

How do I study a book of the Bible?

Written by Josh Winslett

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This question comes up quite often as a pastor. There are really countless ways a person could approach a Bible study. We can read for various reasons. We can read for quantity or quality. Quantity would be for volume, or amount read everyday. A one year Bible reading plan would service this need well. The following principles would be more geared toward quality instead of sheer quantity. Neither are bad, though.

Before we get started, I must mention that I am working under the assumption that you are using a literal translation. Paraphrases are not literal translations and shouldn't be considered with authority. My personal conviction for a translation is the KJV. I trust its underlining manuscripts and translation methods. There are other Textus Receptus Bibles that include 1 John 5:7 and the longer ending of Mark. However, the KJV is unsurpassed as a translation of the Textus Receptus and Masoretic Text. Now moving on, let's consider some study habits and principles.

1. Start by praying that God would open your understanding. Ultimately, all spiritual knowledge must come from his work in us.
2. Read the whole book you are studying a minimum of one time in completion. I would recommend reading it through once and then using a structured outline while reading it again to see how it transitions. By structured outline, I mean what is typically found in the front of a study Bible. The one I often use is from the Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible, though I often consult others. During this time, start making your own assumptions about verses and topics found while reading.
3. Find a commentary and read their introduction to the book. I prefer first reading John Gill. His commentary is free online, thorough, and wonderfully theological. I also enjoy reading from those in my own denomination, such as Elder Michael Gowens. However, you may be of a different theological persuasion than I am and may choose to go a different route for Bible commentaries. Your choice. Either way, reading introduction materials in a trusted commentary for a book of the Bible can give you relevant information involving the author, date written, theme, purpose, synopsis, genre, and other historically relevant information. Note: Someone may take issues with encouraging the reading of commentaries. Commentaries are no different than hearing a verbal opinion of a Bible verse. They can be right or wrong but they never take authority over the Bible. With that said, most cults and heresies thrive in vacuum theology.

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4. After reading a commentary introduction of the book, read the first chapter itself while forming your own thoughts on the verses. This involves uses the sentence structure, language, and writing context. Do this before you read any commentary. This will help you to not just agree with what a commentary may say. Use a dictionary during this this time to look up words that might not be familiar. Two good English dictionaries are the Webster's 1828 and the Oxford English Dictionary on Historic Principles. The Webster's 1828 is free online. There are also good original language dictionaries that can help (Vine's, Thayers, etc.), just dont overwhelm yourself. When you read it through once or twice, try to give a verbal summary of the chapter you read. Even if you cannot remember every text and quote every verse, knowing the general summary of that chapter will help with memorization and contextual understanding.

5. Now read each verse with a commentary companion and possibly read the chapter summary/introduction of that commentary. Again, I generally prefer John Gill. If you do not do this for the whole chapter than at least do it for controversial passages or with the passages with hard language. Also, consult your pastor for problematic language. God has placed him in your life for these answers.

6. After you've read the chapter while gathering your own conclusions and considering commentary. Use cross references to see the bigger picture. This will also help you see if any of your conclusions contradict other parts of the Bible. The Bible is not just contextual but also systematic. Good cross reference Bibles include the Westminster Reference Bible and the Concord Reference Bible. The Thompson Chain Reference is also a consideration. Just remember that every reference isn't canonical. Form your own opinion of their validity. Furthermore, when the Bible actually cross references itself, such as in the epistles or when Jesus Christ would quote the Old Testament, look up those references. Those are canonical references.

7. All of this so far has seemed very theological. Even though I find theology extremely practical and experiential, I understand that it can seem distant to some. Stop and consider the implications that the text has to you as an individual, and how it pertains to your family, church, and community. Ask yourself hard questions about your own discipleship while considering the chapter. If the study of the chapter still seems dry thus far, I often read Matthew Henry and Albert Barnes for a practical approach to the text. As always with commentary, don't agree with it just to agree with it. I generally take a historic Particular Baptist view so I often disagree with certain commentaries on obvious texts. However, we can glean from them where we agree and lovingly move on where we disagree.

8. Repeat steps 3-7 for all the chapters in the book you are reading.

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9. Consider how the book as a whole has fit together from chapter to chapter as you finish your study. Can you now give a summary of the whole book in light of your chapter summaries? After you have done this with one book you will have a better macro, or systematic view of the Bible to start your next book. It only continues to build and increase.

This may sound like a lot but it will help you to retain the content of a book of the Bible. It's also at minimum what most pastors do for every study they undertake. This endeavor can seem strenuous, but it's rewards are out-of-this-world.