

How to Do a Devotional Bible Study

Purposes and Principles

This article will teach you how to complete a devotional Bible study and apply it to the four areas of your relationship with God, your life, your relationships with others, and the church. This method of Bible study emphasizes the use of the Bible to change your life. Bible study can become dead and lifeless unless you apply what you learn. The devotional method of Bible study encourages you to make meaningful application of what you study. You still have an interest in the facts and truths of a passage of Scripture, but your primary emphasis is on ways the passage can change your life. This method depends on a spirit of eagerness to do God's will and to let God's message change your life.

Here is the process you will follow for devotional Bible study.

1. *Always begin with exactly what the passage means.* If you don't understand what a passage is saying, your application can be wrong.

Read Ephesians 4:26. Write what the verse means.

In Ephesians 4:26 Paul was not urging us to show anger based on petty feelings or wounded pride. Paul knew that righteous anger exists. He also knew that this kind of anger can quickly change into anger that is selfish and uncontrolled. Paul was warning us against letting our righteous anger get out of control. Application of a passage must rely on correct interpretation of its meaning.

2. *Evaluate the kind of passage you are trying to apply.* You must know whether a passage is talking about a truth that is timeless or temporary. Timeless truth applies to people of any time or circumstance. Temporary truth applies only to a specific individual or group at a specific point in history.

Read the following verses and indicate for each whether its truth is timeless or temporary.

Leviticus 11:1-7 Timeless Temporary

Luke 20:25 Timeless Temporary

The application of some Old Testament verses is affected by information from the New Testament. The food restrictions of Leviticus 11 may contain helpful health information about eating. However, in Mark 7:19 Jesus declared that following those laws is not necessary in our spiritual lives. Some Bible passages, like Luke 20:25, describe a condition we may not face today. However, the principle that was used in the Bible to face the condition in the first century may still be valid today. For example, we are not ruled by Caesar today, but God expects us to give both to the government and to God.

3. *Relate the passage to others on the same subject.* This increases your understanding of the meaning of the passage you are studying. Read Matthew 7:7. Jesus' teachings on prayer suggest that those who keep on asking can expect God to answer their prayers.

Read James 4:3 and 1 John 5:14-15. Summarize the ways they change the way you would apply Matthew 7:7.

James 4:3:

1 John 5:14-15:

Such passages as James 4:3 and 1 John 5:14-15 give other factors to consider in seeking answers to prayer. You will want to modify your understanding of Matthew 7:7 in light of such passages' teachings.

4. *Determine ways the passage can be applied.* A passage can be applied in many ways. You may learn a truth about God that you can apply to the political, economic, or social arena. You may find a truth about yourself that can give you a higher call of commitment to God's will. You may discover insights that will change your attitudes toward and relationships with coworkers, neighbors, and even enemies. You may learn goals and challenges you can pray into reality in your church.

Begin a devotional study of Ephesians 4:32, following steps 1–3 above. Complete the worksheet “Devotional Bible Study” on the following page to record your responses.

Devotional Bible Study

Scripture reference:

Summary of the passage's meaning/teaching:

Is the teaching timeless or temporary? Timeless Temporary

Related Scripture references and their teachings:

Let's process the way you completed your worksheet. First, there is no single way to write a summary or the main teaching of Ephesians 4:32. An interesting fact about devotional Bible study is that the summary of the passage and its teachings will reflect the needs a person feels most deeply. We don't know what you wrote on your worksheet, but you probably dealt with questions like these.

- What happens if the person or persons I think I need to forgive do not want my forgiveness?
- Is my forgiving another person the same as God's forgiving that person?
- Does forgiving a person mean that I act as if that person had never wronged me?

Next, what did you decide about the timeliness of the passage? Is its truth temporary or timeless? The teaching in this passage is a timeless truth. This passage contains a truth that God intends for us to apply fully today.

The next step in your study was to identify related passages that you could compare with the passage you were studying. Some of the more prominent New Testament passages that deal with forgiveness are Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15; Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60; and Colossians 3:13.

Applying a Devotional Bible Study

When you do devotional Bible study, you should continually ask yourself, *How can I use this Bible truth in my life?* Let's complete the study by finding ways you can apply this passage to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church. Follow these steps to apply devotional Bible study.

1. *Pray that God will give you insight about the application of the passage.*
2. *Meditate on the passage.* As you meditate, try to imagine how you might apply the passage. In the case of Ephesians 4:32, consider someone you need to forgive. What attitude must you overcome to offer forgiveness? How can you express forgiveness? In person? By a telephone call? Via e-mail? With a letter? What can you do to demonstrate that your forgiveness is genuine? Let me suggest a simple device you can use to direct your meditation. As you meditate, ask yourself five questions, which form the acrostic PEACE. As you pray, ask yourself:

Is there any—

Promise to claim or praise to offer God?

Example to follow or avoid?

Action or attitude to change?

Command to obey?

Error to avoid?

3. *Write specific, practical ways the passage can be applied.* Think of specific and practical ways to apply the passage to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church. Merely saying, "I will be more forgiving" is not specific enough. Offering to express forgiveness to everyone who has ever sinned against you is not practical.

4. *Memorize the verse or verses you have studied.* Because you memorized Ephesians 4:32 in week 1, this verse is now a tool God can continually use to help you in the process of forgiving others. The challenge of forgiveness requires time for mastery, and continual help is essential.
5. *Put the application into practice.* In the matter of forgiveness you may need to visit someone, make a phone call, or write a letter to express forgiveness to someone who may have harmed or injured you. Avoid saying to someone, “If I’ve done anything wrong, I want to apologize.” Specifically mention the incident that demands forgiveness. Also, it is best if you admit negative thoughts about a person only to God. Mentioning them to the other person will cause him to wonder what you are thinking.

Complete the worksheet “Applying Devotional Bible Study” on the following page. Make your application of Ephesians 4:32 by following the steps you studied today. Be sure to allow adequate time for the meditation process, using the PEACE acrostic, and for writing applications to the four areas of your life.

Devotional Bible study is a great way to apply the Bible to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church. Applying the truths of God’s Word to your life should be the end result of all Bible study. That is a significant way you grow to be more like your Master Teacher, Jesus Christ.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God’s Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 141–49. Out of print.

Applying Devotional Bible Study

Scripture reference:

1. Pray that God will give you insight about the application of the passage.
2. Meditate on the passage, asking yourself:

Is there any—

Promise to claim or praise to offer God?

Example to follow or avoid?

Action or attitude to change?

Command to obey?

Error to avoid?

3. Ways this passage can be applied—

- to your relationship with God:

- to your life:

- to your relationships with others:

- to the church:

4. Memorize the verse(s).

5. Ways you can put the application into practice: