

A Plan for Group Bible Studies

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The Basic Plan

Most Christians would agree that it is a good thing to learn more about God's word. The problem that keeps them from getting started is often the lack of a simple well organized plan.

No responsible coach would send his team into a game without arming his athletes with some kind of strategy. Even jobs like mowing the lawn, keeping a house clean, building a deck around the pool, or writing a letter to a friend require some kind of plan that organizes the steps needed to get the job done. The same is true for the study of the Bible. A good plan will help you keep focused on your goal in an organized way so that it is reached effectively.

The plan presented here is simple and well tested. The basic concept is not my own. I was introduced to it in college, then I made modifications and adaptations as I used it. This method of Bible study is best used by small groups meeting regularly. It was originally designed for weekly studies, but it could also work for a study that meets every-other-week or monthly. It works best in groups of 4 to 12 people. If there are more people interested it is best to start more than one group rather than to let the size become too large. We have seen study groups multiply into a whole network of studies as they grow and divide. Since it works best for small groups this study could be easily modified to be used by families.

The guidelines presented here will not require you to be or to have a trained leader. Some groups have found it helpful for the members to take turns moderating the study time as the findings are discussed. One of the strengths of this method is that everyone does the work and takes part. This is not a class room type study where one person teaches what he prepared while the others just listen and take notes. The goal is to get everyone studying the Bible, and encouraging each other to keep up with the plan. Groups should be careful not to let one person dominate the meetings. This tends to discourage the rest from doing their own study.

This is not intended to replace the formal teaching of the Bible. Biblically, the presentation of the word in worship is on a different level. Those called and specially trained as ministers of the word have a high responsibility to accurately explain what God has said. Members of a church have a high responsibility too. They are to be attentive when sermons are presented. There is also a valid place in the church for Sunday School classes, seminars, and other lesson type studies. The particular purpose of the study presented here is to get individual believers studying the Bible on their own daily.

The First Meeting

getting the study organized

The first meeting of your group should include a review of the study plan for those not familiar with it. Everyone participating should have a copy of the plan. Since each meeting will build upon the flow of content in the Bible book being studied, it is sometimes difficult for new people to join after the first chapter is completed. They may want to wait for the group to begin a new book. The first few studies develop the context needed to properly interpret what the original writer of the book of Scripture is saying. For this reason it is best to use short books of the Bible in the formative stages of your study group.

At the first meeting your group should agree upon which Bible book to study, and what time will work best for you to meet.

1. Choosing a book of the Bible to study

It is a good idea to begin with the shorter books of the New Testament. They are easier to outline and summarize, and they can be completed in a relatively short time. Once the group has gone through a few of the shorter books a longer one can be attempted.

Experience has shown that certain books of the Bible work best for getting things started, they are: 2 Timothy, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 John. Any of the other short New Testament Epistles will also work well for starters.

2. Setting up a time for your study

At your first meeting the members of the group should agree upon a time that will work best. This will depend upon the work, church, and family schedules of those involved. Some have found that day time meetings work best while others set aside an evening for their studies.

Once you set a time there needs to be a serious commitment by all members of the group to keep it fixed in their schedules. Once you start postponing or skipping meetings it can threaten the commitment of the members causing attendance to drop off. Changes in the time or canceled meetings should only take place in extreme circumstances.

Begin each study session with prayer. God's truth is revealed through his word by the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. Psalm 119:18 offers this model prayer, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

Don't let the study time deteriorate into debates and arguments. That is not the purpose. It is to let God's word be the teacher. The group should see differences in understanding a passage as opportunities to dig deeper into the word to discover the boundaries set by the facts revealed by God himself.

Experience with this method has shown that it's best to set a time limit for the study. About an hour or an hour and a half is all that is really needed if everyone keeps on the plan. If meetings go on too long people tend to get discouraged and some may not want to come back the next time. If more time is needed on some issues that come up, or if you don't finish in the set time, it's best to continue at the next meeting rather than to extend the discussion to where it might disrupt the members' personal schedules. Once the study begins stay on the plan. Keep your visiting and fellowship for before and after the scheduled group study time.

The Second Meeting

an overview of the entire book

The first actual study of the book your group has chosen begins in this second meeting. To prepare, each person should do the following before everyone comes together:

Step 1 Read through the entire book at least three times.

The letters and books of the Bible were written as complete pieces of literature meant to be read through like any other book or magazine article. They should not be read or used as if the parts have no connection with one another. The author had a reason for writing the book other than to provide isolated quotes to be used in sermons, debates, or devotional studies.

As you read, look for the main purpose of the book. Make a list of the main themes introduced by the author for his readers. Don't be too concerned to work out all the details in this first study. Your work will be revised as you work your way through each chapter in the following studies. When you hear what others have found you may want to go back later and add or change things to more accurately reflect the real purpose of the book.

It's important to use more than just one good translation in your study. You might use some of the more smoothed out idiomatic versions such as the New International Version of the Bible, but be sure to use at least one more carefully done literal translation such as the *King James Version*, the *New King James Version*, the *English Standard Version*, the *New American Standard Bible*, or the *American Standard Version*.

Step 2 Learn the details of the book's background

Books and letters are written for reasons that apply to the author and to the people for whom it was originally written. Luke explained the reason his Gospel was written in the first paragraph of his book. He said in Luke 1:1-4, "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed."

Every letter and book of the Bible had a specific reason for being written. Each was preserved for us in the Bible so we could learn what God was saying through those he moved to write. To understand what the Holy Spirit was teaching in each book we need to know the original setting. This overview study fills in that background.

It's important to select good reference books. Make sure that the writers and editors are scholars who believe the Bible to be God's infallible word. Those who approach the Bible as nothing more than a work of human literature will not present the historical facts objectively and honestly. There are some standard works that are well respected among those who study the Scriptures. Most of them are available through popular book distributors. The older works which are not under copyright restriction are available over the Internet and can be found with most search engines.

Particularly helpful are the notations in the *Reformation Study Bible* available from Ligonier Ministries. You also will find *Davis Bible Dictionary* and the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* to be helpful works.

For this week's study you should read your reference books to find out the following basics about the book your group chose for study.

- a. who is the author?
- b. what was the author's situation at the time he wrote?
- c. to whom is the book addressed?
- d. what was the situation of the recipients?
- e. what past contact did the author have with the recipients?

Step 3 Make a simple outline of the book

Try to follow the flow of thought in the book and discover how the author developed the points he was trying to make. Try to stay with just the main points at this time. You will break down these main divisions as you work your way through the individual chapters in the next few weeks. Try to come up with preliminary titles for each chapter which you will share with the group during your study time.

Step 4 List any key words that seem to be important.

- a. where else do these words occur in Scripture?
- b. what do the words mean?
- c. how has the same author used these words in other writings?

Step 5 Summarize the main message of the book in one clear and concise sentence.

This is a very helpful and important step. Each person will share his sentence when the group meets. This will probably be modified as the study improves your understanding of the book as a whole.

Step 6 List any spiritual lessons and applications you find during your study.

These can be lessons of encouragement, comfort, warnings, exhortations, strength, rebuke, praise, worship, or other such things.

At this second meeting each person can share the results of all the above steps. Start with someone different each time around so that each person has a chance to go first. As you listen to one another you will learn what they have found. Often steps 4, 5, and 6 will be very different and will challenge everyone to consider the different applications of the principles in the section you are studying that week. When people disagree about what a passage says it should be a good opportunity to dig in together to see why it is seen differently. Calmly work through the meaning the author intended in the text.

The Following Meetings (chapter studies)

When you finish the overview it's time to dig into the real substance of the book as you look at the individual chapters. Take them one meeting at a time. Encourage each person in the study to come prepared on each part of the study.

1. Read the chapter in the context of the whole book.

Before the meeting each person should re-read through the entire book at least once, and read the assigned chapter at least three times. Look for the main flow of thought and try to identify the main point of the chapter. Write out one carefully worded sentence that summarizes the main lesson of the chapter.

2. Outline the chapter.

Make up an outline in detail showing each main section of the author's thoughts. You can break sections down into sub-points that fit together to support the main point of each section. Some have found it helpful to begin by writing out the main thought of each verse in just a few words.

3. Cross-reference.

Find other verses and portions of the Bible that deal with similar ideas. You can use a concordance, marginal references, or a subject index of some sort. Try to do this for each verse, or at least for each sentence or paragraph in the chapter.

4. List any problems or questions that come up.

During your study you are bound to find some things that are either difficult to understand or that raise questions in your mind. Bring them up for discussion at the group meeting. You might look up answers to difficult problems or conflicts between translations by consulting good commentaries. We recommend *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, *Calvin's Commentaries*, the *Baker New Testament Commentary*, and the notes in the *Reformation Study Bible*.

5. Find one good summary verse.

Decide on one verse that seems to summarize the main thought of the chapter. Try to memorize this key verse.

6. Write out lessons and applications you find in your study.

Write out any spiritual lessons or personal applications that you encounter in your study as you did in your study of the book as a whole.

At each meeting, have every member of the group share his findings. Repeat these steps for each chapter study as you work your way through the book you selected.

Final Meeting (book summary)

After your group has gone through each chapter of the book you selected you should meet one more time to bring together the work you have done. This provides a good opportunity to revise your work and come up with a final summary of the book your group chose.

To prepare each person should do the following:

1. Read through the entire book again at least three more times.
2. Revise your previous work based upon your now completed study of the entire book.
3. Memorize the verse you feel best summarizes the main thought or message of the book.
4. Think up a title for the book as if it was going to be published on the book market today. This can help you remember it's content and message.
5. Write out any spiritual lessons or personal applications you find in your final week of study.

At this last meeting everyone should again share his findings. When you finish, have the group select the next book for study. At the next meeting go right to the Book Survey step then continue through the chapters as you did for the book you just completed.

Keep up the work to reach your goal of learning what God has said in his word. The files or notebooks you create will be your own Bible commentary. It will serve as a good source for personal study, teaching Sunday School, leading family devotions, and other uses you will find as God gives you an opportunity to study more and to teach others.

2 Timothy 2:15 "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."



8245 Parkwood Blvd. Seminole, Florida 33777
editor@girs.com www.genevaninstitute.org