

# How to Do a Synthetic Bible Study

## Purposes and Principles

Synthetic Bible study gives you a complete overview of a book of the Bible, presenting the big picture of God's message and actions. This type of study seeks an overview of a Bible book without getting lost in a web of details.

Synthetic Bible study consists of the following distinctive ways of reading a Bible book.

1. *Read the book continuously.* This means reading the book at a single sitting. Long books such as Isaiah and Psalms may require several hours. You can read a shorter book such as Ephesians, Philippians, or Philemon in fewer than 30 minutes. As you read the book, ignore chapter and verse divisions. Early Bible editors inserted these divisions, so they may not reflect the writer's thought pattern.
2. *Read the book independently.* Don't use a commentary or another study help during the first reading. Learn on your own with the aid of the Holy Spirit. You will be excited and surprised by what you learn!
3. *Read the book repeatedly.* You must read the book more than one time. You will need a pen and some paper or a notebook for making notes during every reading.

The purposes of the first reading are to determine the main theme of the book and to learn the writer's purpose and goal. Ask yourself these questions as you read a book for the first time.

1. Who wrote the book, and to whom did he write it? Was the book written to persecuted, wavering, faithful, or confused believers?
2. What type of literature is the book? Is it poetry, prophecy, narrative, an epistle, or a combination of all of these?
3. Why did the author write this book? Was it written to oppose sin, false teaching, or indifference? How did the author carry out his purpose? What ideas did he present to support his purpose?
4. What arrangement of material did the writer use? Did he arrange it according to time, place, or logic?
5. What is the emotional tone of the book? Does it express joy, concern, excitement, or arguments?

Not all of these questions will apply to every book, but most of them will be useful in giving you insight into a writing's broad purpose.

## Reading Continuously and Independently

If you read a book like 1 Corinthians, you can observe much in the first reading. You can learn that the church was filled with people who were proud and ready to argue. They were practicing sexual immorality. They allowed false teaching. They practiced sensational spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and working miracles while failing to love one another. They had not given generously. Many times Paul used the phrase *now or now concerning* (see 1 Cor. 7:1; 8:1; 11:2; 12:1; 16:1) to introduce a new topic for discussion.

If you read the Book of Romans or Ephesians, you will see a change of emphasis between Romans 11 and 12 and between Ephesians 3 and 4. In both books Paul spent the first chapters outlining important theological truths. In the later chapters he applied these truths in his readers' lives. Both books contain the words *now or therefore* (see Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:1), showing that Paul is changing from one topic to another.

**Read Luke 1:1-4. State Luke's purpose in writing the Book of Luke.**

Although these verses are not an entire book of the Bible, they give you an idea of what the entire book is about. Luke stated that he wrote the book to provide an accurate chronological account of events in Jesus' life so that his readers would know the truth.

**Now read the Book of Philemon in one sitting. Without using any Bible-study aids, answer the five key questions introduced in this session.**

1. Who wrote the book, and to whom did he write it?
2. What type of literature is the book?
3. Why did the author write this book? How did the author carry out his purpose? What ideas did he present to support his purpose?
4. What arrangement of material did the writer use? Did he arrange it according to time, place, or logic?
5. What is the emotional tone of the book? Does it express joy, concern, excitement, or arguments?

Even one reading of Philemon reveals Paul's purpose and circumstances when he wrote this epistle. I'm sure you were able to record the other information about the book, as well.

## Reading Repeatedly

So far in your study of synthetic Bible study, you have learned to read the Bible continuously and independently at one sitting. You know that a continuous reading of a book of the Bible gives you a sweeping picture of what the book contains. You learned to look for the book's purpose, content, and structure on your first reading, without consulting Bible-study aids.

In addition to reading a book of the Bible continuously and independently, you need to read it repeatedly. Additional readings help you uncover the book's hidden treasures of meaning.

As you repeatedly read a book of the Bible, read from different translations. Contemporary versions illuminate different ideas. Be aware that some Bibles are paraphrases. Although a paraphrase is not the same as a translation, many Bible students find a paraphrase helpful for comparing with another translation or for clarifying difficult language.

