

Studying the Bible Prayerfully and Obediently

Is there a “right” way to study the Bible?

We will probably all agree that studying the Bible is critical, but we may not agree on the best method of study. There is no universally accepted pattern for how Christians should interact with this book. Some approach the Bible as a textbook or rulebook that gives them direction for how to live their lives. Others gravitate toward the stories and characters in the Bible as an inspiration or model for living a godly life. Still others take a more mystical approach: let it fall open to any page and you will find some spiritual encouragement or guidance to help you through the day. And then there’s the academic approach, which carefully examines each passage of Scripture to determine precisely what the original authors intended to say.

Most of us cycle through each of these approaches and several others in our attempt to get the most out of the Bible. We know that we need the Bible, but we sometimes struggle in our quest to get the most out of our reading.

Q1 Describe your experience with studying the Bible. What approaches have you tried? What has been effective? What has been ineffective? What have you learned in the process?

Studying the Bible Devotionally

Before we decide on the best approach to studying the Bible, let’s not forget what the Bible is: God’s Word. It is His words to us, so we should be mindful of His authority as He conveys His purpose and will to us. When we read the Bible we are hearing the voice of God.

So how should we read a book that carries the same weight as the audible voice of God coming down from heaven? Obviously, we should read the Bible carefully, paying close attention to what exactly God is saying—a concept we will explore in the next session. In this session, we will focus on another important point: we should read these words devotionally. In other words, we should be “devoted” to them. When God speaks to us, we should be quick to listen, eager to absorb everything He tells us. And we should enjoy the process.

Have you ever thought to simply enjoy reading the Bible? We often get so caught up in the busyness of our lives or the details of the biblical text that we forget that we should be thrilled. We are hearing God’s words to us!

If you want to get a feel for what it means to enjoy the Bible, then read Psalm 119. It’s basically a love letter written to God’s Word. Two things are particularly striking about this psalm: (1) The psalmist had a lot to say about God’s Word (it’s 176 verses long!), and (2) he really, really liked it. The repeated refrain is that he delights in God’s law, statutes, precepts, commandments, etc. At one point (vs. 131) he even said, “I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments.” That’s a serious desire!

Recall once again Peter’s exhortation to long for the Word of God as a baby longs for its mother’s milk (1 Pet. 2:2–3). If these statements reflect the attitude a Christian should have toward the Bible, then it’s safe to say that all of us are falling very short.

We should approach the Bible with the same intensity, aware of the fact that we are reading God's words, and that His words are directed to us. God has given us the Bible to use in discipling, counseling, teaching, and encouraging the people around us (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But whatever else we do with the Bible, we cannot fail to read the Bible devotionally. As we study the Bible to teach, correct, or encourage other people, we need to let God's truths saturate every aspect of our minds, hearts, and lifestyles.

Q2 What does it look like to take joy in reading the Bible? Have you ever experienced this? If so, what is it like? If not, why do you think you've never enjoyed the Bible?

Q3 Read through Psalm 119. What do you find striking, challenging, or encouraging?

Prayer and Understanding

Christians often talk about praying and reading their Bibles, but we don't hear much about praying while reading the Bible. While many Christians will acknowledge that prayer is an important part of understanding Scripture, not many of us have done a good job of actually putting this into practice.

Some believe that if we examine the biblical text closely enough—possibly even learning Hebrew and Greek—if we consult enough commentaries, and if we diagram every passage perfectly, then we can arrive at the true meaning of any biblical text. Each of these elements is important, but this mentality leaves no room for prayer, which means that there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is a mentality of complete self-reliance.

Paul's description of the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of God is worth quoting at length:

As it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:9–14)

Make sure you understand the point of that passage: you cannot understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit's help.

Dependence on God in our thinking is a fundamental aspect of being human—and was even before the fall. When Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, they needed God to tell them what to do. This is huge! Even before sin entered the world, people needed revelation from God in order to understand the world they were living in. Part of what it means to be human is that

we depend on revelation from God in order to understand our existence. And this dependency only intensified after the fall.

As a result of the fall, people are corrupt not only in their actions, but also in their minds (Rom. 1:21). That means we naturally stray from God morally (a concept we're all pretty familiar with), but in addition to that, our minds are tainted by sin. We no longer think the way we ought to think. This intensifies our dependence on the Spirit of God to help us see God's truth as it really is, not as we'd like it to be.

And this is exactly Paul's point: we simply cannot understand spiritual truths apart from the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit, we will look at God's revelation in nature and in the Bible and misinterpret it.

This is why prayer is absolutely essential to Bible study. It's not a symbolic gesture; it's not a formality: it is foundational to understanding the mind of God. If the Bible is God's Word, then understanding the Bible means understanding the mind of God (not fully, of course, but insofar as He has revealed His mind to us). And Paul said explicitly that the only way we can understand the mind of God is through the Spirit of God.

If our Bible study is not saturated in prayer, then we are not studying the Bible the way God intends. The Scriptures are full of the wisdom of God, and we are absolutely dependent on the Spirit to reveal that wisdom to us and establish it in our lives.

Q4 In practical terms, what does it mean to study the Bible prayerfully? What can you do to build prayer and dependence on God into your study of the Bible?

Studying the Bible Obediently

Perhaps the strongest reason for saturating our Bible study in prayer is that we desperately need the Spirit to make our lives align with the truths we are studying. We don't need statistics to convince us that churchgoers tend toward hypocrisy. We all know people who are passionate about the truth but don't seem to understand the concept of practicing what they preach. What we need is the Spirit to keep us from becoming one of them.

What is the value of truth if it doesn't change us? Paul said it this way:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–2)

If you could amaze people with your ability to speak, if you understood everything and had more faith than anyone on earth, but you didn't love your neighbor as yourself, then what would be the point? This is why prayer is critical. We need Him to make us loving—to make our knowledge translate into loving action.

Too many Christians study the Word of God as if gaining knowledge is the sum total of our mission on this earth. But according to Paul, knowledge can be completely worthless and even harmful: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

If we believe that statement, then why do we have so much admiration for people who know lots of facts? Have we forgotten that knowledge is a means to a greater end? Knowledge enables us to love God and love our neighbors more fully.

If we're not putting what we know to work in our lives, then our knowledge will simply make us more arrogant. There's a terrifying irony here: your study of the Bible could actually lead you further away from the Lord.

The problem definitely isn't solved by studying less. Instead, we should be learning everything we can and immediately applying it. We should be begging God to give us a deeper love for Him and others so we can take the truths He reveals and put them into practice. Very often, the truths we learn will actually lead us to search for situations in which to apply them (such as caring for the poor or considering other people better than ourselves).

We can't afford to overlook this point. If you find yourself studying the Bible without applying what you're learning, then you're misusing the Bible. It's that simple—and that serious.

You may not consider yourself a biblical scholar, but think about all the things you do know about the Bible. The Bible is filled with God's commands, and you probably already know some of the things that He clearly wants you to do. Start there. Pray, obey, and begin enjoying the peace that comes from studying the Bible obediently.

Q5 Take a minute to think through the commands that you know God wants us all to be doing (for example, loving the people around you, forgiving others, praying, etc.). Write down a handful of these things below.

Now evaluate your life in light of these commands. If you find that the things you listed above aren't an active part of your life, then it's pretty evident that you need to change the way you study the Bible. If these things are not manifested in the way you live, then you're misusing the Bible. Putting our knowledge into practice will be a lifelong pursuit for all of us, and we rarely see dramatic, immediate results. But if you're not seeing the things you learn translating into the things you do, then something foundational is out of place.

Q6 Take a minute to examine your life in light of what you already know about the Bible. If you find that you haven't been applying biblical truth to your life, then what changes do you need to make to the way you study the Bible?

Studying the Bible with Faith

Something that is often overlooked when studying the Bible is the importance of faith. Once again, this goes back to the very nature of the Bible. If the Bible is indeed the very words of God, then those words carry the same authority and power as God Himself. Every promise is backed by a person—the promise is as trustworthy as the person who makes that promise. When the Bible gives us a command, that command carries all the authority of God. Likewise, when the Bible makes a promise, that promise is as trustworthy as God.

One of the church's greatest handicaps is that Christians don't study the Bible with faith. We read the Bible, but we don't act as if we believe what it says. We read about judgment for those who deny Jesus, but it doesn't change the way we reach out to the people around us. This raises the question: Do we really believe (i.e., have faith) in what God has said? Another example is when we read of God's grace. The Bible is clear that God forgives (Eph. 2:1–9, 1 John 1:9), yet many of us walk around with doubts and insecurities based upon past actions. If we studied with faith, wouldn't we live with visible peace and joy?

If we are going to study the Bible as the very words of God, then we need to believe what it says. We need to study the Bible with absolute faith. When we read that God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), then we need to believe it and live as though it were true. When we read that the Holy Spirit empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), then we need to put our complete confidence in that truth and live as people who are empowered by the very Spirit of God.

Q7 In your own words, explain what it means to study the Bible with faith. Do you see this playing out in your life? How so?

The Bible and Transformation

Often people come out of study groups saying, "That was a good Bible study." But what do they actually mean by that? Does it mean that they learned something or felt convicted at points? Or do they say this because their lives actually changed? Good Bible study leads to transformation. It may not happen all at once, but we should be noticeably different because of our time with Scripture.

We've already looked briefly at Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Bible isn't merely an inanimate object that we study and pull information from. It has a life of its own. It acts. It reads us; it pierces to the deepest parts of our being and discerns our motivations. Since our God is a living God, His Word is alive, and He works through His Word to actively transform every part of our being.

James used striking imagery to highlight our need to be transformed by the Bible:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (1:22–25)

James compared the process of studying the Bible to a man looking into a mirror. Just like a mirror, the Bible has the ability to reveal to you the truth about your condition. First, he described a man who looks into the mirror, clearly sees the reflection, and then walks away without doing anything. This person is clearly foolish, but he also perfectly represents the way most Christians study the Bible. They read their Bibles, see the truth that demands transformation, then walk away as if nothing ever happened.

James contrasted this fool with the person who looks into the mirror and does something about what he sees. This person reads the Word of God, takes what he sees at face value, and then acts on it. James is clear that this person is the one who will be blessed in what he does. There is no reward for merely hearing the truth. Bible study is incomplete and illegitimate until it turns into obedience and transforms us.

So again we have to ask the question: Why do you study the Bible? Is it because you want to be changed, or are you studying to gain knowledge?

James followed his powerful metaphor with these startling words:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Once again, he pointed out that there are going to be those who “deceive themselves.” Don't be one of them. If you think you are a religious person, but don't act on God's truth, Scripture says your “religion” is worthless. Don't kid yourself—true religion is not about what you know, it's about putting what you know about God and His Word into practice.

God has been so gracious to speak to us. His words lead to life. They set us free! So much of God's blessing comes to us as we listen to His voice and put His Word into practice. It would be a shame if we merely studied and didn't allow these words to bless us as He intended.

Q8 Take a minute to consider everything you've thought through in this session. What changes do you need to make in the way you study the Bible?

Q9 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you a heart for His Word. Ask Him to help you approach His Word devotionally and obediently.