Studying the Bible

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Introduction

An Introductory Guide to Deep Biblical Study

Exploring the Bible can be a rewarding exercise for believers. We believe it is a satisfying experience to be able to read its pages, not just in a personal way, but critically and historically, to put the stories and words in their historical context and to understand how other interpreters down through the ages have explained the material, and to use all these tools to help understand what, if anything, we believe and are committed to today.

Each person plays a crucial role in determining their faith and belief conclusions. By asking the Holy Spirit to reveal the meaning of scripture, we take on the responsibility and empowerment of our own understanding.

My intent for this guide is to provide you with a structured approach to studying the Bible, help you to navigate the complexities of the Bible, encourage you to ask questions, explore studying steps for notetaking, and encourage you to conduct your own research. Ultimately, I hope this study assists you in uncovering the revelations that God has for you within the pages of the Bible (the infallible Word).

Foundational Scriptures on Bible Study

Quotations in this section are from the Amplified Bible (AMP).

Romans 10:17 - So faith comes from hearing [what is told], and what is heard comes by the [preaching of the] message concerning Christ.

Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active and full of power [making it operative, energizing, and effective]. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and spirit [the completeness of a person], and of both joints and marrow [the deepest parts of our nature], exposing and judging the very thoughts and intentions of the heart.

2 Timothy 2:15 - Study and do your best to present yourself to God approved, a workman [tested by trial] who has no reason to be ashamed, accurately handling and skillfully teaching the word of truth.

Hebrews 5:13-14 - For everyone who lives on milk is doctrinally inexperienced and unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a spiritual infant. But solid food is for the spiritually mature, whose senses are trained by practice to distinguish between what is morally good and what is evil.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 - And how from childhood you have known the sacred writings (Hebrew Scriptures) which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus [surrendering your entire self to Him and having absolute confidence in His wisdom, power, and goodness]. All Scripture is God-breathed [given by divine inspiration] and is profitable for instruction, for conviction [of sin], for correction [of error and restoration to obedience], for training in righteousness [learning to live in conformity to God's will, both publicly and privately—behaving honorably with personal integrity and moral courage]; so that the man of God may be complete and proficient, outfitted and thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Proverbs 1:5 - The wise will hear and increase their learning, and the person of understanding will acquire wise counsel and the skill [to steer his course wisely and lead others to the truth].

Proverbs 18:15 - The mind of the prudent [always] acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise [always] seeks knowledge.

1 Peter 3:15 - But in your hearts set Christ apart [as holy—acknowledging Him, giving Him first place in your lives] as Lord. Always be ready to give a [logical] defense to anyone who asks you to account for the hope and confident assurance [elicited by faith] that is within you, yet [do it] with gentleness and respect.

Proverbs 9:9 - Give instruction to a wise man and he will become even wiser; teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is meant to be a reference you return to, not a book to read cover to cover. It introduces terms and tools; it is not meant to be the final word on any of them.

Where to Start

- **New to Bible study:** Read Bible Basics, Parts 1–5, Discernment, Red Flags in Bible Interpretation, and the Sample Beginner Study. That is enough to begin studying well.
- **Ready for more:** Add Parts 6–9, the Translation Comparison, How to Choose a Commentary, the Sample Word Study, and Studying the Bible With Others.
- **Going deeper:** Parts 10–11 and the term sections are here when you want them. Look up terms as you meet them rather than memorizing them all at once.

Consider

- **Study and devotion:** This guide focuses on *studying* the Bible. Keep reading Scripture devotionally and praying alongside it. The goal of study is to know and obey God better.

Bible Basics: Getting Oriented

Before you dig in, a few basics will help you find your way around the Bible.

How the Bible Is Organized

- **66 books:** 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. (This is the Protestant count; Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include additional books. See "Deuterocanonical" in How We Got the Bible.)
- **Two testaments:** "Testament" means covenant. The Old Testament covers creation through Israel's history before Christ. The New Testament covers Jesus' life, the early church, and the hope of His return.
- **Many authors, one story:** Traditionally, about 40 human authors wrote over roughly 1,500 years, in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

The Big Picture: A Basic Timeline

Dates are approximate, and some (such as the date of the Exodus) are debated. The main point is the order of events.

- **Beginnings** (Genesis 1–11): creation, the fall, the flood, and Babel. Not dated.
- **Patriarchs** (Genesis 12–50): Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, about 2000–1800 BC.
- **Exodus and Sinai** (Exodus–Deuteronomy): Israel leaves Egypt and receives the Law, about 1446 BC or 1260 BC (scholars differ).
- **Conquest and Judges** (Joshua, Judges, Ruth): Israel settles the land and is led by judges.
- **United Kingdom** (1 Samuel–1 Kings 11): Saul, David, and Solomon, about 1050–930 BC. Many psalms and proverbs come from this period.
- **Divided Kingdom** (1 Kings 12–2 Kings): Israel in the north and Judah in the south, from about 930 BC. Many of the prophets served during this time.
- **Fall of Israel** (the northern kingdom) to Assyria, 722 BC.
- **Fall of Jerusalem and Exile** to Babylon, 586 BC (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel).
- **Return** (Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi): exiles begin returning in 538 BC; the temple is rebuilt by 516 BC.
- **Intertestamental Period** (about 430 BC to the birth of Jesus): Persian, Greek, and then Roman rule.
- **Jesus' Life and Ministry** (the Gospels): born about 6–4 BC; ministry, death, and resurrection about AD 27–33.
- **The Early Church** (Acts): the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Rome, AD 30s–60s.
- **The New Testament Letters and Revelation** (Romans–Revelation): written about AD 45–95. Rome destroys the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.

Reading a Bible Reference

- **Book chapter:verse**: John 3:16 means the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16.
- **Ranges**: John 3:16–18 means verses 16 through 18. John 3–4 means chapters 3 and 4.
- **Numbered books**: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John are three different letters, not chapters of one book.

- **Chapters and verses were added later.** The original authors did not write them. Chapter divisions date to the early 1200s, and New Testament verse numbers to 1551. They are helpful tools, but a new chapter does not always mean a new thought, so read across the breaks.

Common Abbreviations in Study Bibles

- **v. / vv.**: verse / verses
- **ch. / chs.**: chapter / chapters
- **cf.**: compare (look at this other passage)
- **ff.**: and the following verses (John 3:16ff.)
- **e.g.**: for example; **i.e.**: that is
- **c. or ca.**: about, an approximate date (c. 1000 BC)
- **lit.**: literally; a footnote giving the word-for-word wording
- **OT / NT**: Old Testament / New Testament
- **MT**: Masoretic Text; **LXX**: Septuagint; **MS / MSS**: manuscript / manuscripts (see How We Got the Bible)
- **BC / AD** and **BCE / CE**: two ways of labeling the same years. BCE ("Before Common Era") = BC, and CE ("Common Era") = AD.

The Bible's Original Languages

The Bible was not written in English. Knowing a little about its original languages helps explain why translations differ and why careful study sometimes looks beneath the English words.

Which languages?

- **Hebrew:** most of the Old Testament.
- **Aramaic:** a related language used in parts of the Old Testament (Daniel 2:4–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26; Jeremiah 10:11). Jesus also spoke Aramaic, and a few of His words are kept in the Gospels, such as *Abba* (Father) and *Talitha koum* ("Little girl, get up," Mark 5:41).
- **Greek:** the entire New Testament, written in Koine ("common") Greek, the everyday language of the Roman world.

A little about each

- **Hebrew** reads right to left. It was first written with consonants only; vowel marks were added centuries later by the Masoretes. It tends to use concrete, picture-rich words (God's "arm" for His power).
- **Greek** reads left to right and has very detailed grammar. Word endings show how each word functions in a sentence.

Why translation is not word-for-word

- **Some words have no exact English match.** The Hebrew *hesed* is translated "loving devotion," "steadfast love," "lovingkindness," or "mercy," because no single English word covers it.
- **One word can have several meanings.** The Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma* can mean spirit, wind, or breath. Context decides which.
- **Word order differs.** Translators rearrange words so the English reads naturally.

- **Translators choose the closest word.** That choice is why the same verse can read differently from one translation to another.

Grammar matters

- **Singular and plural "you":** English uses "you" for one person or many, but Hebrew and Greek make it clear. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, "you are God's temple" uses a plural "you": Paul is speaking of the church together, not only of each individual.
- **Verb forms:** Greek and Hebrew verbs show whether something is a command, a wish, a possibility, or a statement. A command reads differently from a promise.

Grammatical gender is not biological gender

- In Hebrew and Greek, every noun has a grammatical gender, much like in Spanish or French. The Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) is grammatically feminine, and the Greek word (*pneuma*) is neuter. Neither means the Holy Spirit is female or an "it"; Scripture speaks of the Spirit as a person (John 14:26; 16:13).
- Masculine plural words often include both men and women. The Greek *adelphoi* ("brothers") frequently refers to the whole church, which is why some translations say "brothers and sisters."

The takeaway: you do not need to learn Hebrew or Greek to study the Bible well. Comparing a few translations and checking key words in an interlinear or lexicon will show you what a single English word can hide. Parts 10 and 11 cover these tools for those who want to go deeper.

Part 1: Preparation for Studying

Prayer and Meditation

- **Prayer:** Begin with prayer, asking for guidance and wisdom from God to understand His Word.
- **Meditation:** Take a few moments to meditate and clear your mind, focusing on the purpose of your study.

Setting a Schedule

- **Consistency:** Establish a consistent time for studying, whether daily or weekly.
- **Quiet Place:** Choose a quiet place where you can focus without distractions.

Your Overall Approach: The Inductive Method

Most Bible study courses teach one basic pattern called the **inductive method**. It moves in three steps, and the parts of this guide follow the same order.

- **Observation: What does it say?** Read carefully and notice details: who, what, when, where, repeated words, contrasts, and commands. (Parts 3 and 4)
- **Interpretation: What does it mean?** Work out what the author meant to the original audience, using context, history, and word study. (Parts 3, 4, and 6–8)
- **Application: How should I respond?** Put the truth into practice in your life. (Part 5)

Keep the steps in order. Jumping straight to application before observing and interpreting is how most misreadings start.

Check Your Assumptions

Everyone brings something to the text: a church background, favorite teachers, and things we already believe. That is normal, but it can keep us from seeing what a passage actually says. Before you study, ask yourself:

- What church tradition or background am I coming from, and what has it taught me to expect here?
- Am I reading to find what the text says, or to confirm what I already believe or what I have been told?
- Is there an answer I am hoping to find? Would I accept the text if it said something different?
- Is my own life situation (culture, age, experiences) shaping how I hear this passage?

