

How to  
Prepare & Lead  
an  
International  
Bible Study



**friends**  
INTERNATIONAL

# Quick Guide

- 🌐 Read the passage thoroughly
- 🌐 Observation:  
Why has the passage been written & what are the key themes
- 🌐 Interpretation:  
How does it all fit together?
- 🌐 Application:  
How does it affect us?
- 🌐 Ask open questions that engage the group
- 🌐 Lead gently, lovingly, purposely and competently
- 🌐 Review the study wisely
- 🌐 Pray throughout

# It's a fantastic privilege

**“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

**2 Timothy 3:16-17**

Research has shown that we remember:

- 10% of what we read (e.g. a book)
- 20% of what we hear (e.g. a speaker)
- 30% of what we see (e.g. a poster ad)
- 40% of what we hear and see (e.g. a T.V. program)
- 70% of what we say (when we give a talk or are talking)
- 90% of what we say and do (where we are actively involved in the process)

This helps us to see the task ahead of us when trying to help people understand God's word. The Bible however is not just any book, it is God's living word to us, and we are aided by the Holy Spirit.

We have a responsibility to do everything that we can to explain the scriptures in as clear and memorable a way as possible. Preparing and leading a Bible study is a huge privilege, and we must not be lazy and haphazard in our approach.

## 🕒 **Is there a right and wrong understanding?**

The world is deeply affected by 'postmodernism'. It teaches that when we come to a piece of literature such as the Bible, what matters is not what it actually means, but what it means for us.

The apostle Paul however believes there is a right and a wrong way of understanding the Bible.

***“Do you 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 Timothy 2:15***

The consequences of misunderstanding the Bible can be devastating:

***“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”***

***Acts 20:29-31***

We must always be careful to handle scripture correctly, in our own quiet times, when listening to sermons/talks and as we lead studies.

***“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”***

***Acts 17:11***

# What is a Study?

A study, according to the Oxford Dictionary is:

"The devotion of time to the acquisition of information; a careful examination or observation of something".

So a Bible study must mean devoting time to acquire an understanding about the Bible, and to examine carefully what it says. Therefore like any other study, a Bible Study involves:

- hard work
- time
- discipline

## 🌐 Why Study the Bible?

Our aim when studying the Bible with international students is to introduce them to the person and claims of Christ. Christianity is not a religious system but a personal relationship with Jesus e.g. the 'Come and see' approach found in John 1:46.

## The Bible is:

### 1. From God

(2 Tim 3:16, 2 Peter 1:19-21, John 10:34-36)

- It is "breathed out" (inspired) by Him.
- It is God's gift to man, not man feebly trying to reach up to God.
- It is God's authority.

### 2. About God

- God revealing Himself to us, i.e. what He is like.
- the Bible is "entirely trustworthy in all of which it speaks - and it speaks of everything" Francis Schaeffer.

### **3. Equipping us to serve God**

- It tells us how God wants us to live.
- It prepares us for good works and personal ministry.  
2 Tim 3:16-17.

### **4. Transforming Lives**

- The Holy Spirit shows us how to put the Bible into practice, and we are being transformed and renewed to be more Christ like. 2 Corinthians 3:18, Romans 12:1-2.
- There are examples of others who studied God's Word and were greatly blessed. Daniel 10:12, Ezra 7:10 & Acts 17:11.

### **5. Speaking into all cultures**

(Isaiah 2:2-3)

- From God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 to John's vision of heaven in Revelation 21 and 22, the Bible makes it plain that God's plan is that all peoples might discover forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ.

**“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.”**

**Revelation 7:9**

A Bible study is not just a cosy chat, but it is meeting together to learn the truth about what God has revealed about Himself, in order to change lives and to strengthen and equip each other. Col 3:16.

# How should you Study the Bible?

Preparation for Bible study takes time. Even if you use a study guide you will still need to set aside sufficient time to understand the passage.

It is the Bible that you are studying and not some course textbook, your desire should be an encounter with God.

You also need to spend time in prayer throughout your preparation.

The aim of the study is to discover the **meaning** of the text.

## ❖ Read all the relevant passages

You will need to read through the passage several times, plus the surrounding text to put it into context (the whole book if possible).

You will then need to read the passage using different translations of the Bible. The Bible is infallible, but the accuracy of modern translations is not.

# Biblical Exegesis & Hermeneutics

**Exegesis** = Finding out what the passage originally meant to its hearers.

**Hermeneutics** = Discovering the meaning of the passage for your life and your time, faithfully taking the original intent into today's world.

## The 3 stages of Exegesis & Hermeneutics:

1. **OBSERVATION** - to observe what God has said in the past in His Word.
  - Ask - what does the passage actually say?
2. **INTERPRETATION** - to interpret what God's Word meant to its original readers.
  - Ask - what is the meaning of the passage in context?
3. **APPLICATION** - to obey what we learn from God's Word in our everyday life.
  - Ask - what does it mean for me / us here and now?

## 1. Observation

### i) **What kind of literature is it?**

The Bible is full of different types of literature, and you will need to identify what type of literature your passage is.

Here are some of the types of literature found in the Bible:

- ❖ **Letter**           Colossians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Philemon
- ❖ **Gospel**           Matt, Mark, Luke, John
- ❖ **History**         Acts, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Samuel
- ❖ **Prophecy**       Isaiah, Amos, Ezekiel
- ❖ **Poetry**          Psalms

- ❖ **Wisdom**                      Proverbs
- ❖ **Apocalyptic**              Daniel, Revelation
- ❖ **Law**                              Deuteronomy, Leviticus

## ii) What is the Scriptural Context?

**IMMEDIATE CONTEXT**      ←————→      **DISTANT CONTEXT**  
 sentence » paragraph » chapter/section » Bible book » whole Bible

You look at the individual elements of a passage in the light of the whole Bible. You don't treat the Bible like an encyclopaedia i.e. just look for a word ignoring what came before or after. The Bible is more similar to a novel, where the words are connected. Every word of the Bible is to be taken in context to the passage and ultimately to the whole book.

The Old Testament is a story told on three levels:

### a) **The BIG Picture**

*Creation > Fall > Redemption > Consummation*

### b) **Israel**

*Abraham > Exodus > Exile > Restoration > Messiah*

### c) **Individual narratives**

*Noah > Abraham > Joseph > David...etc.*

You must always ask, "Where does the passage fit within the bigger picture of God's plan?"

### iii) What is the Historical Context?

In order to discover the historical context we need to imagine we are back in Bible times. In order to do this we need to cross certain barriers.

- **WHO**           - is the author?  
                      - are the original hearers?  
                      - are the specific characters mentioned?
  
- **WHERE**       - does it all happen?
  
- **WHEN**       - does it all happen?
  
- **WHAT**       - was the situation?
  
- **WHY**        - was the passage written?
  
- **HOW**        - are the people described?  
                      - did they react & relate to each other?  
                      - did they change?

### **Culture**

Consider the first century Middle Eastern setting:

- way of life
- social customs and attitudes

How do these affect the significance of:

- illustrations, words, concepts?
- incidents, stories?
- people's behaviour?

### **Geography**

How does the location, distance etc...

- affect the people involved?
- aid our understanding?

## Language

Biblical languages include Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew, each has:

- a different range of words
- different shades of meaning

The Bible uses language in different styles:

- hyperbole (exaggeration for effect)
- poetry (parallelism)
- irony (what is stated is not what is meant)
- simile (an object is compared to another object e.g. A is like B)
- personification (objects or ideas are given human qualities)
- anthropomorphism (divine given human characteristics)
- metaphor (comparison is made between two objects i.e. A is B)

The Bible is translated in different styles:

- The Message
  - NLT
  - NIRV
  - Good News
  - NIV
  - Revised Standard Version
  - New English Bible
  - English Standard Version
  - King James / Authorised
- Free**  
|  
**Dynamic Equivalent**  
|  
**Literal**

**iv) Illustrations, themes, repetitions and contrasts, unusual words or concepts, blockers & shockers.**

### **a) Illustrations**

- what illustrations are being used?
- what significance would they have had for the original hearers / recipients of the letter?
- do they have a different meaning now?

