

How To Study and Understand the Bible

By Rod Reynolds

The Bible is the world's best selling book, with estimates of five billion or more copies of the Bible printed. But how many people really understand the Bible, even among those who read it regularly? Do you? Would you like to understand it better?

How important is it to study and understand the Bible? Just this: in the Bible is revealed the **Word of God** to mankind preserved in writing. **God reveals himself** to us through his Word. Through his Word we can learn what God is like. What his purpose is. What principles he upholds. What our relationship to him should be.

Jesus Christ is the living Word of God ([John 1:1](#); [Revelation 19:13](#)). Jesus Christ is the Spokesman, the Revelator, of God to man. God's Word has been revealed through the Spirit of God to men who preserved it in writing in the Scriptures ([2 Peter 1:20-21](#)).

The word "disciple," is a very common expression in the Bible for the followers of Jesus. "Disciple" means learner, or student. Jesus said "learn from me" ([Matthew 11:29](#)). To understand, believe and live according to God's Word is to have eternal life ([John 6:63, 68](#)). The source of godly wisdom is the Word of God, the Scriptures, the Bible. "...the Holy Scriptures ...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" ([2 Timothy 3:15](#)). Effective Bible study then can lead you to eternal salvation ([Proverbs 3:21-23](#); [4:5-6, 13](#)).

Unless we are learning and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ we are in danger of losing out ([2 Peter 3:17-18](#)). We can learn and grow in grace and knowledge through effective Bible study.

No animal can use language in the same way man can. Dogs can learn simple commands. But only humans can communicate abstract ideas in terms of language. In that respect among others we are more like God than animals. God gave us the capacity to learn by the word so we could eventually learn what he is like and become like him. Are we using the gift of intellect as God intended?

In this article you will find twelve keys that will help you to better understand the Bible.

1) **Set aside regular time for study.**

You should make it a point to study the Bible every day ([Deuteronomy 17:14, 18-20](#); [Proverbs 8:33-36](#)). It's spiritual nourishment ([Job 23:12](#); [Matthew 4:4](#)). Bible study should be something you delight in, and look forward to every day ([Acts 17:11](#)). Setting a

specific time for Bible study may prove helpful. If you don't plan it, you will likely let it slip ([2 Chronicles 19:3](#); [Ezra 7:10](#)). Prepare – plan – to study and seek God.

2) Pray for understanding.

A true understanding comes to you from God as you seek to learn of him and practice obedience ([Proverbs 2:1-7](#); [Psalms 111:10](#); [Psalms 119:33-38](#); [Proverbs 3:5-8](#).)

3) Seek correction and understanding.

The mistake of many in their approach to God's Word is that they seek to find in the scriptures some way of justifying themselves. They ferret out some obscure scripture which can be twisted to support what they want to do or some preconceived notion. The proper approach is to study with an attitude of receiving instruction from God in humility. You must want to be taught of God. God's Word cuts deep, like a two edged sword. If you let it, it will judge your inmost thoughts, show you where you are wrong and need to change. It will reveal to you the flaws in your character which need correction ([Hebrews 4:12-13](#); [Jeremiah 10:23-24](#); [Isaiah 66:1-2](#); [Proverbs 6:23](#); [II Timothy 3:16](#)).

4) Realize the Bible is inspired.

The entire Bible –both Old and New Testaments– is the inspired Word of God ([II Timothy 3:16](#); [II Peter 1:21](#)). When studying the Bible, bear in mind it is God speaking to you. Reverence his Word and let it inspire and motivate you to grow spiritually into his likeness ([1 Peter 1:13-16](#)).

5) Let the Bible interpret the Bible.

Though some things seem confusing and are not readily understood, keep in mind that God is not the author of confusion and there are no genuine contradictions in God's Word, when it's properly understood ([1 Corinthians 14:33](#); [John 10:35](#); [II Timothy 2:15](#); [John 17:17](#)). Examine the context and gather **every scripture** on a given subject or doctrine. Use passages that are clear in their meaning to interpret and shed light on those more difficult to understand. Information about a particular subject may be scattered in bits and pieces over many different books of the Bible.

“Theology is the whole meaning of Scripture — the sense taught in the whole of Scripture, as that sense is modified, limited, and explained by Scripture itself. It is a consistently interpreted representation of the statements of the Bible, on the various facts, doctrines, and precepts, which the book of God reveals” (*The Bible Handbook*, Joseph Angus, Samuel Green, p. 201). And further, “...the Spirit of God does not communicate to the mind of even a teachable, obedient, and devout Christian, any doctrine or meaning of Scripture which is not contained already in Scripture itself. He makes men wise *up to* what is written, but not beyond it” (*ibid.*, p. 179). The words of Scripture understood in harmonious relation to the whole of Scripture are the proper basis for interpreting Scripture. “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line

upon line, Here a little, there a little,” is how the teachings of God’s Word are to be understood. The Scripture was written in such a way that ignoring this principle, “...they might go and fall backward, and be broken And snared and caught” ([Isaiah 28:10, 13](#)).

The Bible is a book of symbols, or parables and analogies, type and antitype. But the Bible interprets its own symbols (e.g., [John 21:17](#); [Psalm 100:3](#); [Matthew 10:6](#); [I Peter 2:25](#); [Revelation 19:7-9](#); [Matthew 22:2](#); etc.). One common source of error and deception is putting **one’s own interpretation** on symbolic figures used in Scripture, **rather than following the explanations of Scripture** itself ([2 Peter 1:20](#)).

6) **Keep an open mind.**

Much religious confusion is in the world. You must prove the truth and learn how to distinguish it from error. In so doing it’s necessary to maintain a positive attitude toward God’s Word and keep your mind open to the truth. Often scholars hostile to God’s Word have babbled about alleged errors or contradictions in the Bible. Yet the critics themselves have been proven wrong time and again as new knowledge has come to light. For example, the book of Daniel was said to have been in error because the available historical sources made no mention of king Belshazzar. Finally in 1854 archaeologists dug up documents from ancient Ur written by Nabonidus, King of the Babylonian Empire, which showed that Belshazzar had been made a co-regent with his father Nabonidus (*Archaeology and the Bible*, G. Frederick Owen, p. 142). The detailed accuracy of Daniel is proven by the fact that not only is mentioned Belshazzar, the king forgotten to history, but also that Belshazzar made Daniel the *third* ruler in the kingdom, behind himself and his father. This is only one example of many where critics of Bible have been proven wrong ([2 Peter 3:1-4, 8-9, 14-18](#)).

Many doctrinal errors can also be corrected if you are willing to accept truth that can be clearly proven from the Bible, but is new to you. Many people have seen certain truths but have been unwilling to forsake error. They then stop growing in the knowledge of God ([Isaiah 8:20](#); [I Thessalonians 5:21](#); [I Peter 2:2](#)).

7) **Prove God’s way is right by living it.**

Don’t approach Bible study as an academic exercise only. Rather approach Bible study as your opportunity every day to drink in of the words of life. Look at the Bible as the source of instruction to guide your thinking, your conduct, your approach to life, your philosophy of life, knowing that if you live according to those instructions you’ll have strength of character, peace of mind, spiritual riches, and the promise of life for all eternity. Remember that character is knowing and doing what is right, and God’s blessings come with obedience ([1 John 3:22](#); [John 13:17](#); [James 1:25](#); [Malachi 3:10](#); [John 8:31-36](#)).

8) **Study by subject.**

It's all too easy to rationalize a lack of Bible study with the plea, "I don't know what to study." Sit down and make a list of subjects you need to know more about (Sabbath, heaven, hell, prayer, obedience, love, faith, etc.). By studying a subject in detail you will vastly increase your depth of understanding. It's important that you believe the truth not just because someone else told you but because you have dug into the Bible and searched it out yourself ([Acts 17:11](#)). Faithful ministers of Jesus Christ can point you in the right direction, but then you need study and learn and understand each doctrine through your own efforts as well. If you are faithful, someday you'll be called upon to teach and instruct others. You need to be preparing yourself to do so effectively ([Revelation 20:6](#); [Malachi 2:7](#); [Isaiah 30:20-21](#); [Hebrews 5:11-13](#)).

9) Mark key verses and passages.

A marking system can save time in locating scriptures and provide a quick recall of subject matter. Develop a system that works for you. I sometimes use margins to write down other scriptures for reference or explanations of difficult scriptures. I also try to memorize where I can find Scriptures I may need to refer to to explain a doctrine. Talk to several people to see how they do it for ideas you can use. There are a variety of Bible note taking suggestions and tools available on the Internet you may want to explore as well.

10) Meditate as you study and review.

Stop and think about what you're reading, about what the Scripture is saying. Ask yourself as you read each word, each sentence and paragraph, "Do I understand this?" It's the tendency of many to simply read over things they don't understand without ever even realizing it. If you find unfamiliar words, look them up in a dictionary or lexicon. If phrases seem contradictory or don't make sense begin searching for proper understanding, as you also pray for it ([Proverbs 2:1-9](#)). Then when you do understand reflect on the ways in which you can apply what you have learned ([Psalms 1:1-3](#); [Psalms 119:97-99](#)).

11) Read the Bible through.

Read the Bible from cover to cover as a separate project. Insure nothing is missed. This can broaden your perspective as to story flow. And as you read, keep notes of Scriptures you'll want to go back to later and study in greater depth. This can provide you with a rich source of interesting subjects to study. Some Bibles, for example Nelson's New King James Version, have in the back of at least some editions a plan for reading the Bible through in a year.

12) Learn to effectively use study aids and historical sources.

The Messenger Church of God has published a number of revealing articles and sermons covering important Biblical doctrines (see our website or mailing address below). Take advantage of these by studying them, and use them as a "springboard" to further understanding. Take the time to look up Scriptures referred to in the material presented.

What you find in the material provided by this source may go against the grain of what you have been told elsewhere. But it's your responsibility to prove from the Bible itself the truth of your beliefs ([1 Thessalonians 5:21](#)). If you find something you've been taught in the past is demonstrably wrong, have the courage and integrity of mind to admit the error and change. You can't grow in knowledge if you're unwilling to abandon false beliefs.

Keep in mind that the Bible is inspired, but it was not inspired in the English language. There is no truly "inspired" translation of the Bible into English, in the same sense the Bible was inspired in the original languages. While it's not necessary to be fluent in Hebrew and Greek to understand the Bible's message, gaining at least some familiarity with the original languages can be helpful in developing a more clear understanding of many Bible passages. Commentaries, lexicons, Bible dictionaries, an interlinear translation, and having access to several different good translations, can all be helpful in giving you insight into the original languages of the Bible. Of course, if you want to delve deeper into the original languages you could consult a grammar of Biblical Hebrew or Greek.

For those interested in the latter, a useful introduction to the Biblical languages is provided in *Do It Yourself Hebrew and Greek*, by Edward W. Goodrick. The book is designed for serious Bible students who want "to discover as accurately as possible what the Bible meant in its original languages but who is not in a position to master those languages." It introduces the alphabets and basic grammar of Hebrew and Greek, and provides instructions on the use of various language tools available to Bible students.

A Bible handbook can provide a convenient source of background information (*Angus-Green*, *Halley's*, *Unger's* are good ones). Most useful is a concordance, of which there are several. *Strong's Concordance* has handy lexicons in the back so you can find meanings of original language words. A Bible atlas (such as *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*, by Carl G. Rasmussen, among others) can give you topographical, geographical and historical information. Topical or annotated Bibles can be useful (*Companion Bible*, *Nave's*, etc.). Popular Bible dictionaries include *Easton's*, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, and others. Commentaries can help, but remember they and similar resources may in certain respects reflect unsound opinions and prejudices of the author. Let the Bible interpret itself. Often resources like these referred to can be accessed for little or no cost at a public library or on the Internet.

If you have a computer, it would be wise to invest in a good Bible software program. Some don't cost very much, others can cost hundreds of dollars, and still others are free. One of several free programs available currently is the "Sword Project," (featuring downloadable modules). Graphic front ends are available for Windows, Mac and Linux (and some devices). Available modules include many Bible translations, Hebrew and Greek Bibles, apocrypha, commentaries, dictionaries and lexicons, historical resources, books, maps, etc. More information is available at <http://www.crosswire.org>. Another free Bible software program worth mentioning, designed to run on versions of Windows operating system, is theWord (theword.net).

The Internet is a trove of other resources as well. Many encyclopedias, historical books, etc., can now be obtained at little or no cost from the Internet. There are many sources but some worth checking out include Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/>); Project Gutenberg Australia (gutenberg.net.au); Google books (books.google.com); Internet Archive (www.archive.org). Amazon (www.amazon.com) also has many books available for download free or at very low cost, among which, for example, is Rodkinson's twenty volume translation of the Babylonian Talmud.

