

12 BIBLE STUDY METHODS

BY RICK WARREN

Below is information provided that will present 12 proven Bible study methods that will enable you to study the Bible on your own. They are given in the order of simplicity and use of reference tools, beginning with the easiest and moving on to the harder ones.

1. *The Devotional Method.* Select a short portion of your Bible and prayerfully meditate on it till the Holy Spirit shows you a way to apply the truth to your life. Write out a personal application.
2. *The Chapter Summary Method.* Read a chapter of a Bible book through at least five times; then write down a summary of the central thoughts you find in it.
3. *The Character Quality Method.* Choose a character quality you would like to work on in your life and study what the Bible says about it.
4. *The Thematic Method.* Select a Bible theme to study. Then think of three to five questions you'd like to have answered about that theme. Next study all the references you can find on your theme and record the answers to your questions.
5. *The Biographical Method.* Select a Bible character and research all the verses about that person in order to study his life and characteristics. Make notes on his attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses. Then apply what you have learned to your own life.
6. *The Topical Method.* Collect and compare all the verses you can find on a particular topic. Organize your conclusions into an outline that you can share with another person.
7. *The Word Study Method.* Study the important words of the Bible. Find out how many times a word occurs in Scripture and how it is used. Find out the original meaning of the word.
8. *The Book Background Method.* Study how history, geography, culture, science, and politics affected what happened in Bible times. Use Bible reference books to increase your understanding of the Word.
9. *The Book Survey Method.* Survey an entire book of the Bible by reading it through several times to get a general overview of its contents. Study the background of the book and make notes on its contents.
10. *The Chapter Analysis Method.* Master the contents of a chapter of a book of the Bible by taking an in-depth look at each verse in that chapter. Tear each verse apart word by word, observing every detail.
11. *The Book Synthesis Method.* Summarize the contents and main themes of a book of the Bible after you have read it through several times. Make an outline of the book. This method is done after you have used a Book Survey Method and the Chapter Analysis Method on every chapter of that book.
12. *The Verse-by-Verse Analysis Method.* Select one passage of Scripture and examine it in detail by asking questions, finding cross-references, and paraphrasing each verse. Record a possible application of each verse you study.

The Devotional Method of Bible Study

How to Apply Scripture to Life

As we have already seen in the introduction, the ultimate goal of all Bible study is *application*, not interpretation. Since God wants to change our lives through His Word, it is important to learn how to apply Scripture to our lives before learning any other methods of Bible study. In fact, the techniques you will learn in this chapter will be used in each of the following study methods. Regardless of the

method you choose to use, at the end of each study you will need to make practical steps of application concerning the things the Lord shows you. (In this book, every time we talk about *application*, refer back to this method for an explanation.)

When you use these techniques by themselves (and not with another method), it is called "The Devotional Method of Bible Study." This is the type of simple study that you can use in your quiet time.

Definition

The Devotional Method of Bible Study involves taking a passage of the Bible, large or small, and prayerfully meditating on it until the Holy Spirit shows you a way to apply its truth to your own life in a way that is personal, practical, possible, and measurable. The goal is for you to take seriously the Word of God and "do what it says" ([James 1:22](#)).

Why Application Is Important

The Bible was given to us to show us how we can have a relationship with Almighty God and how we are to live our lives His way in this world. It was given to change our lives to become more like that of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul declared that it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training the believer in righteous living ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)).

The Bible is a practical book, for it is concerned with practical godly living. Bible study without personal application can be just an academic exercise with no spiritual value. The Bible was written to be applied to our lives. In his succinct way Howard Hendricks has said, "Interpretation without application is abortion!" We want to note here that application is necessary for our Christian lives, that it is hard work, and that good applications are possible if we follow some basic principles.

Application Is Necessary for Our Lives

Study of the Word of God should lead to its application in our lives, with the result that the Scriptures change us to conform more with the will of God.

1. *You can't really get to know the Word of God unless you apply it to your life.* During His ministry, Jesus had a number of encounters with the religious leaders of His time. These were primarily the Pharisees, the acknowledged scholars of the day; the scribes, legal and religious experts in Jewish Law; and the Sadducees, the liberalizing element in Jewish society in Jesus' time. On one occasion the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead, asked Jesus a trick question.

His answer is indeed interesting. He said to them, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" ([Matt. 22:29](#)). The Sadducees had an intellectual knowledge of the facts of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament), but they did not apply these principles in a personal way.

You can be a walking Bible encyclopedia, with your head crammed full of biblical knowledge, but it won't do you any good if you don't apply it practically in daily living. If you study the Word of God without applying it to your life, you are no better off than the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day. You really don't know the Scriptures until you put them into practice.

2. *Studying the Word of God can be dangerous if you merely study it without applying it.* Bible study without application can be dangerous *because knowledge puffs up*. The Apostle Paul stated, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" ([1 Cor. 8:1](#)). The Greek word translated "puffs up" has the idea in it of being inflated with pride that in turn leads to arrogance. The Bible tells us that the devil knows the Word intellectually (see his temptation of Jesus—[Matt. 4:1-11](#)), and we also know that he is puffed up with pride and is arrogant. When you correctly apply the Word of God to your life, you eliminate the danger of being puffed up with pride.

Bible study without application can be dangerous *because knowledge requires action*. What a man

knows should find expression in what he does. James declared, "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" ([James 1:22](#)). God's commands are not optional. He doesn't say, "Please won't you consider doing this?" He commands, "Do it!" And He expects us to obey.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compared an obedient disciple to a wise man: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice [action] is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" ([Matt. 7:24](#)). When the trials of life came along, the wise man's life stood firm, while the foolish man's-the one who did not practice what he knew-came crashing down ([Matt. 7:25-27](#)). David was known as a man after God's own heart because he applied the Word to his life and practiced what he knew. The psalmist wrote: "I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to Your statutes. I will hasten and not delay to obey Your commands" ([Ps. 119:59-60](#)). You too need to put what you know into action.

Bible study without application can be dangerous *because knowledge increases responsibility*. If you get serious about studying the Bible, you will be held more accountable than the average person because with added knowledge comes added responsibility. James wrote, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" ([James 4:17](#)). With a deeper knowledge of the Scriptures comes a stronger judgment if you fail to apply them. When you start studying the Bible, God begins showing you areas of your life that need changing and calls you to greater responsibility. If you are not planning on applying the lessons you receive from your Bible study, it would be better for you to not study the Bible at all! You will just be heaping more judgment on yourself!

John Milton, a great Christian poet, is reputed to have said, "The end of all learning is to know God, and out of that knowledge to love Him and be like Him." That sums up what we are talking about in applying our study of Scripture-we are to know God, to love Him, and then to be like Him.

Application Is Hard Work

Why is it so hard to apply Scripture to our lives? It would seem that applying the Bible would be fairly simple, but actually it is the hardest part of Bible study. Application doesn't happen by accident. We have to plan for it or it will never come about. Three of the reasons that make applying Scripture to our lives so difficult are: it requires thinking, the devil fights it viciously, and we naturally resist change.

1. *Application is hard work because it requires serious thinking.* Sometimes it takes a long period of meditation (concentrated, prayerful thinking) before we see a way to apply a truth of Scripture we have studied. Sometimes it may mean looking beneath a temporary rule to see a timeless principle in the text. Sometimes it means looking beyond a local custom to see a universal insight. All this takes time and concentration which we may be hesitant and reluctant to give.

2. *Application is hard work because Satan fights it viciously.* The devil's strongest attacks often come in your quiet time when you are trying to apply what you have studied. Satan knows that as long as you are content with merely having head knowledge of the Word, you are not much of a threat to his plans. But as soon as you get serious about making some changes in your life, he will fight you tooth and nail. He hates doers of the Word. He will let you study the Bible all you desire as long as you don't ask yourself, "Now what am I going to do with all that I've learned?"

3. *Application is hard work because we naturally resist change.*

Often we don't "feel" like changing, which is what true application requires. We live by our emotions rather than by our wills, for we are content to stay the way we are. We hear Christians saying they don't feel like studying the Bible, they don't feel like praying, and they don't feel like witnessing. Feeling has nothing to do with living the Christian life, for feelings come and go. The key to spiritual maturity is to live for Jesus Christ not because we feel good, but because we know it is the right thing to do. I have discovered that if the only time I study the Bible, pray, or witness is when *I feel* like it-the devil makes sure I never feel like it!

You apply the Word of God to your life not because you may feel like it that day or week, but because you know God expects it of you. Applied Bible study as an act of the will leads to maturity and is a basis for stability in your Christian life.

Four Steps to Practical Application

When you do a devotional Bible study, follow four simple steps. These steps can be summarized in the words *pray, meditate, apply, and memorize*.

Step One — Pray for Insight on How to Apply the Passage

Step Two — Meditate on the Verse(s) You've Chosen to Study

Step Three — Write Out an Application

Step Four — Memorize a Key Verse from Your Study

Step One — Pray for Insight on How to Apply the Passage

Ask God to help you apply the Scripture you are studying and show you specifically what He wants you to do. You already know that God wants you to do two things: obey His Word and share it with others. In your prayer tell God that you are ready to obey what He will show you and that you are willing to share that application with others.

Step Two — Meditate on the Verse(s) You've Chosen to Study

Meditation is the key to discovering how to apply Scripture to your life. Meditation is essentially thought digestion. You take a thought God gives you, put it in your mind, and think on it over and over again. Meditation may be compared to rumination; that's what a cow does when it chews its cud. It eats some grass and sends it to its first stomach; then it lies down, brings the grass up, chews on it, and swallows it again. This process of digestion is repeated three times. Scriptural meditation is reading a passage in the Bible, then concentrating on it in different ways. Here are several practical ways you can meditate on a passage of Scripture:

Visualize the scene of the narrative in your mind. Put yourself into the biblical situation and try to picture yourself as an active participant. Whether you are reading the historical books of the Old Testament, the Gospels, or the Book of Acts, imagine yourself in that historical context. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were involved in that situation. What would you say? What would you do?

If you are studying [John 4](#), for example, visualize yourself as being right there with Jesus, the woman at the well, the disciples, and the inhabitants of Sychar. How would you feel if *you* were the one whom Jesus asked for a drink of water at the well near Sychar? What would *your* emotions be if you were one of the disciples who witnessed this incident?

Another example of visualization in meditation is to imagine yourself as the Apostle Paul in prison writing the letter we know as 2 Timothy. Picture yourself in that Roman jail, condemned to death, and awaiting execution, and alone except for Luke. Feel the loneliness Paul must have felt, but also feel the triumph he must have felt as he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" ([2 Tim. 4:7](#)). When you start visualizing a scene, Scripture comes tremendously alive to you.

Emphasize words in the passage under study. Read through a verse aloud several times, each time emphasizing a different word, and watch new meanings develop. For instance, if you are meditating on [Philippians 4:13](#), you would emphasize the words as follows:

"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

"I **CAN** do everything through Him who gives me strength."

"I can *DO* everything through Him who gives me strength."

"I can do *EVERYTHING* through Him who gives me strength."

"I can do everything *THROUGH* Him who gives me strength."

"I can do everything through *HIM* who gives me strength."

"I can do everything through Him *WHO* gives me strength."

"I can do everything through Him who *GIVES* me strength."

"I can do everything through Him who gives *ME* strength."

"I can do everything through Him who gives me *STRENGTH*."

You will get 10 different meanings from this verse as you go through and emphasize a different word each time.

Paraphrase the passage under study. Take the verse or passage you are studying and rephrase it in your own words. As you think on it, use contemporary words and phrases to express timeless biblical truths. *The Living Bible* and J.B. Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English* are two examples of paraphrases of Scripture.

Personalize the passage you are studying. This can be done by

putting your name in place of the pronouns or nouns used by Scripture. For example, [John 3:16](#) would read: "For God so loved *Rick Warren* that He gave His one and only Son that if *Rick* believes in Him *he* shall not perish but have eternal life."

Use the S-P-A-C-E P-E-T-S acrostic. The S-P-A-C-E P-E-T-S acrostic is a useful aid to meditation. Each letter represents a question that can help you apply the passage to your life. If you memorize the nine questions which this acrostic represents, you will have them available every time you want to meditate on a passage. This acrostic asks: Is there any ...

- Sin to confess? Do I need to make any restitution?
- Promise to claim? Is it a universal promise? Have I met the condition(s)?
- Attitude to change? Am I willing to work on a negative attitude and begin building toward a positive one?
- Command to obey? Am I willing to do it no matter how I feel?
- Example to follow? Is it a positive example for me to copy or a negative one to avoid?
- Prayer to pray? Is there anything I need to pray back to God?
- Error to avoid? Is there any problem that I should be alert to, or beware of?
- Truth to believe? What new things can I learn about God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or other biblical teachings?
- Something to praise God for? Is there something here I can be thankful for?

Pray the verse or passage back to God. Put the passage under study into the first person singular, turn it into a prayer, and pray it back to God. The Book of Psalms is a good example of this method of meditation. Bill Gothard has said that David memorized the Law of God, then personalized it and gave it back to God in the Psalms.

An example of this method of meditation may be seen in the use of the first three verses of [Psalm 23](#):

Thank You, Lord, for being my Shepherd, and that I lack nothing.

Thank You for making me lie down in green pastures,

for leading me beside the quiet waters,

for restoring my soul.

Thank You for guiding me in the paths of righteousness

for Your name's sake.

Which one of these methods should you use in your meditation? The one which best fits what you are studying, or a combination of them. If you are studying the Book of Proverbs, for example, it may be difficult to visualize a scene in your mind, but you can emphasize the words and pray some of the teachings back to God.

Step Three — Write Out an Application

Write an application of the insights you've discovered through your meditation. Writing your application out on paper helps you be specific. If you don't write something down, you will soon forget it. This is particularly necessary when you are dealing with spiritual truths. If you can't put it down on paper, you haven't really thought it through. It's been proven that if you write something down, you'll remember it longer and be able to express to others what you have learned.

You need to remember four factors in writing out a good application:

1. Your application should be *personal*—you should write it in the first person singular. When you write out an application, use the personal pronouns "I," "me," "my," and "mine" throughout.
2. Your application should be *practical*—it ought to be something you can *do*. Plan a definite course of action which you intend to take. Design a personal project which will encourage you to be a "doer of the Word." Make your applications as specific as possible. Broad generalities can make you feel helpless and produce little action.
3. Your application should be *possible*—it should be something you know you can accomplish; otherwise you will get discouraged.
4. Your application should be *provable*—you must set up some sort of follow-up to check up on your success in doing it. It has to be measurable so you will know that you have done it. This means you will have to set some kind of time limit on your application.

The following example of these four factors is taken from [Ecclesiastes 6:7](#). The passage reads: "All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied." The four factors in the written application would look as follows:

1. *Personal*: "I need to ..."
2. *Practical*: "I need to lose some weight."
3. *Possible*: "I need to lose 10 pounds."
4. *Provable*: "I need to lose 10 pounds before the end of the month."

To help you carry out that kind of application, tell a friend or someone in the family about it who will occasionally check up on your progress in an encouraging way.

Record applications for future use as well as present needs. What if you find an application that does not apply to you at that particular time? You are studying a passage that has to do with death and how you can overcome grief and sorrow, but this is not your problem now. What do you do with these verses? Write them down anyway, for two reasons. First, the application might be needed in the future when another situation comes into your life. Second, it might help you minister to someone else who is in that situation. Ask yourself, "How can I use this verse to help someone else?"

Step Four — Memorize a Key Verse from Your Study

So that you can continue to meditate on the passage you are applying, and to help remind you of your project, memorize a verse that is a key to the application you have written.

Sometimes God will work on one area of your life for several weeks or even months. It takes time to change ingrained character traits, habits, and attitudes. New habits and ways of thinking are not set in one day. We must be aware of this and be willing to let God continue to reinforce a new truth in our

lives. We should not fool ourselves by thinking that writing out one application will be a magic formula which will produce instant change. Rather, it must be thought of as part of the process of growth. The memorized verse will help in that process because it will ever be with us-"in the heart."

On one occasion my application has to work on the quality of sensitivity. It took several months for God to build that quality into my life. I needed to see how this quality related to all areas of my life. He kept putting me into situations where I was tempted to do the opposite-be insensitive. He may do the same with you. God may teach you to love others by putting you in the midst of unlovely people. You may have to learn patience while experiencing irritations, and learn peace in the midst of chaos. You are then discovering how to have joy even in times of sorrow and testing. You must realize that when God wants to build a positive quality in your life, He must allow you to encounter situations where you can choose to do the right thing instead of following your natural inclinations.

Bible Study Methods: Twelve Ways You Can Unlock God's Word by Rick Warren, pages 30-40
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