

# A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO BIBLE STUDY FOR PENTECOSTALS

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Hermeneutics provides rules and guidelines so that we may interpret the Bible correctly and avoid incorrect and dangerous interpretations. This document provides a step-by-step procedure for the interpretation of Scripture.

## I. Approaches to Bible Study

Before we examine the Bible study process, we will consider three insufficient approaches to Bible study.

### A. The Inactive Approach

Some Bible readers never really study the Bible. Instead, they simply rely on the interpretations of others. They do not take time to examine the Scripture for themselves, but they listen to what others have to say and accept their conclusions and interpretations without question. It is important that we listen to our pastor and our teachers, but God expects us to study his Word for ourselves. We should *meditate* on the Word of God (Joshua 1:8). We should *delight* in it (Psalm 1:2). We should *rejoice* in it (Psalm 19:8). We should *obey* it (Psalm 119:4). We should *hide* it in our hearts (Psalm 119:11). Also, we should *pray for understanding* (Psalm 119:18-19, 73). We should *examine* the Scriptures (Psalm 119:6). We should *search* Scriptures (John 5:39; Acts 17:11). We should *study* the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15). We should *know* the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15). We should *be equipped* with the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:17). Every Christian should study the Bible regularly.

### B. The Reactive Approach

The second insufficient method is what I call the reactive approach. In this approach, we search for Scriptures out of a reaction to our felt needs. If we are sick, we read passages that indicate hope for healing; if we are depressed, we read passages that bring cheer. On the market today are books of Scriptures for men, Scriptures for women, Scriptures for

teenagers, and various other categories. This approach is important and valuable at certain times, but it is not enough. We must take the time and make the effort to study the whole Bible.

### C. The Proof-Text Approach

The third insufficient approach is the proof-text approach. This refers to the use of the Bible to support and prove our own ideas. Rather than reading the Bible openly and listening to the message of the Scriptures, we are tempted to search for ways to prove a particular doctrine or idea. Like the two previous approaches, this one has some value, but it is not complete. Certainly, we should search the Scriptures to find support for our doctrines and practices. However, we should not approach the Scripture with a closed mind. We must allow the Word of God to speak to us and challenge our thinking.

These three insufficient approaches to Bible study are limited, and they do not give us a full understanding of the Scriptures.

## II. The Exegetical Approach

A deeper and more helpful way of studying Scripture is called the *exegetical approach*. *Exegesis* is the study of the Bible through the use of established rules and principles. As we look at the process for exegesis, we should be reminded that the Holy Spirit is our teacher and the Church is our context. Hermeneutical rules and principles are helpful, but mastery of these rules does not guarantee that we will arrive at the correct interpretation. Therefore, at all times, we must pray for wisdom and understanding. We must open our hearts to the voice of the Holy Spirit so that we can hear “what the Spirit is saying” to us and to the Church (Revelation 2:7). Also, we should conduct all of our study as an act of worship. When we come before God to hear his Word, we should come with thanksgiving, praise, and adoration.

## III. Detailed Instructions for Exegetical Bible Study

The three major steps for effective Bible study are (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) application.

### A. Observation

Observation is the process of perceiving the facts of the text. We observe any characters, speakers, or listeners. We observe the setting, the time, and the topics under discussion. Facts are always the actual data contained within the text, such as who did what, precisely what they did, why they did it, and what is said about it. One should make a list of all the important things found in the book and try to be as familiar with the material as possible.

1. Examine the context of your passage.

Part of observation is to place the passage in its context. Read the surrounding Scriptures. Seek to place your passage within the context of what comes before it and after it. Every passage of Scripture must be interpreted in light of the message of the chapter and book in which it appears.

a. Survey the entire book in which your passage is found.

The Bible is made up of sixty-six books, and each book was written as a unit. It would not make sense to pick up a magazine and read a few lines from the middle of an article then a few lines from the end. To understand an article, we start reading at the beginning and proceed to the end.

