**How to Study the Bible**

I. What’s the goal of Bible study?

A. It is more than learning facts.

What if I told you that your Mom loves you, and you believed that, you know it is true, and that’s where it ends.

Would you have a meaningful relationship with your mom?

Let’s say that you never talk to your mom, that you only know stuff about your mom that others have told you.

Would you call that a good relationship?

B. the goal of Bible study is to personally meet with God in a meaningful way. (John 17:3)

“Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Let’s say that you become a missionary in the Czech Republic, and you meet a Czech who only speaks Czech and you only speak English. What would you need to develop a meaningful relationship with them?

-someone to interpret for you

(or better yet)

-for you to learn the skill of speaking their language.

Why would that be so important?

The same is true for us as Christians. Knowledge about God is important, but we need to learn the skill of talking and hearing from God on a personal level.

C. We assume that people automatically know how to understand the Bible, but it is a skill that needs to be learned just like language.

It’s good to learn about a loved one through reports of someone else. It’s good to communicate with someone who speaks a different language through an interpreter.

Coming to church and hearing preaching and teaching from the Word of God is important. Reading books written by others who have studied the Word of God is helpful. But none of those are a substitute for personally communicating with God, especially having Him talk to you through personal Bible study.

So we want to spend time learning the skill of Bible study. The four steps we are going to look at are found in your Ontrack Devotional books.

II. **Step #1: Observation-** What do I see?

A. This is more than just learning the facts.

When my brother was teaching in North Africa, that is how they taught. They did not teach students to think or for understanding. They merely taught facts for students to recite.

B. When we approach the Bible, we want to be investigators. **We want to ask effective questions** that help us understand the passage. Facts are important, but we want to go beyond facts to see how the people in the text are responding. Why are they responding like that? What did it mean to them?

Good questions help to pull out the meaning and help us connect it with our lives today.

C. Read Matthew 26:6-13 (Read it like you have never read this before)

“While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, **7**a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

**8**When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. **9**“This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.”

**10**Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. **11**The poor you will always have with you,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+26%3A6-13&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24066a)] but you will not always have me. **12**When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. **13**Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Start with the traditional Who/What/Where/When/Why/How questions.

Then move into the 2nd and 3rd generation questions that will naturally come from the 1st set of questions. Avoid asking rhetorical questions or silly questions.

Sample questions for Matthew 26:6-13

1. Who attended the dinner? (Simon the Leper, a woman, disciples)

2. Why was the dinner given? (in honor of Jesus, perhaps for healing Simon of his leprosy)

3. Which Mary was this? Why did she care so much? (raised Lazarus her brother)

4. Why did she choose that way to express her love? (prepare Jesus’ body for death)

5. How much was the perfume worth? (years wages)

6. Why did the disciples respond the way they did? (Judas wanted to be able to spend it)

7. How did Jesus respond? Why? (rebuked them for giving the woman a hard time)

III**. Interpretation: What does it mean?** What is the writer saying?

A. Are there many correct interpretations to understanding this story?

There may be many “possible” interpretations, but there is only **one** “correct” interpretation. Our job as interpreters is to try to understand **what the author was intending to communicate** by including this story in his gospel.

C. How might we determine what the correct interpretation is?

1. We need to **know the context** in which the statement was written.

a. What does the immediate context tell us?

Matt. 26:2- timing. The Passover was two days away and Jesus was going to handed over and be crucified.

Matt. 26:12- Jesus says that this woman has prepared his body for burial by pouring this perfume on him.

2. What did it mean to those who heard it? How did they respond?

Some were angry that she “wasted” this costly perfume.

Jesus rebukes them and says what she did was to always be remembered.

3. We naturally start asking the kind of questions we need to ask when we are attempting to find answers to the questions we are creating in our investigation.

a. For example, “Why did Mary choose the time, place and

method she did to express her love for Jesus?” (Matt. 26:6-13)

What do we know of anointing? Was this normal? If not, what was different about it? What did it mean to those in attendance? (see Luke 7:38) Normal hospitable anointing was just the feet.

b. Knowing the background of the situation is crucial in understanding why Mary did what she did

4. Therefore, we need to do research to gain info about the original context so we can fully understand it in ours. Do the surrounding context help give these verses more

meaning?

5. Another key to interpreting a passage is what the Bible says in other places (cross-

referencing Scripture)

a. Do other passages speak to a specific point in this passage?

b. Are there other passages that use the same vocabulary words?

c. Do other passages give details about the story I am reading?

d. A good study Bible will let you know that this story is also recorded in

John 12:1-8 and Mark 14:3-9

John 12:1-8

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2**Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3**Then Mary took about a pint[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+12%3A1-8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26584a)] of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

**4**But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5**“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+12%3A1-8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26586b)]” **6**He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

**7**“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8**You will always have the poor among you,[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+12%3A1-8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26589c)] but you will not always have me.”

Mark 14:3-9

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

**4**Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? **5**It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+14%3A3-9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24760a)] and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.

**6**“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. **7**The poor you will always have with you,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+14%3A3-9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24762b)] and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. **8**She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. **9**Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Let’s read these parallel passages and see if they help to give greater insight.

This was Mary- the sister of Lazarus (John 12:3). The perfume was worth a year’s wages (Mark 14:5).

Jesus said this was a beautiful thing. He commended her for doing what she could (Mk 14:6,8). Somehow Mary understood that Jesus was about to die while it seems the disciples did not.

