

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

TOOL 3: ASK THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS



Psalm 1:1-3 - ¹ Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Many people desire to read the Bible and experience the type of soul-prosperity described in Psalm 1; tragically though, too many get frustrated and give up on that hope after attempting to read for a while without receiving the expected payoff. Rather than being a source of joy, the Bible feels too hard to understand and doesn't seem to apply to everyday life ("it's 2,000-year-old document, after all"), and causes personal insecurities to flare up ("maybe I'm just not smart enough to understand").

I'm teaching my son how to hit a baseball right now. When we watch baseball together, he sees the major leaguers swing the bat and hit the ball—they make it look easy. But when he tries to hit in the backyard, he gets so frustrated after he misses a few pitches in a row. What he doesn't understand is that the major league ball players swing with ease and precision because they were taught the fundamentals of a swing years ago and they've put those fundamentals into practice millions of times since. Nothing is wrong with my son's muscles or the bat on his shoulder. In fact, I don't care even care if he hits the ball today; I'm teaching him the fundamentals. Joy will come with practice.

Similarly, you may be frustrated in your reading because you haven't been taught the fundamentals of Bible study. But that can change now!

Our preferred method of studying the Bible is known as *inductive*. What this means is that we're committed to studying the text in order to discern its meaning and apply it to our lives. It may be helpful to think of this process in three distinct parts: observation, interpretation, and application.¹ I practice this approach by asking and answering three fundamental questions every time I read the Bible:

1. *Observation* | What does the text say?
2. *Interpretation* | What is the author's intended meaning?
3. *Application* | How does it apply to my life?

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

To properly observe the text, we must start with this question. And even while answering this question, it's important not to get ahead of ourselves. You will face a temptation to quickly jump to the "meaning" of the text, but the key to proper interpretation is careful observation. "What does the text say?" is a helpful question because it carries built-in safeguards to our natural sinful nature:

- It protects you from asking, "What do I *want* the text to say?"
- It protects you from asking, "What do I *wish* the text said?"
- It protects you from asking, "What *would* the author have said *if* he lived in the 21st century?"

¹ Capitol Hill Baptist. "Class 1: The Inductive Bible Study Method, Part 1." *Core Seminar | How to Study the Bible | Capitol Hill Baptist*, <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-1-the-inductive-bible-study-method-part-1/>.

You can rest easy, because those questions anticipate the interpretation phase. For now, just observe. And to help you do so, get used to interrogating the text using these questions:

1. Who?
2. What?
3. Why?
4. When?
5. Where?

Feel free to mark up your Bible (or notebook) with these questions. Observe closely, carefully, and diligently.

WHAT IS THE AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING?

Next up, interpretation. But it's important to have the right starting place. The reason we started by adding the tool of context to our toolbox is because it's vitally important for proper interpretation. Authors write to a particular audience. For example, Paul wrote Philippians to the people of the church in Philippi, meaning he wrote to a particular people in a particular place to address particular issues at a particular point in time. Our aim is to study the passage in light of its context in order to determine the author's intended meaning at the time he wrote it. To put it bluntly, "a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers."²

Once again, this question carries built-in safeguards:

- It protect you from asking, "What does this passage mean to me?"
- It protects you from asking, "What do I think this passage should mean?"
- It protects you from asking, "What is the 21st century meaning of this passage?"

Interpretation does not come naturally. It's this phase of Bible study that causes the most frustration. But keep practicing this fundamental, and you will notice your skills beginning to strengthen over time. To help you, keep these tips in mind:³

1. **Context rules** | Remember and study the passage in its historical, literary, and redemptive context.
2. **Look for the main message of the passage** | Don't overthink. Often, the passage's purpose is straightforward.
3. **Let Scripture interpret Scripture** | Study Bibles help. Use your cross references to see how other passages may shed light on the meaning of the passage under consideration.
4. **Interpret Scripture as the author intends you to** | Genre matters. If the author is writing literally, interpret literally; if the author is writing poetry, you'll need to consider imagery, symbolism, etc.
5. **Study the Old Testament in view of Jesus and the New Testament** | How does this OT passage point to Jesus or influence the activity of God's people in the NT?⁴ How do the NT authors interpret this OT passage?
6. **Adopt the NT's attitude toward the OT** | In what way does this NT passage clarify, unveil, fulfill a promise, or amplify something from the OT?⁵
7. **Ask for help** | Don't interpret in isolation. If you get stuck, use the resources at your disposal including asking your pastors, using good commentaries, and listening to sermons.⁶

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 74.

³ Some of these tips are taken from Capitol Hill Baptist. "Class 1: The Inductive Bible Study Method, Part 1." *Core Seminar | How to Study the Bible* | Capitol Hill Baptist, <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-1-the-inductive-bible-study-method-part-1/>.

⁴ Taken from *What is a Healthy Church Member?* By Thabiti Anyabwile, page 34.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ I'll introduce you to these tools during our next session.

I keep telling my son to slow down and focus on the fundamentals of his swing. He doesn't find that fun. He wants to hit the ball. But for me, it's not just the final phase that's fun; I like the process too. Similarly, take your time and hone the skill of answering this fundamental question. The work you put into the interpretation phase will pay dividends. Who knows? You may wake up one morning and discover you find it to be fun.

HOW DOES IT APPLY TO MY LIFE?

Finally, the application phase! Does it seem like it's taken us forever to get to this point? We should desire to apply the Scripture to our lives; after all, "until we apply a truth, understanding of it remains incomplete."⁷ But we must avoid the mistake of beginning with application instead of finishing with it. Asking and answering the first two fundamental questions in order will allow your application to be farther-reaching and more personally-transformative. The reason why is that you and I share many things in common with the original hearers of the Bible, but only through observation and interpretation do we realize what those commonalities are and how God is directing us.

Though not exhaustive, here's a list of 10 questions to help you during the application phase of your Bible study:

1. What beautiful attribute of God does this passage highlight to be meditated on?
2. Does the passage contain a command to be followed?
3. Does the passage point out a sin in your life to be repented of?
4. Does the passage contain a promise to be believed?
5. How might this passage impact my life outside the church—on the job, in my neighborhood, etc.?
6. How might this passage affect the way I interact with or lead my family?
7. How might this passage impact my life inside the church—unity, caring for one another, etc.?
8. How might this truth reorder my lesser loves/allegiances—political affiliations, workplace partnerships, etc.?
9. Does this passage assume a certain posture toward the Lord and others that is not currently present in my life?
10. Does this passage prompt me to pray for a particular person or situation?

Just as with the other parts of your study, take your time and contemplate application. Pray over the passage of Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to point out areas in your lives for application. Don't be scared; though some of the applications may sting, he cares deeply about you and using Scripture to train you in righteousness so that you are complete and equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

HOMEWORK

Practice using the three fundamental questions during your Bible study time this week.

- Practice together today | Philippians 1
- To-do this week | Philippians 2

⁷ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 213.