

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

TOOL 5: SUMMARIZE



Two experiences commonly plague Bible readers.

First, reading something, setting it down, walking away, and then immediately struggling to remember what was just read. And second, reading and re-reading the same passage incessantly only to understand it no better at the end than at the outset.

Have you ever experienced that? Talk about frustrating. Our next tool, *Summarize*, may be the solution to your problem.

Summarization is the discipline of condensing information and converting it into a clearly understood statement. Practicing this tool when reading the Bible begins with a simple question: what was this passage of Scripture about?¹ But it's not enough to leave your answer in vague terms, felt in your mind. On this point, Mortimer Adler's advice proves prescient: "Do not be satisfied with 'feeling the unity' which you cannot express. The student who says, 'I know what it is, but I just can't say it,' fools no one, not even himself."² Instead, work hard to convert your answer into a concise, written statement that you easily reference and remember.

Here's a path to get you started:

1. Choose your passage. Make sure it contains a complete thought. I'll often read from header to header.
2. Use Tool 3: Ask the Fundamental Questions to get an understanding of the passage.
3. Use Tool 4: Investigate Key Words, ensuring you don't glance past any small details.
4. In your own words, write a one to two sentence summary of the passage.

LET'S PRACTICE: SUMMARIZE.

Philippians 3:2-11

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹ The answer to this question is found by asking and answering the three fundamental questions (tool 3).

² Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 163.

Use Tool 3: Ask the Fundamental Questions

Feel free to refer to your notes on Tool 3. For now, I'll simply provide the questions again and offer some brief notes.

1. *Observation* | What does the text say?
 - a. Paul tells the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord. (v. 1)
 - b. Paul tells the Philippians to watch out for evildoers and mutilators of the flesh—those who put confidence in the flesh for righteousness. (vv. 2-3, 8)
 - c. Paul tells the Philippians that believers in Jesus Christ are “the circumcision,” (v. 2)
 - d. Paul lists several reasons he could have confidence in the flesh for righteousness, but ultimately says they are rubbish. (vv. 4-8)
 - e. Paul says his righteousness comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the law. (v. 8-9)
 - f. Paul says knowing Jesus and experiencing his righteousness is far better than anything works may provide. (vv. 7-8, 10-11)
2. *Interpretation* | What is the author’s intended meaning?
 - a. Paul’s intended meaning is _____.
 - b. Don’t overthink. Often, the passage’s purpose is straightforward.
3. *Application* | How does it apply to my life?
 - a. Refer to the list of 10 questions to help you write an apply this passage.

Use Tool 4: Investigate Key Words³

Feel free to refer to your notes on Tool 4. For now, I'll offer a few words I think we ought to investigate.

1. Who are the people Paul refers to as “dogs”, “evildoers”, and “those who mutilate the flesh”?
 - a. What can you discern about their teaching from the rest of the passage?
 - b. Check your Bible for cross references or study notes.
 - c. For additional help, consult a commentary.
2. What does it mean to be “the circumcision”?
 - a. How is that term used in Paul’s other writings? In other portions of the New Testament?
 - b. What was the importance of circumcision in the Old Testament?
 - c. Check your Bible for cross references or study notes.
 - d. For additional help, consult a commentary.
3. Define “righteousness.”
 - a. Combat your Christianese by defining this key term.
 - b. Check your Bible for cross references, look at other translations, or consult a dictionary.
 - c. Righteousness: _____.

Summarize:

Using your own words, write a 1-2 sentence summary of the passage. Your summary should include the purpose of the passage.

³ Tools 3 and 4 can be used simultaneously. Investigating the key words will help you answer the fundamental questions with greater precision.