

Topic 23: Bible Reading & Study

Being Rooted in God's Truth

"Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path."

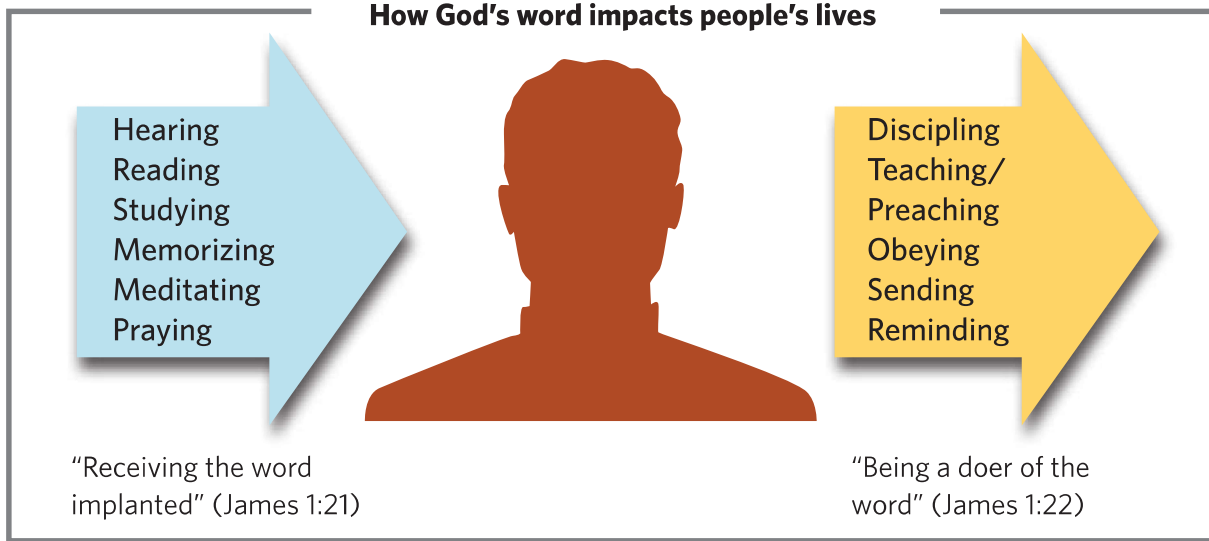
—Psalm 119:105

What can be said about the Bible that hasn't already been said? Its detractors call it names we can't repeat. Its fans call it everything from "the owner's manual for life," to "letters from home," to "the story of God."

Meanwhile, God's Word touts itself as an indispensable, life-saving, life-changing, life-enhancing revelation from God (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21). To help us grasp all that, it likens itself to:

- ▶ *bread* (John 6:51)—necessary for life
- ▶ *gold and silver* (Psalm 12:6; 19:10)—making us spiritually wealthy beyond our wildest dreams
- ▶ a *fire* (Jeremiah 20:9; Luke 24:32)—uncontainable, able to consume what is dead
- ▶ a *hammer* (Jeremiah 23:29)—able to penetrate through hard heads and shatter hard hearts
- ▶ *honey* (Psalm 19:10)—delighting to our senses
- ▶ a *lamp* (Psalm 119:105)—lighting our way in a world that has been darkened by sin and evil
- ▶ *meat* (Hebrews 5:12–14)—able to sustain and nourish mature believers with profound truth
- ▶ *milk* (1 Peter 2:2)—full of simple truths to help "baby believers" grow
- ▶ a *mirror* (James 1:23–25)—able to show us what we truly look like inside and out
- ▶ *seed* (Matthew 13:18–23)—able to grow and bear fruit when it takes root in our lives
- ▶ a *sword* (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12)—our best weapon in fighting spiritual battles
- ▶ *water* (Ephesians 5:25–27)—able to wash us and make us pure

As the diagram on the next page shows, we are to let God's Word take root in our lives, and then let it bear fruit.



