

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

TOOL 4: INVESTIGATE KEY WORDS



Psalm 19:7-11 - ⁷The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Sometimes we look over tasty things, not because they're hidden, but because we consider them to be small. At least, that's what I've realized as I've started to cook. I used to be willing to ignore an ingredient if it seemed to be small, but now that I've been practicing, I realize small ingredients often carry the biggest flavor!

That's the way you may feel as we consider the next tool—investigating key words. Of course, you know that reading the Bible requires reading *words*. But how often have you forfeited flavor by skipping over a word you didn't know or glancing past small details? As obvious as it may seem, remember this: getting the most out of your Bible reading requires that you consider the *words* you're reading.

To that end, here are three tips that will help you investigate key words as your read:

1. Pay attention to repeated words or phrases.
2. Look out for linking words.
3. Define words you may not know.

PAY ATTENTION TO REPEATED WORDS OR PHRASES.

One trick an author uses to get his or her point across is repetition. I'm reminded of an extreme version of this in the TurboTax commercials that play every year during tax season. For thirty seconds, the only word said by multiple characters is, "free." It's obvious TurboTax wants you to know that filing your taxes through them can be *free*. Biblical authors do this too. Consider an excerpt from Psalm 136.

Psalm 136:1-3

¹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

² Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

The author continues that pattern for 26 verses. His use of repetition makes it obvious that he wants every reader and hearer to give thanks to God for his never-ending steadfast love. Though it won't always be as extreme, you'll find repeated words and phrases throughout the Bible. Be on the lookout and note them in your Bible as you read. Very often, the author purposely uses repetition in order to make his main point obvious.

LOOK OUT FOR LINKING WORDS.

Linking words (sometimes called *transition* words) are a common and vital part of language. They connect ideas together and help us understand the relationship between phrases. In a sense, linking words act as handles for our mind, providing logical progression to keep us engaged and focused while reading. Your Bible is filled with linking words. Understanding how and why they are used will help you greatly as you seek to grow your ability to understand the meaning of Scripture.

Linking words can be used in a number of ways:¹

- **Give examples** | *for instance*
- **Add information** | *furthermore*
- **Summarize** | *in short*
- **Show a progression of ideas** | *firstly, secondly,... finally*
- **Give a reason** | *because, for* (2 Chronicles 20:21; 1 Cor. 7:9), *if* (2 Peter 2:4-9)
- **Give a result or purpose** | *so that* (Eph. 3:16-17; Luke 12:1)
- **Compare/contrast** | *however, yet, but, though, although*
- **Distinguish** | *and*
- **Indicate a particular consequence of a preceding statement** | *therefore, consequently, for this reason* (Hebrews 4:14-15; Phil. 2:5-11).
- **Make a conditional statement** | *if* (Deut. 28:13, 15)

DEFINE WORDS YOU MAY NOT KNOW.

Christianese: slang for words or phrases commonly used by Christians in religious contexts, but rarely used at other times in other places. For example, words like sin, gospel, conversion, and sanctification may sound foreign to non-Christians, but inside the church, some sport them as tattoos. These are good words—Biblical words. The only problem with Christianese, though, is that these words have become so commonplace in the church, that we often read or speak them with little understanding of their meaning.

When you read the Bible, you'll regularly come across Christianese. Don't get down on yourself if you recognize the word but don't fully understand it. Instead, consider it an invitation to investigate a little more closely. Here are a few things I do when I come across words I don't know:

1. Look to see if that word is used in other places in that book of the Bible. If so, can you discern its meaning by the way the author uses the word in other places?
2. Look at the concordance in the back of your Bible (or online) to see if that word is used in other books of the Bible. If so, can you discern its meaning by reading those passages?
3. Look in the dictionary. Often, a simple dictionary search will give you the answer you need.

After I discover the meaning of a word, I write the definition in the margin of my Bible so that it's easily accessible for me the next time I need to remember it.

Words matter. God has chosen to communicate to his people through the logic of the Word. My encouragement to you is to take your time and investigate key words words. Try not to get frustrated if you're struggling. Just like cooking, it will get easier the more times you practice. My hope is that this tool allows you to taste the flavor of the Bible even more powerfully.

¹ Examples taken from Capitol Hill Baptist. "Class 5: Other Bible Study Methods." *Core Seminar | How to Study the Bible | Capitol Hill Baptist*, <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/class-5-other-bible-study-tools/>.