



LEADER'S TOOLBOX

Searching For Meaning



Six Steps to Studying and Understanding the Bible

- By **Gerry Peters**

You do not need a graduate degree in Biblical studies to understand the Bible. All you need to be able to do is read. Sadly, many people feel unqualified or ill-equipped to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Consequently, they miss out on understanding the promises God wants them to rest in knowing. Here are 6 easy steps for you to follow . . .

1. DETERMINE THE CONTEXT

In order to understand the meaning of a particular passage in Scripture, it is essential that you first determine its context. Each passage has a historical, cultural, literary and theological context. Try to read every verse in context of each paragraph, each paragraph in context of each chapter, each chapter in context of each book and each book in context with the rest of Scripture. (Apart from what the text says, additional resources to help you do this are listed in step 4).

2. GATHER THE CLUES

Because "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16), no word or thought is insignificant. Each word needs to be examined carefully. Each passage is filled with "clues" (key words, people, contrasts, locations, etc.) that unlock its meaning. Thus, the same skills that are required of a good detective are also necessary for understanding the Bible. Like a good detective, you must ask a lot of questions. Try asking questions beginning with the words: Who, What, When, Where, How and Why? For example, you might ask, "To whom is Jesus speaking?" and "How did they respond?" Or, "When did this event take place?" and "Why is it significant?" The number of questions you might ask are endless.

Based upon what you have discovered, you may summarize by answering the following two questions:

What is the main idea (subject) of the passage?

What is said about the main idea (subject) of the passage?

Make sure that your answers to these questions are not too general (broad) that they fail to deal with the specifics of the text, nor too specific (narrow) that they fail to consider the whole. Once you have identified the main idea (subject), write down everything the passage says about it. (This also serves as an excellent way to outline the text).

3. COMPARE AND CONTRAST SCRIPTURE

The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. Thus, one of the best ways to understand the meaning of a passage is to compare and contrast it with other passages. Often, the same ideas in one passage are repeated or restated more clearly in other parts of the Bible. One way to do this is to use a concordance. A concordance is a tool that lists all the words used in the Bible, gives the reference for where they appear and the surrounding context. Concordances are found in the back of many study Bibles and on many websites such as biblegateway.org.



4. CONSULT OTHER SOURCES

After having studied the passage for yourself, it is helpful to see what other people have discovered about the text. Fortunately, there are hundreds of reference books that can help you. Some of the more popular books that will help you include a concordance, Bible dictionary, Bible encyclopedia, Bible handbook, Bible atlas, a commentary and a good word study book. Some helpful websites that will enhance your study are netbible.org, soniclight.com and biblegateway.org. If you are looking for just one complete resource, the NET Bible is a solid choice for its clarity, study notes and aids. (You can purchase the NET Bible or refer to it for free at netbible.org).

5. DRAW YOUR CONCLUSION

Once you have exhausted all your investigative efforts, it is time to draw your conclusion. To do so, try answering the question, "In one sentence, what is the universal principle this passage is teaching?"

6. COMMIT TO TAKE ACTION

The purpose of studying the Bible is to grow in godliness, not to simply gain more knowledge about a particular subject. Therefore, it is essential that you take the final step of applying what you have learned. There may be dozens of applications. The following questions are helpful to ask:

- Is there an example for me to follow?
- Is there a sin for me to avoid?
- Is there a promise for me to claim?
- Is there a prayer to repeat?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a condition to meet?
- Is there a verse to memorize?
- Is there a doctrine taught that I need to better understand?
- Is there a challenge to face?

MORE HELPFUL RESOURCES

Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods. Rick Warren, *Zondervan*, 2006.

Living By the Book. Howard Hendricks, *Moody*, 2007.

Read the Bible for Life. George H. Guthrie, *Lifeway*, 2011.

How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth. Fee and Stuart, *Zondervan*, 2003.

30 Days to Understanding the Bible. Max Anders, *Thomas Nelson*, 2004.