

A photograph of a person reading a Bible at a desk. The person's hands are visible, one holding a pen and the other resting on the open Bible. A lamp is on the left, and the background is softly lit. The text is overlaid on the image.

RICK WARREN'S BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Twelve Ways You Can
Unlock God's Word

From the author of

THE PURPOSE DRIVEN® LIFE



RICK WARREN'S
BIBLE STUDY
METHODS

Also by Rick Warren

The Purpose Driven® Life

The Purpose Driven® Church

Living with Purpose Series

God's Answers to Life's Difficult Questions

God's Power to Change Your Life

RICK WARREN'S BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Twelve Ways You Can
Unlock God's Word

From the author of
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN[®] LIFE

 ZONDERVAN[®]

ZONDERVAN.com/
AUTHORTRACKER
follow your favorite authors



Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods
Copyright © 1981, 2006 by Rick Warren

Formerly published under the title *Personal Bible Study Methods*

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Warren, Richard.

Rick Warren's Bible study methods : Twelve ways you can unlock God's Word / Rick Warren.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-27300-4

1. Bible – Study and teaching. I. Title.

BS600.3.W37 2006

220.071–dc22

2005037198

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

KJV indicates Scripture quotations from the King James Version.

The website addresses recommended throughout this book are offered as a resource. These websites are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement on the part of Zondervan, nor do we vouch for their content for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. Some forms are designated in the text as being suitable for reproduction. No other part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other – except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Mark Sheeres

Printed in the United States of America

To my wife, *Elizabeth Kay*

whose prayers, support, and commitment to disciple-making have been
a constant encouragement while I was working on this book.

She is truly a gift from God.

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	9
<i>Introduction: How to Study the Bible</i>	15
<i>Preview of the 12 Bible Study Methods</i>	30
1. The Devotional Method of Bible Study	33
2. The Chapter Summary Method of Bible Study	49
3. The Character Quality Method of Bible Study	61
4. The Thematic Method of Bible Study	79
5. The Biographical Method of Bible Study	97
6. The Topical Method of Bible Study	115
7. The Word Study Method of Bible Study	133
8. The Book Background Method of Bible Study	151
9. The Book Survey Method of Bible Study	169
10. The Chapter Analysis Method of Bible Study	189
11. The Book Synthesis Method of Bible Study	207
12. The Verse-by-Verse Analysis Method of Bible Study	221
 <i>Appendices</i>	
A. How to Have a Meaningful Quiet Time	231
B. General Questions for a Biographical Study	255
C. A List of Positive and Negative Character Qualities	259
D. A Partial List of Biblical People	262
E. A Suggested List of Key Words for Study	264
F. What to Look for in a Chapter Analysis Study	265
G. A Plan for Studying the Bible Systematically	267
 <i>For Further Reading</i>	271

PREFACE

For many years every time I heard a good sermon or some in-depth Bible teaching, I would leave the meeting frustrated, wondering to myself, *How did he find all of that in his text?* I wanted to be able to discover those truths on my own. In addition, I often felt guilty because people were always telling me I ought to study the Bible, but when I tried to study it, I didn't know what to do. So I would get discouraged and give up.

Since those days of frustration, I have discovered that most Christians sincerely want to study their Bibles on their own, but they just don't know how. They don't need more exhortation ("You ought to study your Bible!"); they just need some instruction on *how* to study the Word of God. And that is the purpose of this book—it is a "how-to" manual on Bible study. It assumes that you already know the importance of personal Bible study, that you have been exhorted many times to this Christian duty, and that you have been waiting for someone to show you how to do it.

The Bible teaches us that we cannot be disciples of Jesus Christ if we do not have a regular intake of the Word of God. On one occasion Jesus said to his followers, "If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32 KJV). As we look back through the history of the Christian church, we find that the common denominator of every great man and woman of God is that they knew the Scriptures and spent consistent, regular time with the Lord in his Word.

Never before in history has the Bible been more available to the Western world. Yet never before has there been such a famine of God's Word. We have Bibles in hotels, motels, doctors' offices, libraries, and most homes in America, yet most people are ignorant of what the Scriptures have to say. We live in a day of biblical illiteracy, even among many people of God.

Each study method in this book is presented in such a way that any believers in Christ can follow the steps suggested and be able *on their own* to get something out of their study of the Scriptures. I trust that your reading, study, and use of this book will make you into a biblically literate disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ—useful as a worker in your local church in reaching the lost with the gospel and training believers in discipleship.

The claims of discipleship include a call to commitment by men and women who want to follow Jesus. They grow as disciples by getting into the Word as a habit of life and applying it consistently to their daily lives.

George Mueller, the director of a series of orphanages in Bristol, England, during much of the 19th century, was known as a man of faith and prayer. It is amazing to read the answers to prayer this man had during his long life. What made him a man of faith and prayer? During his lifetime he read through the Bible over 200 times, and more than half of those readings he did on his knees, praying over the Word and studying it diligently.

When you know the Word of God that well, you are going to know the will of God for your life. When you know the will of God, you will be able to pray specifically and get specific answers.

If we were to ask in a church meeting, “How many of you *believe* the Bible from cover to cover?” probably everyone would raise a hand. However, if we were to ask, “How many of you *read it regularly* from cover to cover?” we might not get much of a response. It seems we are often guilty of being more interested in defending God’s Word than in studying it.

On a typical evening an average Christian may sit and watch TV for three hours, but only read his Bible for three minutes before bedtime. Is it any wonder many lack spiritual maturity? Many Christians are more faithful to the Dear Abby column or the sports pages than they are to the Word of God. I have known non-Christians who would not leave their homes in the morning until they had read their horoscopes. What would happen if Christians committed themselves with equal vigor to reading their Bibles each morning before they left for work, school, or shopping? It would change their lives and the lives of those around them.

The apostle Paul said something important about the Scriptures. Writing to Timothy, he declared:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:14–17).

Paul gives us two reasons why we should know the Scriptures. The first purpose is that we might come to know Jesus Christ and receive his salvation (v. 15). We learn about him and redemption through the Word. The second purpose of Scripture is to help us grow spiritually that we might be equipped for whatever God wants us to do (v. 17). The means to that growth are teaching (doctrine), rebuking, correcting, and training (v. 16). Teaching shows us the path on which we are to walk; rebuking shows us where we got off the path; correcting tells us how to get back on the path; and training in righteousness teaches how to stay on that path. This means that the Bible is the comprehensive guidebook for living the Christian life.

Near the end of Jesus' ministry, the Jewish leaders were trying to trick him with complicated questions about their Law. To one question the Sadducees had designed to try to trap him, Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). Jesus gives here the two basic reasons for false doctrine, or error. People get off base doctrinally because they know neither their Bibles nor the power of God. All error comes from these two things.

With the current rise and popularity of cults, false teachings, and nonbiblical philosophies, it is imperative that we Christians be grounded in the Word of God so that we can discern error from truth.

Why is it that most Christians do not study the Word of God? Probably many reasons could be given, but three seem to be most common. The first reason is that *people don't know how*. This was my situation for many years. I would go to a Bible

conference, retreat, or revival and hear great preaching. I would often leave the meeting amazed at the scriptural insight the various speakers possessed. Then I would think, *Why didn't I see that?* and I would try to study on my own. But because no one had shown me how to study the Bible by myself, I was unable to do it and felt frustrated. I knew God wanted me to study his Word, so I committed myself to learning how and to teaching others how it could be done.

If I were to meet a starving man by the side of a river, lake, or ocean, I could do one of two things: I could get my fishing rod and catch him a fish, thus satisfying his hunger for a few hours; or I could teach him how to fish, thus satisfying his hunger for his lifetime. The second option is obviously the best way to help that man. In the same way, hungry Christians need to be taught how to feed themselves from the Word of God.

The second reason why people don't study their Bibles is that *they are not motivated*. This is because they have not experienced the joy that comes from personally discovering truths from the Word of God. Past efforts at Bible study have been unfruitful, so they have given up. They have become satisfied with getting all they need for their Christian lives from somebody else rather than finding it out on their own. At this point, I must warn you about this book: If you get serious about studying the Bible on your own, you will never again be satisfied with a mere secondhand knowledge of the Scriptures. Dr. Paul Little once compared personal Bible study to eating peanuts. Once you get started doing it, you're hooked! When you discover how good Bible study "tastes," you will find yourself going back for more and more. Personal Bible study can be habit-forming!

