
HOW I STUDY MY BIBLE

If you've ever felt like the truths of the Bible remain somewhat hidden and you sense you are missing something when you read it, I think you will appreciate these pages. I want them to help you understand the Bible better—not as an academic exercise but as a simple-to-grasp approach to draw counsel from its pages. After all, the main purpose of the Bible is to give us God's truth and counsel.

Lots of people have asked me through the years, "How did you get this from that passage?" This is my attempt to share my personal patterns of Bible study. I'll explain the approaches I take to God's word and show you ways to get more out of what you read—not just memorizing verses or remembering stories but drawing insight, counsel and understanding from God's word. The Bible changes us—and our life!

Simply Reading the Bible

Remember, it is a living book,¹ and it will speak to you if you give the Holy Spirit opportunity to use verses on the page to focus on issues in your life. When I began reading the Bible in earnest for my own spiritual development, I didn't know much about how to approach it. So I just read it (lots) and marked or underlined every verse or phrase that stood out to me. Not surprisingly, most of the passages I underlined were nice-sounding promises or statements of affection from the Lord.

I wasn't even systematic about it. My Bible is marked in almost every color of ink ever invented, and when people notice all the colors, they assume that I had some sort of marking system where certain colors highlighted specific themes. Nope. I just used whatever pen happened to be at hand when I was reading.

As time went on, I began noticing two things: first, the verses that caught my eye spoke to me in very interesting ways! Second, I started seeing how verses in one book related to stories in other books and how the whole Bible kept saying the same things over and over. The grand themes in the Bible, once you know them, are easy to spot throughout its pages: God loves you. And because God loves you, He always wants to

- FORGIVE/restore/heal you
- INVOLVE/engage/use you in His plans

¹ Hebrews 4:12

A Good Habit

During my college years, I prayed a simple prayer before I read my Bible: “*Lord, open my eyes to Your word. Teach me and make Your word like seed planted in my heart; produce fruit in me and through me for people who pass by my life.*” That prayer reminded me to come to God’s word with humility. It also reminded me that reading my Bible wasn’t something I did just for myself, but my Bible reading was an investment in the lives of other people.

That is helpful to remember in those times when we read our Bible and it seems like we’re getting nothing out of it. There are times when, after closing my Bible, I cannot even remember which testament I was reading just moments before. You may read for a long time without having any particular verse impact you. That’s ok because you are still hiding His word in your heart and it will be there for future reference and guidance.

His word never returns without accomplishing its work in us and for us.² God’s word has such spiritual power that even when we do not understand what it is doing inside of us, it is working! Reading is like taking prescription medicine: you might not feel like a little pill is doing much to change your condition, but it is.

Exercise: Read Isaiah 55:1–11

1. Summarize verse 1.
2. What are the promises in verse 2 and in verse 3?
3. What’s the promise/goal in verse 7, and how can we access it?
4. Why do we need the Bible (verses 8–9)?
5. What’s the promise/principle in verse 11?
6. What is God’s goal for us?

Exercise: Read Mark 4:31–32

- What does the “seed” become—and do? [Hint: If you are stuck, look at an Old Testament cross-reference—Daniel 4:4–12.]

Xylophone Tunes

In fact, one of the main benefits of reading the Bible is that it increases our ability to hear God’s voice and discern His words to us. When God speaks to us and leads us in life, He does so mostly by reminding us of passages and verses from the Bible. The more Bible in your memory banks, the better able you will be to hear His voice leading you.

This principle reminds me of the toy xylophone our grandchildren love to bang on when they come to visit at our house. It has only four bars, so our problem—aside from not knowing how

² Isaiah 55:11

to play any instrument—is that it doesn’t have enough notes to play anything but the simplest tune. If it had more bars, like a real xylophone, a musician could play many songs on it. The more bars, the more tunes can be played. That’s how it is with Scripture: the more verses stored in our hearts/minds, the easier it is for us to pick out the tune God is playing for our ears.

The Bible isn’t like a textbook filled with static facts. That means we cannot simply study the Bible like a chemistry manual or a history book. The Bible isn’t a book you ever finish studying. Understanding the Bible is a process to be in, not a goal to have accomplished. As obvious as it sounds, we *develop and grow* in spiritual understanding; we don’t know things before we learn them.

What we get out of reading the Bible is often determined by what we expect from it and look for in it. One reason people have a hard time reading their Bible is that they don’t know what to look for. Mostly, the Bible is a book of counsel and transformation—God uses it to change the way we approach life so that we “see” things according to His perspective. His thoughts and ways are not like ours.³ His are spiritual, ours are natural. As we read the Bible, we learn more and more about how to appraise things spiritually.⁴

A real help for me came early in my Bible-reading career when I stumbled upon one of David’s prayers:

“Make me know Your ways, O Lord, teach me Your paths; lead me in Your truth and teach me for You are the God of my salvation” (Psalm 25:4–5).

