
A GUIDE TO BIBLE STUDY

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God...”

– 2 Timothy 2:15

Harvey Newcomb
1803-1863

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“Study to shew thyself approved unto God...”

– 2 Timothy 2:15

To a true child of God, nothing is so precious as the volume of inspiration. It is like a mine of all sorts of metals and precious stones, overlaid with gold and silver. That which is most necessary for the common purposes of life lies on the surface. These are the simple truths of the Gospel, which are essential to salvation. But below these are the iron, the tin, the copper—the strong truths, the doctrines, the practical principles, which tax the powers of the mind to develop, but which give strength and consistency to the Christian character. Yet beyond these is an inexhaustible treasure of precious stones, every examination of which discovers new gems of surpassing luster and surprising beauty.

The Bible is the charter of the Christian’s hopes, the deed of his inheritance. Is he a wayfaring man in a strange land? This book contains a description of the country to which he is bound, with a map of the way, on which all the crossways and by-paths are designated. Is he a mariner on the stormy ocean of life? This is both his chart and compass. Here he finds all the shoals and reefs distinctly marked, and monuments placed upon many dangerous places, where others have made shipwreck.

Seeing, then, we have such a treasure put into our hands, it cannot be a matter of surprise that we should be directed to search after the precious things it contains, nor that Christians should love to ponder its sacred pages. “Thy word,” says the Psalmist, “is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psa 119:105). It

is like a lantern which sheds light on our path amid the darkness of the night, to direct the steps of our feet. The sincere Christian will therefore search the Word of God, for a knowledge of His will, with more eagerness than he would search for hidden treasures of gold and silver. In obedience to the command of God, he will set his heart to the work.

After the giving of the law, Moses says, "Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day" (Deu 32:46). To set our hearts upon any object implies such a love for it and desire after it, as leads to a strong determination to make every possible effort to obtain it; and this ought to be the settled and permanent feeling of our hearts in regard to a knowledge of the will of God, as revealed in His Word. And, as we obtain this knowledge, we should imitate the Psalmist, who said, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psa 119:11). His object in hiding the Word in his heart was to know how to regulate his conduct so as not to sin against God. So must we hide the Word of God in our hearts, and for the same reason. We must study it as the directory of life. Whenever we open this blessed book, this should be the sincere inquiry of our heart: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Let us come to it with this childlike spirit of obedience, and we shall not fail to learn the will of God.

But when we have learned our duty in God's Word, the next thing is, to do it without delay. First, there must be an earnest desire to know present duty, and then a steadfast and settled determination to do it as soon as it is known. The pressure of obligation rests upon the present moment; and, when present duty is ascertained, the delay of a single moment is sin.

With these remarks, I submit a few practical directions for the profitable reading and study of the Holy Scriptures.

I. Read in a quiet place

Read the Bible in your closet or under circumstances which will secure you from interruption, either by the conversation of others, or the attraction of other objects. Do not attempt to fill up little broken intervals of time with the reading of God's Word. Leave these seasons for lighter reading. Reading the Scriptures is conversing with God, who speaks to us when we read His holy Word. His all-seeing eye rests upon our hearts; and He knows whether we are engaged in solemn trifling. If we read His Word so carelessly as not to understand its meaning and drink in its spirit, we treat Him as we should disdain to be treated by an earthly friend. Let us, then, never approach the Word of God but with feelings of reverence and godly fear.

II. Prepare your heart and mind

Go to the Word of God with a preparation of heart. If we were going to visit some person of great consequence, whose favor and esteem we wished to secure, we should take care to have every thing about our persons adjusted in the most becoming manner. So let it be with our minds when we come to converse with God. Let us shut out all worldly thoughts and strive to secure a tranquil, holy, and tender frame, so that the truths we contemplate may make their proper impression upon our hearts.

III. Seek the aid of the Holy Spirit

Christ promised His disciples that, when the Holy Spirit should come, He would "guide you into all truth" (Joh 16:13). Without His enlightening influences, we cannot understand the Word of God. And without His gracious influences, we shall not be disposed to obey it. But we have the most abundant encouragement to seek the aid of this divine Instructor. Christ assures us that God is more willing to give His Holy Spirit to them that

ask Him, than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children (Mat 7:11). Before opening God's Word, therefore, we should pray that He would show us the truth, the rule of our duty, and incline our hearts to obey it; and, as we proceed, keep our hearts silently lifted up to God for the same object.

IV. Read with self-application

Whenever you have discovered any truth, ask what bearing it has upon present duty. If it relates to spiritual affections, compare with it the state of your own heart. If it relates to the spirit and temper of Christians, in their intercourse with one another, or with the world, compare it with your own conduct. If it relates to some positive duty, inquire whether you have done it. And, wherever you find yourself deficient, endeavor to exercise repentance, and seek for pardon through the blood of Christ with grace to enable you to correct what is wrong.

V. Read the Scriptures regularly

A daily supply of refreshment is no less necessary for the soul than for the body. The Word of God is the bread of eternal life, "the food of the soul." Take, then, your regular supplies that your soul may not famish. Choose for this purpose those seasons when you are least liable to interruption—when you can retire and shut out the world, when you can best command the energies of your mind. There is no time more fit and suitable for this than the morning. Then the mind is clear, vigorous, unencumbered,¹ and prepared to receive impressions. There is also a propriety² in consulting God's Word at the close of the day. But this depends much on the state of the body. If you become exhausted and dull after the

¹ **unencumbered** – unhampered; not entangled or obstructed.

² **propriety** – fitness; appropriateness.

labors of the day, I would rather recommend taking the whole time in the morning. But by no means confine yourself to these stated seasons. Whenever the nature of your pursuits will admit of your seclusion for a sufficient length of time to fix your mind upon the truth, you may freely drink from this never-failing fountain the water of life.

VI. Study the Scriptures systematically

If you read at random, here a little and there a little, your views of divine truth will be partial and limited. This method may indeed be pursued in regard to reading strictly devotionally, but only when other time is taken for obtaining a connected view and a critical understanding of the whole Bible. The Holy Scriptures are like a dish of savory meats. There is almost every variety of style and matter. There is history, biography, argumentative and didactic³ essays, and poetry. Although these various kinds of writing are contained in a great number of books, written by various authors, at different times, without concert;⁴ yet a remarkable unity of design pervades the whole, and perfect harmony of sentiment prevails throughout. Every thing, from the very beginning, points to the glorious plan of redemption revealed in the Gospel. Although we may, at first view, feel the want of a regular system of divinity, yet a careful attention to the subject will discover Divine Wisdom in the present arrangement. We have here the principles of his government exhibited in living examples, which give us a clearer view and more vivid impression of them than we could obtain from the study of an abstract system. In the systematic and thorough study of the Bible, the following hints may be of use:

³ **didactic** – having the giving of instruction as its aim; instructive.

⁴ **concert** – agreement of two or more persons in a plan.

1. View the grand design

Keep before your mind the grand design of the Scriptures, which is to convince mankind of their lost and ruined condition, make known the way of salvation, and persuade them to embrace it.

2. Aim to understand the meaning of the writer

Make it your constant aim to ascertain what is the plain and obvious meaning of the writer, for this is the mind of the Spirit. To aid you in this, observe the following particulars:

(1.) Endeavor to become acquainted with the peculiarity of each writer's style. Although the Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Spirit, yet it was so done that each writer employed a style and manner peculiar to himself. This does not invalidate the evidence of their divine origin, but rather shows the wisdom of the Spirit. If the whole Bible had been written in a uniform style, it would have given opponents a strong argument against its authenticity. The want⁵ of that uniformity furnishes conclusive evidence that it could not have been the work of a single impostor. Again, a continued sameness of style would make the reading of so large a book as the Bible tedious and unpleasant, but the rich variety presented by the various authors of this blessed book helps our infirmities and makes the reading of it pleasing and delightful.

(2.) Inquire into the character, situation, and office of the writer; the time, place, and occasion of his writing; and the people for whose immediate use he intended his work. This will enable you to understand his allusions to particular circumstances and customs, and to see the practical application of the principles he advances.

⁵ **want** – lack.

(3.) Consider the principal scope or aim of the book, or what was the author's object, design, or intention in writing it. Notice also the general plan or method, which he has pursued. This will enable you to discover his leading ideas, if it be an argumentative work, or the particular instructions of God's providence, if it be historical.

(4.) Where the language is difficult to be understood, pay strict attention to the context, and you will generally find the author's meaning explained. But, if not, consider whether the difficult phrase is a peculiarity of the writer's style. If so, look out the place where he has used it in a different connection, and see what meaning is attached to it there. But if this does not satisfy you, examine the passages in other parts of the Scriptures which relate to the same subject, and compare them with the one under consideration. This will generally clear up the darkest passages. But if you still feel in doubt, you may find assistance from consulting commentators who have made themselves acquainted with the particulars I have mentioned; which, with a knowledge of the language in which the book was originally written, may have enabled them to remove the difficulty. But in reading commentaries, always bear in mind that they are the productions of fallible men, whose opinions are not to be taken for Scripture. You may, however, avail yourself of their knowledge, without submitting your mind implicitly to their judgment. This you will be compelled to do because on many points, they differ in opinion.

3. Do not hurry

Do not task yourself with a certain quantity of reading at the regular seasons devoted to the study of the Bible. This may lead you to hurry over it, without ascertaining its meaning or drinking into its spirit. You had better study one verse thoroughly, than to read half a dozen chapters carelessly. The nourishment received

from food depends less on the quantity than on its being perfectly digested. So with the mind: one clear idea is better than a dozen confused ones. And the mind, as well as the stomach, may be overloaded with undigested food. Ponder upon every portion you read, until you get a full and clear view of the truth that it teaches. Fix your mind and heart upon it, as the bee lights upon the flower, and do not leave it until you have extracted the honey it contains.

4. *Read in course*⁶

By studying the whole Bible in connection, you will obtain a more enlarged view of its contents and perceive more distinctly its unity of purpose. But I would not have you confine yourself entirely to the regular reading of the whole Bible in course. Some portions of the historical parts do not require so much study as that which is more argumentative and doctrinal; and some parts of the Word of God are more devotional than others are, and therefore better fitted for daily practical use.

A very good plan is to read the Old and New Testaments in course, a portion in each every day. If you begin at Genesis, Job, and Matthew, and read a chapter every day, at each place, omitting the first and reading three Psalms on the Sabbath, you will read the whole Bible in a year, while on every day you will have a suitable variety. Besides this, the more devotional and practical books should be read frequently. The Psalms furnish a great variety of Christian experience, and may be resorted to with profit and comfort in all circumstances. This is the only book in the Bible, which does not require to be read in course. The Psalms are detached from each other, having no necessary connection.

⁶ An excellent guide for reading the entire Bible through in a year, including the New Testament and the Psalms twice, is *M'Cheyne's Daily Bible Readings*, published by Chapel Library.

The other books were, for the most part, originally written like a sermon or a letter. They have, for convenience, since been divided into chapters and verses. If you read a single chapter by itself, you lose the connection; as, if you should take up a sermon and read a page or two, you would not get a full view of the author's subject. I would therefore recommend that, in addition to your daily reading in the Old and New Testaments, you always have in a course of thorough and critical study some one of the most difficult and fruitful of these books. But, if you attend the Sabbath school,⁷ either as teacher or pupil, the lessons there studied will be sufficient for this purpose.

Before beginning the study of a book, you ought to take an opportunity to read the whole of it rapidly at one sitting, in order to learn the author's scope and design. You will find this a profitable practice whenever you have time for it. You will be especially interested to review, in this way, the books you have studied. The more thoroughly they have been studied, the more deeply will you be interested in the review. You will find great advantage from the use of a reference Bible and concordance. By looking out the parallel passages, as you proceed, you will see how one part of the Scriptures explains another and how beautifully they all harmonize.

