

Guide to Personal Bible Study



Catholic Scripture Study

*"Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of thy law"*

Psalm 119:18



Welcome

Welcome to Catholic Scripture Study. Catholics all over the world have heard the call of Vatican II "...to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ by frequent reading of the Divine Scriptures" (DV 25). Many are opening their Bibles for the very first time. Others have already experienced Bible study, often among Protestants, but they are now discovering the great riches of searching the Scripture in the light of the Church. Some are even ready to start helping others learn to study Scripture. Catholic Scripture Study will serve the needs of all Catholics, wherever they are in their journeys into a deeper knowledge, understanding, and love of Scripture. This study guide is for those doing personal Bible study. It is divided into two sections: (1) For Beginners and (2) For the Progressing Student (if you plan to use the Catholic Scripture Studies in a group, please see the Catholic Scripture Study Leader Guide). Read the section most appropriate for you. And get ready for a great adventure!

For Beginners

Making the decision to begin studying the Scripture sometimes precipitates a flood of questions: "How do I do this? Where do I start? What if I can't understand what I read? I find this confusing and kind of scary!" If you have felt that way, you are in the right place. This study guide is designed to help the person who has never studied the Bible before overcome his anxieties and uncertainties and to enter into the rich, powerful, lifechanging experience of meeting Jesus in Sacred Scripture. As Catholics, our birthright is to know the Lord in His Word and in the Sacraments (see Luke 24). We need not be intimidated by the Bible. You will find tools and encouragement here to make your way through those early awkward feelings of being overwhelmed by how much you don't know. Before long, you'll find it hard to believe you were ever skeptical about your ability to know the Scripture.

How to Study Scripture

A "how to" section on Scripture study only makes sense when one is clear about the goal of such a study. We study the Bible to be both informed and transformed. The goal of Catholic Scripture Study is to increase our familiarity with all the various books of the Bible—the stories, the history, the people, the prayers, the ideas, etc.—so that we can enter more deeply into the life of Jesus (in Whom all Scripture finds its ultimate meaning) and more deeply into the life of His Church. Just consider how much Scripture is read during every Mass or how often it is quoted in Church documents (a quick look at the index of Scripture references in the Catechism of the Catholic Church will confirm this.)

However, Scripture study is not essentially an academic exercise. It is essentially sacramental. The Bible is like the Eucharist in that it looks like one thing while it is really something else. In appearance, it looks for all the world like a large book made up of lots of printed words on paper. But with the eyes of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes a place of direct and dazzling encounter with the Lord Jesus Himself. Knowing that this is your goal will help you use the tools provided here more effectively.



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About the Format

You will see that the studies on this site are built upon sustained and thoughtful interaction with the text to be studied. The various elements of these lessons are explained below:

Introduction to the Book

The first lesson in every new study of a book in Scripture will begin with a page of introduction. At the top of the page, you will see the name of the book to be studied; below that will appear a Bible timeline graphic.

It is important to understand that each book that you study is part of a whole — salvation history. It is critical that you understand where the book you are studying fits into God’s overarching plan. The first step to understanding the Bible chronologically is to identify which of the seventy-three books are of historical nature. The term “historical” refers simply to those books that keep the story moving from one event to another. The historical books provide us with continuity, or give us an ordered account of connected events from Genesis to Revelation.

There are twelve historical books in the Old Testament and, for the sake of simplicity, two historical books in the New Testament. These fourteen books will take you on an adventure through twelve periods of Bible history. Below you will see the twelve periods with the historical book(s) that corresponds with that period. The Bible timeline graphic displays the twelve periods of salvation history. The twelve periods are:

1. History of the Early World (Genesis 1-11)
2. Patriarchs (Genesis 12-50)
3. Israel in Egypt (Exodus)
4. Conquest of Canaan (Numbers, Joshua)
5. Judges (Judges)
6. United Kingdom (1 & 2 Samuel)
7. Divided Kingdom Exile (1 Kings)
8. Exile (2 Kings)
9. Return (Ezra & Nehemiah)
10. Maccabean Revolt (1 Maccabees)
11. Jesus the Messiah (Luke)
12. Church (Acts)

The highlighted box in the graphic places the book you are studying within the chronological sequence. Once you have identified the historical period you can assume that the historical book noted in the list above is the proper setting in which to understand the book you are studying, assuming the book you are studying is not one of the fourteen historical books. After the Bible timeline graphic is an introduction to the book, providing you with helpful information about its author, date, and themes. There will also be a general outline of the whole book, as well as titles of all the lessons

Introduction to the Book

The next page in the lesson will actually begin the study. Each lesson will have a brief introduction, giving you what you need to know to begin your work. In all but the first lesson, this space will review the important points from the previous lesson and preview the current one.

Text

The text of the passage of Scripture to be studied appears in the RSV-Catholic Edition. It is good for you to read the passage in at least one other translation as well. Memory verses (explained in “Questions for Reflection” below) are highlighted in bold print.



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About the Format (cont.)