As you read a book for the second time, build on what you observed in your first reading.

- Observe more about the author's purpose and how he expressed it.
- Discover more about the writer's time, place, and circumstances.
- Notice words or phrases that frequently appear.
- Look for changes of mood or shifts in location.
- Notice a change in the topic of discussion.
- Rely on such connective words as *therefore*, *because*, *so that*, and *since*.
- Make a determined effort to improve your grasp of the facts about the book.

Add what you observe to the notes you made during your first reading.

In the second reading of a book, observe the paragraph divisions. Remember that these were later added and were not part of God's original revelation. They represent God's guiding Bible editors to format a book by logical divisions. They are useful as a means of dividing the writer's thoughts into sections.

**Look at Romans 12. What function do the paragraph divisions seem to serve?**

This passage is part of a teaching letter by Paul. The divisions of each paragraph are made on the basis of different topics discussed.

Now look at Genesis 12. What do the paragraph divisions indicate in this passage?

This is in a narrative section of Genesis. The divisions of each paragraph show different geographical locations.

You will find that in most types of biblical writing, most paragraph divisions help indicate a summary of the writer's thoughts. The paragraph divisions of Revelation, for example, often show features of the visions the Lord Jesus gave to John. However, the paragraph divisions of the Old Testament books of poetry, such as Psalms or Proverbs, are not useful for study. The editors indented each verse as a separate paragraph.

## Using a Paragraph-Summary Form

A paragraph-summary form can be used to prepare a summary of each paragraph you identify in your reading. Examine the form on the following page. Follow these steps to use the form.

1. Duplicate or manually copy the form to use with each paragraph in your reading.
2. Record the Bible reference that composes the paragraph.
3. Use a sentence(s) or phrase(s) to summarize the content.
4. Look for connections between paragraphs.
5. Think of a title or theme to summarize the content.

**Read the Book of Philemon again, this time noting, studying, and analyzing each paragraph. Identify the paragraphs in the version you are reading. Summarize each paragraph, using copies of the form "Paragraph Summary" on the following page.**

How many times should you read a book of the Bible? That depends on the book's length, your grasp of the material, and the amount of time you have. Each reading should give more insight into the book. Each time you read, you will want to add observations to the notes you have made about purpose, content, and structure. You will have further impressions about the content of paragraphs while you are reading.

Next you will put your paragraph summaries together to get an overview of the entire Bible book you are studying.

## Paragraph Summary

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Paragraph Location

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Summary

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Connections with Other Paragraphs

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Summarizing Title or Theme

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## Making a Book-Summary Chart

At some point in your reading you will want to summarize what you have learned about the content of the book. You can use a book-summary chart for this purpose. A book-summary chart is a visual sketch that outlines the book's content. Using a book-summary chart has three major advantages.

1. The chart helps you summarize the key ideas found in a book of the Bible.
2. The chart helps you see the relationship between paragraphs in a chapter or section of a book.
3. The chart becomes a useful memory device to help you learn chapter and book content.

To complete a book-summary chart, use a Bible with paragraph divisions. Here are the steps to follow.

1. *Identify the chapters or major divisions in the book.* List these in the left column of the book-summary chart. In some cases, a major division of a book might include material that is found in more than one chapter. Remember, editors placed chapter and verse divisions in your Bible to help in Bible study. They are not part of the original text. If you need to include material from more than one chapter when listing a major division, feel free to do so.
2. *Write a title for each chapter or major division.* In the next column on the book-summary chart, write the title you would give to the material in each chapter or major division.
3. *Summarize each paragraph in the chapters or major divisions.* Following the process you learned yesterday, write a brief summary of each paragraph in the chapters or major divisions. Write your summaries in the third column of the book-summary chart.
4. *Write on another sheet of paper an outline of the Bible book.* Base your outline on the major divisions you identified. These major divisions may reflect different times, places, or ideas. Beneath these major divisions you will place small divisions. These divisions may consist of chapters, individual paragraphs, or groups of paragraphs. You can learn by comparing your outline with another outline in a commentary or an introduction to a book of the Bible. Your outline does not need to match exactly. However, carefully notice whether your outline greatly differs from what you find in other reference works.

