



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE STUDY METHODS

How to Use Commentaries Without Becoming Dependent on Them

Learning from Other Christians While Keeping Scripture in Its Proper Place

The Short Answer

Bible commentaries can be valuable tools because they allow readers to learn from Christians who have spent years studying Scripture, biblical languages, history, theology, and difficult passages. But a commentary is not Scripture. The healthiest pattern is: **READ SCRIPTURE FIRST -> STUDY IT YOURSELF -> CONSULT COMMENTARIES -> COMPARE THEIR REASONING -> RETURN TO SCRIPTURE.** A commentary should help someone see the biblical text more clearly - not replace the work of reading, thinking about, praying through, and responding to Scripture personally.

Acts 17:10-12 · 2 Timothy 2:15 · 2 Timothy 3:14-17 · 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Opening Memory Anchor

Use commentaries to help understand Scripture - not to avoid studying Scripture.



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PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

1. WHAT IS A BIBLE COMMENTARY?

A Bible commentary is a resource in which a scholar, pastor, teacher, or group of scholars explains a biblical passage.

Depending on the commentary, it may help explain historical background, cultural customs, difficult words, biblical languages, grammar, literary structure, connections with other passages, theological questions, different interpretations, and practical implications.

Good commentaries can be enormously helpful. But there is an important distinction: **The Bible is inspired Scripture. A commentary is someone's interpretation of Scripture.** Paul teaches that Scripture is "God-breathed" and useful for teaching, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17). No commentary receives that description.

Even excellent commentators can misunderstand a passage, emphasize assumptions associated with their theological tradition, overlook evidence, or disagree with another faithful Christian. That does not make commentaries unhelpful. It simply means they must remain in their proper place.

SCRIPTURE = AUTHORITY COMMENTARY = STUDY TOOL

2. WHY USE COMMENTARIES AT ALL?

Because Christians were never intended to learn completely alone. God gives teachers to the Church (Ephesians 4:11-13), and believers can benefit from the wisdom of Christians who have studied Scripture carefully.

A good commentary may help answer: What was happening historically? What would this expression have meant to the original audience? Is there something important in the Greek or Hebrew? How does this passage relate to the rest of the book? Why do Christians interpret this verse differently? Is something important being overlooked in the context?

A commentary can sometimes reveal that an interpretation that initially seemed obvious does not fit the historical, grammatical, or literary context. That is valuable. Humility means recognizing that a personal interpretation is not automatically correct simply because it is personal.

The goal is neither "Never use commentaries" nor "Let the commentary tell you what the Bible means." The healthier approach is: **Study Scripture personally while learning humbly from others.**

3. WHAT SHOULD COME FIRST - THE BIBLE OR THE COMMENTARY?

The Bible. Whenever practical, read and study the passage before opening a commentary.

Consider Acts 17:10-12. The Bereans listened carefully to Paul's teaching, but they also examined the Scriptures daily to determine whether what they were hearing was true. That establishes an important posture: **Listen carefully. Learn humbly. Check Scripture.**

The same posture applies to pastors, teachers, study Bibles, podcasts, Bible studies, commentaries, AI tools - and resources such as this one. Before consulting a commentary, ask: What does the passage actually say? What comes before and after it? Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? What words or ideas repeat? What appears to be the author's main point? What questions does the passage raise?

Write down preliminary observations. Only then consult outside resources. Otherwise, someone else's interpretation can become the lens through which the passage is read before the reader has carefully examined the passage itself.

Memory Anchor

Observation before consultation.

4. WHAT IS A SIMPLE PROCESS FOR USING A COMMENTARY WELL?

STEP 1 - READ

Read the biblical passage carefully, preferably more than once.

STEP 2 - OBSERVE

Write down what is actually present in the text. Notice repeated words, commands, contrasts, promises, questions, cause-and-effect relationships, and connections with the surrounding passage.

STEP 3 - INTERPRET

Ask what the passage most likely meant in its original context. Form a preliminary conclusion. It does not need to be perfect. The important thing is to engage Scripture before outsourcing interpretation.