The books of the Bible were written in the same way. The books of the Bible were designed to be read from beginning to end. For example, Paul began the book of Ephesians with a greeting, followed by his discussion that moves forward with emphasis on his major points. He fully intended that the reader or the listener should begin with the introduction and proceed all the way through to the end.

You cannot exegete a passage without knowing the message of the whole book. Therefore, read the entire book and make observations about the book as a whole. As you read, you should have a Bible dictionary at hand so that you can find the meaning of difficult words. However, you should not yet consult commentaries or the ideas of other people. Just sit down and read through a book of the Bible without distractions.

As you read, you should take note of the structure of the book. What are the major sections and their themes? Also, what is the theological purpose of the book? What is the apparent message or distinctive aim of the book as a whole?

- b. Survey the section where your passage is found.

Pay attention to what comes immediately before your passage and what comes immediately after it. Determine where your passage begins and ends. What is happening in the immediate context? What is God doing and saying? How does the passage reflect, respond, or relate to the surrounding verses and chapters? To the book as a whole? To the surrounding historical and sociological situations? To the themes, patterns, and traditions found elsewhere in the Old Testament or in the ancient world?

2. Determine the genre of your passage.

Define the form of writing that characterizes this particular passage. In other words, is this poetry or prose? Is it a letter or an epistle? Is it narrative? Is it a gospel? Is it apocalyptic? Once this answer is decided, you will know more properly how to interpret the passage.

If it is an epistle, you should observe the apparent reason for which it was written. Is there a heresy in view? Are there questions being asked? Are there practical problems being addressed? If it is a story, you will observe the characters, setting, events, and conflicts. If it is poetry, you will note the structure and figurative language. If it is prophecy, you will examine the symbolism and the message.

3. Study the historical background.

After discovering the form of writing, or the *genre* of the passage, then you should study the historical context. Note points of geography. Look for historical references, cultural references, and religious references that will shed light on the message. For example, Ruth 1:1 tells us, "There was a man who lived in the days of the judges." Therefore, we know the era when this narrative took place. It occurred during the time of the judges. Later we learn that the man and his family migrated from Israel to the land of Moab. The mention of Moab tells us the geographical background of the book. Discover what is known and pertinent concerning when the book was written, where it was written, to whom and by whom it was written. What period(s), event(s), and

situation(s) of Israel's history are important to the proper understanding of the book and why? Helpful information on the historical background of each book of the Bible can be found in Bible encyclopedias.

4. Outline the content.

After reading your passage and the book in which it is located, you should chart and outline the book. This should not be done in an artificial fashion but in a manner that follows the natural progressions found in the book. For example, when we read the book of Genesis, we see a certain phrase repeated over and over. The phrase is, "These are the generations of . . ." as in "These are the generations of Noah," "These are the generations of Adam," and "These are the generations of Terah." This repetition indicates something important to the structure of the book because each occurrence begins a new section. Other books are structured according to different strategies and divisions of the text. When outlining the book, we must remember that the chapter divisions are not a part of the original text, and sometimes they are not accurate signals for dividing up the text.

a. Example of the outline process: Colossians

The best way to outline an epistle is to list each verse then combine verses into paragraphs. The paragraphs can then be joined to form larger sections. We start with the verses, then paragraphs, and then sections and build larger and larger divisions until we have charted the whole book. The paragraphs in Colossians can be listed as follows:

- Greetings (1:1-2)
- Thanksgiving for the readers (1:3-8)
- Prayer for the readers (1:9)
- The preeminence of Christ and his work (1:12-20)
- Encouragement to continue in the Gospel (1:21)
- Paul's own ministry in the Gospel (1:22-24)
- A warning: Christ is all we need (2:1-5)
- Christians should walk freely in newness of life (2:6-15)

