

How to Study the Bible

Why Even Try?

Can you understand the Bible? Have you tried many times to read or study it only to end up frustrated? Isn't it better just to let someone else teach you what the Bible says instead of putting in the work to read it yourself?

Not at all. In fact, that's one of the easiest ways Satan could stall out your faith and hinder you from growing in your love for Jesus and others. How do we know this? Because Jesus made it very clear: the Bible nourishes, strengthens, and satisfies our souls. Why? Because it is the life-giving, faith-creating, joy-producing Word of God to us.

He answered, "It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on *every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" — Jesus (Matthew 4:4 CSB)

Sanctify them by the truth; *your word* is truth. — Jesus (John 17:17 CSB)

Our hearts are like an engine that runs on a certain fuel. That fuel is the grace, love, and wisdom of God revealed in His Word. When our hearts are full of God's Word, that's when we come alive and fire on all cylinders.

But you're probably thinking: I don't know how to study the Bible for myself. I never get anything out of it when I do. Why even try?

Good question. We're glad you asked. You've probably heard the old adage: if you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, then he'll eat for a lifetime. The same is true when reading The Bible: we could give you God's Word on Sunday and you'll eat for a day. But we could teach you to study God's Word for yourself and you'll eat for a lifetime.

That's why we've created this resource: to help you, encourage you, and teach you how to study God's Word.

Hearing from God

When we read God's Word, God is speaking to us. The question is: *do we hear anything?* Thankfully, we are not left to ourselves to figure this out. God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us hear from Him in the Scriptures. As the apostle Paul says:

- In him you also were sealed with *the promised Holy Spirit* when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. — Ephesians 1:13
- Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so *that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.* — 1 Corinthians 2:12

Considering that the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20–21), this is really great news: you have the author of Scripture living within your heart to help you understand the Bible. Let that sink in. Truly, God has given us the greatest resource we could ever need for understanding His Word.

That being said, hearing from God in His word doesn't come without work. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit works *through*—not *in spite of*—our human efforts to help us understand the Scriptures. This means having a plan or a tool to help us hear from God is by no means unspiritual.

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At Stonegate, we like to use the acronym H.E.A.R.¹ This is a simple tool that helps breakdown four components of reading the Bible. Each letter stands for a personal instruction you can remember when opening your Bible.

For example, if you were in Matthew 7 and wanted to break down some of the passages to help you understand them, you would do the following:

- **Highlight**—Identify which passage(s) of Scripture you want to focus on. Maybe you want to focus on Matthew 7:1–5 or Matthew 7:24–28. Either way, the first step is simply identify a smaller chunk of the chapter to dig deeper into.
- **Explain**—As you are reading and thinking about the passage, you want to start asking some questions like:
 - What seems to be the the main point(s) of the passage(s)?
 - Why does the author think this is important to know or understand?
 - What problem is this text addressing? What solution is being given?
 - How does this verse fit with the one before and after it?
 - What does this tell me about God, Jesus, myself, or the world?
 - You may also want make use of a good Study-Bible like *The ESV Study Bible* to help you with this.
- **Application** —After you’ve explained the meaning of the passage, it’s time to ask: so what? What do I actually do with this information. This is where application questions come in. Some application questions you might ask are:
 - What does God want me to **believe** (*i.e. about Him, Jesus, myself, others my circumstances, etc.*)?
 - What does God want me to **desire** (*i.e. His presence, personal righteousness, someone’s salvation, etc.*)?
 - What does God want me to **change** (*i.e. my attitude, perspective, thoughts, words, actions, etc.*)?
 - What does God want me to **do** (*i.e. pray, forgive, trust Him, obey Him, confess my sin, share the gospel with someone, etc.*)?
- **Respond**—Now that you’ve identified what the passage means and how to apply it, your final step is to respond by seeking to obey the application(s) you’ve identified. Some steps you may consider to help you with this:
 - **Pray:** Take the Scriptures you’ve read, put them into your own words, and pray them back to God. Every time you pray, try to *pray the Bible*—when you do this, you can always be sure you’re praying God’s will for your life (1 John 5:14–15).
 - **Memorize:** Spend some time committing a verse to memory. Don’t just get into God’s Word, get God’s Word *into you* (Psalm 119:11).
 - **Repent and Obey:** In light of what you wrote down in the APPLY section, what specifically do you need to seek God’s grace and empowerment for (Phil. 2:12–13)?

When done faithfully, we believe this simple tool will help you hear from God in His word. To be sure, this will take practice—as anything worth doing does. But it is more than worth it and if you’re willing, we won’t have to prove it to you, because you’ll experience it for yourself.