Prepare your book-summary chart and your outline independently. Don't seek help until you are ready to check your work. You will find great excitement in using God's help to discover what the Bible teaches. If you begin your study by relying too much on reference works, you will not develop your own creative style, and you may miss what God wants to teach you personally.

**Read Philemon again. This time follow the steps you have read to complete the chart "Book Summary" on the following page.**

## Book Summary

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Book of the Bible

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Chapter or Major Division

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Title or Theme of Chapter or Major Division

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Summary or Key Ideas of Paragraphs  
in Chapter or Major Division

Let's practice doing a synthetic Bible study to take a broad look at a book of the Bible.

Read the Book of Philippians independently at a single sitting.

1. Who wrote Philippians, and to whom did he write it?

2. What type of literature is the book?

3. Why did Paul write this book? How did he carry out his purpose?  
What ideas did he present to support his purpose?

4. What arrangement of material did Paul use? Did he arrange it according to time, place, or logic?

5. What is the emotional tone of the book? Does it express joy, concern, excitement, or arguments?

You might have made some of the following observations in your first reading.

1. Philippians was written by Paul while he was in prison, probably in Rome. His comments in 1:13-14 suggest imprisonment, and his reference to "those from Caesar's household" in 4:22 points toward Rome. Paul wrote the book to the church at Philippi, a group of Christian friends who had been considerate to him (4:14-16). Some strife was present in the church (1:15; 2:1-4; 4:2), and false teachers were unsettling the Christians (3:2-6, 17-21).

2. Philippians is a teaching letter.
3. Paul wrote the letter to inform the church about his personal situation (1:12-14). He also wanted to encourage them to steadfast Christian living (1:27-28), to urge them to avoid strife (2:3-4), to introduce Timothy (2:19-24), to explain the plight of Epaphroditus (2:25-30), and to warn against false teachers (3:2-6). He specifically rebuked two women in the church (4:2-3) who were apparently quarreling.
4. The book is arranged by logic.
5. Paul shows several different moods throughout the book. In 1:3 he displays a thankful spirit. In 1:12-14 he shows a cheerful, accepting attitude despite his imprisonment. In 3:2-6 he shows passion and excitement as he opposes false teachers. In 3:12-14 he demonstrates spiritual intensity in his commitment to Christ. An outlook of joy appears in 4:4.

**Read Philippians again. This time try to summarize the paragraph content, using a copy of the form “Paragraph Summary” for each paragraph.**

If you used the paragraph divisions of the New American Standard Bible, you may have made the following summaries of the paragraphs in chapter 1.

- Verses 1-2: Paul greets the Philippians.
- Verses 3-11: Paul thanks God for the spiritual progress of the Philippians, declares his love for them, and prays that their love will grow.
- Verses 12-26: Paul explains the results of his imprisonment and rejoices that some are preaching Christ. He believes that God will let him live in order to encourage them to live for Christ.
- Verses 27-30: Paul urges them to endure persecution without being frightened.

**You are almost ready to complete a book-summary chart on Philippians. But first answer the following questions as a way of identifying the major divisions of the book.**

**What was Paul doing in 1:1-2?**

**What was Paul's activity in 1:3-11?**

**What subject was Paul discussing in 1:12-26?**

**What were the Philippians' spiritual needs that Paul discussed in 1:27-2:18?**

Whom did Paul commend in 2:19-30?

In what areas did Paul give a warning in 3:1-4:1?

What specific problems did Paul mention in 4:2-9?

How did Paul conclude his letter in 4:10-23?

Now complete a book-summary chart for Philippians, using the chart that follows. Indicate the major divisions of Philippians on your chart. Also include the chapter titles or themes and summaries of key ideas. On a separate sheet of paper write an outline of the book.

