

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

How to Study the Bible



SESSION 7

Tools for Studying Scripture

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Tools for Studying Scripture: An Overview

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LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- describe some basic tools for studying Scripture and the value of each
- explain the difference between Bible translations
- name some internet sites and computer programs useful for studying Scripture

Tools for Studying Scripture: An Overview

INTRODUCTION



In-depth study of Scripture requires resources. We will not be able to answer all the questions we have with only our knowledge. We must reach out to others who have studied the biblical world, including its languages and literature, to see what they could add to our understanding.

Just as a person digging a hole needs tools to do their job well, so we will want to use resources that can help us “dig” into the Bible. We might scratch the surface with our fingers. But in order to uncover deeper treasures, we must employ useful tools like Bible translations, study Bibles, Bible commentaries, and Bible dictionaries. These can be found in libraries, bookstores, Internet sites, and computer programs.

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS



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One of the most important tools for studying Scripture is a good translation of the Bible. Fortunately, we have many excellent translations available in English today. We will want to read and compare several of them to help us understand a passage we might study.

Translations will differ because they are aimed at different goals. One kind of translation, like the New American Standard Version and the English Standard Version, try to translate word for word from the Hebrew and Greek as much as possible. This is often called a literal or formal equivalency method. This kind of translation is especially helpful for studying particular words or phrases and their repeated usage. We can also get a feel for how the Bible writers liked to express things in literal translations. Yet these translations can be challenging for understanding the overall meaning of the biblical author. They tend not to flow smoothly because Hebrew and Greek express things in different ways than English.

In order to convey the overall meaning of a verse better, some translations take a phrase-for-phrase or dynamic equivalency approach. They seek to express the overall meaning of a passage by adding words that make more sense in English, but the added words may not have been in the original Hebrew or Greek. Many modern translations take this approach, such as the New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and the Common English Bible. The King James Version and the New King James Version also take this approach.

These translations read much smoother than literal translations and are easier to understand on a first reading. Of course, these translations also interpret the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek more than the literal translations do. This means that word studies may not be as accurate as they would be with a literal translation. They do not translate a Hebrew or Greek word the same way each time. Yet these translations can help us comprehend the overall meaning of a passage more easily.

Some dynamic equivalency translations add a lot of extra words to convey the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek. The New Living Translation does this somewhat, but The Message and the Living Bible do this even more so. The latter two are best described as paraphrases. They both make the Bible very readable, using English phrases that can be easily understood. This is their best quality. However, these paraphrases will not be very helpful for studying specific words or phrases.



As we study Scripture, we will want to compare several translations of a passage. The way one translation conveys the meaning of a passage may help us understand its meaning better than another translation. Also, the ways in which translations differ will give us clues about things that we need to explore further. Often differences result from a translator's decision to highlight one nuance of a word or phrase over another. English may not possess a similar word to express all that is involved in the Hebrew or Greek word.

STUDY BIBLES



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Another valuable resource for studying Scripture is the study Bible. This kind of book contains the text of Scripture as well as notes on it. These notes typically answer the kinds of questions we ask in the exploration and application steps of our study. They also include short articles or insets that address these questions in more detail. Further, they provide an introduction to each book that gives an overview of important ideas contained in it as well as the historical circumstances of the book. Most of them include detailed maps of Bible lands and a concordance. This last feature lists important Bible words and the verses where that word is used.

Not all study Bibles are the same. Some tend to focus their comments more on answering historical questions, while others lean more toward application. Some design comments that address issues important to certain groups, such as women, men, teens, or children. Still others intentionally make comments from a particular theological perspective. Usually the title of the study Bible will indicate its particular focus. Here is a list of some of the most popular study Bibles today:

- Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible.
- ESV Study Bible.
- HCSB Study Bible.
- Life Application Study Bible.
- NIV Archaeology Study Bible.
- NKJV Study Bible.
- NLT Study Bible.
- Wesley Study Bible.
- Zondervan NIV Study Bible.

BIBLE COMMENTARIES



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The kind of information found in study Bibles also can be found in Bible commentaries, but in these books the information is usually even more extensive. People who write these books have done considerable study of the Bible by exploring questions about historical background, word meanings, literary character and context, and theology. They have also reflected on how a Bible passage might apply to life.