The natural mind cannot grasp spiritual truth without revelation. Just as the “darkness did not comprehend” Jesus as the light of the world,⁵ neither does the natural man “accept the things of the Spirit.”⁶

Exercise: Read Matthew 11:25–30.

1. From whom does God hide His truths?
2. In light of verses 25–27, why does Jesus tell us to come to Him?

Exercise: Read Mark 8:27–35 and Matthew 16:13–19.

1. Why does Jesus ask His disciples what the culture says about Him? Were the people of the surrounding culture correct?
2. How does Peter know Jesus is the Christ?
3. What leads Peter to challenge Jesus’ words about what awaits Him in Jerusalem?

³ Isaiah 55:8-9

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:14

⁵ John 1:5

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14

4. The phrase “Get behind Me” in verse 33 is the same as the phrase “follow Me” in the following verse. Use the phrase “setting your mind on God’s interests” to explain what Jesus is saying when He repeats “get behind/follow Me.”
5. If we want to “follow” the Lord, we need to “deny” [disavow, contradict, abstain from] our natural inclinations. Putting verse 33 together with verse 34, what is Jesus saying to His followers? [If your answer is correct, verse 35 should be a good example of doing what Jesus suggests.]

Exercise: Read these two passages.

1 Corinthians 1:27–29—But God chose what is foolish [heedless, absurd] in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak [feeble, impotent] in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low [without noble kin] and despised [think nothing of] in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no man may boast before the Lord.

1 Corinthians 2:6–7—Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom.

- The Holy Spirit uses revelation and the Bible to do what for us?
- Do you think God wrote the Bible to be complicated or simple?
- If something we read sounds different from how most people think, and if it is simple (not necessarily easy), should we pay attention to it—or dismiss it?

THE BIBLE’S SELF-DESCRIPTION

The Bible has lots to say about itself—the power it has, what it accomplishes in your life, etc. A good place to begin our study about how to study the Bible is to look at what it discloses about itself. This is one of the most basic guidelines for Bible study: always interpret the Bible in light of the Bible.

Exercise: Read these passages and answer the questions about them. How do these verses change what to look for when you read your Bible?

Psalm 19:7—The law of the Lord is perfect [complete, without blemish], restoring [converting] the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

- How reliable is the Bible as being something upon which to base life decisions?
- Why do you think the word *converting* can be translated *restoring*?

Psalm 119:105—“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

- What is the difference between “lamp to my feet” and “light to my path”? Try actually picturing each in your mind’s eye. What do you see?
- Express in your own words what the Bible has the power to do.

Hebrews 4:12—For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge [discern, sort] the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- What does this mean—and how has it happened in your life before?
- Draw a picture that describes the activity of God’s word in our lives.

2 Peter 1:4—For by these He has granted to us His precious [valuable] and magnificent [very greatest] promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

- What transformation does God’s word enable in our lives? What does it enable us to avoid?
- What is the “divine nature” (read Genesis 1:26–28)? What other expression have you heard that communicates the same idea? (Hint: think of the meaning of “Christian.”)

HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR READING

In my college years, I experienced an instantaneous revelation that changed the way I viewed the Bible. It happened while I was reading this verse:

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

The Bible, rather than being an instrument of condemning judgment, is a tool of God’s kindness and mercy. The nature and purpose of God’s word can be explained in three parts. His words are

1. WORDS OF GRACE—The Bible highlights what He does for us rather than what we’re supposed to do for Him.
2. WORDS TO BUILD US UP—The Bible increases our spiritual maturity, substance and staying power. It builds our spiritual understanding with things we cannot grasp on our own.
3. WORDS ABOUT OUR INHERITANCE—The Bible spells out magnificent promises and the many, many things freely given to us by God (1 Corinthians 2:12–13; 2 Peter 1:4).

Exercise: In the following passage, underline the phrases that most please your heart:

2 Peter 1:2-4—Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

- Explain why you like what it says.
- What is the most hopeful sounding phrase in this passage?

WHAT I LOOK FOR WHEN I READ

I do not always understand everything when I'm reading, but I explore and look around while reading—alert for words or verses that strike me as interesting, instructive or personally illuminating. Like a driver on the lookout for road signs and landmarks pointing to an unfamiliar destination, I always look for phrases or sentences concerning

1. **God's love for me**—Awareness about a *kind* and *affectionate* Father-God.
2. **Ministry tools, skills and understandings**—Understanding of my spiritual inheritance, both for ministering to others and for living a more fulfilled life.
3. **Counsel and direction**—Insights, understandings or advice for my life situation as it is now or as it was earlier.
4. **Conviction of wrongs, faults**—Sudden realization about what is really going on with my thoughts/actions/motives, and where/how “unworthy” elements have crept into my life.
5. **Restoration, new foundations and repair**—Recovery from brokenness and distortion in my life.
6. **Release and deliverance**—Freedom from bondage, oppression and wrong ways of thinking/living.

Exercise: Select any psalm and look for any of the preceding specific points of instruction and blessing.

GUIDELINES I TRY TO FOLLOW

Let me suggest a few patterns to follow while you read the Bible that help me to get more insight and understanding from God's word.

1. BELIEVE THAT THE WORDS ARE TRUE and let that truth explain your thoughts and experiences—not the other way around.
2. Always INTERPRET A PASSAGE WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW TO BE TRUE about God's love and graciousness. Any understanding that paints God in a different light is an incomplete or inaccurate interpretation.
3. Be sure to READ THE PASSAGE IN ITS FULL CONTEXT. Look at what has happened before and what happens afterwards. Those bookends explain a lot.
4. GET THE LITERAL STORY CLEARLY IN YOUR MIND before you start drawing conclusions or trying to generalize from a single episode.
5. CATCH ALL THE DETAILS OF THE TEXT. The details often hold the key to understanding a bigger picture.
6. MEDITATE ON WHAT YOU READ. Sometimes the meaning or implications for your life won't become clear right away. Think about the verses over and over.
7. LOOK AT PARALLEL PASSAGES elsewhere in the Bible. The whole Bible is the best lens through which to look at any portion of the whole.
8. Don't get stuck on something you do not fully understand. Just keep reading and FOCUS ON VERSES THAT MAKE OBVIOUS SENSE to you today.
9. STAY HUMBLE. God knows more, loves more and does more than you can ever realize.

UNDERSTANDING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Now these things happened to them as an example; and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:1–12).

Many of the episodes in the Old Testament that appear to reveal a cruel, vengeful and uncaring God actually demonstrate just the opposite. Much like a surgeon must, at times, cut out a tumor to preserve someone's life, so too, did the Lord carefully and completely remove cancerous distortions and malignancies from His people—as a collective group—in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament individual believers are the primary witness, but in the Old Testament the whole nation of Israel was God's witness to others. They were the collective light to which the nations could come to learn about the Lord.⁷ His word and way was their "great wisdom in the sight of the peoples." So it was crucial, not only for their own well-being but also for the sake of the world, for them to live according to God's prescribed patterns for life.⁸ Otherwise, their witness would be false and misleading.

That explains why God dealt with the Jews in such an exacting manner. If their *national* witness became distorted or intermingled with the practices and doctrines of false gods, the world would lose any hope for atonement and restoration with the true God. If they sacrificed their infants to bloodthirsty gods, as the nations around about them did, God would appear no different from those false gods.

When fundamental wrongness infected the people of God at points in their history, God chose to preserve His witness—and our hope—by eliminating the dangerously infected members of the nation. Like a good parent, He was willing to be misinterpreted by His children in order to save them from great peril.

Different Proportions

This brings us to one of the greatest misunderstandings believers have in reading the Old Testament. When they read about God's judgment against individuals in Old Testament stories, they worry that God is going to judge them in the same way. Remember, an entire nation acted as God's witness in the Old Testament. As a way of preserving the whole nation, God removed evil people from within the whole nation.

In New Testament times, the focus shifts to individual believers and episodes from the Old Testament—about how God dealt with His people—give us insight as to how He deals with us as individuals. Think of yourself as a nation, populated with thoughts, ideas, feelings and desires that sometimes lure you away from God's plan for your life. Just as He cut off evil leaders and false prophets from within the nation of Israel, so He will remove hurtful and wicked thoughts from within your mind and heart. God will correct and excise dangerous thoughts and

⁷ Isaiah 60:3ff

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:1–8

wayward impulses in our heart/mind, but you are not in danger of being cut off or condemned in judgment.

THREE-LAYERED STORIES

Additionally, there are three “levels” at which we can read many Old Testament episodes. Perhaps it is more helpful to say that passages in the Old Testament very often “show” different things, depending on what we’re looking for. The following are three arenas in which I look/listen for God’s message for my personal life:

1. **The literal, historic storyline**—What actually happened.
2. **The patterns and promises of God**—How God deals with people’s attitudes and situations.
3. **Spiritual inheritance and warfare**—What God gives and what the enemy tries to take away.