The third reason why people don't study the Scriptures is that *they are lazy*. Bible study is hard work, and there are no shortcuts to it. It is just like anything else in life that is truly worthwhile: it takes time, effort, concentration, and persistence. Most great truths of the Word of God do not lie on the surface; we have to dig for them. Just as gold might be found at the bottom of a mine or a pearl at the bottom of the sea, so the deeper truths of God must be searched out with great diligence.

Howard G. Hendricks, well-known conference speaker and Christian education expert, has spoken of three stages of attitudes toward Bible study:

- The “castor oil” stage—when we study the Bible because we know it is good for us, but it is not too enjoyable.
- The “cereal” stage—when our Bible study is dry and uninteresting, but we know it is nourishing.
- The “peaches and cream” stage—when we are really feasting on the Word of God.

In the Western world we live in a society that prefers to have other people do our thinking for us. That’s why TV and other forms of entertainment, including professional sports, are so popular. We want to relax and be entertained without having to think or exert any effort. In Bible study, however, we have to learn some techniques, some methods, and then concentrate on digging out the messages God has for us.

The purpose of this book is to teach you how to dig out the riches of the Word of God for yourself. It will require some serious thinking, but we have tried to keep the procedures simple.

In each chapter you will be introduced to one of 12 basic methods of personal Bible study. For the sake of clarity, each chapter contains the same basic components, though the order varies:

1. A condensed outline of each method. This allows you to gain an overview of each method at a glance. You will find this helpful whenever you need to refer back to the sequence of steps in a certain method.
2. A short definition of the method.
3. A rationale for each method. This acquaints you with the benefits and limitations of each method.
4. The procedure for each method. This is explained in a simple step-by-step manner.
5. An example of each method (a completed form).
6. A blank form you can use or copy for your own study.
7. Suggested possible passages or subjects to get you started on your own study.
8. Suggestions for further reading related to each method.

Because each chapter is independent of the others, you may skip around in reading the book, choosing to learn first the methods that interest you most. However, with the exception of the last one, these methods are presented *in order of their difficulty*. There is a logical progression through the book. As you move from chapter to chapter, you will be introduced to additional Bible study skills. For the best results, you should master each method in the order given before proceeding to the next. Chapter 1, “The Devotional Method,” is *foundational*; you should read and understand it before attempting any other method. It will teach you how to write out a personal application from Scripture, which you will then use as a final step in most of the other methods.

I trust that this book will become a well-worn and used reference tool that will guide you in a lifetime of personal Bible study and in your teaching others to do the same.

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

PRINCIPLES OF DYNAMIC BIBLE STUDY

Dynamic Bible study does not require anything magical. Once you understand the basic principles, it is simple to do. Here are five general principles you will need to remember, regardless of the method of study you use.

1. *The secret of dynamic Bible study is knowing how to ask the right kinds of questions.* The twelve methods of Bible study presented in this book require your asking questions of the biblical text. The main difference in these methods is the types of questions you will ask. You will have different types of questions with each method. Asking questions is a skill that you can develop. As you grow in proficiency in Bible study, you will develop the art of asking questions. The more questions you ask about the text under study, the more you will get out of it.

You will realize that you can bombard the text with a limitless number of questions. One benefit of studying the Bible is that you will begin developing a more inquisitive mind. You will discover exciting insights you've overlooked in the past. It will seem as if you have been given a new pair of eyes! Suddenly, every time you pick up the Bible to study, new truths will leap out of the text.

2. *Dynamic Bible study involves writing down what you have observed and discovered.* You haven't really thought through a biblical text until you have put the thoughts gained from it into writing. You *cannot* study the Bible without writing something down. That is the difference between Bible reading and Bible study. In reading the Bible you simply read through a selected portion of Scripture, whereas in studying the Bible you take extensive notes. Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, used to say, "Thoughts disentangle themselves when they pass through

the lips and the fingertips.” If you haven’t put your observations down on paper, you haven’t really thought about them.

This principle is true not only in Bible study but also in many other areas of the Christian life. One of the most profitable things you can do in your spiritual life is to start some kind of spiritual notebook in which you write down thoughts and insights God has given you.

