

# LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

## An Inductive Guide to the Study of the Bible, Using the Gospel of Matthew

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This series of Bible studies is designed for people who want to learn how to study the Bible in a meaningful way, or for people who might need resources for teaching people how to study the Bible. This first series will focus on the study of narrative literature in the New Testament.

There are a lot of folks in the church who have never really studied the Bible in any depth, but who would like to learn how to do it. Frequently the church will simply tell people to read the Bible, or to begin a personal Bible study. But without some guidance this soon becomes confusing and overwhelming. There are a lot of different types of books in the Bible--so where should people start reading? People might start reading in Genesis, but they soon find themselves in passages that are difficult to comprehend (with strange cultural settings) or that seem totally unrelated to their own needs and interests and rather boring (like genealogies of names that are too difficult even to pronounce). Even if they begin reading in the Psalms, or Prophets, they all too often get lost and discouraged with it. It would certainly make things easier for them if they were guided in their reading.

A lot of churches arrange Bible studies for people either in Sunday School or in home groups, but these may or may not be useful in showing people how to study the Bible. A specialist may come in and give a talk; and even though it might be excellent, the listener may be left with the (false) impression that he or she could never find all that in the passage. Or, sometimes Bible studies simply become times of sharing in which the participants offer their opinions about the passage that was read. This is usually not helpful at all unless some of the participants have actually studied the passage.

If the Bible does indeed record God's message to us as we claim, then it becomes rather important for us to learn how to read and use it. As with any important document, there are parts that we want to read first to know the essence of the communication; and then there are many other parts that are related to the main teachings that should also be studied. This is what this **Basic Bible Study** will do.

Let me say at the outset that studying the Bible is not that difficult to do, provided there is initial direction on how to proceed and what helps are available, and then guidance along the way until people feel more comfortable with the text. It is my hope that as people work from lesson to lesson they will become more confident in the process and need less and less guidance.

This series of lessons will focus on narrative literature in the New Testament. It will be followed by a few other series of studies in different kinds of books of the Bible, so that one can see how the basic procedure applies in each type of literature.

The lessons should be followed in their order because each study will build on what has been done before. The lessons can be done at the individual's own pace but should be given enough time to allow for careful analysis and reflection.

The material will begin with a very general survey of what Bible Study in narrative literature involves, then it will provide individual studies on a number of passages from the **Gospel of Matthew**. Each lesson will provide the basic interpretation of the passage being used, but in doing so it will walk the reader through the process. Each passage will require slightly different procedures because even in narrative literature there are different genres included. But gradually, lesson by lesson, the whole array of procedures will become clearer and clearer, and therefore easily adapted to other passages in the Bible.

We have chosen the Gospel of Matthew for this first series of lessons because it focuses our attention on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the proper place to begin studying the Bible as a Christian. Studies in other books of the Bible are certainly important, but understanding Christ is central. Besides a thorough study of the Gospel of Matthew will necessarily involve making connections with passages from other books of the Bible as well. A good Bible study begins in a passage but soon is connecting all kinds of related passages from other books of the Bible.

For this **Basic Bible Study**, I have also selected the specific passages in the Book of Matthew that are to be studied, 42 of them. This does not mean that the passages I have skipped are not important. Rather, I wanted to cover the basic events in the Gospel's narrative fairly quickly, and in the process include a variety of the types of passages that are in the book. This will greatly expedite the plan of this Bible study, but will still include all the major teachings by Jesus and about Jesus in the Bible. At the end of the study the participants should be familiar with the Basic Bible Study method, know what the Gospel of Matthew is all about, and have a thorough understanding of Christology (the name given for the study of Jesus Christ).

## GENERAL SURVEY OF THE METHOD

### Tools

There are a few "tools" that will be most helpful in developing a **Basic Bible Study**. Not all of these resources are necessary at the outset, but as the studies progress you will gradually expand your study resources to make your work easier and more productive. I will not now list all the things that will be helpful but will gradually introduce them as we proceed.

You definitely need a modern translation of the Bible. You can use older translations, but they will require some additional steps in the process to get at the clear meaning. There are a number of good translations available, and perhaps even owning a couple of different ones might be helpful. The wording will be very similar in most of them, but a slightly different translation can be helpful in understanding the text because it may make you look at the sentence differently. I will use the *New International Version* of the Bible for the lessons, but in the comments, I may note how other translations differ. We can work with various translations of the text, but our quest will still be to try to understand exactly what was said in the original Greek version of the Gospel of Matthew and which English rendering best expresses the intent of the author.

Some folks may have a good study Bible to use, and this can be helpful as well. A study Bible is simply a copy of the Bible with some study notes and references added at the bottom of the page. Obviously, such notes are limited, but in basic things they may provide a good, quick explanation of difficulties or meanings.

