

How to Study the Bible

by W.F. Anderson

This sermon provides a step-by-step guide to studying the Bible using the chapter method, emphasizing the importance of work, prayer, and personal application.

Scripture: Psalm 119:11, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 12:10, John 5:39, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 13:7

Topics: "Bible Study", "Hermeneutics"

Description

In this video, the speaker emphasizes the importance of studying the word of God and the role of language in communicating God's message to humanity. He encourages listeners to take the time to outline chapters of the Bible as a helpful study tool. The speaker explains different types of outlines, such as time sequence outlines for studying biographies and topical outlines for chapter study. He also suggests noting the main lesson, teachings about the persons of the Godhead, and important verses in each chapter. Overall, the video emphasizes the rewarding work of studying the word of God and provides practical tips for effective Bible study.

Transcript

Let's turn in our Bible to 1 John, chapter 2. The 1st epistle of John, chapter 2, verse 13. 1 John 2, verse 13. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning.

I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning.

I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. Every one of us here this afternoon who is a Christian would agree that the word of God is one of the most important factors in our spiritual experience. We are aware that we were saved through the instrumentality of the word of God, being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever.

Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ first occurred through the word of God. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. We are aware that, as we have already been exhorted, if we are to live a life of faith in the Lord Jesus, so that he may live his life through us, that faith is strengthened through the word of God.

The more I know of the word of God and apprehend of it, the more I am able to trust the Lord Jesus Christ with my life after I am saved. All spiritual growth is key to the word of God. As newborn babes, Peter writes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

When he exhorts us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we know the Lord Jesus Christ only as we know the word of God where the revelation of Christ is contained. Victory over sin, a cleansed life, comes through the word of God. Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way, by taking heed thereto according to thy word. And here in 1 John, chapter 2, the secret of spiritual strength and victory over Satan is that the Christian is strong because the word of God abides in him. All of us agree to these things.

We know they are true. We desire that they be effective in our own experience. But most of us will have to confess that for several years, at least after we were saved, unless we were properly instructed, we floundered around in our spiritual experience simply because we did not know how to get into the word.

And as I have taught over our youth conferences in years past, and other conferences I have attended, most of us go away from these conferences deeply stirred by the Spirit of God. We go home determined to live for the Lord Jesus. We go home determined to study his word.

And that determination may last for a week or two weeks or for a month, but then it plays out. And we go back to the hit-and-miss business of reading the Bible occasionally, or reading our favorite passages, and all our serious resolve are gone a few weeks after the conference is over. I am persuaded a great deal of our difficulty is that we do not know how to study the Bible.

All of us want to study it, I assume. All of us want to learn its meaning, but how to go about it is our problem. And so, I hope we can be of some help in this study this afternoon on how to study the Bible.

Now, if as you glance through this sheet you have come to the conclusion that this particular method is a great deal of work, you are absolutely correct. Because all Bible study is work. This, to me, is the simplest method of Bible study.

There are others which I am persuaded are much more fruitful, but they are much more difficult. And I have tried to keep in mind that, as I thought of this conference, those who haven't the time that I have, or that others have, to give to the study of the word of God. I have always suggested that you study the Bible by book.

That is, you take it a book at a time. And that requires your sitting down and reading that book through at one sitting, and doing that over and over and over again, until the pattern of that book lies clearly in your mind, the purpose for which it's written, and the major divisions and thoughts of that book you have seen. Then you are prepared to do an analysis of the book.

But I'm aware that most of us haven't the time to give to such a study. For those of you who do, I have suggested additional reading material at the bottom of this page that you can possibly follow. But for those of us who are looking for a shorter space of time because of necessity in which to study the Bible, and want something more than just reading it, this method is not original with me.

I haven't been able to trace it back beyond Grace Sachs in one of her books. Dr. Wilbur Smith uses it in the book *Profitable Bible Study*, or at least a variation of it, and Mr. Gibbs in his little pamphlet on *The Quiet Time* varies it again. It's not a new method, but I hope as we go over it you'll be able to do something with it.