Nowhere is note-taking more important than in your personal Bible study. If you really value the nuggets of truth that you discover, you will take notes on everything you dig out of the Scriptures. Even if you don’t see anything in a particular verse, write *that* down. Each Bible study method in this book has a study form designed to be used with it so that you can write down various notes on what you study.

3. *The ultimate goal of dynamic Bible study is application, not just interpretation.* We do not want to settle for understanding alone; we want to apply the biblical principles to our daily living. Dwight L. Moody, a great evangelist and Christian educator of the late nineteenth century, used to say, “The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge, but to change our lives.” It was given to change our character and bring it more into conformity with Jesus Christ. All of our efforts in Bible study are valueless if in the final analysis we do not change and become more like Jesus. We must “not merely listen to the word,” but we are to “do what it says” (James 1:22).

It is possible to know the Word of God and not know the God of the Word. One of the tragedies of our time is that some of the world’s best Bible scholars are also some of the poorest soul-winners. They have the time to dig for great gems of biblical truth, but they seem to forget that one of the mandates of Scripture is to go out and make disciples. When we apply God’s Word in our lives, we will also become eager to carry out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

One day a man asked me, “What is the best translation?” (He was referring, of course, to the best Bible version.)

I answered, “The best translation is when you translate the Word of God into your daily life.”

He said, “But I’ve got my *Living Bible*.” (He still didn’t get the picture.)

I replied, “You ought to *be* a living Bible! The Word made flesh ought to be visible in your life.”

Some of the questions you ought to be asking yourself in your Bible study are: What attitude do I need to change as a result of this study? What do I need to start doing or stop doing? What things do I need to believe or stop believing? What relationships do I need to work on? What ministry should I be having with others? Our goal in all Bible studies is to know Jesus Christ and to become like him in our attitudes, our thoughts, our speech, our actions, and our values.

When the Word of God changes our lives and makes us more like Jesus, that's when we realize what the real purpose of life is, what true joy is, and what it means for God to change the world through us. The Great Commission is fulfilled and souls are won when we become Christlike and do his will.

One further thought here: When you begin studying the Word of God, don't go to it with the attitude of finding some truth that no one else has ever seen. Don't study it to find something with which to impress others. Just go to the Word to find out what it has to say *to you*. The real problem for most of us is not with interpreting difficult passages but with obeying the passages we do understand.

4. *Dynamic Bible study means that God's Word must be studied systematically.* A haphazard study of the Word of God is an insult to the sanctity of Scripture. It is a slap at the holiness of God, who gave us that Word. The "cafeteria style," the "dip-or-skip" method, or the "what-are-we-going-to-find-today" approach will not produce the results God wants in our lives. What we need is a systematic, regular plan of study, whether we go through a book, study a word, analyze a person's character, study a chapter, or choose some other method.

We should not overlook any passage or section in the Bible. The Old Testament is just as much God's Word as is the New. Many people today do not know too much about the Old Testament. It may be embarrassing for some to get to heaven and have Zephaniah ask them, "How did you like my book?" Because "*all* Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), we need to study all of it systematically. (A plan for such a systematic study is suggested in appendix G.)

Studying the Bible is like being a good detective. A good Bible student basically follows the same procedure as a good sleuth. The first thing a detective does is to go out and look for clues. He doesn't say anything, interpret anything, or draw any conclusions, but he does look at all the details. He observes things that other

people might normally overlook, because he is trained in observation. Second, he begins asking questions on the basis of what he has observed. Third, after intense observation and questioning, he starts putting the evidence together and interpreting what he has. Fourth, he compares and correlates, piecing together all the evidence he has collected to see how each fact relates to the others. Finally, he draws a conclusion and makes a decision on the basis of what he believes actually occurred and who was involved.

A serious Bible student follows these same basic steps in approaching the Word of God. The first step is *observing*: seeing the basic facts contained in the text under study. Next comes *asking* questions: discovering additional facts by more intense observation. Third is *interpreting*: analyzing what the text means. Fourth is *correlating* what you have discovered with other biblical truths you know; this involves cross-referencing verses and comparing Scripture with Scripture. The final step is drawing a conclusion: *applying* to your life in a practical way the truths you have studied. (I am grateful to William Lincoln for the helpful detective analogy. His book *Personal Bible Study* [Bethany House, 1975] is an excellent introduction to the inductive approach to Bible study.)