STEP 4 - CONSULT

Now read one or more reliable commentaries. Ask what the commentator noticed, what historical information helps, whether the context is understood differently, what biblical evidence supports the interpretation, and whether alternatives are mentioned.

STEP 5 - COMPARE

Do not merely ask, "What does this commentator believe?" Ask, "Why does this commentator believe it?" Examine the biblical reasoning.

STEP 6 - RETURN

Return to the biblical passage and read it again. Ask whether the interpretation actually fits the text and its context. The final destination is not the commentary. It is Scripture.

5. WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Consider Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." A reader encountering that verse alone might initially conclude: **"Christ will give believers strength to accomplish anything they attempt."**

Before consulting a commentary, read Philippians 4:10-13. Paul describes experiencing both abundance and need. He has learned how to live with plenty and how to endure hunger. That context already begins refining the interpretation.

A preliminary conclusion might become: **Paul is describing Christ's strength enabling him to remain faithful and content through dramatically changing circumstances.** Now consult reliable commentaries. A good commentary may explain the immediate context, Paul's circumstances, the meaning of "all things," or how the passage fits Philippians as a whole.

Then return to Philippians 4:10-13. The commentary did not create the meaning. Ideally, it helped the reader see more clearly what was already present in Scripture. That is healthy commentary use.



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6. WHAT DOES COMMENTARY DEPENDENCE LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Now consider the process going wrong. Imagine someone studying Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you..." Instead of reading Jeremiah 29, the reader immediately opens a favorite devotional commentary.

Suppose the commentary summarizes the verse as: **"God has a wonderful personal plan for your life, and this verse promises that His plan will bring you success and prosperity."** The reader trusts the author and writes: **Meaning: God promises that every faithful believer's individual plans will eventually prosper.**

What went wrong? **FIRST - CONSULTATION CAME BEFORE OBSERVATION. SECOND - THE COMMENTARY'S CONCLUSION BECAME THE STARTING ASSUMPTION. THIRD - THE SURROUNDING PASSAGE WAS NEGLECTED.**

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Jeremiah is writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They have been removed from Jerusalem under God's judgment, and false prophets have been encouraging expectations of a quick return. Jeremiah tells the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, raise families, seek the welfare of Babylon, and understand that their exile will not end immediately. Verse 10 speaks of seventy years before restoration. Verse 11 belongs within that historical promise of God's continued covenant purposes for His exiled people.

That does not make Jeremiah 29:11 irrelevant to Christians. It reveals something genuinely encouraging about God's faithfulness, sovereignty, and purposes. But the verse should not be transformed into a blanket promise that every Christian will experience personal prosperity or that every individual ambition will succeed.

The problem was not simply that the reader consulted a commentary. The problem was that the commentary was allowed to determine the meaning before Scripture was examined. A healthier process would be: **READ Jeremiah 29:1-14. OBSERVE the exile, audience, seventy-year timeframe, commands, and promise. INTERPRET the verse within that setting. CONSULT commentaries. COMPARE their reasoning. RETURN to Jeremiah 29.**

Memory Anchor

Never let a commentary become the context of a verse.

7. ARE ALL COMMENTARIES THE SAME?

No. Different resources serve different purposes.

STUDY BIBLE NOTES - Best for quick explanations while reading. Useful for beginners, but necessarily brief.

DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARIES - Emphasize spiritual reflection and application. Helpful for encouragement, but they may provide less detailed historical or interpretive analysis.

EXPOSITORY OR PASTORAL COMMENTARIES - Explain passages in greater depth while remaining accessible. These are often an excellent starting point for ordinary Bible study.

TECHNICAL OR ACADEMIC COMMENTARIES - May discuss Greek or Hebrew grammar, manuscript questions, ancient sources, historical debates, and scholarly interpretations. These can be extremely useful but may require more background knowledge.

Most Christians do not need the most technical commentary available. A reliable study Bible plus one or two accessible expository commentaries can provide substantial help.

