

In general, the process of topical study can be complicated if you're trying to do it by yourself. When dealing with any topic, the goal is best summarized by Isaiah: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is _____ in them." (Isaiah 8:20) You need to test any teaching against the rest of Scripture.

The Bible contains over 31,000 verses, and it can be tricky to keep track of what is said where without some help. It pays to be able to track how the Bible addresses a topic in its entirety, and it's especially helpful to be mindful of when a statement is made in the history of God's people (OT or NT) and to see how a particular topic relates to the grand plan of salvation.

Tools for Success

There are several helpful tools that you can use to help you understand passages and topics in your study. Some you might already have; others are available online; and the rest are likely available from your pastor's library or can be found at a Christian bookstore. For examples of some of these resources, see the accompanying guide. The two most common types of tools are:

Study Bibles & Commentaries

These are the notes that scholars have collected in their own studies on a passage or topic. They often give great insights into the grammar, syntax, or context of a passage that can help you understand it better. You might have a Study Bible or two of your own; while commentaries are often expensive multi-volume sets the size of an encyclopedia. Be aware that the authors often bring their own denominational bias in their notes, so keep that in mind.

Concordances

Concordances are lists of where every word is used in the Bible. They used to exclusively be gigantic books; you can now find these lists on nearly Bible app or website. These are your best friend for topical studies as you look at what else the Bible has to say about a certain key word. Make sure to use a version that matches your Bible's translation.

What If...?

What if you look at a passage or a topic, study it deeply and thoroughly, and conclude that what you personally believe is different than what the Bible teaches? The best advice I'd give is to consult with a trusted spiritual leader to see if there is anything you're missing in your study (perhaps failing to understand the place a teaching has in relation to the plan of salvation). If everything you've studied is accurate, then you must decide if God's word is truly authoritative in your life, or if it's just another book. Don't forget that Satan is out to twist and distort God's words and convince humanity that they don't matter. To these temptations, may your answer be the same as Jesus's: "It is written..." (Matthew 4:4).

Bible Study

Getting into God's Word in a meaningful way
by Pr. Michael Taylor

As you learned in the "Bible 101" guide, the Bible is a collection of writings that covers multiple types of literature, centuries, empires, and points of view. It is not just a book of randomness, however; it is a way for us to get to know God. The Book of Revelation opens with these 5 words: "The _____ of Jesus Christ..." (Rev. 1:1). Every time you open the Bible and read, you should be learning something about God and His ways. There are a few basic approaches to getting something meaningful out of your time in the Bible, and I'll cover the two most essential over the next two lessons: Bible study & devotionals. This lesson focuses on how to study your Bible.

When doing a Bible study, there are several questions that you need to ask yourself:

1. Do I want to study a single passage and figure out what it means, or do I want to study a single topic and see what the Bible has to say about it?
2. What tools do I have available to help me find God's answers?
3. What do I do if what I find in the Bible is different than what I personally believe?

Breaking Down a Passage ("exegesis")

Note: The process of breaking down a passage, called "exegesis", is a part of a major portion of religious studies called "hermeneutics". Pastors and Bible teachers will take several classes on this process during their training; I'm going to try to explain it in about a page. 😊

When doing Bible study this way, you typically look at 2 major parts of a passage: the passage itself, and the context.

The Passage

The first part of studying a passage is to get a good understanding of the words and grammar of the passage itself.

- Are there any words that are tricky or easily misunderstood? We'll deal with that in the Tools section a little bit later.
- Does the flow of the sentence make sense?
 - Even Peter sometimes had problems reading Paul's writings. In 2 Peter 3:15-16, he wrote: "...consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them

of these things, in which are some things _____, _____, which untaught and unstable people _____ to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.”

- If the passage is a story, try to visualize the scene playing out – what is said, what is done, and in what order everything happens. This is called “Narrative Analysis” and can be helpful for both Bible study and devotionals.
 - As a practice in doing this kind of study, read the story of Daniel and the Handwriting on the Wall in Daniel 5. Look at the different things that are said to and about Daniel by the King & Queen. At first, the king pretends to not know Daniel, but does he really? _____
The major problem in the story involves the handwriting on the wall that appears in v. 5. What object is mentioned alongside the handwriting to make sure that everyone sees what is written? _____
Everyone sees it, except for the reader. We’re not told what the writing says until what verse? _____ Why do you think that Daniel would not say what the handwriting said until that much later? _____
- If the passage is a prophecy or poetry, what phrases might be meant symbolically, or are metaphors? Especially in prophetic books, the best place to look for meaning of the symbols is the Bible itself! (See “Topical Study”)

Local Context

When you look at a passage, it’s good to know what else has already been said or what is about to be said. There are many passages that are studied in isolation from everything else around it, and people interpret them to mean something completely different than what the author meant.

For example, in Acts 10:9-16 Peter has a vision of all kinds of animals. In verse 13, God tells Peter to “_____ and _____”. Peter replies that he has never eaten anything unclean before, and the reply in v. 15 is, “What God has _____ you must not call common.” Apart from context, this passage seems to show that foods that were formerly “unclean” are now permissible because of God’s cleansing work.

However, reading the rest of this chapter in context suggests a different meaning. The entire story of Acts 10 is the decision to expand the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Up to this point, it had been forbidden, but two events happen in quick succession: God appears to Cornelius (a Gentile), and then Peter has his vision. Immediately after Peter’s vision, messengers from Cornelius arrive at Peter’s house (hoping to hear the Gospel). Before the vision, Peter would have said, “No way!” to them; now, he goes along because he felt God’s leading. What changed his mind? Was it the fact that he feels the freedom to consume previously forbidden foods? No! Peter himself interprets the meaning of the vision in v. 28: “Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep

company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any _____ common or unclean.”

Scripture often interprets itself. It’s amazing how often a difficult teaching or passage is explained by the surrounding passages and chapters.

Historical Context

The Bible contains timeless truths, but it does so using timely authors, stories, and audiences. It’s good to check and see if any of the words, idioms, or topics have some meaning or usage outside of the Bible that may explain why or how the writers wrote something the way that they did. (See “Tools”)

Biblical Context

Just as it’s good to consider how a passage fits into the context of a surrounding chapter or even biblical book, it’s good to be aware of its place in the Bible.

- Is the passage a quote from something earlier, or quoted later in the Bible?
- Is there another version of the passage that may provide additional clues to understanding its meaning? (The Gospels often do this.)
- What else does the author, or the Bible, say about the topic? (Glad you asked! Because next we’re going to study...)

Breaking Down a Topic (“Topical Study”)

If breaking down a passage into its littlest parts and mining for details is like working with a microscope, then topical study is like working with a wide-angle lens on a satellite. Instead of being zoomed in on one story, topical study is a zoomed-out study of the big picture. “Exegesis” discovers concepts and details that show up in scattered places throughout the entire Bible, and it’s good to see how these separate teachings work together into a single big principle on a subject. The process of compiling these scattered teachings into a single combined thought is called “theology”. Jesus did this when He took the disciples through a Bible study about His ministry in Luke 24:27: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in _____ the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

Just like every passage on a topic works together to teach some piece of theology, the Bible doesn’t just have a couple of dozen scattered pieces of random theology that are all separated from one another. Each topic in the Bible relates to all the other topics in some way into a single connected theme. As a Seventh-day Adventist, my single connected theology that helps me view all the others is called “The Great Controversy.” Everything – from creation to the Cross to the Second Coming – all connects as a part of the story of Satan’s attacks on God’s character, and God’s loving revelations of Himself to the Universe. Most of the lessons in the “Enlightening Heads – Foundational Beliefs” section of these studies explains the major parts of the Great Controversy in more detail.