

essentials how to study the Bible

Sarah Wright offers some hints and tips

Most of us will have been to a Bible study at some point during our lives, but not all will have been shown how to study the Bible and discern what God is saying in it. Why should we study the Bible? Why it is so vital to our discipleship? And, above all, how do we actually do it?

why study the Bible?

The Bible is an amazing book. Written over 1,500 years by 40 authors, it is astonishingly coherent in its message and purpose. This is because God was in control of the writing at all times. As Paul writes to Timothy 'All scripture is God-breathed...' ¹ If God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and we want to know more about him, shouldn't we study his 'autobiography'?

Studying the Bible allows us to discover what God says about himself and his plan for our lives. We learn how to be more Christ-like, and understand how God wants us to act towards ourselves, each other and the world. Trying to live for Jesus in this world without studying and following what the Bible is saying to us is useless. It's like trying to put together flat pack furniture without the instruction manual - you're unlikely to succeed!

Spending time with God individually is good and necessary for spiritual growth, but spending time reading and exploring the Bible together is equally helpful. We can share thoughts and ideas, questions and concerns, challenges and encouragements. Studying together, we strengthen our friendships,



Sarah Wright is a junior doctor in Wales and CMF Deep:ER volunteer

support each other through hard times and, most importantly, encourage each other in our journey of faith – ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’.²

Without discussing and exploring God’s Word together, we can become confused and not understand what God is saying. Peter notes that Paul’s letters ‘contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do other scriptures, to their own destruction’.³ Group study not only encourages us in our faith, but can prevent us from unintentionally distorting scriptures through misunderstanding their meaning and purpose.

Such discernment can be particularly important in questions of medical ethics. You will find no direct mention of genetic modification or three person embryos in the Bible. However, through examining the Bible’s view on humanity and creation, we can discuss and form biblical views on these subjects together.

how should we study?

The first step to exploring the Bible is to pray. Prayer is so important to day-to-day life, but especially when we are reading God’s Word. Asking for God’s guidance and wisdom is the perfect place to start when exploring what God is saying and looking to deepen our faith in, and relationship with, Jesus. As Paul writes, ‘I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better’.⁴ We are also called ‘by prayer and petition... [to] present our requests to God’,⁵ including requests for wisdom and guidance in sharing his word together.

There are three questions we need to ask when looking at a Bible passage, whether a single verse, chapter or an entire book!

The first is ‘what does it say?’ This is as simple as it appears – what does the verse, chapter or

book literally say to us? At this stage, no interpretation or thoughts are needed, just a straightforward statement of what it says.

We need to ‘observe’ the passage, much as we observe a patient. Read the passage multiple times to get a feel for the text, how the words flow, and identify any initial thoughts or ideas. While reading look out for unusual or repeated words or phrases, any surprises or common themes, and anything that you don’t understand. It is often useful to have a notebook to jot down any of these observations so that you can look at them afterwards.

Find out not only who the writer is, but who is speaking at a particular point in the text. This is particularly important in books like Job, where there are long passages spoken by Job’s companions. Once you have observed the passage from a distance, it is time to explore the structure of the passage – best done while ignoring the chapter and verse markings. Is the passage part of a longer section, or is it a defined section of the book? Has the writer created separate sentences, or a long single thought stream? What type of writing is it? Is it poetry? Historical? Allegory? Imagery?

Second, ‘what does it mean?’ Identifying structure and context of the passage often leads us to the interpretation. Should it be taken literally or is there an alternative meaning? What would it have meant to the original audience? What would you have thought if you were in a church meeting in Ephesus, hearing Paul’s letter read at the front of the meeting?

This (and not before) is the point to read commentaries and articles to explore the passage further and see what other people have thought about the passage you are studying. This might be formal commentaries or Bible study notes, and both are equally helpful in exploring alternative ideas or meanings. Resist the temptation to skip straight to this point, as you will miss a significant learning opportunity if you do.

Jeremiah 29:11

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

	READING IN ACTUAL CONTEXT	READING OUT OF CONTEXT
WHAT DOES IT SAY?	God has a plan for Israel in exile that will give them hope and not cause them harm.	God has a plan for us that will give us hope and not cause us harm.
WHAT DID IT MEAN THEN?	God knows what will happen to Israel, and that his plan will be good for them. They have not been abandoned by God during the exile.	It means that God knows what our life will hold, and knows that we will not come to harm on the path he has set down before us.
WHAT DOES IT MEAN NOW?	<p>We see that God keeps his promises. He did bring Israel back to Jerusalem.</p> <p>We may infer that he is also alongside the church in her ‘exile’ on earth, and will keep his promise to unite her with Christ in his kingdom.</p>	We can trust in God’s goodness and love towards us, and that he protects us and gives hope for the future.

This verse is often quoted to encourage and inspire us when life is hard, but as such is often taken out of context. Looking at the right hand side answers above, the passage is inspiring, and the conclusion seems true (compare it with Romans 8:28). But seeing Jeremiah 29 as a whole, we see God is speaking to Israel as a nation, during the exile. By applying this verse mainly to ourselves as individuals we miss out on the message that God’s plan for us as a whole is good, and to be trusted. He has plans for us not only individually, but as a whole - to be the body of Christ in this world.

Only after this can we be equipped to answer question three - ‘what does it mean to us today?’ Does the passage say something that clearly applies in all times and all places, or does today’s context affect it? How does the meaning affect our modern lives and behaviours? We are used to this kind of thought process when dealing with sections about Old Testament sacrifices, but often forget to go through this stage when reading Paul or Peter’s letters.

Then we move to apply it to our life. If the passage we are looking at says to be joyful always, how does that impact our day-to-day activities? Maybe it means we should grin and laugh at everything all day everyday, or maybe it means we should find something to be joyful in every day

but not necessarily joyful when our patient has just died? By looking at our life and individual situation we can identify how the message of the passage can alter our outlook and actions in this world.

conclusion

Studying the Bible is an integral part of our journey of faith, and studying together can be a good way of sharing thoughts and ideas about what God is saying to us through his Word. The Bible should impact on our lives, but we can only find God’s message and purpose for us through exploring the Word of God by prayer, observation and application. ■

REFERENCES

1. 2 Timothy 3:16
2. Romans 10:17 (NKJV)
3. 2 Peter 3:16
4. Ephesians 1:17
5. Philippians 4:6