



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

How to Study a Word in Scripture

How to Explore Biblical Words Without Losing Their Context

The Short Answer

Studying an important word can deepen understanding of Scripture - but a biblical word receives its meaning from the way it is used in its context.

CHOOSE - Identify a word that matters to the passage. **CONTEXT** - Read the sentence, paragraph, chapter, and book around it.

COMPARE - Compare several trustworthy Bible translations. **ORIGINAL WORD** - Identify the underlying Hebrew or Greek word when helpful.

USAGE - Examine how that word is used elsewhere, especially by the same biblical author. **SCRIPTURE** - Consider related passages and the larger biblical story.

MEANING - Determine what the word means in this particular passage. **APPLY** - Respond to what the passage actually teaches.

The goal is not to uncover a secret meaning hidden behind the English Bible. The goal is to understand more carefully what God has communicated through Scripture.

Psalm 119:18 - Nehemiah 8:8 - Acts 17:11 - 2 Timothy 2:15

Opening Memory Anchor

WORDS HAVE POSSIBILITIES. CONTEXT NARROWS THE POSSIBILITIES. SCRIPTURE REVEALS THE MESSAGE.



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PART ONE BEGINNER GUIDE

1. WHY STUDY INDIVIDUAL WORDS IN SCRIPTURE?

Words matter.

God chose to reveal His truth through human language, and biblical authors used words to communicate meaning.

A word study can help when a passage contains: an important theological word; a repeated word; an unfamiliar word; a word translated differently across Bible versions; a word central to the author's argument; or a word whose meaning seems unclear.

Words such as GRACE, FAITH, COVENANT, RIGHTEOUSNESS, HOLY, GLORY, JUSTIFY, REPENT, LOVE, PEACE, and KINGDOM may carry important biblical meaning.

But not every word needs a detailed study. The purpose is not to dissect every sentence. Study words that materially help explain the passage.

2. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE OF WORD STUDY?

CONTEXT DETERMINES MEANING.

Words usually have a range of possible meanings. Consider the English word "bank." It might mean a financial institution, the side of a river, or a place where something is stored. The word itself does not tell which meaning is intended. The sentence does.

Biblical languages work similarly. A Hebrew or Greek dictionary may list several possible meanings for a word. That does not mean every definition belongs in every verse.

The central question is not: "What can this word possibly mean?" It is: "WHAT DOES THIS WORD MEAN HERE?"

Memory Anchor

A dictionary gives possibilities. Context determines meaning.

3. SHOULD PRAYER BE PART OF WORD STUDY?

Yes.

Word study uses dictionaries, concordances, translations, and other tools, but Bible study remains a spiritual activity centered on God's Word.

Psalms 119:18 says: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

Pray for understanding. Depend upon the Holy Spirit. Approach Scripture humbly.

But prayer does not make every thought about a word correct. The Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, and personal impressions should be tested by Scripture. A word study should increase attention to the biblical text rather than encourage speculation beyond it.

READ: 1 Corinthians 2:12-16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

4. STEP ONE - CHOOSE THE WORD

Begin with the passage, not the dictionary. Read the passage several times. Then identify a word worth investigating.

Ask: Is this word repeated? Does the author's argument depend upon it? Is it an important biblical concept? Is its meaning unclear? Do translations render it differently? Would understanding it better clarify the passage?

Avoid choosing words merely because they sound interesting. The word study should serve understanding of Scripture.

5. STEP TWO - READ THE CONTEXT

Before opening a concordance or lexicon, read around the word.

Read: THE SENTENCE. THE PARAGRAPH. THE CHAPTER. When practical, understand the book's larger message.

Ask: Who is speaking or writing? Who is receiving the message? What subject is being discussed? What comes before and after? What kind of biblical literature is this? How does this word function in the author's argument?



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Genre also matters. POETRY may use a word figuratively, emotionally, or through imagery. NARRATIVE may use ordinary descriptive language within a story. WISDOM often communicates through memorable observations and general principles. PROPHECY may use vivid imagery within messages of warning, judgment, repentance, hope, or restoration. LETTERS often develop a word's significance through a sustained argument.

A word should be understood according to the kind of literature in which it appears. Often the surrounding passage answers much of the question before an original-language tool is needed.

Memory Anchor

Before looking behind the English Bible, look around the word in the Bible.

6. STEP THREE - COMPARE TRANSLATIONS

Compare the passage in two to four trustworthy Bible translations.

Different translations may use different English words for the same Hebrew or Greek term. For example, one translation may use STEADFAST LOVE while another uses LOVINGKINDNESS, FAITHFUL LOVE, or MERCY.

Translation differences can reveal places worth investigating.

Ask: What meaning do the translations share? Where do they differ? Does the difference significantly affect understanding? Why might translators have chosen different English words?

Do not simply choose whichever translation supports a preferred interpretation. Use translation differences as invitations to investigate.

7. DOES A BEGINNER NEED TO KNOW HEBREW OR GREEK?

No.

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with portions in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek.

Knowing these languages can deepen biblical study, but readers do not need to speak Hebrew or Greek to begin studying biblical words responsibly. Good English translations provide an excellent foundation.

Helpful beginner tools can identify the original Hebrew or Greek word, a basic definition, where else the word appears, how it is translated in other passages, and its Strong's number.

A Strong's number is simply a reference number assigned to a Hebrew or Greek word so readers can locate information about it. Strong's numbers are useful navigation tools. They are not inspired. They do not determine what a word means in a particular passage.

8. STEP FOUR - IDENTIFY THE ORIGINAL WORD

When deeper study would help, identify the Hebrew or Greek word behind the English translation.

A concordance, interlinear Bible, Bible-study application, or original-language tool can help.

Record: THE ORIGINAL WORD; ITS TRANSLITERATION; ITS STRONG'S NUMBER, IF USEFUL; A FEW BASIC DEFINITIONS.

Then stop and ask: Which of these possible meanings actually fits this passage?

Do not copy an entire dictionary entry into the interpretation. The goal is understanding, not collecting definitions.

9. STEP FIVE - EXAMINE HOW THE AUTHOR USES THE WORD

One of the most helpful questions is: HOW DOES THIS BIBLICAL AUTHOR USE THIS WORD?

Start close to the passage. Look for the word: 1. Elsewhere in the same paragraph. 2. Elsewhere in the same book. 3. Elsewhere by the same biblical author. 4. Elsewhere in the same Testament. 5. Across Scripture when the connection is legitimate.

Why begin close? Because an author may use a word consistently within a particular argument or book.



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A concordance can locate occurrences. Read several of them in context. Do not merely count them.

Ask: Does the word seem to have the same meaning each time? Does the context change its sense? What patterns emerge?

This moves word study beyond dictionary definitions and into actual biblical usage.

10. WHAT DOES A WORD STUDY LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Consider the word GRACE in EPHESIANS 2:8-10.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 before studying the word. Paul describes people as spiritually dead in sin but then explains what God has done because of His mercy and love. Ephesians 2:8 says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith."

CHOOSE - GRACE is central to Paul's explanation of salvation.

CONTEXT - Ephesians 2:1-3 describes humanity's condition in sin. Verses 4-7 emphasize God's mercy, love, and action in making believers alive with Christ. Verses 8-9 explain that salvation is by grace through faith and is not the result of works. Verse 10 explains that believers are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. The context already shows that grace is connected to God's saving initiative rather than human achievement.

COMPARE - Trustworthy English translations consistently use "grace" in Ephesians 2:8. The surrounding wording may differ slightly, but the central idea remains clear.

ORIGINAL WORD - The Greek word translated "grace" is CHARIS. It can refer to grace, favor, or a gracious gift, depending upon context. The dictionary provides possibilities. Ephesians determines the meaning here.

USAGE - Paul uses charis frequently in his letters. Rather than assuming every occurrence means exactly the same thing, examine how he uses it within each passage. In Ephesians 2, the contrast with human works is especially important.

MEANING - A concise conclusion might be: In Ephesians 2:8, grace describes God's undeserved favor expressed in His saving action toward people who could not save themselves. Salvation is God's gift rather than a human achievement.

JESUS AND THE GOSPEL - The context explicitly connects this saving grace to Christ. God makes believers alive "with Christ" and raises them with Him. Grace is therefore not merely a dictionary concept. It belongs within the Gospel announcement of what God has accomplished through Jesus.

APPLICATION - Grace leaves no room for boasting in personal merit. It produces gratitude, dependence upon God, and a life shaped by the good works for which believers were created.

The word became clearer because it was studied within Paul's sentence, paragraph, argument, and Gospel message.

11. WHAT DOES A WORD STUDY GONE WRONG LOOK LIKE?

Suppose a Greek lexicon lists five possible meanings for a word. A reader copies all five definitions and concludes: "This verse means all five things."

That is not careful interpretation. A lexicon describes ways a word can be used. It does not mean every possible definition is present every time the word appears.

Imagine returning to the English word "bank." A dictionary might list a financial institution, the side of a river, and a stored reserve. To say every sentence containing "bank" carries all three meanings would produce nonsense.

The same principle applies to biblical words. The dictionary provides possibilities. The sentence and context determine which meaning fits.

Memory Anchor

Do not pour the whole dictionary into one verse.

PART TWO WANT TO GO DEEPER? INTERMEDIATE



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12. CAN THE SAME ENGLISH WORD REPRESENT DIFFERENT GREEK OR HEBREW WORDS?

Yes.

Translation moves meaning from one language into another. One English word may sometimes represent several different original-language words. Likewise, one Hebrew or Greek word may require several different English translations depending upon context.

This is one reason original-language tools can sometimes clarify a passage. But discovering a different Hebrew or Greek word does not automatically reveal a dramatic theological distinction.

Consider LOVE. The New Testament uses more than one Greek word that can be translated "love." Agape and philia-related words are familiar examples.

It is sometimes claimed that each Greek word represents a completely separate kind of love with a fixed theological definition. Actual biblical usage is more flexible.

Context - not a popular chart - must determine how the word functions in a passage. The original language can sharpen interpretation. It should not replace contextual interpretation.

13. WHAT IS THE ROOT FALLACY?

Words often have histories. They may develop from older words or contain smaller word parts. Studying that history can occasionally be interesting.

But a word's origin does not automatically determine what the word means in a biblical sentence.

Consider the English word: BUTTERFLY. Studying the meanings of "butter" and "fly" does not explain what a butterfly is.

The same problem can occur with Hebrew and Greek. A reader may break a word into pieces or trace its ancient history and then claim that the hidden original meaning must be present in a biblical verse.

That is called an ETYMOLOGICAL or ROOT FALLACY.

Meaning comes primarily from how a word is actually being used in its linguistic and literary context.

Memory Anchor

A word's history may be interesting. Its context determines what it communicates.

14. WHAT OTHER WORD-STUDY MISTAKES SHOULD BE AVOIDED?

MISTAKE 1 - IMPORTING EVERY DEFINITION. A lexicon may list several meanings. Do not place all of them into one verse.

MISTAKE 2 - ASSUMING THE SAME WORD ALWAYS MEANS THE SAME THING. Words can have different senses in different contexts. Study each occurrence where it appears.

MISTAKE 3 - ASSUMING THE SAME ENGLISH WORD ALWAYS COMES FROM THE SAME ORIGINAL WORD. Translation is more complex than one English word equaling one Hebrew or Greek word.

MISTAKE 4 - BUILDING DOCTRINE FROM STRONG'S ALONE. Strong's is helpful for locating words. It is not a substitute for context, grammar, theology, or a good lexicon.

MISTAKE 5 - COUNTING OCCURRENCES WITHOUT READING THEM. Knowing that a word appears fifty times does not explain what it means. Read representative occurrences in context.

MISTAKE 6 - SEARCHING FOR SECRET CODES. Numerical values, hidden letter patterns, or speculative meanings are not responsible substitutes for reading Scripture according to its language and context.

MISTAKE 7 - MAKING THE WORD BIGGER THAN THE SENTENCE. A word contributes to a sentence. The sentence contributes to a paragraph. The paragraph contributes to a book. Do not let an isolated word overpower the author's actual message.

15. WHAT IS A LEXICON?

A lexicon is a dictionary designed for another language. Biblical Hebrew and Greek lexicons provide information about how words are used.



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A good lexicon may include possible meanings, examples of usage, grammatical information, different senses of the word, biblical references, and information from other ancient writings.

A lexicon is generally more useful for serious word study than a simple list of English definitions attached to a Strong's number.

But even a lexicon does not interpret the passage automatically. The lexicon provides evidence. The reader must still consider grammar, sentence structure, context, genre, authorial usage, and the larger argument.

You do not need to master technical lexicons to understand the central biblical message. They are tools for deeper investigation, not requirements for faithful Bible reading.

16. WHAT IS AN INTERLINEAR BIBLE?

An interlinear places original-language words alongside or beneath an English translation. It can help readers identify which Hebrew or Greek word stands behind an English word.

