

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THE BIBLE

Questions students might ask and answers you could give them ...

1. WHY SHOULD I READ THE BIBLE?

God greatly desires to talk with you. He can communicate to you through circumstances and as you pray, but the foundational and most reliable way He speaks is through the written words of the Bible. Those words are “God-breathed” – that’s what *inspired* in 2 Timothy 3:16 literally means. It’s easy to be mistaken about what you think God is saying through circumstances and inner promptings (your desires and assumptions distort your perceptions), but the Bible is an objective, trustworthy standard of God’s will, character and truth. The Bible is your best source if you want to know:

- who God is
- what God desires
- what God offers
- God personally

The Bible tells you how to enter God’s presence and live a secure, fruitful life in intimacy with Him.

2. HOW CAN I KNOW THAT THE BIBLE IS RELIABLE?

Human interpretations are fallible, but you can trust the facts and teachings in the Bible because:

- **Jesus said so** – Matthew 5:18, John 10:34-35
- **Prophecies reveal the Bible’s supernatural origin** – The Bible made numerous predictions, sometimes hundreds of years in advance, that were literally and accurately fulfilled.
- **Archaeology and historical documents confirm it** – Critics have been unable to disprove a single detail, despite intense effort. The resurrection of Jesus – the fact on which the whole book stand or falls – is amply attested, for any reasonable court of law.
- **The Bible has transformed more lives than any other book in the world.**
- **It has amazing unity amid great diversity** – The Bible was written by 35 authors (from peasants to kings) in two main languages over about 1600 years. Yet it is one book with one message, because God inspired every writer.
- **God confirmed its writers’ authority** – The authors were proven to be real prophets and apostles by the accuracy of their prophecies and the miraculous signs that accompanied their ministries.
- **The canonical councils were meticulous** – The Hebrews and early Christians had innumerable books that were well regarded. But the canonical councils subjected every candidate for Scripture to rigorous tests as to author, facts and doctrine. They prayed and pondered carefully, for they were not about to approve any books that were not unquestionably inspired by God.

3. WHAT SHOULD I REMEMBER ABOUT THE BIBLE WHEN I READ IT?

Take it seriously – it’s divine. The creator of the universe, the God who has rescued you from disaster, gave it. So, it deserves a humble, attentive, believing response. You can buy a Bible, but you don’t own it in the sense of having the right to control what you will use from it. Its Author owns you. Let His words penetrate your defenses, show you the truth about yourself, transform what you think and confront you with the Holy One.

Enjoy it – it’s good news. Let it convict you, not depress you. Let it drive you into the arms of One who has the power to make you into the person you want to be but can’t. Let it draw you into the arms of One who loves you.

Study it – it’s personal. God didn’t just dictate a series of sermons to secretaries. A human being in a particular historical setting and with important purposes of his own wrote each book of the Bible. Therefore, to understand what God is saying when it was first written. This will require researching the historical and cultural background and also reading and rereading the text.

4. HOW SHOULD I GO ABOUT READING THE BIBLE?

Read it daily. It’s better to set aside fifteen minutes every day to let the Bible affect you, than to try to manage an hour a day but to fail most of the time. Start with an amount that you can live up to consistently, every day.

Read it systematically. If you read at random, you will tend to read only the parts you like and miss large portions that are unfamiliar or seem uninteresting. If you read at random you will get an unbalanced view of God. Instead, read straight through whole books. Alternate between the New and Old Testaments. If you have never read the whole Bible, start with a plan to read it all in a year (at the rate of two or three chapters a day), then go back and study individual books more closely. Various organizations publish plans for covering the Bible systematically if you need help. But you can make your own plan just by reading three chapters of Genesis a day until you finish it, then two chapters of Matthew every day and so on.

Balance devotional reading and study. You might want to read for fifteen minutes a day, just to commune with God and hear His voice, then take an hour on Saturday or Sunday for careful study. Or, you might want to read devotionally every day for a month, then take a couple weeks to really delve into a book with study aids. Alternating between a focus on study for careful interpretation and on prayerful listening to let God change you will keep your Bible reading fresh and balanced.

Don’t treat the Bible as magic. God will sometimes guide you to the passage that speaks to the specific situation you are wrestling with. But beware of using the Bible like a Ouija board: opening at random and dipping your finger in, hoping to find the answer to a question. Beware of insisting that the passage you are reading today be the answer to today’s concern. Instead, read systematically, and read today’s passage for what God is saying through it. Write down and pray about what you learn. Let it sink in. If you want God’s guidance on a specific issue, look back through your Bible for what light others passages shed on your question. Use a concordance or a topical Bible to research an issue, but avoid pulling individual verses out of context.

