

Ingredients for a Successful Bible Study

(A Brief Overview)

Any serious study of the Bible will take time and effort. Though intellectual abilities and analytical skills will play a factor, a *willingness* to do the work is even more important. God does not reward spiritual laziness - though the devil might be happy to do so (with a counterfeit substitute for true godliness).

Here is a brief overview of what is involved in studying the Word of God. You will notice that some of the concepts (such as "application") seem to repeat throughout the different sections. This is because the different aspects of studying the Bible are interrelated, and they cannot be totally separated.

Reading it

The starting point for understanding the Bible is a willingness to read it. Until we get to that point, the Bible will do us no good. Even then, we must be willing to pay attention to it, and let it change us, or reading the Bible will be no better than reading a meaningless story or fable. (It could be *worse*, for God will hold us accountable for our unwillingness to pay attention to it.)

Understanding it (Study it, think about it, write it down.)

This involves examining the Word, thinking about what it says, and trying to determine how it applies to our lives. In the Old Testament this is sometimes called "meditation." (This is not to be confused with the *world's* concept of meditation, which attempts to reduce or eliminate thinking.)

If you can, pick a time and place that will allow you to be alert and not distracted by things around you. Ideal circumstances might not always be possible, so work (as best as you can) with whatever situation you have. Do not try to rush through a time of study and reflection on the Word, for many of the greatest insights and breakthroughs occur only after much time has been spent - invested - in God's Word.

It is a good idea to write down your observations and thoughts. Doing this is not mandatory, but it can be quite helpful for gaining an understanding of the Word, as well as for remembering (and reinforcing) what you have learned. If you are taking notes, there are many types of things you can write - and there are no rules which say you have to follow one specific technique or another. You may even wish to keep a journal, in which you can keep study notes, a personal diary, prayer requests and answers, etc. Pick the method that is best for you.

Prayer

Though not the main focus of this article, prayer is also an important part of studying and understanding the Bible. It is good to communicate with the Author of the Book you are studying!

Application

If a person's Bible study is nothing more than an intellectual exercise, it is a failure. A person's *response* to God's Word is just as important as his *understanding* of it. In fact, the Bible's concept of understanding normally *includes* application.

As you think about what a passage says, you may wish to ask yourself application-type questions about it. Perhaps you can compare what you find in the passage you are studying with what you find elsewhere. (You could look for similar teachings. You could also look for other passages that present a *contrasting* perspective, knowing that they are intended to *complement* each other, rather than *contradict* each other.)

In some passages, you could look for general principles that might be applicable to you (paying attention to the context, so that you don't wrongly apply them). If the passage involves a response to something, you could think about how you might have responded, if you were in the same type of situation. (If you would have been tempted to respond *wrongly* in such a situation, you could compare that wrong response to the way you *ought* to respond, and try to learn from it.)

A good principle to remember is this: Commands are meant to influence our actions; facts are meant to influence our thinking. The context will determine how, and to what extent, a command or fact ought to impact our life. (A passage torn out of context could lead us to false conclusions, and thus to a wrong application of what is being stated. Some commands might not be applicable to us, if they are limited to a specific context, but we can still learn from them in other ways.)

What about "Resources"?

There are many resources available that can serve as aids in studying the Bible. There are Bible dictionaries, concordances, commentaries, language helps, information related to history or customs or geography, and much more.

Each of these may have value (to varying degrees), and we do not need to be afraid of using them. But we dare not let them replace the *primary* requirements of reading and studying the Bible itself, of prayer and application. If we do, we will be in danger of having a Bible study that is "intellectually productive," but "spiritually sterile."