

PERSPECTIVE

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HOW SHOULD I STUDY THE BIBLE?



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HOW SHOULD I STUDY THE BIBLE?



BAD STUDENTS

The Sadducees were the theological modernists of Jesus' day. They only received the Torah (or Law) as authoritative. They denied heaven and hell and sought to accommodate Judaism to Roman rule. It isn't surprising, then, that Jesus would rebuke this group for not knowing the Scriptures (Matt. 22:29).

The Scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, devoted themselves to the study of the Hebrew Bible. They believed all of the Scriptures were the very words of God, and so they sought to know and obey every jot and tittle of God's revelation. The Pharisees studied and taught what we know as the Old Testament, while the Scribes devoted themselves to copying the Scriptures. The Pharisees debated the minutiae of God's Word, while the Scribes knew the exact number of letters, words, and paragraphs in any portion of Scripture. If these groups were still around today, people would probably call them something like "Bible thumpers."

Yet, shockingly, Jesus rebuked these Jewish students of the Scriptures for the very thing at which they most excelled—namely, the study of the Scriptures (John 5:39)! Though they meditated on God's Word day and night, their study was erroneous. In fact, the result of their failure was eternal death (John 5:40). Such study produced a demonic and hellish

knowledge (Jas. 2:19). It should be obvious, therefore, that there is a wrong way to study the Bible.

What, then, is the right way to study the Scriptures?

The Prerequisite to Rightly Studying the Bible

While these Scribes and Pharisees had PhDs in the Bible, they didn't believe its essential message. They failed to come to Jesus in faith. Seeking to establish a righteousness of their own, they were blind to beholding Jesus as the point of the Law (Rom. 10:1–4). They had memorized God's laws concerning atonement but did not recognize their own need for atonement. They knew much about ceremonial cleanness but could not resonate with David's cry, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps. 51:2). Paul could thus write about many of his fellow Jews, "For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away" (2 Cor. 3:14).

The essential prerequisite to studying the Bible is a saving knowledge of Jesus. While the unredeemed man can excel in a knowledge of mathematics, literature, or ice cream, he cannot accept the teaching of the Scriptures (1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:7). While unbelievers should be encouraged to study the Bible, apart from God's saving grace, their hearts

remain veiled from a knowledge of the truth (2 Cor. 4:3). On the other hand, the redeemed person has been born again with renewed knowledge, faculties, and affections. He can now receive spiritual truths as one who is spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13). Whereas before God's Word was foolish to her, now she can shout, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:103).

HOW THE REDEEMED STUDY THE BIBLE

While redeemed, the Christian has not been perfected. Sometimes sin makes Bible study hard (1 Cor. 3:1-2; Heb. 5:12-13). Like Aslan peeling back Eustace's cursed dragon skin, God's Word can be painful when it confronts the Christian's sin. Yet the Christian sees God's goodness in such discipline (Heb. 12:11). As the Psalmist says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word" (Ps. 119:67).

Yet there is another reason Christians can struggle with studying the Bible: human weakness. We forget that Zephaniah and Zechariah are different books. We can't provide a definition for time, let alone understand eternity. Hebrew and Greek cannot be downloaded into our minds in a moment. And even if we master these languages, Paul can still be difficult to understand at times—at least that is what Peter thought (2 Pet. 3:16).

It is clear, therefore, that we need help to study the Scriptures rightly—help for us in our sin and our weakness as we approach God's revelation of Himself. Seven items are offered here to answer the question "How should I study the Bible?" This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is a starting point for the saints as they resonate with the Psalmist: "Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them" (Ps. 111:2).

(1) Study the Bible as God's Word

When the Thessalonians heard Paul preach, they probably thought he had the accent of a man from Asia Minor. The distance from Tarsus to Thessalonica was about the same as the distance from Atlanta, Georgia, to Providence, Rhode Island. People living that far apart have different accents. Yet the delivery of Paul's message did not distract them from understanding who was essentially speaking: God. These Thessalonians "accepted it

not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

Likewise, the Bible must be received as God's very Word. God is the essential author of the Scriptures. He superintended the biblical writers such that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, the New Testament authors felt freedom to ascribe Old Testament writings to particular figures such as Moses or David, while in another moment ascribing them to God. The Scriptures should therefore be studied in accordance with what they truly are: the very words of God.