5. HOW DO I STUDY THE BIBLE?

Overview. Start by reading a book at least once through, preferably two to five times. Jot notes about your first impressions: What does the book seem to be about? Does the mood seem to be serious, humorous, joyful, mournful, rebuking or encouraging? Does the author seem to be teaching doctrine, telling a story, exhorting his readers to do something or writing for another purpose or purposes? How does the author seem to feel about his readers? What writing style is he using – poetry, a friendly letter, a sermon, episodes of a story? What words does he repeat often as clues to the ideas he is emphasizing?

Next, divide the book into main sections. These may not correspond to the chapter divisions. Give each section a title that summarizes its content.

Now you should have a good beginning grasp of the purposes for which the book was written. The author’s original purpose often shows how God wants to use the book in your life. Try to write a brief statement of what the book is about and why you think it was written.

Having taken an overview, now look at each section in detail.

Observe. Observing details in a passage is a matter of asking and answering a lot of questions like a detective:

- *Who* is being addressed? What is speaking? Who is being spoken of? (What do you know about these people?)
- *What* is the speaker saying? What is happening? What do you see?
- *When* is the action taking place? When is the predicted event going to occur?
- *Why*, according to the author, is this statement true? Why is it important? Why did this happen?
- *How* is this promise possible?

Interpret. Once you've carefully observed what a passage says, consider what it means. Divide it into subsections and paragraphs. Think about what verses belong together and what subjects are covered. Then relate the paragraphs to each other. Ask yourself:

- Is this an introduction?
- Is this a digression from the main argument?
- How is this section related to what the author was talking about in the previous section?
- Why does this passage occur in the Bible at all?
- Why does the author say it here, after what he said in the previous passage?
- What does it have to do with his overall point in the book?

To interpret individual statements, ask yourself:

- What is the author's point?
- What are the implications of the event?
- What do I think motivated this person to do this?
- What does this word mean?

One of the keys to interpretation is context. Interpret verses in light of the whole paragraph; interpret paragraphs in light of the entire book and the whole Scripture. Take into account the type of literature the author has chosen, and interpret poetry under the rules of poetry, prophecy under the rules of prophecy, parables as parables and letters as letters. (You may need to learn more about these types of literature.) Take into account the historical setting of the book as well. (Did a custom have some special meaning at the time? Was that statement made during a time of persecution or prosperity?)

Apply. The point of studying is to let God make you more like Christ. Gaining knowledge without acting on it will puff you up and make you like the Pharisees Jesus condemned (Matthew 23:27-28). So let the passage affect your life.

First, tell God you are ready to obey Him and ask Him how He wants this passage to affect your life. Then, ask yourself these questions:

- Is there a *sin* here for me to confess or avoid? (Do I need to make restitution?)
- Is there a *promise* to claim and live by? (Does this promise apply to me, or just to the original readers? Have I met the conditions for claiming this promise?)
- Do I need to change an *attitude*? (How can I go about this?)
- Is there a *command* to obey? (Am I willing to do this no matter what I feel?)
- Is there an *example* to follow or avoid?
- Is there something to *pray* or *praise* God about?
- What *truth* can I learn about God the Father, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit? What difference should it make to me?

When you choose an application, listen to what God wants you to do in your life, rather than to what you would like to achieve or concentrate on. This will require thought and prayer.

Summarize. When you've studied a whole book in detail, go back and see if your view of its main themes and purposes has changed. Write a short summary of what the book is about and how it is supposed to affect our lives.

Use resources. Ultimately, you must depend on the Holy Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures for you. But some basic resources are invaluable as you study to discern what the Spirit is saying:

- *An accurate translation of the Bible.* Don't use a paraphrase, such as The Living Bible, as your primary version for study. It can be helpful as a commentary on the text, but you should go first to a literal translation. Unless you're comfortable with the older English of the King James Version, choose one of the modern translations. Take time to look at several versions in a bookstore before you choose one. You may find paragraph divisions and subtitles helpful.
- *A study Bible* that includes cross-references and/or comments in the margins may be a good choice.
- *A complete concordance.* Young's and Strong's concordances list every word in the Bible alphabetically, along with each verse in which the word appears. A concordance can help you trace a theme (such as humility or prayer) through the whole Bible.
- *A Bible dictionary.* Use this to look up historical and cultural background about a passage.
- *A one-volume commentary.* This is a reasonably inexpensive source of what someone experienced thinks about a passage. Ask about the theological slant of commentaries before you buy one.
- *A Bible atlas.* Geography had a huge impact on biblical events. You'll find places named in nearly every book of the Bible.

6. HOW DO I READ DEVOTIONALLY?

Pray. Before you start to read, ask God to speak to you personally through the passage. As you read, praise and thank God for things the passage says about His character or what He has done. Ask Him to make real in your life the things the passage says He wants to do. Make an effort to listen to God speaking.

