



A “How To” Guide for

Effective Bible Study

Hearing God Through His Word

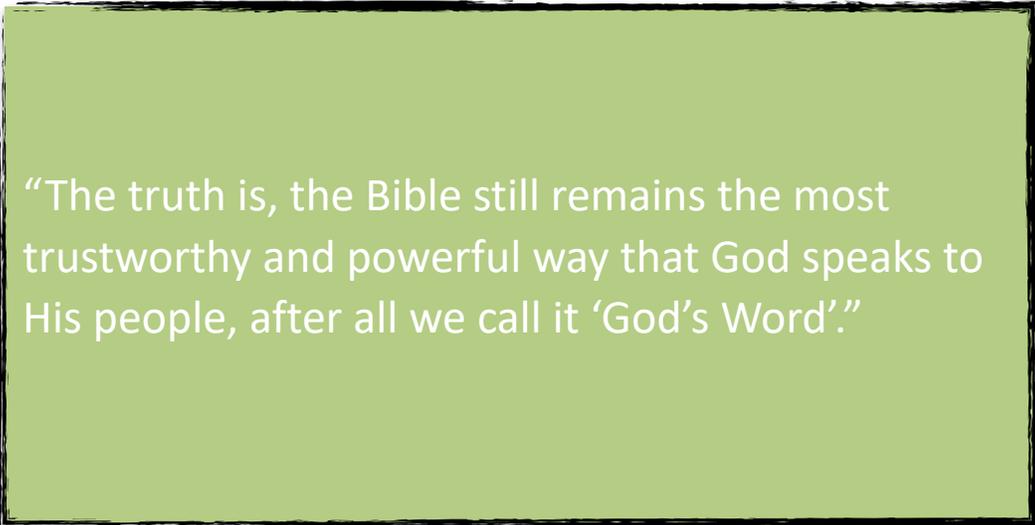
Contents

Why Study the Bible?	1
Objective #1 - Choosing the Right Bible Translation(s)	2
Word-for-Word Translations (More Literal)	3
Thought-for-Thought Translations (More About Understanding)	3
Paraphrase (All About Understanding)	4
What Pastor Aaron Recommends	4
Objective #2 – Preparing to Read	6
Preparing Your Heart — Start with Prayer	6
Prepare Your Path - Pick a Passage	7
Guard Your Mind - Context Is King	7
Objective #3 – Time to Read	9
Verse-by-Verse (An Inductive Study)	9
Topical Study	9
Tools that Help	10
Conclusion: Hearing God for Yourself	11
Bibliography	12

Why Study the Bible?

In a world filled with all sorts of noise, confusion, and distraction, hearing God clearly is more important than ever before. While a lot of people would agree with this, many have forgotten how to readily “hear” from God. The truth is, the Bible still remains the most trustworthy and powerful way that God speaks to His people, after all we call it “God’s Word.” So, knowing that, why are so many believers beside themselves as they feel they haven’t “heard” from God in a while? Perhaps it is because many Christians feel unsure about how to even approach God’s Word, not to mention study it effectively.

This guide is designed to bridge that gap. Whether you're a new believer or someone looking to deepen your walk with God, this brief eBook will walk you through the most essential elements needed to study the Bible effectively and begin knowing, with confidence, that you’re hearing from God through His Word. With practical tools, trusted resources, and a posture of prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, you’ll discover how to let Scripture not just inform you—but transform you.