Fairly soon you will want to get some kind of a modern Bible dictionary. There are a number of these available, ranging from one-volume dictionaries to multi-volume dictionaries. Again, it should be obvious that a one-volume dictionary will not have as much in it as a multi-volume dictionary. But a one-volume dictionary may be the simplest place to start. If it proves adequate for your studies for now, that is fine. If you soon “outgrow” it, then you may wish to look into a more comprehensive set.

The dictionary will give you brief discussions of persons, places, events, and concepts that are mentioned in the Bible. They may not give you word studies on words that are used, unless those are also major topics (like “faith”), but they will give you a lot of useful information as you work through passages. There will be times you will not need to look at the dictionary, but other times you will.

I will recommend more of these as the studies proceed. But some that people have found helpful are *The New Bible Dictionary*, or *The Wycliffe Bible Dictionary*. For a good multi-volume set, you may wish to get *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. These can be ordered from local Christian book stores, or directly from the publishers, or from Christian Book Distributors (CBD), or from Amazon.com.

It is also helpful to have a commentary to read along with the Bible study. There are so many commentaries available that one hardly knows where to begin. While you could buy a good commentary on Matthew alone to supplement the study, it would be far more useful at this beginning stage to have a commentary on the whole Bible. This will give you a basic discussion of the passage you are studying--which will get you thinking in the proper direction--but you will also have commentary on other portions of the Bible to which the study may take you. There is no hurry to buy on of these, but soon you will see that it could come in handy. I would recommend a two-volume set called *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Gaebelein, and published by Zondervan. It was first published in 12 volumes (which you can buy if you like), but has now been abridged and is available in two volumes. This is clearly easier to afford and less cumbersome to use. It is just good to have some helpful interpretations on each passage of the Bible available when you are looking up different sections.

So with a few helpful resources your work should be made a bit less baffling. We will proceed with the study, and as the needs arise I will mention things that are also available for further studies (customs and manners, historical settings, and the like). I will include an annotated bibliography at the end of this set of lessons.

## Procedure

This discussion will now survey the steps in the basic approach in a logical order. But as you will soon see, in any given passage the order of these different steps may vary considerably, and some of them may not even be necessary in some passages. You will find as you get used to the method that some of these steps will even be done simultaneously, and, after a bit of practice, even instinctively.

There are two general considerations that must be mentioned at the outset for **Basic Bible Study**, “context” and “usage.” Any interpretation of a passage or a verse in a passage must be made in context. One cannot simply take lines and phrases out of context, or ascribe totally new meanings to the words and phrases that were used, and call that “Bible Study.” Our quest is to determine what the text meant in its original context (interpretation), and then determine what it means to us today (application). And secondly, usage will be used to determine the meaning of words or expressions. These are just basic safeguards for interpretation. Any text has an original intended meaning, and that meaning must be understood within the currency of the way that words and expressions were used at the time of writing. This is why we are always trying to improve on our English translations with new revisions; we want to have the clearest, modern English translation that is the closest to the meanings of the original Greek and Hebrew texts. And you will learn how we can determine this as we study passage by passage.

This is the traditional approach to understanding the biblical text. Some modern approaches place very little emphasis on the original meaning and instead re-interpret the text from modern critical interests. Such approaches are too subjective; they allow the “readers” to make the text say whatever they think it should say. They usually criticize the traditional approach for taking the Bible too literally--that is often an effective argument, but is totally beside the point. The choice is between discovering what the Bible means, and what some modern critical scholars try to make it mean.

### 1. Read the passage a number of times and observe its details.

This beginning step may seem unnecessary to stress, but it is amazing how many people will embark on a Bible study without actually reading the text very carefully. You want to read it in a good, clear modern translation (along with your favorite if you like--in fact, it may be interesting to read it in the King James Version, then something like the New International Version, and then perhaps the New Living Translation). Read the passage several times, observing the details of the passage. The more familiar you are with the material, the easier the steps in the study will come.

## 2. Determine the subject matter of the passage.

Here you want to understand what the passage is “about.” This sounds simple enough, but in more complicated passages it may not be that easy. The “subject matter” might emerge instantly the first time you read it, or it may require some thought and some analysis of the material.

Matthew is written mostly in narrative form which includes a lot of didactic (teaching) material. One thing to do that can be very helpful is to separate (in your mind, if not on paper) the story line from the explanatory material. When you are reading a narrative, isolate the sentences or clauses that advance the story. This simply means that if the passage has a lot of quotations, or if it has a lot of descriptive or explanatory verses, for the moment put those aside and trace the action of the passage. It may be simply that Jesus went here, did this, said this, and then left. But knowing the story line will help you keep the focus on the event being discussed and on the major actors in the events.

