

## BIBLE & THEOLOGY

# How to Study Your Bible in 2020

DECEMBER 30, 2019 | **MATT SMETHURST**

Ever heard the parable about the man who, in order to discern God’s will for his life, would open his Bible and read whichever verse he saw first?

One day, as he was going through a difficult time with his family, he sought the Lord’s guidance. Opening his Bible, he pointed to a random verse. His finger rested on Matthew 27:5: “Then Judas went away and hanged himself.” Puzzled by these directions, but still hungry for a word from God, he called a “do-over” and flipped to another page. His eyes settled on Luke 10:37: “Go and do likewise.” Flustered but chalking it up to coincidence, the man decided to give his method one last chance. Saying a quick prayer, he flipped the page and placed his finger on John 13:27. There, staring up at him, was a command from Jesus: “What you are about to do, do quickly.”

It’s a humorous anecdote, but it illustrates a serious point. Misusing the Bible is easy; “correctly handling” it is not (2 Tim. 2:15).

In my little book *Before You Open Your Bible*, I explored nine heart postures that are helpful, even necessary, for rightly approaching God’s Word. But what happens when the prelude ends and you begin reading? What then?

## Three Vital Steps

Here are three commonly cited steps that have served me over the years—and will prove helpful as you reengage your Bible in 2020.

### 1. Observe: What Does It Say?

The first step is observation (or perhaps better, comprehension). Whenever we open God’s Word, our most fundamental task is simply to see what’s there.

The good news is that observation isn’t complicated. It mainly consists of reading slowly and carefully in order to gather the basic facts of who, what, where, and when. Good questions to bear in mind include:

- Are there any repeated words or ideas?
- Who is speaking or writing?
- To whom are they speaking or writing?
- Who are the main characters?
- Where is this taking place?
- Are there words that show chronology?
- Are there contrasts, comparisons, or conditional statements?
- What is the logical progression in the author's argument?
- Are there words that indicate atmosphere, mood, and emotion? Figures of speech?
- What are the section divisions and linking words?
- What don't I understand here?

Biblical observation doesn't have to be some drawn-out, laborious process. You don't need to consciously ask and answer each question. The more you engage the Bible, the more alert you'll become to such things. (By the way, it's best to work through whole books of the Bible from beginning to end, rather than adopting a "popcorn" approach that ignores context and bounces randomly from one passage to another.)

## 2. Interpret: What Does It Mean?

The next step is interpretation. You've considered what the passage says, but what does it *mean*? It may help to ask questions like:

- Does the surrounding context clarify any confusing words or phrases? (It's wise to examine the "nearest" context—other verses in the same chapter or other chapters in the same book—before consulting "farther" passages or outside resources.)
- How would I paraphrase this passage in my own words?
- Why did the biblical author write this particular passage? Why did he feel it necessary to include?
- Is my interpretation consistent with what I noticed in the observation stage, or is it too dependent on a few details?
- Do other passages of Scripture fill out my interpretation? (The saying "Let Scripture interpret Scripture" reminds us to let clearer passages shed light on more complex verses.)
- Where does this passage fall in redemptive history? How does it fit within the Bible's teaching as a whole?

Shortly after his resurrection, as described in Luke 24, Jesus encounters two men and explains the most vital secret to Bible study: the entire thing is about him:

Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

(Luke 24:25–27)

But it wasn't just after his resurrection that Jesus spoke this way. During his earthly ministry he explained to the local "Bible experts" his central place in the great story:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. . . . If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ([John 5:39–40, 46](#))

It's one thing to know Bible stories; it's another to know the story of the Bible. It's one thing to be aware of the story's many heroes; it's another to know the Hero himself.

It's been stated that the Old Testament is "Jesus Christ concealed," and the New Testament is "Jesus Christ revealed." From beginning to end, the storyline of Scripture looks forward to and finds its final resolution in God's redeeming Son ([John 1:45; 8:56; 12:16; 2 Cor. 1:20; 1 Peter 1:10–12; Acts 13:27; 13:29; 28:23](#)).

Here is a simple framework, gleaned from a pastor named Tommy Nelson, that has helped me interpret all of Scripture with the Savior in view:

- Old Testament: Anticipation
- Gospels: Manifestation
- Acts: Proclamation
- Epistles: Explanation
- Revelation: Consummation

No matter where you turn, your Bible is about Jesus.

It's worth noting that once you've interpreted as best you can, it's often useful to consult an outside study aide such as a commentary or Bible dictionary. Though never replacements for Scripture, such tools can be great supplements. (To start I'd recommend the [ESV Study Bible](#), the [New Bible Commentary](#), and the [New Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#).)

### 3. Apply: How Should I Respond?

After observation and interpretation comes application. This is the ultimate goal of Bible study. In the first two stages you study the text; now the text studies you. To quit prematurely, before applying what you observe and interpret, is like chewing without swallowing.

The Bible itself is clear about the importance of moving through understanding to obedience ([Matt. 7:24–27; John 13:17; James 1:22; 2 Tim. 3:16–17](#)). Helpful questions to ponder at this stage include:

- What’s something I learned about God—his character, his plan, his priorities, his promises, his desires, his ways?
- What’s something I learned about myself? My neighbor? The world?
- What’s the “fallen condition” on display in this passage (i.e., what aspect of human sin or brokenness is most evident)? How about the “redemptive solution” (i.e., what aspect of God’s grace is most evident)?
- How does the gospel—the stunning news of what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to reconcile rebels to himself—affect my understanding of this passage? Conversely, how does this passage illumine my understanding of the gospel?
- How do I need to change my thinking or living based on what I’ve learned?
- How should I be praying in light of this passage?
- Is there an encouragement or promise here that I need to meditate on?
- What implications does this passage have for the way I engage my unbelieving friends?
- How does this passage apply to my brothers and sisters in Christ? How does it speak to our life together as a church?

## Take the Plunge

What does this Scripture passage say? That’s *observation*. What does it mean? That’s *interpretation*. How should I (or we) respond? That’s *application*.

Studying the Bible this year will take work, but the payoff will be priceless. The Book is a bottomless treasure chest of wisdom, beauty, power, and truth. Let’s dive in.

**Editors’ note:** This is part of TGC’s 2020 [Read the Bible](#) initiative, encouraging Christians and churches to read together through God’s Word in a year. You can download the [PDF reading plan](#) (print it out and give away!) and subscribe to our daily [newsletter](#) and [podcast](#) ([Apple](#) | [RSS](#) | [Stitcher](#)). (A version of this article appeared at [ExploreGod](#).)

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