

A Guide to Reading the Bible Well

Why read the Bible? This question must be addressed at the outset of bible reading and study!

The Bible answers this question quite well!

Luke 24:27 – And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

The resurrected Christ reveals to his followers that all Scripture bears witness to Him! He is the focal point of the Bible!

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – (16) All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Paul reveals that the Bible is from God! He is the source! It's His word to us! Furthermore, it's profitable for teaching us and helping us to bring our lives in line with God's will. The Bible not only helps us to see how we shouldn't live, but goes even further to help us see how we ought to live. The Scriptures are God's instruction manual for godly living. Praise God for His word!

Psalm 1:1-2 – (1) Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; (2) but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Blessed or happy is the man who delights in the word of God and regularly makes it the object of his meditation. True worship is done by those who delight in obeying the word of God!

Why read the Bible? All Scripture points to Christ, the Savior of our souls! Scripture is from God, meaning it's perfect and authoritative, and is useful for teaching us and training us to live God-honoring lives! Blessed is the one that delights in God's word, meditates on it and obeys it!

Where to start?

My goal is to make this as simple and informative as possible. This is not always an easy task, being that more information often prevents simplicity. However, we are dealing with a large and complex book that warrants our attention. Much more could be said than what's provided below. My goal is to help get you started. I'll do my best.

- I. Make sure you have a good translation. I recommend the ESV, NIV, NASB and HCSB, to name a few. It's also helpful to compare translations when studying a particular passage in Scripture. Also, be sure to have a good study bible. I recommend the *ESV Study Bible* or the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*. Since I teach from the ESV, I would recommend going with the *ESV Study Bible*.
- II. Apply the **RIP** method. **Read—Interpret—Practice!**
 - **R (Read)** – When studying a passage, start by reading it through two to three times. The “read” step seeks to answer the question, “What does the text say?” Here's what you should be looking for:
 - Identify repeating words and words/phrases that are theologically significant (e.g., Son of Man, forgive, sins, etc...).

- Identify major themes in the passage that appear throughout the particular book being studied (e.g., salvation, Kingdom of God, suffering, etc...).
- Think about WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY & HOW. Who is speaking or doing the action and to whom are they speaking or doing the action? What is happening in the story? When is it happening (e.g., evening, Sabbath, festival, banquet, etc...)? Where is it happening (e.g., temple, synagogue, home, Jewish territory vs. Gentile territory, etc...)? Why is it happening, namely, what is the reason behind the main character's actions or the actions being done to him or her? Lastly, how is the character accomplishing his or her action? For example, if we're studying a gospel, how is Jesus ministering (e.g., teaching, miraculous works, etc...) in the passage being studied?
- Identify purpose statements, namely statements that begin with "to," "that" or "in order that." You may label these as "purpose clues" (PC). They help the reader to determine why something is happening. It's even helpful to write PC out in the margin beside a particular purpose clue.
- Identify "situation clues" (SC). These are things in the text that help bring to light the situation, namely what's going on in the passage being studied. They may include the setting (e.g., mountain, synagogue, the Temple, etc...), or a group or individual confronting Jesus (e.g., Pharisees, a leper, etc...), or a particular action (e.g., teaching, casting out demons, etc...). It's helpful to write SC out in the margin to mark a particular situation clue.
- What does the passage itself reveal about God's character (e.g., gracious, loving, just, faithful, etc...)?
 - **I (Interpret)** – The "interpret" step seeks to answer the question, "What does the text mean?" The second step of the bible reading process builds upon the first. In order to interpret well, you must first read well! Your goal here will be to answer one question: *What was the intended meaning of the text for its original audience?*
- The most important task at this stage in bible reading/study is to engage the context. The question of context seeks to understand a particular passage's place in a chapter, book, testament and the bible as a whole. Begin by asking, "What comes before and after my passage and how does knowing this aid in determining the meaning of the passage?" When studying the bible let's focus on three different contexts: literary, historical and theological. The literary context deals with words, sentences, paragraphs and genre (e.g., historical narrative, poetry, wisdom, gospel, epistle, etc...). The historical context deals with understanding the historical culture and its bearing on the meaning of the passage. The theological context deals with reading a particular passage within God's grand story of redemption. If we understand the 4 great acts of the Bible *as Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation*, we must locate our passage within one of these particular acts. For example, is the passage being examined before redemption (Christ) or after? Furthermore, when reading we must be careful to place our passage within its proper covenantal framework. Is the particular audience being addressed under the Mosaic covenant (Israel) or the New Covenant (the church)? For example, we (the church) don't relate to the LAW the same way Israel did, since Christ has fulfilled the LAW and established the New Covenant. The Old Testament is still incredibly rich and highly practical for the church today, but must be read with these differences in mind.
- Good interpretation is concerned with first determining the meaning God intended for the original audience. What did the original Spirit-inspired author set out to say to his intended audience? It's a common temptation to try to begin with what the text means here and now. In

