

# How to Analyze a Bible Passage

The kind of study that can help you examine a small passage of Scripture is called analytical Bible study. Analytical Bible study gives you a detailed view of a Bible book. Here the words, sentences, and paragraphs become important. The prayers, commands, and promises of Scripture have new meaning. We get this view of the Bible by slow, deliberate study with close observation. This Bible-study method makes the details of a Bible passage become clear.

Analytical Bible study consists of five elements:

1. Write a paraphrase.
2. Use observations and questions.
3. Summarize the content.
4. Make a comparison.
5. Apply the passage.

Let's study and practice using each of these elements.

## Writing a Paraphrase

There are four steps in paraphrasing a Scripture passage.

1. *Select a section for analysis.* If you are going to study, teach, or speak on a Scripture passage, it is best to use a paragraph of Scripture, since a paragraph is the basic unit of thought.
2. *Read the section several times in different Bible versions.* As you read the paragraph, notice the main verbs used in the sentences. Observe whether they indicate statements, exclamations, questions, or commands. Observe important nouns in the sentences and what they mean. Carefully note any words or phrases that modify the nouns. The modifiers provide information you can use in a paraphrase.
3. *Write the section in your own words.* Don't copy the words of a modern translation or a paraphrase. Express the biblical writer's thoughts, attitudes, and purposes as you understand them. Use modern English words. You may use several words to say what a biblical writer has said in a few words. Be careful to maintain the meaning of the verses.
4. *Check your paraphrase against a modern translation.* You may learn that your paraphrase has brought out a different idea from the translation you have consulted. If this is true, you may have given the verse the wrong meaning. Revise your paraphrase after checking it with other translations.

**Read Philippians 4:4-7. On the chart "Analytical Bible Study" on the next page, follow the four steps you have read to write a paraphrase of these verses in the column "Paraphrase."**

# Analytical Bible Study

Paraphrase	Observations and Questions	Summary	Comparison	Application

Here are some problems we identified in paraphrasing Philippians 4:4-7. Check to see whether your paraphrase addressed these concerns.

- The verbs in verses 4-7 are commands except for the promise in verse 7. Obeying the command in verse 6 is a prerequisite to experiencing the promise in verse 7.
- The King James Version uses the word *moderation* in verse 5. Can you find a word that expresses the thought more accurately?
- Can you find three words for *prayer* in verse 6?
- How would you define God's *peace* as it is used in verse 7?
- What did Paul mean by *heart* and *mind* in verse 7?

The purpose of writing a paraphrase is to help you understand what the author is saying. A paraphrase is the best way to discover the biblical writer's ideas and thoughts. As the beginning point for analytical Bible study, a paraphrase will help you complete the other parts of analytical study more accurately.

## Using Observations and Questions

You have practiced paraphrasing Philippians 4:4-7. Now you are ready to make observations and ask questions about the passage. One way to analyze a Bible passage more deeply is to ask questions.

- You might ask, "Who?" Who wrote this material? Who are the characters involved? For whom is the passage intended?
- You might ask the question "What?" What is happening in the text? What does it say to us?
- "Why?" is another good question. Why did the writer say these things, and in what context were they written?
- "So what?" may be the most important question of all. What difference does this passage make to people today?

Asking questions about the passage stimulates your thinking and forces you to take the Bible seriously. This will help you apply its teachings more completely to your life.

**Read again Philippians 4:4-7. What questions would you ask to discover the meanings of these verses? Write your questions in the appropriate column on the chart "Analytical Bible Study."**

Here are some questions we identified. How do they compare with your list?

- What Bible-study tool would give you the meanings of the three words for *prayer* in verse 6?
- In verse 6 what practical activity does Paul challenge the Philippians to perform instead of worry?
- Why do we need to present the requests of verse 6 to God? Does He need the information?
- What is the relationship between verses 6 and 7? How would you learn the meaning of the *peace* of God?
- What does the word *guard* in verse 7 suggest about God's protection?

You can also use observations to analyze a Bible passage. You can observe details like the following.

- **Key words.** What do the verbs, nouns, adjectives, or adverbs mean?
- **The type of statement.** Is it offering advice, warning, exclamation, or promise?
- **Contrasts or comparisons.** What is the writer comparing or contrasting?
- **Repetition.** Are words or phrases repeated?
- **Questions.** Often a question in a passage introduces new ideas or summaries.
- **Connectives.** Look for words such as *but*, *if*, *therefore*, or *in order that*. What do they suggest about the meaning of the passage?
- **Grammar.** Look at verb tenses and the use of pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs.
- **Atmosphere.** What is the general tone of the passage?
- **Literary form.** Is it poetry, prophecy, narrative, an epistle, or a parable?
- **General structure.** How are the ideas in the passage related to one another?

**What observations would be important to explore in Philippians 4:4-7?  
Add these to the second column of the chart “Analytical Bible Study.”**

I’m sure you recorded the need to explore the meanings of key words in the passage, Paul’s imperative statements and promises, the contrast evident in verse 6, the repetition of key ideas, and the confident and deeply spiritual tone. You may have noted other details, as well. Often your observations will lead you to more questions rather than to answers. These questions will be of two basic types.

1. You will ask questions about the meanings of certain terms, places, or statements in the Bible.
2. You will ask questions about the meaning, significance, and application to life of what is in the Bible.

List your questions along with your observations. Here are some ways to answer your questions about a passage.

- Use a dictionary to define unfamiliar words.
- Read different translations to obtain the meaning of a phrase or a puzzling statement.
- Study other biblical passages that are cross-referenced in your study Bible.
- Think, study, meditate, and pray.
- Use a Bible-study aid such as a book on Bible culture, history, or social life.
- Use a commentary on a passage only after you have struggled to arrive at your own answer.

**Use one of these suggestions to explore a question or an observation you made about Philippians 4:4-7. Write what you learn.**

## Summarizing the Content

After you have paraphrased, made observations, and asked questions about a Scripture passage, you are ready to take your study a step further. Next it is helpful to write a summary of what you have learned about the Scripture passage, based on the paraphrase, observations, and questions you have recorded. A summary helps you articulate and clarify what you have learned about the Scripture passage.

You can use two methods to summarize a passage. First, you can use the observations and questions you have recorded about the passage to state conclusions about the passage's meaning. Your summary states what you have learned about the passage, what you believe the biblical writer meant, and how the passage may be used. Make sure that your summary encompasses everything in the passage and conveys the feeling as well as the message of the content.

**Try composing your own summary of Philippians 4:4-7. Write it under "Summary" on the chart "Analytical Bible Study."**

Your summary may have included some of the following ideas. Paul emphatically commanded the Philippians to rejoice. Their joy was to be in the Lord, and it was to be unchanging, in spite of circumstances like the one Paul found himself in. He also told them to be forbearing or gentle. A gentle person does not insist on his rights but respects others' integrity. This person's fairness and sense of purpose attracts others to Christ. In verse 6 Paul was not content merely to tell the Philippians not to worry. He gave them a practical activity to perform instead of worrying. They were to tell God their requests. We do not tell God our requests in order to inform Him. He already knows about our needs. We want to relieve ourselves of the anxiety they cause. Through prayer we transfer the responsibility to Him, and we center our lives in Him by praying with thanksgiving. The peace of God mentioned in verse 7 is much more than happy feelings and a carefree lifestyle. The word refers to the wholeness or balance God gives to someone who fears and follows Him. The word *guard* in verse 7 is a military word. It is used outside the Bible to describe a Roman sentry in the act of guarding something. The heart and the mind in verse 7 make up our entire personality. God will keep watch over our mind, our emotions, and our will.

In addition to making summarizing conclusions about a passage, it is helpful to construct an outline of the passage. The purpose of this outline is to describe the content of the biblical passage—to state your understanding of what the biblical writer is saying. To make this outline, use the declarations, commands, or questions of a paragraph as the main points. The modifiers of these main verbs will become the smaller subheads beneath the major points. Use as few words as possible and try to use words that allow you to visualize the content of the passage. When possible, use words that come directly from the text itself.

Your outline does not need to have rhyming words or other special features to catch a listener's attention. Sometimes a teacher may use repeated or rhyming words to make a passage vivid and memorable. This may be helpful if it is natural, but you should not force a passage into an artificial outline.

Prepare this outline without outside help for the content. After you have made your outline, give the passage a title.

**Write an outline of Philippians 4:4-7 in the third column of the chart “Analytical Bible Study” along with the summary you have written. Your outline and your summary should bring together all you have learned about the passage to this point.**

Writing a summary and outline are important steps because they lay the groundwork for applying the Bible passage to your life or to someone else’s life.

## **Making a Comparison**

After you have determined the meaning of a Bible passage, it is helpful to compare the passage with other passages that teach or illustrate the same message. This type of study is called comparative Bible study. As you learn how to do this type of study, you will need the following Bible-study resources: a study or reference Bible, a concordance, a topical Bible, a New Testament introduction, and a commentary on Philippians.

When you are doing a comparative study of a given passage, you make four comparisons:

1. Use topics or subjects to compare.
2. Use words to compare.
3. Use persons or events to compare.
4. Use the context to compare.

Let’s take a close look at these and learn how we can use each comparison to gain a better understanding of Philippians 4:4-7.

1. *Use topics or subjects to compare.* Ask, *What is the subject or topic of this passage I am studying, and what does this passage say about it?* Then compare what other passages in the Bible say about the same subject. You can use several ways to find other passages that deal with the subject you are studying.
  - Most good study or reference Bibles refer you to passages that deal with the same subject.
  - A number of passages that deal with the subject are gathered and listed under that subject in a topical Bible.
  - Your memory is a valuable resource because you will recall having studied related passages at other times.
  - Occasionally, you can locate related passages by looking up the subject in a Bible dictionary.

If you are studying a passage that deals with an incident in the life of Christ, compare what the other Gospel accounts say about the same incident. One Gospel may give a detail about Jesus’ deeds and words that another Gospel omits. This will give you a more complete understanding of what Jesus said and did.

The New Testament passage may quote an Old Testament passage or refer to an incident in the Old Testament. A comparative study of the Old Testament text can help you better understand why the New Testament author referred to the Old Testament.

**Read Philippians 4:4-7. What would you identify as the general subject this passage deals with?**

This passage addresses worry and anxiety or the need for prayer and thanksgiving.

**Compare other passages that deal with the same subject. Using other resources, find and compare other passages. List some of the passages you discovered that deal with the same subject.**

2. *Use words to compare.* The resources we have listed will help you compare words. But a concordance is probably the best resource for finding other passages that have the same words as the passage you are studying. A concordance is particularly helpful for comparing often-used words like *prayer*, *joy*, *anger*, *Holy Spirit*, and so on.

**Take the word *supplication* in Philippians 4:6 and use a concordance to compare the way the word is used in other Bible passages. What meanings do the other passages add to the use of this word in Philippians 4:6?**

Here is a helpful hint for comparing words or topics. In addition to looking up the word or topic you are studying, also look up synonyms (words or topics that mean the same) and antonyms (words or topics that are the opposite).

3. *Use persons or events to compare.* Often your study will reveal persons or events in the Bible that illustrate the importance of practicing a truth you are studying. At other times you will discover a passage that highlights a person who ignored the truth you are studying. This kind of comparison helps you realize the way those concepts have worked out in human experience.

Name someone in the Bible or a biblical event that illustrates one of the concepts in Philippians 4:4-7.

Use a concordance or a Bible dictionary to read about that person or event in the Bible. What insight did you gain that illuminates the meaning of the Philippians passage? Write a brief description of what you discovered.

4. *Use the context to compare.* When you do a comparative study of the Bible, be careful to observe the context of the passage. If you ignore the context, you may make a serious error in the interpretation of the passage. Sometimes people will pull a passage out of context to make it say what they want it to say and not allow the passage to communicate God's message. This is referred to as proof-texting a passage. A good study or reference Bible, a concordance, or a New Testament and Old Testament introduction can give you the proper context of the passage you are studying.

Use a resource to discover the context in which Paul wrote Philippians. Write a brief description of what you learned.

Reinforce the comparative study you did by making notes in the column "Comparison" on the chart "Analytical Bible Study."



## Applying the Passage

You have learned how to discover a passage's meaning by writing a paraphrase, using observations and questions, summarizing the content, and making a comparison. Everything you have done this week has brought you to the point of applying a Scripture passage to your needs or to the needs of others.

Your application of a Scripture passage must be based on the meaning of the passage. As you learned in week 2, sometimes a passage of Scripture will give you a principle you can apply to your life. Sometimes your application of that principle will result in a different action from the one mentioned in the Bible. For example, an equivalent of a “holy kiss” (2 Cor. 13:12) is a handshake.

Be very careful when you apply biblical principles to your life. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul decided to give up eating such meat if it offended another Christian. However, we should not give up all practices merely because they might offend others. Some Christians might feel that they should not share the gospel for fear of offending someone. The Bible clearly conveys the expectation that every believer share the gospel. The principle is not that we should give up a practice just because we offend another person with it. The principle is that we should give up any unnecessary practice if it harms another Christian. Careful and thoughtful use of the Bible can prevent errors in applying its teachings.

If you apply the Bible to others' needs or to your church, be careful not to apply the Bible to others without first using it on yourself. Also, be cautious in announcing to others that you have applied the Bible to them. Much prayer should precede any effort to apply the Bible to someone else's life.

When you apply the Bible to yourself, make your application—

- *personal*. Write an application for yourself in a sentence with I, me, or my in it.
- *practical*. It must be something you can do, not something beyond possibility.
- *specific*. If God has convicted you about prayerlessness, your application must include a specific plan to begin to pray.

Use probing questions like the following when applying the Bible to yourself.

- *What am I to believe?* Is something in the passage about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, grace, mercy, forgiveness, hope, or eternal life?
- *What am I to do?* Do I need to change some actions or confess some sins? Do I need to put away attitudes like fear, worry, hate, resentment, or jealousy?
- *What have I learned about relationships?* Does this passage teach me a new truth about my relationship with God through Jesus Christ? Do I see new insights into my relationships with others in my family, community, congregation, or world?
- *Is there a promise I need to claim?* Are there conditions for claiming this promise? Is there a word of encouragement or hope for me?

Don't use this list of questions in a mechanical way but to search for ways to apply a Scripture passage. Try to find a command, promise, or example by which you can apply God's grace to your life.

Use the previous questions to apply **Philippians 4:4-7** to your life.

What am I to believe?

What am I to do?

What have I learned about relationships?

Is there a promise I need to claim?

Now write your applications in the final column of the chart "Analytical Bible Study." Remember, these applications should be personal, practical, and specific.

The five components of analytical study are valuable tools for helping you dig beneath the surface of a passage to discover the rich truths God has for you.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 75–94. Out of print.

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