Questions on the Text

After the text, you will see questions grouped together under headings. Most of the questions are designed to help you engage directly with the text so as to understand its literal meaning. Beyond that, each grouping of questions will end with at least one summary-application question. This question will help you to recognize the significance of the responses you've given to the questions by asking you to make an application of them for our lives today. This kind of question directs you beyond the literal meaning of the verses, encouraging you to consider the other senses of Scripture that are opened up by the literal (see paragraphs 115-118 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Questions for Reflection

At the end of all the questions on the text is a section called "Questions for Reflection". They are explained in more detail below (see "Four Steps to Good Personal Bible Study"). This is the most important part of the lesson, for this is where the Scripture penetrates your soul. This section will always remind you that one excellent response to Scripture is to memorize it. As the Psalmist says, "Thy Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee" (Ps. 119:11). In every lesson a suggested memory verse will appear in boldface print in the text. You may memorize that one or choose one for yourself.

Opportunities for Additional Study

For the progressing student, these will deepen and enrich the insights discovered through the questions and responses. An explanation of these features is included at the end of this study guide.

Responses to the Questions

In addition to asking questions aimed at challenging you to dig into the word of God more deeply, Catholic Scripture Studies offers a feature called Responses to the Questions which discusses ways of responding to those questions. It is extremely important to understand what this feature is and is not about.

Our purpose in offering Responses to the Questions is to model various ways in which the text of Scripture can be engaged by a Catholic student of Scripture. Many new students of Scripture profit from seeing how more experienced students tackle a text and dig out the many and varied nuggets of gold God has hidden there for us to find. So we offer this section as a way of helping the new student of Scripture see this "digging process" in action, as well as to create a starting point for others to offer their insights and discoveries as well, and to wrestle with the meaning of the text.

These responses, although they are informed by the Tradition and magisterial teachings of the Church, are not magisterial themselves. They will provide you with solid direction as you investigate the meaning of the verses under discussion. They will not give you an "official interpretation" of the verses in the study. It is not the Church's way to give definitive interpretations of Bible verses. Instead, she defines dogma (and even that she is profoundly disinclined to do unless she absolutely has to). She prefers to give her children as much freedom as possible to plumb the depths of Scripture within the boundaries of a few basic—and crucial—guidelines. To understand those guidelines, it is important for you to read paragraphs 109-119 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.



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About the Format (cont.)

Responses to the Questions (cont.)

In providing our responses to the questions in this study, we have paid particular attention to paragraphs 112-114. These guidelines are the bedrock upon which all truly Catholic Bible study rests. Scripture does not and cannot mean whatever we “feel” it to mean regardless of context, common sense, and the Tradition of the Church. In addition, we recognize that we have not said everything that can possibly be said about the verses you will be studying. To be sure, Scripture is unfathomably rich in meaning and often does its work by making startling and subtle connections in fascinating ways. This is what makes Scripture study new every time it is done.

So, as in all things, we are to seek a balance as Catholics. We must do our Scripture study within the boundaries given in the Catechism, but we must also remember that these boundaries are something like the boundaries on the playing field of a game or the rulings of an umpire. Use our responses to the questions as models, not laws. And have fun!

Summary

Each lesson will have a brief but thorough summary at the end. This summary will help you make sure that you have clearly understood the main ideas of the lesson. Beginners will find this particularly helpful.

Getting Started

Although reading the Scripture can seem overwhelming to the beginner, there are some simple steps that help reduce anxiety and make it possible to turn something difficult into something immensely thrilling. Here are our suggestions.

Four Steps to Good Personal Bible Study

Pray. Read. Think. Respond. these four actions form the basis of all good Bible Study.

Pray

Because the Scripture is Holy Spirit-breathed, it is always wise to seek His help and intercession as we study it. We need enlightenment to see the words in their true supernatural meaning, and we need the will to submit our lives to the truths we receive, no matter what the cost. In this, we are utterly dependent on His work in us. Always take the time to invoke His help. The Fathers of Vatican II wrote that we are to “remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together, for ‘we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying’” (DV 25).

Read

Sit down when you have some uninterrupted time (but not when you might fall asleep) and read through, at one sitting, the whole book you are about to study. Do this several times, if possible, before you ever look at the questions. The text on the site is the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. If you have another favorite Bible translation, read it there as well. The idea is to make yourself familiar with the entire book before you break it up into parts for study. How does it strike you? Which parts are clear and which are murky? Questions like these get the juices of analysis going. And analysis is precisely what you want to do.



Four Step to good Personal Bible Study (cont.)

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Think

Before a passage of Scripture can have spiritual meaning for you, you need to know what it actually says. This may sound obvious, but it's tempting sometimes to rush through this part or skip over it almost entirely. That is because this is where the really hard work is, but one cannot derive fruitful spiritual meaning from a passage of Scripture without first understanding what its author intended to say and what he expected his readers to understand him to say. This is why St. Thomas Aquinas said, "All other senses of sacred Scripture are based on the literal." It is a very important step.

