

Help in Studying the Bible

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Introduction

Studying the Bible is a life-giving and transformative work. As we dig into the word of God, the Holy Spirit loves to meet us as, convict us, awe us, and help us obey Jesus for the sake of being transformed. Receiving deep insights and words from God in the Scripture, however, is not magic. Jesus says that growth in him happens through a balance of our effort, will, and desire, and his grace in response to our hearts. “The measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.” (Mark 4:24). The more we give our selves to study of the Bible, to understanding what it says, and then to living out the convictions that come from our study, we will be transformed. Many people have asked me how to “study” the Bible, how to dig deeper into the text. *The first advice I give is if you want to really study the Bible, it is best to actually put the text onto a word document, use double spacing and create wide margins. Print it out and put it in a binder. Then as you read, you can write all over it, and actually interact with the text.* We miss so much because we just read too fast and only skim the content. Taking the Bible out of our “traditional Bibles”, and printing it out on a word document will tremendously in getting you started.

Below, I have put together different things to look for when you are studying that will help you see more of the riches of the text. This is not comprehensive by any means. But if you use these helps in your time in the Word, you will understand better the message of the author and Holy Spirit. Enjoy feasting on God’s word!

1. Repeated Words and Themes

Looking for repeated words and themes in scripture is one of the most overlooked study-help. It often seems tedious and insignificant, but is a great way to understand what the author is communicating to us on a deeper level. Repetition of words and concepts helps us see what is important to the author, and helps us dig deeper into the text. It is very helpful to highlight or circle repeated words in themes. Making it color-coded helps your manuscript not be confusing.

Mark 1:21-28. ²¹*They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.* ²²*The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had **authority**, not as the teachers of the law.* ²³*Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, ²⁴“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”* ²⁵*“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”* ²⁶*The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.* ²⁷*The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with **authority**! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”* ²⁸*News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*

Here in Mark 1:21-28 we see the repetition of the word “authority.” Seeing this helps us understand that Mark is not re-telling two isolated events of Jesus’ life. Rather, he is showing us that the reason Jesus became popular so fast was because of a unique authority that people had never seen before. The account of Jesus teaching and then the account of Jesus casting out the demon are two examples of this unique authority. Thus, the next step for a studious reader is to study the accounts trying to understand what kind of authority Jesus has, and how it is unique. Doing this gives us the deeper meaning of the text, which we can then apply as we ask for Jesus to lead us with this kind of authority.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

Each book of the Bible is written in a specific historical time period, in a specific culture. Thus, we need to understand the cultural context, the historical context, the spiritual context, the social context, the economic context, etc. in order to understand the depth of what the author is communicating to us.

Mark 1:1. *'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Without good historical and cultural context we would normally read over this as normal Christian language. But this first verse is actually loaded with meaning! The words “gospel” and “Son of God” have Roman history to them. Archaeologists have found tablets written during the same period of this gospel that say, “Caesar Nero, the son of God, the one who brings the gospel (good news).” The term gospel was used in the context of battle, as messengers would ride throughout Rome immediately after military victory proclaiming the “gospel” and worshipping Caesar. Mark begins his gospel by challenging the Caesar worship of the day! Mark begins by telling us that only Jesus is the true son of God, and only can bring true good news, and only Jesus can give us real victory. Understand this historical context gives us deeper insight into the text.

There are many references available to help give you information that will fill out the historical and social contexts. Here are just two references that have been specifically designed for the “lay” student of the Bible:

- The Bible Background Commentary- New Testament. Craig Keener.
- New Bible Dictionary. Ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer and Donald J. Wiseman

3. Setting and Immediate Context

Every time we study Scripture we should look for the setting and immediate context of our passage. One of the great errors of Bible interpretation is to use it like a phone book, where we just pull verses out of their context and make them fit a situation we want them to fit.

For example in Mark 8, we read about Jesus feeding over 4,000 people. This is the second miraculous feeding that is recorded as in Mark 6 we read about Jesus feeding over 5,000. If we don't understand the setting and context we would just think it is a second miracle of feeding. However, the context (which you get from text that comes prior to Mark 8) tells us that this second feeding is in Gentile territory, where as the first feeding is in Jewish territory. This is extremely significant as it helps us see Jesus modeling for the disciples racial reconciliation, and equal love for both Jews and Gentiles.

Another example is in reading the Epistles. Every letter of Paul, Peter, James, etc. is written to a specific community of Christians who are dealing with specific issues. We need to study the context and setting of these churches and issues in order to get an accurate and right interpretation of the different letters.

