



BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Examining God's Word

A beginner's guide to careful observation, interpretation, and application

KEY SCRIPTURE

"Give diligence to present yourself approved by God, a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed, properly handling the Word of Truth." — 2 Timothy 2:15 WEB

Simple · Clear · Scripture-grounded

THE SHORT ANSWER

Examining God's Word means slowing down to discover what a passage says, what it communicated in its original context, how it fits the whole story of Scripture, and how its truth should shape life. Observe carefully, interpret responsibly, apply faithfully, and pray throughout the process.

Why Examine Scripture Carefully?

A verse can be true while still being misused. A statement can be quoted accurately while removed from its original purpose. A personal application can sound spiritual while having little connection to what the passage actually teaches.

- Read verses within their paragraphs and books.
- Distinguish description from command.
- Respect poetry, narrative, law, letters, prophecy, wisdom, Gospel, and apocalyptic literature.
- Identify the original recipient of a promise.
- Avoid forcing modern meanings or personal opinions into the text.
- Let Scripture correct existing beliefs.

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH

The Bible is God's Word communicated through human authors in particular languages, genres, cultures, and historical settings. Faithful study respects both its divine authority and its human form.

What this guide will help you do

01

Prepare to listen

Approach Scripture prayerfully, expectantly, and humbly.

02

Observe before explaining

Notice words, structure, people, actions, and relationships.

03

Interpret in context

Respect literary form, history, covenant, and the book's purpose.

04

Follow the story to Jesus

Trace responsible promise, pattern, theme, contrast, need, and fulfillment.

05

Apply and verify

Respond specifically, then test the conclusion against Scripture and responsible sources.

Observation, Interpretation, and Application

Observation: What does the passage say?

Pay attention to words, sentences, structure, repetition, contrasts, commands, promises, questions, people, actions, and relationships.

Interpretation: What does the passage mean in context?

Seek what the human author communicated to the original audience within the literary, historical, and covenant setting.

Application: How should this truth shape life?

Respond through belief, repentance, obedience, worship, prayer, wisdom, hope, service, or proclamation.

THE ORDER MATTERS

Application should grow from interpretation, and interpretation should grow from observation. Observe carefully. Interpret responsibly. Apply faithfully. Pray throughout the process.

Prepare to Hear God's Word

Begin with prayer

- Ask for understanding and discernment.
- Ask for humility and honesty.
- Ask for willingness and strength to obey.
- Ask for greater love for God and others.

Prayer does not replace grammar, context, history, or literary form. The Spirit who inspired Scripture does not lead people to disregard what Scripture says. Prayer and careful study belong together.

Prayer throughout the process

01

Before reading

Ask for attention and freedom from distraction.

02

After observation

Thank God for what is clear and ask for help with uncertainty.

03

Before interpretation

Ask for protection from pride, bias, fear, and careless conclusions.

04

Before application

Ask for conviction, courage, wisdom, and strength to obey.

05

During verification

Ask for humility to recognize and correct error.

06

After study

Respond with worship, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and obedience.

Check the posture of the heart

- Is the goal understanding or confirmation of an existing opinion?
- Is there willingness to obey an uncomfortable truth?
- Is sin being defended or fear controlling the conclusion?
- Is a preferred teacher being treated as unquestionable?
- Is Scripture being used to judge others while avoiding correction?
- Is there openness to the wider church?

KEY REMINDER

Bible study is not merely preparation for teaching someone else. The first person placed under the authority of the passage is the reader.

PART TWO

Choose the Passage

A complete passage is a unit of thought: a paragraph, scene, poetic stanza, proverb, prophetic message, parable, teaching section, or vision. Chapter and verse numbers help locate text but do not always mark a complete thought.

Look for natural boundaries

- Change in speaker, location, time, event, audience, or subject
- Repeated introduction, conclusion, or summary
- Shift from teaching to application
- Change in poetic stanza

Read before and after

1. Read the entire chapter.
2. Read at least one section before and after.
3. If possible, read the entire biblical book.