- Freedom from legalism (2:16-19)
- Freedom from the old way of life (2:20)
- The new life is to seek things above (3:1-4)
- Freedom from the old man and his actions (3:5-11)
- The new man and his actions (3:12-17)
- The Christian's relationships with others (3:18-25)
- Request for prayer (4:2)
- Mention of Paul's friends (4:7-17)
- Closing salutation (4:18)

The paragraphs above can then be combined to form the following sections of Colossians:

- Growth in Genuine Christianity (1:3-11)
- The Preeminence of Christ (1:12-29)
- The Sufficiency of Christ (2:1-15)
- Freedom From Legalism (2:16-23)
- The New Life (3:5-17)
- Relationship to the Unconverted (4:2-6)
- Greetings From Friends (4:7-17)

By joining the related sections together, we arrive at a basic two-part structure for Colossians:

- The Preeminence and the Sufficiency of Christ (1-2)
- Living Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (3-4)

It seems obvious from this brief study that the major theme of Colossians is that *Jesus Christ is sufficient to free us for new life in him.*

## B. Interpretation

The second major part of the exegetical process is the interpretation. This interpretation is informed by your survey of the whole book and of the context in which your passage is found.

1. Look for patterns.

After reading your passage several times, take note of any patterns that you have observed. What are the prominent words, repetitions, contrasts, or symbolisms? How do they function in the passage? What is the progression, development, climax, and focal point? Patterns to look for include:

a. Comparison and contrast

For example, at the end of Colossians 2 and the beginning of Colossians 3, Paul contrasts life and death. He tells his readers, “You were dead, but now you are alive in Christ” (2:13). He then states, “If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above” (3:1). Formerly, they were dead without Christ, but now they are alive in Christ and should pursue those things that contribute to life.

Other examples include Romans 5:12-19, where Adam is contrasted to Christ. In Luke 7:36-50, Simon the Pharisee is contrasted to the sinful woman. In Galatians 5:16-25, the works of the flesh are contrasted to the fruit of the Spirit.

b. Repetition

We should pay close attention to words and themes that are repeated. John’s Gospel repeats words like “world,” “light,” and “darkness.” These and other words, such as “witness” and “believe,” are all repeated in the Gospel of John. This repetition highlights the importance of those ideas. In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus repeats the phrase, “You have heard it said.” Jesus used this pattern frequently, and these repetitions reveal a unit of thought within a particular book.

The number of times a word appears may indicate its importance to the theme of the book. For example, the word “priest” is found 38 times in the book of Hebrews and only 3 other times in the Pauline and General Epistles. This emphatic repetition suggests that the priesthood of Christ is one of the major themes of Hebrews. Similarly, the word “holy” is found in the book of Leviticus 109 times but only 6 times in Genesis. There is no doubt that one of the aims of Leviticus is to teach the concept that we should be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 20:26).

c. Movement from the general to the particular

The movement from a general statement to particular examples is found often in passages where teaching is in focus. For example, Jesus says, “Beware of doing your righteous deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1). After this general warning, he gives particular examples of “righteous acts,” including giving alms, prayer, and fasting. In Luke 3:8-9, John the Baptist demands that his hearers bring forth fruits of repentance, and then he talks about particular examples. In 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul mentions spiritual gifts, and then he names them.

d. Movement from the particular to the general

Also in the teaching passages, the speaker may begin with particular examples and then state a general principle based upon the stated examples. In Matthew 5:21-47, Jesus states several moral examples, then he concludes with the generalization, “Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

2. Look for themes.

Along with the patterns mentioned above, we should look for themes, ideas, and motifs that may be prominent in the book and passage. For example, the theme of the Trinity is evident in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul states, “There are diversities of gifts, but the same *Spirit*. There are differences of ministries, but the same *Lord*. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same *God* who works all in all” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, emphasis added). We note that Paul moves from the *Spirit*, to the *Lord*, then to *God*. It seems important that the spiritual gifts are associated not just with the Holy Spirit, but with the entire Trinity.