When the CEO of a company speaks, the employees listen intently. When a general speaks, the soldiers stand at attention. When we comprehend that every line of the Scriptures is the very Word of God, we should respond with due respect and readiness to hear from our Creator and Redeemer.

(2) Study the Bible Prayerfully

At times, familiarity can lead to presumption. I don't pray for God to supply my daily electricity until the power goes out. I don't ask for God to bless me with good health until I am at the doctor. Often we assume that since God blessed our study of His Word yesterday, He will bless it again today. The Psalmist, on the other hand, recognized his own sin and weakness and responded by turning to the Lord: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Ps. 119:18).

Jesus taught His disciples for nearly three years. If there was ever anyone who didn't need further divine assistance to understand the Bible, it was these men. Yet the Apostles were dumbfounded by how their Old Testaments squared with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the risen Lord "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

For my family, the need for God's grace to comprehend His Word works out to a simple prayer every night before we open our Bibles: "Heavenly Father, help us to understand, believe, and obey your word. In Jesus' name, amen." It's rather unremarkable, yet it starts our family worship time with the implicit statement: "We need Your help, God."

(3) Study the Bible in Context

“Let them eat cake.” Marie Antoinette famously uttered these words in reference to the peasants of France’s hunger. In her mouth, this phrase represented an obliviousness to the plight of the masses. Yet when these same words are proclaimed at a child’s birthday party, jubilation ensues. Context matters.

When studying the Bible, context matters too. The covenantal context matters (i.e., Old Covenant or New). The historical context matters (e.g., pre-exilic or post-exilic prophets). The genre as a form of context matters (e.g., Romans and Revelation communicate truth in differing styles). The internal literary context matters (i.e., how verse 1 relates to verse 2, etc.). Keeping these contexts in mind is essential for properly understanding the Scriptures.

Sometimes these contexts are evident (e.g., Paul wrote Romans to the Romans). At other times they require more in-depth study (e.g., the “elect lady” in 2 John is a term for a church and not an individual). Often a good study Bible like the ESV Study Bible can make readers aware of these contexts.

(4) Study the Bible Broadly

Augustine summarized the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament as “The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed.”¹ In Augustine’s understanding, you need the whole of the Bible to understand any singular part of the Scriptures. The first pages of the New Testament bear witness to this. Matthew begins his Gospel by showing over and over again how Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations. For Matthew and the New Testament authors, Jesus cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament. Simultaneously, the Old Testament lacks fulfillment until the arrival of the New.

How, then, are we to study the Bible? We are to study the Scriptures broadly. A devotion to one part over another is insufficient. Studying all of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is necessary for the Christian to grow in godliness and maturity. Reading through the Bible in a year takes about 12 minutes a day. It’s a reasonable goal.

(5) Study the Bible Granularly

When debating the resurrection with the Sadducees, Jesus proved that there would be a future bodily state by arguing from the tense of the verb “am” (Matt. 22:32). Paul argued that the promises made to Abraham find fulfillment in Christ based on a singular use of the word “offspring” (Gal. 3:16). At Jesus’ death, John recognized that Jesus’ bones were not broken. He saw this as evidence that Jesus was the true Lamb of God typified in the Passover lamb (John 19:33–36). Jesus and the biblical authors clearly cared about the minutiae of the Scriptures. High-level overviews were not sufficient for them. Their example proved that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Our study of the Scriptures should therefore not limit itself to breadth but should also include depth. Picking a book or passage of the Bible to attempt to master is a commendable goal. The Puritan Joseph Caryl (1602–1673) spent decades preaching through the book of Job as well as producing a 60-pound commentary. While I wouldn’t prefer a multiple-decades-long sermon series, I can appreciate the pastor’s effort to mine the depth of God’s Word. The Scriptures are inexhaustible because God, their Author, is inexhaustible. To this end, consider slowly meditating through a portion of Scripture over an extended period of time, reading a commentary on a book of the Bible, or studying the Scriptures with a fellow saint. Miners don’t regret finding too much gold, and neither does the Christian who diligently mines the Bible.

(6) Study the Bible Ready to Joyfully Obey

Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount by presenting two different ways to live. The wise man “hears these words of mine and does them” (Matt. 7:24). The foolish man “hears these words of mine and does not do them” (Matt. 7:26). Hearing is not enough. God’s Word isn’t advice; it is a command. And God’s Word is to be joyfully obeyed.

Obedience often carries negative connotations, as though it means doing something contrary to our own desires. While obedience to God does require denying our sinful inclinations, it is for our good.

Like a farmer enjoying the fruit of his field as he works, so the one who obeys God “will be blessed in his doing” (Jas. 1:25). Furthermore, “in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).

On the other hand, failure to heed God’s Word distorts one’s ability to comprehend it. Like the man who fails to clean out the lint trap of his dryer, the longer sin is allowed to grow, the worse its effects. The author of Hebrews therefore instructs his readers to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). God’s Word is to be studied not merely for knowledge but for obedience.

(7) Study the Bible with God’s People

The Apostle Paul never heard of a Bible college or seminary. Nor did he travel throughout the Mediterranean world in the hopes of producing a YouTube series on Christian doctrine. Paul planted churches. This doesn’t mean that there is no place for Christian educational institutions or teaching material outside of a Christian’s own church. But it does mean the church should be the primary ecosystem for studying the Bible.

To put this another way, I can’t say, “The Lord says to read J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*.” Although I can strongly recommend it as an excellent book, I can’t command it with any moral weight. On the other hand, I can quote the author of Hebrews: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). Under the Old Covenant, one could expect to find an Israelite in Israel. So under the New Covenant, one can expect to find a New Covenant individual—namely, a Christian—among the New Covenant people, namely, a particular church.

Therefore, study the Bible with God’s people. If you want to grow in godliness, attend to the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. Trees need sunlight to grow, and Christians need God’s Word to grow. So, sit under the right teaching of God’s Word and watch as the elders seek to obey God’s Word as “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). This shouldn’t exclude learning from other Christians outside of your particular church, but it should help inform

it. If an elder keeps quoting Charles Spurgeon, by all means ask for a Spurgeon book that they would recommend. Be discipled and disciple with those brothers and sisters with whom you gather every Lord’s Day. Study God’s Word with God’s people.

Study the Bible by God’s Grace

In Shai Linne’s song, “Cosmic Powers,” the rapper depicts Satan’s attack on those with access to God’s Word:

And His top priority is that we deny The Book

Tactic One: The Bible - keep you from reading it

And if you’re reading it, he’ll try to keep you from believing it

If you’re believing it, he’ll try to keep you from obedience

Or speaking it, he’s got temptations for every season kid²

Satan has a bag of tricks to keep Christians from obeying God’s Word. It is easy to fall into such temptations. And once caught in the snare, Satan’s aim is to keep the Christian in sin. For some, this manifests itself in guilt and despair, keeping them from opening God’s Word. In others, this manifests itself in pride about one’s Bible study. Either way, Satan is pleased that the Christian has failed to believe the message of the Bible: God saves sinners.

If this list has brought you further into despair about your Bible study, remember what Micah cried out in his distress: “Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (Mic. 7:8). Micah didn’t place his hope in his own efforts but in the Lord who shows grace to sinners and gives strength to the weak. Pray that God would grant you renewed energies and then open His Word and marvel at His love toward you.

If this list has confirmed your practices, praise God! Don’t grow prideful. Fasting twice a week or reading the Scriptures twice a day will not commend you to God (Luke 18:9–14). By all means, keep studying, but not like a Pharisee.

Rather sing with the tax collector who went home justified,

*Not the labors of my hands
can fulfill thy law's demands;
could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone;
thou must save, and thou alone.*³

— Madison Rieke

Resources

¹ Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, Book 2, Question 73.