Interlinears are useful. But they can also create false confidence.

Hebrew and Greek grammar cannot always be understood simply by matching each original word with an English word directly beneath it. Languages arrange and communicate ideas differently.

Use an interlinear to identify and investigate words. Do not assume it provides the same understanding as knowing the original language.

17. WHY SHOULD THE SAME AUTHOR'S USAGE RECEIVE SPECIAL ATTENTION?

Words receive meaning through usage.

When Paul uses a word repeatedly in one letter, those nearby occurrences may help explain how he is using it within that argument. The same principle applies to other biblical writers.

This does not mean an author always uses a word identically. It means nearby usage is often especially relevant evidence.

A helpful study order is: SAME PARAGRAPH -> SAME BOOK -> SAME AUTHOR -> SAME TESTAMENT -> BROADER SCRIPTURE.

Start close. Then widen the search.

18. WHAT IS THE SEPTUAGINT, AND WHY CAN IT MATTER?

The SEPTUAGINT, often abbreviated LXX, is an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It was widely used in the ancient Jewish and early Christian world.

New Testament writers sometimes quote Old Testament passages in wording that reflects this Greek translation.

Because the Septuagint shows how Hebrew biblical vocabulary was expressed in ancient Greek, it can sometimes help readers explore connections between Old Testament and New Testament language.

But caution is necessary. A Greek New Testament word does not automatically equal one particular Hebrew word. Likewise, finding the same Greek word in the Septuagint does not prove that two passages have identical meanings.

The Septuagint can provide useful evidence. Context still governs interpretation.

19. HOW SHOULD WORD STUDY CONNECT TO JESUS AND THE BIBLICAL STORY?

After determining what the word means in its immediate passage, consider whether the concept develops through Scripture.

Ask: Does this word or concept connect naturally to promise, covenant, sacrifice, priesthood, kingship, kingdom, sin, grace, redemption, forgiveness, faith, resurrection, new creation, or the Gospel?

Jesus may fulfill or deepen a biblical theme. The New Testament may explicitly connect an Old Testament concept to Him.

But do not insert "Jesus" into a word's dictionary definition merely because Scripture ultimately points to Christ.

First determine what the word means in its passage. Then trace legitimate biblical connections.



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Memory Anchor

Understand the word in its passage. Then follow the concept through Scripture.

20. WHAT TOOLS CAN A BEGINNER ACTUALLY USE?

Several accessible resources can help readers begin.

BLUE LETTER BIBLE - Provides multiple Bible translations, Strong's numbers, concordance searches, interlinear information, and basic Hebrew and Greek study tools.

BIBLE HUB - Provides parallel translations, concordances, interlinear information, lexicon entries, cross-references, and commentaries.

STRONG'S CONCORDANCE - Helps readers locate biblical words and identify underlying Hebrew and Greek terms through its numbering system.

A trustworthy **STUDY BIBLE** can also provide valuable background, cross-references, and explanatory notes without requiring specialized language knowledge.

More technical Hebrew and Greek lexicons are available for deeper study, but beginners do not need advanced academic resources to begin studying biblical words faithfully.

Remember: A sophisticated tool does not automatically produce a sophisticated interpretation. Careful reading of context remains more important than owning advanced resources.

21. IN WHAT ORDER SHOULD STUDY TOOLS BE USED?

A helpful progression is:

1. **BIBLE** - Read the passage carefully.
2. **CONTEXT** - Understand the sentence, paragraph, chapter, and book.
3. **TRANSLATION COMPARISON** - Notice meaningful differences.
4. **CONCORDANCE** - Find other occurrences.
5. **LEXICON / LANGUAGE TOOLS** - Investigate the original word and its possible meanings.
6. **COMMENTARIES** - Compare conclusions with responsible interpreters.
7. **RETURN TO SCRIPTURE** - Re-read the passage with what has been learned.

Tools should lead back to Scripture. They should not become substitutes for Scripture.

RESOURCE SAFEGUARD - Listing a resource does not mean 3Nails endorses every theological position, methodology, study note, commentary, interpretation, or conclusion it contains. Compare resources carefully and continually return to Scripture.

22. A SIMPLE 3NAILS WORD STUDY WORKSHEET

PASSAGE: _____

WORD: _____

PRAY - Ask God for understanding and approach Scripture humbly.

CONTEXT - What is happening in the sentence and paragraph? What is the author's main point? What kind of biblical literature is this?