Here, we just want to focus on the truth that disciples of Jesus make Bible reading and study a regular practice. They want to hear God speak. They want to know his heart and do his will. A disciple is a student and practitioner of God’s Word.

Bible Study

Reading the Bible

Reading is one of the fundamental ways we process information and acquire knowledge. Consider the Bible passages in the table that starts below. They emphasize the importance of reading God’s Word.

Example	Scripture
God’s command to Israel’s future kings, that they must be immersed in divine truth.	“He must always keep that copy with him and read it daily as long as he lives. That way he will learn to fear the Lord his God by obeying all the terms of these instructions and decrees.” (Deuteronomy 17:19, NLT)
Ezra the priest’s plan for helping his countrymen grow in their faith after the exile.	“They remained standing in place for three hours while the Book of the Law of the Lord their God was read aloud to them. Then for three more hours they confessed their sins and worshiped the Lord their God.” (Nehemiah 9:3, NLT)
The Apostle Paul’s command to Timothy, a young pastor and Paul’s protégé.	“Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:13, NASB)

1. What stands out to you from these examples?



2. What are your own habits of Bible reading?

3. If you are not a regular Bible reader, why? What holds you back?

Seven Ways to Read God's Word

- ▶ **Prayerfully** Before you begin, ask God to speak. Ask him for “ears to hear.”
- ▶ **Expectantly** Believe that God wants to speak to you, even more than you want to hear from him. Then be alert for his voice.
- ▶ **Devotionally** See your Bible reading as a personal time *with* God rather than an assignment in trying to learn new information *about* God.
- ▶ **Slowly** Don't be in a rush. It's not a race. You don't get a prize for finishing your reading quickly. Linger. Savor the words. Re-read them.
- ▶ **Comprehensively** You wouldn't buy a best-selling novel (or a work of non-fiction), let it fall open to page 134, and start reading there. Or only read the final four chapters. Why do we do that with the Bible? Resist the urge to read randomly. Read through a book at a time. (You might consider starting with the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.) Don't ignore big sections of Scripture. Consider reading the entire Bible cover to cover. That's the best way to get the truest sense of who God is, and what his story is about.
- ▶ **Regularly** Exercising once every three weeks is better than nothing. But such a sporadic training regimen isn't likely to get you in great physical condition. In the same way, occasional Bible reading isn't the optimal way to cultivate your relationship with God or prepare for helping others know God.
- ▶ **Obediently** Always read with a mindset of “I will do whatever God commands.”

“Read it through; pray it in; live it out; pass it on.”—George Gritter



Studying the Bible

Bible study is the practice of a disciple of Jesus in which we try to deepen our understanding of God's Word so that we can more closely align our lives to what God has revealed and commanded.

4. What intimidates you most about studying the Bible?

Bible study is engaging one's mind, heart, and will in order to understand and apply God's Word to everyday life.

There are all kinds of ways to approach Bible study. One of the simplest, clearest, and easiest methods is the three-step method that includes

Step #1: Observing God's Word

Step #2: Interpreting God's Word

Step #3: Applying God's Word

Below is a chart that shows the differences between these three phases of Bible study.

Observation	Interpretation	Application
"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things from your law." (Psalm 119:18)	"Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works." (Psalm 119:27, ESV)	"I will hurry, without delay, to obey your commands." (Psalm 119:60, NLT)
Asking: What does it say?	Asking: What does it mean?	Asking: What do I need to do?
Probing	Pondering	Practicing
Exploring	Explaining	Exercising
Discovering	Digesting	Doing
Seeing	Understanding	Obeying

Sample Bible Study

Let's look at those components in more detail, by actually doing a simple Bible study of Mark 8:22–26 together. Here's the passage:

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

Step #1: Observing God's Word

- ▶ **Pray** Ask the Spirit of God to be your teacher and to guide you into truth. Ask God for "eyes to see."
- ▶ **Read** Don't skim the passage the way you'd click and scroll through the Internet looking for something to catch your eye. Study the scene like a detective. What do you see? Noticing details requires conscious effort. Read the passage a second and third time. Don't read things "into" the text, but do try to draw out every relevant detail "from" the text.
- ▶ **Question** Dedicated Bible students bombard the text with questions. Study the chart below to discover some examples of questions you are encouraged to ask as you read the Scriptures.
- ▶ **Write** Record all your observations. Don't lose those "Aha!" insights by trusting them solely to your memory. Jot them down.

