

MARTIN ARCHIBALD

Bible Study Methods

A Short Guide



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Is study for every Bible reader?

From Bible study, Daniel worked out the year of release from captivity. From their study, we judge Simeon and Anna knew that Christ would come to the temple in their lifetime, and so were there to hold Him as a baby in their arms. A Temple-poet was so deeply impressed at what he gained from the words of God that he wrote a poem of 176 beautifully patterned verses about his meditation.

For reasons like these, J.C. Ryle, preacher and theologian, said, "We must read our Bible like men digging for hidden treasure"⁽¹⁾. That is, we will be enriched beyond measure if we read with single-minded, untiring devotion, as of those who search deeply, and find wonderful things.

But is systematic Bible study a rewarding aim **for every disciple**? Is it not enough to read a chapter a day? I think our personal answer will depend on what success we have in that daily reading. If we have met God in His word, will we not wish to listen more for His voice, and understand what He says more clearly? Or if we have not yet managed to find Christ "in all the Scriptures" (Lk.24:27), are we not drawn to search a little more for how those other parts testify of Him? We may remember also that the Jews in Berea were commended for the strength of character they showed in "examining the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11). If daily reading is working properly, it will leave an urge to follow up a topic or enquiry through a book, or Bible-wide, whether we are

naturally studious and do so intensively, or are ordinary readers, and take a quieter pace. Certainly, study will speed our progress from “milk” to “solid food” (Heb.5:12-14), provided we strive to practise what we find.

Study is also the safeguard against the natural inclination to **build on a verse or passage isolated from its setting**, and thereby give it a false meaning. For example, the Lord advised His disciples when witnessing to kings and governors, “not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Lk.21:14,15). Someone might regard this as an instruction not to prepare for giving a gospel address or a talk to youth—and find no such help forthcoming! Whereas a careful study of the setting shows it belongs to times of extreme persecution where there would be little freedom to consult a Bible, or time free of harassment, and the need to speak in a position of intense pressure.

The student finds also in his wider reading that even in the Old Testament, the advice of the book entitled ‘Preacher’ (see Eccl.12:9-10) is different, because the context there is a prepared lesson or address. Again, Peter says for everyday witnessing, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet.3:15).

The same danger arises on a broader front, since the outlook

of a whole Bible book needs to be compared with similar themes in others found in other books. Ecclesiastes, for instance, deals with life as observed naturally “under the sun”, that is, its view at many points is that of human wisdom, recording with devastating power the message of disillusionment with the passing pleasures of this life. There are certain points (e.g. 5:19-20; 12:1) at which the reader is guided to a deeper spiritual understanding that teaches us to ask for God’s help in finding the meaning of life. But when Ecclesiastes has taught us not to trust in this world’s prosperity, we are almost forced to take refuge in a neighbouring book like Psalms to seek more of God’s answer to our spiritual need.

Thus we do well to undertake the Bible study to gain a **balanced over-view of any Scriptural subject**, tracing it through the Old Testament into the New. Further support for this point may be seen in 1 Corinthians 10:6,11.

Finding Time

A little study is of course better than none, but an hour snatched at random in the week will not take us far, and an isolated burst of lengthy study will likely make us put off the next spell for as long as possible. Any study benefits greatly if we reserve time regularly for it. Some may be able to keep, say, a particular night in the week for this, sometimes using it to prepare for an address or class (though probably finding that some further hours have to be worked in somewhere). But when beginning a family or changing jobs upsets the

routine, it will prove well worth the effort to defend at least an hour or two in each week for deepening our knowledge of the ways of God. (And I have heard this said by young mothers!).

“If Your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Ps.119:92).

When study becomes hard exercise, it can be helpful to ensure that something relaxing or easier to enjoy is worked into the timetable afterwards, rather than give up in discouragement.

With prayer and thanksgiving

It will of course be time well spent if we begin with prayer for the Holy Spirit’s teaching. This helps us to recognise the positive action that should flow from any study of the living Word, whether to adjust our inward attitudes, or to take some outward action like settling an old disagreement, or setting ourselves some goal in service. It helps also to continue to ask for the Spirit’s leading when we meet a difficult problem—or find things flowing with suspicious ease!

