

her·me·neu·tics

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

Lesson 3 – How to Study a Passage (Part 2)

We have broken down the study of any passage into six steps. Last week we covered the first two: 1) Get the context (historical, cultural, and literary), and then 2) makes lots and lots of observations. This week we will look at the next four steps: 3) outline the passage, 4) study key words, 5) study themes, and 6) apply the truth personally.

3. Outline the Passage

Why should you outline?

1. Outlining will help you follow the writers' thinking.

The goal of an outline is to visually represent the flow of thought in a piece of writing. Outlines help us to visualize the careful organization of a good writer, and the Bible is certainly organized carefully! A good outline can help us understand how ideas develop.

2. Outlining will help you better relate details to the big picture.

As we have said before, when we study a passage it can be easy to become lost fixating on the details and lose sight of the overall purpose all those details play. When you work through an outline, you are constantly asking yourself how ideas fit together and how they work together.

3. Outlining will force you to ask important questions that will help you think about the carefully about the Bible.

As you outline, you will find yourself wondering “Does this sentence go with what the author just said or what he is about to say?” “Is this a new topic being introduced, or are we continuing the train of thought the author has been talking about for a while?”

How should you outline?

While outlining is not an exact science the following six steps should be generally helpful as you outline on a passage.

1. Decide how large a chunk to outline.

You can outline a whole book, or you can narrow your focus to a smaller section within the book, or even a single paragraph. It may be helpful to start by getting an outline of a whole book, and then break down each main point and outline the material there.

- Outline a book (e.g. 1 Corinthians)
 - 1-4 – The Issue of Divisions in the Church
 - 5 – The Issue of Church Discipline
 - 6a – The Issue of Suing Other Christians
 - 6b – The Issue of Immorality
 - 7 – The Issue of Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness
 - 8-10 – The Issue of Food Sacrificed to Idols
 - 11a – The Issue of Headcoverings
 - 11b – The Issue of the Lord's Supper
 - 12-14 – The Issue of Spiritual Gifts
 - 15 – The Issue of the Resurrection
 - 16 – Final Comments and Travel Plans

- Outline a section of a book (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12-14)
 - 12 – The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts
 - 13 – The Importance of Love when Using Gifts
 - 14 – The Specific Problem of the Abuse of Tongues

- Outline a paragraph or two (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3).
 - Tongues without love is worthless (13:1)
 - Prophecy without love is worthless (13:2)
 - Sacrifice without love is worthless (13:3)

2. Break up the passage into the several larger sections.

The first step is to attempt to figure out where one idea ends and another begins. To do this...

- Look for a switch in topic, a new scene, or some other kind of break.
- Look for connecting words that indicate a new thought.
- Look for phrases repeated at key points (especially helpful in prophets).

3. Summarize the general content in each section.

Once you found where generally speaking one idea ends and another idea begins, then it's time to add labels. Look at each section and ask yourself how you could summarize it in a sentence or a phrase. The better you know the passage, the easier you will be able to summarize it clearly and succinctly.

Consider repeating these first three steps with each of the major sections you have discovered. Take point one and divide it into several big ideas, labeling each of them. Do the same for your second major point, and so on. Below are a few other pointers as you work on your outline.

4. Recognize the importance of genres

Different genres can often best be outlined in slightly different ways.

- Letters – these are the easiest to outline because the logical form of a letter – “this happens and then that happens which leads to this” – that style of writing works well with an outline.
- Narratives – stories are often outlined according to scenes. Stories normally make one point and the different scenes lead up to that main point. For this reason, detailed outlines with subpoints tend to be less helpful for stories.
- Prophecy/Poetry – Can be hardest to outline. Some poems and prophecies are easily outlined. Others seem to be repetitive and thematic, not necessarily following a logical progression.

5. Check your outline against others.

Once you have completed your outline, check to see if someone else has outlined your passage and if the two of you agree or if there are differences. Especially when working on a whole book, make sure to check out study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, and introductions in commentaries because all these sources should have outlines for you to compare. If your outline differs from some of your resources, that is okay! Ask why your outline is different, and then compare their understanding of the passage with your understanding of the passage.

6. Be ready to revise your outline as you continue studying.

Remember, the steps of studying a passage in last lesson and this lesson are “sequential yet simultaneous.” That means that we follow the general pattern, but we aren't afraid to back up or skip ahead. You might finish an outline, continue your study, and realize that you had misunderstood something. Always be ready revise your understanding, and always be ready to admit you might have been wrong.