8. HOW CAN SOMEONE RECOGNIZE A TRUSTWORTHY COMMENTARY?

No single checklist guarantees accuracy, but several questions help: Does the author treat Scripture seriously and in context? Does the explanation arise from the passage, or is an idea being imposed upon it? Does the author explain the reasoning behind conclusions? Are difficult passages acknowledged rather than avoided? Are alternative Christian interpretations represented fairly? Does the author distinguish clear biblical statements from theological conclusions? What theological tradition or perspective influences the author? Is the author appropriately qualified for the kind of commentary being written?

Also remember: **Popularity does not equal reliability.** A bestselling author can be wrong. A famous preacher can be wrong. A respected scholar can be wrong. And an unfamiliar commentator can sometimes make an excellent observation. Evaluate arguments, not merely reputations.

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER? - INTERMEDIATE

9. DOES EVERY COMMENTARY HAVE A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE?

Yes. There is no completely perspective-free interpreter. Commentators may approach passages from Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Wesleyan/Arminian, Baptist, Pentecostal, dispensational, covenantal, Anglican, Lutheran, or other theological traditions. Other factors can influence interpretation as well, including historical period, culture, academic training, denomination, and ministry experience.

Recognizing perspective is not the same as dismissing someone's interpretation. Instead of saying, **"This commentator has a bias, so the commentary cannot be trusted,"** a better question is: **"What assumptions may influence this interpretation, and does the biblical evidence support the conclusion?"** Reading commentators from more than one faithful Christian perspective can sometimes reveal assumptions a reader did not realize were being made.

10. WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN WHEN GOOD COMMENTARIES DISAGREE?

Do not panic. Faithful Christians sometimes disagree about difficult passages. Romans 7:14-25 provides a useful example. Paul describes an intense conflict involving sin: he desires what is good yet struggles with doing what he hates. He describes sin dwelling within him and cries out for deliverance.

INTERPRETATION A - PAUL IS DESCRIBING CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE. Some interpreters understand Paul as describing the continuing struggle with sin experienced by a genuine believer. They point to language such as Paul's delight in God's law and his desire to do what is good.

INTERPRETATION B - PAUL IS DESCRIBING LIFE UNDER SIN APART FROM CHRIST. Other interpreters understand the passage primarily as describing Paul before conversion, or the human condition under the law apart from the liberating work of Christ. They emphasize Paul's language of captivity and compare it with the freedom described in Romans 8. Other interpretations and variations also exist.



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How should a reader respond? Do not simply count commentators. Separate the evidence: **1. EXPLICIT SCRIPTURAL TEACHING** - What does Romans 7:14-25 actually say? Paul describes conflict involving God's law, human desire, sin, inability, and the need for deliverance; the passage explicitly points toward deliverance through Jesus Christ in verse 25. **2. BIBLICAL / THEOLOGICAL INFERENCE** - Is Paul describing his present Christian experience, his pre-conversion experience, Israel/humanity under the law, or using a rhetorical perspective? Those conclusions require interpretation of Paul's language and its relationship to Romans 6 and Romans 8. **3. DENOMINATIONAL OR HISTORICAL TEACHING** - Different Christian traditions and theologians may emphasize different readings, often in connection with broader understandings of conversion, sanctification, law, and the Christian life.

The important lesson here is not to settle Romans 7 in a paragraph. It is to learn how to study disagreement. Read Romans 6-8. Compare the arguments. Ask which interpretation best explains the words Paul actually uses and the flow of his argument. A reader may eventually conclude, **"The evidence seems strongest for this interpretation, while recognizing that faithful Christians understand the passage differently."** That is not weakness. It is calibrated confidence.

Where Scripture speaks clearly, believe it. Where interpretation is required, examine the evidence. Where uncertainty remains, do not manufacture certainty.

11. WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF COMMENTARY DEPENDENCE?

Commentaries have probably moved beyond their proper role when someone rarely studies a passage before reading commentary notes; feels unable to understand any Scripture without an expert; immediately asks, "What does my favorite teacher say?"; repeats conclusions without understanding the biblical reasoning; assumes a commentator must be right because of reputation; becomes anxious when respected commentators disagree; spends more time reading about Scripture than reading Scripture; or treats commentary conclusions as though they carry biblical authority.

