

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 5: Word Studies

I. Introduction:

The word is the cornerstone of all language. Used in various forms, structures, and combinations they convey thoughts, actions, events, etc. Thus, in our study of the Bible it is important that learn to mine the depths of the vocabulary of God. While this is an essential element to Biblical interpretation, it's also one of the most abused. A common saying among interpreters goes "He knows enough Greek to be dangerous." Just like giving a man a saw does not make him a master carpenter the ability to look up a word in a dictionary and lexicon does not automatically make one a stellar Bible student. Yet, when used properly the word study is a tool which when used with skill can lead to fantastic results. In this study, we will introduce you to this vital tool, so that you can skillfully mine the riches of God's word.

- How can people abuse word studies?
- Why is it important to remember that the Bible contains sentences not simply words?

II. Tools for the Trade:

The following resources are immensely helpful for a word study.

- NASB Concordance (This is indexed with Strong's Numbers)
- Vines Complete Expository Dictionary
- ESV and MacArthur Study Bible
- Good Biblical Commentaries

Note blueletterbible.org is also an excellent resource for word studies.

III. Word Study Mistakes:

1. Believing that words which share the same root have the same meaning.

Adult and Adultery

Exist and Existential

In Biblical Hebrew the word for “bread” has the same root as “fight” and “angel” has the same root as “work, occupation.”

2. Not being mindful of the migration of language.

Compare modern usage of gay with its usage a hundred years ago. This is not a major issue in the New Testament, but it is in the Old Testament which was written over a thousand year period.

3. Placing undue emphasis on the origin of words.

For instance in *1 Corinthians 4:1* ***Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.***

The term servant comes from a term “under rower.” This has caused many to conclude that Paul is drawing upon nautical language. But just like a pineapple is neither pine nor apple, an under rower is neither under nor a rower, it simply means “servant.” When determining the meaning the word, look at the present context.

4. Reading Modern Usage Back Into the Words:

In *Romans 3:18* we read "***There is no fear of God before their eyes.***"

The Greek word for fear is “*phobos*” and for God it is “*Theos*.” Thus, we should not reverse the words and construct *theophobia* believing that there was an absence of the irrational fear of God.

5. Having a Salad Bar Approach to dictionaries and lexicons.

This happens when you see five different definitions of a word, and you select the one which helps the verse make your point.

6. Stretching the Meaning:

For instance crawling is different from walking. While they both use legs and involve motion, it would be a mistake to say that walking and crawling are synonyms or even have some overlapping meaning. We should not stretch the meaning of certain words to say things that they don’t mean. For instance, it would be a mistake to say that “fear” means deep passionate love.

IV. Principles and Procedure for a Word Studies:

The following principles do not always have to be used in the same order, but each of them should be considered when using a word study.

- A. *Use multiple translations to discern how a word is translated and which word merits a word study.*
- B. *Use a wide variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.*
- C. *Understand that different authors use words in different ways.*
- D. *Ask yourself why the author used one word and not the other.*
- E. *Consider the meaning of a word in relationship to another. For instance, does an accompanying word shape its meaning.*
- F. *Consider whether or not a word is a technical or idiomatic expression. Is this a figure of speech, or taken literally.*
- G. *Remember context is king. Test your conclusion against the context.*

V. An Old Testament Example:

To help illustrate this point we will look at the following passage:

Proverbs 8:13 “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate.

- A. Use multiple translations to discern how a word is translated and which word merits a word study.**

Looking at the different versions on blueletterbible.org there seems to be uniform consistency in the translations. Therefore, I will select fear, which seems to be a key word.

- B. Use a wide variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries to categorize meanings.**

In this case, I look up the Strong's reference number (H3374), and consult Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary. Towards the end of the definition under the heading of nouns I read:

"Fear; reverence." The noun yir'ah appears 45 times in the Old Testament. It may mean "fear" of men (Deut. 2:25), of things (7:25), of situations (Jonah 1:10), and of God (Jonah 1:12); it may also mean "reverence" of God (Gen. 20:11).

On blueletterbible.org I see the following outline of biblical usage.

- 1) fear, terror, fearing
- a) fear, terror
- b) awesome or terrifying thing (object causing fear)
- c) fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety
- d) revered

C. Understand that different authors use words in different ways.

When surveying Solomon's writings we observe that "of the Lord" accompanies every usage of "fear." In the earlier Law of Moses, we see that "fear of the Lord" is not used so much as "fear of God." It is translated both reverence and fear in Job as well as the Psalms. In the prophetic literature (written at a later date), we see the usage includes "Frightened."

- Given this information, which of the following definitions can we rule out for *Proverbs 8:13*?

- fear, terror, fearing
- a) fear, terror
 - b) awesome or terrifying thing (object causing fear)
 - c) fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety
 - d) revered

D. Ask yourself why the author used this word and not the other.

This can happen by looking up "fear" in a concordance or doing a search on blueletterbible.org and seeing the different words for "fear." When you do this you will notice that terror, dread, and being afraid are most commonly associated with other words.

In the Old Testament especially, we have to be mindful of the impact of genre on our word study.

- For instance, how would the concept of fear be used by the Prophets verses the wisdom literature of the Proverbs? How might its usage be different in the Law verses Leviticus?

E. Consider the meaning of a word in relationship to another.

For instance “body” when accompanied by “of work” has a narrow meaning.

As we noted in Proverbs, fear is always accompanied by “of the Lord.”

“Of the Lord” leads us to adopt the definition from Strongs:

c) fear (of God), respect, reverence, piety

F. Try to understand if this word is a technical or idiomatic expression. Is this a figure of speech or should it be taken literally?

For instance, “in a minute” taken technically would be 60 seconds, taken idiomatically it would mean a short amount of time.

In light of the above, “fear of the Lord” is really an idiomatic expression. The context shows us that “fear” in the phrase “fear of the Lord” does not mean literal fear or terror.

G. Remember context is king. Test your conclusion against the context.

Adapting the term “reverential, respect, piety” of God, place this understanding back in the verse to see if it still makes sense.

Proverbs 8:13 “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate.

VI. A New Testament Example:

In this section we will examine:

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

A. **Use Multiple translations to discern how a word is translated and which word merits a word study.** You can do this by putting your cursor over the “tools” icon and then clicking on the “V” icon in Blueletterbible.com.

The New International Version	New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update	The Good News Translation
21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.	21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.	21 Parents, do not irritate your children, or they will become discouraged.

- Which word seems to alter the meaning of the text?

B. **Use a wide variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries to categorize meanings.**

To look up the dictionary definitions on Blueletterbible.com, hold the cursor over the “tools” icon, and then click “C”/Interlinear. Click on the “Strong’s” number (in this case it will be G3962), and you will receive the following outline of biblical usage with every usage in the New Testament.

- 1) generator or male ancestor
 - a) either the nearest ancestor: father of the corporeal nature, natural fathers, both parents
 - b) a more remote ancestor, the founder of a family or tribe, progenitor of a people, forefather: so Abraham is called, Jacob and David
 - 1) fathers i.e. ancestors, forefathers, founders of a nation
 - c) one advanced in years, a senior
- 2) metaph.
 - a) the originator and transmitter of anything
 - 1) the authors of a family or society of persons animated by the same spirit as himself
 - 2) one who has infused his own spirit into others, who actuates and governs their minds
 - b) one who stands in a father's place and looks after another in a paternal way
 - c) a title of honour
 - 1) teachers, as those to whom pupils trace back the knowledge and training they have received
 - 2) the members of the Sanhedrin, whose prerogative it was by virtue of the wisdom and experience in which they excelled, to take charge of the interests of others
- 3) God is called the Father
 - a) of the stars, the heavenly luminaries, because he is their creator, upholder, ruler
 - b) of all rational and intelligent beings, whether angels or men, because he is their creator, preserver, guardian and protector

- 1) of spiritual beings and of all men
 - c) of Christians, as those who through Christ have been exalted to a specially close and intimate relationship with God, and who no longer dread him as a stern judge of sinners, but revere him as their reconciled and loving Father
 - d) the Father of Jesus Christ, as one whom God has united to himself in the closest bond of love and intimacy, made acquainted with his purposes, appointed to explain and carry out among men the plan of salvation, and made to share also in his own divine nature
 - 1) by Jesus Christ himself
 - 2) by the apostles
- Which of these definitions can we rule out?

The MacArthur Study Bible leads us to the following conclusion:

6:4 fathers. The word technically refers to male parents, but was also used of parents in general. Since Paul had been speaking of both parents (vv. 1–3) he probably had both in mind here. The same word is used in Heb. 11:23 for Moses' parents.¹

C. Understand that different authors use words in different ways.

Given the scope of the term father, it may be helpful to narrow any search to Paul. Clicking on the “C” I am given every occurrence of *patēr* but when I look through Romans through Philemon, I note that it is only translated Father.

- How should the above impact our understanding of how *patēr* should be translated?

D. Ask yourself why the author used one word and not the other.

To do this exercise, let's do a search on the word “parents”.

When I do this, I see that “parents” is used in *Colossians 3:20*. Further research shows that the word is different from “Father” (*patēr*). It is transliterated “*goneus*” which can be translated “Fathers, parent, the parents.”

¹MacArthur, John Jr: *The MacArthur Study Bible*. electronic ed. Nashville : Word Pub., 1997, c1997, S. Eph 6:4

- How does this help us understand how *patēr* should be translated?

E. Consider the meaning of a word in relationship to another.

(Try to understand if associated words shape its meaning).

In order to do this, we might want to look at the larger structure of the household code. Consider the larger context of *Colossians 3:18-4:1*.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* ¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.* ²⁰ *Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.* ²² *Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.* ²⁵ *For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.* ¹ *Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.*

- List who is addressed with each command?
- Notice that the subordinate member is listed first and the authority is second.
- Why would it be a problem to translate *patēr* as *parent* instead of *father* given the parallel commands?

F. Consider whether or not a word is a technical or idiomatic expression. Is this a figure of speech, or taken literally.

- How does the command to children help us to discern if this is literal or idiomatic?

G. Remember context is king. Test your conclusion against the context.

- Does the translation of *patēr as father* furnish us with a consistent translation? Why or why not?

I. Thought Questions:

- A. Should the fact that there is scholarly disagreement about translation discourage us from performing word studies?
- B. Why is it important to subject all word studies to the last step of testing your conclusion against the context?

II. Application:

- A. Use the method to conduct your own word studies.
- B. Understand that you can't simply rely on one source.
- C. Show discernment when you read or hear others conclusions about the meaning of a word.

III. Assignment:

Using *Titus 3:4-7* perform two word studies using the following principles and procedures:

- A. Use multiple translations to discern how a word is translated and which word merits a word study.**
- B. Use a wide variety of sources including dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries.**
- C. Understand that different authors use words in different ways.**
- D. Ask yourself why the author used one word and not the other.**
- E. Consider the meaning of a word in relationship to another.**
- F. Consider whether or not a word is a technical or idiomatic expression. Is this a figure of speech, or taken literally.**
- G. Remember context is king. Test your conclusion against the context.**

IV. Conclusion:

Word studies can no doubt be laborious and at times difficult. However, sometimes a quick consultation of Vines and a Concordance is all you need. Like of skills in this series this is a tool which whose helpfulness varies on the circumstance. In addition, be patient with yourself as you will find rapid improvement with repetition.