Taking time to outline a passage will help you put together your observations and provide a roadmap for continued study of the passage. A completed outline is better than a perfect outline that never gets written. Don't be afraid to start outlining, realizing you may miss some things or not understand it all perfectly.

4. Study Key Words

Words are very complicated little things. On the one hand, we use them every day without even thinking about them and they do their job reasonably well. On the other hand, linguists have printed countless books arguing about what exactly words mean and how they work and how they don't. As you study, don't feel like every word needs to be studied. Study words that are 1) unusual 2) confusing, or 3) especially significant.

- **How not to study words.**

Unfortunately, there is often much confusion about how to carefully study words. We will cover four major mistakes, or fallacies, that are common while studying words. While we could probably add more to this list, these are some of the biggest offenders.

- **English fallacy** – this happens when too much significance is read into the specific choice of one English word. This does not mean that you cannot really understand what your Bible says if you don't know Hebrew or Greek. It does mean that detailed word studies should be based on the original languages and not on English.

Words in different languages don't have a one to one correspondence. Words often have a range of meanings, and a Greek word will often overlap with several different English words, and those English words will often have some meanings different from that Greek word.

Example: In the Great Commission we read Christ say that "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." The English word power often means the capability to do something. Our minds are filled with images of superheroes, sorcerers, or impressive athletes, electricity, or the power of a river's current or a rip tide. We might look at this word and think that it is referring to Christ's ability to accomplish any miracle as we seek to take the gospel to the ends of the world. But that's not what power means here. That would be a different Greek word, the word *dunamis*. This word is the word *exousia*, which refers to a right or an authority. In other words, Jesus is saying that he now has all the authority in the universe, and under such authority he is commissioning his disciples to go everywhere and tell everyone about him. When you study, be careful not to read too much into a specific English word.

- **Root fallacy** – this happens when the meaning of a word is reduced to its etymology, the different parts that make up a word. A word is more than just the sum of its parts. You might hear someone say that a certain word means something because this part of the word means this and that part of the word means that. But that’s not how words work.

Example: Girlfriend. Imagine a junior high boy say he has several girlfriends. Slightly disturbed by his cavalier attitude, you challenge him and tell him that is not good. He replies with a smirk, “What, I have several friends who are girls!” In this instance, we would understand that something is wrong with the way he is using language. Girlfriend, when used by a guy, means more than just a friend who also happens to be a girl. It means someone that you are in a romantic relationship with.

Example: *ekklesia* (the Greek word for church). The root of this word comes from two distinct parts “*ek*” which means “out of” and “*klesis*” which means calling. So the church is an *ekklesia*, those whom God has called out (of the world). Now, while it is true that the church is a group of people whom God has called to come out of the world, you can’t argue that based on the etymology of the word. In this instance it ends up working out to define a church as “the called out ones,” but we have to be careful because this method may result in misunderstanding other words.

However...

- 1) Some words are the sum of their parts. This is especially the case when we have brand new words that have never existed before. When Paul writes in 2 Timothy that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, the word inspiration is a word never used before Paul. The word has two parts to it *theos* meaning God, and *pneuma*, meaning spirit or breath. In other words, all Scripture has been breathed out by God. Here, it is legitimate to simply look at the parts of the word, because there are no earlier examples of the word to compare it to.
 - 2) Although the meaning of a word cannot normally be reduced to the parts of that word, the meaning is normally related to those parts. For example, girlfriend certainly is related to the words “girl” and “friend.” It’s just that how the word is used everyday means more than what the individual pieces mean.
- **Later usage fallacy** – the meanings of words change over time. The English word “nice” once meant “dumb,” but that is not what it means today. Too often a later usage of the term is wrongly read back into an earlier instance of the word.

Example: Hebrews 12:1 states “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses.” The word for “witnesses” is the Greek word *martus*, from

which we get the word martyr. *martus* at the time simply meant “witness.” Over time it would come to mean a witness who gave their life for what they were witnessing to, namely the truth of the gospel. This is how we understand the term – a martyr. But that’s not what it meant at this point. If we ask who these witnesses are, we need only to look at the context. Hebrews 12:1 comes right on the heels of the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the rest mentioned in this chapter are the witnesses mentioned in 12:1, and most of these men were not killed for their faith.

But there is an even more serious form of this error. Sometimes an English word can be traced all the way back to a Greek word (e.g. “angel” from *angelos* and “photo” comes from *phos/photos*). But we can’t define what a Greek word means based on what it has come to mean in *English*.