4. Paragraph and Section Breaks

Look for where the author breaks his thought, where he starts a new paragraph, or where he starts a new section (chapter). Many Bibles today have put in their interpretation of these breaks. But it is just their interpretation, as the original languages did not physically break the thoughts, sections, and paragraphs.

John 13:37-14:1. ³⁷Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times! **14:1** "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.

Here, the original editor, decided to put a chapter break between verse 38 of chapter 13 and verse 1 of chapter 14. However, in studying the section, we can see that verse 1 of chapter 14 is a continuation of Jesus' prediction of Peter's betrayal. If we just assume that the chapter break is fixed, we can miss the flow. Here we see that right after Jesus gives a very hard prediction, he works to encourage the disciples and give them hope in the midst of their weak hearts.

5. Cause and Effect Climax

It is helpful to read Scripture through the lens of the cause and effect. In narrative sections, looking for cause and effect helps us understand more of what is going on. Reading New Testament epistles in light of cause and effect helps us understand the logic in the arguments being presented.

Mark 5:22-24,30,32-35. ²²Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴So Jesus went with him....³⁰At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"...³²But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." ³⁵While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"

Reading this famous account of the healing of the bleeding woman with the lens of cause and effect helps us see more in the text. We realize that the context of the healing is that Jesus is rushing with this rich ruler and crowd to save his daughter who is dying. But then Jesus stops to heal a poor woman who is sick. The woman's interruption caused Jesus to stop. The effect of Jesus stopping was that the daughter Jairus died. The girl's death causes the crowd to freak out, the effect of which is Jesus sees who has deeper faith in him. Jesus stopping caused the girl's to die, but the effect was that her father gets to see Jesus raise her from the dead, signifying a greater power than just a medical healer.

6. Characters

In narrative sections, it is very important to study all the characters. I find it helpful to ask myself the question, "If I were to turn this section of Scripture into a movie scene, how would I direct the different characters?" Another question that is helpful is, "If I was a fly on the wall during the time when this narrative happened live, what would I notice, feel, sense, observe in all these characters?"

It is also helpful to trace the development of major characters throughout the narratives. Watching the disciples in the Gospels, the leaders, Kings, and prophets in the Old Testament, helps us understand what the author is trying to show us.

An example of tracing character development is the Pharisee Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. We know him as the one who came to Jesus in the middle of the night (chapter 3) asking questions, but

leaving confused. He reappears in chapter 7:50 and 19:39. And these reappearances are significant, as we seem in progress in his faith of Jesus.

7. Original Language

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament was originally written in Greek. The different Bibles we have in English today are different translations of these original languages. The NIV, NRSV, NAS, NKJV are all very good translations. However, it is often necessary to consult a language concordance in order to understand what is going on in a particular passage.

John 1:38-39. *They said, "Rabbi," where are you staying?" "Come", he replied, "and you will see."*

John 15: 4. *Remain in me, and I will remain in you.*

The word "staying" in John 1 is the same word in the original Greek as the word "remain" in chapter 15. In fact this Greek word is repeated over 50 times in the Gospel of John! Going back to our repeated word section, we see that this is a major theme in John's Gospel. In fact, the first mention of the word is here in our 1:38 reference. It sets up a mystery as to where Jesus makes his home. Jesus finally answers that riddle in chapter 15 when he declares that he wants to make his home in us! But the Greek word can have multiple English meanings (stay, remain, live, dwell, abide, make your home). So, often the translators will pick the best English word to fit the context of the sentence. While it makes it easier for us to read it in our language, if we don't go to the original languages, we will miss important parts of the section. Again, there are many references available to help you find the original meanings of words in the Bible. I have listed two below.

- The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. James Strong. Strong has put numbers to every Hebrew and Greek word. So you look up the English word (it is alphabetical), when you find it you will see a number. Turn to the back of the book and look for the number. You will see the Greek word, and the different connotations for that word.
- The Complete Word Study New Testament (there is also one for the O.T.). Edited by Spiros Zodhiates. This is a great, easy to use reference. The Greek numbers are listed above every word in the Bible, so you have immediate access.
- There is also great software available so you can look up original language on your computer.

8. Old Testament References

When we read the New Testament, we have to remember that for the authors, their Bible was the Old Testament. So, much like historical context and setting, we need to be constantly referencing the Old Testament in order to understand what is going on. We need to remember that Jesus operated in a Jewish religious context.