## **b) Themes**

What are the different themes in this passage?

- an incident
- teaching on a particular topic
- issues the author was trying to confront / solve
- information he wanted to give
- an expression of his experience of life and / or God

## **c) Repetition and Contrasts**

Repetition may be used simply for emphasis, or to drive a point home. It is very possibly the heart of what the author is saying.

So observe what words, phrases, concepts, ideas are being repeated or contrasted?

## **d) Unusual words or concepts**

Observe the unusual words or concepts:

- which have their background in the Old Testament (e.g. sacrifice)
- is there any technical jargon that needs to be explained (e.g. redemption, sanctify etc...)

## **e) Blockers & Shockers**

Now and again you will find passages of scripture that you either don't understand or just seem completely shocking.

- **Blocker** - This is a passage of scripture that you just find extremely difficult to understand e.g. 1 Peter 3:19.
- **Shocker** - This is a passage that is just really strange or shocking e.g. 1 Samuel 15:3.

These types of passages require a great deal of study in order to understand them, and learn how best to lead a discussion concerning them.

Write down any questions which come to mind as you read the passage e.g. anything you don't understand and want to look up, or ask someone.

## **2. Interpretation**

- How do the parts of the passage fit together?
- What is the purpose and implications of what you have read?
- summarise the passage.

Now consult a commentary to gain reassurance about your own observations and gather any new information.

## **3. Application**

- The study of INFORMATION is to lead to TRANSFORMATION.
- You have to ask the question 'DO I WANT TO OBEY?'
- The literal application is not always appropriate, e.g. 2 Tim 4:21 (you are not expected to get there before winter!!!)

You need to ask:

- Are there points of contact between 1<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century society?
- What are the implications on our conduct?
- Are there any specific commands or instructions?

### **Important Note**

A text cannot mean today what it did not mean to its original readers / hearers or author, unless this meaning is very clearly revealed in later parts of the Scriptures, e.g. references to 'The Messiah'. What did David understand when he wrote Psalm 22?

Where we do not share similar situations then we must look for the **principles** that lie beneath the issue e.g. 1 Corinthians 8.

# Preparing Questions

## Before you start...

- you should now understand what the passage means.
- write a brief introduction to the study.
- the aim now is to be able to draw the groups attention to the main points.
- keep in mind the 3 stages, don't jump straight into *application* before having a firm basis in *observation* and *interpretation*, but equally don't forget the *application*.

## Good Questions:

1. Catch the group's immediate attention and are not too general.
2. Are brief and to the point, i.e. are not too vague; too complex; or too 'spiritual' in language.
3. Lead to searching the text and thinking, not just repeating the text.
4. Ask for view points and ideas, not just for correct answers; one word answers or for agreement with the leader.
5. Help the members to probe beneath the surface and to identify with the people in the passage.
6. Build bridges between the passage and the group by expressing in question form what we feel or imagine others in the group to be thinking deep down, i.e. giving them an opportunity to express verbally what is going through their mind, whether it is confusion or frustration.

7. Arrive at questions of application via discussion of what the passage says and means, don't jump straight to application.
8. Encourage the group to think about concrete examples of application, and not leave application at the level of general principles.

### **Examples of Good & Bad Questions**

In your own opinion which of the following are good questions and which are bad? Think through the implications of asking any of them.

1. "How can we learn to stand firm in the Lord" when we are daily fighting against the manifold principalities and powers of the universe?
2. Would someone like to summarise what we have said on the subject, please?
3. You're wrong, Peter, v6 doesn't mean that at all, anyone can see that. So what does it really mean?
4. I'm not sure I know the answer to your question, John. Does anyone have any suggestions?
5. What do you think are the practical implications of this teaching?

6. What 3 points, all starting with the same letter, can we draw from this passage?
7. We often talk about "standing firm" what do you think it means?
8. Does anyone have any questions about what Sarah has just said?
9. What are you going to do about this Bob?
10. Well you have all been real muppets so far, has anyone got anything interesting to say?