A short example: Philippians 4:13

The verse is sometimes used to promise success in any chosen goal. Its context concerns Paul's learned contentment in hunger and abundance, need and provision. Christ strengthened Paul to remain faithful and content in changing circumstances; the verse does not promise unlimited achievement.

A short example: Matthew 18:20

Jesus is present with His people, but the immediate context specifically concerns correction, witnesses, church discipline, agreement, and authority under Jesus. Context reveals a more specific purpose than the isolated quotation may suggest.

PASSAGE PRINCIPLE

A verse belongs to a sentence. A sentence belongs to a paragraph. A paragraph belongs to a book. A book belongs within the whole story of Scripture.

Observe What the Text Says

- People: Who speaks, acts, receives, knows, or responds?
- Actions: What happens, and who performs each action?
- Repetition: Which words, images, commands, questions, or themes recur?
- Contrasts: Life and death, faith and unbelief, pride and humility, weakness and power.
- Comparisons: Like, as, just as, in the same way, better than.
- Connections: Therefore, because, for, so that, since, and if.
- Commands: Who receives them, and what reason is given?
- Promises: Who received them, under which covenant, and with which conditions?
- Movement: Fear to faith, grief to hope, rebellion to repentance, prayer to praise.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Lord, thank You for what is clear. Reveal any overlooked detail, guard against assumptions, and give understanding faithful to Your Word.

Observation worksheet

People

Actions

Repeated words or ideas

Contrasts and comparisons

Commands and promises

Questions and connecting words

Changes or movement

Initial questions

Identify the Genre

Narrative

Study scenes, characters, dialogue, conflict, and resolution. Ask whether an action is commanded, permitted, judged, or merely recorded. Description is not automatically prescription.

Law

Identify the original covenant audience, what the instruction revealed about God and holiness, how Jesus fulfills it, and how the New Testament applies its principles.

Poetry

Notice parallelism, imagery, metaphor, emotion, and arranged lines. Poetry communicates truth without requiring wooden literalism.

Wisdom

Proverbs commonly describe what is generally true rather than giving unconditional promises. Job and Ecclesiastes explore suffering, limitation, injustice, and meaning.

Prophecy

Identify the original covenant situation, sin or hope addressed, symbolic or poetic language, immediate fulfillment, and later development.

Gospel and letter

In a Gospel, ask what an event reveals about Jesus and how it advances the book's purpose. In a letter, trace the author's argument from theological truth to practical instruction.

Apocalyptic literature

Apocalyptic passages use visions, symbols, dramatic images, and Old Testament echoes to reveal spiritual realities and God's final victory.

A quick apocalyptic example: Revelation 5:5–6

John hears that the Lion from Judah has conquered, then sees a Lamb standing as though slain. Jesus is not literally an animal. The Lion recalls royal victory; the slain Lamb recalls sacrifice and suffering. Jesus conquered through His sacrificial death and resurrection. The surrounding vision explains that He is worthy because He was slain and redeemed people for God.

GENRE PRINCIPLE

Interpret a passage according to the kind of literature God chose to communicate through.

Examine Literary Context

Immediate context

- What happened before and afterward?
- Does the passage answer an earlier question?
- Does a later sentence explain it?
- Which subject is being discussed?

Book context

- Who wrote and received the book?
- Why was it written?
- Which themes repeat?
- Where does this passage fall in the structure?

Biblical context

- Where does the passage fall in the biblical storyline?
- Which covenant applies?
- What had God revealed at that point?
- How does later revelation clarify it?
- How does it contribute to the message centered on Jesus?

Watch for therefore

Romans 12:1 begins with “Therefore.” Its practical instruction rests on God’s mercy and saving work explained in Romans 1–11. Beginning at chapter 12 alone may turn Christian obedience into mere moral effort.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Lord, help this passage be understood as You intended. Correct any assumption that does not fit its context. Give wisdom to recognize what is clear and what remains uncertain.

