

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Written by Jerry Schmoyer <http://www.mainstreetbaptist.org/blog>

Adapted by Tim Schmoyer <http://timschmoyer.com>

## DAY FIVE – INTERPRETING DOCTRINE (TEACHING)

In previous articles we talked about how to study the Bible by three steps: Observation, Interpretation, and Application. We looked at these, one each, for the first four days. For the next three, though, we will go back and spend more time in Interpretation because this is where people usually need help. We have already seen how to go about interpreting History sections, this time we will talk about interpreting Teaching (doctrine) sections.

Teaching, or doctrine, refers to any communication of ideas from one person to another. That is why I prefer the word Teaching. This includes Jesus' teaching, Paul's epistles, the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, and many other portions of Scripture. Literature today of that type would include study books, sermons, how-to books, lectures, educational programs on TV, and non-fiction books of any kind. It is quite a large area, and one that is very important for Bible study. It is the most direct means of communicating truth from God to man through His Word.

To continue our food analogy, teaching can be thought of as the food group *protien*. It is composed of products like meat, fish, poultry, cheese, eggs and beans. Protein is necessary for growth of tissue. Learning the teaching of the Bible is essential for spiritual growth. Protein is also necessary for repair and maintenance of the body. We need to keep falling back on what we have learned from the bible's teaching to repair and maintain our own Christian life. Learning what the Bible teaches is very important to spiritual health. Protein is key to a strong structure of bones and muscles and that is the framework for our bodies and all they do. The teaching sections of the Bible also provide for our spiritual bones and muscles, the inner structure for our Christian life.

### Main Idea

One of the most important steps in interpreting a teaching section is to discover the main idea of the section. In effect, this is what you are doing when you outline and then title a section. The title should summarize the main idea. That is very helpful and important for all kinds of Bible literature, but for teaching sections it is a real must. Think of a good sermon or Bible study you heard recently, or a book you enjoyed – you should be able to summarize it in one or two sentences. Now think of one which never got a hold of you and still remains fuzzy; there was no one main idea. Remember this when you are teaching or communicating. Always write down and know your main idea, what you want to convey. Stick to what your main idea is and don't add too much extra information. This is what makes the difference between an effective teacher and an ineffective one. The Bible's teaching is done by good teachers, and they always have a main idea. If you don't read the writer's mind and discover it, you won't be able to correctly interpret the rest of the passage correctly. Remember, you have direct access to the very mind of the One who wrote it all, so stay in constant contact during this process through prayer. Do not go further in your Bible study until you can write the main idea of a passage in as few words as possible. You can and probably will adjust and fine tune this as you go, but you must work hard to make sure this is straight. It is the foundation for all you will build as you study the passage – make it true!

### Topical Studies

Sometimes you will come upon a subject in a passage you would like to study in more detail, or instead of studying a passage to begin with you want to study a topic. That is an exciting, informative, excellent way to study.

First you must collect passages about your subject. You can do this using a topical index. Naves Topical Index is good, so is the Thompson Bible, the back of Strong's Concordance is excellent, too.

YouVersion.com, BibleGateway.com and Ebible.com have several good tools, as well. You can also use

cross-references in your Bible or a concordance, although these sometimes become hit-and-miss. You can do this for a person as well as a subject, although that is more of a history study.

Next, list all the facts you can find in each passage about your subject, putting the reference behind it. Make sure you do your observation exercises for each, looking at it as if for the first time, writing questions to answer about the subject you are studying, etc. Make a separate entry for each individual fact.

Then group the facts with others that relate to it. If a group is too large break it down into smaller groups. This synthesizing of the material makes it useable.

After you have done this, write a paragraph as well as a summary statement for each group. You can put the various groups in order of progression or outline them.

Finally, combine your paragraphs onto a paper or an outline that includes all the information you have written about the subject. Make sure you have a summary sentence for the whole subject. This will be the main idea.