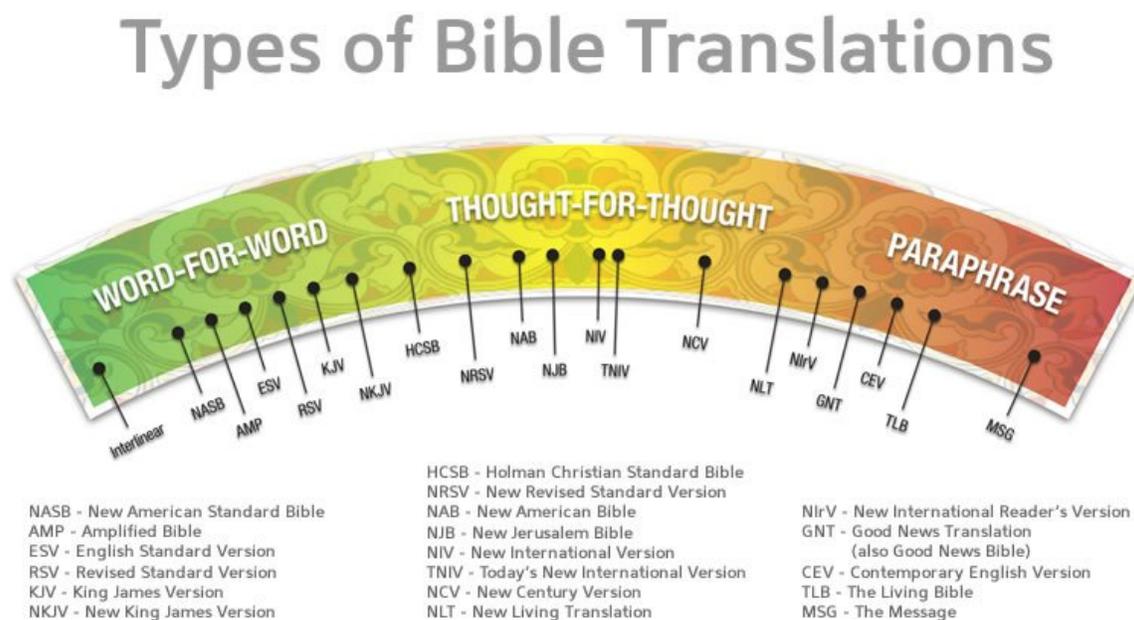
“The truth is, the Bible still remains the most trustworthy and powerful way that God speaks to His people, after all we call it ‘God’s Word.’”

Objective #1 - Choosing the *Right* Bible Translation(s)

One of the first and most common questions that arises when beginning Bible study is: *Which translation should I use?* With, quite literally, dozens of versions available to us today, it can feel overwhelming to choose. However, having the *right* translation can really make a difference for you to enhance understanding and clarity. Depending on your purpose for reading – whether deep study, devotional reading, or outreach – the *right* version can make all the difference.

Now the question becomes, “*what is the right translation?*” Well, there are many translations that are perfectly acceptable to read as they have been accurately “translated” into the English language from the original Bible time languages (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic). So, what we mean by “*the right*” translation, is the one or one’s that are *right* for you among all those that have been translated accurately.

To figure that out, we need to know that Bible translations generally fall into one of three broad categories: a) Word-for-Word (Formal Equivalence), b) Thought-for-Thought (Dynamic Equivalence), and c) Paraphrase. Check out the graphic below:



Word-for-Word Translations (More Literal)

The objective, or translating style, of the “Word for Word” translations is to try and stay as close as possible to the original writings in Hebrew, Aramaic, and/or Greek. Now, at first glance, that feels like the translation you want to read above all others. However, this style of translating can be so literal that it is less fluid in modern English. They are highly reliable for study, but the reading can be tough to follow because of its literal translating style.¹ Although, these translations shine when the objective is deep study and accuracy. Examples of these types of translations are as follows: New American Standard Bible (NASB), English Standard Version (ESV), King James Version (KJV), and New King James (NKJV), etc.

Thought-for-Thought Translations (More About Understanding)

In these translations, the goal changes a bit. While they want to maintain as much word for word accuracy as possible, the objective also includes making sure that the original message/point is being communicated in English. So, it’s more about understanding than it is about a cold, hard translation. So, without sacrificing accuracy or understanding, these translations serve as a bit of middle ground that is easier to read and understand without totally abandoning *how* it was originally said in another language. Like how, in Spanish, one might say, “vamos a la casa de Aaron,” and a word-for-word translation of that to English would be “let us go to the house of Aaron.” But... that’s simply not how native English speakers talk, so a thought-for-thought translation like, “let’s go to Aaron’s house,” makes more sense. The same is true for Bible

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 24–26.

translations. So, thought-for-thought translations try too convey the meaning of phrases or sentences rather than translating them word by word. They are easier to read and great for teaching and personal reading.² Examples include the New International Version (NIV), New Living Translation (NLT), the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), etc.

Paraphrase (All About Understanding)

The final category of Bible translations is called “paraphrase” translations. While they are commonly called “translations,” these are not direct translations from original languages. Rather, they are texts that have just been reworded from existing English translations to be more even more readable and creative.³ So, they’re not really “translations” at all. They are simply reworded takes using other translations as source documents. Examples include: The Message (MSG), The Living Bible (TLB), The Passion Translation (TPT), etc.

What Pastor Aaron Recommends

Now, as mentioned earlier, the “right” translation is simply one that is accurate, and you can read with understanding. As for my personal recommendation, I would say grab a translation from each of the categories mentioned earlier. I personally use the **ESV** for deep study and memorization (word-for-word translation), **NIV** for balanced readability and faithfulness, and I use **NLT** for devotional reading and fresh insight. I don’t actually use any paraphrase versions, because the NLT serves me well in readable

² Leland Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 31.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 47–50.

and clarity if I need it. When I study for sermons, I'll work almost exclusively out of the NIV, checking my understanding with the ESV, and if I don't understand something I'll consult the NLT. Again, I don't personally use any paraphrase versions, but I do think they can be useful to gain insight. Although, I wouldn't recommend them for study or daily reading. I think they're place is more for gaining understanding for your reading.

