

How to Study a Bible Passage

Some suggestions partly based on InterVarsity-style "manuscript Bible Study"

1. Be quiet for a few minutes; ask God to be with you in your study and to enable you to see things
2. Read the passage in three versions: the one you usually use plus two others.
3. Write down your first thoughts about what it was saying and how it might be important and what questions it raises for you. As you go along, add to these notes on thoughts and questions.
4. Look at the passages on either side and ask whether you learn anything from considering its place in the book as a whole.
5. Ask what the passage or the wider context imply about the people it was addressing—e.g., their needs, their mistakes?
6. Ask what the passage was seeking to do. How was it aiming to make a difference to them? In due course, express this in a sentence. E.g., Psalm 147's aim is to encourage people to worship God with enthusiasm, because of who God is and because of what creation is.
7. In seeking to achieve that aim, ask what its the main point is. In due course, express this too in a sentence.
8. Identify the sub-points that contribute to that main point and help it make its argument. Does it have a logical structure? Can you lay out the structure in a diagram? The structure might be linear (see Psalm 107) or it might be like the petals of a flower (see Psalm 119) or it might be a spiral (see Psalms 42-43). Give a title to each of the sections.
9. If the passage doesn't have a structure (see e.g., Psalm 72) and it's more like a "natural" garden, ask about the structure of its thought. What's its underlying theology and how do the elements of that theology relate to one another?
10. Remember that for #6, 7, 8, and 9 you're not just trying to summarize the passage. You are getting inside it. And you're trying to avoid just being impressionistic—to get beyond what you noted under #3
11. For a narrative text, ask also about the plot of the story, the different characters, and the viewpoint from which the story is told.
12. Study a literal translation of the text such as the Lexham English Bible or the American Standard Version. Print it out if that helps. Remove all the verse numbers. Use highlighting to identify markers of the argument such as changes in forms of speech (past verbs, present verbs, imperatives); the use of link words such as "for", "therefore", "then", "but," "so that"; changes in the subjects of verbs (I/we, you, they); changes in the subject matter. See if this helps to refine your findings so far.
13. See if there are any words that recur (or different but related words, or pairs of opposite words), which therefore suggest something important to the passage.
14. See if there are any theologically important words whose meaning you need to think about.
15. Read the *New Interpreter's Bible* Volume 8 (or similar commentary) on the passage. Does it help with any puzzles you had or does it add anything to what you had seen or does it make you reconsider anything you thought you had seen (or add to your questions!)?
16. Ask whether the passage says something that conflicts with what you have been told or what you "know" God wouldn't say, and ask whether that was wrong or whether your reading of the passage is wrong.
17. In light of the answers to all these questions, ask what the passage's significance is for a congregation today. What does it say about (e.g.) worship or mission or spirituality or the nature of the gospel or what we believe or ethics or pastoral care or work life or what you do for the rest of your week?