Bible Study How-To

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Preamble

Hi, I am John from Willows, and thank you for joining me for today's devotion on this Tuesday, the 10th of November, 2026. A PDF with the full text and some study resources is available at our web site, willows.org.za.

Introduction

The central message of The Bible is not difficult to understand, but it is nevertheless a difficult book to read. One of the reasons is that it is actually not *a* book, but it is *many* books! In fact, the English word 'Bible' has a long history going back to ancient Greek, but the essence is that the word actually refers to books, or more accurately, papyrus scrolls. So clearly we should not approach it as a single book, but as a collection, for that is what it is.

Today I want to give a high-level overview of some of the things to consider when we want to study this collection of books we call The Bible, so that it becomes easier to understand. At the end (and in the PDF) I will give references to web sites and books that can help you on your journey as you study the Scriptures.

Before we continue, let's pray.

Thank You, Lord God, for Your Word. You have given us the treasure trove of The Bible to teach us Your ways. While its central message can be understood by children, those who study Your Word will discover limitless riches. Please speak to us through today's devotion, O Spirit, and may it spur us on to a greater appreciation for and understanding of Your Word. Amen.

Devotion

For centuries up on centuries, the books of The Bible were each a single text, but over the years a system was devised both for reference (to help one find parts of the text) as well as for guidance in reading and teaching (indicating where a specific train of thought ended, for example). It is a long and complicated story, because it involves both Jewish and Christian scholars. The problem is that these divisions of chapters and verses can make one miss things in the text.

So, while the chapters and verses make it easy to refer to part of the text, we should always remember that the text is actually the entire book. An obvious exception is of course the book of Psalms, which is a collection of individual psalms, so by all means read them one by one, but most of the rest has to be approached differently.

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It's not all bad, though. For example, if I told you that it says in Isaiah that God whistles and you wanted me to show you where, that would take a long time without being able to say that it is in chapter 5:26 and in chapter 7:18. But you may not find it, and that brings us to the next point: we are not reading The Bible in the original languages, but in translation.

The fact that we have different languages is a direct result of human sin, and you can read about it in Genesis 11:1–9. So unless you are fluent in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek, the only way to read The Bible is to read a translation. Often the best translation is not what is referred to as a transliteration — which is a word-for-word equivalence — but rather a translation of the idea which is being communicated. This comes up especially when using figures of speech. While we know that the brain is where our thoughts reside, we commonly refer to the mind, and that is why Psalm 26:2 reads "... test my heart and my mind" instead of the transliteration of the Hebrew, which is "...test my kidneys and my heart".

Then there is the issue of languages changing over time. Consider English from a few hundred years ago. We have a hard time understanding the King James Version translation, because we just don't speak that way any more. A famous example is Matthew 19:14

- KJV: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me"
- ESV: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them"

In the 1600s the word 'suffer' meant to allow or to permit.

So should we all start using the Message, or the Living Bible? After all, they are really easy to read. Well, no. While they might be useful from a *story* perspective, they pretty much show only a single interpretation, and often leave out a *lot* in terms of meaning.

Why was The Bible not rather written as a simple set of statements (such as "God loves you"), laws ("Do not steal"), and guidelines ("Do not quarrel about opinions")? Part of the answer is that God wants us to have a *relationship* with Him, and you don't have a relationship with a set of books. While there are statements, laws, and guidelines in The Bible, much of it requires us to *study* it. Simply reading a bit here and there makes it very easy to miss the point completely, so reading a book at a time gives us the bigger picture. We need context in order for the text to make sense. There is a great saying, "A text out of context becomes a pretext." It's a different way of saying, "You can prove anything from The Bible."

On the other hand, if we don't understand the meaning of the words use in the context of *when* they were written, we can sometimes miss much of the more subtle meaning behind them. An example I took a lot further in another devotion is the reason behind Galatians 6:2 saying "Bear one another's burdens" while verse five says "each will have to bear his own load". In English they're synonyms, but in Greek they mean very different things. This brings us to the next point: interpretation.

We need help to interpret Scripture, and yes, The Holy Spirit is a crucial part of that exercise, but He does not simply pop ideas into our heads as we scratch them when reading something we don't understand — we have a part to play, and it's called studying the Scriptures.

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At the end of the devotion I will give some pointers, but there is one more aspect I want to highlight: the so-called documentary hypothesis, which tries to use theories of literature theory to "prove" (in inverted commas) that the Pentateuch (the first five books of The Bible) were not written by Moses (if he existed at all), but rather by... well, there's the rub: exactly who and when is rather fluid, as it depends on which author you read. The point is that these are people who are trying to break the authority of Scripture. There is a similar movement regarding the New Testament, where the core idea is (and again, it changes somewhat depending on who you read) that the gospel of Mark was written first, then those *attributed* to Matthew and Luke mostly used Mark — but doubt is cast on who actually wrote them — while John's gospel was not written by the disciple John at all, but by some other John — or even by an entire 'school' of writers.

