

## 4. It is applied to life

Some Bible studies spend 90% of their time on observation and interpretation, debating and discussing biblical theology. This is important, but we need to remember that the purpose of studying the Bible is not to fill our heads with knowledge, but to **change our lives**.

**“If you work these words into your lives, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock... But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach.”**

[Jesus in Matthew 7, *The Message*]

So make sure you allow plenty of time to:

- discuss application that is down-to-earth, personal and specific.
- make goals and commitments together – what are you going to do in response to what you have read together?
- pray these into each other’s lives.
- hold each other accountable – ask each other when you next meet how you got on.

**“The Bible gets into our hearts through our feet, not our heads.”**

[Eugene Peterson]

## 5. It is creative

**“The book was written with zest, and if possible it should be read that way.”**

Flannery O’Connor said this about one of her novels, but it’s even more true of the Bible. This is God’s good news, and we believe it is liberating and life-giving. So it is a tragedy when we engage with it in dull and predictable ways. Don’t let your Bible study become like an English comprehension!

Find ways to interact with the Bible that are **energetic**, **passionate** and **creative**:

- manuscript study
- act out passages
- silently meditate on a passage
- memorise a passage
- use different translations
- use diagrams, pictures, visual aids, music
- spend time as a whole group, in twos and threes, on your own

You need to pray for the Spirit to give you a *passionate* heart – if you are bored and just going through the motions it will be infectious.

Leading creative and passionate studies takes time and some real hard work spent in preparation and prayer.

A great resource for help is *Leading Better Bible Studies* by Karen and Rod Morris.

## RESOURCES

It's a good idea to really wrestle with the passage yourself for a good while before reaching for a commentary. But it can be very helpful to consult a good commentary and compare your understanding with the author's.

*The New Bible Commentary* (IVP) is a great one-volume guide to the whole Bible, worth investing in and having on your shelf.

Some series we would recommend (in ascending order of difficulty, though they are all very accessible):

*Crossway Bible Guides* (IVP)

*New Testament for everyone* by Tom Wright (SPCK)

*The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP)

For general help with understanding the Bible, check out:

*How to read the Bible for All its worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart

*Getting the Message* by Gilbert Lennox

*God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts

### 3. It engages the heart

The purpose of the Bible is not imparting information, but **developing relationship** – a relationship of love between us and our creator.

So our engagement with the Bible should never be simply at an intellectual or academic level. We need to engage with our hearts, and listen to God's heart.

Allow time in your group to pause and be silent, to listen for what God is saying to you by his Spirit and through his Word.

In particular, we need to engage with:

- **humility** – we sit under God's Word as learners and disciples, asking him to shape our hearts, characters and lives. We don't sit over it as experts, wanting to show that we are right and everyone else is wrong.
- **honesty** – sometimes our response to God's Word will be one of confusion or doubt. Sometimes we will be offended. There is nothing to be gained by pretending we find it easy. We can respond honestly and bring our struggle to God.

## 2. It engages with the Bible

**“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the word of truth.”**

[2Timothy 2:15]

If it’s possible to correctly handle God’s message it must also be possible to incorrectly handle it, to misunderstand and misuse it.

You don’t have to be a genius to handle the Bible well – but it does take some time, some hard work, and some patience. Paul doesn’t ask us to be biblical masterminds, but he does ask us to do our best, to use the minds God has given us to engage thoughtfully with his Word. Here are a few top tips for handling the Bible well:

### OBSERVE, INTERPRET, APPLY

There are three vital steps towards understanding the Bible well:

- **observation**                      what does it say?
- **interpretation**                    what does it mean?
- **application**                      what does it mean for us today?

We can be so keen to rush to “real life application” that we don’t really pay close attention to what God’s Word says or what it means. We can almost use the Bible as a useful discussion starter so we can talk about ourselves!

We can end up reading our own ideas and opinions and assumptions into the Bible rather than humbling ourselves to listen to what it really says - “wonderful things in the Bible I see, some put there by you and some put there by me”!

So be patient with the first two steps, and then your application will be rooted in God’s Word and therefore genuinely powerful and life-changing.

### CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

Pay attention to the context of the verses you are reading. This includes:

- **immediate context** – look at the sections immediately before and after the bit you are studying. How do they help you understand your section? How does it fit into the flow of the wider text?
- **whole book context** – the books that make up our Bible were intended to be heard and understood as whole books, not little paragraphs. What kind of literature is it (story, letter, poetry...)? What is the main message or purpose of the book? How does your current section fit into that bigger theme? What is the author’s intention?
- **whole Bible context** – how does the section you are studying fit into the flow of the biblical story? In particular, how does it point to Jesus who is the centre of the biblical story?
- **cultural context** – these books were written in cultural settings very different from ours. It’s vital that we ask what a passage would have meant to its original hearers (then and there), before we ask what it means for us (here and now).

## ENGAGING WITH THE BIBLE

*How do you feel about studying the Bible?*

*What experiences have you had of bad Bible studies?*

*What experiences have you had of good Bible studies?*

### Five qualities of life-changing Bible studies

#### 1. It is prayerful

We can't understand God's Word on our own – our hearing is dulled by our sinful hearts and limited minds.

Invite God the Holy Spirit:

- to come and help you [Luke 11:11-13]
- to teach you [John 14:26]
- to reveal God to you [John 17:26]
- to open the eyes of your heart [Eph 1:17-19]
- to help you understand his thoughts [1 Cor. 2:10-12]