5. Inquire on certain subjects

In reading the Scriptures, there are some subjects of inquiry, which you should carry along with you constantly.

a. What do I find here which points to Christ? Unless you keep this before your mind, you will lose half the interest of many parts of the Old Testament, and much of it will appear to be almost without meaning. It is full

⁷ **Sabbath school** – now often called simply Sunday School. The use of “Sabbath” refers to the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day.

of types and prophecies relating to Christ, which by themselves appear dry, but when understood are most beautiful and full of instruction.

b. The Bible contains a history of the church. Endeavor then to learn the state of the church⁸ at the time of which you are reading.

From the commencement, you will see a gradual development of God's designs of mercy, and a continually increasing light. Take notice of what period of the church you are reading, and from this you may judge of the degree of obligation of its members—for this has been increasing with the increase of light, from the fall to the present day, and it will continue to increase to the end of time. Note also the various declensions and revivals of religion, which have occurred in every period of the church, and endeavor to learn their causes and consequences. By this, you will become familiar with God's method of dealing with his people; from which you may draw practical lessons of caution and encouragement for yourself.

c. Inquire what doctrinal truth is taught, illustrated, or enforced in the passage you are reading and what principle is recognized. Great and important principles of the divine government and of practical duty are often implied in a passage of history, which relates to a comparatively unimportant event. Let it be your business to draw out these principles and apply them to practice. Thus, you will be daily increasing your knowledge of the great system of divine truth.

d. Note every promise and every prediction. Observe God's faithfulness in keeping His promises and fulfilling His prophecies. This will tend to strengthen your faith. You will find it profitable, as you proceed, to take notes

⁸ **church** – this indicates the author's belief that there is one people of God in both the Old and New Testament, all of which are saved by faith alone.

of these several matters particularly. At the close of every book, review your notes and sum them up under different heads.

6. *Study Jesus*

Read the Gospels with great care for the purpose of studying the character of the blessed Jesus. Dwell upon every action of His life and inquire after His motives. By this course, you will be surprised to find the Godhead shining through the manhood in little incidents, which you have often read without interest. Look upon Him at all times in His true character, as Mediator⁹ between God and man. Observe His several offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. See in which of these characters He is acting at different times, and inquire what bearing the particular action you are considering has upon His mediatorial character.

Observe also the particular traits of character which appear conspicuous in particular actions—such as power, energy, manly hardihood,¹⁰ dignity, condescension, humility, love, meekness, pity, compassion, tenderness, forgiveness, etc. Take notes, and when you have finished the course, draw from them, in writing a minute and particular description of His character. This will be of great service to you as a pattern. You will also, by this means see a peculiar beauty and fitness in Christ for the office He has undertaken, which you would not otherwise have discovered. But do not stop with going through this course once. Repeat it as often as you can consistently with your plan of a systematic study of the Holy Scriptures. You will always find something new, and upon every fresh discovery you can revise your old notes.

⁹ **Mediator** – one who intervenes between two parties for the purpose of making reconciliation; a go-between.

¹⁰ **hardihood** – the quality of being courageous; boldness.

7. History and biography

In reading the historical and biographical parts of Scripture, observe the following.

a. The histories contained in the Bible are the histories of God's providence. Notice His hand in every event, and inquire what principle or law of His moral government is exemplified, carefully observing its application to nations, communities, and individuals.

b. When you read of particular mercies or judgments, look back for the cause. In this way, you may discover the principles on which God administers His most holy, wise, and just government.

c. In the biographies of the Bible, study the motives and conduct of the characters described. If they are unconverted men, you will learn the workings of human depravity, and discover what influence a correct religious public sentiment has in restraining that depravity. If they are good men, you will see in their good actions living illustrations of the great doctrines of the Bible. Endeavor to learn by what means they made such attainments in holiness, and strive to imitate them. If any of their actions are bad, look back and inquire into the cause of their backslidings. If you discover it, you will find a way-mark¹¹ to caution you against falling into the same pit.

8. Poetry and instruction

The poetical and didactic parts of the Scriptures are scattered throughout the whole Bible. These abound with highly wrought figures. This is probably owing partly to the insufficiency of ordinary language to express the lofty and sublime ideas presented to the minds of the writers by the Spirit of truth, and partly to the method of communicating ideas which always prevails in the infancy of language. Endeavor to understand the

¹¹ **way-mark** – a mark along a path or road to guide in traveling.

figures used. They are often taken from prevailing habits and customs, and from circumstances peculiar to the countries where the Scriptures were written. These habits and circumstances you must understand, or you will not see the force of the allusions.

Others are taken from circumstances peculiar to particular occupations in life. These must also be thoroughly studied, in order to be understood. But where the figures are drawn from things perfectly familiar, you will not perceive their surprising beauty and exact fitness to express the idea of the sacred penman, until you have carefully studied them and noted the minutest circumstances. Beware, however, that you do not carry out these figures so far as to lead you into fanciful and visionary interpretations.

9. The prophets

The books of the prophets consist of reproofs, exhortations, warnings, threatenings, predictions, and promises. By carefully studying the circumstances and characters of those for whom they were written, you will find the principles and laws of God's government set forth, in their application to nations, communities, and individuals. From these you may draw practical rules of duty, and also learn how to view the hand of God in His providence in different ages of the world. The predictions contained in these books are the most difficult to be understood of any part of the Bible. In reading them you will notice,

a. Those predictions whose fulfillment is recorded in the Bible, and diligently examine the record of their fulfillment. You will see how careful God is to fulfill every jot and tittle of His Word.

b. There are other prophecies, the fulfillment of which is recorded in profane¹² history; and others still

¹² **profane** – not sacred, relating to secular things.

which are yet unfulfilled. To understand these, it will be necessary to read ancient and modern history, in connection with the explanation of the prophecies, by those writers who have made them their study. Attention to this, so far as your circumstances will admit, will be useful in enlarging your views of the kingdom of Christ. But beware of becoming so deeply absorbed in these matters as to neglect those of a more practical nature; and especially be cautious of advancing far into the regions of speculation as to what is yet future.

10. A whole book

You will find it an interesting and profitable employment, occasionally to read a given book through for the purpose of seeing what light it throws upon some particular point of Christian doctrine, duty, practice, or character. For example, go through with Acts with your eye upon the doctrine of Christ's divinity. Then go through with it a second time, to see what light it throws on the subject of Revivals of Religion. Pursue the same course with other books and in respect to other subjects. In this way, you will sometimes be surprised to find how much you have overlooked in your previous reading.

The foregoing suggestions may appear formidable because of the time and study requisite to carry them into execution. But it is to be remembered that the young Christian has his lifetime before him, and that his great business is to obtain a knowledge of divine things. The plan is not sketched with the expectation that every thing here recommended will be accomplished in a single year, but with the view of laying out business for life.



A Guide to Bible Study is a concise summary of what many longer works have proven to be true: the person who applies himself to studying the Scriptures thoroughly will reap fruit a hundred-fold over those who only read devotionally. But how do we study the Scriptures thoroughly? The principles for Bible study contained herein are the same as those contained in longer and more scholarly works. By writing these principles in a straightforward and no-nonsense style, Harvey Newcomb has done a great service for God's people.

Harvey Newcomb (1803-1863) was a Congregational minister in America. He edited several journals, including the "Christian Herald," and authored 178 volumes, including fourteen on church history and many books for children and young people. Among his most popular works are *The Young Lady's Guide*, *How to Be a Man*, and *How to Be a Lady*. Though excerpted from *The Young Lady's Guide*, this booklet is valuable for men, women, and saints of all ages.