



THE TOLSON GROUP

COMPLETE GUIDE TO: HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE



We are thrilled you are reading this... it tells us you want more out of your time in God's Word and want to know how to get there. Well, we're here to help! In this guide, we'll walk you through our best tips for:

1. Preparing to Study Your Bible
2. Recommended Bibles and Study Tools
3. How to use the Inductive Bible Study Method

So, let's get to it!

Preparing to Study Your Bible

A SIMPLE, LIFE-CHANGING APPROACH TO STUDYING THE SCRIPTURES

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding.

Seek His will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.

Proverbs 3:5-6

God wrote a Book. One Book. It's called the Bible... the very Word of God, and every word of it is God-breathed true Truth. There's no other book like the Bible; never has been or ever will be. Through the Word of God, we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Therefore, regularly, faithfully, and systematically studying the Scriptures is the wisest and best investment of your time and your life. So, pray to hunger and thirst for His Word!

This process takes time, so be patient with yourself and stay at it. I promise that you will see beautiful fruit develop from your time with God in His Word... and your appetite and love for His Word will continue to grow stronger.

The goal of Bible study is to grow in your knowledge of God (Ephesians 1:17), cultivate your relationship and intimacy with God (Psalm 84:2; Matthew 22:37), and bring glory to God as you become more like His Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).

Prepare for Success:

#1 – Pick a Regular Time and Place

Your study time is more likely to happen if you have a regular time and place to meet with the Lord for prayer and Bible study.

#2 – Get a Bible. A real Bible... with real pages!

As you pray to fall in love with God through His Word, pray also to fall in love with your Bible. Please use an actual Bible in book form, not electronic, as your main source of study. See suggestions under Bible Study Tools. If you are new to studying the Bible, get a good study Bible in a good translation that you can easily read. **Make a copy of the Table of Contents page** so you can easily look up Scriptures until you become familiar with their location.

#3 – Be Prepared!

You'll need some basic supplies that you'll keep in "your place" so that you're not using up your quiet time hunting things down. Punky keeps her supplies in a basket near her chair where she meets with the Lord each morning. Some supplies you'll need for your Bible study are:

- Pens, pencils, highlighters: Yes... mark in your Bible! And if there is something that really jumps out at you use your highlighter. Be sure to get gel pens and highlighters that won't bleed through the pages.
- A Bible Reading Plan: This can be found online or on many of the different Bible apps. It gives you a structured daily reading of the Scriptures in context. This is not the same thing as a daily "devotional."
- A journal or notebook for studying the Scriptures: Record Scriptures you are studying (see "*Inductive Bible Study Method*" in the following section). Record your thoughts and prayers as you study. Write down questions you have, etc. and record how God is speaking to you through His Word. When God speaks to us through His Word in a specific way that touches us, it just makes sense to write it down. Amen!
- If you use reading glasses, keep an extra pair in a basket or container in "your place."
- Keep your calendar or planner nearby and a note pad. Distractions are going to happen—usually thoughts about things you need to do that day. When that happens just stop, jot down a reminder note, and continue on with your studying.

#4 – Ask for the Holy Spirit's Guidance

Bible study is more than just gaining knowledge of God's Word; it's developing a relationship and true intimacy with God's Son, and it's asking the Holy Spirit (who opens

our minds to understand the Scriptures) to help us know God. Begin by asking the Lord to help you understand His Word. Use your own words or pray what the Scriptures themselves say: *“Lord, thank You for Your Word so that I may know You and what You desire for my life. Now I ask You, please, to give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know you better (Ephesians 1:17). Lord, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18). Open my mind to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45) and help me do what You want me to do.”*

#5 – Read and Re-read the Scriptures... over and over again!

There is no other book like the Bible! It is *the* most important book you will ever read; a message from the God who created you, who loves you and who wants to have a relationship with you. Train your ear to listen to your Shepherd’s voice (John 10:27) as you prayerfully, purposefully, thoughtfully, inquiringly, and *slowly* read and re-read His love letter to you. START SMALL, maybe just a verse or a paragraph of Scripture to begin with. You’ll work up to more, but there is great merit in taking small bites and chewing them up thoroughly!

#6 – Study the Scriptures with your Heart, Mind and Strength

The goal of Bible study is not merely information, but *transformation* (Romans 8:29, 12:2)... *a changed life*; and that requires the correct interpretation as well as application of the Scripture. The in-depth method of “Inductive Study” teaches us how to *think*, and to *understand* the Scriptures, and how to correctly *apply* the Word of God and to *live* it out by following this 4-step method:

- **Observation, Interpretation, Application & Response.**
(See more on this in Inductive Bible Study Method in the following section.)

ASK... and it will be given to you;

SEEK and you will find;

KNOCK and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7)

#7 – Talk to God Through Prayerfully Studying the Scriptures

Prayer is conversation. By dialoguing with God as you read and study the Scriptures you deepen your relationship with Him. Ask good questions; tell Him when you don’t understand something and ask the Holy Spirit to help you gain understanding. Praise God when you read something that strikes your heart with joy and thanksgiving. Confess anything the Holy Spirit might convict you of as you read. Don’t put it off; do it right then. And ask Him for what He tells you in His Word that He wants for you. Remember, when God’s Word *says to*, then *pray to*.

Open your Bible & talk to God

Lord, who are You?

What does this Scripture tell you about God?

Lord, who am I?

What does this Scripture tell you about yourself?

Lord, help me to obey Your Word.

What does the Scripture tell you to do?

Lord, today I will...

How will you respond to what you just learned?

Next: Let's Talk Bibles!

If you are new to Bible study, I recommend first getting a Bible translation that you can **read easily** and graduating from there. Choose a Bible with margins wide enough to make some notes, one with Scripture cross-references, and with an adequate concordance and several maps. I suggest one without thumb tabs.

Recommended Translations:

A Bible **translation** attempts (to varying degrees) to communicate as “word-for-word” or as “thought-for-thought” as possible to English from the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic language.

Word-for-word translations from the original language:

- English Standard Version (ESV)
- New American Standard Bible (NASB)
- Christian Standard Bible (CSB)
- King James Version (KJV)
- New King James Version (NKJV)

Thought-for-thought translations of original language:

- New English Translation (NET)
- New International Version (NIV-84)
- New Living Translation (NLT)

The Amplified Bible (AMP):

I personally LOVE this very unique Bible translation and use it regularly as a study “tool.” *The Amplified Bible* attempts to take both word meaning and context into account in order to accurately translate the original text from one language into another. *The Amplified Bible* does this through the use of explanatory alternate readings and amplifications which serve to amplify and clarify the text so as to assist the reader in understanding what Scripture really says.

Recommended Paraphrased Bibles:

A **paraphrase** is a retelling of something in your own words. A paraphrase Bible takes the meaning of a verse or passage of Scripture and attempts to express the meaning in “plain language” – essentially the words the author of the paraphrase would use to say the same thing. ***It's best to use a paraphrase after you've done your initial study of the text, re-reading the passage you've studied in the paraphrased version to gain clarity.***

- The Message (MSG)
- J. B. Phillips – New Testament (JBP)
- The Living Bible (TLB)

Recommended Study Bibles:

A study Bible also includes study notes, commentary and historical and character background pertaining to the Scriptures. **Word of caution: Don't get too dependent on the commentary and application notes. Stick to the Scriptures themselves for your interpretation!**

- **ESV Study Bible** (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011)
- **CSB Study Bible** (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017)
- **The Reformation Study Bible- ESV** (Lake Mark, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005) with study notes and commentary by R. C. Sproul
- **Life Application Study Bible** (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997) is a good study Bible with an extensive concordance, topical references, and commentary. I would recommend this for those new to studying Scripture.
- **The Swindoll Study Bible** (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017) New Living Translation with study notes and commentary by Dr. Charles R. "Chuck" Swindoll is my new, very favorite study Bible. Filled with excellent commentary, geographical, biographical and historical study notes- this is the perfect study bible to give you insight while still challenging you to dig into the Scriptures.
- **MacArthur Study Bible** (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson – Word Publishers, 1997) with study notes and commentary by John MacArthur is, again, a really excellent study Bible.
- **NIV Faithlife Study Bible** (Lexham Press – Zondervan Publishers, 2017)
- **The Daily Walk Bible (NLT or NIV)** (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers)

Recommended Children's Bibles:

This may sound odd, but I encourage anyone who is serious about knowing God through His Word to buy and read a children's story Bible, especially if you've never read all the way through the Bible. But even if you have, reading a children's story Bible is a great way to get the big picture of the grand narrative of the Gospel from Genesis to Revelation.

I recommend:

- **The Child's Story Bible** (Catherine F. Vos. Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983)
- **The Jesus Storybook Bible** (Sally Lloyd-Jones. Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Kidz, 2007)

Bible Study Resources and Tools

FREE Online Bible Study Resources

These web sites feature various translations of the Bible, concordances, commentaries, lexical aids and dictionaries, and Strong's Greek/Hebrew numbers.

- BibleGateway.com
- BibleStudyTools.com

- BlueLetterBible.org
- BibleHub.com
- NetBible.org
- ESV.org
- GodQuestions.org
- Miriam-Webster.com (dictionary)

Concordances, Dictionaries, and Other Study Tools

- ***Strong's Concordance*** (James Strong. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999)
- ***Vine's Concise Dictionary of Bible Words*** (W. E. Vine. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005)
- ***Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible*** (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2013). I LOVE this study bible! It includes Strong's Greek-Hebrew numbering system, Hebrew-Greek dictionary, word studies and lexical aids. It comes in several translations like NKJV & ESV.
- ***What the Bible is All About – Bible Handbook***, (Dr. Henrietta Mears. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999)
- ***The Complete Word Study – Old Testament*** (Dr. Warren Patrick Baker. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1994)
- ***The Complete Word Study – New Testament*** (Dr. Spiros Zodhiates. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993)
- ***Living by the Book, The Art and Science of Reading the Bible*** (Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007)
- ***Searching the Scriptures*** (Charles R. Swindoll. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016)
- ***How to Study Your Bible*** (Kay Arthur, David Arthur, and Pete De Lacey. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010)
- ***How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*** (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003)
- ***The Navigator Bible Study Handbook*** (The Navigators. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994)
- ***The Four Priorities*** (Dr. John Tolson and Larry Kreider. Dallas, TX: High Impact Life, 2012)

Bible Software

- For those who want to make an investment, I highly recommend **LOGOS BIBLE SOFTWARE**. They offer a variety of editions depending on your level of need- for the serious Bible student, seminary student, Bible teacher or pastor. It's pricey, but excellent.
- **MyWSB.com** is a free online resource and offers a more than sufficient library of Bible commentaries and study aids.

NEXT: Let's Go Deeper!

(With a Systematic Approach to In-depth Bible Study)

The Inductive Bible Study Method

Observation ~ Interpretation ~ Application ~ Response

*Jesus systematically taught the Scriptures to His disciples (Luke 24:27, 32, 45). And so it goes that we, also, should study the Scriptures using a systematic method. A good personal Bible study method should be simple enough to be easily passed on as you disciple others. **Teaching someone else how to study the Bible for herself is far better than only sharing what you have received from your own study.** The following method has been used for centuries by lovers of God and His Word to help mine the Scriptures and uncover the rich treasures within. This method will enable you to know God better and what he desires for you, and to understand how to practically apply the Scriptures to your everyday life. **The result will be a transformed life... that strongly resembles Jesus!***

STEP 1) Observation answers the question: **What does God's Word say?**

Not what you *think* it says, but *what does it actually say?* What do you see in the actual content in the text? Before we consider what the text means, we must ask what it says. This means *reading and re-reading* a text until we become acquainted with it.

- Read it over and over and over again, using a few different translations.
- Read it out loud.
- Think it through. Ask questions.
- Chew it up, word by word.
- Pray it out!

Observation is the process of seeing and taking notice of things as they actually are in the passage you're studying. You want to look for facts like a detective uncovering clues by asking good questions of the Scripture using "who, what, when, where, why, and how" questions. Soak up as much as you can and write down your observations and facts.

This takes time, so look carefully and don't rush through it.

Observation Questions:

- **WHO?** Who are the people involved? Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to?
- **WHAT?** What is happening here? What happened? What's the main theme? What ideas are expressed? What are the results? What are the key words or phrases? What literary style is being used? Is this passage of Scripture a narrative, conversation, parable, prophecy, poetry, letter, prayer, or sermon?
- **WHERE?** Where does this take place? What is the setting? Are there any locations mentioned – towns, roads, rivers, mountains, regions, or other landmarks?
- **WHEN?** When did it take place? Are there any references to time or date? Any words related to the past or future? Look for words like after, until, then...

- **WHY?** Why did it happen? For what reason or purpose did it happen? Are there any clues about why things are being said or done?
- **HOW?** How are things accomplished in this passage? Is there any explanation or a process or any cause-and-effect statements?

STEP 2) Interpretation answers the questions: *What does the Scripture mean? What did God mean by what He said?* This is not what *you think* it means, but what it actually means. Our goal is to discover the original intent and meaning of the author. Paul writes, *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15). In the original Greek language *"correctly handles"* literally means "cutting a straight line." As in cutting material in a straight line in order to make a garment or a tent, our interpretation of Scripture needs to be precise and accurate so that it will all fit together without contradiction.

- The first step in interpretation is to let Scripture interpret Scripture by reading the passage in context to the surrounding passages, and using the cross-referenced passages listed in the margin of your Bible. Always seek the full counsel of God's Word. Don't overanalyze the "main things and the plain things."
- A golden rule of interpretation: "If the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense or it will result in nonsense." – D. Cooper, Biblical Research Society

STEP 3) Application answers the question: *What does this message mean for my life?* Bible study doesn't end with interpretation; it continues to the question, *"So what?"* The goal of studying the Bible is not only to gain information but also to **experience transformation**: A changed life! And that only happens when we become "doers of the Word" (James 1:22).

Once we've completed the observation and interpretation steps, we can now apply the lessons from the passage and put God's Word into practice in our own life. **The benefit of Bible study comes in obeying the voice of God, receiving what He has said and putting it into practice.** These questions in the form of an acronym can help you apply the Word to your life:

- **S** – Is there a **sin** for me to avoid?
- **P** – Is there a **promise** from God for me to claim? Is there a condition to that promise?
- **E** – Is there an **example** for me to follow?
- **C** – Is there a **command** for me to obey?
- **K** – How does this passage help me to **know** God or Jesus Christ better?

Here are some other helpful application questions to ask yourself:

- Is there a **lesson** to learn?
- Is there a **blessing** to enjoy?
- Is there a **prayer** to be prayed?
- Is there an **exhortation** or **warning** to heed?
- Is there a **new thought** to carry with me?
- Is there a **rebuke**, a **question**, an **answer**, or a **quotation** of another passage of Scripture?

Most importantly: Do I believe what God is saying to me in this Scripture?

STEP 4) Response answers the question: *How and when will I apply God's Word to my life?* Here's where we get very specific and give some feet and legs to our lesson. Remember that you're not simply filling in the blanks in a workbook or just taking notes on another great lesson. **You're responding to God**, and your response should be motivated by the fact that God loves you, and your desire to please and glorify Him.

Be specific in your personal response to the Scripture: *When will I apply this to my life? How will I apply this to my life? In what area of my life? With whom?* You may also want to date your response and have someone hold you accountable to follow through with it.

Inductive Bible Study Methods adapted from writings of Kay Arthur, Howard Hendricks, Robert M. West, Anne Graham Lotz, Charles Swindoll, The Navigators Bible Study Handbook, and John Tolson.