Example: Have you ever heard someone say that God loves a hilarious giver? Why would they say that? 2 Corinthians 9:7 states that God loves a cheerful giver. And, you’ve probably guessed it, the Greek word here is *hilarios*, from which we do get our English word hilarious. So, should we be cracking jokes as the offering plate is passed? Is God more pleased with the gifts of a comedian than by a quiet introvert? Obviously not. While *hilarios* came to mean humorous in English, that’s not what it meant when Paul used it. Pointing out that the Greek word for cheerful eventually came to be our word hilarious is an interesting piece of trivia, but it doesn’t in any way help us understand Paul better.

- **Overload fallacy** – words can mean lots of different things. It can be interesting to see the many different ways one word can be used. The English word “bug” can be a noun or a verb. As a noun, it can mean an 1) insect, 2) a piece of equipment used to spy on someone’s conversations, or 3) a problem in computer software. As a verb, it can mean 1) to annoy or 2) to spy on someone. But it only means one of those things in any given context.

Example: Let’s say a linguist from the year 4020 read the sentence “My sister really bugs me” and comes up with the following analysis. “The English word bug is a fascinating word. It can mean an insect, so here the brother is likely insulting the looks of his sister. It can also mean to annoy, so he is probably insulting her because she is annoying him. What is she doing that annoys him? Again, we have a clue in our word ‘bug.’ The word could also be used to describe the process of implanting an electronic device to listen in on another’s conversations, or for a glitch in computer software. Thus, this boy is probably upset at his sister, either for listening in on his conversations or for causing problems with some computer device he had, and he thus lets the reader know that she is annoying and unattractive.”

Clearly, that is not what the boy means when he says “My sister bugs me.” The boy is saying that his sister annoys him, and that’s it. While bug can mean all those things, it only means one of them in this context. There are some rare instances where an author means two different things by one word, what we call a pun or a play on words. But these are rare and are normally pretty obvious.

Example: *paraklesis*. If we looked this word up in a Greek dictionary we would find that it has a range of meanings, including “exhortation...appeal...comfort.”¹ When we read 2 Corinthians 1, we find this one word show up six times in five verses! In this context the word clearly refers to God’s comfort. It doesn’t mean that God is exhorting us to do something, or that God is appealing to us. Not all the meanings of the word are used when the word shows up.

- **How to study words**

So how do we know what a word means? The answer, as we have already hinted at, is by seeing how a word is used. This is a simple yet foundational principle linguists have developed, “Usage determines meaning.” Normally, when you hear a new word, there are hints around it that clue you in to what it means. The more you hear that word used, the more you get an idea what it means. If you want to study a word in the Bible on your own, look and see how that same Greek or Hebrew word is used elsewhere, keeping in mind the word may have several different although often related meanings. Of course, for many people the easiest way to accomplish this step is to look up the word in a dictionary or in a commentary. Doing word studies on one’s own can be a challenging task, but hopefully this brief survey has helped you understand how to think rightly about words and perhaps even given you the boldness to try studying a word’s usage out on your own.

As we conclude, don’t forget that many who use faulty word studies end up saying generally true things about theology. The church is a gathering of those God has called out from the world. We just can’t say that dogmatically based on the etymology of the word. Some of these fallacies are quite common, and so respond with grace if you hear one in a pulpit or read it in a book.

5. Study Themes

A theme is a big idea in a passage, something the author comes back to and talks about several different times. When we outline a passage, we tend to focus on the progression of thought. When we look at themes, we pay attention to what types of things he is talking about and what he says about those things. There are several ways to do a thematic study.

¹ A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd edition (BDAG).

- We could study how a theme runs throughout the whole Bible (e.g. sin, righteousness, laziness, wealth, or repentance).
- We could study the themes of a certain author (John – light and dark, truth and error, love and hate; Paul – righteousness, grace, faith, works).
- We could study the themes of a specific book (1 Peter – the suffering of the righteous; Ezekiel – the glory of God; Philippians – joy and unity).
- We could study the themes in a chapter or a section of a book (Isaiah 53 – Christ’s suffering; John 3 – regeneration).

How do we study out a theme? Using the two main questions from last week are a big help: “What is the author talking about?” and “What is he saying about what he is talking about?”

1. Read and reread the passage.

As a general rule, the more readings you can get in on a passage the better. Read quickly, skimming over the words so that you can get the big idea in your head. Read at a moderate pace, like you would a novel or an email. Read slowly, carefully pondering each word and working through the details of a passage, like you would a love note.

2. Pay close attention to what topics get talked about.

Words that are repeated often tend to be themes the author is discussing, words like righteousness in Romans or love in 2 John. But themes aren’t always connected to just one word. For example, the theme of “the world” might show up using different terms, like “Gentiles,” “unbelievers,” or “this age.” If you study what the Bible says about repentance, you will want to pay careful attention to the OT word “turn” or “return,” as this OT concept is closely related to the idea of repentance.

3. Ask what it is that the author says about these subjects.

Once we have identified several themes, we want to see how the author develops them. Paul talks a lot about righteousness in Romans, what does he say about righteousness? John talks about our assurance in 1 John, what types of things does he say bring assurance? Many struggle with their devotions because they don’t know how to meditate. Asking how an author develops a theme can be a real help in meditating on God’s Word.

4. Consider outlining the themes of a passage.

Sometimes, especially in the OT poetry and prophecy, doing an outline that progresses chronologically through the text becomes a challenge. Often, in these types of literature, there are several themes that get discussed and relate to and reinforce each other. In these instances, it might make more sense to try and outline the big ideas wherever they show up. Rather than saying point 1, verses 1-3, point 2 verses 4-6, consider doing something like “What Proverbs says about laziness:” “Point 1, The causes of laziness” “Point 2, the cost of laziness,” “Point 3, the cure for laziness.”

6. Apply the Truth Personally

The goal of learning hermeneutics is not so that we can be right all the time; it's so that we can have a clearer understanding of God's Word so that we can better love him and others. Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 8:1 that "knowledge puffeth up, but charity [love] edifieth." Knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge inflates our ego. Knowledge that is made servant to love builds our Christian character.

Application is not something to be tacked on to the end of our Bible study. In a very real way, all Bible study is headed for application. But this does not mean we simply read God's Word asking what rule we've missed or need to start following better. As we think about how God's Word changes us, there's a phrase from a Christian camp the Wilds that can be helpful. It goes something like:

You do what you do and you say what you say because you think what you think. You think what you think because you want what you want. You want what you want because you believe what you believe about God, about yourself, and about the world.

Application, then, is an understanding that God is trying to do more than just reform my behavior. He's trying to change the kind of person I am. He wants to convince me to think like Him and to want the types of things He desires. He does this by changing my view of the world, by creating in me an awe and a fear of Him, and by helping me to train my desires so that I love what He loves and hates what He hates. When studying a passage, ask these questions...

- **What does this passage teach me about God?**

Our view of God will dramatically shape our behavior. A.W. Tozer began one of his most famous books with the following statement: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man." Ask what this passage teaches you about what God likes, what He dislikes, how He thinks, what He desires, how He operates. Get to know God. The better you get to know God, the more you will think like Him, and the more you will want what He wants, and the more you will act like Him. When we meditate on God and his character, we become like Him.

- **What does this passage teach me about man?**

God's Word pulls back the curtain on our human condition in a piercing way no other piece of literature can, because only the Bible was ultimately written by the creator of humanity. As we study the wilderness wanderings, we're astounded by Israel's lack of faith, yet convicted that we often behave the same. When we watch the kings of Israel and Judah make humble, trusting decisions as well as proud, destructive decisions, we're reminded that all of us are a mixed bag in need of God's grace. The Bible often hold up a mirror to our own sinful nature, convicting us while holding out hope for our change.

- **What does this passage teach me about the world?**

The Bible presents to us a view of the world in which God is the creator and he knows best how it operates. The world feeds us multiple other visions of reality, from humanist materialism, to Buddhism, to deism. What we don't realize is that we can often begin thinking about the world incorrectly and if we don't understand how the world works we won't live rightly in it. Much of Proverbs is simply observation of how life works. Ecclesiastes ponders the emptiness of life apart from God. Jesus in his teaching emphasizes how nature itself demonstrates God's care for his children.

- **What do I need to change...**

- In my thinking? Where have I been looking at life wrongly?
- In my desires? What do I want that is wrong? What do I not want that I should?
- In my actions? Are there specific behaviors that need to change?

Studying God's Word is an exciting adventure. If you feel overwhelmed by these six steps, that's okay. Remember, you don't have to be perfect. The more you study, the better you will become at it. Work through a smaller book using these methods, or a chapter or two from a larger book. You may not rigidly follow all of these steps every time you do your devotions, but hopefully as you work through this material it will help train you in how to think rightly about a passage.