

## How to do a Word Study

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Conducting a successful word study is a skill that every serious Bible student should possess. Words have meanings, and those meanings affect one's understanding of the Bible. The definition of a single word can redirect one's understanding not only of the immediate context, but of the remote context as well. Conducting word studies helps the Bible student remain vigilant in his understanding of God's word.

The mechanics of doing a word study are straight forward. One must know the word that he desires to study. Then, it is important to have some research tools available. Dictionaries and lexicons are the primary resources. One may also want a good concordance. Since the Bible was originally written in languages other than English, the student will want some works that address the original languages and their meanings.

After deciding what tools to use in one's study, it is important to discover where the word occurs and in what contexts. The student will then want to read the word in its context as it was used. This will expose the student to various different meanings of the word. More often than not, words have more than one meaning, and sometimes opposite meanings. The word "cleave," for example, can mean to bring together (as in "a husband should cleave to his wife") or separate (as in "please cleave the meat into two pieces"). The same is true for words in other languages. Studying a word in the Greek or Hebrew languages does not necessarily provide ultimate clarity. The context in which a word is used may be the deciding factor on its meaning. Words may also be used in both literal and figurative ways. Words may have multiple literal meanings and multiple figurative meanings. For example, the Bible talks about literal lions, such as the one that Samson killed, and it talks about figurative lions, as in Satan walking about as a lion. To a certain degree, one will want to study these grammatical devices to understand how words are used. In this regard, one may consult an English, Greek, or Hebrew grammar to understand word usages in its various forms and figures.

Beyond the mechanical aspects of word studies, there are spiritual concerns also. Many desire to do word studies in order to prove a specific point. This is the wrong way to approach studying the Bible regardless of what kind of study one is doing. Instead, we must let the Bible speak to us, including allowing the definitions of words that the Bible uses to sway our thoughts. Approaching a word study with a prejudicial desire to prove oneself right is dishonest. It is not allowing the Holy Spirit to speak, and we must "speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Approaching a word study with a prejudicial point of view will skew one's perspective in many areas. For example, the translators of the New International Version chose to translate the Greek word "flesh" as "sinful nature" in some places. This is placing one's theological prejudice into the text of the Bible instead of letting the Bible's text influence one's theology. Honesty in word studies is paramount.

Finally, one must conduct word studies independent of one's social circumstances. The evidence for the meaning of a word must speak for itself, and one must have the courage to accept that meaning regardless what others believe. "Others" could be scholars, colleges, schools of

preaching, preachers, elders, congregations, or immediate associations. Societies can place great pressure upon the Bible student to conform to their beliefs. The Pharisees were guilty of changing the meaning of words in order to advance their agenda. For example, they changed the meaning of the word, "Honor" in "Honor your father and mother," to not include supporting elderly parents (Matthew 15:1-9). The Pharisees excused folks from obeying this commandment because of their party affiliation. Jesus, however, would not excuse them.

While there are many mechanical things that may be done to conduct word studies, the most important aspects are spiritual in nature. If we have wrong motives and attitudes regarding the Bible, our word studies will not be profitable. We must have honesty of character and a spiritual attitude to really glean from these studies what God desires us to know. May God bless us in such endeavors.