

MG University Presents:

How to Study the Bible

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1. Bible translations

- a. Use several good translations
 - 1) Translations recommended by people you trust
 - 2) Easily available online (try Bible Gateway)
- b. Compare and contrast their choice of words and phrasing
 - 1) Good translations tend to say the same thing in different ways
 - 2) The different expressions might help you grasp the intended idea
- c. Consider a mix of translation styles
 - 1) Formal equivalency: Attempts to stay close to the original wording and phrasing (King James Version, New American Standard Bible, English Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, etc.)
 - 2) Dynamic equivalency: Focuses on modern contemporary wording and phrasing (New International Version, New Life Version, etc.)
 - 3) Paraphrase: Re-phrases the original text with amplification to explain the intended meaning (Living Bible, Amplified Bible, etc.)

Notes:

2. Study tools

- a. Cross-references
 - 1) Links to passages related to the text you are studying
 - 2) Available in the margins or footnotes of most Bible translations
- b. Concordance
 - 1) An alphabetical listing of words in the Bible, with a list of passages where a given word is used
 - 2) Useful for finding a verse you are looking for
 - 3) Can help you see a Biblical pattern, and highlight Biblical themes
 - 4) Caution with your conclusions: The listing below an English word may actually be more than one Greek or Hebrew word (with nuanced differences)
 - 5) Available in the back of many Bible translations, in separate print versions, and online
- c. Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, handbook
 - 1) Detailed explanations of Bible terms, people, places, things, dates, etc.
 - 2) Maps, pictures, diagrams, etc.
 - 3) Look for conservative scholarship and recent publication
 - 4) Available in the back of some Bible translations, in separate print versions, and online
- d. Commentaries
 - 1) A verse-by-verse study and interpretation of a Bible book
 - 2) Recommended by people you trust
 - 3) Be aware of theological bias (good or bad)
 - a) Conservative, liberal, postmodern, traditional, progressive, etc.
 - b) Denominational, Catholic, Calvinist, Dispensational, Restoration, etc.
 - 4) Take note of good authors (scholarship and perspective) and publishing companies
- e. Study Bibles
 - 1) Packages some of the study tools above with a Bible translation
 - 2) In marginal notes, footnotes, excursus, end notes
 - 3) Follow the same counsel and caution noted above

Notes:

3. Biblical context

- a. Every verse should be interpreted in harmony with its Biblical context
- b. The immediate context: The verses preceding and following that are part of the same story or development of an idea
- c. The larger context
 - 1) The entire book
 - 2) Other books by the same author
 - 3) Parallel passages
 - a) Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy
 - b) Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles
 - c) Matthew, Mark, and Luke
 - d) Ephesians and Colossians
 - e) Timothy and Titus
- d. The ultimate context: The entire Bible
 - 1) Use cross reference notes and concordance to find other similar passages to compare to your text
 - 2) Assumes a unity of thought (truth) among inspired writers
- e. Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture
 - 1) Use easy passages to shed light on a difficult passage
 - 2) Better to confess ignorance than to pronounce an interpretation at odds with the rest of Scripture
- f. Be cautious with conclusions drawn from an obscure passage
 - 1) Caution in stating an interpretation, given no parallel passages or teaching to confirm your interpretation
 - 2) Caution in declaring significance: If an idea is important, it would likely be repeated in other passages

Notes:

4. Historical background

- a. Always ask the obvious background questions
 - 1) Who, what, when, where, why, how, etc.
 - 2) Sometimes sheds light on the interpretation of a verse
 - 3) Often enhances the story within the text
- b. The literary details of a Bible book and its composition
 - 1) The author and intended recipients
 - 2) The date and circumstances
 - 3) The intended purpose and objectives
- c. The identifying features of the narrative within the book
 - 1) Characters and locations
 - 2) Speakers and audiences
 - 3) Timing and circumstances
- d. The general information that forms the historical context
 - 1) Religious and cultural practices
 - 2) Political and military activity
 - 3) Geography and climate
 - 4) Place in Biblical history
 - a) Pre-flood, Patriarchs, Moses, conquest and Judges, Kings and Prophets, Babylonian exile, post-exile restoration
 - b) Ministry of Jesus, beginning of the church, fall of Jerusalem, end of 1st century
 - 5) Place in world history

Notes:

5. Literary genre

- a. Always identify the type of literature for each Biblical text
 - 1) Biblical authors use a variety of literary styles common in their day
 - 2) Knowing the typical rules for each literary genre can help us interpret a Biblical passage correctly
- b. The general literary categories for the Bible
 - 1) Old Testament
 - a) Law: Genesis – Deuteronomy
 - b) History: Joshua – Esther
 - c) Poetry: Job – Song of Solomon
 - d) Prophecy: Isaiah – Malachi
 - 2) New Testament
 - a) Gospels (biography): Matthew – John
 - b) History: Acts
 - c) Epistles (letters): Romans – 3 John
 - d) Prophecy: Revelation
- c. Note which literary styles tend to follow a literal manner of speaking
 - 1) As a general rule, should be read as straight-forward, means what it says
 - 2) History, narrative, story
 - 3) Law, commands
 - 4) Epistles, speeches, sermons
- d. Note which literary styles tend to speak in a figurative manner
 - 1) As a general rule, expect a lot of creative statements using figures and imagery to convey ideas, not to be taken literally
 - 2) Poetry and prophecy
- e. Poetry
 - 1) Dresses up ideas in imaginative and exaggerated imagery
 - 2) Draw out the intended truths, do not take the imagery literally
- f. Proverbs
 - 1) Wise sayings, written in a short, pithy statement
 - 2) Intended to convey conventional (common sense) truths
 - 3) Not so much rules and commands, as a word to the wise
- g. Parables
 - 1) A real life story designed to illustrate a spiritual truth
 - 2) Focus on the key, singular lesson intended by a parable
 - a) Sometimes indicated by the setup to telling the parable
 - b) Usually apparent in the reading of the parable
 - 3) Be cautious with allegorical interpretations of the minor details of a parable
- h. Prophecy
 - 1) Proclamation
 - a) Most prophecy texts are actually preaching texts (sermons)
 - b) A good mix of literal descriptions of spiritual truths and needs and figurative expressions and imagery

- c) As a general rule, intended to exhort the prophet's audience
- 2) Foretelling
 - a) Some prophecy texts are inspired predictions of the future
 - b) As a general rule, written in a figurative (symbolic) style (Num. 12:6-8; Hosea 12:10) not to be interpreted literally
 - c) Old Testament prophecies are best interpreted as focused on the first coming of Christ (not the second coming)
 - d) Look for New Testament indications of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies
 - e) Use historical fulfillments that seem apparent
- 3) Apocalyptic
 - a) Some prophecy books follow a more specialized literary genre called apocalyptic literature
 - b) A collection of visions using commonly-known symbols and images to describe the troubles facing God's people and the divine help to come
 - c) Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation
 - d) Use the established pattern of symbols and meanings and interpret figuratively (not literally)
 - e) Look for historical parallels and fulfillments that seem apparent

Notes:

6. Figures of speech

- a. Be alert for the frequent use of ancient figures of speech
- b. Idioms: Common expressions not meant to be taken literally
- c. Similes and metaphors: To compare a thing to something that is quite different, and yet has a distinctive element in common
- d. Metonymy and synecdoche: To use the name of one thing to represent something else associated with it
- e. Hyperbole: An exaggeration for the sake of emphasis
- f. Irony: To say the opposite of what you really mean, often with humor or sarcasm

Notes:

7. Practical application

- a. The meaning of each text is very specific
 - 1) Always seek the ideas intended by the author and by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21)
 - 2) Do not read a foreign meaning into the text
- b. The application of each text can be quite varied
- c. Focus on the general principles of Scripture
 - 1) Biblical principle: A general rule intended to cover a variety of specific situations, yet stated as a simple concept
 - 2) Not every injunction in Scripture is intended for us
 - a) The old covenant Law of Moses
 - b) Instructions to specific individuals for particular situations
 - 3) But the general principles behind each Biblical statement can be relevant and useful
 - 4) Always consider the negative application of a Biblical principle (what actions seem to contradict the rule)
- d. Consider lessons to be learned from the actions of Bible characters
 - 1) The character of a person may be a clue to the moral lesson, but not necessarily so
 - 2) Focus upon the action (in light of Biblical teaching), the intent, the consequences, and the tone of the Biblical narrative as set by the writer
- e. Always look for a practical application in each Biblical passage (Rev. 1:3)

Notes:

8. Miscellaneous tips

- a. Take notes when you study
- b. Outline your study passage
 - 1) A simple mapping of the progression of thought
 - 2) Also make lists of things
 - 3) Create theme labels for chapters and sections
- c. Read through a whole book (or large section) before you study verse-by-verse
- d. Read your study passage out loud
- e. Memorize and meditate upon key verses
- f. Teach what you have learned to others

Notes: