

The “Whys” and “Hows” of Bible Study

Get beneath the surface of Scripture

The apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2). By applying the mind to those things that will transform it, the mind is renewed. God provides the Bible and invites us to read it, listen to it, reflect on it, and study it humbly asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understanding and to transform our lives. “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8). Richard Foster in *The Celebration of Discipline* reminds us that we have been given the grace of thoughtful Bible study as a means of personal transformation.

Why Study the Bible?

The main purpose and value of Bible study is to help deepen our relationship with the Lord and to be more and more transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). God utilizes the Scriptures to lead us to salvation, train us for righteousness, and equip us to do good works (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

How to Approach Studying the Bible

God has graciously provided the Bible to his people. It is his truth written down and preserved for us over the centuries. What a joy to receive this gift from God. As we begin to study the Bible and desire to know how best to “go deep,” the Bible itself provides guidance and direction.

First, it counsels, “Be humble” because God gives wisdom and grace to the humble (Prov. 3:34, 11:2). Be open to have your opinions and assumptions changed. Be alert to issues you need to face and sins that you need to repent of and be forgiven for. And be humble and ready to see the Lord’s new way of righteousness and peace.

Second, it reminds us, “Cry out for supernatural help.” Ask God to give you his “Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Ephesians 1:17) and to open your eyes so you may see wonderful things in his law (Psalm 119:18). God is happy to give us his Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13) as we seek to understand the Scriptures.

And third, it directs, “Be ready to obey.” Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). We want to be like the good soil that receives the Word of God and produces a crop that multiplies thirty, sixty, and a hundred times the seed that was sown. We want to do what the Word says and be blessed (Mark 4:1-20).



The “Hows” of Bible Study

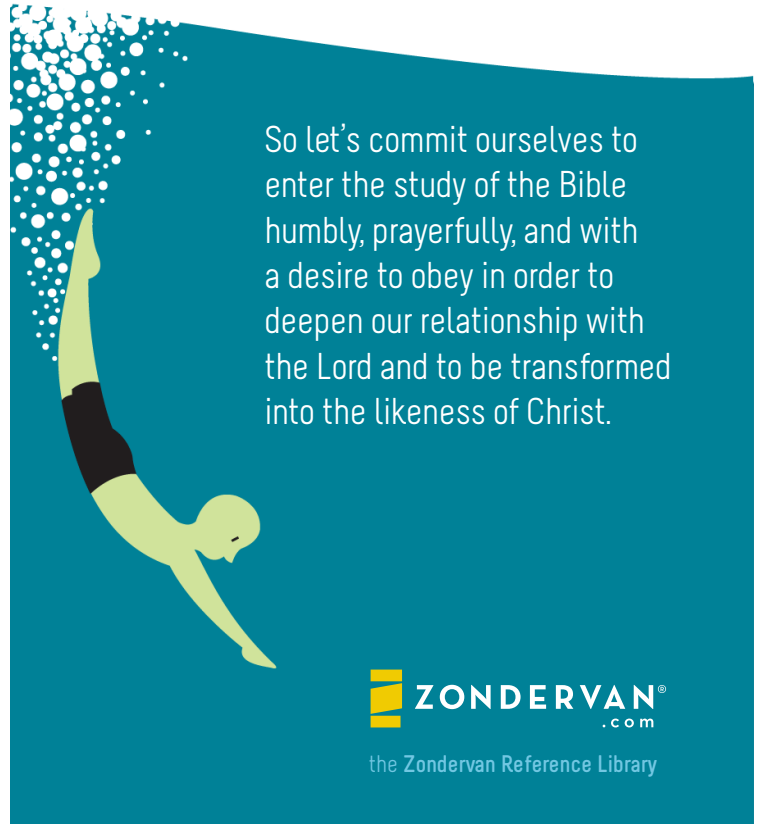
Rick Warren, in his helpful book *Rick Warren’s Bible Study Methods*, reminds us that once you understand the basic principles of Bible study it’s simple to do. He outlines the following five general principles.

- 1. The secret of dynamic Bible study is learning how to ask the right kinds of questions.** Asking questions is a skill you can develop. The more questions you ask about the text you study, the more you will get out of it. One benefit of studying the Bible is that you begin to develop a more inquisitive mind.
- 2. Dynamic Bible study involves writing down what you have observed and discovered.** You cannot study the Bible without writing your insights down. It’s the difference between Bible reading and Bible study. In reading the Bible you simply read through a selected portion of Scripture. In Bible study you take extensive notes recording your discoveries and the implications of text on your life.
- 3. The ultimate goal of dynamic Bible study is application, not just interpretation.** We don’t want to settle for understanding alone; we want to apply the biblical principles to our daily living. The Bible has been given to change our character and bring it more in conformity with Jesus Christ. We want to know both the Word of God and the God of the Word. In your Bible study ask yourself: What attitude do I need to change? What do I need to stop doing or start doing? What things do I need to stop believing and start believing? What relationships do I need to improve? How should I be serving others? As you start Bible study commit yourself to understanding it and then obeying it.
- 4. Dynamic Bible study means God’s word must be studied regularly and systematically.** The best and most fruitful type of Bible study is one that reviews a whole book of the Bible, an investigation of an important word in the Bible like “hope” or “disciple,” or a complete study of a biblical character like Moses or Peter. Commit yourself to interpret the Bible honestly, carefully, and consistently, instead of picking out verses that support what we would like the truth to be. Three books that are helpful for this are *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *Understanding the Bible* by John R.W. Stott, and *Applying the Bible* by Jack Kuhatschek.
- 5. In dynamic Bible study you will never exhaust the riches in any one passage of Scripture.** You will be able to study the same passage of Scripture over and over again, dig into it, ask lots of questions, gain meaningful insights, leave it for three or four months—and when you return to it you will make more discoveries! So stick with it! Bible study is hard work. But if you are diligent and patient, you will gain the deep and lasting benefits of greater understanding of the Bible and a character formed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Additional Preparation for Dynamic Bible Study

Here are four reminders of things to do to get the most benefit from your Bible study.

- 1. Schedule your Bible study time.** Set aside a specific amount of time to study the Bible each week. Put study into your weekly schedule and schedule it when you are at your best physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and when you can be undistracted and unhurried.
- 2. Keep a notebook to record your observations and discoveries.** It’s critical to write down your discoveries and the implications of the text to your daily life.
- 3. Get the right Bible reference tools and build a library.** When you first start out to make Bible study a priority in your life, make an investment in a Bible handbook (an “overview” resource), a Bible concordance (a “find” resource), and a Bible dictionary (an “understand” resource). Bible reference tools help us handle God’s Word correctly (2 Tim. 2:15) and to study it with the reverence and care it deserves.
- 4. Spend a short time in prayer before each study.** Ask God to cleanse your life from all known sin and to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Through studying the Bible you have the privilege of direct communication with the Author and Revealer. Ask God to guide you into the Word of God. Memorize Psalm 119:18 and use it before each study: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.”



So let’s commit ourselves to enter the study of the Bible humbly, prayerfully, and with a desire to obey in order to deepen our relationship with the Lord and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

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the Zondervan Reference Library

The “Go Deep” Core Library

So Many Reference Books – What’s the Difference?



In your desire to “go deep” and get beneath the surface of Scripture, Zondervan offers five unique resources. We call them the Core Library. These resources will give you an overview of the Bible (Bible Handbook), help you find verses and passages in the Bible (Concordance and Topical Bible), and help you understand things in the Bible (Bible Dictionary) by providing more specific information. As you think about building your Core Library consider these key organizational words: “Overview,” “Find,” and “Understand.”

The Overview category is comprised of resources that give you the essentials for Bible study. These resources give you the big picture of Scripture in one place.

The Find category is comprised of resources that help you locate things in the text. These resources vary from topical lists to detailed collections of every verse in Scripture.

The Understand category is comprised of the resources that help you dig deeply into Scripture and comprehend difficult passages.

1. Bible Handbook

A Bible handbook gives a clearly written *overview* of the Bible. It is a companion to Bible reading. It’s arranged in the order of the books of the Bible. It provides background before you read through a Bible book, commentary and illustrations as you read, and topical and historical notes to expand your understanding.

2. Topical Bible

A topical Bible is also a *find* resource and a guide to different subjects addressed in the Bible. Under “faith,” it will list not only the most important verses where the word “faith” is found, but also verses that talk about faith without using the word, for example Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed the LORD...”

3. Concordance

A concordance helps you *find* words in the Bible. It lists common words found in the Bible and shows the places where they occur. For example, under the entry “faith,” you’d find the locations in the Bible where the word “faith” is used. A concordance enables you to do word studies as well as locate verses you vaguely remember.

4. Bible Dictionary

A Bible dictionary is an *understand* resource. It gives more detailed information about people, places, words, and events in the Bible. You could use it to learn more about what the Bible says about children, for example, or about Peter, or Egypt, or miracles.

5. Commentary

A commentary is also an *understand* resource. It is a single or multi-volume work that explains the meaning of Bible passages.



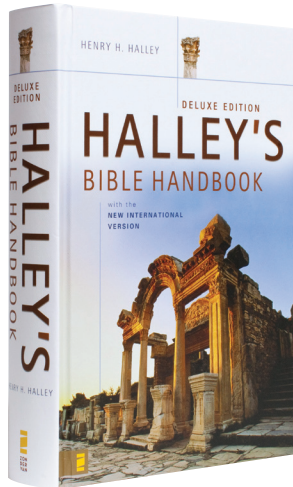
the Zondervan Reference Library

1. Bible Handbook

The first Bible handbook ever published was *Halley's Bible Handbook*. It was a revolutionary concept that came out of Dr. Halley's desire to get people to read the Bible with more understanding. It remains a perennial bestseller to this day. A new, revised edition of *Halley's Bible Handbook* is now available from Zondervan.

How to Choose

A Bible handbook is arranged in the order of the books of the Bible, and typically contains maps, charts, indexes, essays on special topics, outlines of Bible books, brief commentary on the Bible text, and cross-references to other parts of the Handbook.



Ask Yourself

- + Is it more devotional or informational? Which am I looking for?
- + How much more content does it have than my study Bible? Is it too basic for my needs?
- + Do I plan to use it permanently or temporarily? (If you will be using it permanently, get the best you can afford.)
- + Is it well indexed?
- + Are the illustrations and charts helpful and easy to use?
- + Is it readable and usable?

Using a Bible Handbook

We recommend a Bible handbook as a primary reference book (after the study Bible) because it is comprehensive and easy to use. To use a handbook, you simply open it to the book of the Bible you're reading. All of the relevant information is right there. You don't need any advanced knowledge to use it. A handbook is an ideal basic companion to Bible reading, especially for people who are less familiar with the Bible.

2. Topical Bible

How to Choose

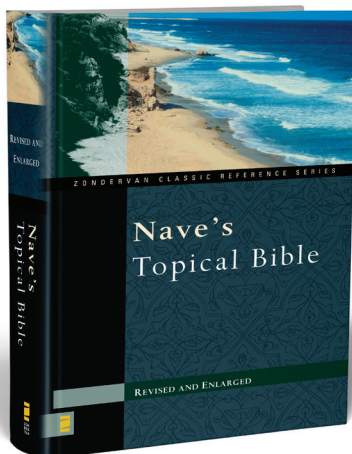
You can use a topical Bible with any translation of the Bible, even if it quotes from a particular translation. Some topical Bibles list only biblical and theological topics, while others focus more on practical topics. Make sure you choose the kind you want. The size of a topical Bible doesn't necessarily reflect the number of topics or references it contains. A small one that gives only verse references may actually be more complete than a big one that prints out the full text of many verses. Since a concordance and a topical Bible complement each other, we recommend that you use them together, rather than choosing one over the other.

Ask Yourself

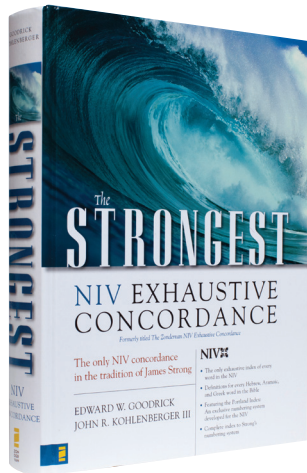
- + Which one best addresses the subjects I want to study?
- + How much information does each topical Bible contain?
- + Does the editor's choice of topics and their relative length seem balanced?
- + Are the topics well subdivided and indexed?
- + Are the Bible verses printed out in full? How important is this feature to me?
- + When was it originally published and last revised?
- + Which one seems most user-friendly?

Using a Topical Bible

If you want to study a topic such as baptism, a concordance will only give you a list of all the verses in which the word "baptism" occurs. A topical Bible, on the other hand, will help you also find verses and passages in the Bible that talk about the subject of baptism without using the word "baptism" as such.