Here is a side by side comparison from word-for-word to paraphrased translations:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life." - John 3:16 NASB

"For God so [greatly] loved *and* dearly prized the world, that He [even] gave His [One and] only begotten Son, so that whoever believes *and* trusts in Him [as Savior] shall not perish, but have eternal life." - John 3:16 AMP

"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." - John 3:16 HCSB

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." - John 3:16 NIV

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." - John 3:16 NLT

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." - John 3:16 MSG

Objective #2 – Preparing to Read

Preparing Your Heart — Start with Prayer

After you have your desired Bible translation(s), it's time to start preparing to read. Notice, I said "preparing" to read, and not actually reading. I say that because before you read a single verse, you need to pause and understand that Bible study isn't some intellectual pursuit—it's a spiritual encounter. Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). So, we receive it best when we come before God with a prayerful, open heart.⁴ In your own words, simply ask the Holy Spirit to do the following before you begin to read:

1. "Holy Spirit, illuminate the meaning behind what I read from your Word today, make it stand out to me, and let it stick."
2. "God, prepare my spirit to receive the truth of Your Word. I don't want to just know it, I want to be changed by it."
3. "Holy Spirit, guard my mind from distractions and misinterpretations. I desire only to draw closer to you in spirit and in truth."

In doing this, you adopt a posture of prayer that invites alignment with the Spirit of God, it softens your heart, and sets the tone for a divine exchange, not just data collection. Do this, **every single time** before you read.

⁴ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 35–37.

Prepare Your Path - Pick a Passage

There's no single right answer here. Simply, let the Holy Spirit lead you. But if you're looking for a suggestion, I always suggest beginning with the **Gospel of John**. In John's Gospel, the focus is on the identity of Jesus and the purpose of His coming. It's both theological and personal. It opens with rich truths and ends with a call to believe.⁵ Which, is the most wholesome picture for what we're living for as Christians. It's less about where you read exactly because God can actively speak to you through any of it. Although, if you feel led to read a certain passage/book of the Bible, that might just be the Holy Spirit leading you there, so give it a shot. I'll confess that I've went to the table of contents and just looked at all the books before, and there it was like one of the books just jumped off the page at me, I just had to read there. Turns out, God was leading me to read exactly what I needed to hear.

Guard Your Mind - Context Is King

Now, you have a bible, you've prepared your heart in prayer and located a place to start. Here's one last thing you need to know before you start. One of the most important disciplines in Bible study is understanding context. Without it, the verses can easily be distorted to mean things they were never intended to communicate. In the theological world there are these labels for Bible reading:

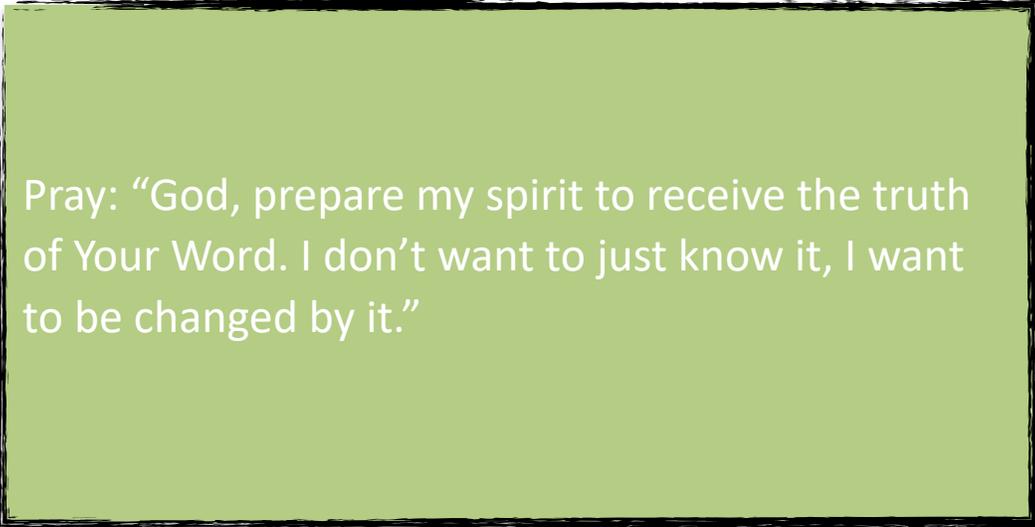
- **Exegesis** — Drawing out the original meaning from the text.
- **Eisegesis** — Reading your own ideas into the text.

⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 21.

If you want to hear from God, and not hear from yourself and label that as God, you must be careful not to make Scripture say what you *want* it to say. Instead, let it speak for itself.⁶ To help with this, I like to gain context by asking the “5 W’s.”

- **Who** wrote it?, Who is being addressed? Who is this about?
- **What** is the passage saying? What’s going on in that place?
- **When** was it written? What was going on at that time in History?
- **Where** did it take place? (Where tells you what culture too)
- **Why** was it written? Why did they need this? Why do I?

As you go through and ask these questions, you’ll start to notice things like Philippians 4:13 is not at all a message about God giving us strength. Rather, it’s one verse in a passage about being content with whatever and wherever God has you in this life. So, never forsake context. Start with prayer, locate where to read, and get the context as you read or before.



Pray: “God, prepare my spirit to receive the truth of Your Word. I don’t want to just know it, I want to be changed by it.”

⁶ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991), 20–22.

Objective #3 – Time to Read

Ok! Now you're ready. You have a Bible, a prepared heart, a plan, and the context is well underway. Now, as you read, be mindful that not all Bible study looks the same. Here are three effective approaches:

Verse-by-Verse (An Inductive Study)

Here, the idea is to focus deeply on one passage at a time, one verse at a time. This, of course, allows you to slow down and see nuances and themes in scripture. Think of it as you "seeing the sites" as you make a journey in studying the Bible. If consistent, this is probably the best method for long-term spiritual growth in a person's life because it allows you to simply consume whatever God is saying as you move through the scriptures.⁷ This is what I'd recommend as the method for daily reading and growth.

Topical Study

However, as you are reading verse by verse you will encounter themes and questions that draw your interest. You'll want to know what those answers are, and verse by verse may not get you there until you've completed the Bible several times over. For this reason, some like to use the **topical method** of study. This method gathers verses from different places across scripture about one subject (e.g., faith, forgiveness, sin, etc.) and you study the Bible's take on *that* topic rather than just studying the Bible and dealing with whatever topic it presents as you progress. This method is wonderful for helping you form a holistic biblical view on a theme, and it lets you see things like

⁷ Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2003), 15–18.

God's heart, His consistency, and plan at work across multiple centuries worth of scripture. I wouldn't recommend topical studies as a daily reading plan. Rather, I think topical should be more extra-curricular as it's a great method for gaining understanding and clarity about things you encounter from your regular verse-by-verse reading.

Tools that Help

Taking all of those essential things above into account, this section is all about giving you some extra tools to make Bible reading and study all the more effective and enjoyable. While, you don't *need* external tools to hear from God through His Word, but they can help you dig deeper:

- **Commentaries** – Provide historical and theological background.
- **Study Bibles** – Contain notes, cross-references, and maps.
- **Logos Bible Software** – A powerful platform with resources, tools, and original language aids.⁹

These are supplements, not substitutes. Let the Bible always be your primary source.

Conclusion: Hearing God for Yourself

Bible study isn't about checking a religious box—it's about encountering the living God. Too often, we approach Scripture out of obligation, habit, or curiosity, but the true purpose of Bible study is transformation, not just information. God has spoken through His Word, and He invites us to listen, respond, and be changed.

When we approach the Bible with a heart aligned in prayer, equipped with the right tools, and hungry for truth, something powerful happens: we begin to hear the voice of the Author. Scripture becomes more than ancient text—it becomes living and active (Heb. 4:12). We begin to see patterns, promises, and purposes that were always there, but now come alive to us by the Holy Spirit's illumination.

Don't underestimate the value of even small moments in the Word. Over time, consistent engagement with Scripture will renew your mind (Rom. 12:2), anchor your soul, and empower your walk with Christ. The aim is not just to master the Bible, but to be mastered by it—to allow God's voice to shape your thinking, your actions, and your identity.

So, open your Bible, open your heart, and let this be your prayer:

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” — Psalm 119:18

Bibliography

- Arthur, Kay. *How to Study Your Bible*. Eugene: Harvest House, 2003.
- Carson, D. A. *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.
- Fee, Gordon D., and Mark L. Strauss. *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
- Gallaty, Robby. *Foundations: A 260-Day Bible Reading Plan for Busy Believers*. Nashville: Lifeway Press, 2015.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.
- Logos Bible Software. Accessed May 12, 2025. <https://www.logos.com>
- Ryken, Leland. *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2009.
- Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014.
- Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991.