6. Resources to help interpret properly

a. Concordance - shows other verses that used a certain word

b. Study Bible

c. Commentary - what other scholars have to say about the passage

D. General rules of bible interpretation

1. The passage could never mean what it could not have meant to the original hearers.

2. Our job is to try to determine the meaning that the author was trying to communicate.

3. We should take the literal meaning unless there is a good reason not too.

4. We need to take into consideration the literary form of the passage. For example,

You would read a poem differently than you would read a science textbook. You would

Read a letter about your uncle’s fishing trip differently than you would read a will.

In the bible there are narratives, songs, poems, prophecies, biographies, proverbs, epistles.

5. The best interpreter of the Bible is the Bible. Does another passage in the Bible talk about the same story or theological ideas?

6. Always interpret an obscure or more difficult passage with one that is more clear or plain to understand.

**IV. Application: How does it apply to me?**

A. This step involves connecting the principles that were gleaned from interpretation to our own lives.

B. As a teacher, mentor, or discipleship maker, one of the primary ways we can help others understand this is modeling. A well-focused question followed by a personal “for-instance” can help others understand application.

C. One’s spiritual maturity impacts a person’s ability to make application.

1. Hebrews 5:11-16 talks about two types of Biblical truths:

Hebrews 5:11-16

“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. **12**In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! **13**Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. **14**But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

a. Milk - Biblical truth that simply requires an intellectual ability to accept

For example, “What did Jesus mean when he spoke of turning the other cheek?”

b. Meat - truth that impacts how we live (teachings about righteousness)

For example, actually turning the other cheek and living it out at school.

2. Spiritually immature people usually struggle with knowing how to apply truth to their lives.

D. How can I apply Matthew 26:6-13 to my life? What does God expect of me in response to this passage?

E. Possible Application Questions (for small groups)

1. Do I respond to God the way Mary responded to Jesus? Why or why not?

2. How do I respond to those around me that are “radical” in their expression of love for God?

3. Is my response most like Jesus’ or more like the disciples?

4. What/Who do my actions and responses tell me that I value most?

5. What is the most significant (money, time, reputation) thing I could give to Jesus? Am I willing to do it publicly? Am I willing to get down on my knees and adore Him?

6. What is the most dangerous thing I could do to express my love for Christ and His love for others?

F. As important as it is for us to know and understand the Bible, that is not enough. Jerry Bridges said, “The Bible was not written to increase your knowledge, but to guide your conduct.” We must learn to interpret properly and then to apply it to our lives. This is when the Scriptures become life-changing.

REVIEW:

1. So far, we talked about **making observations about a text by asking good questions**.

2. We have also talked about **interpretation**; What is the writer saying?

3. Lastly, we talked about making **personal application** of the text: how does this apply to my life today?

**V. Implementation**

Two Kinds of Responses to God’s Word:

Read JAMES 1:22-25

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. **23**Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror **24**and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. **25**But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

A. Hearer

1) A hearer is someone who not only knows what the Word says (interpretation), but also know what he is to do (application).

2) Why do I say that? He is described as someone who looks at himself in a mirror (God’s Word). When he does this, he sees himself as he really is.

3) This is the student who can verbalize what he learned in his devotions and how it applies to his life.

4) Why does James give the warning of this person being deceived?

(a) He believes that he is spiritually mature, because he sees himself in light of what Scriptures teach, but he walks away from this revelation and does nothing to change.

(b) He remains the same and continues to behave the way he did before understanding how the principles applied to his life, but now he thinks he is spiritually mature when he is not.

e) When does change take place? After change has taken place!

B. Doer

1) A doer is someone who doesn’t forget what he discovers and goes beyond application to implementation.

2) He sees himself as he really is AND is determined to put a plan into practice to change, in light of what he saw.

3) He sees his need to be victorious over sin an in area of his life and is determined to be successful.

4) He sees an area he is lacking in character, and puts a plan together to grow in that area.

C. An Example from My Life

1) My parents divorced when I was 12 years old. As a result of this divorce, I didn’t deal with the hurt I felt, so I just held it inside and put a wall around my heart so I wouldn’t be hurt again. As a result of that wall, I didn’t allow myself to get close to others and was pretty much a loner. I also had a very difficult time verbally expressing love to others. God convicted me of this and so I put a plan into place to begin to tear down those walls. The first step of my plan was to tell my mom and I loved her, which I hadn’t verbalized to her in over six years. I also began to work at opening myself up and developing meaningful relationships.

2) Acknowledging that you have a problem expressing love to people is not the same as doing something about it.

3) The Bible was not written to just increase our knowledge, but to guide our conduct.

4) This will not happen without creating a plan to integrate our Bible reading into our lives.

5) The plan should be very practical, realistic, and measurable. In other words, the best plans are ones that have obvious steps that can be seen in action by those around you.

APPLICATION: (To discuss in small groups)

1. Out of the four steps of bible study which would you say that you need to work on the most? Why?

(observation, interpretation, application, implementation)

2.Would you say that you tend to be a hearer or a doer of the word? Why is it so important to implement what you are learning?

3. Are you presently studying God’s Word? If not, are you willing to begin?

4. Note the following plan to start studying God’s Word and discuss how you could implement it.

a) Set a definite time when you will do your devotions.

b) Choose a place that is quiet that you can consistently go to spend time with God.

c) Commit to sharing with someone daily what you are learning in your quiet time.

d) Ask someone to hold you accountable to your Quiet Time and its implementation in your life.