Hold your conclusions humbly, and be willing to change them when the text points another way (Acts 17:11).

Part 2: Study Methods

Choose the study method that best fits your current goals and spiritual needs.

1. Verse-by-Verse Study

- **Read the Verse Multiple Times:** Start by reading the verse in different translations (e.g., NLT, NIV, KJV, BSB) to gain a broader understanding.
- **Understand the Historical Context:** Research the time, place, and circumstances in which the verse was written.
- **Keyword Analysis:** Identify and study key words or phrases using a lexicon or concordance. Use a real lexicon when you can. A Strong's number alone gives only a basic definition (see Parts 10 and 11).
- **Personal Reflection (SOAP Method):** Use SOAP (Scripture, Observation, Application, Prayer).
- **Cross-References:** Look up related verses to see how the Bible interprets itself.
- **Commentaries and Sermons:** Read or listen to trusted commentaries for additional perspectives.

2. Topical Study

- **Choose a Topic:** Select a topic relevant to your current life situation (e.g., grace, suffering, prayer).
- **Gather Scripture:** Use a concordance or Bible app to find all verses related to your topic.
- **Categorize Verses:** Organize the verses by subtopics (e.g., under "faith," you could have "saving faith," "living by faith," and "faith in trials").
- **Study in Context:** Ensure each verse is studied within its broader context. Read surrounding verses or chapters to avoid taking scripture out of context.
- **Create a Summary:** Write a summary that encapsulates the Bible's teaching on your chosen topic. This can be a bullet-point list or a more detailed paragraph.
- **Practical Application:** Reflect on how you can apply the biblical teaching to your daily life.

3. Character Study

- **Select a Biblical Character:** Choose a person whose life or story resonates with you.
- **Read All Relevant Passages:** Find all the passages where this character is mentioned, noting key events, decisions, and interactions.
- **Character Traits:** Identify the character's strengths, weaknesses, and key traits. How did these traits influence their life and faith journey?
- **Life Lessons:** Extract lessons from their experiences. What can you learn from their successes and failures?
- **God's Role:** Analyze how God interacted with this character. What does this reveal about God's nature?
- **Personal Application:** Reflect on how the character's story applies to your life. Are there any areas where you can emulate their faith or avoid mistakes?

4. Book Study

- **Overview and Background:** Start by researching the book's authorship, date of writing, and historical context. What was the main purpose of the book?
- **Chapter Summaries:** Write a summary for each chapter, highlighting key themes, verses, and events.
- **Identify Key Themes:** Identify and track recurring themes or concepts throughout the book (e.g., redemption, judgment, grace).
- **Verse-by-Verse Study:** For particularly significant passages, you can do a verse-by-verse study as mentioned above.
- **Cross-References:** Compare and contrast the book's message with other parts of the Bible. How does it fit into the overall biblical narrative?
- **Personal Reflection and Application:** Write down how the teachings in the book apply to your life and what changes or actions you might need to take.

Part 3: Understanding Context

Knowing the context of any Bible passage is a large part of reading the verse responsibly. Context tells us where a verse fits the broader narrative and how we should apply it.

A. Immediate Context

- **Theme or Main Idea:** What is the theme found in the surrounding paragraphs? Consider writing down the main themes.
- **Connective Words:** How are words like "therefore," "and," "but," and "however" used to develop a complete thought?
- **Meaning from Context:** How does the immediate context help determine what the verse means?

B. Chapter/Book Context

- **Repeated Themes:** Is the theme repeated throughout the book?
- **Overall, Purpose:** How does the theme fit within the overall purpose of the book?

C. Bible Context

- **Consistency:** Does my interpretation hold true throughout the rest of the Bible?
- **Clarity from Other Passages:** Does another passage provide clarity? Does the text quote or allude to another passage, and what understanding does that give?
- **Big Story of the Bible:** How does this passage fit into the Bible's big story, and why is it included? Consider the historical and cultural background.

D. Speaker, Audience, and Covenant

Before you apply a passage, ask four questions:

- **Who is speaking?** God, a prophet, an apostle, or a person whose words the Bible simply records (such as Job's friends, whom God later corrects in Job 42:7).
- **Who is being addressed?** One person, a nation, a local church, or all believers.
- **Under which covenant?** Old Testament laws and promises were given to Israel under the Mosaic covenant. Believers today live under the New Covenant (see The Major Covenants).
- **Is it universal or specific?** Is the instruction meant for everyone, for one person, or tied to a particular situation?

Example: Jeremiah 29:11 is a much-loved verse about God's plans to give His people a future and a hope. It was spoken to Judah's exiles in Babylon, promising their return after seventy years (29:10). The timeless truth is God's faithfulness to His people. It is not a personal guarantee of a particular plan for each reader.

When a Passage Is Hard

Some passages are genuinely difficult: two texts that seem to disagree, hard commands in the Old Testament, or questions Christians have debated for centuries. When you hit one:

- **Name the difficulty honestly.** Write down exactly what troubles you. Don't skip it or explain it away.
- **Check the basics first.** Context, genre, and translation solve many apparent problems.
- **Look at the main views fairly.** A good study Bible or commentary will usually list them. Ask what each view gets right and where it struggles.
- **Let clear passages guide unclear ones.** Build your understanding on what Scripture says plainly, and read the harder text in that light. Use this rule carefully: name which passages you are treating as clear and why, and make sure they are truly clearer, not just easier for you to agree with.
- **It is okay to hold a question open.** You can say, "Here are the main views, here is where I lean and why, and I am still learning." Honest questions are part of faithful study.
- **Know when to set it aside.** If you have checked the context, a few translations, and two or three commentaries and are still stuck, write down your question and the main views, then move on. Come back to it later. Time, more reading, and talking with others often help.

Part 4: Analysis - Digging Deeper

Analyzing Bible passages is essential for uncovering the richness of Scripture. You can explore their meanings, implications, and relevance to your life by breaking down passages. This step is where you move from mere reading to deep understanding. Reading Bible passages out loud helps us sift our way through to the meaningful layers. The more times you can break down a passage, the more beyond-the-surface work you do.

Steps for Effective Analysis

- **Identify Key Terms:** Look for words or phrases crucial to the passage's meaning.
- **Examine Literary Devices:** Note metaphors, similes, and other literary devices.
- **Understand Cultural Context:** Consider the cultural and historical setting of the text.
- **Explore Theological Themes:** Identify recurring themes such as redemption, judgment, or grace.
- **Who, What, When, Where, Why, How:** Identify key characters, events, locations, and reasons.
- **Literary Style:** Note the use of genealogies, narratives, and dialogues.
- **Key Verses:** Identify verses that summarize the chapter's main points.
- **Cross-References:** Compare the chapter with other related Bible verses.
- **Themes:** Identify theological themes such as God's sovereignty, human sinfulness, and the promise of redemption.
- **Commentaries:** Refer to Bible commentaries for deeper insights and explanations.
- **Read:** Multiple times, slowly, and observing details. It should be the same if you are studying a chapter, book, or verse. Sometimes, it is necessary to read multiple times.
- **Learn About God:** What do you learn about God's character, attributes, or desires?

Figurative Language

Figurative language is essential when studying the Bible because it allows you to grasp the deeper meanings behind the words.

Metaphors

A figure of speech that compares two things by stating that one thing is another. It doesn't use "like" or "as" (which would make it a simile) but instead directly equates one thing with another to highlight similarities. In the Bible, metaphors are often used to explain complex spiritual truths in a way that is easier to understand.

- *Example:* Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).
- *Explanation:* Jesus uses bread as a metaphor to convey that just as bread sustains physical life, He sustains spiritual life.

Hyperbole

An exaggerated statement not meant to be taken literally, used to emphasize a point or express strong emotion. In the Bible, hyperbole often underscores the significance of an action or the importance of a teaching.

- *Example:* "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out" (Matthew 5:29).

- *Explanation:* This hyperbole emphasizes the seriousness of avoiding sin and the drastic measures one should take to stay pure. It does not advocate self-harm.

Idioms

A phrase with a meaning different from the literal interpretation of the words. Biblical idioms often stem from ancient cultural or linguistic practices, making them difficult to understand without some background knowledge.

- *Example:* "His heart was hardened" (Exodus 9:12).
- *Explanation:* This idiom doesn't mean that Pharaoh's heart physically became hard. Instead, it indicates that Pharaoh became stubborn or resistant to God's will.

Rhetorical Questions

A question asked not to get an answer but to make a point or provoke thought. In the Bible, prophets, Jesus, or apostles often use rhetorical questions to provoke thought or emphasize a truth.

- *Example:* "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).
- *Explanation:* Jesus isn't asking this question to get an answer. Instead, He uses it to make His listeners think about the value of spiritual life versus worldly gains.

Similes

A comparison that uses “like” or “as.”

- *Example:* Psalm 1:3 compares the righteous person to a tree planted by streams of water.
- *Explanation:* The picture shows a life that is stable, nourished, and fruitful.

Personification

Giving human qualities to things, ideas, or nature.

- *Example:* Isaiah 55:12 pictures the mountains singing and the trees of the field clapping their hands. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is pictured as a woman calling out in the streets.
- *Explanation:* Creation is shown celebrating what God has done; the poetry expresses joy, not a literal event.

Symbolism

Using an object, number, or image to stand for something else, especially in prophecy and apocalyptic writing.

- *Example:* In Revelation 1:20, the seven lampstands are explained as the seven churches.
- *Explanation:* Look first for the text’s own explanation, then for Old Testament background.

Irony

A result or statement that is the opposite of what is expected.

- *Example:* Haman builds a gallows for Mordecai and is hanged on it himself (Esther 7:9–10).

- *Explanation:* The reversal shows God at work behind the scenes, in a book that never mentions His name.

See also parallelism and chiasm (Part 7) and anthropomorphism (More Interpretation Terms).

Reading by Genre

The Bible contains several kinds of writing, and each is read a little differently. “What kind of writing is this?” is one of the first questions to ask of any passage.

- **Narrative** (Genesis, Samuel, Kings, Acts): tells what happened. Look for the main point of the whole story. Not everything a character does is approved by God (see Descriptive vs. Prescriptive in Red Flags).
- **Law** (Exodus–Deuteronomy): shows God’s holiness and Israel’s covenant duties. Ask what it reveals about God’s character and how it is fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 5:17).
- **Poetry** (Psalms, much of the prophets): uses images, emotion, and parallel lines. Don’t press every image literally.
- **Wisdom** (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes): Proverbs are general principles about how life usually works, not guaranteed promises.
- **Prophecy** (Isaiah–Malachi): calls people back to God, warns of judgment, and gives hope. Some prophecies were fulfilled soon, some in Christ, and some are still future.
- **Gospels** (Matthew–John): four accounts of Jesus’ life, each written with its own emphasis and audience.
- **Epistles** (Romans–Jude): letters to real churches and people. Learn the situation being addressed before applying the instructions.
- **Apocalyptic** (Daniel 7–12, Revelation): uses symbols and visions. Look for explanations in the text itself and in the Old Testament.

Part 5: Application

The Bible is a book about God; its teachings are meant to transform us. Read it to learn what God is saying to you, and how it is to transform you.

Steps for Application

- **Pray:** "Lord, what do you want me to learn, and how should I apply this to my life?"
- **Yield:** Are you holding on to a conclusion you like? Be willing to let it go if the text points elsewhere. What do you need to surrender?

From Then to Now: Building the Bridge

Good application moves from what the passage meant *then* to what it means *now*. Work through these questions in order:

- **What did it mean to them?** State the message for the original audience in a sentence or two.
- **What is different between them and us?** Note differences in culture, covenant (before or after Christ), and situation.
- **What timeless truth carries across?** Look for the principle behind the passage. Check it: Is it taught elsewhere in Scripture? Would the original audience recognize it?
- **How does it apply to me today?** Make it specific: one attitude, action, or belief to change this week.

Two cautions:

- Don’t turn every passage into a moral lesson (“be brave like David”). Ask first what the passage shows about God and His plan.
- Not every passage applies to you directly. A genealogy or temple law may not give you a task, but it still teaches you about God, His faithfulness, and the story that leads to Christ.

Part 6: Exploring History

Understanding the historical context can bring the Scriptures to life, helping you hear the message as the original audience would have.

Key Historical Considerations

- **Audience:** Who was it written to and about? How does the Bible describe them?
- **Location:** Where does the narrative take place, and where was it written? What can you learn about their town and travel?
- **Timeline:** When did the events occur, and what was happening in history then?
- **Purpose:** Why was this message given to those people at that time?
- **Worldview and Culture:** What cultural, religious, and political factors influenced them? What was their understanding of God?

Part 7: Learning About the Bible Author

The Bible's authors came from diverse backgrounds and communicated in unique styles. Understanding the author's perspective enriches the study and sheds light on the text. Just as no two people are identical, neither are the individual authors of the Bible or their literary styles.

Author's Perspective

- **Author's Background:** What can you learn about the author, and how did their experiences influence their writing?
- **Purpose and Point:** What was the author's purpose, and how does it help you understand the passage?
- **Figurative Language:** What is communicated through metaphors, hyperbole, idioms, and rhetorical questions? Without recognizing these literary devices, one might misinterpret the Scriptures, either taking something too literally or missing the profound message altogether.
- **Patterns:** What is highlighted through repetition and patterns like parallelism and chiasm? For example, Ecclesiastes 11:3–12:2, Genesis 6–9, Amos 5:4–6a, Isaiah 1:21–26, and Joshua 1:5–9 are examples of chiastic patterns.
- **Literary Style:** What literary style(s) did the author use, and how should that affect your reading?

Structure

- **Related Texts:** How are questions and answers, compare and contrast, and cause and effect used?
- **Order:** What is emphasized by the order of events, ideas, or people?
- **Space:** How much space is devoted to a person, theme, or circumstance?
- **Layout:** How is the book organized (chronological, biographical, ideological)?

Part 8: Conducting Research

Researching the original languages and using resources can deepen your understanding of biblical passages.

Research Techniques

- **Observations and Questions:** What stands out to you when you read the passage?
- **Translations:** Does another Bible translation add clarity? What does the word mean in the original language? In what context does it appear, and how does that context affect our understanding? What authorities concerning this detail and verse can be drawn upon? Lexicons, concordances, and the like are helpful here.
- **Original Language:** What does a word mean in the original language? Use resources like blueletterbible.org or biblehub.com.
- **Scholarly Insights:** What insights do you learn from study Bibles, commentaries, and credible online resources?
- **Paraphrase:** How would you rewrite the message of the passage in your own words?

Learning From Interpreters Through the Ages

Christians have been studying these same passages for 2,000 years. Checking how faithful teachers through history understood a passage is one of the best guards against reading something new into it. If no one in church history read a passage the way you are reading it, slow down and look again.

A few accessible places to start:

- **Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture** (InterVarsity Press): short quotations from early church writers, arranged verse by verse.
- **John Chrysostom** (late 300s): a leading preacher of the Eastern church. His sermons on Matthew, John, and Paul's letters are free online at NewAdvent.org and CCEL.org.
- **Rashi** (1000s): the most widely read Jewish commentator on the Hebrew Bible. Helpful for seeing how Jewish readers have understood the Old Testament. Free online at Sefaria.org.
- **Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*** (1200s): a medieval collection of church fathers' comments on the four Gospels, arranged verse by verse. Free online.
- **John Calvin's Commentaries** (1500s): a leading Reformer working through most of the Bible. Free online at CCEL.org.
- **Matthew Henry's Commentary** (early 1700s): a devotional, verse-by-verse classic. Free online and in most Bible apps.
- **Charles Spurgeon** (1800s): *The Treasury of David* on the Psalms, plus thousands of sermons. Free online.

Treat these as wise voices to consult. Scripture is still the standard they are measured by.

Using Every Tool Available

Some believers worry that using Google, commentaries, or AI is "cheating" or shows a lack of faith. Scripture does not forbid outside resources, and it shows God's people learning from others and from written sources again and again:

- **Luke researched carefully.** Before writing his Gospel, he investigated everything from the beginning and drew on the accounts of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–4).
- **Paul used books and teachers.** From prison he asked Timothy to bring his scrolls and parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). He was trained under the teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and even quoted Greek poets (Acts 17:28).
- **Apollos learned from others.** He already knew the Scriptures well, yet Priscilla and Aquila explained the way of God to him more accurately (Acts 18:24–26).
- **Moses and Daniel were educated** in the learning of Egypt and Babylon (Acts 7:22; Daniel 1:17).
- **Wisdom seeks counsel.** Plans succeed with many advisers (Proverbs 15:22), and the wise seek knowledge (Proverbs 18:15).

Even readers who say they use "only the Bible" depend on translators, scholars, and publishers. Every English Bible is the result of other people's research.

The safeguard is testing. The Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true" (Acts 17:11, BSB). Use books, websites, sermons, and AI freely, and test what you find:

- **Bring it to the Holy Spirit.** Pray for understanding. Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide His followers into all truth (John 16:13).
- **Check it against Scripture.** Test everything and hold on to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). No source, however confident it sounds, outranks the text.
- **Weigh the source.** Books, websites, and sermons vary in quality. AI can sound certain and still be wrong (see "Using AI tools" in Part 9).
- **Keep Scripture first.** Read the passage yourself before reading what others say about it.

Use the good tools God has made available, and let Scripture and the Spirit have the final word.

Part 9: Essential Study Tools

Physical Tools

- **Bible Versions:** Choose a primary Bible translation for reading and a secondary one for comparison.
- **Study Bible:** Use a study Bible with commentary notes and cross-references.
- **Bible Dictionary:** Helps with understanding terms, names, and places.
- **Concordance:** Useful for finding other Bible verses that relate to specific themes.
- **Journal or Notebook:** Keep a record of your insights, questions, and reflections.
- **Highlighters and Pens:** Mark key verses, themes, and important notes.
- **Harmony of the Gospels:** Lays Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John side by side so you can compare how each records the same event.
- **Parallel passages:** Places where the Bible records the same event or teaching more than once, such as Kings and Chronicles, or the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Many study Bibles list them under section headings.

Tips for Organizing Your Notes

- **Key Points:** Use bullet points to highlight important insights.
- **Scripture References:** Include a list of related verses for further study.

- **Cross-References:** Link related verses to show how the Bible connects across books.
- **Commentaries:** Note insights from reputable Bible commentaries to deepen understanding.
- **Study Questions:** End each study with a few questions for reflection or group discussion.

Keeping Your Notes

- **Keep them in one place:** one notebook, binder, or digital folder, so you can find past studies.
- **Label every entry** with the date and the passage, so you can search by either later.
- **Review them:** reread your notes before the next session, and again after a few weeks. Studies stick when you come back to them.
- **Keep a running list of open questions** and check it when you study related passages. Many questions answer themselves over time.
- **Respect privacy:** your personal reflections and prayers are yours to share or keep. In a group, never pass along what others shared personally.

Digital Tools

- Bible apps with multiple translations
- Online interlinear Bibles
- Digital concordances and lexicons
- Bible study software (Logos, Accordance)
- **A note on cost:** Logos and Accordance are powerful but can be expensive and take time to learn. Start with the free tools (STEPBible.org, BlueLetterBible.org, Biblehub.com) and upgrade only if you need more.
- **Using AI tools:** AI can help explain background, define terms, or find related passages, but it often states wrong information with confidence. Common problems in Bible study include made-up quotes or page numbers from commentaries and lexicons, basic Strong's definitions presented as deep word study, and Hebrew or Greek "roots" or word meanings that do not exist. Always check its answers against Scripture and trusted sources, and never let it replace your own reading of the text.

Part 10: Advanced Hebrew Study Resources

Optional: for going deeper. This section goes beyond a 101/202 study. You don't need these resources to study the Bible well; they're here for when you want to dig into the original Hebrew.

WARNING: Strong's Concordance is NOT sufficient for true Hebrew study. It's a numbering system with basic glosses, not a comprehensive lexicon. For deeper Hebrew word studies, use the following professional resources.

Essential Hebrew Lexicons

HALOT (Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament)

- Widely regarded as the standard lexicon for modern Hebrew scholarship
- Includes cognate languages (Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic)
- Available on Logos/Accordance software

BDB (Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon)

- Highly respected
- Organized by root system
- Free online at BlueLetterBible.org
- Great starting point

TWOT (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament)

- Focuses on theological significance
- Easier to read than BDB/HALOT

NIDOTTE (New International Dictionary of OT Theology & Exegesis)

- 5 volumes
- Combines lexical and theological study
- Shows how words are used throughout Scripture

Grammar Resources

Beginner-Friendly:

- Pratico & Van Pelt - *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*
- Futato - *Beginning Biblical Hebrew*

Advanced (Reference Works):

- Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (GKC) - the classic
- Joüon-Muraoka - *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (most comprehensive)
- Waltke & O'Connor - *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*

Bible Software (Game-Changer!)

