

Studying the Bible requires at least three disciplines:

First, you need [time](#). Just reading a passage quickly isn't going to give you the in-depth understanding that you need. Not only do you need to set aside regular periods of time for study, but you will have to spend considerable portions of time on any particular passage. The truth comes by studying: by digging, meditating, thinking, asking questions. And all this will require time.

The fruits of Bible study come by perseverance and persistence. It's like digging for gold: if you give up too soon, you'll never find that rich mother-lode. If you read the Bible superficially and run away without spending time over it, of course you will miss most of what's there.

And you will find it necessary to return to the same passage over and over. Never assume that you have found its meaning after only one or two sessions. Successful teachers of the Word know that the Bible is so rich, they can come back to familiar texts and find new things there that they didn't see before.

Second, you need to [think](#). Thinking isn't easy; we're naturally lazy in our minds. We would rather read the passage and then trust to our feelings and snap judgments about what it means.

But almost always the first impression isn't good enough. No matter how simple it may look, a passage in the Bible is the Word of the Creator and Redeemer -- it's the product of an infinite mind, dealing with eternal matters. If calculus and physics require deep thought, we can expect the meditations of the Creator who made this world to be much more profound.

In order to think, you have to first *ask questions*. Don't assume anything. Ask questions about every aspect of the text -- and especially about how it fits into the bigger picture around it. Asking questions opens the subject up to the possibilities that are there -- it opens many doors of inquiry that will make the passage richer than you imagined at first.

Next, you need to *meditate*. In Psalm 1 it talks about the righteous man "meditating" on the Law of God -- by day and night. Meditating is rather like a cow chewing her cud: she chews it over and over, then swallows it, then later brings it back up to chew on it some more! Christians need to develop the skill and habit of working a passage over and over in their minds and hearts, then later coming back to it to work on it some more. That kind of determined and devoted effort will pay dividends.

Finally, your aim is to see how the pieces of the Bible *fit together*. Only thinking will eventually show you how God's truth is *one* truth. So many people despair of understanding the Bible, simply because it's so huge and complex and seemingly unconnected. But to someone who has worked on its pieces diligently, the Lord will start showing them the single story line through this book of his. It's then that Bible study gets exciting and even more fruitful.

Third, you need to be [open to God](#) and whatever he wants to teach you. Perhaps

the biggest obstacle to learning from the Bible is when we come to it *not willing to learn*. God's intent is to teach us: we have to *let* him teach us. As it says in Ecclesiastes, "Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools." (Ecclesiastes 5:1)

If you need to, throw away the filtered glasses you're wearing -- the traditions of men, the theologies of men, the current opinions and politics of men. These too often prevent us from seeing what the text actually says. There's nothing wrong with men's writings so long as they get their material from the Bible -- without changing it, preserving its original form and purpose.

Besides, people haven't yet found everything in the Bible! If we limit ourselves to rehashing the same doctrines that we've been taught, we will miss out on new exciting material that hasn't yet been brought out. Nobody knows all the truth of God; there is much more work to be done by open-minded students.

Finally, when you study the Bible, work on *God's* agenda -- not yours. He wants us to focus on certain issues that are important to him. If we keep looking for what *we* want in the text, we will actually be ignoring his "to-do" list for us. The Bible is designed to save us, to enrich us spiritually, to prepare us for Heaven. If we insist on spending our time on unimportant matters -- rabbit trails that Paul calls "unprofitable" -- we will gain nothing from our Bible study, and will actually hurt our chances of being prepared for his Kingdom. So find that list of "this is what you must know" principles in the Bible. They are there!

When we study the Bible, we are after these things:

First we want to [see God](#). The purpose of the Bible, after all, is to reveal God. Other books focus on other subjects; but if you want to know what God is really like, then the Bible is your textbook.

There are many ways the Bible reveals God: wisdom, miracles, history, etc. But in every story, in every doctrine of the Bible, there is something to be learned about God. Look for it, and you will demonstrate that you understand its purpose. If you look only for yourself in it, you will miss the point. Unless we train ourselves to look for God in the Bible, we will miss out on what only God can do for us. There is salvation only in God -- we need *him*.