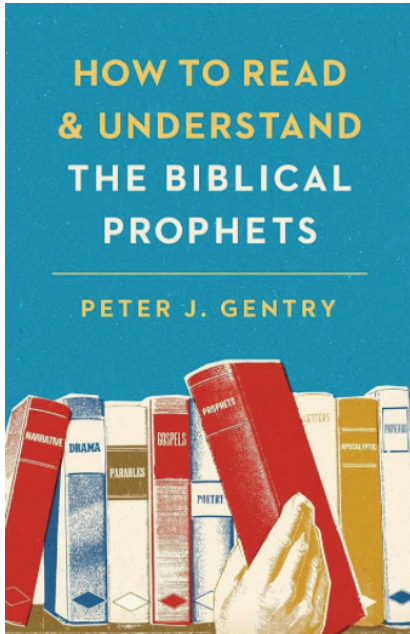
² Shai Linne, “Cosmic Powers,” *Lyrical Theology Part 1: Theology* (Lamp Mode Recordings, 2013).

³ Augustus Montague Toplady, “Rock of Ages,” *The Gospel Magazine*, March 1776.

BOOK HIGHLIGHT

HOW TO READ & UNDERSTAND THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS

Written by Peter J. Gentry | Recommended by Bill Timmons



Old Testament prophets hold a key place in Scripture as they deliver God's Word to his people and the surrounding nations and predict the future, both near and distant. *How to Read & Understand the Biblical Prophets* by Peter J. Gentry is written to help the reader understand that the prophets communicated differently from today's authors, and that, accordingly, we can't approach them in the same way that we might approach other books. In this short, easy-to-read book, Gentry shows how the prophetic books should be read by noting characteristics that are common in prophetic works and offering strategies for reading them.

The topics Gentry covers include calls to return to the Mosaic covenant, consequences of breaking the covenant, the use of repetition, oracles concerning foreign nations, and different types of prophecies regarding the future. I was particularly helped by Gentry's discussion of repetition. One might read Isaiah, for example, and think that Isaiah keeps repeating himself. Gentry shows that this repetition is purposeful. The prophets used couplets, word pairs (such as kindness and faithfulness) and chiasmic structure to develop ideas in a way that is more robust than by using single words or ideas. Gentry uses the example of surround sound—the music that travels through each speaker is different yet also the same—to

drive home his point that the prophets look at things from different angles to give a fuller understanding. I also learned that finding these patterns of repetition can help in understanding a difficult passage of Scripture by locating a paired passage that is more straightforward.

Apart from the strategies that Gentry gives, I greatly benefited from simply following along with Gentry's exegesis of passages from the Old Testament—particularly from difficult books such as Isaiah and Daniel—that he uses to illustrate his points. This encouraged me to really consider word usage, patterns, and repetition as I read the prophets.

This book would be an excellent resource for every Christian to help them better understand the Old Testament prophets, as well as for those who really want to dig deeper and study the books in a more comprehensive way. (There is also a bonus chapter on the literary structure of Revelation that includes a fun outline of the book, which is very timely as the church studies Revelation.)

BOOK EXCERPTS

Apocalyptic language uses complex and highly colored metaphors and symbols in order to describe one event in terms of another. In this way, an event can be described and, at the same time, the meaning of the event can be explained.

– "Describing the Future, Part 2," p. 101

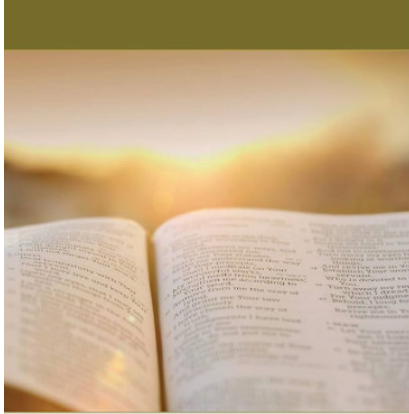
The idea that later writers of Scripture help to interpret earlier writers of Scripture means that citations of the prophets by later writers of the Old and New Testaments are important in learning how to read and understand the biblical prophets. This is especially true if you want to have a Christian understanding of the prophets.

