

Basic Tools For Bible Study



“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” 2 Tim 3:16 (KJV)

“...No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” 2 Peter 1:20-21 (ESV)

God wants us to read and understand the Bible...

God has revealed his character and will in Scripture. An essential part of growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ is learning the Written Word of God. The Holy Bible proclaims God’s message of salvation, divides truth from falsehood, makes known the ways of righteousness, corrects and strengthens the faithful and serves as a warning to disbelievers. More than any other book, Christians should treasure and study the Bible.

Start with a Good Translation

Unless you read Hebrew and Greek, you will need an English Translation. Not all translations are “equally accurate.” An example of a bad translation is the *New World Translation* from the “Watchtower Society,” which is filled with inaccuracies that lead to interpretive errors.

Some “easy to read” Bibles are actually “paraphrases” and not true translations. This means that the editors attempted to give an easy to understand summary of what the ancient text said. A well known paraphrase of Scripture is *The Living Bible*. Paraphrases are easy to read and may be okay for personal devotions, but are too imprecise for in-depth Bible study.

The poetic *King James Version* (KJV) is an old and famous English translation, but the old style wording may be awkward for those not used to it. There are good translations that use modern English, including *the English Standard Version* (ESV) and the *New International Version* (NIV). Like the KJV, the ESV is called “essentially literal” because the ancient Hebrew and Greek is translated in a “word-for-word” manner referred to as “formal equivalence.” The NIV is a “thought-for-thought” translation method which aims at putting the intended meaning of the ancient author in modern terms, called “dynamic equivalence.”

Thematic Bibles and Study Bibles...

Some publishers print Bibles that include a variety of themes. Some are “devotional themes” that include poetry, hymns, and stories that are inspirational for private or small group devotions. Some themes are focused on the life concerns of married couples, parents, children, men or women. Some thematic Bibles are aimed at helping believers read Scripture on a daily basis and organize the Scripture into daily readings. Some of the daily reading Bibles even organize the Scripture chronologically, printing each passage in the order that it occurred in history. When matched with a good Bible translation, thematic Bibles can be helpful in encouraging regular Bible reading.

Study Bibles include the notes and comments of Bible scholars to aid the reader in understanding the history and interpretation of each passage of Scripture. “Reference Bibles” provide lists on each page showing how the subject of one verse is linked to other verses throughout the Bible. Typically, a Study Bible will include such references, while not all Reference Bibles include study notes and commentary. It is important to remember that the commentary is not Scripture, but is only a scholar’s perspective. Such comments can be helpful, but must not be viewed as having the “authority” of the Scripture text that appears next to it on the same page. Good study Bibles include: *The ESV Study Bible*; *The NIV Study Bible*; *The Reformation Study Bible (ESV)*; *The NIV Spirit of the Reformation*.

Parallel Bibles include various Bible Translations displayed “side-by-side” for easy viewing and comparing.

Other Bible Study Tools Include...

A Concordance lists where words appear in various passages of scripture. Some Bibles come with a brief (abridged) concordance included. Unabridged concordances are large and include where every word can be found in a particular Bible translation.

A Bible Commentary provides interpretive insights into specific passages in the Bible. They can be a single volume or sets of dozens of books.

A Bible Word Study provides in depth information on important words in the Bible, giving information on their history, language of origin, and meaning.

A Bible Encyclopedia has articles on various topics relating to biblical history, culture, characters, geography and more.

A Bible Atlas includes maps depicting the sites of biblical events, kingdoms, cities or the travels of biblical characters. Some Bibles will have maps included.

A Bible Dictionary provides definitions, pronunciation keys, and insights into words and names used in the Bible.

A Bible Topical Index lists scripture verses by subject.

Some of these resources are available for free online. Because Commentaries can reflect a variety of perspectives, it would be good to consult your pastor when purchasing one or using one online.

A Few Helpful “Ground Rules” for Reading the Bible

Start with prayer, stay prayerful, and finish with prayer... Ultimately, the Holy Spirit will guide your Bible Study. A prayerful believer will receive the blessing of insight as they read Scripture. Ask for God to grant you understanding as you read the Bible.

Trust in, and submit to, the Word of God. Sometimes Scripture can be hard to understand. Don't become frustrated, ask your pastor or Bible Study teacher for help. Sometimes Scripture will say what you don't want to hear. God's Word is not meant to reflect what is popular, but to proclaim what is righteous... it is not an opinion, it is truth.

Never assume you know all there is about a passage of Scripture. The fullness of the depth of the meaning of a passage and its various applications are often illuminated over time and with continual study.

Let the Scripture “speak.” Often we approach a text with our own biases that diminish our ability to “hear” what the text is saying. Pay attention to what is written in God's Word and let the text guide you into its meaning.

Reading the Bible for Understanding...

While it may be deep and multi-layered, each text has but one correct interpretation with potentially numerous applications. Knowing the background setting, occasion of the writing, and section of Scripture that a book comes from aids in properly studying and interpreting the book.

Questions like... Who wrote it? Why was it written, under what circumstances? How would the original recipients understand it?

It is also important to identify the “genre” or “type” of writing, as poetry should be interpreted as poetry, history as history, teach as teaching, etc.

Identifying the overall topic being addressed in a passage is also key to rightly understanding it. Helpful questions include... What are the biblical themes being discussed? What biblical doctrines are in view? Comparing what is said on a given topic with other sections of Scripture that also address the topic is a good comprehensive way to growing in understanding Scripture.

Remembering that “Scripture interprets Scripture” is also a valuable principle, because the Bible is unified by the intention of the Holy Spirit, its ultimate author, who moved upon divinely appointed and inspired human writers to proclaim God's Holy Word. Clarity in interpreting one portion of God's Word will come from another portion of God's Word.

Written by the Rev. J. R. Norwood, PhD

Copyright © 2009
Communion of Confessing Orthodox Evangelicals
All Rights Reserved

Distributed by:

Ujima Village Christian Church
1001 Pennington Road * Ewing, NJ 08618

www.UjimaChurch.org