It's important to remember that the Bible is a book of history, one might even say a book of history — past, present and future — understanding that much of the Bible is prophecy, or history written in advance. The Bible is replete with types and antitypes, recurring themes and patterns expressed often in historical and prophetic events — varying in detail, but similar in outline and substance. Not only is the Bible a book of history, but it is a book that has a history, that is, the various books of the Bible were each written in a particular historical setting, and reflect to a degree the language and the cultural and historical milieu in which they were written. An accurate knowledge of history is an important aid to understanding, and is sometimes essential to a full understanding of Biblical teaching.

For example, in the book of Daniel are prophecies concerning four great empires whose influence extends to the far reaches of the earth, to be succeeded by the Kingdom of God. The four are all discussed in chapters 2 and 7, and every chapter of the book relates to one or more of them in some way or other. The first of these empires or great kingdoms is identified as that of Nebuchadnezzar ([Daniel 2:37-38](#)), the empire of Babylon ([Daniel 1:1](#), *et al.*), also known in history as the Chaldean Empire. The second and third great kingdoms are identified as the combined empire of Media and Persia, and the empire of Greece, also known as the Macedonian Empire ([Daniel 8:20-21](#)). But the fourth empire is nowhere in the Bible directly identified by name.

The Babylonian Empire was conquered and succeeded in 539 B.C. by the Medo-Persian Empire, which swallowed up its territories and peoples ([Daniel 8:3-4](#), [20](#)). The latter was in turn conquered by Alexander and his army in a series of battles ending in 330 B.C., and the Persian Empire, its territories and peoples were absorbed into the Grecian realm ([Daniel 8:5-7](#)). Upon Alexander's death a struggle for succession ended with the Empire being divided under four rulers, as Daniel had prophesied ([Daniel 7:6](#); [8:21-22](#)). Each of these four surviving kingdoms was eventually overrun and integrated into the Roman Empire. By carefully comparing the historical record with prophecies of the Bible the fourth great kingdom of the book of Daniel is clearly identified as the Roman Empire. **Without a knowledge found in external sources of historical events related to these prophecies, we would have little understanding of them.**

Also, each book of the Bible was written against a particular historical and cultural background. The message of the Bible is not limited by its historical and cultural context, contrary to the opinion of those who seek to malign and ridicule Scripture. Nevertheless, **an understanding of the context of its history and culture can be an**

important aid to understanding. For example, understanding what the term “law” (or Hebrew: *Torah*; or Greek: *Nomos*) meant to the Jews of the New Testament era can be of considerable help in developing a thorough and correct understanding of New Testament teachings related to law.

So learn as much as you can about history, particularly as it relates to Scripture. Besides general histories, histories dealing with specific nations, cultures or subjects can be useful. *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Joachim Jeremias), *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, and *The Temple* (both by Alfred Edersheim) are excellent sources of information on Jewish culture at the time of Jesus Christ, as are the works of Josephus.

Books on archaeology can also be helpful. Some useful ones are: *World's Lost and Found, Archaeology and the Bible* (G. Frederick Owen); *Archaeology and Bible History* (Joseph Free and Howard Vos); *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Kenneth A. Kitchen); *The Bible in Its World* (Kenneth A. Kitchen). Not everything in such sources is necessarily accurate however. Weigh what you read carefully against the Scriptures and other publications offering viewpoints worthy of consideration on controversial matters. Remember, “There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the Lord” ([Proverbs 21:30](#)). Another resource for up to date information relating to Bible archaeology is the website maintained by Associates for Biblical Research (<https://biblearchaeology.org>) and their magazine *Bible and Spade*.

Documents from Old Testament Times, D. Winton Thomas, Ed., is a worthwhile book featuring English translations of extra-biblical documents relating to the Old Testament. Pritchard's *Ancient Near East* is similar. Both of these may as of now be downloaded free of charge at <https://archive.org>.

An Encyclopedia of World History (Langer) provides a useful summary and timeline of important historical events. Other encyclopedias, especially the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, can also provide useful summaries of historical information relating to the Bible. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of useful historical sources, but only a sample to which could be added many more.

Remember that Bible study is as important to you spiritually as food is to you physically. Partake daily of the bread of life. Spend time letting God teach you. Following these principles should make you a better student and make more effective use of your time. They will make Bible study more interesting and effective, and can make the Bible a more effective tool for you as you strive to let God build in you his character.

Unless otherwise noted Scripture taken from the New King James Version™
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



Copyright © 2020 by Rod Reynolds

cogmessenger.org

Messenger Church of God
PO Box 619
Wentzville, MO 63385
USA