

How to Study the Bible, 11/4, 7

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The Bereans ... received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

Mastering the Message of a Bible Book

The Bible is one divinely inspired story told through human authors over a period of 1,500 years. It contains individual books, each written at a point in history, for a specific purpose, and with a distinct message that contributes to the one united story, the message of Scripture. The Bible is not like a dictionary or an encyclopedia to be studied selectively and at random. To understand the Bible we need to study it book by book rather than by individual verses or stories that we select randomly from a book. The Bible is made up of sixty-six individual books, each with a unique message. It is essential to study each book carefully to comprehend that message. There are three steps that must be taken in order if we wish to gain firsthand knowledge of each book.

Step one is observation, glean information from our personal study of each book, paragraph-by-paragraph, paying special attention to the opening paragraph of the book.

Step two is synthesis, systematizing all the data gleaned from our observations to determine the purpose, occasion, structure, and abiding message of each Bible book.

Step three is research, using competent and reliable sources (introductions to the Old or New Testament) to: 1) Determine historical and cultural setting, 2) Supplement our own observations by consulting commentaries containing in-depth introductions, and 3) Compare and evaluate our own personal synthesis of the book with that of others and revising ours as necessary, incorporating insights we have gleaned in our research.

How to Prepare

1. Select the Bible book. It is best to start with a simpler, shorter book.
2. Gather tools for study. Use a good word for word translation with paragraph divisions, but preferably without notes and outlines that inhibit originality. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the English Study Version (ESV) are recommended. Both are recognized for accuracy and readability, as is the New English Translation (NET). The New King James (NKJV) is accurate though some find it less “readable.” The New International Version (NIV) is very readable but lacks the same measure of accuracy (it is thought for thought rather than word for word). The recently revised NIV is not recommended. Make notes of your observations. A pencil is good for recording your initial observations.
3. Allow sufficient time (regularly) to do it well. Avoid interruptions and distractions as much as possible. Quality and quantity of time both matter. Read the book repeatedly and preferably at one sitting. There is no substitute for careful, repeated reading of the text itself. It is helpful also to read it in more than one translation, but limit your careful study to just one translation to avoid confusion.

Exploration: What to look for

This first phase of the study is to glean important information about the author, the audience, the author's reason for writing the book, and the essence of the book's message. This is done by careful, firsthand observation of the book itself. This process should be followed before reading what others have written about the book (that is helpful but should come only after direct personal study of the book). The aim is to glean important information about the book from examining the content of the book itself. This involves, (1) gleaning background information from within the book itself, (2) carefully analyzing the meaning of each and every paragraph within the book, (3) determining how the paragraphs tie together to communicate the message of the book, and (4) determining the enduring meaning and message of the book. It requires personal observation and is limited to what we are able to see first-hand as we read the book carefully and thoughtfully. It will be followed next by context studies using Bible study resources to discover information that is not readily evident simply by reading.

Do a "walk through" to glean information from a Bible book

- A. Read** the book through carefully at least three times (the more times the better). Each reading should be at one sitting for shorter books and in large segments for longer books. It is also helpful to read the book in more than one translation.
- B. Glean** the following information by first-hand observation. It is helpful to read the book again and again, each time with just one of the following ideas or questions in mind. Keep in mind that the opening paragraph of a book is often the key to understanding the author's reason for writing, central idea, and logical argument (development of thought). Record your first observations of details and references on a sheet of paper (or in a file on your computer).
1. The **author**: not only who he was, but also what the book reveals about his calling, personal history, personality, actions, situation, values, etc.
 2. The **recipients**: to whom, for whom, and about whom was the book written? How does this data relate to the author's purpose and message?
 3. The **occasion**: What problem, event, or idea occasioned the writing? Look for historical data that explains the circumstances under and for which it was written. Is the author's purpose stated (as in Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:30-31)?
 4. The **time**: both of the writing and of the action. How do the chronology and history relate to the purpose for writing the book? (Before, or after the exile?)
 5. The **location**: Where was it written? Where did the events occur? Does the geography have a bearing on the message? (Ezekiel and Daniel in Babylon).
 6. The **nature** of the book: what kind of literature is it (narrative, epistle, etc.)?
 7. The **main** theme of the book: What's it all about?
 8. The **peculiarities**: identify unusual elements (content or structure): the absence of the name of God in Esther, the repeated cycles of chronology and biography in Judges, the opposition to Jesus and His focus on the cross in the Gospels.

Let's practice on the book of Philemon.

What do you learn about the three main characters, Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus?
What do you learn about the circumstances that occasioned the writing of this letter?

Philemon (NASB)

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved *brother* and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; *and I pray* that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal *to you*—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Exploring the book of Philemon

Gleanings regarding Paul the author,

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Gleanings regarding Philemon the recipient,

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Gleanings regarding Onesimus the subject,

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Gleanings regarding the occasion for writing the letter,

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Next week- Probing each paragraph