We're going to discuss this afternoon the chapter method of Bible study. Most of us can take a chapter in his *Private Devotions* daily, and you can cover a chapter in a short space of time, and then you want to study it. Now, first of all, the materials you are going to need for the study of this chapter method.

You'll need two or more translations. You have your King James Bible that most of us love, and I'm suggesting you use other translations along with it. You can have your own choice.

Second, you will need a good notebook. Don't get scattered sheets of paper, but have notebooks that you have definitely set aside for the study of the Word of God, and use a pen and ink, not a pencil, because, as Mr. Gibbs points out in his little booklet *The Quiet Time*, whatever you write down in pencil is temporary, and you're aware of it as you write it. You don't have a serious purpose in putting it down, so put it down in a permanent form.

Use pen and ink when you're writing your notebook. Now, this is the method. First of all, of course, we would look to the Lord in prayer before we even begin to read the chapter, but the Spirit of God may open our understanding and give us His necessary help in studying that particular chapter.

The first thing, then, is to read the chapter in the various translations that you have. You will discover immediately differences in words, in grammatical structure, and sometimes in whole verses. Beloved, as our King James Version is, many of us fail to understand particular passages because of the obscure language used.

The language of 1611 has changed in the intervening centuries. For instance, we use the word *prevent* in the sense of stopping. It's used sometimes in our New Testament in the sense of preceding or going before.

We use our English word *let* to mean permit or allow, but sometimes in our New Testament it is used in the idea of preventing, and unless you are familiar with that change in the English language, you will lose the meaning of the text. So, some of these more modern translations have cast the biblical text in a language we could more readily understand. And then again, the best New Testament manuscripts had not been discovered even at the time that Mr. Darby made his translation, which you will remember was so dear to Paul and Silas.

But the best New Testament manuscripts have not yet been discovered, and there are important corrections to be made as a result of that manuscript. So, it is important that we compare our translations, and we get so used to the cadence of our King James that we can no longer see the meaning. We're lost in the beauty of the words sometimes, and it's good for us to read one of these modern translations that will hit you square between the eyes in its modern language, because sometimes we evade the practical issues involved in a passage because of the beauty of the language.

We admire the poetry and the rest of it, and miss the lesson. Well, you won't do that in a modern translation. So, after you have read this chapter in two or three translations, you take your notebook, and you jot down the things you have learned just in the different translations.

A verse has been made more clear to you. Put it down. Write it.

Take the time to write what you have learned in your different translations. Once you have read the passage, the second thing you will do is outline the chapter. Now, I have suggested that you not leave the chapter until you have discovered at least a simple outline.

Now, for this, you are not permitted to use the Schofield Reference Bible. That's a rule I have laid down. Because, obviously, Mr. Schofield has already divided the chapter for you, and you will automatically take his division without discovering anything for yourself.

So, you take a plain text Bible, and you outline the chapter as the result of your repeated reading. Now, you know what I mean by outline. If you've been to school at all, at least we used to have to outline.

I don't know whether you do or not. I don't even know whether you study English anymore. But, you must outline.

And for those of you in your early years in high school, could I urge you to take all the language study you can? I know Latin is a dead language, but you would be surprised at how much better you understand English after you study Latin. Take all the language you can. You're dealing with a book of language, and if you don't understand the parts of speech and grammatical construction, you'll never be able to outline a chapter.

If you understand paragraphing, you'll miss a great deal of the thought, especially of the Apostle Paul in his life. So, if you're still in school, take all the language you can get, because the message of God, the revelation of God to man, is communicated in language. An outline, briefly, as I have noted, is a short summary in the form of heads and subheads.

It gives the significant features of any subject, or in our case, of a chapter. So, as you read the chapter, you will discover, if you read it frequently enough, that several thoughts may be developed in the chapter. Each thought is a whole, a unity in itself, where you're automatically beginning to see the outline of that particular chapter.

Put it down in your notebook. Don't leave it until you get that outline of a chapter in your notebook. It's a lot of work.

