first time!

Day 1: Decide which book of the Bible you are going to study and read the whole book in one sitting to get an overall picture of the context, etc. For longer books this may need to be spread out over a few days, but if possible try to do it in one sitting.

Day 2: Go back over the whole book and write a short outline, noting what sections seem to go together, etc. Then, from this outline write a short 3-5 sentence summary of what the purpose of the book seems to be. Try to answer the basic questions about the book, such as who wrote it, when was it written and why, who was it written to or for? Then quickly check and see if you're on the right track by referring to commentaries online.

*Jen Wilkin, *Women of the Word* (Crossway 2014, Wheaton IL), 31.

Day 3, And Beyond: Start going through the book in smaller chunks, starting at the beginning and moving in order. Focus on one chapter at a time, or even smaller sections in a chapter. For each section of text you might spend several days:

- The first day write down every question you have about the section you are reading, and pray through those questions.
- The next day focus on trying to answer every question you wrote down the day before using only your bible. You can do this by cross-referencing scriptures, looking up other verses that relate (this can be done using the index in the back of your Bible), and if you're in one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), read the matching accounts in the other three Gospels to compare when applicable.
- The next day you can turn to commentaries and Google to find the answers to the questions you weren't able to answer yourself with just your Bible.
- Another day you can try to answer the questions: What does this passage teach me about God? What does it teach me about man? How does this passage fit into the greater gospel narrative?
- Another day you may ask the question, why was the passage placed before and after the passages it was? Is there any significance in the timing of the events around it?
- When you feel you have a good grasp of the context and meaning of the passage, spend some time praying and journaling about how this passage applies to your life, and what the Holy Spirit is convicting you of through it. This may last one day or several days depending on the passage.
- Then, once you feel satisfied with that section, move on to the next chapter, paragraph, etc. and do it all again!

Last Day: Once you have broken down, studied, and meditated on each section in the book, read the whole book in one sitting again!

DAY 1: READ READ READ!

The first step is to choose a book of the Bible to study. I recommend starting with a shorter book in the New Testament for your first attempt. Any of Paul's letters are a great choice. Once you get the hang of things and decide whether you like this method or not, then you can gradually move to longer books or some of the more difficult Old Testament books.

What You Will Need: Just a Bible today! Try and find a good reference Bible if possible. This means that the margins will have tons of cross references, which will be important in a few days.

Bible Translations: When choosing a Bible, here are some of the popular translations and the differences between them. My personal favorite is the New American Standard, but the ESV is also a great choice.

- NASB: New American Standard Bible: This translation is known as the most literal word for word translation of the Bible in the English language.
- ESV: English Standard Version: This translation combines word for word translation and accuracy with readability and literary excellence. This is a relatively new translation of the Bible.
- NIV: New International Version: This translation combines word for word with thought for thought translation. This is a very smooth-reading, popular version of the Bible.
- KJV: King James Version: This is a very respected traditional translation dating back to the 1600's. (While accurate, it can be very difficult to read and for this reason I don't recommend it as your primary study Bible.)
- The Message: This is a paraphrased version of the Bible. (While great as a secondary Bible to aid in comprehension and application, I would not recommend it as your primary Bible when learning to study this way.)

So that brings us to Day 1. Grab your Bible, find a comfy spot free of distractions if possible, and try to read the whole book that you have chosen to study in one sitting. If you pick a longer book this may not be possible and you may have to stretch this step over a few days, but if that's the case I still recommend reading it in as few days as possible. The goal of this step is to get an overview of the book so that as you study it over the next several weeks you will be able to study each section in it's proper context instead of in isolated sections like we so often tend to do.

DAY 2: OUTLINE

Now it's time to look back over the book and write a quick outline. Mine are always short and to the point. The goal here is to be able to look at a page or two of notes and get a picture of the overall purpose of the book.

After you write your outline, try to use it to write a short summary of the apparent purpose of the book. Just a few short sentences is all you need here. During this step make sure you can answer some of the basic questions about it, such as who wrote it, to what audience, when was it written, and why. Again, we are still getting a framework for the book to help give us perspective and context when we break it down later.

Last, get online and check a few commentaries to see if the purpose explanation you came up with is on track with what commentators are saying. I would check a few since not all commentators will say the same thing. While it would be easy to just go straight to the commentaries, I really recommend doing the work of outlining and explaining on your own first. You would be amazed at how much difference this one step makes on your study moving forward. Here are a few online resources and commentaries to try. They all have search boxes where you can type in the book or passage you are reading. You can also just Google "What is the purpose of I Timothy", etc. if you can't find a good summary on these. I do that a lot!