By listing the themes, we are able to determine the main concerns of the passage. In other words, what is the message of the passage? For example, the book of 2 Corinthians presents an entirely different theme from that of Philippians. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is defending his apostleship, protecting himself and his honor against those who have accused him falsely. In the book of Philippians, however, Paul is very joyous, very

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of these patterns and more, see Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).



encouraged. It appears that Paul has a very close and loving personal relationship with the people of Philippi. We should ask the following questions:

- What response is expected from the readers?
- What are the readers expected to do?
- What can we learn from the way the details are arranged?
- What is going on in the writer's or reader's situation as reflected in this text?
- Is a particular doctrine being emphasized?

### 3. Investigate the meaning of important words.

In any biblical passage, we will find words that deserve detailed study.

#### a. How to study biblical words

Word studies should include these four steps:

- Consult a dictionary for the range of meanings.  
Words can have a variety of meanings, and the dictionary will list all of the possible meanings.
- Examine the occurrences of the word throughout the Bible.  
Look especially at contexts that are similar to the passage you are studying. Seeing the word used in context will give you a deeper understanding of the word.
- Examine the occurrences of the word in your passage and book.  
Give priority to the meaning that you find in the immediate context and book. The word will often mean the same thing throughout one particular book.
- Determine the meaning that best fits the context.  
While all of the steps above will contribute to your decision, you should choose the meaning that best fits into the flow of the passage where it occurs.  
Remember that a word will not have all of its meanings within a single context; it will have only one meaning.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, you should never bring all the meanings

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<sup>2</sup> In rare cases, an author may use the literary device called "double meaning," which is used for poetic effect.

of a single word into one situation. You should look at the context and determine the most likely meaning in that particular context.

b. How to choose which words to study

You can investigate the meanings of as many words as your time permits; however, you should begin with the following categories:

- Study words that appear differently in various translations.

As you know, our Bible has been translated from the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We should compare Bible translations and compile a list of the words that are translated differently. For example, compare these translations of Matthew 28:18. Jesus says,

“All *power* is given unto me” (KJV)

“All *authority* has been given to Me” (NKJV)

“All *authority* has been given to Me” (NASB)

The two newer translations use the word “authority,” while the older translation uses the word “power.” By consulting a good study Bible, commentary, or Strong’s concordance, we learn that the underlying Greek word is *exousia*, which should be translated “authority.”

- Study ambiguous words.

A biblical passage may contain words whose meanings are unclear to the reader, words that are difficult to understand, or words which today carry a meaning that is different from years past. Any word that causes difficulty is worthy of examination.

- Study words that are important to the passage.

Certain words may contribute heavily to the meaning of your passage. These crucial words are deserving of study. For example, while discussing the person and work of Christ in Colossians 1:9-18, Paul calls Jesus the “firstborn of all creation.” The word “firstborn” is important in establishing the nature of Jesus Christ. A study of the word suggests that it signifies “preeminence.” In Hebrews 2:1 we read, “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things

which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip” (KJV). The word “slip” is significant for the meaning of the verse. A study of the word shows that it means “drift away”; therefore, the verse is warning us not to drift away from the Gospel that we have heard. In Romans 1:17, where Paul says “the just shall live by faith,” it would be helpful to study the words “just” and “faith.” These two words are significant to an understanding of the passage.

- Study words that are theologically significant.

Some words carry more theological significance than other words. Significant theological words occur more frequently in the New Testament, particularly the epistles. Examples of theological terms include *righteousness*, *salvation*, *redemption*, *justification*, *sanctification*, and *grace*. For example, Jesus says of himself, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). The word “ransom” is an important theological term. A study of the word shows that it is a variation on the word “redemption” and that it is first used in reference to salvation from sin in Psalm 130:7-8.

#### 4. Consider the genre of your passage.

Is your passage a story, a proverb, a parable, an epistle? Is it wisdom literature, poetry, or narrative? Is it a prophetic or apocalyptic passage? Each type of writing requires a specific set of questions that we should ask the text. Depending upon the genre, your study should include the following:

- a. Examine any figurative language.