Read the passage aloud. This helps the truth penetrate to your heart rather than stopping as facts in your head. If you are reading a story, let it catch you up. If it is a letter, let the author's feelings touch you.

Meditate on it. Meditation is a piece of straight thinking under God's guidance and Godwards. It is digesting a scriptural truth by chewing on it over and over until you understand it and have drawn conclusions about how to live more precisely and more concretely in accordance with the gospel. Here are some suggested steps for meditation:

- Look closely at the scene and speculate on what the people in the story might have been thinking and feeling.
- Read a sentence several times, emphasizing different words.
 - “I can do all things through *Christ*”
 - “I *can* do all things through Christ”
 - “I can do *all* things through Christ”
- Put the passage into your own words.

Write out your thoughts about the meaning and your plan for application.

Memorize a key verse.

7. WHAT IF I TRY TO APPLY A STATEMENT IN SCRIPTURE & FAIL?

Peter says, “Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit” (1 Peter 2:1). You might have tried to do that for a few days and discovered that you are still deceitful and feel malice toward certain people. It helps to realize the following:

Change is a process. You built up the habit of deceit over years to protect yourself from hurt and achieve what you wanted. It is going to take God some time to uproot and replace such habits.

Let God control the process. Your old self was crucified with Christ when you accepted Him as your Lord, but your sinful nature fights to live on and stay in control. The sinful nature animates the habits like malice and deceit that God wants to uproot. However, when you try hard to break those habits yourself, your sinful nature sometimes will cooperate. It will give up a certain amount of surface malice in order to maintain deep control of your life. But God is not so much interested in changing this or that bad habit as He is in taking complete control of your life, killing the old nature, laying a new foundation and rebuilding you from the ground up. When you try hard to break a bad habit and fail, let the failure drive you to deeper dependence on God. Ask Him to make you more loving and honest, but more than that, thirst for Him to slay you and remake you in His image.

Let God go to the root of your habits. Luke 6:43-45. If you have a bad fruit in your life, you can be sure that it is growing from a bad root in your heart. Your deceitful behavior may be rooted in a heart of judgment that people will reject the real you, a heart of anger against those who have rejected you in the past, or a heart commitment to get what you want regardless of how it affects others. Don't go digging around in your heart trying to find the root of your sin (that's you in control again, and you're likely to do more harm than good). Instead, as you study the Bible, pray, and talk with other believers, let God reveal those roots. When He convicts you, you will be able to see and reject your sin in all its ugliness.

Forgiving others is crucial. At the root of many of our bad behaviors lies a refusal to forgive people who have hurt us. We have responded to hurt with bitterness and a resolve to protect ourselves from being hurt again. But when we refuse to forgive, we put up a wall that blocks God from forgiving and changing us (Matthew 5:14-15, 7:1-5). The only way to acquire traits like love, joy and peace is to resolve to forgive those who have wronged us and to stop protecting ourselves from hurt. This presumes that loving God is more important to us than holding on to bitterness, that loving others is more important than not hurting and that we trust God to take care of us when we are hurt.

Knowing the Father is crucial. At the root of many bad behaviors lies a desire to be nurtured. We all crave to be loved, valued and respected, and none of us had perfect parents. We have sought nurturing from many wrong sources: sex, money, food, possessions, work, drugs, status, alcohol. The only way to become free of these false sources of nurture is to:

- recognize them for what they are: rotten bread and polluted water
- seek God as the Source of true bread (John 6:35-59) and living water (John 7:37-39). The Spirit within us cries out, “Abba, Father.” Abba means “Papa.” We need to come to our Papa with the passion of deep hunger and thirst for the nurture only He can give.

If you need help, get it. Rarely can we let go of deeply rooted habits to the Father on our own. If you are struggling with a temptation or compulsion you can't shake alone (illicit sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, anger, depression, overwork, etc.), talk to a Christian or Christians you trust. The prayers and counsel of a friend may be enough to help you cling to the Father when your flesh wants to go back to the habit. If you don't have a friend with the maturity to help you, or if your problem seems more than your friend can handle, don't hesitate to seek professional Christian counsel.

8. HOW CAN I TELL IF SOMEONE IS MISUSING THE BIBLE?

Ask yourself these questions:

- **Is some person's, group's or book's interpretation of the Bible the real standard?** In a cult, the leader(s) or some book other than the Bible (such as the Book of Mormon) is viewed as the real authority, and Scripture is interpreted in light of that other source. If you aren't permitted to challenge that other source, then the Bible is being misused even if the source's views on a particular subject happens to be biblical.
- **Does the interpretation contradict what the whole Church has held to be true for two thousand years?** Beware of groups who say that Scripture was misunderstood for all the many centuries until they came along.
- **Is the interpretation consistent with the whole of Scripture?** You may not know the Bible well enough to answer this. If not, check with a mature Christian *outside* the group in question.