5. *In dynamic Bible study you will never exhaust the riches in any one passage of Scripture.* The psalmist declared, “To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless” (Ps. 119:96). You can dig and dig in Scripture, but you will never touch bottom. Solomon said, “If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God” (Prov. 2:4–5). But God’s silver lode is inexhaustible and the treasure is boundless.

For this reason you can study the same passage over and over again, dig into it, leave it for three or four months—and when you come back to it, there is much more to find. The key is this: *Stick with it!* Remember that there is no limit to the number of questions you can ask, no limit to the observations you can make, no limit to the applications you can make. So don’t give up. The best attitude to have in Bible study is the one Jacob had when he wrestled with the angel and said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26).

Bible study has no shortcuts. It is hard work, but if you are diligent and patient, you will reap results in due time. Once you have felt the joy and satisfaction that

comes from finding a fantastic spiritual truth on your own and applying it to your life, you will realize that it was well worth the effort. So stick with it!

PREPARATION FOR DYNAMIC BIBLE STUDY

You do not just rush into Bible study. Good Bible study demands some preparation. Here are four things that are important to you if you are to receive the most benefit from your study.

1. *Schedule your Bible study time.* Set aside a specific amount of time to do Bible study each week. Decide how much time you want to spend on Bible study. Don't overdo it, but don't shortchange yourself, either. If you don't put study into your weekly schedule, you will never make time for it or it will be sporadic and shallow. *You must make time for Bible study.*

How often should you study the Bible? The answer will vary from person to person, but an important factor to keep in mind is the distinction between your quiet time and your Bible study time. You should have a quiet time every day. It is usually a short devotional period (10–30 minutes) in which you *read* the Bible, meditate for a few minutes on what you have read, and have a time of prayer. The purpose of your quiet time is to have fellowship with Jesus Christ. (See appendix A for instructions on how to have a quiet time.)

You should not try to do in-depth Bible study during your quiet time. In fact, nothing will kill your quiet time faster than engaging in serious Bible study during that devotional period. Just enjoy the presence of God and fellowship with him.

While it is better to have a 10-minute quiet time every day than just a one-hour period once a week, the exact opposite is true in Bible study. You cannot study the Bible effectively in a piecemeal fashion. It is better to block out larger periods of time (two to four hours) than to try to study a little bit every day. Then as you grow in your Bible study skills, you can spend additional time with it.

Probably the worst enemy of Bible study today in the Western world is television. Surveys show that the TV is on 7 hours, 40 minutes per day in the average American home. The average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day—which packed together would be 61 days of TV viewing per year. By age

18 the average American child will have seen 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 murders. By age 65 the average American will have spent about 9½ years in front of the tube. (For more statistics see <http://tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/FactsFigs.pdf>.)

If, on the other hand, a person went to Sunday school regularly from birth until age 65, he would only have had a total of four *months* of solid Bible teaching. Is it any wonder that there are so many weak Christians in Western society? We have to discipline ourselves and make specific time for Bible study, and not let anything get in its way.

You should study your Bible when you are at your best physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and when you can be undistracted and unhurried. Since you are either a “day person” or a “night person,” you should pick the time when you are most alert. You should never try to study when you are tired or right after a large meal. Try to study when you are rested and wide-awake.

2. *Keep a notebook.* As already stated, you cannot study the Bible without writing down things that you have observed. Each study method suggested in this book has a study form designed to go with it.

3. *Get the right tools.* With each method of study is a list of suggested reference tools you will need for your study. The first few methods require few or no tools, while the later ones require a number of them. You should consider making an investment in these reference tools and setting up a little personal reference library. It will be an investment you will use the rest of your life. You will find a discussion of these in the next section, with suggestions for a basic and more advanced library.

4. *Spend a short time in prayer before each study.* First, ask the Lord to cleanse your life from all known sin and to fill you with the Holy Spirit, so you will be in fellowship with him during the study. This is the advantage of studying the Bible as compared with studying a textbook: you have direct communication with the Author himself. You have the privilege of studying not only the revelation, but also the Revealer. So make sure you are in fellowship with Christ before you study his Word. The apostle Paul said that if you are in the flesh, or carnal, you cannot understand spiritual truths (1 Cor. 2:10–3:4). You have to be in fellowship with the Lord

in order to understand and apply his Word. As someone said, “We need to search our hearts before we search the Scriptures.” We need to make sure our lives are right with God before we try to dig into his Word.

Second, pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you in your study. The best way to understand the Bible is to talk with its Author. Memorize Psalm 119:18 and use it before each study: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Ask God to open your eyes to his Word. In the final analysis, unless God the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to see the truths in the Bible, all of your studying will be a wasted effort.

SELECTING THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR GOOD BIBLE STUDY

Probably one of the best-kept secrets in Christendom is the availability of practical Bible study helps. Many Christians are not aware of the many excellent reference tools currently available to make personal Bible study possible and exciting. This is comparable to a carpenter who sets out to build a house without knowing that a hammer and saw are available to him.

Pastors should acquaint their people with these books, for the devil delights in keeping them out of circulation. As long as Satan can keep Christians from studying their Bibles on their own, his work will be that much easier. A Christian who does not spend regular time each week in personal Bible study will be weak in resisting the devil’s temptations. A practical way that pastors can “prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:12) is to familiarize their people with these Bible study tools.

THE PURPOSE OF REFERENCE TOOLS

Christians living in the Western world have an abundance of helpful books that are designed to aid us in our personal Bible study, making use of the latest archeological finds, word studies, and research of great Bible scholars. Bible study tools, however, are not meant to replace the Bible; rather, they help us in studying the Bible itself. Bible study is a skill we need to develop. Most skills require the use

of some kinds of tools. Carpenters need their hammers and saws; artists need their brushes and paints; plumbers need their wrenches. Likewise, serious Bible students will want to take advantage of the available reference tools to help them search the Scriptures effectively. People who try to study the Bible systematically without using good tools will find their job tedious and difficult.

Some Christians hesitate to use references out of fear that they will become too dependent on them. Some say piously, "All I need is the Bible." True, but the tools suggested in this section are designed to help you get *into* the Bible. You should not be afraid of using reference tools, for most of these books represent the lifelong studies of dedicated men of God. The insights they received from the Lord can enrich your Bible study immensely and provide information about people, places, and events that you would not find in the Bible alone.

THE TOOLS THEMSELVES

In this section we look at eight types of reference tools that are used in the Bible study methods presented and explained in this book.

1. *The study Bible.* Your first and most important tool is a good study Bible. Some Bibles are more adaptable to personal Bible study than others. A good study Bible should have print large enough for you to read for long periods of time without getting a headache from eyestrain. It should also have paper thick enough for you to make notes without the ink running through the paper to the next page. Wide margins are helpful because they allow room for making personal notations. Finally, a study Bible should have a good system of cross-references.

I recommend the New International Version (NIV) because exhaustive concordances and various study Bibles are available today in that version. The study Bibles include a general edition as well as versions designed for particular categories of people, such as men, women, teenagers, and people still in their spiritual search for God.

Study Bibles and concordances are also available in the King James Version (KJV), but that version's archaic language can be a handicap unless you keep a more recent translation such as the NIV at your side during your Bible study.

2. *Several recent translations.* In the past 50 years we have seen the production of many new translations of the Bible that use contemporary English. Though weaknesses exist in every translation, each one makes a unique contribution to a better understanding of the Bible. Many people who were previously not interested in the King James Version have begun to read and study the Bible in the more recent translations. The greatest benefit you can receive from these versions is comparing them one with another in your study. The many possible meanings and usages of a word can be found by reading a verse in the various versions and noting the differences.

Also available today are some “parallel” Bibles, which include several translations side by side in a single volume. This allows you to compare translations quickly without having to lay out 10 Bibles across your desk. Besides these recent translations, a few well-known paraphrases have been produced. A translation is more of a word-for-word translation from the original language; a paraphrase is what one person believes the original says, which calls for inclusion of their own interpretation in some places. Most translations have been prepared by a group of scholars, while a paraphrase is the work of one person. Paraphrases are fine for occasional light devotional reading, but should not be used for serious Bible study. Use an accurate and respected translation for that.

Some useful and reliable translations available today besides the NIV are

- *The New American Standard Bible* (produced by the Lockman Foundation and published by Zondervan and several other publishers), recognized as one of the most accurate translations that is faithful to the original languages.
- *The Amplified Bible* (produced by the Lockman Foundation and published by Zondervan), a translation that includes different possible meanings of many words used in the text. It seeks to show the many renderings a Greek or Hebrew word can have, so you can understand the full implications of its usage. (Some say it allows the reader to select his own meanings.) It is helpful in doing word studies, but is not recommended as a regular reading Bible.

- *The New Living Translation* (produced and published by Tyndale House), a contemporary translation that has a dynamic approach to language similar to that of the NIV. It is a little freer in its language than the NIV, but it is not a paraphrase like its predecessor, *The Living Bible*.
- *Today's New International Version* (produced by the Committee on Bible Translation and published by Zondervan), one of the newest versions available. It is very similar to the NIV (only 7 percent is different), but takes a more gender-accurate approach.

Many other fine translations are available today, so choose the ones with which you will be most comfortable. Two or three different recent Bible translations will get you started.

Two paraphrases are *The Living Bible* by Kenneth Taylor (Tyndale) and *The Message* by Eugene Peterson (NavPress).

3. *An exhaustive concordance.* By far the most important tool you will need in Bible study next to your study Bible is a concordance geared to your primary Bible version. This tool is a Bible index of the words contained in that version. A number of Bibles have limited concordances at the back, which list only a few of the major words and names. An “exhaustive” concordance lists every usage of every word in the Bible and gives all the references where that word may be found.

Exhaustive concordances are available today for various versions of the Bible. They are the descendants, adapted to more recent translations, of the original *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (various publishers) that was compiled for the King James Version. Two of these are the following:

- *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Zondervan)
- *The Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance* (Zondervan)

In addition, there is *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Eerdmans), which, like Strong's, originated in the 19th century and is based on the King James Version. Young's is better than Strong's for word studies because of the way it is organized. All exhaustive concordances are large, bulky volumes that are fairly expensive, but they are worth every penny you invest in them.

You will need a concordance in all but two of the methods presented in this book.

4. *A Bible dictionary and/or Bible encyclopedia.* A Bible dictionary explains many of the words, topics, customs, and traditions in the Bible as well as giving historical, geographical, cultural, and archeological information. Background material is also given for each book of the Bible, and short biographies are presented for the major people of both testaments. A Bible encyclopedia is an expanded Bible dictionary, with longer articles that deal in greater detail with more subjects. Some of the best are

- *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols. (Baker)
- *The Complete Book of When and Where in the Bible* (Tyndale)
- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Broadman & Holman)
- *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Tyndale)
- *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nelson)
- *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (InterVarsity Press)
- *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale)
- *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Zondervan)

5. *A topical Bible.* This tool is similar to a concordance except that it categorizes the verses of the Bible by topics instead of by words. This helps a Bible student because a verse often deals with a topic without ever using the specific word. If you had to rely on your concordance alone, you might miss those verses when studying a particular subject. For example, if you were to look up the subject "Trinity" in *Nave's Topical Bible*, you would find 83 references listed, even though the actual word does not appear in the Bible.

Another helpful feature is that the verses under each topic are written out in full, which allows you to scan the key verses on a topic quickly without having to look up each one in your Bible. You must note, however, that a topical Bible is not exhaustive, for not every verse related to a topic is necessarily listed.

The standard topical Bible for the King James Version is *Nave's Topical Bible* (Moody Press). Billy Graham has said that apart from his Bible, this is the book he

uses more than any other. For a more contemporary version, see the *Zondervan NIV Nave's Topical Bible*.

6. *A Bible handbook*. This tool is a combination of an encyclopedia and a commentary in concise form. It is used for quick reference while reading through a particular book of the Bible. Instead of being arranged by topics alphabetically, handbooks are designed to follow the order of the books of the Bible. They give background notes and a brief running commentary and include maps, charts, archeological notes, and many other helpful facts. The best ones are

- *Halley's Bible Handbook with the New International Version* (Zondervan)
- *Holman Bible Handbook* (Broadman & Holman)
- *The New Unger's Bible Handbook* (Moody Press)
- *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Zondervan)

7. *A set of word studies*. This is one area where today's Christian has the great privilege of profiting from the work of Bible scholars. Because of the availability of practical reference tools written for the average Christian, you can now study the original words of the Bible without knowing anything about Hebrew or Greek. Some men have spent their lives searching out the full meanings of the original words, then writing about them in simple, comprehensible language.

A good set of word studies will give you the following information: the original root meaning of the Greek or Hebrew word (its etymology), the various uses of the word throughout the Bible and in similar nonbiblical literature of that historical period, and the frequency with which the word occurs in the Bible.

These reference tools range from inexpensive one-volume expository dictionaries to very expensive 12-volume sets. These four are recommended:

- *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: New Testament*, 3 vols. (Victor)
- *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: Old Testament*, 4 vols. (Victor)
- *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Hendrickson)
- *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology* (Kregel)

8. *Commentaries*. A commentary is a scholarly collection of explanatory notes and interpretations on the text of a particular Bible book or section. Its purpose is

to explain and interpret the meaning of the biblical message by analyzing the words used, background, introduction, grammar and syntax, and relation of that particular book to the rest of the Bible. Used properly, commentaries can greatly increase your understanding of the Bible. Generally, you should not refer to a commentary until *after* you have done your own study. Don't let someone else rob you of the joy of discovering biblical insights on your own. Never let reading a commentary take the place of your personal Bible study.

Because commentaries are written by people, they are fallible. Sometimes equally able commentators disagree on interpretations of the same biblical text. The best way to use a commentary is to check your own findings with those of the authors/commentators and discover whether they are solid and evangelical in their commitment to Scripture. Beware of buying and using commentaries written by people who do not regard the Bible as the Word of God.

Commentaries come in all sizes, ranging from one volume covering the whole Bible to multivolume sets. Here are some good one-or-two-volume commentaries:

- *Baker Commentary on the Bible* (Baker)
- *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols. (Victor)
- *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition*, 2 vols. (Zondervan)
- *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nelson)
- *New Bible Commentary: Twenty-First Century Edition* (InterVarsity Press)

Commentary series with more volumes include the following. Some series are incomplete, with some volumes still to be published.

- *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 4 vols. (Victor)
- *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 18 vols. (Tyndale)
- *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 13 vols. (Zondervan)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Broadman & Holman)
- *Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Broadman & Holman)
- *New American Commentary*, 44 vols. (Broadman & Holman)
- *The NIV Application Commentary*, 23 vols. Old Testament, 20 vols. New Testament (Zondervan)

A BASIC LIBRARY

A person just beginning personal Bible study should obtain only the basic tools necessary to get started. For the Bible study methods presented in this book, the following compose a basic library:

1. A study Bible
2. Two recent Bible versions
3. An exhaustive concordance
4. A Bible dictionary
5. A topical Bible
6. A Bible handbook
7. A one-or-two-volume commentary

A MORE ADVANCED LIBRARY

As you become proficient in your personal Bible study and feel comfortable in using the tools in your basic library, you might want to begin adding advanced tools to your collection. In addition to the above seven tools, the following are recommended:

1. Additional versions and paraphrases
2. A Bible encyclopedia
3. A set of word studies
4. Individual commentaries on Bible books
5. A Bible atlas
6. Old and New Testament surveys
7. Any additional books that interest you, perhaps some listed in the bibliography

CONCLUSION

At this stage you might be thinking, *That's a lot of books!* You are absolutely right, but think of them as long-term investments in your spiritual life. Many books you

buy are read once, then put on the shelf to gather dust. But reference books are used over and over again as you study the Bible, and they can give a lifetime of enjoyment. If you are serious about personal Bible study, you will want to acquire these tools regardless of cost.

Start saving money to buy these tools, and begin with the basic library. If you will set a goal of buying one book a month, in a year's time you will have a respectable and valuable collection of reference tools. You might also consider asking for these as Christmas or birthday gifts. A book you use is a gift that lasts a lifetime.

Finally, encourage your church to set up a section of Bible study reference tools in its library. The church could purchase the more expensive tools, such as the encyclopedias, word studies, and commentary sets, then make them available to its members. In larger churches, the library could possibly obtain several copies of each tool.

Because the Bible is God's Word, Bible study must have a top priority. With these tools you will be able to dig into the Scriptures effectively, an all-important endeavor that will change your life.