Figurative language is found in all types of biblical literature; however, it is far more prevalent in the poetic books. Take note of any figures of speech, including metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and personifications.

- b. Study any poetic forms.

Poetry will include a large amount of figurative language, and it will call for other considerations as well. We noted earlier that poetry is intended to move the heart rather than inform the mind. If your passage contains poetry, you should consider

its impact upon the heart and the feelings of the reader. Poetry will attempt to paint a picture in the mind of the reader. What kind of picture does it paint in your mind? Remember as well that biblical poetry uses *parallelism* of lines in which two lines combine to form a verse.

c. Analyze any narratives.

If your passage tells a story, then it is narrative. Most of the Bible is narrative. Narrative books include Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. When interpreting narrative, you should:

- Listen to the words of the narrator.
- Follow the events of the plot.
- Pay attention to the descriptions of the characters.
- Examine the point of view.
- Consider the setting of the story.

In addition to the basic elements of narrative (listed above), you should be alert for other common literary devices that may appear in the narrative, such as imagery, tone, poetic justice, paradox, dramatic irony, and allusions to other Scriptures.

d. Explore any prophecies.

In order to understand prophecy, you will need to examine the historical context, analyze any prophetic symbols, and determine the theological message of the prophetic word.

5. Consult study Bibles and commentaries.

Until now, you have conducted your study mostly on your own. Your final step in interpretation should be to consult commentaries and other scholarly resources. Sometimes the commentaries will confirm your own findings, and at other times they will include observations and insights that you have not previously considered. When reading commentaries, you should note any different interpretations and the arguments

that attend each interpretation. You should observe any outstanding insights or quotations.

6. Contemplate the theological significance of your passage.
  - a. How does this biblical text inform our Pentecostal theology? The following topics are examples:
    - The nature and character of God.
    - The plan and purpose of God.
    - One of these doctrines: salvation, sanctification, Holy Spirit, sin, healing, eschatology, ecclesiology, anthropology.
    - The nature of revelation and/or doctrine of Holy Scripture.
    - The nature of truth and the means to knowing God (epistemology)
  - b. Identify any aspects of this passage that may create tension in our theology or practice, something that tends to make us uncomfortable, or that requires discernment. How does this tension and struggle with the text feed our spiritual growth?
  - c. Explore how this text forms and shapes our affections and desires. That is, how does it transform the heart? Observe the rhetorical structure and language of the text and describe any affections/emotions that are provoked and brought to the surface by the literary devices in the text or by the text as a whole. Does the text generate gratitude, love, compassion, courage, hope, joy, or a combination of these?
  - d. Describe one way that this text contributes to Pentecostal spirituality. Explain how the text relates to any of the following:
    - The spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, fasting, witnessing, testimony, giving, study, etc.)
    - Worship.
    - The community of faith.
    - The divine–human relationship.

- Spiritual formation.
- Ministry formation and practice.
- The sacraments.

### C. Application

Apply the message. In seeking to apply the message of the text to people today, four steps can be helpful.

#### 1. Face the issues.

How is life informed, formed, or transformed by this passage? What response is being called for? How might this passage be speaking beyond its own day even unto our own? List the issues in your life that surfaced in your study of the text. Describe the impact of the study on your life.

#### 2. Deal with the challenges.

Second, you must deal with any personal tensions created by your study. Where do you find yourself at odds with the message of the text? Where is the struggle focused? Where is the difficulty revealed?

#### 3. Address behavior.

Finally, you should address specific behavior. How should you fulfill the meaning of this passage in your personal life? How should you change your life in response to this text? In what ways should the Church be challenged by this passage?

#### 4. Construct a sermon or lesson plan.

Once your study is finished, you are prepared to carry the message of God's Word to other people in the form of a lesson or sermon. The lesson or sermon should take the application of this passage and present it to others in a form that will challenge them and encourage them to be follow Christ faithfully in love (2 Timothy 2:2).