

Maybe a Bible handbook could help us understand. We don't know, but what we know for sure is that we don't understand it right now. That's OK. Sometimes it's just best to move on to another passage.

It's OK to have questions.

4. Talk.

Often, the things you don't understand, someone else does — and vice versa. So when we have questions about the meaning of the Bible, we can talk about it with other Christians. They may have already studied the very same question, and may be able to make it clear.

Or you might want to share something you learned and enjoyed. Perhaps you've seen a proverb that applies to a situation you are in. Perhaps you have read a story of faith that you wish you had. Or maybe it was a glimpse of how great God is. Talk about these things, too, to encourage one another.

The New Testament describes the early church as a fellowship, as a group of people who spoke often to one another about the things of God. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings. They enjoyed what they learned, and talked about their joy.

In the modern world, Christians often talk before or after church, or in small groups that meet during the week in homes — small groups that meet for the specific purpose of praying together, discussing Scripture, and helping one another.

One of these groups could help you in your Bible reading. So that's a good step for better understanding: Talk about the Bible with other Christians.

5. Don't stop.

Since it's a big book, and since we don't understand it all the first time, it is essential that we keep at it. If you really want to understand how God speaks to us through the Bible, then you need to form a life-long habit of reading, thinking, and talking about the Bible.

We will die before we know it all — there is always more to learn. This should be a motivation to keep at it, not to quit. There are indeed treasures hidden in the Bible, and it takes patience and persistence to seek them out.

Some gems we can find right away; others will come to light only after many years. There's always something waiting for us to see.

And we all have to admit it, we aren't getting any younger. We forget things. We forget lessons we once learned, we forget promises we once knew. If we aren't refreshing our memory of Scripture, then we will be slowing losing something we once had. Out of sight, out of mind.

So don't quit — keep reading the Book!



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Five Simple Rules for Bible Study

The Bible is a complex book, but it has a simple message. There's enough wisdom in it for a lifetime of detailed study; there is also wisdom that beginners can easily find. Here are a few basic rules to get you started on the right foot.

If you have never read a 1,000-page book, the Bible may seem difficult and unapproachable. The strange names and strange customs might be intimidating.

But perhaps you *want* to read the Bible, despite its difficulties, because you have heard that it can tell you more about the God who made you and who loves you. It can tell you about Jesus, your Savior, and what he did and taught.

There's treasure hidden somewhere in this book, but you aren't quite sure how to go about finding it.

Here are five simple rules to help you:

1. Start.

It is a big book, and nothing will change that. The only way to begin is to begin. The one-mile hike begins with the first step. So start reading!

But don't try to read it all in one sitting. The Bible wasn't designed for that fast reading. It is not a novel, a mystery, or a thriller. Rather, it is a collection of different types of writing.

Genesis, for example, contains several types of story covering several major characters. Each requires some thought of its own, so don't be in a hurry to rush onward just to say you've done it. Take your time, a little bit each day. Structure your schedule so that you will have some time set aside for this.

But where do you start?

Genesis has some interesting stories, and Exodus starts with a great story, but then the story slows dramatically, and most people lose interest by the time they get to Leviticus and Numbers, which are even slower.

It's probably better to start in the New Testament, with the stories of Jesus. Mark is a fast-moving Gospel, and Acts has a great

story flow. This will then put Paul's letters in context.

Don't feel obligated to read everything "in order" — the Christians in Rome did just fine reading Romans first. Feel free to skip around a bit, reading the Gospel of Luke, then the letter of Hebrews, or whatever. Later, you might want to try an Old Testament book, such as Psalms or Samuel.

When you begin each book, put the date. That way you'll know which books you've read, and which you haven't. Eventually you'll get to them all — if you keep at it.

You may want to get a modern translation, too. There's nothing especially holy or helpful about 400-year-old English. Try the New International Version, the New Living Translation, or other easier versions.

2. Read.

If you read only one sentence, you might misunderstand it. For example, if I shout "Fire!" you might not know whether I am warning you of danger, or telling you to shoot a gun. The word needs a context before you can understand it.

The same is true of sentences in Scripture. For example, "No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you." To understand this sentence, we need to know who is speaking, who he is speaking to, and why. We need a context.

So if you want to understand what is going on, you need to read *passages*, not lift sentences off the page as if they had independent meaning. Sometimes they do, but most often they do not, and the only way to know whether they do is to read at least a few sentences before and some after, to get a feeling for what the passage as a whole is talking about. Who is talking, who is doing what, and why?

Many modern translations help us see the context by putting the words into paragraphs and

giving subtitles for the major sections. These markers are usually a helpful indication of where one subject stops and another starts.

The point is to *read* each verse in context, not as a totally independent thought.

3. Ask.

Unfortunately, we don't understand everything we read. We don't understand everything in a modern novel or movie, either, but we can nonetheless enjoy the flow of the story.

But when it comes to the Bible, people often get troubled when they don't understand everything. After all, it is a message from God, and we are supposed to understand it, and we feel stupid when we don't.

OK, let's make it clear: Nobody understands all of the Bible, even after studying it for 50 years. Nobody understands everything the first time they read it. (Some people *think* they do, but they have a bigger problem!)

When it comes to the things of God, we are all a little bit stupid. So relax. If you don't understand something, ask questions. Ask the Bible. (Talk out loud if you want to, but don't expect to hear any voices.)

Ask the Bible: Who is talking here? How does he or she feel? Why are these people doing things this way? Would I probably do the same thing? Are we supposed to take this literally, or is it really talking about something else? Is it something good, or something bad? Is there anything in the text itself to give me clues to help me understand?

Sometimes the answers are clear, sometimes they are not. Sometimes we just have to write a big question mark in the margin and move onward. That's just the way the Bible is.

Maybe we'll understand it five years later.