The problem is that these views are being taught at many seminaries and universities, and as I stated above, it erodes the authority of Scripture. Christianity soon becomes only one of the many roads for those who need the crutch in their lives that a religious faith provides — in the thinking of materialists, atheists, agnostics, and the like. A key that many miss is that a theologian is not automatically a Christian: all a theologian does is to study religious belief systems, and in the eyes of many, Christianity is nothing more than yet another belief system.

Where to get help

So, what to do? For the Christian, the answer is two-fold:

1. You have a brain — use it!
2. You (should!) have The Holy Spirit — pray that He guides you.

I can't do much more from my current position to help you with the second point, but regarding the first, I can point you to some resources. There is one very important point to keep in mind in all of this, and that is that Satan is working very hard to dilute the impact of The Bible to the point of irrelevance. The attack is on every front we can imagine, so don't be surprised if your study brings you into conflict with what *most* other people believe. Remember that in Matthew 7:14 Christ said that "...small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

So, with that caveat, here are some resources.

David Pawson wrote a series of short books he called his "Explaining" series, one of which is called "Studying The Bible". You can download each book in this series for free by going to the short-cut explainingbiblicaltruth.global. They want an email address to keep robots out, but other than that you can simply download the PDFs. There is a total of 20 such little books there — all available for free download. That short-cut again is explainingbiblicaltruth.global.

A book that goes into this in greater detail is by Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart, called "How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth". Look for the fourth edition.

Then we get to Bible commentaries. They are useful, but just remember that they are commentaries — understanding the actual Biblical text is what we are after. Sadly a lot of the freely available commentaries display their Victorian era origins, both in 'floral'

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English as well as in world-view. One modern commentary (which is still being updated) is by Dr. Thomas L Constable, available at https://soniclight.com.

That brings us back to web sites. Of course the world and its dog are on the web, so you need to be careful, but these four articles are helpful. The site they are on actually exists for another reason, but that is not why I am referring you to them now. The site is called https://creation.com, and when you land on their home page search for these titles:

- https://creation.com/en/articles/should-we-trust-the-bible
- https://creation.com/en/articles/did-moses-really-write-genesis
- https://creation.com/en/articles/jesus-christ-on-the-infallibility-of-scripture
- https://creation.com/en/articles/faith-not-facts

They are generally well written and not in a scholarly manner, so they're easy to read.

The last site I recommend for serious study of The Bible it is https://blueletterbible.org, and I recommend that you read their documentation. Although I've been using them for years, there is still a lot for me to learn about everything they offer. The site is free to use, and worth investing time into if you want to go deeper.

There you go! Quite a lot of ground covered, and my prayer is that these resources will help you as you study God's Word. Remember that the PDF lists more resources as well.

Let us pray.

Thank You, God, that You have made available to us so very many resources to study Your Word. Help us to read *Your Word and not just* about *Your Word. I ask that Your Holy Spirit will light Your fire in us as He enlightens us.*
Amen.

General Bible Resources

[Most of the original language information (including Strong's concordance) is via the Bible Hub site.]

This list is alive in that I update it as I go along — I just don't update all the instances of it, so see my latest devotion has the then-current one. At some point I'll probably put it on the web somewhere and update that, but for now this is it. Also note that I don't check each link for its continued existence… .

There are some points in these resources where you (and I) may think differently. Just don't throw the baby out with the bath water — consider what is said, read widely in The Word, and pray to God that He would keep you from heresy as you continue in your study of His Word. Though I find the following resources useful in many ways, *each* has its points where at the very least I go, 'Mmm. Not so sure about that. I need to look into that more deeply.'

https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A1&version=ESVUK is a brilliant collection of Bible translations. I tend to use the ESV-UK version: a solid translation in English.

https://biblehub.com is an enormous collection of resources. They have commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and more. Unless otherwise specified, this is where I get the information on the original languages. They have of late been encouraging people not to use ad blockers.

https://www.blueletterbible.org/ packages of the same resources as biblehub.com, but has a completely different approach. They are also (currently) free.

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https://www.stepbible.org/ is an incredible resource if you want to look at the original language. When you use it on a PC and you hover over certain links you get more information without having to click.

https://www.thebibleunpacked.net is a rather unusual set of resources. At its core is a free book exploring core concepts of Christianity, but the book is available in seven editions. The smallest is just four 'pages' (each the size of a credit card) while the largest is 2,424 pages of A4 material. The two main areas are 'What to Know' and 'What to Do', which is an excellent balance. You can get an overview of the structure and topics at https://www.thebibleunpacked.net/whats-inside.

https://www.preceptaustin.org/ is an enormous resource of commentaries by Dr. Bruce Hurt, a medical doctor. His work includes copious references, easing further study.

https://soniclight.com/constable/ is the official site of the Bible commentary of theologian Dr. Thomas Constable, where that material is freely available.

https://www.gotquestions.org intends to provide answers to common questions about The Bible. While there is a core doctrinal point (predestination) on which I differ, there are many insightful answers.

These should be sufficient to get you going, but a word of warning: many 'fringe' sites (and some sects) go to great lengths to make their public / introductory material seem completely main-stream, so you really need to be on your guard.

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