The explanatory verses and the quotations are not to be ignored--in point of fact, they are the most important elements in the passage for they interpret the story line for you. But if as you read the text you can get used to seeing the skeletal story line to know the event or the subject, and then see how the explanatory verses and direct quotations explain the subject matter, you will be able to see the “point” of the whole passage rather easily.

This should not be a long, drawn out process. In time you will be able to see these things easily as you read the passage. It may sound elementary, but it is simply learning to read so that you can see how the speakers in the story and the story-teller himself interprets what is happening.

## 3. Determine the meanings of the words and expressions.

Most of the words used in the text will be clear enough to understand--if the English Bible you use has done a good job of trying to get the English equivalent. But frequently there will be words that call for further study, and here a good dictionary or word study book may become necessary. In simple narrative accounts this will not be a major concern. But in some of the sayings and teachings of Jesus, or in some of the Old Testament quotations, you may have to study words more carefully. And so on occasion you will want to know precisely what Jesus meant when he used words like “faith” or “righteousness” or “hypocrite.” In this study on Matthew I will provide the basic meanings of these kinds of words, and still make suggestions on how or where you could study them further.

Also important will be the understanding of figurative language. The Bible uses a lot of language that is poetic, but because it uses it so frequently we are able to learn what it means from its usage in Scripture. The more you see it in your studies, the more accustomed you will be to using it. And so along the way I will point these out, offer my interpretation for them, and recommend what to study further on such subjects. Here a little knowledge of the culture will become important (to understand sowing seed, winnowing at the threshing floor, putting wine into wineskins, and the like). These kinds of things we will study as they come up passage by passage rather than make a list of them at this point.

#### **4. See if there is anything in the culture or history that will have a bearing on the interpretation of the text.**

These books of the Bible were written at certain times in history and therefore reflect the history and the culture of those times. Consequently, you will often need to learn a bit about such things in order to clarify the full meaning of the passage. This does not mean that you cannot understand the point of the passage if you miss the cultural setting; but it does mean that the passage and its details may make more sense if you do know something of that world.

#### **5. Determine the connection to the Old Testament.**

You will soon discover that the Gospel is filled with references to the Old Testament, because Jesus is the fulfillment of those Old Testament pictures and prophecies. Sometimes the references are direct (“this happened that might be fulfilled the word of the prophet . . .”), and sometimes they are indirect (“a wicked and adulterous generation seeks a sign” as a reference to Hosea’s audience). But in each case we have to go back into the Old Testament and take a look at the passage referred to, learn what the prophet meant, and then determine how it applies to Jesus or to the times of Jesus. There are books on this procedure, but we will study some of the cases inductively before listing the resources that are available.

This step will be new to most people who study the Bible because it is not often done, or if it is done it is not done very well since most people are afraid to get into some of the Old Testament—they just do not know how to work with it. But Matthew will give us many opportunities to use it and see how the testaments fit together. This will certainly remind us of the unity and the progression of the Scripture.

#### **6. Correlate the ideas of the passage with the New Testament teachings.**

The epistles in the New Testament take the events of the gospels and put them into doctrinal and practical forms. We formulate our doctrinal and practical teachings from these epistles. And so any study of the gospel narratives must find the connections with the teachings of the apostles. This is where a good topical resource like a Bible dictionary could come in handy, or a good study Bible. But even there all the connections are not easily found. The more familiar you become with the New Testament, the easier it will be to find these connections. Some are obvious just from attending church (an Easter service may read the account of the resurrection of Jesus as well as 1 Corinthians 15 which is Paul’s explanation of the significance of this event).

A good concordance will be useful as well, and so as the need arises I will introduce you to some concordances and how they are to be used. A concordance is not a dictionary. It will list each word in the Bible and give the passages in the Bible where the same word is also found. If you were looking at Jesus’ teaching on “righteousness,” you might look in a concordance to see where the epistles use this word. Upon checking those references you would find a couple of passages that deal with the subject in depth. But we will look at this step later.

## 7. Draw some legitimate and practical application from the passage.

This final step is a little more of a challenge than one might initially think, especially for passages that are essentially stories. And, as will be seen later, it will be even more involved when working with an Old Testament passage. This is why the correlation to the epistles is so important, for these apostolic teachings provide the clear statements of doctrine and practice for us today.

But in making the application of a passage we are trying to determine what the text is requiring us to believe (that is the easier part) and as a result to do (that is the more difficult part because the text may not actually say what to do in so many words). In many places Jesus will say what his disciples should do, and that is usually pretty straightforward (but even there we may need to correlate the application with passages in the epistles to make sure the application harmonizes with the rest of Scripture). But in other passages we have to draw the implications from the text and then harmonize these with other passages.

And of course we have to make the connection to our cultures in the modern world, and this may involve finding equivalent issues and procedures.

Once again it will be easier to do a number of these inductively rather than offer samples at this point. After a number of passages are studied we should be able to put together some guidelines for making appropriate applications from passages in the Bible.