In order to get the absolute maximum benefit from the work you put in on this study, you need to work very hard on the questions without looking at the responses we provide. This can't be stated strongly enough. The real thrill and power of Bible study comes largely in seeing what look like mere words (and sometimes difficult ones at that) on a page begin to beam forth Divine Truth as you analyze, ruminate, get stumped, analyze again, contemplate, and finally understand them. Don't short-circuit this process! Expect this to be somewhat difficult at first. Read the questions carefully and see how they can be approached from the specific text reference. Some responses will be obvious. Others will not. Think long and hard about the question, then write down your response (you might want to use a notebook reserved only for this study). If you find it hard to respond to a question, move onto the next one. Sometimes what was murky at one point become clearer as you move through the passage and think about other questions on it. After you have finished a chapter's questions, refer to the Responses to the Questions. If your response to a question is different, examine why. Did you misunderstand the question? Did you go beyond the text for the response you gave? Take time to think about whether your approach is plausible but not the best one. This may seem tedious, but it is actually part of learning to be a good Bible student. Remember that this will take time. The more you work at it, the easier it will become. You may be tempted at first to give up, feeling overwhelmed by what you don't know. Persevere! In time, you will break through the uncomfortable unfamiliarity into the wide open space of comprehension and light. It's worth all the effort.

Respond

The "Questions for Reflection" at the end of each lesson will encourage you to translate truth into action. This is the step that prevents truth from being academic, because it is here that we submit our will to Jesus, the Living Word. This is the great reward of Bible study—not to simply know about Him, but to know and experience Him. Memorizing meaningful verses is a wonderful door to contemplation of the Living Word. As Catholics, we have many sacramental opportunities for the Living Word to take root in us. As a result of your reflection on what you've studied, perhaps you will want to sit before the Blessed Sacrament and speak directly to the Lord about what you are learning. As the Catechism teaches, "to meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them. It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'" (CCC 2706). Perhaps you may need to go to confession. Certainly your participation in the Eucharist during Mass will be enriched by your growing understanding of Divine Revelation. Reflecting this way on Scripture will, over time, help you develop the habit of this two-pronged analysis of Scripture: What does this passage mean? What does it mean for me?



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For the Progressing Student

As you already know if you have studied Scripture before, there is nothing more thrilling than to study it in the clarifying light of the Catholic Church. Catholic Scripture Studies offers many opportunities for those who have experience in Scripture study to mine the riches of the Tradition of the Church on Scripture. We suggest that you read through the first part of this study guide, starting with “How to Study Scripture,” so you will understand our approach to Scripture. As explained there, every study ends with opportunities for further learning and reflection. Some features will appear at the end of each study. Others will appear as appropriate.

Appearing in every study are:

Points to Ponder

In every lesson there are layers of meaning in the text that simply cannot be reached by a question-and-answer approach. There may be theological points that are worth developing, comparisons with other parts of Scripture worth pursuing, or attention to the other senses of the text beyond the literal that are worth considering. For those ready to take the time to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, we provide here further commentary for that purpose.

Catechism Connection

In every study we include cross-references to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The Catechism helps the student to understand and apply the text within the larger context of the Living Tradition of the Church. “According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures (‘according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church’)” (CCC 113). In this section we will list appropriate Catechism references to verses in the lesson (found in the index in the back of the CCC), with their paragraph numbers. Each reference will be preceded by the citation of the verse(s) to which it refers.

Appearing as appropriate are:

Rome to Home

Part of the Living Tradition of the Catholic Church is our long history of pastoral direction by the successor to Peter, the Pope. Each pope down through the centuries has not only preserved the content of the faith but has passed it on to the next generation. Over the years the Church has been blessed with volumes of pastoral direction in the form of Encyclicals, Apostolic Letters, and other various church documents. From time to time, papal writings will be quoted to bring clarification to the text.

Family Devotions

This section is similar to the Catechism Connection in that it will contain aspects of the Living Tradition such as quotes from the saints, important information about Our Lady, and reminders about Catholic devotions like the Rosary.

Word Studies

This section will enable the student to learn more about words in their original languages, how they have been used in other parts of Scripture or in other ancient writings, and how those meanings affect the overall message of a text.



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Helpful Resources

Here are some recommendations for helpful Bible study resources:

Making Senses Out of Scripture (Mark Shea) Basilica Press: San Diego, 1999.

A handbook on understanding the “big picture” of the Bible as well as how it is interpreted in its four senses (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical), which has been the tradition of the Church for 2000 years.

Dictionary of the Bible (John McKenzie, S.J.) Macmillan: New York, 1995.

Defines words, people, and places in the Bible.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1997.

Lists every word in the Bible alphabetically with its Scripture reference; assigns a number to each word, corresponding to the original Hebrew or Greek word, which is indexed in the back. Those numbers are used by many other study tools.

The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands (Barry J. Beitzel) Moody Press: Chicago, 1985.

Helpful maps and photos of Bible lands in different periods of salvation history The Faith of the Early Fathers (William A. Jurgens) The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1970 Chronological quotes from significant writings of the Fathers of the Church in the first four centuries of her history.

Navarre Bible: Texts and Commentaries, Four Courts Press: Dublin

Available for all the New Testament books as well as the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament); designed for the general reader, drawing on rich variety of sources—Church documents, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and works of prominent spiritual writers.

A Message from the Authors

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Thank you for making the Word of God available to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.
God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle