

How to Use the Bible to Enrich Life

The Bible, a living, two-thousand-year-old book, is the most useful resource for quality living available to the human family. It will continue to serve as a promise of God's faithfulness as long as people remain on earth. Like the brilliant college freshman who knows everything until he meets a wise old person who tells him how life really works, Scripture keeps amazing folks. It is full of wisdom and truth to help readers deal with life as it is. Let's consider several ways to maximize these benefits.

Personalize a passage. Read until you receive a word that speaks to your situation. Put your name in the promise as you read: "I will never leave {your name} nor forsake {your name}" (Heb. 13:5, KJV). "Who shall separate {your name} from the love of Christ? shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom. 8:35). "I will not leave {your name} as orphans; I will come to {your name}" (John 14:18).

Personalize a passage by allowing it to take you to Jesus. This can be done by reading what our Lord did or said in the Gospels. Then contrast what you do and say in similar circumstances. Few experiences are so humbling, but it provides healing medicine for complacency or selfishness.

Another way to make Scripture your own is to pray it back to God. On your knees, with your Bible open to a passage, simply pray, "Lord, I think this passage promises help for my present problem." Or, "Lord, this passage makes demands I cannot meet. I need Your help now." Or, "Lord, open the meaning of this passage for me. Overcome my slow mind and active resistance. I want the mind of Christ." This method harmonizes belief with behavior as a reader moves from merely reading the Bible to actually living it.

Enter Scripture as an active participant. Look at a miracle, an event, a parable, a relationship, or even a single word through the eyes of the people who were there. Allow its first meaning to take root in you. Seek to apply all your senses to help you live the experience and listen for its contemporary significance. How did Lazarus feel as he threw off his graveclothes? What would it be like to spend time with Peter and John? As you read Jeremiah, think how troubled his times seemed to him. How would it feel to be in prison with Paul? Or, what was the leper's reaction when Jesus healed him?

For example, in your mind, climb into the tree with Zacchaeus to get a better view of Jesus. Try to imagine every detail of that event. See, hear, and smell the pressing crowd. Feel the burning heat. Grip the tree limb. Sneeze in the swirling dust. Then, allow your heart to melt with devotion as Jesus calls your name and invites himself to your home. Be an active participant who views the incident as if it happened yesterday or this morning.

Develop a personal Bible study method. Find a method that works well for you. The SMA method, both simple and useful, unlocks a passage with three questions: What does it *say*? What does it *mean*? How can it be *applied* to life? (S = say; M = mean; A = apply.)

A second technique uses three dimensions. *Then* (exegesis) asks what the original writer meant when the passage was first written; *always* (exposition) asks what truth in this passage applies to human situations in every age; and *now* (application) asks what the passage says to your own situation. That trio--then, always, and now--can be counted upon to open the meaning of the Bible.

Another helpful approach is to follow Terry Hall's suggestion that people write a short summary title for each chapter of Scripture in their own study Bibles. His guidelines for labeling each chapter are: (1) Use four words or less, (2) discover the original thought of the writer, (3) consider the chapter's uniqueness, and (4) retain the big idea. This approach allows readers to relate each chapter to their lives, consider how the paragraphs fit together, and summarize the chapter's meaning. It also provides a study guide for subsequent readings.

Effective Bible study begins with the assumption that the paragraph is the basic study unit that deals with one central idea. These sections, marked with a paragraph symbol in the King James Version, have regular paragraph indentations in newer translations. Though there are many powerful single verses, to study each passage in the context of a paragraph, chapter, or entire book deepens understanding.

Participate seriously in biblical preaching. Accurate hearing of a sermon is as important as preaching a sermon. The communication process is like the sound of a tree falling in a remote forest; while it can be argued that the falling tree made a crashing sound, nothing was communicated if no one heard. In the same way, preaching must be heard to be effective. Whole hearted participation by the listener requires serious mental, emotional, and spiritual engagement with the biblical passage, the preacher's thoughts, and the implications of the sermon.

Why not consider sermons as a source to help you better understand Scripture? Persons who attend

worship services every Sunday morning receive twenty-six hours of Bible teaching each year (fifty-two sermons times thirty minutes of preaching); those who attend an additional service each week double the impact. Think of the possibilities of personal spiritual growth when one experiences fifty-two hours of biblical instruction each year for a lifetime. In this way, the promise that faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17) becomes an actuality, and special blessing is promised to those who read, hear, and heed (Rev. 1:3).

This kind of sermon hearing, much more than courteous listening, requires tough mental engagement with the biblical content of the sermon while it is being preached and long after it is finished. Since the sermon preached and the sermon heard are never identical, the listener may go back to Scripture to check meanings. A clarification might even be requested from the preacher; he will be gratified to know someone gave his sermon a second thought. Such a shared reception of Scripture bonds the listener and preacher together in a passion for the truth as found in the Bible.

Cultivate a Berean attitude. When Paul preached at Berea, “They received the message with great eagerness and *examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*” (Acts 17:11, italics added). Such resolute study makes the Bible come to life, so that each reading offers additional insights for life. Such reading need not be the critical analysis of a prosecuting attorney as much as a receptive reading by a single-minded disciple with a mood of openness that asks, “What does God want me to hear from this passage?”

The Berean plan can be personalized by writing your discoveries in a letter to God. The main divisions of such a letter might include: (1) Thank you, Lord, for what I learned from this passage; (2) help me correct my life according to this Scripture; and (3) I confess the shortcomings I learned from this passage. These letters can be kept in a journal to provide a satisfying record of spiritual progress resulting from encounters with the Bible. Over several weeks, as you mesh the details of your life with the teachings of Scripture, your spiritual development will astound you.

Try the Six Questions exercise. This method builds on the journalist’s five W’s and one H formula, which Rudyard Kipling summarized in *Just-So-Stories*:

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Question biblical passages with who, what, when, where, why, and how. The answers will transform your inner world and deepen the meaning of Scripture for you.

Paraphrase a passage. This exercise helps you learn more about life from Scripture because it requires you to carefully consider the meaning of every word in the passage. Chaplain Carl F. Burke, who served for years in a boys’ correctional institution near Buffalo, New York, used this technique to make Scripture relevant to delinquent boys from urban slums. Think how one eleven-year-old was affected by his own paraphrase of a portion of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my probation officer. He will help me. He tries to help me make it every day. He makes me play it cool.”

Ask yourself as you read, “What does the passage say to me? To be most effective, this approach requires that paraphrases be written—writing encourages organization and precision of thought. Some people keep a journal where they record paraphrases and jot down new thoughts for future reading. To write your paraphrase now and read it later deepens its impact and makes you deal with the passage at least twice. In reality, two or more thoughtful encounters with a passage make it reverberate in the inner world for a long time. This practice will likely lead to the joyous discovery that obedience to Scripture is more than a duty; it is also a gloriously satisfying adventure.

Make friends of Bible personalities. Every reader remembers an especially influential biographical article or book about a famous person like Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, Truman, or Kennedy that shaped their views of democracy and patriotism. Likewise, Bible personalities like Elijah, Joseph, Paul, and Peter help us know God better and mold our thoughts about forgiveness, hope, and faith.

We can study the strengths, sins, crises, or spiritual influences of Bible characters. The enormous enablement these individuals received from God may be the exact encouragement you need to see you through your current perplexities. How reassuring to learn that at least one Bible character lived through circumstances just like yours.

Use your knowledge of Scripture. Like all skills, learning about Scripture expands as it is used. That is

why Scripture is easier to retain when it is recited frequently; hearing a sermon becomes more meaningful when it is practiced in life; and discussing the Bible increases one's understanding of its message.

Those who communicate the Bible in teaching, preaching, and witnessing need to internalize its message before they share it. Some serious disciples consider their understanding and use of the Bible as an ascending seven-step ladder: (1) hear, (2) read, (3) study, (4) memorize, (5) reflect, (6) apply, and (7) share.

Compare translations. The purpose of translations is to deliver the Bible's message to ordinary people in words they understand. For many, the stately, familiar King James Version, first published in 1611, still remains the best-known, much-loved, and often-used version. For years to come it will doubtless remain their first choice. But new translations open the meaning of Scripture to this generation and communicate its wisdom in words used in everyday life. Modern translations update words that may have changed over nearly four centuries and take advantage of newly discovered older manuscripts that were written nearer the date of the original writings. These are the reasons why new translations may explain the original writer's message more accurately.

Try using various translations to help you trace themes like love, faith, or hope throughout the entire Bible; a concordance or study Bible will help you locate the references. The Bible's comprehensive message on these big themes will prove helpful in your quest to grow a great soul.

As you compare individual passages in various translations, make a commitment to be as thorough as possible in your study of Scripture. John Wesley once received a letter informing him, "The Lord has told me to tell you that He doesn't need your book-learning, your Greek and your Hebrew." Wesley replied, "Thank you, Sir. I already knew the Lord had no need for my 'book-learning,' as you put it. However--although the Lord has not directed me to say so--on my own responsibility I would say to you that the Lord does not need your ignorance, either."

Serious study of Scripture can be splendid and thorough at the same time. There need be no contradiction between tenderheartedness and tough thought; God welcomes both as sojourners seek to faithfully follow the Manufacturer's Manual. Your life will be more useful and joyful as you follow God's instruction in Scripture. The Bible, much more than a mere book, is a way of life, an encounter with God, a loving correspondence of the Father's plans for His child, and a revelation of what really matters. The Bible is an invitation to fulfillment and a promise of enablement for the authentically good life.

Exercises to Get Your Soul in Shape

- Personalize a passage.
- Enter Scripture as an active participant.
- Develop a personal Bible study method.
- Participate seriously in biblical preaching.
- Cultivate a Berean attitude.
- Try the Six Questions exercise.
- Paraphrase a passage.
- Make friends of Bible personalities.
- Use your knowledge of Scripture.
- Compare translations.