Logos Bible Software (Recommended)

- Includes HALOT, BDB, TWOT, grammars

- Morphological tagging (shows every word's form)
- Right-click any Hebrew word for instant analysis
- Best investment for serious study

Free Online Resources

- **STEPBible.org** - robust free tools with morphology
- **BlueLetterBible.org** - has BDB integrated
- **Biblehub.com** - multiple resources and interlinear
- **Sefaria.org** - Jewish perspective with rabbinic commentaries

Practical Workflow for Deep Word Study

1. **Identify the Hebrew word:** Use interlinear or software; get the root (usually 3 letters); note the form (verb stem, noun form, etc.).
2. **Look it up in a real lexicon:** Start with BDB or HALOT; read the entire entry; note semantic range; look at all biblical occurrences.
3. **Check grammar:** What verb stem? (Qal, Piel, Hiphil, etc.) What noun form? How does this affect meaning? (See Quick Glossary of Grammar Terms at the end of Part 11.)
4. **Study context:** How is it used in this passage and elsewhere in Scripture?
5. **Consult theological wordbooks:** TWOT for theological significance; NIDOTTE for comprehensive overview.
6. **Read commentaries:** See how scholars handle the word; note debates and different interpretations.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

DON'T:

- Rely on Strong's alone
- Commit the "root fallacy" (assuming etymology = meaning)
- Ignore context
- Cherry-pick definitions

DO:

- Read entire lexicon entries
- Study words in actual contexts
- Compare multiple resources
- Learn basic grammar principles

Part 11: Advanced Greek Study Resources

Optional: for going deeper. This section goes beyond a 101/202 study. You don't need these resources to study the Bible well; they're here for when you want to dig into the original Greek.

WARNING: Strong's Concordance is NOT sufficient for true Greek study. It's a numbering system with basic glosses, not a comprehensive lexicon. For deeper Greek word studies, use the following professional resources.

Essential Greek Lexicons

BDAG (Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich)

- Widely regarded as the standard lexicon for New Testament Greek
- Most comprehensive and authoritative
- Includes extensive citations from ancient Greek literature
- Available on Logos/Accordance software

LSJ (Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon)

- Standard lexicon for classical Greek
- Helpful for understanding word usage in broader Greek literature
- Shows development of word meanings over time
- Available online at Perseus Digital Library

TDNT (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament - Kittel)

- 10 volumes
- In-depth theological articles on key Greek words
- Shows word usage throughout biblical and extra-biblical literature
- Useful for theological word studies, though some articles read too much meaning into single words. Use it alongside a lexicon.

NIDNTT (New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology)

- 4 volumes
- Organized by English concepts with Greek word studies
- More accessible than TDNT
- Excellent for understanding theological themes

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon

- Classic lexicon, still useful
- Based on Grimm's Wilke's *Clavis Novi Testamenti*
- Free online at BlueLetterBible.org
- Good starting point, but dated scholarship

Grammar Resources

Beginner-Friendly:

- Mounce - *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*
- Black - *It's Still Greek to Me*
- Duff - *The Elements of New Testament Greek*

Intermediate:

- Wallace - *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*
- Porter - *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*

Advanced (Reference Works):

- BDF (Blass-Debrunner-Funk) - *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*
- Robertson - *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*
- Smyth - *Greek Grammar* (for classical Greek background)

Bible Software (Game-Changer!)

Logos Bible Software (Recommended)

- Includes BDAG, TDNT, NIDNTT, grammars
- Morphological tagging (shows every word's form)
- Right-click any Greek word for instant analysis
- Parsing information (tense, voice, mood, case, etc.)
- Best investment for serious study

Accordance

- Similar to Logos with excellent Greek tools
- Strong morphological search capabilities
- Clean interface preferred by many scholars

Free Online Resources

- **STEPBible.org** - robust free tools with morphology
- **BlueLetterBible.org** - has Thayer's integrated
- **Biblehub.com** - multiple lexicons and interlinear
- **Perseus Digital Library** - classical Greek texts and LSJ
- **GreekBible.com** - interlinear with parsing

Practical Workflow for Deep Greek Word Study

1. **Identify the Greek word:** Use interlinear or software; note the lemma (dictionary form); identify the parsing (case, number, gender for nouns; tense, voice, mood, person, number for verbs). (See Quick Glossary of Grammar Terms at the end of Part 11.)
2. **Look it up in a real lexicon:** Start with BDAG or Thayer's; read the entire entry; note semantic range; look at all New Testament occurrences; check if the word appears in the Septuagint (LXX).
3. **Check grammar:** What case is it? (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative) What tense/aspect? (aorist, present, perfect, etc.) What voice? (active, middle, passive) What mood? (indicative, subjunctive, imperative, optative) How does this affect meaning?

4. **Study context:** How is it used in this passage? Elsewhere in the New Testament? In the Septuagint? What's the syntactical relationship?
5. **Consult theological wordbooks:** TDNT for extensive theological analysis; NIDNTT for accessible theological overview; check for semantic domain relationships.
6. **Read commentaries:** See how scholars handle the word; note debates about translation and interpretation; consider textual variants if applicable.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

DON'T:

- Rely on Strong's alone
- Commit the "root fallacy" (assuming etymology = meaning)
- Ignore context and syntax
- Cherry-pick definitions
- Assume one Greek word always = one English word
- Ignore differences between classical and Koine Greek
- Neglect the influence of Hebrew/Aramaic on NT Greek

DO:

- Read entire lexicon entries
- Study words in actual contexts
- Compare multiple resources
- Learn basic grammar principles
- Consider the Septuagint background for OT quotations
- Pay attention to word order (it matters in Greek!)
- Study syntax and sentence structure, not just individual words

Key Differences: Hebrew vs. Greek Study

- Greek has more precise grammar (cases, moods, tenses)
- Greek word order is more flexible but still significant
- Greek has fewer words with wider semantic ranges than Hebrew
- New Testament Greek is Koine (common) Greek, not classical
- The Septuagint heavily influences NT Greek vocabulary and syntax

Quick Glossary of Grammar Terms

These terms appear in Parts 10 and 11 and in many lexicons and commentaries.

General

- **Lemma:** the dictionary form of a word, the form you look up in a lexicon.
- **Parsing:** identifying a word’s grammatical form (for a verb: tense, voice, mood, person, and number).
- **Root:** in Hebrew, the core consonants (usually three) that a family of words is built on. A root does not settle a word’s meaning (see the root fallacy).

Hebrew verb stems

- **Qal:** the basic, simple form of a verb (“he broke”).
- **Niphal:** usually passive or reflexive (“it was broken”).
- **Piel:** often described as intensive or as bringing about a state (“he smashed”).
- **Hiphil:** usually causative (“he caused to break”).

Greek

- **Aorist:** a tense that presents an action as a simple, whole event, usually past in statements. It does not by itself mean “once for all.”
- **Case:** the form of a noun that shows its job in the sentence. Nominative: the subject. Genitive: often “of” (possession or source). Dative: often “to” or “for.” Accusative: the direct object.
- **Voice:** active (the subject acts), middle (the subject acts with special involvement or for itself), passive (the subject receives the action).
- **Mood:** indicative (a statement), subjunctive (a possibility), imperative (a command), optative (a wish; rare in the New Testament, as in “May it never be!”).
- **Participle:** a verb form used like an adjective or noun (“the one believing”).

Understanding Theological ("God-Talk") Terms

These terms come up often in commentaries and Bible studies. Learning them will make those resources much easier to follow.

Is There a Biblical Definition of Theology?

Not directly. The word “theology” never appears in the Bible, and Scripture does not define it as an academic field. But knowing God, thinking clearly about Him, and speaking rightly of Him runs from Genesis to Revelation. Every writer of Scripture was doing theology. The word came later, but the work is as old as the faith.

Biblical Foundations for Theology:

Quotations in this section are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB).

1. **God reveals Himself and wants to be known**
    - Jeremiah 9:24: “But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD”
    - John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.”
    - Hosea 6:6: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”
2. **We're commanded to study and understand Scripture**
    - 2 Timothy 2:15: “Make every effort to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman who accurately handles the word of truth.”
    - Acts 17:11: The Bereans “examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true.”
3. **Sound teaching/doctrine matters**
    - Titus 2:1: “But as for you, speak the things that are consistent with sound doctrine.”
    - 2 Timothy 4:3: A warning that “the time will come when men will not tolerate sound doctrine”
    - 1 Timothy 4:16: “Pay close attention to your life and to your teaching.”
4. **We're to grow in knowledge**
    - 2 Peter 3:18: “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”
    - Colossians 1:9: Paul prays for God “to fill you with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”

Theology is simply the formal name we give to this biblical mandate to know and understand God through His revelation.

The closest biblical concept might be "the fear of the LORD," which Proverbs repeatedly connects to knowledge, understanding, and wisdom (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10).

Theology

The study of God. The word comes straight from Greek: *theos* (God) plus *logos* (word or study). At its simplest, theology is "God-talk."

Scholars usually break the field into a few branches:

- **Systematic theology** organizes what the Bible teaches by topic, such as God, salvation, and the church.
- **Biblical theology** follows themes as they develop across the storyline of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation.
- **Practical theology** takes doctrine and puts it to work in ministry, counseling, and daily life.
- **Historical theology** looks at how Christian belief has taken shape over the centuries through councils, controversies, and creeds.
- **Dogmatic theology** deals with the officially defined teachings of a specific tradition (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and so on).

Helpful Resources:

- https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/systematic-theology-review/
- https://www.ccu.edu/blogs/cags/2021/03/biblical-theology-vs-systematic-theology/

Doctrine, Dogma, Creed, Confession

These four words show up constantly, and they don't quite mean the same thing.

- A **doctrine** is a specific teaching, such as “the doctrine of the Trinity” or “the doctrine of justification.” If theology is the whole subject, doctrines are the individual truths inside it.
- A **dogma** is a doctrine that a church has formally defined as non-negotiable. Not every doctrine is a dogma; dogmas are the ones the church has drawn a line around.
- A **creed** is a short, memorable summary of Christian belief, meant to be recited and taught. The word comes from the Latin *credo*, "I believe." The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are the two most familiar.
- A **confession** is longer and more detailed: a full statement of what a particular church body believes. The Westminster Confession and the Augsburg Confession are classic examples.

Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, Heresy

Orthodoxy means “right belief”: teaching that lines up with historic Christian faith. **Orthopraxy** means “right practice”: living that faith out. The two should go together, though churches sometimes emphasize one more than the other. **Heresy** is a teaching that contradicts something essential to the Christian faith.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the discipline of biblical interpretation: the rules and habits that help you read the Bible well.

Good hermeneutics pays attention to context (what surrounds the passage), culture (what the original readers would have assumed), language (what the words actually mean in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), and genre (whether you're reading history, poetry, prophecy, or a letter).

Two questions drive the whole process: What did this mean to the original audience? And then, how does it apply today? Skipping the first question is how bad interpretations get started.

Helpful Resources:

- https://www.logos.com/grow/biblical-hermeneutics-guide/
- https://www.str.org/w/resources-to-learn-hermeneutics
- https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/foundations/nt110-biblical-hermeneutics-and-exegesis/
- https://answersingenesis.org/hermeneutics/
- https://study.com/academy/lesson/hermeneutics-history-application-criticisms.html
- https://bibleproject.com/videos/collections/how-to-read-the-bible/

Exegesis

Where hermeneutics is the set of rules, exegesis is what you *actually do* with a passage. The Greek prefix *ex-* means "out of," so exegesis means drawing the meaning out of the text.

The word to watch out for is **eisegesis**: reading your own ideas into the text. Everyone does this occasionally; the goal is to catch yourself.

Apologetics

Apologetics is the work of defending the Christian faith with reason and evidence. It comes from the Greek *apologia*, "a defense." Peter uses the same word in 1 Peter 3:15 when he tells believers to always be ready to give an answer.

The questions apologetics tackles are the ones honest skeptics actually ask. Does God exist? Can we trust the Bible? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? If God is good, why is there so much suffering?

Helpful Resources:

- https://carm.org/ (Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry)
- https://www.str.org (Stand to Reason, Greg Koukl)
- https://apologetics315.com/ (daily apologetic resources)
- https://www.bethinking.org/apologetics (UK apologetics resources)
- https://www.reasonablefaith.org (Reasonable Faith, William Lane Craig)

The Major Theological Disciplines

Theologians tend to divide their subject into branches. Most of these names end in *-ology* because they come from Greek roots, and once you spot the pattern, the vocabulary gets easier.

- **Theology Proper:** the study of God Himself: His existence, nature, attributes, and works.
- **Paterology:** the study of God the Father specifically.
- **Bibliology**: the study of the Bible itself. Where it came from, how we got it, and why Christians treat it as the Word of God. (See "How We Got the Bible" below for the terms in this field.)
- **Christology**: the study of Jesus. Who He is (fully God and fully human), what He accomplished on the cross, and what His resurrection means.
- **Pneumatology**: the study of the Holy Spirit, from *pneuma* (spirit, breath). Covers the Spirit's identity as a person of the Trinity, His work in salvation, His indwelling of believers, spiritual gifts, and the fruit He produces.

- **Soteriology**: the study of salvation, from *sōtēria*. Asks the practical question: how are people saved? And then the harder ones: what part does faith play? What about grace, works, election, and the death of Christ?
- **Ecclesiology**: the study of the church, from *ekklēsia* ("assembly" or "congregation"). What the church is, why it exists, how it should be led, and how baptism and communion fit in.
- **Anthropology (theological)**: the study of what it means to be human, biblically speaking. The image of God, the fall, and the effects of sin on human nature.
- **Hamartiology**: the study of sin, from *hamartia* ("missing the mark"). Where sin came from, what it does to us, and what the Bible means when it uses the word.
- **Angelology**: the study of angels: what they are, what they do, and how they fit into God's purposes.
- **Demonology (or Satanology)**: the study of Satan and demons, including where they came from and how the Bible describes their eventual defeat.
- **Eschatology**: the study of last things, from *eschatos* ("last"). Covers death, judgment, heaven, hell, Christ's return, resurrection, and the new creation.
- **Missiology**: the study of Christian mission: the theology, history, and practice of spreading the gospel.

Key Terms About God

Trinity: one God, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, and yet there is only one God. It is the mystery at the heart of Christian belief, and every major branch of the church confesses it.

Attributes of God are the qualities that make God who He is. A few of the classic ones:

- **Omnipotence**: all-powerful
- **Omniscience**: all-knowing
- **Omnipresence**: present everywhere at once
- **Immutability**: unchanging in character and purpose
- **Holiness**: set apart, morally perfect
- **Sovereignty**: supreme authority over everything

Providence describes how God actively runs the world. He sustains it, guides it, and works through even ordinary events to accomplish His purposes.

Transcendence and **immanence** are two sides of the same coin. God is transcendent in that He is above and beyond His creation. He is immanent in that He is present and at work within it.

Key Terms About the Bible

- **Revelation**: the general word for how God makes Himself known. Christians usually distinguish between two kinds. *General revelation* is what anyone can see: creation itself, and the sense of right and wrong written on the human conscience (Romans 1:19–20). *Special revelation* is God's more direct self-disclosure through Scripture and through Jesus Himself.
- **Inspiration**: the doctrine that Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). Human beings did the writing, but the Holy Spirit worked through them so that what they wrote is genuinely God's Word.

- **Inerrancy**: the teaching that the Bible, in its original manuscripts, is without error in anything it affirms.
- **Infallibility**: closely related but not identical. Infallibility means the Bible cannot fail in its purpose; it will not lead you astray in matters of faith and practice.
- **Illumination**: the Spirit's ongoing work in the reader. Even a perfect text needs a receptive mind, and 1 Corinthians 2:12–14 says the Spirit is the one who opens ours.
- **Canon:** the collection of books the church recognizes as Scripture. The Greek *kanōn* meant a measuring rod or standard; these are the books that measure everything else.

Key Terms About Salvation

Grace: God's unearned favor. The whole of salvation begins here.

Atonement: the word for what Christ accomplished on the cross to deal with sin. A few related terms fill out the picture:

- **Propitiation**: Christ absorbing the righteous wrath of God against sin
- **Expiation**: the guilt of sin being removed or covered
- **Redemption**: a purchase price being paid to set someone free
- **Reconciliation**: a broken relationship being restored

Justification: God's legal verdict that a sinner who trusts in Christ is righteous. It happens once, and it is complete.

Regeneration: the Spirit giving new spiritual life. This is what Jesus meant by being "born again" in John 3:3.

Sanctification: the slow, ongoing work of being made more like Christ. Where justification is a moment, sanctification is a lifetime.

Glorification: the final piece. Believers receive resurrection bodies and are made complete in Christ, free from sin.

Election and predestination refer to God choosing people for salvation before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4–5). How God’s choice fits together with human choice is one of the oldest debates in Christian theology, and Christians have landed in different places on it.

Key Terms About Jesus

- **Incarnation**: the Son of God taking on human nature. John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
- **Hypostatic union**: the technical term for how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human at the same time. One person, two natures, held together without confusion or mixing.

Key Terms About Humanity

- **Imago Dei**: Latin for "image of God." Genesis 1:26–27 says human beings are made in God's image, and Christian ethics has traditionally rooted human dignity here.
- **The Fall**: Adam and Eve's disobedience in Genesis 3, and everything it set in motion: sin, death, and a creation that no longer works the way it was meant to.

- **Original sin**: the doctrine that we inherit a sinful nature from Adam. We are not sinners only because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.

Key Terms About the Church

Sacrament and **ordinance** are two words for the same set of practices: physical acts commanded by Christ that carry spiritual meaning. Different traditions prefer different terms. Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed Christians usually say *sacrament* and treat these acts as a means of grace. Baptists and many evangelicals prefer *ordinance* and see them mainly as acts of obedience and remembrance.

- **Baptism**: the sign of Christian initiation, done with water.
- **Communion, Lord's Supper, Eucharist**: different names for the meal Jesus instituted at the Last Supper. Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians most often call it the Eucharist, from the Greek word for "thanksgiving." Protestants tend to say Communion or Lord's Supper.

The Major Covenants

A **covenant** is a binding agreement. God's covenants form the backbone of the Bible's storyline.

- **Noahic** (Genesis 9): God promises never again to destroy the earth by flood. The sign is the rainbow.
- **Abrahamic** (Genesis 12, 15, 17): God promises Abraham land, descendants, and that all nations will be blessed through him.
- **Mosaic** (Exodus 19–24): the Law given at Sinai, setting out how Israel was to live as God's people.
- **Davidic** (2 Samuel 7): God promises David an everlasting throne and kingdom through his descendant, fulfilled in Jesus.
- **New** (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Luke 22:20): God promises to forgive sin and write His law on hearts, established through Jesus' death.

Covenant theology and dispensationalism (below) differ on how these covenants relate to Israel and the church.

Frameworks for Understanding the Whole Bible

Covenant theology and **dispensationalism** are two big-picture ways of understanding how the Bible fits together as a single story.

- **Covenant theology** emphasizes continuity. God has always been working with one people through a series of covenants, and the church is the continuation of Israel in a new form.
- **Dispensationalism** emphasizes distinction. It divides history into distinct periods, called dispensations, in which God works differently. It also typically keeps a sharper line between Israel and the church.

Both are broad traditions with many variations, and many Christians hold views somewhere between them.

Views on the millennium grow out of Revelation 20, where John describes a thousand-year reign of Christ.

- **Premillennialism**: Christ returns first, then reigns for a literal thousand years on earth.
- **Postmillennialism**: the gospel gradually transforms the world, and Christ returns at the end of that golden age.
- **Amillennialism**: the thousand years is symbolic of the whole church age, the time between Christ's first and second coming.

Rapture: the belief that Christ will gather His people to Himself when He returns (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). Where Christians disagree is on the timing in relation to the tribulation: some hold to a pre-tribulation rapture, others mid- or post-tribulation.

How We Got the Bible: Canon, Manuscripts, and Scholarship Terms

The terms in this section come from a field seminaries call **Bible introduction** (or "general introduction"): the study of how the Bible was written, collected, copied, and translated. It falls under Bibliology. You will run into these words constantly in study Bibles, commentaries, and footnotes, and knowing them keeps you from being confused or misled.

Canon Terms

- **Canonicity**: the qualities the early church looked for when recognizing which books were Scripture: a connection to an apostle or prophet, agreement with the faith already received, widespread use across the churches, and early origin. The church did not *create* the canon; it *recognized* the books God had already given.
- **Tanakh**: the Jewish name for the Hebrew Bible, from its three parts: **T**orah (Law), **N**evi'im (Prophets), and **K**etuvim (Writings). Its 24 books contain the same material as the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament, counted and ordered differently.
- **Pentateuch / Torah**: the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy.
- **Protocanonical**: books accepted as Scripture by all Christian traditions.
- **Deuterocanonical**: "second canon." The Catholic and Orthodox term for Tobit, Judith, 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and additions to Esther and Daniel. The Catholic Church formally confirmed them at the Council of Trent (1546). Protestants generally do not accept them as Scripture.
- **Apocrypha**: from the Greek *apokryphos*, "hidden." The word has two uses:
    - **Narrow sense ("The Apocrypha"):** the specific Old Testament–era books listed above under Deuterocanonical. This is how most Protestants use the word.
    - **Broad sense ("apocryphal"):** a scholarly category label for any ancient religious writing that resembles Scripture but is outside the canon. Being called apocryphal does not mean a writing is in the Bible; it means the opposite.
- **Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha**: Jewish writings mostly from about 300 BC to AD 100, connected to Old Testament figures, settings, and themes. Examples: Tobit, Judith, 1 Enoch, Jubilees. Standard collections include R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, and James Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.
- **New Testament Apocrypha**: Christian writings mostly from the 2nd century onward that imitate New Testament types of writing:
    - *Gospels:* Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Judas
    - *Acts:* Acts of Paul, Acts of Peter, Acts of John
    - *Epistles:* Epistle to the Laodiceans, 3 Corinthians
    - *Apocalypses:* Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Paul
    - Standard collections include Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, and J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Many of these reflect Gnostic or other teachings the early church rejected.
- **Pseudepigrapha**: "falsely attributed writings": works that claim to be written by a famous biblical figure who did not write them, such as 1 Enoch or the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Jude 14–15 quotes 1 Enoch, but quoting a book is not the same as treating it as Scripture; Paul also quotes Greek poets (Acts 17:28).

- **Homologoumena and Antilegomena**: "agreed upon" and "disputed." Terms the church historian Eusebius (early 300s) used for New Testament books. A few books, such as James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation, were debated in some regions before being accepted by most of the church. Some ancient churches, such as the Syriac-speaking church, were slower to accept certain books, and a few traditions still differ today.
- **Muratorian Fragment**: one of the earliest known lists of New Testament books, traditionally dated to the late 2nd century.
- **Athanasius' Festal Letter (AD 367)**: the earliest known list that matches the 27 books of the New Testament exactly.

> ***How the apocryphal categories are grouped:*** *Scholars divide apocryphal writings into Old Testament and New Testament groups based on which testament each writing connects to: its characters, setting, and type of writing. That generally corresponds to when and by whom it was written (Jewish writings before and around the time of Christ, Christian writings afterward). The match is not perfect, since a few "Old Testament" pseudepigrapha, such as 4 Ezra, were written around AD 100. So the safest wording is: apocryphal writings are grouped by their Old Testament or New Testament connection, which generally lines up with their time period.*

Historical Periods and People

- **Intertestamental period**: the roughly 400 years between Malachi and the New Testament, when much of the Old Testament Apocrypha was written. Sometimes called the "400 silent years," because no new prophetic Scripture was given.
- **Second Temple period**: from the rebuilding of the temple (516 BC) to its destruction by Rome (AD 70). Scholars often use this term instead of "intertestamental."
- **Church Fathers**: influential Christian writers of the first several centuries, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, and Jerome. The study of their writings is called **patristics**.
- **Apostolic Fathers**: the earliest Christian writers after the apostles (late 1st to mid 2nd century), such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp, plus writings like the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas.
- **Gnosticism**: a 2nd-century movement that claimed salvation through secret knowledge (*gnōsis*), taught that the physical world was evil, and produced many New Testament apocryphal writings. Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* (about AD 180) to refute it.

Manuscript and Text Terms

- **Autographs**: the original documents written by the biblical authors. None survive; we have copies.
- **Manuscript (MS, plural MSS)**: a handwritten copy.
- **Scroll**: a long rolled strip of papyrus or leather; the standard book form in Old Testament times.
- **Codex**: a book with bound pages. Early Christians adopted the codex very early, which made it easier to collect and look up Scripture.

- **Papyri**: the earliest New Testament manuscripts, written on papyrus. The John Rylands fragment (P52), containing a few verses of John 18, is usually dated to the first half of the 2nd century, though some scholars date it later.
- **Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus:** two of the most important early Greek Bibles, both from the 4th century. Sinaiticus contains the entire New Testament; Vaticanus is missing some sections, including the end of Hebrews and Revelation.
- **Masoretic Text (MT)**: the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament, carefully preserved by Jewish scribes called the Masoretes (about AD 500–1000), who added vowel marks and detailed notes. The Leningrad Codex (AD 1008) is the oldest complete copy.
- **Septuagint (LXX)**: the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 3rd–2nd centuries BC. The New Testament writers often quote from it. "LXX" (70) refers to the tradition that about 70 scholars translated it.
- **Dead Sea Scrolls**: scrolls discovered near Qumran beginning in 1947, dating from about 250 BC to AD 68. They include parts of every Old Testament book except Esther. The Great Isaiah Scroll is about 1,000 years older than the earliest Masoretic copies and agrees with them remarkably closely.
- **Vulgate**: Jerome's Latin translation (completed about AD 405); the standard Bible of the Western church for over a thousand years.
- **Variant**: a place where manuscripts differ. Most variants are spelling, word order, or small words like "the," and no core Christian doctrine depends on a disputed passage.
- **Critical apparatus**: the footnotes in a scholarly Greek or Hebrew text that list the variants and which manuscripts support each one.
- **Textus Receptus (TR)**: "Received Text." The Greek New Testament first published by Erasmus (1516) and later editors, based on a handful of late manuscripts. It is the basis of the KJV and NKJV New Testament.
- **Critical Text**: the Greek New Testament edited by comparing all available manuscripts, giving weight to the oldest (the Nestle-Aland and UBS editions). Most modern translations, including the ESV, NIV, NASB, CSB, and BSB, use it.
- **Majority Text / Byzantine Text**: the reading found in the majority of surviving manuscripts, most of which are later copies from the Greek-speaking East. The Majority Standard Bible (MSB) follows it.

These three Greek texts explain most differences between the KJV and modern translations, and why modern Bibles have footnotes such as "Some manuscripts add…"

Biblical Criticism: Methods Scholars Use

In biblical studies, **criticism** comes from the Greek *krinō*, "to judge or discern." It means careful analysis, not attacking the Bible. Some methods are used by nearly all scholars; others often begin from skeptical assumptions, so their conclusions should be weighed carefully.

Method	Question it asks	Example
Textual criticism ("lower criticism")	What did the original text say?	Is the longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) original?
Higher criticism /	Who wrote it, when, where, and from	Debates over the date and

Method	Question it asks	Example
historical-critical method	what sources?	authorship of Daniel
Source criticism	What earlier written sources did the author use?	The "Synoptic problem": how Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate
Form criticism	What oral form or type of saying lies behind a passage?	Classifying parables, miracle stories, or psalms of lament
Redaction criticism	How did the author shape and arrange material for a purpose?	Why Matthew groups Jesus' teaching into five large speeches
Literary / narrative criticism	How does the story work as literature: plot, characters, structure?	Tracing the role of the "beloved disciple" in John
Canonical criticism	What does a book mean in its final form within the whole Bible?	Reading Psalms as an arranged collection, not loose poems
Grammatical-historical method	What does the text mean by its grammar in its historical setting?	The approach this entire guide teaches

Textual criticism in practice: Scholars weigh *external evidence* (which reading appears in the oldest manuscripts and in manuscripts from many regions) and *internal evidence* (which reading best explains how the others arose, and which fits the author's style). Because copyists tended to smooth out hard wording or add clarifications, scholars often give weight to the harder or shorter reading. These are considerations to weigh, not automatic rules. Well-known examples include Mark 16:9–20, John 7:53–8:11, and 1 John 5:7–8 in the KJV.

Grammatical-historical method: This is the approach most evangelical scholars use. It reads each passage according to the normal meaning of its words and grammar, its genre, and its historical setting, while treating Scripture as God's Word. Parts 3 through 8 of this guide are this method in action.

More Interpretation Terms

- **Typology**: Old Testament people, events, or institutions that foreshadow Christ. The earlier picture is the *type*; its fulfillment is the *antitype*. Example: the Passover lamb points to Christ, "our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- **Allegory**: a story in which each detail stands for something else. The Bible uses it rarely and openly (Galatians 4:24). Typology is rooted in real history; allegory is not.
- **Theophany**: a visible appearance of God, such as the burning bush (Exodus 3) or Ezekiel's throne vision (Ezekiel 1). An appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ is sometimes called a **Christophany**.
- **Anthropomorphism**: describing God in human physical terms, such as His "arm" or "eyes." **Anthropopathism** describes God with human emotions, such as grief or regret. Both help finite people understand an infinite God.
- **Progressive revelation**: God revealing His plan more fully over time. Later revelation builds on earlier revelation without contradicting it.

- **Parallelism**: the main feature of Hebrew poetry: a second line repeats, contrasts, or builds on the first.
- **Chiasm**: a mirror-image structure (A-B-C-B'-A') that often places the main point in the center.
- **Hapax legomenon**: a word that appears only once in Scripture, which makes its meaning harder to pin down.
- **Koine Greek**: the "common" Greek of everyday life in which the New Testament was written.
- **Aramaic**: a language related to Hebrew. Parts of Daniel and Ezra are written in it, and Jesus likely spoke it ("Talitha koum," Mark 5:41).

Genre and Book-Group Terms

- **Historical books**: Joshua through Esther.
- **Wisdom literature**: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.
- **Major and Minor Prophets**: named by length, not importance: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel are "major"; Hosea through Malachi are the twelve "minor" prophets.
- **Apocalyptic literature**: prophecy using vivid symbols and visions to reveal God's ultimate victory, as in Daniel 7–12 and Revelation.
- **Synoptic Gospels**: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which "see together" (*synopsis*) and share much material. John is written differently.
- **Pauline Epistles**: Paul's letters, Romans through Philemon. The **Pastoral Epistles** (1–2 Timothy, Titus) are his letters to church leaders.
- **General (Catholic) Epistles**: James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude, written to a broad audience. "Catholic" here means "universal," not Roman Catholic.

Recommended Reading on How We Got the Bible

- F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*
- Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*
- Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*
- Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* and *The Text of the New Testament*
- Paul Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*

Common Bible Translation Comparison

Not all Bible translations are created equal, and understanding the differences will help you choose the right one for your study needs.

Translation Philosophy

Word-for-Word (Formal Equivalence)

- Translates as literally as possible from the original languages
- Preserves word order and sentence structure when possible
- Best for: Detailed study, word studies, cross-referencing
- Examples: NASB, ESV, KJV, NKJV, BSB

Balanced (Optimal Equivalence)

- Aims for the most literal wording that still reads naturally in English
- Falls between word-for-word and thought-for-thought
- Best for: Study and daily reading in one Bible
- Examples: CSB

Thought-for-Thought (Dynamic Equivalence)

- Translates the meaning/ideas rather than exact words
- More readable, flows naturally in English
- Best for: Devotional reading, new believers, general understanding
- Examples: NIV, NLT

Paraphrase

- Rewrites the Bible in the author's own words
- Very readable but not suitable for serious study
- Best for: Devotional reading, fresh perspective
- Examples: The Message, The Living Bible
- **Warning:** Do NOT use paraphrases for word studies or doctrinal study

Recommended Translations by Purpose

For Serious Study (Primary Study Bible):

- **NASB** (New American Standard Bible) - Most literal, excellent for word studies
- **ESV** (English Standard Version) - Literal but more readable than NASB
- **NKJV** (New King James Version) - Updates KJV language while maintaining literal approach
- **BSB** (Berean Standard Bible) - Literal and readable; public domain, free to copy and share, and linked to free interlinear tools on Biblehub.com

For Daily Reading (Secondary Bible):

- **NIV** (New International Version) - Good balance of accuracy and readability
- **CSB** (Christian Standard Bible) - Optimal equivalence between word-for-word and thought-for-thought

- **NLT** (New Living Translation) - Very readable, captures meaning well

For New Believers:

- **NLT** - Clear, easy to understand
- **NIV** - Accessible yet accurate

For Comparing Perspectives:

- Use 2-3 different translations when studying a passage
- Compare a word-for-word (ESV/NASB/BSB) with a thought-for-thought (NIV/NLT)

What to Avoid

- **Using only paraphrases for study** - They reflect the author's interpretation, not direct translation
- **Using only one translation** - You miss nuances and alternative renderings
- **KJV-only mindset** - While beautiful, the 1611 English can obscure meaning for modern readers, and its New Testament rests on the Textus Receptus rather than the many older manuscripts found since (see "Manuscript and Text Terms" above)
- **Translation-shopping for preferred meanings** - Don't pick the translation that says what you want; seek what the text actually says

How to Choose a Commentary

Commentaries can be incredibly helpful or deeply misleading. Choose wisely.

What Makes a Good Commentary

1. Scholarly Rigor

- Author has credentials in biblical studies or theology
- Interacts with original languages (Hebrew/Greek)
- Considers historical and cultural context
- Engages with other scholars' views

2. Biblical Faithfulness

- Takes Scripture seriously as God's Word
- Interprets Scripture with Scripture
- Doesn't impose foreign philosophies onto the text
- Acknowledges difficulties honestly rather than explaining them away

3. Practical Balance

- Not just academic - applies truth to life
- Not just devotional - grounds application in solid exegesis
- Helps you understand what the text meant then AND means now

Red Flags - Avoid Commentaries That:

- **Ignore the original languages** - If it never mentions Hebrew or Greek, it's superficial
- **Over-allegorize** - Everything becomes a spiritual symbol rather than taking the text at face value
- **Have a rigid agenda** - More concerned with proving a point than understanding the text
- **Lack citations** - Good commentaries reference other scholars and sources
- **Contradict clear Scripture** - Any commentary that denies core Christian doctrines
- **Are overly simplistic** - "This means God loves you" for every verse without deeper analysis

Trusted Commentary Series (By Level)

Beginner/Devotional:

- Life Application Bible Commentary
- NIV Application Commentary (NIVAC)
- Wiersbe's "Be" Series

Intermediate/Popular:

- Tyndale Old Testament/New Testament Commentaries
- Baker Exegetical Commentary (New Testament)
- Expositor's Bible Commentary (EBC)

Advanced/Technical:

- Word Biblical Commentary (WBC)

- New International Commentary (NICOT/NICNT)
- Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC)

Free Online Commentary Resources:

- **StudyLight.org** - Multiple commentaries available
- **BibleHub.com** - Parallel commentaries on every verse
- **EnduringWord.com** - David Guzik's commentary (solid, accessible)
- **PreceptAustin.org** - Extensive notes and commentary links

Discernment: Testing What You Hear

Pastors, books, podcasts, social media, and AI all make claims about what the Bible says. These tools help you separate what the text says from what someone concludes about it (Acts 17:11).

Scripture, Interpretation, and Application

When you hear a teaching, ask which of these it is:

- **Scripture:** what the text directly says. *Example:* Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved Him (John 21:15–17).
- **Strong interpretation:** a conclusion most careful readers draw from the context. *Example:* The three questions mirror Peter's three denials (John 18:15–27).
- **Debated interpretation:** a reading that careful scholars disagree on. *Example:* The two Greek words for love show two different levels of commitment.
- **Application:** how a truth is lived out today, which can rightly differ from person to person. *Example:* Jesus restores people who fail Him, so I can bring my failures to Him instead of hiding them.

Hold each with matching confidence. Scripture carries God's authority; interpretations and applications carry only as much weight as the evidence behind them.

Command, Promise, Principle, or Description?

Not every sentence in the Bible works the same way. Before you apply a verse, identify what kind it is:

- **Command:** tells someone what to do. Check who it was given to and whether it still applies today.
- **Promise:** God commits Himself to act. Check who the promise was made to and whether conditions are attached.
- **Warning:** points to consequences to avoid.
- **Prediction:** foretells future events. Some have been fulfilled, and some are still future.
- **Principle:** a general truth about how life usually works (much of Proverbs), not a guarantee for every case.
- **Description:** records what happened without necessarily approving it (see Descriptive vs. Prescriptive in Red Flags).

Example: Proverbs 22:6 tells parents to train up a child in the way he should go. It is a wise principle about parenting, not a guarantee that every child raised well will follow God.

How to Check a Claim

When someone says, "The Bible says…," work through these steps:

- **1. Find the verse.** Look it up yourself instead of trusting a quote or a screenshot.
- **2. Read the surrounding passage.** Read at least the whole paragraph, and ideally the chapter.
- **3. Compare translations.** Check a word-for-word and a thought-for-thought translation. If they differ, find out why.

- **4. Check the original wording when it matters.** Use an interlinear and a real lexicon (see Parts 10–11).
- **5. Separate evidence from inference.** Ask what the text clearly establishes and what the speaker is adding or assuming.

Red Flags in Bible Interpretation

We can mean well, but can misinterpret Scripture. Here are the most common errors and how to avoid them.

Eisegesis (Reading INTO the Text)

What it is: Imposing your own ideas, biases, or desired meaning onto Scripture rather than drawing out what it actually says.

How to avoid it:

- Ask: "What did this mean to the original audience?"
- Check the surrounding context
- Let Scripture interpret Scripture
- Be willing to change your interpretation if evidence contradicts it

Proof-Texting (Using Isolated Verses)

What it is: Taking a single verse out of context to prove a point, ignoring what comes before and after.

Example: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) is often used to claim Christians can accomplish any goal. In context, Paul is saying he's learned contentment in every circumstance through Christ's strength. It's about contentment, not capability.

How to avoid it:

- Always read at least the entire paragraph (5-10 verses) around any verse
- Ask: "What is the main point of this passage?"
- Never build a doctrine on a single verse

Cherry-Picking Translations

What it is: Shopping for the translation that says what you want it to say instead of what the text actually means.

How to avoid it:

- Compare multiple translations, including literal ones (NASB, ESV, BSB)
- If translations differ significantly, investigate WHY in the original language
- Be humble when faced with a translation you don't like

Ignoring Context

What it is: Failing to consider historical, cultural, literary, or biblical context.

Example: "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1) is used to say Christians should never make moral judgments. In context, Jesus is warning against hypocritical judgment, not all discernment. He commands judging rightly based on fruit (vv. 15-20).

Types of context to consider:

- **Immediate context** - verses before and after
- **Book context** - purpose and theme of the book
- **Biblical context** - what the whole Bible says on this topic
- **Historical context** - what was happening when it was written
- **Cultural context** - customs and practices of that time

Allegorizing Everything

What it is: Finding hidden spiritual meanings in every detail rather than taking the text at face value.

How to avoid it:

- Start with the literal, plain meaning
- Only allegorize when the text itself indicates symbolism
- Ask: "Would the original audience have understood this as allegory?"
- **Know the difference from typology.** Typology sees real people and events in history that point forward to Christ, usually where the New Testament itself makes the link (the Passover lamb in 1 Corinthians 5:7). Allegory turns details into hidden symbols the text never signals. See “Typology” and “Allegory” under More Interpretation Terms.

The "What Does This Mean TO ME?" Trap

What it is: Making the Bible all about your personal feelings rather than God's revealed truth.

How to avoid it:

- Ask "What does this mean?" BEFORE "What does this mean to me?"
- Personal application follows proper interpretation
- Test your "feeling" against the actual meaning of the text

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive

What it is: Treating every event in a Bible story as a command for today. Some passages *describe* what happened (descriptive); others *tell us what to do* (prescriptive).

Example: Gideon tested God with a fleece (Judges 6:36–40). The passage describes what Gideon did; it does not command believers to “put out a fleece” to make decisions.

How to avoid it:

- Ask: “Is this passage describing what happened, or telling me what to do?”
- Look for clear commands elsewhere in Scripture that teach the same thing
- Remember that the Bible records people’s sins and mistakes without approving them

Quick Self-Check Questions

Before finalizing your interpretation, ask yourself:

- Have I read the entire passage and surrounding context?
- What did this mean to the original audience?
- Does my interpretation align with the rest of Scripture?

- Is this passage describing what happened, or prescribing what I should do?
- Am I reading this because I want it to say something specific?
- Have I consulted trusted scholars and commentaries?
- Does this interpretation honor God and align with His character?
- Am I willing to change my view if shown I'm wrong?

Remember: The goal of Bible study is not to make Scripture say what we want, but to hear what God has actually said.

Studying the Bible With Others

Studying with others helps you see what you might miss on your own (Proverbs 27:17). A few tips for leading or joining a group study:

Leading a Discussion

- **Prepare first:** Study the passage yourself, using this guide, before you lead it.
- **Ask open questions:** "What do you notice?" works better than questions with one right answer. Follow the inductive order: observe, interpret, then apply.
- **Keep pointing back to the text:** When the conversation drifts, ask, "Where do you see that in the passage?"
- **Make room for everyone:** Draw in quieter members, and gently redirect anyone who dominates.
- **Don't answer your own questions:** After you ask, wait. A little silence is fine; give the group time to think.
- **Move past small talk:** Allow a set time to catch up, then open the passage with a question.

Ground Rules

- **Size:** About 4–12 people works best. Split larger groups so everyone can take part.
- **Length:** 60–90 minutes. Start and end on time.
- **Confidentiality:** What people share personally stays in the group.
- **Freedom to pass:** Anyone may pass on answering a question or praying aloud.
- **Preparation:** Read the passage ahead of time when you can, and bring a Bible.