Examine Historical and Cultural Context

Background may clarify government, geography, family life, agriculture, trade, warfare, worship, honor and shame, law, travel, servitude, festivals, and temple or synagogue life.

Begin with Scripture

- Named rulers, cities, regions, and political events
- Religious groups, festivals, and customs
- Occupations, conflicts, and social relationships

Use background responsibly

- Avoid cultural claims with no reliable source.
- Verify sermon illustrations and supposed Hebrew or Greek facts.
- Do not exaggerate archaeology.
- Make sure a custom belongs to the passage's time and location.
- Let background clarify rather than replace the text.

BACKGROUND PRINCIPLE

Historical context should illuminate what the biblical text communicates, not provide a secret meaning unavailable in the passage.

Study Important Words Carefully

Words have a range of possible meanings, but context selects the meaning intended in a sentence. A dictionary lists possibilities; it does not decide which one applies.

Questions for a word study

- How is the word used in this sentence and paragraph?
- How does the author use it elsewhere?
- Does genre affect the meaning?
- Is it literal, figurative, or part of an idiom?
- How do reliable translations render it?

Avoid the root fallacy

A word's history or component parts do not automatically determine its meaning. The English word butterfly is not a fly made of butter. In the same way, a Hebrew or Greek word's origin does not decide its meaning in a biblical sentence.

Avoid total transfer

A word may have several possible meanings, but every meaning should not be imported into one occurrence.

Compare translations

Differences may reveal alternate ways to express an idea, difficult grammar, a possible textual variant, or more than one translation option. Differences do not automatically indicate error.

Important word

Meaning in this sentence and paragraph

How the author uses it elsewhere

Translation differences

Conclusion supported by context

Identify the Main Point

A topic may be prayer, faith, suffering, or forgiveness. The main point states what the passage communicates about that topic.

A good main-point statement

- Uses one or two sentences
- Reflects the entire passage and its emphasis
- Fits the original context and genre
- Avoids including every detail or making the passage say too much
- Prepares for faithful application

Questions that help

- What does the author emphasize?
- What problem is addressed?
- What changes?
- Which truth controls the details?
- What response is expected?
- What would be lost if this passage were removed?

Section one summary

Section two summary

Section three summary

Repeated emphasis

Main point

MAIN-POINT PRINCIPLE

A responsible interpretation explains the passage as a whole rather than selecting only details that support a preferred conclusion.

Compare Scripture With Scripture

Because Scripture ultimately comes from God, its teachings form a coherent whole. Clearer passages help with less clear passages; later revelation may develop earlier promises; parallel accounts may provide complementary details.

Use cross-references carefully

Cross-references are editorial study aids, not inspired text. A connection based on quotation, person, event, word, theme, prophecy, or similar expression must still be examined.

Useful comparisons

- Parallel accounts
- Direct quotations
- Shared themes
- The same author's usage
- Canonical development

Do not cancel one passage with another

Salvation by grace through faith and the call to obedient works belong together. Works do not earn salvation, but saving faith produces fruit.

COMPARISON PRINCIPLE

Related passages should clarify the passage being studied, not replace its own context.

Locate the Passage in the Biblical Story

4. Creation
5. Rebellion and fall
6. Promise
7. Covenant and Israel
8. Law, priesthood, sacrifice, and kingdom
9. Exile and prophetic hope
10. Jesus the Messiah
11. Cross and resurrection
12. Church and mission
13. Return, judgment, resurrection, and new creation

Progressive revelation

God revealed His redemptive plan over time. Later revelation adds clarity without making earlier revelation false. Sacrifices taught Israel about holiness, sin, substitution, cleansing, and fellowship; the prophets anticipated redemption; Jesus offered the final sufficient sacrifice; Hebrews explains the fulfillment.

BIBLICAL-STORY PRINCIPLE

Understand a passage first in its own setting and then within the completed story of Scripture.

Recognize How the Passage Relates to Jesus

Jesus taught that Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms spoke concerning Him. This does not make every verse a direct prediction. Scripture's story, promises, covenants, patterns, and hopes reach fulfillment in Him.