🌐 **Who can join the study group**

- ❑ Any international student from any background who is interested in finding out what Christians believe.
- ❑ Any national student who shows respect for people from other cultures and is willing to listen and learn. The ideal group size is around 7-8 people, of whom 2-3 (and no more than half) should be nationals.

# Bible Study Example

**Passage:** 2 Timothy 1

**Read it**

## **Observation:**

- What type of literature is it?
- Where does it fit in the BIG Picture of the Bible message?
- **WHO**            are the people involved?
- **WHERE**        does it all happen?
- **WHEN**        does it all happen?
- **WHAT**        was the situation?
- **WHY**        was the passage written?
- **HOW**        are the people / events described?

## **What are the:**

- **Illustrations**
  
- **Themes**
  
- **Repetitions & Contrasts**
  
- **Unusual words or Concepts**
  
- **Blockers or Shockers**

## **Interpretation:**

- What is the author saying to his hearers?
- How do they all fit together?
- What is the main message(s) of the passage?

## **Applications**

- How does it apply to us?
- What difference is it going to make in our lives?

## **Questions**

Write 4 questions that will:

- Break the ice, making it easy for the group to start talking.
- Make them look at the passage to find the answer.  
(observation)
- Allow them to think of all the observation answers and start tying them together i.e. how do they fit.  
(Interpretation)
- Force the hearer to apply the learnt key principles to their lives.  
(Application)

# Leading well

As a leader, make sure you identify with the group by:

- using 'we' and 'us' rather than 'you'
- avoiding sounding as if you know all the answers
- do not ask 'what was the problem?' unless you are looking for facts but 'what do you think ( would you say) was the problem?'
- express honestly your own reactions / questions about the passage or your problems in applying it to your own life.

## 🌐 Cultural Issues

- The aim is to confront people with the person of Jesus, so the gospel passages are great. Luke is a good place to start with Muslims because so much teaching is given in parables.
- Have enough Bibles for everyone – the same version and in good condition. Some cultures will be highly offended to see a Holy book that is treated badly e.g. placed on the floor, ripped or have notes written in it.
- In making introductions it may be helpful to write down people's names
- Give a very clear explanation of the context of the passage.
- Ask someone who is reasonably fluent in the language to read. Don't ask people to read a verse each.
- Give people time to re-read and to ask about any words or concepts they don't understand.

- Use handouts, posters, music or videos if appropriate to help understanding.
- Have a long-term perspective. People of other faiths are seldom converted from one day to the next. The Bible study group may play an important part in a long process, even if there are no immediate results.
- Try to encourage a desire to return. For people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, there is much 'unthinking' and 'unlearning' to be done. It takes time; don't be over-eager and put your friends off.
- Respect other persons and don't impose your views.
- Remember that the cost of becoming a Christian is usually far higher for a Muslim or a Hindu than it is for the nominal Christian or agnostic.
- Use language that is acceptable and comprehensible to your international guests. Avoid cross-references and creating a 'them-us' divide.
- Listen carefully. Find out what your international friends really think and believe. Remember that this is often not what you think someone from that culture or religion ought to think and believe!
- Be aware that many internationals will agree with you out of politeness i.e. in their culture it is highly insulting to disagree with the teacher. Reassure the internationals that you are genuinely interested in their opinion and that no offence will be caused. This usually takes time.

- Be sensitive to prejudice and pre-conceived ideas – theirs and yours. International students may think ‘Christianity is a Western religion’ or ‘Christianity is no good’. The national student may think ‘Someone who speaks my language so badly can’t be very intelligent.’
- Understand that internationals will act and react in very different ways to a question being asked. Some cultures will answer straight away, whereas others will naturally wait longer before answering. Some cultures will naturally prefer a seminar style to the study while others would prefer a discussion.

