

Sitting Down to Study...

We have spent quite a bit of time and effort to establish principles of Bible study in general. We have talked about various aspects of how principles of communication and study in general should be applied to the scriptures, and how we can understand scripture in the same manner as we understand any other type of material. With this lesson, we want to consider various methods of Bible study in particular. When we sit down to study God's word, how do we approach it? There are several different types of Bible study, all of which are productive and beneficial in their own ways! We will take a look at each briefly, hoping to help us prepare for specific studies we might want to do.

Reading scripture...

The first aspect of study that we want to consider is the simple reading of the scriptures. This is the beginning of any study we might approach. However, we need to realize that just reading the scriptures is not studying it. Many have a daily Bible reading, which is quite beneficial. But, there is a difference between reading through material, and studying it to understand it, and to teach it to others. Frequently, reading schedules are extensive, covering a large section of scripture per day. For example, a schedule that is designed to have a person read through the whole Bible in one year will often have several chapters assigned per day, often with a selection of various sections of the scriptures (Old Testament, New Testament, Wisdom Literature, etc.). This type of approach is good, as it encourages the habit of spending some time in the scriptures every day. But, simply reading the scriptures, without trying to go deeper and understand them, only benefits us so much. We might know where a particular story, or account is found, and yet not know what God intends for us to learn from the account!

Reading scripture is only the first step in any real productive Bible study. We cannot possibly reason together about the scriptures if we have not read them! We cannot be obedient to God's instructions if we have never read His instructions. So, as we begin to discuss the various methods of approaching and studying the scriptures, we must recognize the need to spend time in reading those scriptures. Having a regular and structured reading plan can be very helpful in familiarizing ourselves with the scriptures, and preparing us for more substantial study.

Overview study...

The least in depth type of study can be described as an overview. In an overview type study, we are looking to understand the main points of the part of scripture we are considering. We might do an overview of the whole Bible, working to understand how everything in scripture fits together. Bob and Sandra Waldron have put together a very good overview study of the whole Bible. In that series of study books, they break all of scripture down into 17 points as a way to help the student remember the various time periods of the Bible. This type of study is very beneficial for gaining insight into the big picture of the Bible. It helps to explain how the accounts of the Old Testament fit together with the message of the gospels, or the epistles of the New Testament.

An overview study can also be accomplished on a smaller scale. Perhaps one would like to begin to have an understanding about why there are four gospels instead of just one. Rather than tackling each of the gospels in depth, he might approach the four gospels as a unit, reading them together

and focusing on what the various accounts have in common. Or perhaps another person might want to do an overview study of the Pauline epistles. Rather than trying to get every detail out of the various epistles, an overview might bring out similar themes between the various letters. One could learn a lot about the churches themselves, and some of the problems or issues that they were facing at the time Paul wrote to them.

Overviews serve an important role in the study of scripture. An overview study is deeper than simply reading the scriptures, but it is still done in a more cursory way than the other methods we are going to discuss. Its purpose is to help gain a general knowledge of the scriptures, and how larger principles fit together. Working on an overview study is good way to start a study into the Bible as a whole, or into a particular book of the Bible. You can spend some time familiarizing yourself with the broader picture, or message, and build a good foundation for deeper study.

Expository study...

Expository study is a method of study that delves into a particular passage to discover what is found therein. Some may identify this type of study as a *Book Study*, or a *Verse-by-Verse Study*. The idea is that you would pick a particular passage and study it in its context, working through it one verse at a time. This type of study can become very intense, as you might look at each word in each verse, and work to understand every aspect of the passage in question.

This type of study is also known as *inductive study*. Inductive study is a process using inductive reasoning when studying the scriptures. Inductive reasoning is the use of specific premise, that which is revealed in the passage, to make more general conclusions. We can read what is revealed, but we must draw conclusions on what that means for us. What is it that God wants us to put into practice?

Expository study can be quiet challenging. While seeking to dig every detail we can out of a particular passage, we may fall into the trap of missing the bigger picture. It is easy, for example, to forget the context of one of the epistles while trying to discern what a particular word or phrase might mean. It is important, no matter what type of study we are involved in, that we remember the context. One cannot gain the true meaning of the passage, without understanding it in the context in which it appears. If we assign some meaning that contradicts the context, then we clearly have missed the point that God intended for us to grasp.

An expository study might begin as an overview, looking at the whole of the book in consideration. What was the historical setting for the book? When was it written, and to whom? How might these details impact the our understanding of what is written by the author?

Then, we might begin to “drill down” into the passage further. What major themes might be present in the book we are considering? How might the book be broken up into different sections? What purpose might the author have for that breakdown? How does each section fit together with the one before it? Or the one after it? How do the chapter and verse breaks represent the translators view of changing topics? Do these breaks fit with what you see as the flow of the material revealed?

After having this type of grasp on the book being studied, we might begin to look at the individual chapters, breaking the book down into reasonable chunks. What is the message in the first chapter of the book? What points are introduced? How might these points impact or influence what will be said later?

The breakdown then continues to each verse. How does each verse communicate a message that

God intended for the initial audience to understand?

We might then break each verse down into words or phrases, trying to understand the meaning of each one. Here, we might have to look up the specific meanings of words through various tools (which we will discuss in more depth in the next lesson). We want to try and understand the meaning of these words and phrases in their original setting. Remember, words can change meaning, which means that we might not be able to simply use a 21st century definition of the word, and understand what the original author intended.