WHO?	Who is mentioned or involved here?
	Who seems to be the primary character?
WHAT?	What is going on or what is being said?
	What is the context for these events?
	What happened just before this?
	What is the sequence of events?
	What words (verbs, adjectives, prepositions, etc.) did the Spirit-guided author choose?
	What descriptive details do I see?
	What is the mood and setting?



WHEN?	When is this action taking place? When one character says or does ____, then . . .
WHERE?	Where are these events happening?
WHY?	Does the author explain why these events are unfolding? Does the author offer a motive for a character's words or actions?
HOW?	How do the characters respond? How does the scene conclude?

5. Take a few minutes to observe Mark 8:22–26. Jot down some of your observations:

a. Why is it important to first objectively gather data before you do anything else?

b. How solid will our interpretations of a passage be if we don't first carefully observe the passage? Why?

Step #2: Interpreting God's Word

Once you've done the hard work of gathering facts—objectively asking what does it say and/or what do I see?—it's time to begin asking what does all this mean?

6. Suppose a friend studying Mark 8:22–26 with you said the following were things that were meaningful in the passage:

- ▶ Apart from the intercession and intervention of others, sick people will never experience Jesus' healing touch (v. 22).



- ▶ People aren't healed until they first agree to take Jesus' hand and follow him (v. 23).
- ▶ Spitting on people with disabilities helps them find healing (v. 24).
- ▶ When it comes to healing broken people, Jesus works in unique and unexpected ways (vss. 23–25).
- ▶ Divine healing is not always instantaneous (vss. 24–25).
- ▶ When Jesus takes us out of a bad situation and changes us, he does not want us going back into that same situation (vss. 23, 26).

Do you agree with any or all of those interpretations? Why or why not?

Knowing the Author's Intent

Imagine a terminally ill billionaire has drawn up her last will and testament.

After her funeral, when the will is read by a probate court, what's the goal? Is it to discover and do what she actually intended, or is it to have family factions interpret her words in five very different ways and bicker over the matter for the next twenty years?

Obviously the goal of a good attorney and a non-biased judge is to disregard what all the readers of the will want it to mean, and, instead, to discern and carry out the intent of the author of the will.

And so it is with interpreting God's Words. His intent must be our goal.

Scholars call the science of interpretation *hermeneutics*. As with all disciplines, there are agreed-upon principles and rules to follow. Disregarding these practices can lead to unbiblical ideas and the formation of pseudo-Christian cults. Finding out how various Bible scholars who've studied the language and culture of the Bible interpret a text is valuable.

In interpreting a passage, we are asking what does God intend to communicate here? We are not asking "What do I *feel* this passage means to me?"

Avoiding Wrong Bible Interpretations

Leave our presuppositions behind.

We must beware of trying to force a passage to fit with our preexisting beliefs or experiences. Disciples should always base their beliefs on what the Bible says rather than interpreting the Bible in accordance with their beliefs.

Resist getting overly creative.

It's tempting to look for some mysterious, hidden, symbolic meaning that no one has ever seen before. It's also dangerous.



Take into account historical, cultural, grammatical, and literary realities.

Though it's one timeless story, God's Word is comprised of a variety of kinds of literature. Plus it was compiled over 2,000 years in various Near Eastern and Mid-Eastern cultural settings by some forty different human authors writing in three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. If we insist on reading it through twenty-first century western eyes, we will misunderstand its meaning. This requires that you . . .