## Book Summary

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Book of the Bible

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Chapter or Major Division

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Title or Theme of Chapter or Major Division

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Summary or Key Ideas of Paragraphs  
in Chapter or Major Division

Did you find it difficult to do a synthetic study of a whole book of the Bible? Maybe you are not accustomed to viewing an entire Bible book as a whole. When you gain more practice, you will find it valuable to be able to quickly grasp the major purpose, theme, and ideas in a Bible book. Let's complete another synthetic Bible study to become more comfortable with this method.

Read I Peter at a single sitting without the help of study aids. Make notes by answering the following questions.

1. Who wrote I Peter, and to whom did he write it?
2. What type of literature is the book?
3. Why did Peter write this book? How did he carry out his purpose? What ideas did he present to support his purpose?
4. What arrangement of material did Peter use? Did he arrange it according to time, place, or logic?
5. What is the emotional tone of the book? Does it express joy, concern, excitement, or arguments?

Here are our observations about 1 Peter. Compare them with the observations you made during your first reading.

1. Peter probably wrote the letter from Rome. His reference to Babylon in 5:13 is probably a way of describing Rome. New Testament Rome was as wicked as ancient Babylon. The readers of 1 Peter lived in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. In New Testament times this was the northern part of Asia Minor.
2. First Peter is a teaching letter.
3. Peter wrote this book to a group of Christians who were facing painful suffering. The topic of suffering appears in every chapter of the book in such passages as 1:6-9; 2:18-25; 3:13-22; 4:12-19; and 5:10-11. The presence of so many references to suffering indicates that this is the major theme of the book.
4. The subject matter proceeds logically. In the middle chapters of the book Peter placed some material that shows a Christian response in different situations. In 2:13-17 Peter talks about the Christian and government. In 2:18-25 he discusses slaves and their masters. In 3:1-7 Peter discusses the Christian home. In 3:8-12 he discusses Christians' relationships with one another.
5. Peter demonstrates varied moods throughout 1 Peter. In 1:3-4 he expresses praise to God. In 1:13; 2:1,13,18; 3:1; and many other passages he shows earnestness. His earnestness is also mixed with much compassion in 4:12 and with pastoral encouragement in 5:1-4.

**Now complete paragraph summaries for 1 Peter, using copies of the form "Paragraph Summary."**

Here is a sample of paragraph summaries from 1 Peter 1, using paragraph divisions in the New American Standard Bible.

- Verses 1-2: Peter greets his readers.
- Verses 3-12: Peter praises God for his living hope and shows that the Holy Spirit revealed the plan of salvation to the Old Testament prophets.
- Verses 13-21: Peter calls his readers to disciplined, holy living because of the high cost of their salvation.
- Verses 22-25: Peter urges his readers to express their new life with brotherly love for one another.

Are you satisfied with your paragraph summaries? Remember, your paragraph summaries do not have to be exactly like anyone else's to be correct. However, it is important that you are satisfied that you have done a good job with the summaries before you go on to the next step, which is to make a book-summary chart.

**Before making your book-summary chart, answer these questions to identify the major divisions of 1 Peter.**

**Who performs the work mentioned in 1:1-2?**

For what was Peter thankful in 1:3-5?

What is the effect of the trials in 1:6-9?

What character trait was Peter demanding from his readers in 1:13–2:3?

Why was he demanding this trait?

How were the readers to show this trait?

What group was being described in 2:4-10?

How were they to reflect their position?

List the subjects Peter was treating in 2:11–3:12.

What groups would find these subjects a challenge?

Who would be encouraged by the commands and promises in 3:13–4:19?

What situation would these readers be facing?

What group was addressed in Peter's final chapter?

What encouragement did Peter give to their obedience?

Now complete a book-summary chart for 1 Peter, using the chart on the following page. Indicate the major divisions of the book on your chart. Also include the chapter titles or themes and summaries of key ideas. Then on a separate sheet of paper write an outline of the book.

We hope you are becoming comfortable with synthetic Bible study as a result of your work and will find this method useful in the future.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 53–74. Out of print.

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## Book Summary

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Book of the Bible

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Chapter or Major Division

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Title or Theme of Chapter or Major Division

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Summary or Key Ideas of Paragraphs  
in Chapter or Major Division