### 🌐 **General Issues**

- Be a friend. You are not there to judge others but to find out together with them what God has said. Don’t sacrifice friendship for the sake of winning an argument. Expect to learn something yourself.
- Don’t feel under pressure to cover the whole gospel in a single study. One truth at a time is more effective in the long run.
- Set a time limit and stick to it unless there’s a very clear reason for carrying on.
- Trust the Holy Spirit to apply the word. He will speak, but it may not always be to those who say the most in discussion.
- PRAY. Before, during and after the study, and follow up in personal fellowship.

## 🌐 Learning Styles

People think in different ways and so have preferred ways of learning. If you were putting together an *Ikea* wardrobe, how would you put it together?

- ❑ Carefully read all the instructions before touching the pieces. (Abstract Conceptualiser)
- ❑ Assemble stage by stage with the instructions beside you. (Reflective observation)
- ❑ Disregard instructions and try and figure the best way yourself. (Practical Experimentation)
- ❑ Recall a similar one you've seen and work from memory. (Concrete Experience)

Everyone shows elements of each, but we have a preferred style. Recognising our preferred learning style helps us to be aware of our own, and others, strengths and weaknesses.

### **Style**

Concrete  
Experience

### **Key ideas**

Feeling and intuition are important  
- will learn from past experience  
- needs concrete examples

Reflective  
Observations

Watching and reflecting are important  
- learns from observing  
- needs time to assess

Abstract

Conceptualisation

Thinking and analysis are important

- learns from rational argument
- needs logical presentation.

Active

Experimentation

Doing and trying are important

- learns by experimenting
- needs opportunity for practical work

These varying learning styles has a great effect on the group. The Bible study therefore needs to take this into account

- Relate the study to past lessons/experiences.
- Vary the times of doing things together, not just academic study. Do evangelism, let them see concern in action as you visit and follow up.
- Change the structure, not drifting waffle.
- Occasionally break up into smaller groups with co-teaching.

## 🕒 **Creating a helpful atmosphere**

Before - pray and prepare  
- arrange chairs and people

During - help people to be involved  
- look at people and thank them for their contributions  
- listen to the answers people give  
- avoid using commentaries and too many cross-references  
- change the question if need be (*be flexible*)

- be patient, humble, relaxed, honest, expectant, and in control
- be aware of the stage the group is at and don't ask more of them than they are ready to give.

### 📍 **What are the difficulties?**

- ❑ Group never seems to 'gel'
- ❑ Over-talkative person
- ❑ Silences
- ❑ Wrong answers
- ❑ Red herrings
- ❑ Hobby horses
- ❑ Group weakness in Bible knowledge
- ❑ Verses out of context
- ❑ Private conversations

These are all very common problems of group dynamics, and can be dealt.

## **Dealing with Awkward Questions**

A question may be awkward for a number of reasons.

**Ignorance**     If you don't know the answer, admit it and promise an answer for the following meeting. Make sure you do try and find an answer.

**Esoteric**     If its really obscure and not everyone is interested, treat the question as serious, but after a few minutes ask if you could continue later over coffee, or even suggest a book that would cover the subject.

**Red Herring** This type of question is just asking about something because they are vaguely interested, but not that much. It may be asked to keep you off the real problem.

**Real Hindrance** This is something which is a real issue for that person. The key is to know whether the hindrance is positive or negative, a good way to find this out is to ask what was it that prompted the question.

**Technical** If you are not completely clued up, it is worth saying that you'll get back to them in order to check it and get it right rather than confusing them for no good reason.

**Irrelevance** If questions of irrelevance come up, either say, 'That's a good question, but its covering an area that's not covered in this study, perhaps we could chat about it over coffee.'  
Or give them a chance to justify themselves by saying 'How did you arrive at that point'.  
Sometimes the question is good but badly timed then reply, 'That's a very important question. We are going to deal with it in a few minutes?'

## 🌐 **Group Dynamics**

Group dynamics will vary from group to group depending on the leaders personality and style, and the group itself. No one group will behave exactly like another, so in the

same way no leader with lead the same, however each leader should have the same ideal.

***The ideal situation is that everyone in the group is equally likely to contribute and interact within the group.***

This ideal is quite possible, although it will probably require a fair amount of effort. At this stage it is probably easiest to look at reasons why this ideal situation doesn't occur naturally, and then how these difficulties can be overcome.