Ask and answer a LOT of questions!	For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What kind of literature is this? Poetry? History? Prophecy? Wisdom? Epistolary? ▶ Is this passage narrative (a story) or didactic (instruction)? ▶ Is this text descriptive (simply telling about things that happened in a unique setting) or prescriptive (showing what should happen in all places at all times)?
Use the whole of Scripture to help interpret the parts of Scripture.	If other passages do not corroborate your interpretation of a text, you may be on dangerous ground. We should always use clear passages to help us grasp the meanings of unclear ones. Regarding the Mark 8 passage, since there are no other healings recorded in the gospels which show Jesus laying his hands on a person a second time, we are probably wise not to read too much into this unique event. In fact, that may be a valid interpretation: Jesus deals with each person uniquely.
Consider the context of a statement or passage.	For example, to understand Jesus' command to the healed man "Don't go into the village," we need to look at comparable passages in Mark's gospel (1:44; 5:19, 43; see also Matthew 8:4 and 16:20).
Consult trustworthy commentaries on Scripture.	Seeing how Bible scholars interpret a text is a valuable help in understanding God's Word. So make use of Bible commentaries and study Bibles with notes from scholars.

7. Based on these rules of interpreting Scripture, what do you think of the "friend's" interpretations of Mark 8: 22–26 above?

a. What would you suggest as the meaning/interpretation of the story in Mark 8:22–26?

Step #3: Applying God's Word

Applying the Bible is the final, crucial step of Bible study. This is where we put God's truth into practice. We live it out. We seek to be doers of the Word (James 1:22). Though a single verse or passage never has multiple interpretations (meanings), it can and does have a myriad of different possible applications.

For example, a men's group studying Ephesians 5:25 and the command to "love your wives, just as Christ loved the church" all agreed that the timeless *principle* there is that husbands are called to love their wives unconditionally and sacrificially. But their individual *applications* of that principle will look very different. For example,

- ▶ Bob has decided to back out of his fishing trip, and stay home to do three "honey do" projects that his wife Elizabeth has been begging him to do for months.
- ▶ Stephen feels nudged to apologize to his wife Ellen for being a slob and for not helping around the house. He wants to give her a weekend at a nice hotel.

How to Find Good Applications

After you have carefully observed a Bible passage and prayerfully determined what truth God meant to convey through it, you need to state that truth in the form of a broad "now" principle (like the guys did above). This serves as a kind of "bridge" between interpretation and application.

For example, in the case of our passage, Mark 8:22–26:

- ▶ **Observation** When some people brought a blind man to Jesus and requested he touch and heal the man, Jesus did so, in two phases.
- ▶ **Interpretation** Jesus demonstrated unique compassion and power to those who needed his touch.

8. What broad timeless principle do you see in this passage?

a. Finally, what **application(s)** do you get from the story of Jesus healing the blind man?

Take-Home Reflections



The growing, fruitful disciple of Jesus makes it a practice to read and study God's Word. He or she has the attitude expressed by John Wesley:

"I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book."

D. L. Moody on Why and How to Study the Bible

- ▶ "Someone has said that there are four things necessary in studying the Bible: Admit, submit, commit and transmit."
- ▶ "What we need as Christians is to be able to feed ourselves. How many there are who sit helpless and listless, with open mouths, hungry for spiritual things, and the minister has to try to feed them, while the Bible is a feast prepared, into which they never venture."
- ▶ "Depend upon it, my friends, if you get tired of the Word of God, and it becomes wearisome to you, you are out of communion with Him."
- ▶ "The more you love the Scriptures, the firmer will be your faith. There is little backsliding when people love the Scriptures."

Classic Bible Study Application Questions:

- Is there an overt command here to obey?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there a new truth about God in which I can trust?
- Is there a sin to avoid?
- Is there a behavior to renounce?
- Is there an attitude to embrace?
- Is there an example to follow?
- Is there a prayer to express?