Exercise: With that backdrop in mind, read Jeremiah 29–33. Look for parallels between Israel’s history and your life today. In each of the following sections, translate God’s words to the exiles into words to you and your current life situation.

1. “Multiply and do not decrease” (29:5–6).
2. “Seek the peace and welfare of the place where you find yourself” (29:7).
3. _____(29:10).
4. “I am with you to deliver you” (30:11).
5. _____(31:2).
6. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I will draw you with kindness” (31:3).
7. “I will rebuild and gather you, and redeem you from too-strong enemies” (31:4, 10–11).
8. “There is hope for your future” (31:17).
9. _____(32:37).
10. “This is for your good—and the good of your offspring—that you refuse other gods and learn not to turn away from Me” (32:39-40).
11. _____(32:41).

12. “I will bring you to health in an abundance of peace and truth” (33:6).

13. _____(33:9).

14. “I will give you back your joy as in the beginning” (33:10–13).

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Why does God have Jeremiah buy a worthless piece of property?
2. What are the great and mighty things God is going to do?
3. Why does this extended story contain one of the clearest statements about the New Covenant found anywhere in the Bible (Jeremiah 31:33–34)?

NEHEMIAH 1–4: A BIBLE STUDY EXAMPLE

In addition to being a precise narration that chronicles God’s dealings with His people—both as a nation and as individuals—the Old Testament provides us with profound insights into the goings-on in the spiritual dimension. Because the stories and conversations it contains are “written for our instruction” for our spiritual walk,⁹ we are invited to read the episodes not merely to glean an accurate glimpse of history but also to extract principles and understandings about the invisible realm.

For instance, the people of God were delivered from Egypt by the hand of Moses. That is history. But the choices Moses made that enabled him to become a deliverer (i.e., eschewing worldly reward systems) and the lessons he had to learn along the way (i.e., the inadequacy of taking matters into his own hands) serve as excellent training for our own journey and ministry.

Likewise, when God declares to Israel that He has plans for their future—a hope-filled future that cannot be accessed by their own skill and effort—we legitimately cling to that same promise. It teaches us to keep turning to and relying on His plans, not our own. A long-ago pledge to God’s people becomes a foundational understanding for how things work in the Kingdom.

Because we are not archaeologists trying to discover ancient sites or artifacts, few of us, outside of those living in or traveling to Israel, would be likely to have much interest in the exact location of biblical cities in relation to one another and to surviving geographic landmarks. If we were on the lookout for those now-buried cities, we would pay far more attention to the many physical descriptions found in the Old Testament.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:11

Description of the Invisible World

That is an apt analogy for the many statements in the Old Testament that describe the invisible world in which the stories unfold. I do not mean to imply that there is a spiritual geography per se or that we should try to “go back” to some location in the spirit world. However, just as archaeologists can rely on the physical descriptions, landmarks and reference points for their profession, so too can we trust the spiritual descriptions and reference points for ours. Somewhat like archaeologists, we ply our trade among *ancient ruins* and *ruined cities*—not the remains of long-ago civilizations but of present-day people who have inherited ancestral “*devastations of many generations.*”¹⁰

That is our assignment, our calling, the very reason why we have been set apart unto the Lord. The *weapons of our warfare*, the tools of our trade—the stuff we use to do what we do in the world—are “*divinely powerful*” to dismantle the “strong holds” that, paradoxically, create such spiritual weakness and brokenness in people’s lives.¹¹ “*Under the reign of which king,*” an archaeologist might ask, “*was this city overrun by its enemies? And what in their culture/society made them vulnerable to conquest?*” The *Bible as history* reveals much more of the whole story about a site than what just a few surfaced artifacts can tell.

In like manner, the Bible has more to tell us about what’s going on with all things “*both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.*”¹² Is a location’s history always significant? No, of course not. Are spiritual powers behind everything that happens to people? Again, no, but if archaeologists look mostly beneath the surface of the soil to find answers, so do we. Visible *and* invisible, material *and* spiritual, the Bible is a manual about both dimensions—in the past, present and future—historically and literally accurate and spiritually instructive.

Many parallels exist between Nehemiah as minister and those of us who want to be spiritual leaders today. Let’s do a Bible study on Nehemiah’s approach to people and ministry situations.

- In chapter 1, which verses express the people’s condition, and how is it described?
- What was Nehemiah’s attitude toward those people? What posture did he adopt?
- In chapter 2, describe the journey Nehemiah took and what the king supplied for the job. How would you apply these historic truths in your ministry today?
- (2:7-9) Why did Nehemiah need more than one letter? What parallel can you see for your ministry to individual people?