doing that we dangerously step over the original audience (inserting ourselves) and as a result often miss the intended meaning by failing to take into consideration the historical context and the author's original intention. Applying the steps above will help us get at the intended meaning. Once we understand the intended meaning of the passage we must seek to understand that meaning in our own context. This moves us into the final step of practice (see below). Make it your goal at this step to get to the plain meaning of the text. It's oftentimes right there, staring you in the face. As you read and study the Bible, be sure to approach this process with prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14; Psalm 119:18).

- Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Make sure that your interpretation is consistent with the rest of the Bible. Where else in Scripture is this interpretation supported. Provide cross-references.
- If reading the New Testament, is the Old Testament mentioned or alluded to? Oftentimes a New Testament writer will intentionally reference the Old Testament to bring to light God's faithfulness in fulfilling His saving promises (e.g., the gospel of Matthew)!
- What's the big idea of the passage? Once you feel like you've grasped the intended meaning of the passage, try to state your interpretation in one sentence!
 - **P (Practice)** – The “practice” step seeks to answer the question, “How do I apply the meaning of any given passage to my own life?” The purpose of bible reading is never simply to amass information, but to obey and be conformed more and more to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Once we understand the meaning of a passage (interpretation) then and there (original context), we must then seek to bring the meaning into our own context with the end goal being application. How do we go about this? Let me begin by providing us with several directives and questions necessary for accomplishing the goal of application. Next, I'll provide several more ways to go about applying a particular passage. I call these “practice steps.”
- When it comes to practicing or applying God's word, you must begin by finding *points of situational similarity*. Here's what I mean. Once you've discovered the meaning of a passage in its original context, you must then bring that meaning into a life situation similar to the one found in the biblical passage being studied. For example, Philippians 4:13 reads: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” What was Paul's situation here? He was in prison, suffering for the gospel. It simply won't do for us to apply this passage in the context of sporting events or school exams. That was not Paul's situation. If you read Philippians 4:13 in context you will quickly learn that Paul was saying much more than, “I can accomplish anything with the help of Christ.” Instead, Paul was saying that he could face any hardship or persecution because of the grace and strength of the Lord Jesus Christ. Following Christ will be difficult at times. However, know that the Lord will give you the grace and the strength needed to follow Him no matter what you're going through on His behalf!
- What are the commands given? Look for statements like “Do this..,” “Don't do this..,” etc...
- How can you imitate Christ and His followers in your passage?
- Here's a helpful quote from Francis Chan that helps us to see the difference between application (or practice) and interpretation: “Application depends on the specific life situations, so we may all read the same passage and walk away with different applications. Interpretation, on the other hand, is all about discovering what God has actually said and what He intended to communicate. We should all read the same passage and walk away with the same meaning.”

Practice Steps

- Incorporate what you've learned from this passage in a personal prayer. Write it out! If you read a chapter a day, focus on at least one verse to pray for yourself and others.
- Commit to sharing the truth learned from this passage with both a believer and non-believer.
- How will what you've learned from this passage help you to better follow Christ?
- How has this passage affected the way you think, act and speak as a follower of Jesus?

Example: Mark 2:1-12

2 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. ³ And they came, bringing to him a *paralytic* carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the *paralytic* lay. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their *faith*, he said to the *paralytic*, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the *scribes* were sitting there, questioning in their *hearts*, ⁷ "Why does this man speak like that? He is *blaspheming*! Who can *forgive sins* but *God* alone?" ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your *hearts*? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? ¹⁰ But that you may know that ***the Son of Man*** has *authority* on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the *paralytic*— ¹¹ "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." ¹² And he rose and *immediately* picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all *amazed* and glorified *God*, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

1. Read Step

Repeating words: paralytic; sins; forgive; hearts; God

Theologically significant words: Son of Man; forgive; faith; blaspheming; God

Major Themes: forgiveness; faith; authority of Jesus

Who: Jesus; a paralytic carried by four men; scribes; a crowd

What: Jesus is preaching in a crowded home; a paralytic is brought before Him; He forgives sin and heals; the scribes confront Jesus

Where: Jesus returns to Capernaum. Context is HUGE here! What happened the last time Jesus was in Capernaum? See Mark 1:21-28. Crowded home.

Why: Jesus forgives sin and heals to reveal His identity and authority. See vs. 10.

How: Jesus forgives sin and heals the sick with His authoritative word!

Situation Clues: Capernaum (vs. 1); home (vs. 1); preaching the word (vs. 2); paralytic (vs. 3); scribes (vs. 6)

Purpose Clues: “But *that* you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic...(vs. 10)

What does the passage reveal about God’s character? Jesus is God! He’s forgiving! He has power/authority over sickness/disease. He’s compassionate!

2. Interpret Step

Literary context: Jesus’s first miracle in Mark’s gospel takes place in Capernaum (Mark 1.21-28). Now that Jesus is back in Capernaum, there is a great degree of expectation (as evidenced by the full house).

Historical context: Homes in the first century in Galilee were typically constructed with a roof (accessible by an outdoor staircase) used for working and rest. This helps us to see how the men were able to get the paralytic on the roof.

Theological context: The time of the Messiah and God’s Kingdom, spoken of in the Old Testament, looked forward to a time when the sick would be healed; sin forgiven; and evil dealt with. Jesus’ actions in our passage declare the reality of the time—the Messiah has come! God’s Kingdom is breaking in!

Old Testament background: “*Son of Man*” (vs. 10) – see Daniel 7:13-14

Big Idea: Only Jesus can meet your greatest need! In our passage we see that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin. He forgives the paralytic’s sin before healing him, thus emphasizing the greater need!

3. Practice Step

This passage should move followers of Jesus to give thanks to God for providing forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ! This passage should also move us to thank God for His faithfulness in providing the Savior.

Knowing that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin should motivate us to share Him (and His gospel message) with others.

Share with others that Jesus has come to meet their greatest need—forgiveness of sin.

We can imitate Jesus here by ministering to the greatest need of those in our own lives. We do this by sharing the gospel!

A final note: The expectation is not for you to write out all the information for each step every time you read the bible. That would overwhelm most Christians. The idea is that you write out the steps three to five times or until it becomes second nature. After some practice, you will begin to work through the three step process (RIP) in your mind whenever you read and study. It gets easier and it’s well worth the practice! Before you start, I would encourage you to take fifteen to twenty minutes to read through Psalm 119. Pray for the psalmist’s same passion for God’s word and whenever you sit down to read God’s word, begin by praying Psalm 119:18: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”

Additional Resources

Books on How to Read and Study the Bible

- Duvall, J. Scott and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Fuhr Jr., Richard Alan and Andreas J. Kostenberger. *Inductive Bible Study*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016.

Study Bibles

- *ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008.
- *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.
- *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.