TRANSLATION COMPARISON - How do two to four trustworthy translations render the word?

ORIGINAL WORD - Hebrew / Greek: _____ Transliteration: _____ Strong's number, if useful: _____

POSSIBLE MEANINGS - What meanings does a trustworthy lexicon provide?

BIBLICAL USAGE - How is the word used in this paragraph? In this book? By the same author? Elsewhere in Scripture?

MEANING HERE - Complete: "In this passage, this word means..."

JESUS AND THE BIBLICAL STORY - Does this word or concept connect legitimately to Jesus, the Gospel, or the larger biblical story?



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APPLICATION - How should the truth of this passage shape belief or life?

FINAL CONTEXT CHECK - Does the conclusion fit the sentence, paragraph, book, genre, and larger teaching of Scripture?

23. WHAT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED ABOUT BIBLICAL WORD STUDY?

Word study can be fascinating. But more information does not automatically produce better interpretation.

The goal is not to impress others with Greek or Hebrew. The goal is not to discover a meaning translators somehow missed. The goal is not to find secret information behind the Bible. The goal is to understand Scripture more faithfully.

Remember: START WITH THE PASSAGE. STUDY THE CONTEXT. RESPECT THE GENRE. COMPARE TRANSLATIONS. USE ORIGINAL-LANGUAGE TOOLS HUMBLY. EXAMINE ACTUAL BIBLICAL USAGE. LET CONTEXT DETERMINE MEANING. CONNECT SCRIPTURE CAREFULLY. LOOK TO JESUS WHERE SCRIPTURE LEGITIMATELY POINTS TO HIM. APPLY WHAT THE PASSAGE ACTUALLY TEACHES.

Then return to the Bible.

Final Memory Anchor

START CLOSE. Sentence. Paragraph. Book.
LOOK DEEPER. Translations. Original word. Usage.
LOOK WIDER. Author. Scripture. Biblical story.
RETURN HOME. Let the word serve the passage.

REVIEW

1. Why can studying an individual biblical word be helpful?
2. What is the most important rule of word study?
3. Why should context be examined before a dictionary or lexicon?
4. How can biblical genre affect the way a word is used?
5. How can comparing Bible translations help?
6. Does a reader need to know Hebrew or Greek to study biblical words responsibly?
7. What are Strong's numbers - and what can they not do?
8. Why is usage by the same biblical author especially helpful?
9. Why should every lexicon definition not be imported into a verse?
10. What is the root or etymological fallacy?
11. Why can an interlinear be helpful while also creating false confidence?
12. What is the Septuagint?
13. How should word study connect to Jesus and the larger biblical story?
14. What is the proper role of commentaries and language tools?
15. What is the ultimate goal of biblical word study?

WORD STUDY PRACTICE PATH

Try the method with several important biblical words:

HESED - Psalm 136: Explore the rich Old Testament language of steadfast love and covenant faithfulness.

SHALOM - Numbers 6:24-26: Study the biblical idea of peace, wholeness, and well-being in context.

HOLY - Isaiah 6:1-7: Explore holiness within Isaiah's vision of God.

GRACE - Ephesians 2:1-10: Study grace within Paul's explanation of salvation.

JUSTIFY - Romans 3:21-28: Examine Paul's use of justification within his Gospel argument.

ABIDE - John 15:1-11: Study what Jesus means by abiding within the Vine imagery.

KINGDOM - Mark 1:14-15: Explore Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God.

Do not try to discover everything a word has ever meant. Study what it means where Scripture uses it.

ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE - POINTING TO JESUS

Words matter because God communicates through words.

But biblical words do not float independently from sentences, paragraphs, books, authors, genres, history, and the larger story of Scripture.

A concordance is not the destination. A Strong's number is not the destination. A Greek definition is not the destination. A Hebrew definition is not the destination. A lexicon is not the destination.

The goal is to know God through His Word.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

Open the Bible. Pray for understanding. Read the passage. Notice the important word. Study its context. Respect its genre. Compare translations. Investigate the original language when useful. Examine how Scripture uses the word. Avoid hidden meanings and exaggerated claims. Determine what the word means in the passage. Follow legitimate connections through Scripture and toward Jesus. Respond faithfully to what God has revealed. Then keep reading.

The best word study does not leave the reader fascinated primarily with a word. It leaves the reader understanding the Word of God more clearly.