¹⁰ Isaiah 61:4

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 10:1-5

¹² Colossians 1:16

- (2:10) Why were Sanballat and the other rulers so angry? What hint does that give you about your main ministry assignment?
- (2:12) What did God put in Nehemiah's heart? What was his hidden agenda (2:16)?
- (2:17) How did Nehemiah evaluate Jerusalem? What was his assessment? What was his follow-up? Why did Nehemiah want to "minister"?
- (2:18) Assume that Nehemiah is an excellent model for leaders. What does he do, and what do his followers do?
- (2:19) What was the response of the enemy? Sanballat's questions are forms of accusation against Nehemiah. What are the accusations?

What connections can you make between these verses and your current situation?

- What convicts you the most?
- What do you find the most encouraging?

A Real Adversary

From the earliest pages of the Old Testament, we are introduced to the reality of an adversary who was cast down from God's presence because of his pride and his refusal to accept God's order for the cosmos. Desiring to ruin the beauty of God's arrangement ("And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good."), Satan drew Adam and Eve into his deception by claiming that God was, first of all, a liar and that His prevailing motive was to deny them personal fulfillment.

The devil is not just an historical character.

The Adversary still prowls about seeking to consume people like us. Consequently, one of our main occupations as believers is to resist him and his forces.¹³ Like it or not, in joining ourselves to the family of God's chosen ones, we have enlisted in the cosmic struggle "*not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*"¹⁴

Not only are we called to resist sin/temptation—for which there is always the provision of forgiveness—but also we are called to "*stand firm against the schemes [ploys, traps, ambushes, methods] of the devil*" (6:11)—for which there is also the provision of deliverance.

¹³ 1 Peter 5:8-9
¹⁴ Ephesians 6:12

So, what is our enemy's modus operandi? What methods and minions does he typically employ? How will he often ambush us? As the saying goes, "People are people." People in the 21st century AD act like people harassed and assaulted by enemies whose tactics and ploys in the 6th century BC closely resemble ones used against us today. Since the history of God's people is so vast and most of it had to be left out of the Bible record, we have to ask ourselves why the stories we read were included in the anthology God edited. May I suggest that God's aim was to give us both a natural and a spiritual history from which to learn?

Long-Ago Patterns

What has been true about the Lord will continue to be true in the future. When we read about the ways in which He dealt with His people in the past, we can see patterns that repeat themselves today. What motivated Him and moved Him then does so now. He calls Himself "I AM," the ever-present, ever-the-same, now-as-always One. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and how He *has been* is how He is *going to be*. *Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.*¹⁵ We love that—and count on it.

In a perverse parallel, the devil and his cohorts continue their pattern of stealing, killing and destroying.¹⁶ As we read the Bible and pay attention to the spiritual topography, we can learn a great deal in order to minister effectively to people who have been sorely wounded by spiritual forces. Patterns of enticement, captivity, oppression and affliction found in the ancient, physical foes of God's people will be repeated by our present-day supernatural adversaries.

To gain a biblical perspective on the forces of evil—and how they manifest in human experience—we can study the many passages in the Old Testament that describe God's people in conflict with their adversaries.

In Nehemiah we meet three leaders of the enemy, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, who are angry that "someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel" (2:10). Their conspiracy to demoralize the people and their plots to halt the restoration of Jerusalem in 445 BC perfectly resemble the kind of spiritual attack against us today. The mocking statements they made sound like the disheartening, demonic whispers sounding in our minds.

Once again, let's look at specific verses to see how they relate to our daily lives—and our situations or our ministry. We're looking for patterns in the natural arena that resemble spiritual realities as revealed in the Bible. Read and answer the following questions:

1. (4:1) When the rebuilding begins, how does Sanballat react? What does he do?
2. (4:2-3) Sanballat asks several mocking questions, and Tobiah makes one mocking statement—each of which can be translated into an accusation against Nehemiah (and us). **Translate each question and the statement into an accusation**—likely things you have heard in your own mind.

¹⁵ Hebrews 13:8

¹⁶ John 10:10

- What are these feeble Jews doing?
 - Are they going to restore it for themselves?
 - Can they offer sacrifices?
 - Can they finish in a day?
 - Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble, even the burned ones?
 - Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down.
3. (4:4-5) How does Nehemiah describe the intended effect of the enemies' assault against him and the work of God?
- Feeling despised—looked down on, deemed inadequate
 - Feeling reproached—scolded, told not to be doing this
 - Feeling demoralized—discouraged, wind out of his sails
 - (4:4-5, 6, 9) How does Nehemiah respond with his words? With his actions?