- ▶ "Bear in mind there is no situation in life for which you cannot find some word of consolation in Scripture."
- ▶ "The best law for Bible study is the law of perseverance."
- ▶ "So few grow, because so few study."
- ▶ "When I pray, I talk to God, but when I read the Bible, God is talking to me; and it is really more important that God should speak to me than that I should speak to Him. I believe we should know better how to pray if we knew our Bibles better. What is an army good for if they don't know how to use their weapons?"
- ▶ "I thank God there is a height in [the Bible] I do not know anything about, a depth I have never been able to fathom, and it makes the Book all the more fascinating."



Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse, Psalm 119:105.

"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."

2. Review "D. L. Moody on Why and How to Study the Bible" on the previous page.

Which of the individual points represent something you already do? Which represent something you would like to do? Determine which of the "want to" points you will immediately incorporate into your Bible study practices.

3. Read the following article about "Scripture Memory."

Scripture Memory

A lot of people (especially people who are upwards of 30 years old) are inclined to think *I can't memorize a bunch of Bible verses!*

Not true! Think of all the information, all the facts you've already got stored in your mind—computer passwords, pin numbers, funny lines from movies, phone numbers, important dates (like your anniversary—right, guys?), addresses, etc. And that doesn't include all the song lyrics you know by heart.

The truth is we *can* memorize Scripture. The only question is *will* we?

Why does Scripture memory matter?

Internalizing God's truth is life-changing! It:

- ▶ Gives us victory over sin. Psalm 119:11 says that when we hide God's Word in our hearts, it is a great defense against temptation. Jesus proved this in his own wilderness struggle against the devil (Matthew 4:1–11).

- ▶ Radically affects our lives by helping renew our minds (Romans 12:1)
- ▶ Helps us overcome worry; God promises to flood our lives with peace when our minds are fixed on him and his Word (Isaiah 26:3; Philippians 4:6–8).
- ▶ Gives us confidence when we share our faith (1 Peter 3:15). No longer will we feel tongue-tied or wonder what to say in a conversation about spiritual matters.

When is the best time to memorize?

Most people find the best times are probably just before going to bed, or when you first wake up in the morning. But it may be that your mind is sharpest at 2:15 in the afternoon, or around lunchtime. The point is, there is no "right" time. Just do it whenever you can really focus and concentrate. NOTE: Some people like to memorize while running or walking (*Warning! You can twist an ankle doing it this way!*)



How much Scripture should I memorize?

Don't get too ambitious and try to memorize all four gospels the first week (at least not in Greek). Shoot for one or two verses per week, and keep reviewing them until you really have them down.

What is the "trick"?

Now we get down to the nitty-gritty. Here are some tips for getting God's Word into your mind and heart:

- ▶ Pick out the verse you intend to memorize.
 - ▶ Read the chapter that contains the verse so that you understand the context—what's going on in the background.
 - ▶ Include the reference (example, Psalm 119:105) as part of the verse. Say this *before* reading the verse and again *after* you've finished. This is important because it helps you remember exactly where the verse is located. Then you won't get in situations where you end up saying, "Well, I don't remember where that verse is, but I know it's in the Bible *somewhere*."
 - ▶ Read the verse several times out loud. This gives you the flow of the verse.
 - ▶ Break the verse into chunks, memorizing phrase by phrase. Say the reference by itself. Then the reference and the first "chunk." Then the reference, the first, and the second part of the verse. And so forth, until you've said the reference, the whole verse, and the reference again.
- ▶ Carefully write the verse on an index card, note pad, or in your mobile phone, thinking about it as you go. This helps cement it in your mind. For visual learners, writing the verse works better than merely saying it over and over. Once you've written the verse down, take it with you everywhere you go and . . .
 - ▶ Review your pants off! (Not *literally*, of course, but several times each day during the next two or three days).

That's all there is to it. Isn't that simple?

A final reminder

God will help you as you memorize. He wants his Word to take root and bear fruit in your life even more than you do. (See Deuteronomy 6:6 and Colossians 3:16.)

You can count on his help!