Legitimate connections

- Direct prophecy
- Covenant promise
- Typology: a real earlier person, event, or institution anticipating greater fulfillment
- Theme: kingdom, sacrifice, rest, wisdom, shepherding
- Contrast: human failure revealing need for the faithful King
- Gospel need: sin, judgment, weakness, or inability
- Gospel result: life, hope, obedience, unity, or holiness through Christ

Avoid forced connections

A Christ-centered connection should arise from the passage, book, biblical storyline, New Testament use, or an established theme—not a superficial similarity.

Original meaning

Place in the biblical story

Promise, pattern, theme, contrast, need, or result

New Testament connection

How the passage leads toward Jesus

CHRIST-CENTERED PRINCIPLE

Faithful study does not force Jesus into the text. It follows the paths Scripture provides to the One in whom God's redemptive purposes are fulfilled.

Apply the Passage Faithfully

The passage's meaning is anchored in context, yet that stable meaning may support more than one faithful application. Application remains connected to the passage's truth.

PRAY BEFORE APPLYING

Lord, reveal where this truth confronts sin, fear, unbelief, or disobedience. Give courage to respond faithfully, wisdom to act appropriately, and strength through the Holy Spirit to obey.

Move across the bridge

14. What truth did the original audience need?
15. What differs between that setting and the present?
16. What theological or moral principle remains true?
17. How is it clarified through Jesus and the New Testament?
18. What response is faithful today?

Categories of application

- Truth to believe
- Sin to confess
- Command to obey
- Promise to trust
- Example to follow or avoid
- Reason to worship or hope
- Relationship to repair
- Truth to share

Make application specific

Instead of "Trust God," name the feared outcome, write the truth revealed about God, and choose the next obedient step without demanding control of the result.

Application is not self-improvement alone. It depends on grace and the Holy Spirit and seeks faith, repentance, Christlike character, love, holiness, justice, mercy, worship, obedience, perseverance, and hope.

Truth to believe

Sin or false belief to confess

Command or principle to obey

Promise or reason for hope

Specific action

Person to encourage or serve

Prayer response

Verify the Interpretation

Check the text

- Does the conclusion account for the whole passage?
- Was anything important ignored?
- Does it depend on one unusual word meaning?
- Was figurative language handled properly?
- Was description mistaken for command?
- Was a specific promise made universal?
- Does application grow from interpretation?

Check the book and the whole Bible

- Does the conclusion fit the book's purpose and the author's usage?
- Does another section clarify the issue?
- Does it conflict with clear biblical teaching?
- Does later revelation clarify it?
- Is it consistent with Jesus' character and work?

Check responsible resources

- A trusted study Bible
- More than one responsible commentary
- A Bible dictionary or atlas
- A reliable pastor or teacher
- Mature believers within a faithful church

Warning signs

- Secret meanings unavailable in the text
- Dependence on a modern event or unsupported word claim
- Contradiction of clear biblical teaching
- One teacher treated as the only trustworthy interpreter
- Fruit of fear, control, greed, pride, or abuse
- The reader made central while Jesus and the gospel are minimized

PRAY DURING VERIFICATION

Lord, expose any error in this conclusion. Provide humility to receive correction and wisdom to distinguish biblical concern from preference.

VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE

A trustworthy interpretation arises naturally from the text, fits its context, agrees with Scripture's larger teaching, and directs attention toward God rather than the interpreter.

Two Guided Practice Examinations

Practice one: Mark 2:1–12

People include Jesus, a paralyzed man, four people carrying him, the crowd, and scribes. The carriers open the roof; Jesus sees faith, forgives sins, identifies the scribes' reasoning, heals the man, and receives glory from the crowd.

Mark has already shown Jesus' authority in teaching, over spirits, sickness, and leprosy. This scene reveals divine authority to forgive sins, demonstrated through visible healing. Application includes bringing need to Jesus, helping others come to Him, and recognizing forgiveness as the deeper need.

PRAYER RESPONSE

Lord Jesus, reveal any need not brought to You. Give faith to trust Your authority and mercy, willingness to help others come to You, and humility to receive the forgiveness only You give.

Practice two: Psalm 1

The psalm contrasts delight in God's instruction with sinful counsel, a fruitful rooted tree with windblown chaff, stability with instability, and two paths with different destinations. As wisdom poetry, it describes two ways of life rather than promising that faithful people never suffer.

Psalm 1 emphasizes God's instruction; Psalm 2 introduces God's anointed King. Jesus perfectly delighted in the Father's will and is the righteous King. Application examines shaping influences, establishes regular Scripture reflection, and seeks rooted fruit rather than immediate success.

PRAYER RESPONSE

Lord, create deeper delight in Your Word. Reveal any influence drawing the heart from truth. Establish a life rooted in Christ that produces fruit for Your glory.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The process remains consistent, but genre shapes the questions. Narrative emphasizes event and resolution; poetry emphasizes images, parallel lines, contrasts, and spiritual movement.

An Intermediate Framework for Examining Scripture

01

Distinguish exegesis from eisegesis

Draw meaning from the text rather than reading a preferred meaning into it.

02

Consider author, text, and reader

God is the ultimate Author; human authors communicated in history; readers receive rather than create meaning.

03

Examine discourse and structure

Trace introduction, development, repetition, contrast, cause, climax, conclusion, and response.

04

Distinguish word from concept

Concepts may be present without one technical term; gather complete propositions rather than count words.

05

Understand semantic range

Use grammar, nearby words, author usage, literature, ambiguity, and idiom to identify meaning.

06

Recognize textual questions

Identify readings, translation footnotes, and whether the main point changes; avoid doctrine built on a disputed reading alone.

07

Control historical background

Prioritize primary sources and documented evidence; do not let speculative custom control a clear passage.

08

Distinguish biblical and systematic theology

Trace themes through redemptive history and gather the whole canon's coherent teaching.

09

Study typology responsibly

Require history, original meaning, recognizable pattern, escalation, and canonical support.

10

Examine New Testament use of the Old

Read both contexts, compare wording, classify the connection, and identify emphasis.

11

Distinguish meaning, significance, and application

Keep what the passage communicates distinct from why it matters and how to respond.

12

Build a theological bridge

Identify permanent truth, covenant difference, fulfillment in Jesus, New Testament guidance, and faithful response.

13

Include individual and corporate application

Ask whether the command addresses a person, family, leaders, Israel, church, or all believers.

14

Calibrate confidence

Distinguish explicit, strongly implied, probable, possible, speculative, and unsupported conclusions.

15

Recognize the role of the church

Personal study benefits from pastors, teachers, mature believers, and historic Christian interpretation.

16

Keep study connected to prayer and worship

Pray before observation, interpretation, application, verification, and final response.

INTERMEDIATE PRACTICE

Choose an Old Testament passage quoted in the New Testament. Examine both contexts, wording, type of connection, theological truth, relationship to Jesus, personal and corporate applications, confidence level, remaining question, and prayer response.

PART FIFTEEN

A Repeatable Examination Process

01

Pray

Ask for understanding, humility, correction, and obedience.

02

Read

Read the complete passage several times and include surrounding context.

03

Observe

Record people, actions, repetition, contrast, commands, promises, questions, and connections.

04

Pause and pray

Thank God for clarity and ask for help with uncertainty.

05

Identify genre

Determine how this form of literature communicates truth.

06

Examine context

Study paragraph, book, history, covenant, and place in Scripture.

07

Pray for understanding

Ask for protection from bias and careless conclusions.

08

Study important words

Use context first, compare translations, and avoid unsupported language claims.

09

State the main point

Summarize the passage in one or two sentences.

10

Compare Scripture

Examine quotations, parallels, themes, and clearer related passages.

11

Locate the passage

Identify its covenant setting and place in redemption.

12

Trace the connection to Jesus

Follow prophecy, promise, typology, theme, contrast, need, or result.