- esvbible.org
- biblegateway.com
- biblestudytools.com
- desiringgod.org

This sounds like a lot for one day, but it's really not as hard as it looks! It typically takes me 20 minutes for a short book. The following page is an example of what an outline and summary might look like. I used the book of I Timothy for the example. This outline is literally taken out of my journal so you can see how I quickly divided the text into sections that made sense to me.

I Timothy Sample Outline:

Greetings and encouragement

- Paul encourages Timothy to avoid false teaching.
- More encouragement to avoid sinful lifestyles.
- Paul gives glory to God for his own forgiveness.
- Paul encourages Timothy to keep the faith and fight the good fight.

Instructions

- Instructions for Timothy to pray for all men.
- Instructions for women.
- Instructions for overseers and deacons.

More encouragement

- Another warning against falling away and false teaching.
- Paul encourages timothy to pursue godliness.
- Tells him to teach others and be an example.
- Encourages him to use his spiritual gift.

More instructions

- Instructions on how to treat widows and who should take care of them.
- Instructions on how to treat elders.
- Instructions to those who minister in other ways.

More encouragement and closing.

- Warnings against the love of money.
- One more encouragement to fight the good fight.

I TIMOTHY SAMPLE SUMMARY:

This letter was written by Paul to Timothy, and seems to be aimed at both giving encouragement to Timothy as well as laying out instructions as to how people should behave. Paul gives instructions both for those who serve (elders and deacons) as well as those who are served (widows). Along with encouraging Timothy, Paul also gives him a few warnings against riches and false teachings.

Now I will get online and check my summary against a few commentaries to see if I'm on the right track, and to fill in any gaps on the who, where, and when.

- According to biblica.com Paul instructed Timothy to care for the Church at Ephesus while he went on to Macedonia. He wrote this letter to his disciple to develop him and help him lead the church since Paul realized he would not be returning to help.
- According to esvbible.org it was probably written in the mid-60's A.D. and "false teachings are the main cause for the letter".

Now I have a pretty good idea of the context of this letter, which will greatly help as I study each section in more detail over the next few weeks.

DAY 3 AND BEYOND!

Think of these next few pages as a “box of tools”. You don’t have to do these in order and you don’t have to do all of them for every text. Try all of them at least a few times and see which ones you like! Some will lend themselves better to some texts than others, so don’t give up on one if it’s not enlightening the first time or two you try it. Also, keep adding more tools to your box. These are just a few that have helped me but there are many more out there!

While you don’t have to do these next pages in order, it is important to have a pretty good understanding of a text before jumping to personal application. Comprehension comes first, otherwise how will you know that you are applying the text to your life correctly? For this reason, I recommend using the tools that focus on personal application after using some of the other tools for whatever text you are reading.

In her book “Women of the Word”, Jen Wilkin stresses the importance of starting with comprehension (what does this text say), then moving to interpretation (what does this text mean), then finally moving to application (how should this text change me).*

So what you are going to do is start at the beginning of the book, read a small section, and spend several days going deeper into that section before moving on to the next section. I usually do either a chapter or a portion of a chapter. Your Bible most likely has divided the text into sections and titled each section. I often use these sections and just focus on one at a time. I may spend anywhere from 3-10 days on each section, picking it apart with my “box of tools” before moving on to the next one and doing it all again.

*Jen Wilkin, *Women of the Word* (Crossway 2014, Wheaton IL), 31.

THE QUESTION TOOL

This is the tool I start with every single time. It can take several days depending on how many questions I have and how difficult the answers are to find and comprehend.

- First, write down every question you have about the section you are reading, and pray through those questions. Don't hold back, even if you understand something but want to understand it more fully write it down. No question is too big or small! Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you a greater understanding and a correct understanding of your questions before you start researching them. You can stop here for the day and move to the next step tomorrow, or if you have time keep going to the next step.
- The next day (or the same day if time allows) start trying to answer every question you wrote down using only your Bible. This step often takes me several days depending on how many questions I write down. Do this by crossreferencing scriptures (this is where a reference bible becomes important!), looking up other verses that relate (you can do this using the index in the back of your Bible), and if you're in one of the Gospels, read the matching accounts in the other three Gospels to compare when applicable. Remember, try to find the answers to your questions yourself with only your Bible before moving on to study tools such as commentaries. Commentaries can be so helpful, but we want to continue to stretch our ability to interpret scripture for ourselves first, then look to commentaries to fill in the gaps or to give us assurance that we are interpreting scripture accurately. For help with this step, I've included a more detailed explanation of how to cross reference scripture and how to effectively use your index on the next page.
- The next day (or the same day if you have time), you can turn to commentaries and Google to find the answers to the questions you weren't able to answer yourself with just your Bible, or to check your answers and see if you are on the right track. I usually start by looking at what 2-3 different commentaries say about the passage in general, then I often go to desiringgod.org and type the passage or topic in the search box and see what I can find. If I still don't have an answer I will literally type my exact question into Google and see what comes up. (Just beware, not everything that pops up in a Google search is trustworthy!)

