

Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

Introduction

As with any written work, there are often many tools available to help in your interpretation and understanding of the text. Often times these are not needed for casual reading (fiction, biography etc...). However we do use them when working with any type of text that involves learning i.e. education. Years ago “Cliff Notes” were available to help a reader better understand the main points of a text. Magazines were available to find how others might critique and/or interpret the text. Today we have so many resources at our disposal it is often difficult to decide which one to use. Don’t believe me? Take any book title and place it in the Google search engine. Just look at how many tools are available to help understand this book by just doing this one small thing. AMAZING.

The same trend has been seen in the tools used to help understand and/or interpret the Bible. We are very fortunate to live in time during God’s history where there is such a wealth of resources available that can help us to understand and make is words available to so many people. However, along with this comes a new challenge for the Christian. How do we know what is “reliable” or “acceptable” to use in our quest for study? Many of these tools can be written by someone who is not grounded in God’s word and therefore can quickly lead us astray.

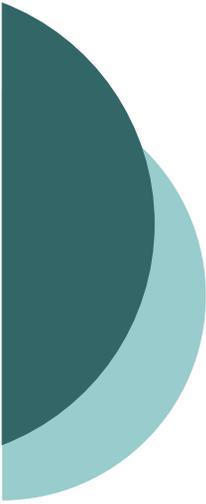
In this lesson we will look at many of the tools that are now available to us. We also will determine a sound way to know what tools are “reliable” and “acceptable” to use in our quest to study God’s text. At the end of this lesson we should be very confident in the tools that are available for use, and how to choose them.

1. The Bible

Let’s just put this out on the table:

There is simply no other more reliable source or aid for our study of the Bible, then the Bible itself. Our quest for a study of God’s word should start and end with the Bible.

Absolutely everything beyond the word of God itself becomes “un-inspired” and thus brings a huge risk of “adding to” or “taking away” from God’s word. In our lesson on “Rules of Interpretation” we learned:



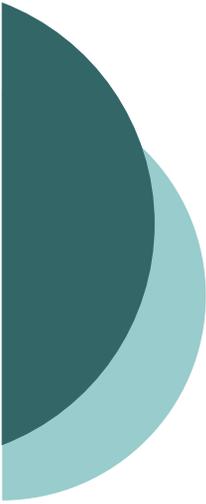
Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

- To allow an author's own explanation of a passage to stand beyond any other explanation
- That one passage will often explain another passage
- To let plain passages determine difficult passages

In other words, let the Bible be its own commentary, dictionary and study aid! So did we just restrict the use of all other study aids? No, we have simply qualified them in reference to the Bible itself. With that knowledge we can certainly implement the use of tools that other Christians that have skillfully put together to help aid our study of God's word. Some of these tools can be found right in the copy of God's word that we have in front of us.

- Table of Contents:** Almost every Bible published today will have a table of contents. Know where this is and use it when you need to. If you are a new Christian that does not know the books of the Bible, Old and New Testament, this is a wonderful resource to help you during a class, sermon or personal study. Never be intimidated if you find that you need use this resource. It's there for that reason and should be utilized as much as necessary.
- Cross Reference:** A cross-reference is when an instance within a document is related to similar information elsewhere within the same document. This can be very helpful when trying to let the Bible be it's own commentary. In John 1:1-3 we have simple passage with a deep meaning. Utilizing the cross reference helps to understand that the "Word" used here actually means Christ! Utilizing a cross reference will often help to make sure we do not take individual verses out of context as well.
- Maps:** Most Bibles today come with internal maps of some sort. (some may not) Maps at this size are a wonderful resource for the student to help understand the author's location and environment. Use your maps often and keep yourself up to date on biblical geography.
- Red Lettering:** Most if not all versions are available in a "Red Lettering" edition. This tool is simply there to help the student quickly know when Jesus is speaking. Sometimes, especially for a new student, it may be difficult to keep track of who is speaking and when. Please remember, while this aid is certainly helpful, all scripture is inspired and should be read with equal authority.
- Edition Instructions:** Most Bibles have detailed instructions on how to use the tools and\or aides that are supplied. Make sure to read and fully understand these instructions so as not to miss use the tools provided.

Many Bibles will have additional tools and\or aides available like concordances, dictionaries, time tables, weights and measures etc... Since all of these additional tools are also available as stand alones, we will incorporate them into that part of our study.



Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

2. Written Aids (Hard Copy)

With the advent of today's electronic media, written books and resources are (at best) becoming less known and (at worst) becoming unused. Years ago, when Texas Instruments came out with that first calculator, no one would ever have dreamed that you could go to a store and have a clerk not be able to make change for you without the help of a machine. There is something that is inherently lost when we lose the ability to do things on our own. In this section we will look at those tools, how they are used and any cautions that should be while using them.

A. Chain Reference

In the late 1800's, a young preacher named Frank C. Thompson became dissatisfied with the reference Bibles that were then available to preachers. Dr. Thompson believed the Bible should be presented in a simple, but scholarly way. He saw the need for a well-organized reference Bible that would be of practical use to the layman as well as a minister. In 1890, Dr. Thompson began the work he would continue for the rest of his life. The first version of Thompson's study Bible, based on the King James Bible was published in 1908.

The heart of the Thompson Chain-Reference system are the "chain topics". The system incorporates over 4,000 chain topics. For example, if you look up ([Rom 13:1-2](#)) in the Thompson Chain reference bible you will see the following:

Submit to Government

13 ¹Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers are not

Romans 13:1

Duty of Government

2525 Citizen's Duties, Titus 3:1
2526 Honor Rulers, 1 Peter 2:14

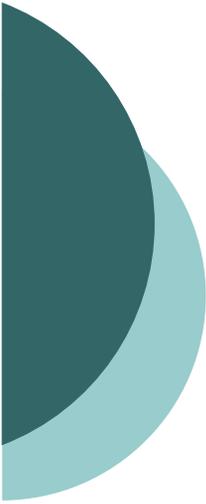
Romans 13:2

2551 Rebellion (3), Jude 8
2662 Ordinances
3130 Condemnation (1)

Romans 13:3

Authority of Government

p.p. 2 Samuel 23:3
3905 Do Good, Galatians 6:10



Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

The word government is divided into two main groups “Duty of Government” and “Authority of Government”. Notice the first group is then further divided into sub-groups each with their own chain reference number. If we were to turn to ([Titus 3:1](#)) we would see the same chain reference number and a reference to ([1 Pet 2:14](#)). And the chain goes on until it reaches then end. The ending chain reference is marked with the ‡ symbol which verifies the end of the chain.

B. Dictionary

One of the most well known in this area is Smith's Bible Dictionary. Originally named “A Dictionary of the Bible”, it was a 19th century Bible dictionary containing upwards of **four thousand** entries that was named after its editor, William Smith. The popular well know name today is, "Smith's Bible Dictionary". The original dictionary was published as a three volume set in 1863, in London and Boston, USA. This first edition was followed in 1893 by an expanded four volume version which was published in the United States as “A dictionary of the Bible”; comprising its antiquities, biography, geography, and natural history, edited by Smith and J. M. Fuller. Condensed versions are now incorporated into most Bibles today as well as sold in stand alone form. A bible dictionary is a wonderful, expedient way for us to find meanings of words that we may not have been familiar with before studying the bible. A good example of this is found in ([1 John 4:10](#)) where we find the word “Propitiation”.

*“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **propitiation** for our sins.”*

Most of would not know the meaning of this word. However taken in context we might be able to conclude that it has something to do with forgiveness of sin. Smith’s Bible Dictionary reveals that it actually means a “Sin offering”. Now, base on what we know the sin offering meant to the children of Israel and the current day Jews, we have a much fuller understanding of this verse!

C. Concordance

A concordance is a very useful tool for studying the Bible. Made up of word lists and formatted in alphabetical order, under each word there is a series of verses where that word can be found. The original Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, for example, takes every single word of the KJV and lists where it can be found in the scriptures. Each word has been assigned a number, and each number represents the word in the original Hebrew or Greek. Using a lexicon or other word study dictionary, the numbers can be used to locate the word and read the Hebrew or Greek definition. A concordance takes the Bible dictionary to the “next level”. The dictionary gives the meaning of the word in the current language. A concordance allows you to find the original meaning of the word used by viewing it’s Greek or Hebrew root.



Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

Concordances are also great for topical studies or to locate a scripture verse according to words when the chapter and verse can't be recalled. To demonstrate this study process let's research the word "rejoice". To begin we look up the word "rejoice" in the concordance. Below is an example of what you will see in the concordance (This is only a sample of what is actually found in the concordance). The left column shows the excerpt of the verse containing the word "rejoice" (identified as "r"). The middle column is the verse location and the right column identifies the Strong's number assigned to the Hebrew word translated as "rejoice" in that verse.

REJOICE (192)

Scripture	Location	Strong's Number
ye shall r before the LORD your	Lev 23:40	8055
so the LORD will r over you to	Deut 26:83	7797
with fear, and r with trembling	Ps 2:11	1523

The first thing to take note of is that the word "rejoice" is used 192 times (this number is located after the heading "Rejoice"). However, it is an English word used to translate several different Hebrew words. So now we would want to record each of the Strong's numbers.

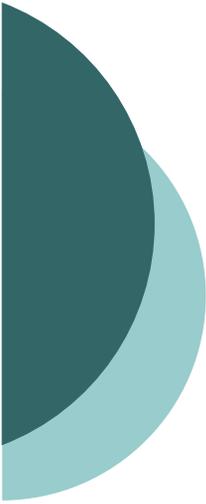
The next step is to look up each of these numbers in the dictionary in the back of the concordance.

1523

guwl {44x}, a primitive root; properly to spin round (under the influence of any violent emotion), i.e. usually rejoice, or (as crying) fear:- rejoice {27x}, glad {10x}, joyful {4x}, joy {2x}, delight {1x}.

Here we find that the Hebrew word is "guwl" and means to "spin round" (concrete meaning) and is translated in the King James Version as "rejoice", "glad", "joyful", "joy" and "delight". The concrete meaning of the word is what we are looking for as this would be the more ancient Hebraic meaning of the word and gives a better understanding of what this word implies.

We can now do a study on the actual Hebrew word itself. If we wanted to study the Hebrew word "guwl" (#1523) we can look up every place in the Bible where this occurs. To do this we look at the dictionary entry for this Hebrew word and write down all translations for this word; rejoice, glad, joyful, delight.



Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

The number in brackets after each word tells you how many times this Hebrew word is translated with that English word. For example, the Hebrew word "guwl" is translated as "joyful" 4 times. We can go back into the concordance and look up the word "joyful" and scan down the right column looking for the 4 times the number 1523 appears as in the abbreviated example below.

Scripture	Location	Strong's Number
And my soul shall be j in the LORD	Ps 35:9	1523
of Zion be j in their King	Ps 149:2	1523
and be j, O earth	Is 49:13	1523
my soul shall be j in my God	Is 61:10	

We can now look up the verses above containing the word "guwl" (#1523) and read them interjecting our new understanding of the Hebrew word behind the English translation.

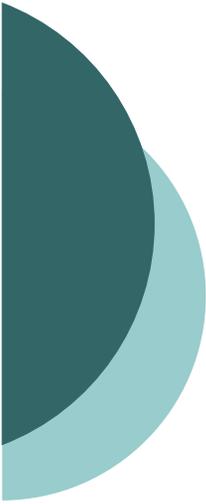
Before using a concordance, take time to review our first lesson on "Fundamentals of Bible Study". Remember that we need to be using tools such as a concordance to find out what God is telling us, not what we want God to tell us!

D. Commentary

A biblical commentary is a written systematic series of explanations and interpretations of Scripture. They are written by some of the most knowledgeable theologians in church history. Through a personal narrative, they provide deeper understanding and insight into the Bible, and can be valuable tools to assist both casual reading and serious study.

Commentaries come in lots of different varieties. There are different levels of difficulty, different target audiences, different emphases, and different lengths. Some commentaries are part of a sets (series) while others are individual volumes on a single book of the Bible (stand-alone). Other biblical commentaries are called "one-volume" commentaries because the entire Bible is covered in one book, that is usually pretty thick.

Commentaries can be divided by level of difficulty: At the top of the pyramid are the "full technical" or "critical" commentaries which often have very detailed and technical discussions and assume that the student knows the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) to some extent. These are used mostly by scholars, seminary students, and preachers with some language training. These are usually difficult for the lay-student to read and understand. Next there are commentaries that are



Tools For Bible Study (Part 1)

sometimes called "semi-technical" because while they refer to some technical details, reference to Hebrew and Greek is occasional and usually confined to the footnotes rather than the text itself. A well-educated student can often read and follow these discussions, though some things would still be somewhat hard to understand. Usually these commentaries are based on a particular English translation for the entire series, like the NIV or RSV.

Another type closely related to the "semi-technical" commentaries, are the "pulpit" commentaries which are intended to give special help to preachers in developing sermons, so there is an emphasis on insights useful for teaching.

Then there are commentaries intended primarily for general readers. These have a less technical focus and are more applicational in nature. These may not have much detail on a given passage, but will usually highlight the major points and key issues. They can be especially helpful if you don't have much time to study a given passage but need a general knowledge of what it is talking about.

Although some Bible students shy away from using commentaries, not wanting to be "influenced" by the teaching of others, commentaries provide a good way to check your own understanding of scripture and your own interpretations of passages. They help even the casual user to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes about the Bible. They can also help you get a better grasp of major Bible themes and topics and see the flow of the author's argument better in a given passage of scripture. If you are concerned about being unduly influenced by a particular commentary, read two or three on the same passage, which will serve as a "check and balance" on one another.

Conclusion (Part 1)

The next lesson will look into Biblical tools that are available electronically and finally a short discussion on how we know which tools are "okay" for use. Before continuing on to that lesson, let's take a minute to reflect on how we started this lesson:

There is simply no other more reliable source or aid for our study of the Bible, then the Bible itself. Our quest for a study of God's word should start and end with the Bible.

Any tool we used, aside from the Bible, is vulnerable to error, and should be taken with that grain of salt. However, with the correct motivation and understanding of these tools we can certainly gain a better understanding of God's word!