13

Pray before application

Ask for conviction, wisdom, courage, and strength.

14

Apply

Choose a specific response rooted in meaning and grace.

15

Verify

Check the text, book, whole Bible, and responsible resources.

16

Pray for correction

Ask for humility to recognize error.

17

Respond

Pray with worship, confession, thanksgiving, petition, trust, and obedience.

FINAL WORKSHEET

Examine the Passage

Passage and opening prayer

Passage boundaries and genre

People and actions

Repeated words and ideas

Contrasts, commands, promises, and questions

Connecting words and prayer after observation

Immediate and book context

Historical and cultural context

Important words

Main point

Related passages

Place in the biblical story

Connection to Jesus

Prayer before application

Truth to believe and sin to confess

Response to obey and reason for hope

Specific application

Verification sources

Remaining questions and closing prayer

THE VERDICT

What Does Careful Examination Accomplish?

- Notice what the text actually says
- Respect literary and historical context
- Distinguish meaning from response
- Avoid common interpretive errors
- Understand Scripture within its unfolding story
- Trace legitimate connections to Jesus
- Apply truth faithfully
- Hold conclusions with appropriate confidence
- Remain open to correction
- Grow in knowledge, faith, obedience, prayer, and worship

THE VERDICT OF THIS STUDY

God gave Scripture to be read, understood, trusted, obeyed, proclaimed, and treasured. Prayer does not replace examination, and examination does not replace dependence on God. The Spirit works through Scripture to reveal truth, expose sin, magnify Jesus, and produce faithful obedience.

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

How Will God's Word Be Received?

- God is holy, loving, just, merciful, and faithful.
- Humanity bears God's image yet is fallen in sin.
- Jesus is the promised Messiah and Son of God.
- The cross is God's saving provision for sinners.
- The resurrection is Jesus' victory over sin and death.
- Salvation is a gift of grace received through faith.
- The Spirit gives new life and produces spiritual fruit.
- Jesus will return and renew creation.

The gospel announces

God created humanity for relationship with Him, but sin brought guilt, corruption, and death. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became truly human, lived without sin, died for sinners, was buried, and rose bodily. Forgiveness cannot be earned; salvation is God's gift received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

A RESPONSE

Turn to God in repentance. Trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Receive the forgiveness and new life He gives. Open Scripture humbly, ask the Spirit for understanding, believe what God reveals, obey what He commands, and rest in what He promises.

RESEARCH NOTES

Helpful Starting Points

Primary biblical passages

- Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Joshua 1:7–9; Psalms 1, 19, 119; Proverbs 2:1–11; Isaiah 55:8–11
- Matthew 4:1–11; 5:17–20; 18:15–20; Luke 24:25–49; John 5:39–47; 16:12–15; Acts 17:10–12
- Romans 12:1–2; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16; Ephesians 2:1–10; Philippians 4:10–20; 2 Timothy 2:14–19; 3:14–17; Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:12–13; James 1:19–27; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Revelation 5:1–14

Related 3Nails studies

Investigating the Bible; The Bible on Trial; The Case for the Bible; A Beginner's Guide to Biblical Context; and How to Use a Study Bible, Commentary, and Bible App.

SOURCE AND SHARING NOTE

Begin with Scripture. Examine context, check citations, compare responsible sources, and hold secondary conclusions humbly. This guide may be shared freely for personal, church, or small-group use. It supports—not replaces—careful reading of Scripture. Please do not sell, alter, rebrand, or present the material as an authority equal to the Bible.

THE GOAL

Everything Points Back to Scripture

The purpose of this study is not to make Bible reading feel complicated. The purpose is to provide a clear process for slowing down, listening carefully, praying dependently, and responding faithfully.

Observation protects against assumption. Context protects against distortion. Interpretation protects against misuse. Prayer acknowledges dependence on God. Application moves truth into life. The Holy Spirit opens understanding and produces obedience.

Everything points to God. Everything points to Jesus. Everything points back to Scripture.