– "Describing the Future, Part 3," p. 118

BOOK HIGHLIGHT

40 QUESTIONS ABOUT INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Written by Robert Plummer | Recommended by Katie Vines



40 QUESTIONS ABOUT Interpreting the Bible

Second Edition

Robert L. Plummer

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor

Have you ever had a friend, coworker, or family member ask you a question about the Bible that left you stumped? Or maybe you've had your own question about how to rightly understand a passage of Scripture. These days, it's tempting to type that question into ChatGPT and take whatever answer comes back at face value. Instead, let me commend to you Robert Plummer's *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. This trustworthy, well-referenced guide walks through many of the questions Christians and non-Christians commonly ask, all aimed at helping people read their Bibles more faithfully.

Throughout, Plummer calls his readers to pursue biblical fidelity through both prayerful meditation and careful interpretation. I was particularly helped by Plummer's answer to Question #15. He helpfully addresses whether a text can have more than one meaning, concluding that the intent of the author determines a text's meaning. Yet a text can carry more than one implication that the author may not have consciously intended, as context and culture still shape how that meaning is applied today. The core meaning and significance of the text remain unchanged even as its implications may vary.

As I finished the book, I found myself with an even deeper appreciation for expositional preaching and gratitude for our church's commitment to wisely teaching God's Word. Every Wednesday night at Mount Vernon, our teachers close the night together by debriefing the Sunday morning sermon, Sunday evening devotion, and adult classes taught that week. This standing meeting isn't kept out of obligation, but out of a shared conviction that faithful interpretation and application sharpen over time through the counsel of others.

This book feels less like a book you read once and shelve, and more like a reference you'll keep coming back to. With that, I'd recommend this book to anyone wanting to deepen their personal study time. I'd especially commend it to anyone who desires to grow as a teacher. Plummer reminds us that interpreting Scripture requires humble dependence on God. While sound interpretation is important, it isn't the ultimate goal. Rather, applying what we learn from those interpretations to our daily lives grows our love for God and, in turn, our obedience to his Word.

BOOK EXCERPTS

The Bible confronts the reader with ultimate claims as to the human situation (rebellion and condemnation) and the nature of God (holy and loving). In that sense, no neutral middle ground will ever be possible in biblical scholarship.

– "How Has the Bible Been Interpreted Throughout Church History?," p. 104

...faithful interpretation is more easily caught than taught. By reading or listening to faithful expositions of Scripture, one's heart and mind are engaged. Just as the person who regularly drinks fine coffee develops a refined taste for the beverage, a person who consumes a regular diet of faithful teaching develops a mind and heart that is able to recognize good interpretation, as well as distortions.

– "How Can I Improve as an Interpreter of the Bible?," p. 124

BIBLE READING PLAN

AUGUST

TAKE UP & READ

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message.
Take Up & Read!

August 1	Ephesians 5	August 17	Revelation 20:1-6
August 2	Revelation 19:1-10	August 18	Isaiah 24
August 3	Revelation 19:11-21	August 19	Isaiah 25
August 4	Psalm 2	August 20	1 Corinthians 15:20-28
August 5	Isaiah 11	August 21	Genesis 3:1-15
August 6	Revelation 17	August 22	Psalm 110
August 7	Deuteronomy 10:12-22	August 23	Revelation 20:1-6
August 8	Revelation 18	August 24	Matthew 10:40-42
August 9	Revelation 19:11-21	August 25	Hebrews 13
August 10	2 Samuel 7:1-20	August 26	2 Kings 4:8-17
August 11	1 Chronicles 17	August 27	3 John
August 12	Psalm 89	August 28	Isaiah 58:6-11
August 13	Luke 1:26-38	August 29	Matthew 10:34-42
August 14	Hebrews 1:1-9	August 30	Matthew 10:40-42
August 15	Romans 1:1-7		
August 16	2 Samuel 7:1-20		

*Sermons in Bold

NEW MEMBERS



BEN
BUXTON



SARAH
BOOTH



LARRY
HUANG



MEGAN
HUANG



MICHAEL
HEBERT



RACHEL
HEBERT



GORDON
MOORE



AMY
MOORE



JOHN
ROE



RACHEL
WALKER

"We must grasp once again, the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honour which can come a man's way in this world."

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES



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