Prayerful meditation avoids:

1. strengthening our own prejudices
2. hiding from unpleasant truths
3. pursuing 'pet' themes only
4. developing blind spots in familiar passages
5. giving up when a passage becomes obscure.

Where to begin

From the range of possible approaches, perhaps the most immediately attractive one would be the **Character-study**. This is as inviting as the opportunity to meet a new friend (or even to learn from someone who was a failure!), or to get to know an acquaintance more deeply. We can develop an exciting sense of spiritual companionship, while we learn from God's dealings with the person. We are free to choose from Old Testament or New; and if from Old, we may in most cases look forward to seeing how the New provides the best commentary of all.

Here is a simple **plan of enquiry**:

- (a) Background circumstances
- (b) Life before God's first 'dealing'
- (c) The effects of the first personal experience of God
- (d) God's purpose and work for the character
- (e) Qualities of character formed; weakness overcome? e.g., were this person's natural abilities used notably by God after conversion or calling?

- (f) Influence on others
- (g) Failures and successes, and the reasons for them.

We might then try a **Book-study**, which has several attractive features. We can choose from a range of lengths; a range of difficulty; or according to the likely relevance to our current circumstances. Again, we may choose from Old Testament or New.

It would be wise, however, to look for an outline guide if we are 'beginners', such as those provided in the *Scofield Bible*, the *NIV Study Bible* or *ESV Study Bible*. Better still would be to ask an older brother or sister to work with you or advise—fruitful in friendship as well as learning! More experienced students will enjoy working out their own summary-outline as they go along, and adjusting its shortcomings as understanding matures.

One of the Gospels always makes a profitable beginning, and will lead us sooner or later to comparison with the other three. A book like Romans or Galatians, however, will yield most if we already know the Old Testament books of the Law quite well, e.g. from having read them more than once in daily reading, since we will not appreciate the Jewish veneration of the Law (and its danger of depending on personally earning favour with God—as old and as new as humankind) unless we have come to value its richness ourselves.

Other Types of Study

Now we might choose from a more demanding range: a theme or topic; a word-study; some of the Old Testament types of Christ; or prophecy.

For a **theme-study**, which in theory could lead us through all 66 books, we would be wise to choose a group of books, e.g. the books of Moses, to give practical limits; or follow, for example, personal holiness through a sample-book from each of: the Law, the histories (Ruth to Esther), the poetic books, the prophets; a Gospel, the Acts, a Letter by Paul, and a non-Pauline Letter. This would of course be a study in quite some depth!

A lighter course might follow 'holiness' and 'sanctification' and related words through a Concordance, selecting only the occurrences that are likely to illustrate a distinct aspect.

For a more intensive **word-study**, consult the excellent examples of these by Mr. James Martin, which are presented in a very readable style in volumes of *Bible Studies* magazine (Hayes Press), from the 1940s to the 1960s. What we are looking for here is the flavour that belongs to a particular Hebrew or Greek word, compared with its synonyms. Each carries its own subtle (or marked) variations of sense, and this can be used with special effect by the Holy Spirit's guidance of the writer.

For instance, Romans 10:17 says, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Here the Greek translated ‘word’ is *rhēma*, which is used in the New Testament for the spoken word especially, reminding us of the necessity for oral witness and preaching.

Our **method** would be to choose a passage where, for example, the word ‘power’ occurs more than once, and find ‘power’ in the concordance list of all occurrences of a Greek word that is translated with that English word. We might first profit from looking at the range of verses where the English ‘power’ translates the Greek *dunamis* = ability, compared with those where ‘power’ translates *exousia* = authority, and noting how this affects our understanding of the passage we first chose.

Then we could look at other English words used to translate *dunamis* elsewhere. For this, turn to the list of Greek words near the end of Dr Young’s concordance, which is the best for this kind of enquiry.