A simple test is: **If the commentary disappeared, could the reader still open the Bible, observe the text, consider the context, identify the central message, and begin studying responsibly?** Growing biblical maturity should increasingly make the answer: **Yes.**

12. CAN AI TOOLS BE USED LIKE COMMENTARIES?

AI tools can assist Bible study, but they require significant caution. They may be useful for generating study questions, explaining unfamiliar terminology, summarizing interpretive positions, identifying possible cross-references, suggesting historical questions to research, comparing interpretations, and helping organize observations.

But AI is not Scripture, a pastor, a scholar, or an infallible reference source. AI can make mistakes, misunderstand context, provide inaccurate historical information, confidently state something incorrect, or blend interpretations from different theological traditions without clearly identifying them.

A SIMPLE AI VERIFICATION EXAMPLE. Suppose an AI tool says: "The Greek word used here literally means _____, so this verse must mean _____." That may sound authoritative because Greek has been mentioned. Do not assume the claim is correct. **1. READ THE PASSAGE.** What does the surrounding context indicate? **2. COMPARE SEVERAL TRANSLATIONS.** Do reputable translations render the word differently? **3. CHECK A RELIABLE LEXICON OR ORIGINAL-LANGUAGE TOOL.** Does the word actually have only the meaning the AI claimed, or a broader semantic range? **4. CONSULT RELIABLE COMMENTARIES.** How do scholars explain the word in this context? **5. RETURN TO SCRIPTURE.** Which meaning best fits the sentence, paragraph, book, and biblical context?

This matters because words rarely have one mechanical English equivalent that can simply be inserted everywhere they appear. An AI system may provide a useful question to investigate while giving an oversimplified answer to that question.

AI OUTPUT = RESEARCH LEAD NOT AI OUTPUT = BIBLICAL CONCLUSION. When historical, linguistic, or scholarly claims matter, verify them through reliable sources. AI can assist Bible study. It should never become a substitute for Bible study.

13. CAN COMMENTARIES ACTUALLY MAKE SOMEONE A BETTER INDEPENDENT BIBLE STUDENT?

Yes - when used correctly. A good commentary does more than provide answers. It teaches readers what kinds of questions careful interpreters ask. Over time, a reader may begin noticing: the commentator always checks context; asks how this paragraph fits the whole book; considers the original audience; compares related passages carefully; and distinguishes observation from interpretation. Those habits can gradually become the reader's habits.

That is one of the best uses of a commentary. The goal is not, **"Eventually no commentary will ever be needed."** There will always be more to learn. The goal is: **"Commentaries increasingly deepen Bible study rather than replacing it."**

14. HOW DO COMMENTARIES FIT WITH OTHER BIBLE-STUDY METHODS?

Commentaries are not really a competing Bible-study method. They are supporting tools that can be used during many methods. But the order matters.

WHEN DOING A WORD STUDY - A commentary can explain why a particular meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word fits a passage. But it should not replace examining how the word functions in its actual context.

WHEN STUDYING A BIBLICAL TOPIC - A commentary can explain difficult passages related to the topic. But doctrine should be built from Scripture - not from collecting commentators who support a preferred conclusion.

WHEN TRACING A BIBLICAL THEME - A commentary may point out connections between passages. But the reader should examine those passages and determine whether the proposed connection is explicit, strong, possible, or speculative.

WHEN USING CROSS-REFERENCES - A commentary may explain why two passages are related. But read both passages. A printed cross-reference or commentator's connection is an invitation to investigate - not proof that two passages mean the same thing.

WHEN USING SOAP, SPECK, COMA, HEAR, SWEDISH, VERSE MAPPING, OR INDUCTIVE STUDY - Begin with Scripture. Observe first. Use outside resources later when they help answer questions the text has raised.