## **Different personalities**

Different personalities are likely to have different effects on the group, and it is the job of the leader to enable everyone to speak and everyone to be heard. The two extremes usually encountered are "**the loud person**" and "**the quite person**". The first is likely to take over the group, talking non-stop, whereas the latter will probably be too scared to even utter a word. Common sense tells us that the first needs gently quietening down, whereas the second needs encouragement to speak out. The ability to do both these things at potentially the same time, without causing offence and still encouraging the whole group to discuss freely the matter in hand, is a skill of a good leader. The key is good verbal and non-verbal communication.

## **Verbal communication**

The most important thing to remember when speaking is that, it is not only what you say but the way that you say it. Be constantly mindful of the effect your words will have, not only on the person you are talking to, but also to other members of the group.

- **Be positive**  
Even when trying to quieten or correct someone.
- **Be encouraging**  
To promote further interaction, especially towards quieter people.
- **Summarise**  
So everyone has a clear idea of what has been said.
- **Be careful of humour**  
Humour can be useful in relaxing the group, but you must be aware that not everyone will share your sense of humour. Humour does not travel well, huge cultural issues here. Sarcasm for example can be quite hurtful, and although your friends will be able to take it, it may undermine others confidence.

## **Non-verbal communication**

This includes all kinds of body language, and is usually the most difficult to control since you are not usually aware of it. I'll just highlight a few things to bring to your attention the effects it can have on the group.

**Eye contact** This shows you are listening and that you value their contribution. However nerves can make you look too much or not enough.

### **Annoying habits**

Your friends will be able to tell you what yours are. It can undermine the discussion by distracting people

## **Hand gestures**

They can be good to make or reinforce a point, although they can be a distraction. Closed, aggressive gestures are not good, look for it in others as an indicator of when things need to be relaxed e.g. arms crossed or pointing finger.

## **Smiling**

Looks nice and relaxes people, but can be unhelpful during serious points.

## **🌐 Use Variety**

### **Delegation**

Get someone else to lead the whole or part of the study, choose wisely.

### **Groups**

Divide into sub groups, and each look at different aspects of the passage and then report back for discussion.

## **Topical studies**

- ❑ Use an outside speaker

To introduce an issue leading to a discussion or lead the Bible study.

- ❑ One off meetings

All read the same book and discuss a chapter or have an end of term meeting discussing issues that have arisen during the term.

### **🌐 At the end of the study**

- ❑ Encourage people to apply and pray about what they have learnt.
- ❑ Ask how we are going to be different as a result of the Bible study.

# And finally...

Evaluate:

- Your leadership
- The group's participation
- The result! Bible study should be unnerving and transforming

Care for the group:

- Look out for anyone being withdrawn etc.
- Follow up on prayer requests

# Resources

- New Bible Dictionary - IVP
- New Bible Commentary - IVP
- The Lion Handbook to the Bible - Lion
- New Bible Atlas - IVP
- Systematic Theology *by Wayne Grudem* - IVP
- Know the Truth *by Bruce Milne* - IVP
- Tyndale Commentaries - IVP
- Welwyn Commentaries - Evangelical Press
- Bible Speaks Today Series – IVP
- The 'BE' Series Commentaries *by Warren Wiersbe* – Scripture Press
- Pathway Bible Guides - Matthias Media
- Interactive and Topical Bible Studies - Matthias Media
- VISA - Friends International
- Christianity Explored (English Made Easy Edition) - The Good Book Company
- Lifebuilder Bible Study Guides - Scripture Union
- Postcards from Palestine *by Andrew Reid* - Matthias Media
- How to Read the Bible for All its Worth *by Fee and Stuart* - IVP
- How to Read the Bible Book by Book *by Fee and Stuart* - IVP
- Getting the Message *by Daniel Doriani* - P&R Publishing
- God's Big Picture *by Vaughan Roberts* - IVP
- Dig Deeper *by Beynon & Sach* - IVP