Second, we need to learn the [fundamentals](#) first. We already mentioned that God has his own agenda for us when we study his Word. The first order of business is to ground us in the truths of the faith. Hebrews 5-6 tells what we need to know -- the basics of the faith. It also tells us that without these basics, we can't go on to learn deeper and more important things.

We like to study things of "secondary importance" instead of the fundamentals. I guess it's the longing to appear wise, to know deep mysteries about small details that nobody else can understand. Going over the basics is too boring. But actually only a solid foundation in the basics will keep us from misunderstanding the secondary issues. People often fall prey to the cults because they never learned the

fundamentals of the Faith, and so they never knew when they were being lied to. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Keep your eye out for what the Bible says is important to know -- you may be surprised where it shows up. For example, Psalm 105 lists several duties that we have -- it tells us to call on his Name, to make his works known, to dwell on his miracles and wonders and judgments, to remember the covenant that he made with Abraham. Ask yourself, do I know what these are? Unless I do, how can I fulfill my duty that it's describing here?

Third, we need [knowledge for the future](#). Like the ant (Proverbs 6:6), spiritual winters are coming and we will need a well-stocked reserve of resources to get us through. Life is full of problems, heartaches, frustrations, failures -- and even more sin, unfortunately. In order to face those trials with the wisdom and strength necessary to weather the storm and honor our God, we have to do our homework now and "store up treasures in Heaven" in our spiritual accounts, so that we can draw on them when the time comes.

There will also be tremendous needs in the world and in the Church that God will expect us to address. Since we are called to be fellow laborers with Christ, we will need uncommon knowledge and wisdom to know how to build God's spiritual house. It's wisdom to store up knowledge ahead of time -- "The wise man stores up knowledge" (Proverbs 10:14) -- and get skilled for the day when we will be called upon to do service in God's Kingdom.

There are three safeguards while studying the Bible:

First, what we learn from any passage must [agree with the rest of the Bible](#). The Bible doesn't contradict itself; it's one book, written by one Author, and it teaches one truth from Heaven. It's too easy for the young and inexperienced to get whatever message they want from its pages -- and no wonder, since the Bible is profound wisdom from God, a knowledge that is beyond our natural capabilities.

The Bible is designed in such a way that the same subject will be mentioned and developed in many places across the entire book. Our job is to find *all* the places that it's mentioned -- not just focus on one particular passage. And usually there are one or two particular places where the root of the matter can be found; and other passages will add other necessary details to the overall picture.

Second, what we learn from any passage should [agree with traditional or orthodox interpretation](#). What I mean is this: God has given his Spirit to every one of his children in the Church, not just to you and me. It's a bad sign when we think we have found a "truth" in the Bible that other wise and often more experienced believers in the Church can't seem to see. It's a good sign, however, when we learn truths that other believers -- either in the past or in our own time -- have either seen for themselves or agree with you on. The Spirit works in the body of believers, and he provides many safeguards against "lone rangers" and the problems, false teachings and heresies that they often introduce into the Church.

Of course there are limits on this idea. Not everyone in the Church is in good spiritual health, and many have been blinded by traditions and "rules taught by men" that have no foundation in the Bible -- so of course they aren't going to agree with things that we learn in the Bible. Even whole denominations have been sidetracked into wrong doctrines, and they certainly won't welcome light from the Bible that contradicts their views. But someone who has the Spirit of God and honors God's Word will be a reliable safety check to confirm or correct the results of your Bible study.

Third, what we learn from the Bible will glorify God and humble us -- if we got it right. The purpose of the Bible, remember, is to reveal God. And that God is full of glory: he has all power and wisdom and majesty. He's the King of the universe, and its Creator. He is unutterably holy -- "holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty" (Isaiah 6:3). You know that the Spirit is leading you in your Bible study when God gets bigger and bigger to you. If, when we study the Bible, we see this God so overwhelmingly that we fear him, turn our hearts over to him, learn to trust him completely, and love him -- then we are reading it aright.

Plus, if we are getting the message of the Bible, we will learn that our own hearts are our biggest problem. We will learn not to trust ourselves in any situation but to lean on Christ alone and his power. The Bible's message is that our sin alienates us from God, that we can't do a thing to help ourselves, that our only hope is God and his mercy. Even when he calls us to work in his Kingdom, we will show that we are skilled workmen when we rely on his resources and wisdom to do our work. If we approach it that way, then we are reading the Bible aright.