

## How To Do a Topical Study

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Topical study is a systematic method of researching a specific subject in the Bible. Topics may include people, customs, occupations, behaviors, key words, and individual doctrines, among others. This type of study offers a complete picture of what the Bible has to say about a particular subject. We will outline seven important steps for successful study using this method.

First, choose a specific topic for study. Identify it clearly and be sure it is sufficiently limited in scope. A topic that seems manageable at first could become unwieldy quickly. If it becomes cumbersome, limit the study to either the Old or New Testament, to one particular biblical character, author, or individual book.

Second, find all the places where the topic is mentioned in Scripture. Dictionaries, concordances, reference Bibles, websites, and Bible software will prove invaluable when finding passages on any given subject. Lexicons will provide information on the nuances of significant terms in the original languages. You should be as thorough as possible. A random selection of a few verses may not give an accurate sense of the subject. Each passage needs to be examined closely. Record any personal observations or insights. During this step, a literal (word-for-word) translation will be far more helpful than free (sense-for-sense) translations or paraphrases.

Third, look up related words and concepts, including both synonyms and antonyms. A study on the tongue might examine both positive and negative aspects, including lying, praising, boasting, blessing, cursing, instruction, reproof, admonishment, and rebuke. Studying anxiety could include worry, but also peace and contentment—in other words, the things of which anxiety robs the believer. Understanding what something *is* will be helped by also understanding what it *is not*. For instance, God is love (1 John 4:8), but it is not an unconditional love that overlooks wrongdoing or reneges on punishments for sin.

Fourth, consider the context of every passage. Context is key for a proper understanding of the Bible's view on any subject. Taking words, phrases, and passages out of context lead to error and misunderstanding. Part of considering the context of each passage is noting whether there are any cultural differences that may impact our understanding of the topic today. For instance, slavery in the Mosaic Covenant was more like indentured servitude than the slavery practiced in the last few centuries in the Western world. Another example is the difference between the modern and biblical understanding of "fool." Understanding the larger context by examining extrabiblical evidence may be helpful for support or background information, but the biblical text should always receive preference.

Fifth, create an outline to organize your research, looking for patterns and recurring ideas. As you look over the list of items related to the topic being studied, appropriate divisions and subgroups will begin to emerge. It will also allow you to see whether the topic undergoes development throughout the Bible. For example, the Hebrew word for covenant (*berith*) means a formal legal agreement between two parties in the Old Testament, but the Greek term (*diatheke*) often means something like "last will and testament" in the New.

Sixth, summarize your findings and formulate your conclusions. Asking a number of questions will help in doing this. How frequently does the topic appear in the Bible? Does it build upon antecedents in Scripture? Do later biblical authors broaden, deepen, or otherwise expand our understanding of the topic being considered?

Finally, apply what you have learned. After ensuring that you have researched the topic thoroughly, ask, “What does this mean to me?” Determine how what you have learned may be applied to yourself in your relationship with God and other people, your needs, or your desires.