By systematically working through a given passage, we can dig into its meaning and mine out all of the information that God wanted us to gain from it. One can certainly see how this type of study can be much like peeling an onion. There are layers that we can work through, and we add more to our knowledge with each layer that we peel away. Each study is beneficial to us, as we learn more and more about God, and His will for us. Because of the layers, we can also have confidence that each time we return to a passage, we can and should learn something more. This provides opportunity for us to challenge ourselves, pushing ourselves to learn more about Him. We will never, if we maintain the proper attitude toward God's word, believe that we have learned all there is to learn. We will know that we can go back, and peel away another layer, digging ourselves deeper into God's word!

Sometimes this process of critically examining a passage in detail is referred to as *exegesis*. Exegesis simply means "critical explanation or interpretation of a text or portion of a text, especially of the Bible."¹ This is the process of taking out of the passage what God intended. We can contrast with the concept of eisegesis, which is "an interpretation, especially of Scripture, that expresses the interpreter's own ideas, bias, or the like, rather than the meaning of the text."² Our goal should always be to try and find the meaning that is in the text, not read in our own biases or desires into the text! We are to take the meaning out of scripture (exegesis), not try to put meaning into it (eisegesis)!

Expository study is the method that will allow us to gain the most depth, and understanding of particular passages of scripture. We can, through this method, break down a passage to its smallest parts, and come to understand it in the most detail!

Thematic study...

A thematic study is one in which we pick a topic that we want to learn more about, and then look throughout all of the scriptures to find what God has revealed on that topic. This type of study is known as a *deductive* (rather than inductive) study. Deductive study, based on deductive reasoning, starts with a general premise, and then turns to the scriptures to work toward the specific details. Through this process, we can learn a lot about different topics. So, whereas in an expository study, we might cover several topics in one passage, in a thematic study, we will study one topic across many passages. We want to learn all that God has said about a particular topic.

Character studies would be one type of thematic study. We might pick a particular Bible character, and then systematically work through all the passages in scripture that tells us something about that character. We could, for example, decide to study the life of King David. We would then piece together every passage that tells us something about him, or his actions. We might consider other men or women who come into the account of his life, and look at how they impact his account. We might break up the events of his life into good examples and bad examples. We might then discuss how the examples that are revealed are intended to be used by us, the lessons that we are sup-

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/exegesis>

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/eisegesis>

posed to take from the examples that are revealed. Through this process, not only would we learn factual information, such as the history of the time period, but we would also learn to what lessons, or applications, God would want us to take from the accounts revealed!

Thematic studies are very important to us when we are trying to understand just what God expects of us today. We cannot know all that God expects in any given area by simply studying one passage in detail. We must be able to look at all that He has recorded.

The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever (Psalm 119:160, ESV).

The psalmist here relates the idea that it is the “sum” or “entirety” (NKJV) of God’s word that comprises truth. We must take all of what He has said, and put it together to understand His will for us.

One example of this type of study would be to consider God’s will for *salvation*. So our general premise would be *salvation*, and we would turn to the scriptures to find all that God has revealed on what we must do to be saved. Many people want to turn to John 3:16, and say that is the end of the study, the end of the discussion. However, we should do a deeper search, and look at other things that God has said are a part of salvation. If we stop at just the part we like, or want to believe, and look no further, we are not seeking the entirety of God’s will on the matter. We cannot ignore (or fail to look for) the other passages that tell us what actions are necessary for salvation. For our example, consider these:

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:8–10).

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 3:21)

These passages illustrate for us that we must look throughout all of scripture to find God’s will for us on any given topic. We cannot stop with one passage, and think that is necessarily all that God has revealed.

These types of thematic studies can be difficult. Sometimes, we may overlook a passage that is quite important to understanding the topic we are considering. Sometimes, we may see similar words, or phrases in passages and think they are related, when in fact they are not. We must make sure when doing a topical study that we are actually considering those passages that address the topic we are focused on.

Mixed methods...

Sometimes, we might blend these various types of study. We might decide that while doing an expository study that it would be beneficial for us to branch off briefly and do a thematic study of some topic that we have found in our context. We might be doing a character study, and find a particular passage that we think would be beneficial to address in a more expository way, and so we spend more time looking at it in detail. Because all of these studies are greatly beneficial, it is easy to mix and match them to accomplish what is most beneficial to our learning! In the end, our goal should always be to seek out the will of God, and be confident that we are doing our best to serve

Him, based on what He has revealed to us!

Different circumstances will call for a different type of study. We should keep in mind the ultimate goal of our study:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:8–10)

Whatever methodology we use in our study, this should be our focus. We want to discover, through His revealed word, what is acceptable to Him, and then put it into practice! Learning simply for the sake of learning is not profitable to us spiritually. We want to figure out what it takes for us to be acceptable to the Lord!

May we show the diligence necessary to understand His word, and put it into practice!

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).

Questions...

1. How is reading scripture different than studying it?
2. What is an Overview Study? How might an Overview Study be conducted?
3. Describe a Verse-By-Verse Study. What steps might you go through with a particular passage with this type of study?
4. What is a Thematic, or Topical Study? How is this different than a Book or Verse-By-Verse Study?
5. How might you conduct a Topical Study?

Practice...

1. Choose a short passage of scripture and work through it as a Verse-By-Verse Study. Remember to start with the broader context and move to the more specific!
2. Choose a topic that you'd like to study, and use the procedures we have discussed to begin to examine all that the scriptures have to say on this topic.