Usually authors move through a book of the Bible commenting on each verse, paragraph, or chapter. In most commentaries, chapters and verses are well marked so that it is easy to locate the particular passage on which we may be focused. We do not have to read the entire book to use its information.

Bible commentaries differ in several ways. Since information about a Bible passage could include many things, different commentaries focus on answering certain kinds of question more than others. Thus, some commentaries tend to highlight information on word meanings, while others discuss the theology of the text more. Still other commentaries focus on historical background information, while others examine the literary character and context of a passage. Then there are those commentaries that are primarily interested in application. Most commentaries do some of each of these things, but they will tend to talk about one aspect more than another.

Bible commentaries vary in length. Some make brief comments and move through the entire Bible in one volume. Others include more information on each passage and take an entire volume on just one book of the Bible. Still others treat several books together in one volume.

Another feature to notice about Bible commentaries is whether one person or several are involved in the writing. Some learned people have produced commentaries on the entire Bible by themselves. Of course, this gives us only one person's perspective on things. In many Bible commentaries, however, groups of scholars contributed to them. Different people were assigned particular books of the Bible, usually because they had dedicated much of their life to studying that book. These kinds of commentaries may vary in style and presentation, but they often provide the best information and insights.



Since Bible commentaries differ, we will want to use several and discover which ones will be most helpful to us. If we have questions about historical backgrounds, for example, we will want to know which commentary tends to focus more on that. If we are looking for more insights on theology, we will want to locate the commentary that does that well.

Bible commentaries are most useful to us after we have spent time exploring the text ourselves. Once we have made our own observations and asked questions of exploration and application, we can turn to a commentary for additional information and understanding. It will be like having another set of eyes looking at the text with us.

BIBLE DICTIONARIES



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At times we will want to find out even more about a person, place, or word mentioned in the Bible. Bible dictionaries list such items in alphabetical order and provide information on each. These books give us more than a definition of a word; they supply information about its usage within the biblical world and outside it that helps us understand the Bible better. We could look up Abraham in the “A” section, for example, and get an overview of his entire life and family. Under letter “J,” we will find “Jeremiah,” “Jerusalem,” “Jesus,” “Jezebel,” and “Jordan River.” For each entry, a brief article gives additional insight into the significance of that person or place.

Important Bible words can be found in a Bible dictionary as well. Bible dictionaries typically include words like “glory,” “grace,” “holy,” “love,” “mercy,” “peace,” and “righteousness.” The article for each will define the word in the context of the ancient world and describe how it is used in different Bible books. Such information will help us avoid interpreting the meaning of a word only from our worldview. We will be able to understand it in the context of the Bible.

Like Bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries vary in length. Some are one volume, while others can be as much as six volumes. The multivolume Bible dictionaries are often called encyclopedias since they include more entries, and each entry is much longer. For most of us, one-volume dictionaries provide the kind of succinct information we desire. Here are some of the most popular and useful one-volume Bible dictionaries:

- Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Tremper Longman III, ed.
- Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, David N. Freedman, Allen C. Myers, Astrid B. Beck eds.
- Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Chad Brand and Eric Mitchell, eds.
- Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Ronald F. Youngblood, Herbert Lockyer, F. F. Bruce, eds.
- New Bible Dictionary, I. Howard Marshall and others, eds.
- Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary, J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, Moises Silva, eds.

INTERNET RESOURCES



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Many of the resources just mentioned can be found on the internet for free. Bible internet sites often include Bible dictionaries and commentaries along with a variety of English translations. Study Bibles usually cost, but a few are free.

Just about every modern and older English translation can be accessed through internet sites like YouVersion.com and Biblegateway.com. On some sites, these translations can be arranged parallel to one another so that we can easily see how they are similar and different. Translations in other languages are also available on these sites.

The Bible dictionaries and commentaries available on these sites generally are older ones that no longer are copyrighted. One of the most popular commentaries on these sites is Matthew Henry's, which was written in the 1700's. Easton's Dictionary often appears on these sites as well, and was accomplished in the 1800's. Both of these resources contain valuable information and insights, but some of the material is dated and not completely accurate. So these must be used with care.

A very useful feature on most Bible internet sites is the word search. A person can type in a word or phrase, and the site will find all the places it appears in a particular translation. This enables us to see how the word is used in a variety of contexts in the Bible. The word search feature can also locate where a word is mentioned in the site's many other resources, like Bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries, word study books, and sermons.

BIBLE SOFTWARE PROGRAMS



NOTES

One of the most efficient ways to study Scripture is with computer programs. Bible software programs allow people to access all kinds of resources with just the click of a button. Several companies have produced programs that contain multiple Bible translations, study Bibles, Bible commentaries, and Bible dictionaries along with other resources. The three most powerful programs – Accordance, BibleWorks, and Logos – include thousands of Bible study resources in their packages. As a result, comparing different translations, accessing Bible commentaries and dictionaries, and doing word searches can be done quickly and easily.

Such programs are costly, but they provide a wealth of information at the tip of our fingers. We should explore several different programs before deciding to invest in one. Online videos describe some of the main features offered in these programs, but several vendors supply free applications through the internet so that a person can actually try a particular program to see how it works.

CONCLUSION

**NOTES**

The tool shed for studying Scripture is filled with all sorts of useful resources. The basic tools of Bible translations, study Bibles, Bible commentaries, and Bible dictionaries provide essential resources for our study of Scripture. By means of the internet and Bible software programs, these tools become even more accessible.

We live in a day of tremendous opportunity for studying Scripture in depth. We have what some have called “an embarrassment of riches” in this regard. If we are willing to commit the time and energy to serious study of the Bible, we have the tools to help us discover life-transforming treasures in God’s word.

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Look at the learner objectives for this session. Can you:
 - describe some basic tools for studying Scripture and the value of each?
 - explain the difference between Bible translations?
 - name some internet sites and computer programs useful for studying Scripture?
2. Compare four translations of John 1:14, and notice how they differ.
3. Go to a library or bookstore, locate a study Bible and a Bible commentary, and read what they say about John 1:14. Then locate a Bible dictionary and read the entry on “Dwell.”
4. Go to either **Biblegateway.com** or **Biblehub.com**, locate a Bible commentary on John 1:14, and read what it says. Then locate a Bible dictionary on one of these Sites, and read the entry on “Dwell.”
5. Download either Logos or Accordance applications on a digital device, and explore what information it can give you on John 1:14.

EXAM - SESSION 7



NOTES

1. Why do translations differ from one another?
 - A. They take different approaches: word for word versus thought for thought.
 - B. Some words carry a wide range of meanings.
 - C. To some level, all translations must interpret what the Bible writer meant.
 - D. all of these
2. What kind of translation would be most helpful for doing a word study?
 - A. a word-for-word, formal equivalency translation
 - B. a thought-for-thought, dynamic equivalency translation
 - C. a paraphrase
 - D. all of these
3. What kind of information is typically found in a study Bible?
 - A. the biblical text
 - B. notes about historical background and word meanings
 - C. introductions to Bible books
 - D. maps of Bible lands
 - E. all of these
4. What are some ways that Bible commentaries differ?
 - A. in length
 - B. in focus upon historical background or some other aspect of the text
 - C. in how many authors contributed
 - D. all of these
5. Bible commentaries will be most valuable to us before we have studied the text for ourselves.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. A Bible dictionary is valuable for studying Scripture because it _____.
 - A. gives additional information on important words
 - B. gives additional information on Bible people and places
 - C. gives additional information on Bible customs
 - D. all of these

 **NOTES**

7. Word search is one of the most useful features of Bible study Internet sites because it helps us _____.
- A. find lost words
 - B. see how a word is used in a variety of Bible verses
 - C. decode secret messages in the Bible
 - D. all of these
8. Computer programs designed for Bible study are helpful because they _____.
- A. make comparing different translations easy
 - B. provide quick access to Bible commentaries and dictionaries
 - C. allow us to do word searches easily
 - D. all of the above

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. How can comparing different Bible translations help us understand a passage better?
2. How can a study Bible help us study Scripture?
3. How can a Bible commentary help us study Scripture?
4. What kind of information can a Bible dictionary give us?
5. What kinds of information can a Bible study internet site give us?
6. What value could a Bible software program be for studying Scripture?