Handling Disagreement

- Separate core beliefs (such as the Trinity or salvation by grace) from secondary issues where faithful Christians differ (such as the timing of the rapture).
- Ask people to show their reasons from the text, not just share opinions.
- It is fine to leave a question open and come back to it next time.
- If someone denies a core belief, don't debate it in front of the group. Talk with them privately, listen first, and involve your pastor or church leaders if needed.
- If someone tends to dominate (including the leader), speak to them privately and kindly. Most people don't realize they are doing it.

Teaching a Passage You Haven't Settled

- Be honest: "Here are the main views, here is where I lean, and here is why."
- Describe the other views fairly, the way their own supporters would.
- Keep the focus on what the passage clearly teaches, even if some details remain uncertain.

Sharing Notes

- Use the Study Template so everyone records observations, questions, and applications the same way.
- Share your open questions, too. They make good starting points for the next session.

Sample Beginner Study: Proverbs 3:5–6

This walkthrough shows the whole method from start to finish on a short, familiar passage. Use it as a model for your own studies.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5–6, BSB)

Step 1: Read

Read the verses several times, then read all of Proverbs 3, ideally in two translations.

Step 2: Observe

- **Commands:** trust the LORD, don't lean on your own understanding, and acknowledge Him in all your ways.
- **Contrast:** trusting the LORD versus relying on your own understanding.
- **Repeated word:** "all" (all your heart, all your ways). The trust is meant to be complete.
- **Promise:** He will make your paths straight.

Step 3: Context

- **Immediate context:** Proverbs 3 is a father's instruction to his son (3:1). Verse 7 continues the thought: don't be wise in your own eyes, but fear the LORD and turn from evil.
- **Book context:** Proverbs is wisdom literature. Its foundation is that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge (1:7).
- **Genre:** proverbs are general principles about life with God, not legal guarantees (see Reading by Genre).

Step 4: Interpret

"Trust" means to rely on or put your confidence in the LORD. "Your own understanding" is not a rejection of thinking, since Proverbs values understanding highly. It warns against relying on your own judgment in place of God. "Acknowledge Him" means recognizing Him in every area of life. The promise is that God guides the person who lives this way. The original audience would have heard a call to wholehearted, practical faith in Israel's God.

Step 5: Investigate

- **Key word:** "acknowledge" translates the Hebrew *yada*, the common word for "know." It suggests more than admitting God exists; it points to knowing Him personally. Confirm this in a lexicon (see Part 10).
- **Translations:** the NIV reads "submit to him," and the KJV reads "he shall direct thy paths." Comparing them shows the range of the Hebrew words.
- **Cross-references:** Psalm 37:5 (commit your way to the LORD) and Jeremiah 17:7–8 (the person who trusts in the LORD is blessed).

Step 6: Evaluate

A common assumption is that this passage promises an easy life or a specific outcome if you trust God enough. The text does not say that. In Proverbs, a “straight” path is a right and clear way of life under God’s guidance, not a problem-free one. Proverbs itself says the righteous may fall seven times and rise again (24:16).

Step 7: Apply

For Israel, this called for wholehearted trust in the LORD in everyday decisions. That truth carries over to believers today. A specific application: before a decision this week, pray about it and look at what Scripture says before relying on your own instincts.

Step 8: Document

Record your work in the Study Template:

- Observations and key words (trust, understanding, acknowledge/know)
- Your interpretation and the evidence for it
- Open questions (for example, “How does God guide: through Scripture, wise counsel, circumstances, or all three?”)
- One specific application

Sample Word Study: Walking Through the Process

Let's do a complete word study of "love" in John 21:15-17. This is the passage where Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Many people miss that Jesus uses two different Greek words for "love" in this exchange.

Step 1: Identify the Greek Words

Using an interlinear Bible (Biblehub.com or STEPBible.org):

- **Verse 15:** "Simon, son of John, do you love (ἀγαπᾷς - *agapas*) me more than these?" Peter responds: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλῶ - *philo*) you."
- **Verse 16:** Jesus asks again: "Simon, son of John, do you love (ἀγαπᾷς - *agapas*) me?" Peter responds: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλῶ - *philo*) you."
- **Verse 17:** Jesus asks a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love (φιλεῖς - *phileis*) me?" Peter responds: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (φιλῶ - *philo*) you."

Note the words:

- **Agapao (ἀγαπάω)** - used by Jesus in questions 1 and 2
- **Phileo (φιλέω)** - used by Peter all three times; used by Jesus in question 3

Step 2: Look Up in a Real Lexicon

Using BDAG or Thayer's (available on BlueLetterBible.org):

Agapao (ἀγαπάω):

- To love; to have warm regard for and interest in another
- Used widely in the New Testament, including for God’s love and the love believers are to show
- Its meaning overlaps with phileo. Context, not the word alone, decides the sense.

Phileo (φιλέω):

- To love; to have affection for someone or something
- Often used of friendship and warm personal attachment
- Also used of God’s love (John 5:20; 16:27), so it is not a lesser word

Step 3: Check the Grammar

Jesus’ questions and Peter’s answers use present-tense, active-voice verbs. In Greek, a question uses the same verb form (the indicative) as a statement; the context shows it is a question.

Why this matters: Jesus is asking about Peter’s love now, after his denials. Be careful not to build too much on the tense alone. The present tense shows how an action is viewed; it does not by itself prove that the action is ongoing.

Step 4: Study the Context

Biblical context:

- This conversation happens after Peter's three denials (John 18:15-27)

- Jesus asks three times, corresponding to Peter's three denials
- This is a restoration conversation

Step 5: Consult Theological Wordbooks

In John's writings, *agapao* is the preferred term for the love of God and the love Christians should have. *Phileo* appears less often and is not a lesser word. It emphasizes the emotional, personal dimension of love.

Step 6: Read Commentaries

Scholars debate two main interpretations:

Interpretation #1: The words are synonymous

- John often uses synonyms for variety
- The main point is Peter's three-fold affirmation matching his three denials

Interpretation #2: There is a meaningful distinction

- In this view, Jesus asks for *agape* love (committed, sacrificial)
- Those who hold this view see Peter's *phileo* as affectionate, but less than Jesus asked
- Jesus meets Peter where he is in question 3 (using phileo)

Step 7: Application

Contextual conclusions:

- Jesus restores Peter through this three-fold questioning
- The repetition corresponds to Peter's three denials
- Peter must affirm his love and accept his shepherding responsibility

Application:

- Jesus restores us despite our failures
- Love for Jesus must translate into service ("Feed my sheep")
- Restoration often involves facing our failures honestly

Time investment: This complete study might take 30-60 minutes, but the depth of understanding is worth it.

Quick Term Finder

An alphabetical list of key terms and where each is explained. You can also search the whole guide in Word with Ctrl+F (Windows) or Command+F (Mac).

- **Allegory:** How We Got the Bible (More Interpretation Terms); Red Flags (Allegorizing Everything)
- **Anthropomorphism:** How We Got the Bible (More Interpretation Terms)
- **Aorist, Case, Mood, Voice:** Part 11 (Quick Glossary of Grammar Terms)
- **Apocrypha:** How We Got the Bible (Canon Terms)
- **Apologetics:** Theological Terms
- **Atonement, Justification, Sanctification:** Theological Terms (Key Terms About Salvation)
- **Canon:** Theological Terms (Key Terms About the Bible); How We Got the Bible (Canon Terms)
- **Chiasm, Parallelism:** Part 7; How We Got the Bible (More Interpretation Terms)
- **Codex, Manuscript, Papyri:** How We Got the Bible (Manuscript and Text Terms)
- **Covenants (Noahic to New):** Theological Terms (The Major Covenants)
- **Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism:** Theological Terms (Frameworks for Understanding the Whole Bible)
- **Critical Text, Majority Text, Textus Receptus:** How We Got the Bible (Manuscript and Text Terms)
- **Dead Sea Scrolls, Masoretic Text, Septuagint:** How We Got the Bible (Manuscript and Text Terms)
- **Descriptive vs. Prescriptive:** Red Flags in Bible Interpretation
- **Deuterocanonical:** How We Got the Bible (Canon Terms)
- **Doctrine, Dogma, Creed, Confession:** Theological Terms
- **Eisegesis, Exegesis:** Theological Terms (Exegesis); Red Flags
- **Eschatology, Soteriology, and other -ologies:** Theological Terms (The Major Theological Disciplines)
- **Genre:** Part 4 (Reading by Genre); How We Got the Bible (Genre and Book-Group Terms)
- **Gnosticism:** How We Got the Bible (Historical Periods and People)
- **Grammatical-Historical Method:** How We Got the Bible (Biblical Criticism)
- **Hermeneutics:** Theological Terms
- **Higher Criticism, Textual Criticism:** How We Got the Bible (Biblical Criticism)
- **Inductive Method:** Part 1
- **Inerrancy, Infallibility, Inspiration:** Theological Terms (Key Terms About the Bible)
- **Intertestamental Period:** Bible Basics (A Basic Timeline); How We Got the Bible (Historical Periods and People)
- **Lexicon:** Parts 10 and 11
- **Millennium Views, Rapture:** Theological Terms (Frameworks for Understanding the Whole Bible)
- **Orthodoxy, Heresy:** Theological Terms
- **Pseudepigrapha:** How We Got the Bible (Canon Terms)
- **Qal, Piel, Hiphil, Niphal:** Part 11 (Quick Glossary of Grammar Terms)
- **Root Fallacy:** Parts 10 and 11 (Common Mistakes to Avoid)
- **Strong's Concordance:** Part 2 (Keyword Analysis); Parts 10 and 11
- **Theology:** Theological Terms

- **Trinity:** Theological Terms (Key Terms About God)
- **Typology:** How We Got the Bible (More Interpretation Terms); Red Flags
- **Variant:** How We Got the Bible (Manuscript and Text Terms)

Study Template

Use this template to structure your Bible study sessions and keep notes organized.

Study Element	Notes
Study Method	☐ Verse-by-Verse ☐ Topical ☐ Character ☐ Book Study
Date	
Scripture/Topic	
Translation(s)	Which translations you read and compared
Context	Historical and cultural background
Original Audience	Who first received this passage, and what was their situation?
Key Observations	Context: briefly describe the historical and cultural background. Keywords/Topics: list and define key words or topics. Key Themes/Traits: identify and summarize key themes or character traits.
Interpretation	What did the passage mean to its original audience? What is the main point?
Cross-References	List related verses for further study
Sources Used	Commentaries, lexicons, study Bibles, or other resources you consulted
Open Questions	Questions still unresolved and the views you found. It is fine to end a session with these.
Personal Reflection	What did you learn? How will you apply this?
Application	One specific way to put this into practice this week
Prayer	Write a prayer related to the study

May this guide enhance your journey through God's Word. Study with diligence, pray for understanding, and allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures for you.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16, BSB)