HOW TO USE A REFERENCE BIBLE

There are several types of Bibles. Some simply have the verses and that's it. Then there are study Bibles with notes at the bottom of each page providing extra insight into historical context, etc. A reference Bible, however, is one that has several verses referenced in the margins of each page. For every verse you read in the text, you can look in the margin and there will most likely be at least a few verse references that somehow relate to the verse you just read. They may be verses relating to the same topic, or references to the scripture or events of origin.

For example, I Timothy 2:9-10 are instructions for how women should dress. Needless to say, I had several questions about these verses! I've included my journal entry from the day I studied this passage so you can see how cross referencing helped me process the text, and how using commentaries after that helped me fill in the gaps! The two passages I mention were both listed in the margin of my Bible for me to use as cross references.

I TIMOTHY REFERENCE BIBLE SAMPLE ENTRY:

Why the warning against braiding hair, etc.? Was this a certain lifestyle, or merely a warning against vanity? Is it bad to want to look nice and in style?

I Peter 3:3 has a similar verse that says to not let your adorning be merely external. So in that passage it seems the act of dressing well isn't bad, just not as important as the hidden person of the heart. Women tend to care more about our appearance often, so it makes sense that he would single that out as not being important enough to take all our energy, etc.

In Matthew 6 it says we shouldn't worry about clothing and what we should wear. Here, it's in the context of where the treasure of our heart is. The heart is the problem, not the clothing. The clothing is a symptom of our heart treasuring our own appearance (our glory).

*So is I Timothy in the same vein as these 2 other passages? Is he getting more at the heart?
Or is it actually bad to put effort into appearance?*

Also, Paul starts the verse with the word "likewise", so it's still part of his exhortation to pray for all men.

• According to biblehub.com this verse isn't speaking about everyday life clothing, but specifically clothing worn at worship gatherings. Women shouldn't dress in a way that puts all the focus and attention on them, & distracts people from worshiping God.

• Several commentaries specify that this verse is saying how women are to pray, not what they should or shouldn't wear in everyday life.

My conclusion - In the same section Paul says that men are to pray without wrath or dissension, women are to pray without trying to attract all the attention to themselves. Paul seems to be speaking to the weaknesses and tendencies of each sex.

You can see how at first glance one might read those verses and assume the Bible says it's wrong for women to dress nicely. Or even that it's sinful to braid your hair! Examining what other similar verses in the Bible say help give us a more holistic view of how the Bible talks about a topic, and then commentaries can help fill in gaps like historical context, etc.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A REFERENCE BIBLE:

- There are cross reference apps you can download onto your phone, or cross reference websites you can use online.
- If the cross references aren't helpful, most Bibles also have an index in the back. You can search a topic, such as "clothing" and if your index is good it should list some or all of the places in the Bible that clothing is talked about, and you can cross reference that way as well.

THE PERSPECTIVE TOOL

Take a day to re-read the passage and try to answer the following three questions:

- What does this passage teach me about God?
- What does this passage teach me about man?
- How does this passage fit into the greater gospel narrative?

Then pray through your answers. Praise God for what you have realized more deeply about Him or His character, thank Him for what He has taught you about what he has done in His gospel narrative, or repent of any personal sin that may have been revealed through your deeper understanding of man.

The reason for these specific questions is they help us to follow some basic Bible reading principals: 1. The Bible is primarily a book about God, not about us! And 2. Knowing the context within the greater gospel narrative is imperative.

1. THE BIBLE IS PRIMARILY A BOOK ABOUT GOD, NOT US.

We like to read a passage and jump straight to “how do I apply this to my life?”. This treats the Bible like it’s primarily about us. So the first basic principle is to learn to first ask the question, “What does this book, chapter, and passage teach me about God?” Following this question by contemplating what the passage teaches about man is often very eye-opening!

2. LEARN THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT!

We like to read an encouraging verse and then be on our way. All scripture fits into a larger context, not only of the specific chapter or book you are reading, but into the greater gospel narrative. This also reinforces the first principal above by refocusing on God and what He has done and is doing, rather than focusing on ourselves.

The basic greater gospel narrative is: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration.

So the second basic principle is to ask the question, “How does this passage fit into the greater gospel narrative?”. It may be obvious. If you are reading the creation story in Genesis it’s pretty clear that you are in the creation part of the gospel narrative. However, it may be symbolic. When Jesus is healing people in the Gospels, it’s a picture of the future restoration of all things to come. When Abraham goes to sacrifice his son Isaac, and God provides a lamb to sacrifice instead, it’s a foreshadowing of God sacrificing his son in our place, bringing redemption to mankind. If it’s not obvious, wrestle with it for a while. Journal and pray that God would give you insight and understanding. Don’t give up!

THE CONTEXT TOOL

There are many levels of context for every passage. On a larger scale, knowing the context of where it fits into the greater gospel narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration as discussed in the last tool is very important. On a smaller scale, reading the whole book the passage is found in as discussed in Day One, gives a good context of the purpose of the book, etc. Now, we are going to focus in even more. Sometimes I like to take a day or two to ask the question, “Why was the passage placed before and after the passages it was? Is there any significance in the timing of the events around it?”

I usually read at least a full section or two before and after the section I am studying, and see if there are similarities or obvious contrasts. I ask myself what is being communicated by each section, and see if grouping them together gives me further insight.

Finish by praying and thanking God for what He has revealed to you through His word, praising Him for what you have learned about who He is and what He has done, or repenting of any sin that may have been revealed.

If you still aren't sure about this one, I've included an example of what this might look like on the next page.

CONTEXT TOOL SAMPLE:

And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a peck-measure, is it, or under a bed?

Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear." And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given to you besides. For whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken from him".

Mark 4:21-25

These verses are placed in the middle of three separate parables that Jesus tells his followers about seeds, and seem really out of place! Why not tell all the seed parables together, then move to these verses? Why are these in the middle of the seed parables?

It's interesting that these two short parables come so early in the book of Mark. Jesus has just told His first parable of the sower, and already the disciples are bewildered and confused after just that one parable. So much so that Jesus had to go back and explain the parable to them. I can imagine how discouraged they may have felt. If they couldn't understand even this first seed sower parable, how would they understand even deeper teaching? Was understanding even possible?

That brings us to these five verses. First, through the lampstand parable it seems as though Jesus is giving some comfort to the disciples, that although truth and understanding are hidden now to many people (due to the fact that they are being taught in parables), they won't be hidden forever. If the lamp represents Jesus, then just as the light from a lamp is meant to be seen, so is Jesus and His glory at the appointed time. The disciples may have felt discouraged at the parable of the sower, just as we often do when we don't understand the scriptures at first glance. We can find comfort that spiritual knowledge is attainable, and even more that just as a lamp is meant to give off light and not be hidden, Christ came that we would have understanding and not walk in darkness!

In the next short parable Jesus gives the disciples, He begins by stressing the importance of listening to His teaching. He tells them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you...". Could the "measures" He is referring to be their attempts at understanding, or possible lack thereof? If the disciples failed to listen closely to His teachings, and didn't apply themselves to understanding, most likely no understanding would follow. However, if they listened closely and sought after understanding, then knowledge and understanding would be sure to follow. Remember, Jesus just got done assuring them that he is meant to be seen and understood, as a lamp is meant to shed light. This is true for us as well. If we don't understand something, and therefore dismiss it or fail to apply ourselves to gaining understanding, why would we expect to grow in our knowledge of the teachings of Christ? Could it be though, that when we apply ourselves whole heartedly to studying the scriptures, and wrestle through the things we don't understand, that perhaps wisdom, knowledge, and greater understanding could be the result?

Then, after these verses Jesus gets back to two more parables about seed. Rather than being random verses out of place in the middle of a grouping of seed parables, it seems that maybe these verses were meant to be both an encouragement and an exhortation to the disciples to hang in there with all the parables to come.

They couldn't understand the first seed parable without Jesus explaining it to them, so Jesus stopped, encouraged them that things won't always be hidden but will be in the light. Then Jesus seemed to push them to apply themselves to understanding, before continuing on with the next parables.

THE APPLICATION TOOL

When you have a good grasp on the context and meaning of the passage, devote some time to praying and journaling about how this passage applies to your life, and what the Holy Spirit is convicting you of through it. You have probably done some of this already as you have prayed. This may last one day or several days depending on the passage.

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK YOURSELF IF YOU ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY WITH THIS STEP:

- How is the Holy Spirit convicting me through this text?
- What has this text revealed to me about how I am to live?
- What situation in my life kept coming to mind as I read this text?
- What might the Holy Spirit be telling me about that situation?
 - What sin has been revealed that I need to repent of?
- How does the truth revealed in this passage help me to love God more?
- How does the truth revealed in this passage help me to love others?
 - How can this text change the way I live my life this week?
 - Who can I share this passage with?

LAST DAY!

Yay! You did it! You studied through a book of the Bible on your own. Now that you have worked your way through the whole book, section by section, find your comfy spot and read through the whole book in one sitting again. Enjoy reading it with a deeper understanding, and simply soak in all the beautiful truths you have been learning in their full context again. Praise God for giving you greater insight and understanding into His Word!

**NOW PICK OUT THE NEXT BOOK OF THE BIBLE YOU WANT TO TACKLE
AND DO IT ALL AGAIN!**