Here is part of the list:

ability - 1 might - 4 miracle - 8 virtue - 3

The figure shows the number of times *dunamis* is translated by the English word in the A.V. It is interesting to note the eight places where the translation is ‘miracle’; though, as we would expect, the commonest rendering is ‘power’ (77 times).

If 'virtue' drew our attention, we would benefit from looking at its derivation in our English dictionary, where we could find it once was nearer to its original sense in Latin, viz. 'power' or 'strength.'

We need hardly add that, with prayer, such an enquiry should result in fresh light from the Word that would enrich our worship, prayer, witness, and fellowship.

Another exacting but fruitful search is the **types of Christ** to be found in the Old Testament. This ranges from characters like Joseph, to the provisions of the Law, where Christ and His work is seen in the service of the priesthood, and in sacrifice and offering.

We may search the material structure of the dwelling-places of God on earth among His people for pictures of Christ as "Son over God's house" today; and the imagery of the prophets, such as "the shadow of a mighty rock in a weary land." For the types form one of the richest sources of finding Christ "in all the Scriptures."

Nor should we miss the treasury of the poetic books, with their description of their sufferings of the Lord, and the glories that should follow.

To finish this brief sketch of a large field, we note the importance of recognising possibly four **distinct layers of**

truth here:

- (1) the immediate meaning of the Old Testament text for the times in which it was first written.
- (2) the fulfilment of prophecy for Israel in the days of the Lord's first coming, and perhaps also for the Gentiles, including foreshadowing of Christ.
- (3) elements of prophecy that concern Israel as a nation for which God still has unique purposes.
- (4) elements that are related directly to New Testament believers in Christ, and to His gathered together people.

There is general agreement that (2) and (3) are the largest elements in prophecy. Lastly, we observe that one passage can contain all four layers, some of which have already been fulfilled, e.g. Isaiah 9:1-7, where we read:

- (1) of the eventual defeat of Assyria (vv.4,5)
- (2) the birth of the Messiah
- (3) His millennial reign
- (4) the kingdom of God and of His Christ in eternity (v.7b).

Essential questions for every passage

Now to draw up a 'plan of attack' that will keep us on profitable lines in any area of the Bible. We suggest five main questions:

- (1) What did this passage mean to the writer or speaker and to his first audience?**

The more we dig in this direction, the more we will be consulting language dictionaries, and works on the history of Bible times, and historical geography.

Two cautions may help. First, beware of assuming that the vegetation and wildlife of Israel today is identical to that of Bible times. Rivers may also change their course through history, and between summer and winter!

Second, while the archaeology and mapping of ancient Israel is a fascinating study, there are a large number of places that cannot be identified with certainty by scholars. Therefore we conclude that the meanings of Bible names are often more important, and carry far more spiritual profit, than working out their location on a map.

We can also usefully subdivide this question with the old box of tools, '**Who, What, Where, When and Why?**'

(2) Make a list of the main points in the passage.

This will keep in mind the overall structure the writer is developing, and help us to find our way more quickly when we return to the chapter later. Good for memory too!

(3) Have I found Christ reflected in the concerns of this passage?

One route to meditation on our Lord is to ask in what way

the topics of the passage would interest *Him* when they were read in the synagogue.

(4) What is the relevance of this portion today?

Essential stimulus to spiritual growth and action.

(5) Where is this verse or passage commented on elsewhere in the Scriptures?

The best commentary of all, as we noted above. “Nothing can cut the diamond but the diamond; nothing can interpret Scripture but Scripture” (2). Scholars today still say that the next best is the marginal cross-references of the Revised Version, on which later systems are still based.

The five questions will take time, but will yield the fruits of thoroughness that Martin Luther spoke of: “Pause at every verse of Scripture and shake, as it were, every bough of it, that if possible some fruit may at least drop down.”

Helpful Checks

For the last lap, here is a bank of profitable checks on our findings.

(1) If the Spirit caused so many more pages to be occupied with **the Old Testament** books, let us not miss the value of looking there for **the foundation of God’s treatment on any subject**. Pastors and teachers have also long taught the

worth of studying especially the first mention of a topic. In general, the book of Genesis offers a very important field for beginning your study.

(2) A great deal can be gained by **comparing modern with older translations**. It is still true, however, that the R.V. offers the most consistent use of English words to translate the original equivalents, and so gives directness to our study. It also tends to avoid simplifying a Greek expression in order to make it easily recognisable to modern or western readers.

For example, “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father” is a richer concept than the easier rendering “the Thessalonians who belong to God the Father” (Revised English Bible) suggests (1 Thess.1:1). Following the RV use of English renderings usually yields rapid access to key passages on a chosen subject. But modern translations can often force us to look especially at familiar portions with fresh eyes.

(3) It is essential to observe the rule of **faithfulness to the context or setting** of a verse or word. This will help us, for instance, to distinguish between the imagery of building up the Church the Body of Christ and that of building in the House of God.

The Lord bless your search. You have now read through an overview of some guidelines that our spiritual fathers have commended to us. Let the words of the veteran of preaching and teaching urge us on: “Do your best to present yourself to

God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim.2:15).

- (1) J.C. Ryle (2015). “Bible commentary - The gospel of John”, p.100, Editora Dracaena
- (2) Thomas Watson, in *A Body of Practical Divinity: Consisting of Above 176 Sermons on the Lesser Catechism*, Thomas Watson, 1692, p.16

Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As Thou didst break the bread beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord;
My spirit longs for Thee, Thou living Word!

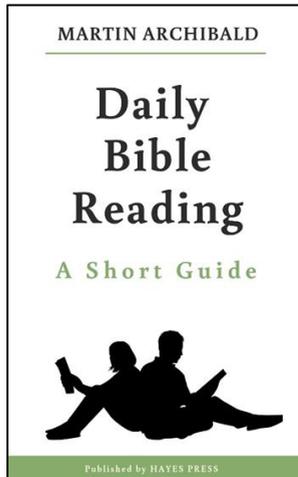
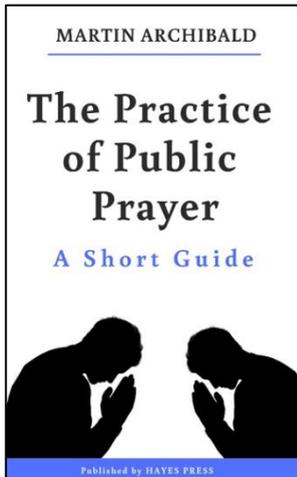
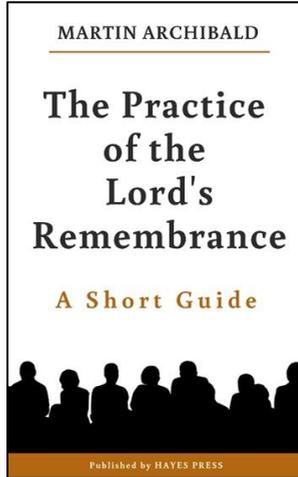
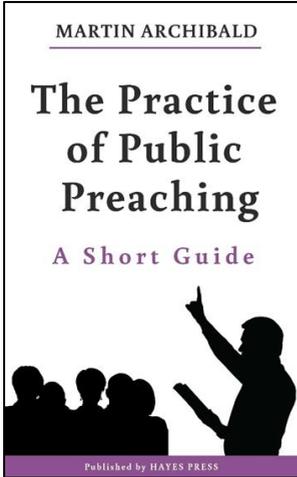
Thou art the bread of life, O Lord, to me,
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me.
Give me to eat and live with Thee above;
Teach me to love Thy truth, for Thou art love.

O may Thy Spirit, Lord, so quicken me,
That He may touch my eyes, and make me see;
Show me the truth concealed within Thy word,
Then in Thy book revealed I'll see Thee, Lord.

Bless Thou the bread of life to me, to me,
As Thou didst bless the loaves by Galilee;
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall,
And I shall find my peace, my all in all.

(Mary A. Lathbury)

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