3. Concordance



A concordance is an index to the words found in the Bible. It lists the references of the verses where they occur, and a piece of each sentence where the word occurs.

Unlike most Bible reference books, a concordance is based on a specific Bible translation, e.g., NIV, KJV, NASB, etc. It should be used ONLY with that translation. The Greek word that is translated “love” in the NIV, for example, is usually translated as “charity” in the KJV and so would be listed in a different part of the concordance. If you were raised on the KJV but now use a modern translation, you may want a concordance for each so that you can also find verses you vaguely remember from your KJV days.

Ask Yourself

- + What translation of the Bible am I using?
For most effective Bible study, you need a concordance that is based on the Bible version you use.
- + Do I want to use it to find a verse or to do word studies?
- + Is there a numbering system?
- + Do I own a computer? Software can perform the same functions as a concordance with greater speed and flexibility.

How to Choose

Concordances come in different sizes, ranging from brief, abridged concordances in the back of most study Bibles to exhaustive concordances of almost 2,000 pages. There are four basic types:

- + **Handy, concise, or compact concordances** are in some way abridged. Only the most important words found in the Bible are included, and only the most important references for those words are listed. This type of concordance may be adequate if you only use this tool occasionally to find a Bible verse.
- + **A complete concordance** is still abridged, but in a different way. Not all words found in the Bible are included, but the list of references for each of the words that is included is complete. If you want to do English word studies, a complete concordance is a must, though an exhaustive concordance is even better.
- + **An unabridged concordance** indexes every word and lists every reference.
- + **An exhaustive concordance** indexes every word and lists every reference. It also shows which Hebrew or Greek word is translated for every occurrence of every English word in the Bible version. If you want to do in-depth word studies based on the occurrences of Greek and Hebrew words, an exhaustive concordance is indispensable.

The best-known exhaustive concordance is Strong’s, which is based on the King James Version. *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* is the only true exhaustive concordance to any version other than the KJV.

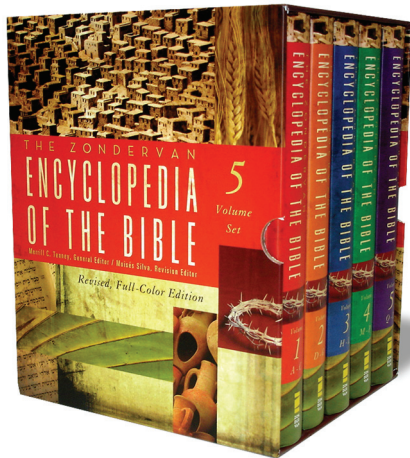
A very useful feature of exhaustive concordances is a numbering system which assigns a specific number to each of the Greek and Hebrew words found in the Bible. *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* uses the Goodrick/Kohlenberger numbering system, which reflects modern linguistic standards and is increasingly used in newer reference works. Strong’s numbering system is out dated and inadequate by modern standards, but is still widely used. There are also concordances that are based directly on the Greek and Hebrew text.

Using a Concordance

A concordance is meant to be used together with your Bible. Don’t do a word study with only your concordance. Always read the context in which a verse is found, not just the verse or portion of the verse that appears in the concordance. For example, Psalm 14:1 says, “There is no God” – but the context tells you that this is what the fool says. When you do a word study, read the verses you find, in their context, in several translations. Very few words – especially abstract words – have only one clear-cut meaning.

If you are unable to locate a word, look for its dictionary form. For example, if you can’t find “went,” look for “go.” Look up other inflected forms or roots of words. Many concordances direct you to the various inflected forms of words, e.g. come, comes, coming, came, or even to words of the same root, e.g. heart, faint-hearted, half-hearted. By looking up the other forms or spellings, you can do a more thorough word or concept study. When doing a word study, use an English thesaurus to find synonyms and related words. For example, under “faith,” a thesaurus will list words such as belief, hope, confidence, assurance, dependence, etc.

4. Bible Dictionary



A Bible dictionary is more like an encyclopedia than like a regular English dictionary. It gives definitions and pronunciations, but it also provides biblical, historical, and theological information on people, places, words, and events in the Bible, all in alphabetical order. A Bible encyclopedia is simply a multi-volume Bible dictionary.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, such as the *New International Bible Dictionary* and the *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, don't define every word of the Bible. They focus mostly on nouns – people, places, and things – although some also have articles on theological terms that are not in the Bible, such as “Trinity.”