Across all these methods, the principle remains: **Do not use a commentary to avoid doing the work the Bible-study method is designed to teach.** A word study should teach careful word study. A topical study should teach responsible synthesis. Theme tracing should teach recognition of genuine biblical connections. Cross-referencing should teach comparison in context. Inductive study should teach observation before interpretation. Commentaries can strengthen each process. They should not replace it.

A SIMPLE COMMENTARY WORKSHEET

BEFORE OPENING THE COMMENTARY

PASSAGE: _____

What does the passage clearly say? _____



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What is the surrounding context? _____
What seems to be the main point? _____
What questions remain? _____

AFTER CONSULTING THE COMMENTARY

What did the commentator notice that was missed? _____
What historical or contextual information was helpful? _____
What interpretation did the commentator propose? _____
What biblical evidence supports that interpretation? _____
Do other reliable commentators disagree? If so, why? _____

NOW RETURN TO SCRIPTURE

Read the passage again.
What conclusion now seems best supported by Scripture? _____

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

For most readers, a useful progression is:

- 1. A RELIABLE STUDY BIBLE** - Study Bible notes provide concise explanations and can be a good first step into commentary use. Read the biblical passage before reading the notes.
- 2. AN ACCESSIBLE EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY** - Series such as the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (TOTC) and Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (TNTC) are examples of commentaries designed to combine serious engagement with Scripture with relative accessibility. Individual volumes within any multi-author series can vary because different scholars write different books.
- 3. MORE DETAILED COMMENTARIES** - Readers wanting greater depth may eventually encounter series such as the New International Commentary on the Old Testament/New Testament (NICOT/NICNT) and other scholarly commentary series. These often provide more detailed interaction with historical, linguistic, and interpretive questions. More technical does not automatically mean more useful for every reader. The best commentary is often the one that answers the questions appropriate to the reader's present level without replacing personal study.
- 4. DIGITAL BIBLE-STUDY TOOLS** - Resources such as BibleGateway, Bible Hub, Blue Letter Bible, STEP Bible, and Logos Bible Software may provide access to Bible translations, language tools, cross-references, and various commentaries. Availability, cost, and included resources can change over time.

Resource Safeguard

Listing a resource does not mean 3Nails endorses every theological position, methodology, publication, interpretation, or conclusion it contains. No commentary series is inspired. No publisher is infallible. No Bible-study platform guarantees correct interpretation. Compare sources and continually return to Scripture.

REVIEW

1. What has final authority in Bible study? **Scripture.**
2. When should a commentary normally be opened? **After first reading, observing, and thinking about the biblical passage personally.**
3. What is more important than knowing what a commentator believes? **Understanding why the commentator believes it and whether the reasoning fits Scripture.**
4. What should happen when commentaries disagree? **Return to the biblical text, compare the arguments, distinguish explicit teaching from inference, and hold conclusions with appropriate confidence.**
5. What is one major warning sign of commentary dependence? **Allowing another person's interpretation to replace personal engagement with Scripture.**
6. What is the safest way to use AI in Bible study? **Treat its answers as material to investigate and verify - not as authoritative biblical conclusions.**
7. How should commentaries relate to other Bible-study methods? **They should support the study process without replacing the observation, interpretation, comparison, and verification those methods are intended to teach.**

FINAL MEMORY ANCHOR

Final Memory Anchor

READ SCRIPTURE FIRST. OBSERVE BEFORE CONSULTING. THINK CAREFULLY. LEARN HUMBLY. CHECK THE REASONING. RETURN TO SCRIPTURE.

Commentaries are gifts when they help readers understand God's Word more faithfully. They become a problem when they begin occupying the place that belongs to God's Word.

The purpose of Bible study is not to become skilled at repeating what commentators say. It is to grow in the ability to read Scripture faithfully, recognize what it actually teaches, learn humbly from the wider Church, and continually return to the Word God has given.

The Bereans provide a lasting model: **Receive teaching eagerly. Examine Scripture carefully.** That posture can govern the use of commentaries, study Bibles, sermons, podcasts, Bible-study resources, original-language tools, and AI.

Scripture is the authority. Commentaries are companions. Keep them in that order.

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