### **Word Studies**

When you come upon a key word, a hard or confusing word, or just a very interesting word, it can be very useful to do a word study on it. First go through the general principles of interpretation (normal sense, use in sentence, use in context, purpose of writer, etc.). Do this carefully and thoroughly. Like in anything else, your final product is only as good as what you put into it.

To do a complete study, though, you need to go beyond this. How much you can do here depends on what reference tools you have. If you have a concordance like Strong's or Young's that will give helpful information about the word, its root, and where it is used. Looking at all the uses can be very helpful. Another helpful book is "Vines' Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words." Some commentaries do a good job of explaining words (like John MacArthur), although use of commentaries can become a crutch that can undermine your Bible study. For now don't use them.

### **Principles of Observation for Teaching Passages**

As you interpret teaching, always be aware of certain ways of writing that tip you off to what is going on in a writer's mind. These are the same as if a writer would highlight, underline, or start things in his writing and are very helpful in interpreting passages.

1. **Look for things that are compared:** It is natural to describe an object or idea by comparing it with something similar or by giving an illustration. Make sure of such comparisons and illustrations and determine how they bring out the author's message. Look for words like, "as, likewise, also, like," for example.
2. **Look for things that are contrasted:** Contrast is the association of opposites. Our minds can recall contrasts better than comparisons. Look for words like, "but, yet, although, otherwise, much more," for example.
3. **Make note of things that are repeated:** In order to impress a point, a teacher will repeat words, phrases or ideas - maybe in the same or maybe in different ways. Note these carefully.
4. **Make note of logical relationships:** Whether we write or speak, we often give commands, advice or warnings and then back them up with reasons, purposes, proofs or results. Make special note of such admonitions because they are very important. Look for cause and effect relationships. A writer may describe a condition and then give the reason for it. Train yourself to look for "because" or "for" (shows reason or result), "in order that" (gives the purpose), "therefore" (summary, result, conclusion), "if" (condition which requires action).
5. **Make note of generalizations:** Noting the arrangement of the material is important. Sometimes the author makes a general statement and then explains it with an example or illustration. Or he may list a series of ideas and then summarize them with a general statement.
6. **Make note of progressions in thought:** Take special note of lists, looking for how they relate and build on each other.

7. **Make note of the use of questions:** An author may use a question to introduce a problem or for a summary challenge.
8. **Make note of grammatical constructions:** Verb tense, prepositions, and all that goes with grammar is very important in Bible study. God picked each word and tense for a reason. Use your Bible passage for a grammar lesson. Watch for words like “however, yet, likewise, truly, finally, behold,” etc.

### Literary Structure

#### Sentence or paragraph 1

- ALSO** = comparison (illustration) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- ALTHOUGH** = contrast (opposites) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- AND** = additional information (look for progression in thought)
- AS** = comparison (illustration) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- BECAUSE** = logical relationship (reason, purpose, proof, result) usually reason or result
- BUT** = contrast (opposites) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- FINALLY** = last in a series
- FOR** = logical relationship (reason, purpose, proof, result) usually reason or result
- HOWEVER** = gives an exception
- IF** = logical relationship (reason, purpose, proof, result) condition which requires action
- IN ORDER THAT** = logical relationship (reason, purpose, proof, result) gives the purpose
- LIKE** = comparison (illustration) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- LIKEWISE** = comparison (illustration) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- MUCH MORE** = contrast (opposites) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- OTHERWISE** = contrast (opposites) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1
- THEREFORE** = logical relationship (reason, purpose, proof, result) summary, result, conclusion
- TRULY** = emphasized because of being extra important
- YET** = contrast (opposites) in block 2 to help bring out the meaning in block 1

#### Sentence or paragraph 2

*In your Spiritual Journal:*

- Let’s take a short easy passage to study together: James 1:22-25. Go through the observation, interpretation, and application as described today and in previous lessons. This should be a fairly easy passage for you, so be careful not to jump ahead to interpretation and application during your observation! Spend quality time in the first stage of observation and work your way through accordingly.
- Remember: Always start your Bible studies with prayer!