How to Choose

It's helpful to have a Bible dictionary that matches the version(s) of the Bible that you use. The spelling of some people and place names may be different from one translation to another, and sometimes words are translated differently altogether. For example, there's a Hebrew word that the KJV, NIV, NASB, and NRSV translate as “cormorant,” “desert owl,” “pelican,” and “hedghog,” respectively.

When you're comparing dictionaries, pick a few words – for example a place name like Shiloh; a person, perhaps Mary; an abstract biblical word such as grace; and a theological word like Trinity – and read the entries for these words in several dictionaries.

It can be helpful to have more than one Bible dictionary, especially if they're somewhat different in focus or orientation.

Look for thorough cross-referencing. If you don't know the exact word to look up, a good cross-reference system will anticipate many of your guesses and help direct you to the topic you're looking for.

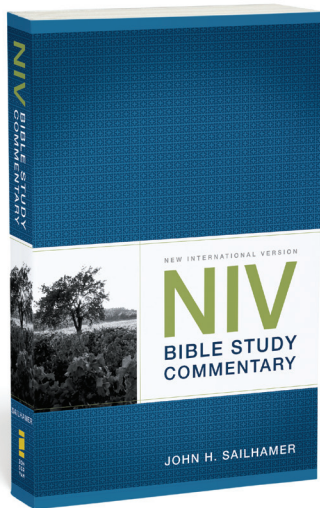
Ask Yourself

- + What kind of information will I most likely want to look up?
- + How many articles does the dictionary have? Do I prefer many shorter articles, or fewer longer ones?
- + Does it have good cross-references? What size dictionary is best for me? What type size and page layout do I like?
- + Do I want a dictionary that uses more every day English or a more scholarly one?
- + When was the dictionary originally published and last revised? Historical, archaeological, and linguistic knowledge has grown dramatically over the past decades.

Using a Bible Dictionary

Cross-references or cross-indexing can help you find articles of related interest. An article about Jesus might end with “See also ATONEMENT, MESSIAH, MIRACLES, PARABLES, SECOND COMING,” to name just a few. A good English dictionary is an indispensable tool for use with your Bible dictionary. There may be unfamiliar words in the Bible that you won't find in a Bible dictionary. Take, for example, Isaiah 14:23 in the New English Bible: “I will make her a haunt of the bustard, a waste of fen, and sweep her with the besom of destruction.” Your Bible dictionary probably won't help you here, but your English dictionary will. An English thesaurus is another valuable tool. For example, if you can't find an article on “Gentiles” in your Bible dictionary, a thesaurus may suggest “heathen” as a synonym, and that may be the right heading in the Bible dictionary.

5. Commentary



Commentaries give the commentator's perspective on passages in the Bible. They should never be the first books you check when doing a Bible study—if you do, you start with somebody else's conclusions rather than finding your own. There is no substitute for first-hand study, using the tools of the Core Library and relying on the illuminating presence of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, commentaries can be helpful in supplementing your own study by giving you other perspectives and additional insights.

How to Choose

Choosing a commentary, perhaps more than choosing other Bible reference books, is a personal matter. The key issue is which commentary answers the kinds of questions you are likely to ask. As usual, you should take time to look at what's available. Compare before you buy. One consideration for comparison is what theological perspective the author is writing from. Another consideration is the date of publication – some historical and cultural information in older commentaries might be outdated or incorrect, but the devotional material in them would be timeless. Commentaries come in many different sizes. You can get a commentary or set on the whole Bible or for individual books of the Bible.

Using a Commentary

Devotional commentaries, such as *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, focus on the spiritual significance of the text for our lives. Expository commentaries focus on explaining the text. Most expository commentaries, such as the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, use historical, geographical, and cultural information as well as discussions of the original languages to explain the text. Exegetical or critical commentaries focus primarily on technical issues related to the Greek or Hebrew text and its interpretation and are written primarily for specialists.

Ask Yourself

- + Is the Bible text included? Is it the author's own translation?
- + Is there an explanation of the text?
- + Is historical, geographical, and cultural information included?
- + Are there word studies and grammatical explanations?
- + Are there critical notes dealing with textual criticism; form, literary, and other "higher" criticisms; history and comparison of different interpretations?
- + Are footnotes, bibliography, and indexes included?