¹ This acronym is not original to us, but comes from Robby Gallaty, *Growing Up: How to Be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples* (Bloomington: B&H, 2013).

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Where do I Start?

Having said all this, where do you start? This is a great question and honestly, there's no right answer to it. The Bible is God's "living and active" word (Hebrews 4:12) and you can hear from Him in any and every page. However, there are parts of the Bible that are easier to understand – especially for beginners. Here are a couple of options:

1. **Old Testament & New Testament Mix.** Read one chapter a day from the Old Testament and one chapter a day from the New Testament. You can mix this up however you'd like, but here are a few examples:
 - The Psalms // The Gospel of Mark
 - Proverbs // Romans
 - Psalm 119 // Colossians
2. **Book Study.** Do a deep dive into a single book of the Bible like the Gospel of John, Romans, or 1 Samuel. Here are some study tools you may want to look into:
 - A Good Study-Bible like *The ESV Study Bible* or *The CSB Study Bible*.
 - A Good Commentary like *The John MacArthur Whole Bible Commentary*
 - Individual Books of the Bible Studies by *Crossway*.
3. **A Topical Study.** Download the YouVersion Bible App and search through any of their topical Studies.

These are just some suggestions, but they will at least help you get started. You may take these one at a time or combine them. Either way, the most important thing is just to get started and begin to hear from God in His Word.

To be clear, you will come across passages you don't understand or that are hard to process. That's ok! Every honest Bible-reader will tell you they experience this, even if they've been reading the Bible for decades. As C.S. Lewis once said:

There are a great many things that cannot be understood until after you have gone a certain distance along the Christian road...Whenever you find any statement in Christian writings which you can make nothing of, do not worry. Leave it alone. There will come a day, perhaps years later, when you suddenly see what it meant.²

Lewis' point should be considered wisely: maybe you should leave those passages alone or maybe you should dig in and apply the HEAR method to them. Either way, the point is *don't try to be a perfect Bible reader!* Just dig in, seek the Spirit's Help, and begin the process of hearing from God in His Word.

How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. — Psalm 1:1–3 CSB

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 144.

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Helpful Tip: Carve Out the Time. Reading the Bible is kind of like eating a meal. When you don't plan to have breakfast, lunch, or dinner, you usually don't. The result? You're starved of nutrition and then just eat whatever is convenient. When we don't intentionally carve out time to read God's Word, our souls starve and we settle for spiritual nuggets and out-of-context Bible verses on social media. God has so much better for us.

But we must be intentional, even a bit obsessed with having intentional time in God's Word. It doesn't have to be long by any means. In fact, we'd suggest you try to carve out 15 minutes in your day to be with Jesus by reading His Word. Make this your time with Him and then protect it. Don't shame yourself if you miss a day, just pick it back up.

When you miss a meal, you don't stop eating altogether. When you miss a day in God's Word, don't stop reading it—just plan your next meal time with Jesus.

Helpful Tip: Memorizing Scripture. One way followers of Jesus have maximized their time spent in God's Word is by selecting a verse to commit to memory. Everyone approaches this differently, but you may begin to try and memorize a verse a week or a verse a day. Either way, being intentional about remembering God's word can be a very effective way to retain and apply God's Word.

Moreover, this will help you resist the temptations from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Much like putting bullets in the chamber of a gun, memorizing Scripture puts ammunition in our hearts for the battle of faith. Does it take a little extra work? No question. But is it worth the effort? Absolutely.

I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you... I will meditate on your precepts and think about your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. — Psalm 119:11, 15–16 CSB

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Some Extra Resources

Books

- *The ESV Study Bible*
- *The John MacArthur Whole Bible Commentary* by John MacArthur
- *Growing Up* by Robby Gallaty
- *Women of the Word* by Jen Wilkin
- *Taking God at His Word* by Kevin DeYoung
- *The Quiet Place* by Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth
- *Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney

Podcasts

- “The Sunday Plus” in the Stonegate Sermon Podcast
- “Word Matters” with Trevin Wax
- “The Bible Project”
- “Ask Pastor John” with John Piper
- “Renewing Your Mind” with RC Sproul
- “Pray the Word” with David Platt
- “Look at the Book” with John Piper
- “Knowing Faith” by The Village Church

Websites

- The Bible Project (www.thebibleproject.com)
- Desiring God (www.desiringgod.org)
- Ligonier (www.ligonier.org)
- Bible Gateway (www.biblegateway.org)
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