The study of the Word of God is work. You're not going to be able to sit in daydream and expect the Spirit of God to reveal the truth to you, because it doesn't work like that. It takes work.

But there is no more rewarding work in all the world than the labor that is spent on the study of the Word of God. One of the helps in outlining is to pick out your main verbs, or your main sentences, and then separate from them all the subordinate sentences and clauses, and put them over to one side. And if you have the time, do that.

Put your main thoughts, the main sentences that are written in that chapter, in one column, over against them the subordinate sentences or clauses that modify those main sentences. And when you can pick out the main sentences at a glance, you've got pretty much the outline of the chapter. Now, there are several kinds of outlines that you might develop you might want to use in the study of the Word of God.

There is a time-sequence outline. This is most helpful when you're studying biography. You want to take up the life of a character in the Bible.

Of course, I'm away from chapter study right now. But I'm throwing in some of these types of outlines. You're studying a character, you're doing a biographical study of someone in the Bible.

Well, it's almost natural to divide it up in a time-sequence as to his birth and his youth and his adulthood and his maturity and his death and so on. A time-sequence is a very helpful method of outlining in Bible study. A geographical method of outline is most essential in studying something like the book of Exodus or the life of the Lord Jesus in the Synoptic Gospel.

You'll find that very frequently they break up into geography and you can get a geographical outline of the movements of the Lord Jesus Christ. But what I'm interested in is a topical outline which would more fit our chapter study. The main thoughts, the main topics are put out as the major heads of your outline.

So, you go through the chapters, you pick out the main thoughts, and they will in all probability be the main heads of your outline. The subordinate thoughts will be the sub-heads under those main heads in your outline. And when you finish that, you will have a graph of the contents of that particular chapter of that particular book.

You know what it's about. You've gone through the labor of outlining. The third thing I have suggested in studying the Bible or studying by chapter method is to write the answers to these questions or instructions that are here.

First of all, you'll make a list of all the persons who are mentioned in that chapter. That would run you into difficulty in Matthew chapter 1, but you'll understand that. But in a particular chapter you're studying, you will list the persons who are mentioned in that chapter.

The importance of that can be seen especially in the life of the Lord Jesus. For instance, I have often wondered why did the Lord Jesus tell his disciples, when they were going to prepare the room for the Passover, you go into the city and you'll see a man bearing a pitcher of water, you follow him, and he'll show you a large upper room furnished, and there make ready. Well now, we can spiritualize that and say it's a man typified with the word of God, and you follow him and all the rest of it, but I want to know why did the Lord use that kind of language? Why didn't he say, go to such and such a street, as Ananias was instructed to go to the street straight in the very house where he'd find Paul of Tarsus? Why didn't the Lord tell his disciples, go to such and such a street and such and such a house, and there you'll find the room for our Passover? Well, it all revolves around the persons in that chapter.

One in particular, Judas Iscariot. He has already gone to the chief priests and agreed to betray the Lord. He has come back from that mission, and he's now standing there in the group.

Suppose the Lord had said, you go down to such and such a street, and in such and such a house, and that's where we're going to have the Passover. All Judas would have to do is leave the crowd and go to the chief priests and say, you can get him right there. But the time wasn't right.

It wasn't yet for the Lord to be taken, and so the Lord obviously uses language that Judas would never know where the place was because he wasn't among the group that went. So he had no chance to betray the Lord before the Lord was ready for him. So it's important to list the persons who are named in a chapter.

On that same line, by the way, God doesn't perform any unnecessary miracles. He wasn't miraculously going to prevent Judas from taking the Lord before the time. The Lord just used a common sense method of not telling Judas where he was going to have the Passover.

I'm all for a literal reading of a chapter, as you understand. Well, anyhow, you list the persons who are mentioned in that chapter. Second, you will list the places that are mentioned.

This, again, can be very important in the life of the Lord. It's also important in trying to lay out the life of the Apostle Paul and fit the epistles in at the particular time and place where they were written. But again, in the life of the Lord Jesus, the geography of his movements is most important.

Certain events occurred peculiarly because the Lord Jesus was not in the land of Palestine when he made that journey northeast of Palestine into the land of Tyre and Sidon. That was Gentile country. And if you don't notice the geography of that passage, you'll miss the whole meaning.

So, you list, secondly, every place mentioned in that particular chapter. Third, you will list all the times mentioned in that chapter. Again, I go to the life of the Lord Jesus.

It's obvious I've been teaching the Gospel of Mark in a maze. There are certain events in the life of the Lord Jesus that caused difficulty only because of the time involved. He performed many healings that caused no controversy with the religious leaders.

But when he performed a healing on the Sabbath day, opposition was aroused. It's important that you note the time, the Sabbath day. So, you will list in your notebook all the times that you find in that particular chapter.

And, obviously, you will list next, the major lesson in the chapter. As you've read through this chapter, you've listed all these places, persons, and times. Now, what is the writer trying to teach in this chapter? What is his purpose in writing this chapter? Because these men did not sit down in a trance.

They were not so supernaturally controlled that all sense of purpose and direction in writing was gone. There was no dictation of the Word of God to these men. The Spirit of God did control them.

The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit of God used a man as he was. His personality, his interests, his emotions, his desires.

The Spirit of God didn't override those things. When Paul sat down to write an epistle, he had a reason for writing it. He had a reason for putting everything in that epistle he put there.

Now, as you read, why did he write this chapter? What lesson is he trying to get across? Well, when you go to the Gospel, why did the Spirit of God lead this writer to arrange the material in this particular sequence? Because the sequence is different in the very Gospel. Why? What lesson is the writer trying to get across to me? Write down in your notebook the major lessons of that particular chapter. Again, you'll want to keep a section on the lessons you learned about the persons of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Is there any revelation about the persons of the Godhead, any teaching about them in that particular chapter? You'll want to note that. It would be helpful next to put down the most important verse in that chapter, and memorize it. Memorize it.

There's nothing more helpful than a systematic method of memorizing Scripture. That'll come before us when we come to the subject of witnessing later on. Again, and these last several ones or at least before we come to the last one of all, you'll want to particularly pray into your own experience.

Is there any example to follow? Has God set before me any man who has lived for Him in such a method that I could pattern my life after Him? On the other hand, is there something in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ I have learned that I should have in my own life? Put it down. Make that a subject of your prayer as you go before God. Oh God, I have learned this is the life that pleases You.

I want that worked out in my experience. And so you put down in your notebook the examples that are there for you to follow. Is there any prayer that you could repeat? And this especially when you come to Paul's letters as you pray for your fellow Christians.

Well, here is an apostle on his knees before God with the needs of these Christians before him. And this is what he, by the Spirit of God, desired for these saints. Form a good basis for our own praying as we lay hold of God for our fellow believers.

So you'll note the verses that contain any prayer that you could use in your own prayer life. Also, next to last on the sheet, you will list the warnings, the exhortations, and the promises. In the warnings you will find sins that we are to avoid, pitfalls that would ensnare us in our walk for the Lord, and we're warned against them.

And it's much better to learn by the warning than by the experience. So I want to note every warning in that chapter that God gives to me. And finally, I want to list the problem passages.

That is, there's a particular passage in this chapter I don't understand. And I've worked my way at it, and worked my way at it, and I still can't understand it. Well, I want to put that down as a problem passage.

Or as I read through that chapter, someone brought that up not long ago. This is something that troubled them. You run across a passage that is likely to trouble someone else, you put that passage down.

And once you have done all that, then you are ready to go to the commentary. Most of us, when we come to study the Bible, the first thing we do is go to the commentary. Like C.S. Lewis said when he was teaching literature, that when he assigned a passage in Plato for them to read, the first thing the student did was go to the library and check out a commentary on Plato.

He never thought of checking out Plato and reading the passage. And if someone else was suggested, if you weren't required to paint or describe a sunset, the first thing you would do is go to the art gallery and see how someone else was painting it. Instead of going out and seeing the sunset.

Now, one does not wish to ignore the work of the Spirit of God in the history of the church. As he has taught men the truths of God, one does not wish to ignore that. But it's one thing for you to sit here in a conference and learn something as someone teaches it to you, and teachers are necessary in the church.

It's another thing to get before the Lord and have the Spirit of God give it to you direct, as you study the Word. So you leave the commentaries until you've done all this work. And your commentaries will be primarily helpful on your problem passages.

You will of course discover that many commentators skip over the same passages you're hunting help on. But you turn to the commentaries after you have done your work in that particular study. Now, there are about 1,189 chapters in the Bible.

If you did a chapter a day by this method, in a little over three years you would have gone through the whole Bible by this method. Perhaps you're in the habit of reading through your Bible once a year. I would not want to discourage you from that, but I am far from convinced that that's the best thing to do.

I personally would rather take five years to go through my whole Bible by this method than simply to have read it five times in those five years. For a while, I was reading a psalm each morning. After having done that for a lengthy period where I had gone through the book of Psalms five times, I discovered that I couldn't tell you the content of most of the psalms.

And I had read through them five times. And I decided it's a whole lot better to go much more slowly, but much more thoroughly in the study of the Word of God. So if you've just been reading and reading, and when you're through, you can't really put your finger on anything you've learned, and once you've read through the whole Bible or through a whole book, the events or teachings of that book are just a jumbled mass in your mind, then could I suggest you try this very simple chapter method of Bible study, and give yourself enough time to do it thoroughly, chapter by chapter, in your reading.

And if you have to work at a chapter more than one day, work at it more than one day. If you find you're going stale on that chapter, go to the next one, but come back to that one and don't leave it until you have it. And if it takes you five years to go through the Bible, you will at least have done a much more thorough job than most of us do in reading it once a year.

Now, at the bottom of the page, I have suggested additional reading if you're interested in going beyond chapter methods of Bible study. I first got this method from Wilbur Smith's book Profitable Bible Study, which I have listed first. I consider it most valuable for a number of reasons.

But you men especially, you ladies too, who are interested in building a library, in that book he suggests the first 100 books that a minister should purchase. Well, you're not saying change that minister idea. But he gives you the gist of what each book is about that he recommends.

Now, you'll not want all that he lists and the first 100 that I would buy would eliminate a good number that he lists and would include some that he doesn't list. But he'll give you a suggested start on your own library on some books that you may purchase. And then there is one I would like to list that I didn't put on here, and that's Mel C. Tenney's book Galatians, the Charter of Christian Liberty.

I'm recommending that primarily because he goes through Galatians in several different methods. He actually gives you a study of Galatians in different methods of Bible study. So, you can follow and go right through Galatians by different methods, and you can see the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of Bible study.

So, if you're interested in going beyond this, then some of these books, I'm sure, would prove most helpful to you. But whatever we do, again, I don't know why you have come to this conference. I hope it is for a serious purpose.

I wanted to take time to go through a chapter about that method, but we don't have time. We wouldn't get anywhere in a chapter. Give yourself to the study of the Word of God.

You've planned a career for yourself. Is that job going to leave you time to study the Word? Serve the Lord in your local assembly? Then forget it. I'm serious, forget it.

Get yourself a lesser paying job. Set yourself a lower standard of living. Do anything, but don't lose your time for the study of the Word of God.

When you stand at the judgment seat of Christ, it's not going to matter a bit what kind of a house you lived in, or what your social status was in the community in which you lived. It's not going to matter at all what your yearly income was. It won't matter at all what people thought of you.

But this will matter. The world passes away and the desires thereof. He that doeth the will of God abideth forever.

The Lord Jesus said, Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away. The word of the Lord endureth forever. And when you're giving yourself to a study of the Word of God, you're engaged in something that's eternal, whose benefits are not going to leave in the course of a month or a year or in the course of your lifetime, but whose benefits are going to follow you through the countless ages of eternity.

And if there's one thing I could urge you to do, to discipline yourself to a systematic study of the Word of God.

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