

S.M.R.T. Bible Study Guide

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Studying the Bible is one of the most rewarding activities we can do in this life. The Bible is full of wisdom for our lives, examples for us to follow, songs for us to sing, prayers for us to pray, **but most importantly, the Bible reveals God to us.**

Because the Bible is a book, understanding it takes intense discipline and careful study. However, people in the church often haven't been trained to read their Bibles well. I hope this guide helps you become a more careful Bible reader, because being a more careful reader will lead to more fruitful readings.

These steps for Bible study can be remembered with an acronym, S.M.R.T. (pronounced "smart")

Step 1. What Does the Text Say?

In this phase we read the selected passage, repeatedly and carefully to understand its meaning. Before we can ask questions like "What does this text mean to me?" we have to ask questions like "What does this text say?" What words does it use? What logic does it contain?

- **Read** the passage repeatedly, copy it by hand, or memorize it.
- Find all the **pronouns** used in the passage. Who is each one referring to?
- Circle every reference to **God** (including pronouns)
- Find all of the **verbs**. Who is doing the action? Is the action past, present, or future? Is the action a command?
- Underline any **repeated** words or phrases. Repetition is often used by the biblical writers to emphasize something.
- Make note of anything that a lot of **space** is given to. This will ensure you don't get distracted by minor details and really determine the main point of the text.
- Circle all **transitional** words (e.g., "for," "so that," "because," "therefore," "by") and try to explain what logical relationship they paint. (e.g., "so that" usually explained a desired outcome or goal).

- Look for any **questions** in the passage. Does the passage give an answer?
- Look for any **conditional statements** (statements beginning with “if”). Does the passage give a result? If this, then *what*?
- Does the passage **compare** anything? Look for words like “but,” “as,” and “like.”
- Determine the author’s **tone**. Is he encouraged or discouraged? Happy or sad?’
- Are there any words you don’t know? Look them up in a dictionary or Bible dictionary.

Example — John 3:16–18

16 For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.

Annotations:
 - "God" (twice) above the first and last "God".
 - "Cause and effect" above "so that".
 - "Repeated" above "believes" in verse 16.
 - "the Son" above "him" in verse 16.
 - "not / but - two options" above "not" and "but" in verse 16.
 - "Reason - why eternal life?" above "For God" in verse 17.
 - "comprehensive - everyone included!" above "Anyone" in verse 18.
 - "the Son" above "him" in verse 18.
 - "comprehensive again" above "anyone" in verse 18.
 - "But = contrast" above "but" in verse 18.
 - "reason - why are they condemned?" below "because" in verse 18.

Step 2. What Does the Text Mean?

The Bible wasn’t written to us, so understanding the Bible requires us to understand its original audience.

- In light of all the textual details you observed in step one, **write a one-sentence summary** of this text’s meaning to its original audience. This sentence should be past tense and should not include any application.

Example — John 3:16–18

John writes to encourage his readers to believe in Christ as the only way to eternal life.

Step 3. What Does the Text **Reveal**?

The Bible wasn't written about us, it was written *about God*. The Bible is a revelation of God (literally, a “revealing” of God). Again, there is no application in this step — our only goal here is to uncover what this text describes about God.

Because God is unchanging, these timeless truths are also unchanging.

- Make a **list** of all the truths about God you can find in the passage.

Every timeless truth has these four characteristics:

Taken from [*David Platt, Secret Church: How to Study the Bible*](#)

- Biblical
- Compatible (Shouldn't contradict the rest of Scripture)
- Eternal (Not tied to a specific situation, true for all people in all times).
- Cross-cultural (Not tied to a specific situation, true for all people in all places).
- Applicable

If you need help finding timeless truths, these questions might be helpful guides.

Taken from [*Joe Thorn and Jimmy Fowler, The RANSOM Bible Study Method*](#)

- What does this passage tell us about the person and work of God?
- What does this passage tell us about human nature and the world we live in?
- What commands are explicitly or implicitly given?
- What sin is highlighted or condemned?
- Is this passage revealing God's commands or God's promises?
- How does this passage connect to the whole of Scripture?
- How does this passage demonstrate the need for a Savior?
- How does this passage relate to the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Example — John 3:16–18

- God loves the world
- God gave his Son
- Believing in Christ is the only way to eternal life
- Anyone who does not believe in Christ will perish

Step 4. What Does the Text **Tell**?

When we look at God in his glory through his Word, our lives must be changed. The final step is to understand what the text demands of us, commands us to do, or *tells* us to do.

In light of the timeless truths identified in step three, answer these application questions:

- **What truths do I need to believe? What lies do I need to stop believing?**
The Word instructs us and forms our worldview. Are there any promises I can believe? How should this passage change the way I view myself, God, others, the church, etc.?
- **What commands do I need to obey? What examples do I need to follow?**
How does the passage direct our actions and thoughts?
- **How does this text point to the finished work of Christ?** Our only hope is that Christ died for our sins and rose again. All of the Bible is looking forward to those crucial events or flowing out of them. What aspects of the work of Christ does this passage highlight?
- **What Christian can I share this with? Why?** You are called to encourage and instruct the other Christians around you. Help them follow Christ by sharing this truth with them.
- **What non-Christian can I share this with? Why?** What non-believer can I share this message with?

Your answer to these questions should be personal and specific. Don't write generally true things that you could share with anyone — write specific things that apply to you personally. Don't just write, "We should evangelize more," but write, "I will share the gospel with John on Tuesday."