Mark 1:40-42 ⁴⁰*A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."* ⁴¹*Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"* ⁴²*Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.*

To read this in an American lens, we would miss so much of the power of this text. But if we understand the Jewish world and Old Testament, we will see that when Jesus touches the leprosy man in verse 41, this is very significant. Leviticus 5:3 tells us that if you touch someone considered

unclean, it would automatically make you unclean. Jesus is breaking big-time barriers in touching this man.

The NASB has a good study-Bible with tons of Old Testament references.

9. The Unexpected and “Random Details”

If we only read the Bible on a superficial level, and not actually study it, we will often miss the details and unexpected pieces of the text that will help us understand it better. As we study a particular book of the Bible, we will notice a style of writing. So when something in this book jumps out as irregular, we should ask “why?”. If there seems to be random details, we should ask “why?”. When we study narratives, we should look for the unexpected and ask “why?”

Mark 6:39. *Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.*

Mark is a fast-paced gospel. Mark rarely includes descriptive adjectives, or specific details. So the fact that he wants us to know this is “green” grass (wouldn’t we just assume that?) should cause us to ask “why?” As we study the section in light of this detail, we realize that Mark wants to communicate a deep reality of Jesus. This section of him feeding the 5,000 takes us back to Psalm 23. (That’s all I will say here. I will let you pick it up and study it – it is a wonderful insight into this section. ☺)

Chapter 9 in the Gospel of John contains the unexpected. This is the story of Jesus healing the blind man. What is completely unexpected is that with the exception of the first seven verses, Jesus is completely absent the entire chapter. This is very unexpected because for the first 8 chapters Jesus is always the main character. Why is he gone? The study of this helps us see the deeper insight that John is writing about in chapter 9.

10. Logical Connectors

Logical connectors are those words that connect sentences and thoughts together. Again, while this may seem trite, it is amazing how many of the questions that come up in our study of the Bible can be answered by just looking at the logical connectors within the text. Logical connectors are words like, “but,” “therefore,” “and,” “because,” “so that,” “since,” and “yet.”

Mark 3:29 *Jesus says, “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”*

This verse brings up a lot of questions. So often we just stop reading and start to try to figure out what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, and what is the unforgivable sin. But if we read the next verse we see the logical connector, “He said this because they were saying ‘He has an evil spirit’ (Mark 3:30). Noting the “because” then helps us see that the answer to our questions, the ability to understand verse 29, lies in us understanding what is going on with the teachers of the law as they interacted with Jesus.

11. Emotive Words and Emotional Tenor

As we read books of the Bible in their proper context, we have to try to understand the emotional feel that the author is trying to give us. This is very important in narratives, as we have to remember that an original reader would easily be able to put themselves in the shoes of the characters in the accounts. However, even in non-narrative books, like the epistles there are emotive words that help

us understand the emotion of the author writing the words. Emotional tenor is trying to understand emotional meaning of passages.

John 8:1-11. *This is the story of the woman caught in adultery. This text has amazing logical teaching. But we need to ask questions like, "What would this woman be feeling at this point?" To continue to ask how the woman is feeling throughout the account is a powerful way to understand what Jesus is doing throughout the account. Asking the question of what the characters are feeling throughout an account understands the emotional tenor of the account.*

12. QUESTIONS!

Asking questions is the most important way to understand the Bible. If you don't ask questions, you won't get deeper answers. We are not expected to understand everything automatically and are not expected to just swallow everything and accept it.

Luke 8:56. *Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.*

This is the end of an account where Jesus raises a girl from the dead. We could just read over this last verse, but instead we should ask the question, "why doesn't Jesus want the parents to tell anyone that he just raised their daughter from the dead?" Pursuing this answer will give us greater understanding of Jesus.

It is important to distinguish from questions that the author of our text can and wants to answer, and questions that he is not really addressing.

Mark 1:12-14. *At once the Spirit sent him (Jesus) out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee...*

A question that we could ask here is, "What did Satan tempt Jesus with during these forty days?" But it is clear that Mark does not want to focus on that, and thus we can't get the answer from Mark, but thankfully have other accounts that can give us that answer. The question we should ask first in looking at the Mark account, is "why does Mark want us to know this information?" "What is important for Mark in communicating this information?" "How does what we have connect to what comes before and lead into what comes next?" If we are only concerned with what happened in these 40 days, we will not get deeper into what Mark is trying to communicate to us. Appropriate study of the Bible is first book by book. We want to understand what each author is trying to communicate. The next step is to study larger themes and questions that will bring us into study of the whole Bible.