



THE CHARA BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

How to Study the Bible

THE **Chara** PROJECT

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A Note From The Team

God's Word is meant to be understood. It was understood by the original audience in its day and we believe the Bible can make sense to us today.

But sometimes reading the Bible can be intimidating and we don't always agree on how to interpret and apply its message. That's what The Chara Project team experienced as we began studying the Bible with people from differing beliefs. The more we dove into something called hermeneutics (how to study and apply the Bible), we were both fascinated and overwhelmed. We wanted to equip ourselves and our neighbors to learn how to read and study the Bible, but at times it felt like too much.

This is what birthed The Chara Project's mission: **to build confidence in studying the Bible on your own and with a neighbor.**

Thankfully, God showed us that we could use our very own name, The CHARA Project, as a simple and memorable acronym to study the Bible: **C**ontext, **H**istory, **A**uthor, **R**esearch and **A**pply.

Chara (pronounced khar-ah) is the Greek word for JOY in the Biblical text. We believe that the joy-filled message of the Bible is for everyone. We have experienced this joy, and so have our neighbors who have studied the Bible alongside us.

Because the CHARA Bible Study Guide is designed to teach you HOW to think, not tell you WHAT to think, this guide can be used by anyone, regardless of your faith background or Biblical knowledge. This guide will help you identify what bias and assumptions you bring to the Biblical text (we all have them!) and teach you to read the Bible on its own terms.

It is our ultimate hope to create a world where anyone can explore the Bible and grow in their Biblical understanding.

Just tuck this go-to guide in your Bible to use anytime and anywhere and get ready for an exciting journey of discovery that brings unimaginable joy!

With JOY,
Heather & Sarah
Co-founders, The Chara Project

Getting Started

LEARN HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

You can use the CHARA Bible Study Guide to learn how to study and understand the Bible, by discovering what questions to ask when studying the Bible and how to stay focused on the original intended meaning of the text. Just follow this simple-to-remember CHARA acronym - we even provide specific questions to ask for each:

Context - Understand the text surrounding the passage

History - Understand the history and culture of the ancient world

Author - Understand the author's purpose and their style of writing

Research - Dig deeper through word and translation study

Apply - Identify how you can apply this passage to your life

HOW TO USE CHARA

Use the CHARA Bible Study Guide on its own as your go-to guide for personal or group Bible study, or it can be used as a supplement to an existing guided Bible study.

BIBLE STUDY IN 2 SIMPLE STEPS

1

CHOOSE WHAT TO STUDY

- **Use for any size passage** - The CHARA Bible Study Guide can be used to study a single verse, passage, chapter or more!

2

CHOOSE WHICH CHARA QUESTIONS TO ASK FROM THIS GUIDE

- **It's not a checklist** - Not every question from this guide will apply to every passage. Pick out a handful of CHARA questions that will help unlock the original message and meaning. Just note the Key Principles to ensure Biblical accuracy.
- **Hop around** - You don't have to ask questions in the same order of C-H-A-R-A. Mix it up and go in any order that makes sense to guide you through the passage.

Here's the best part - while using this guide in your Bible study, you're simultaneously learning *how* to study the Bible. Before you know it, these questions will become second nature and if you're like us, your confidence and desire to spend time in God's Word will soar!

NEW TO CHARA?

Start with some of the questions we ask the most—they are noted with an *asterisk in this guide.

To see **CHARA in Action**, we've provided you with a quick example and practice Bible study on pages 12-15.

EXAMPLE: See an example of CHARA in Action, including what questions to ask with potential answers while studying Jeremiah 29:11, a verse you may have seen on a coffee mug or displayed in a friend's home.

PRACTICE: Practice using the CHARA Bible Study Guide on one of the most loved Bible verses, John 3:16, and see what new insights you can learn from this often familiar verse.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Whether you're new to the Bible or you've been reading it for years, we're here to help you build confidence in studying the Bible. You'll find many helpful resources on our website, www.thecharaproject.com, including:

In-Depth CHARA Support: For deeper insights on how to understand and study the Context, History, Author, Research, and Apply, go to **www.thecharaproject.com/charaguide** and check out The Chara Project podcast found on YouTube and most podcasting sites.

Bible Studies: Find more examples of CHARA in Action Bible studies (with accompanying videos that include answers) and other pre-written Bible Studies using CHARA at **<https://www.thecharaproject.com/bible-studies>**

Group Bible Study: Do you struggle doing Bible study alone? Join a Bible study group - or start your own - and engage in God's Word with friends and neighbors using the CHARA Bible Study Guide! For tips and information on how to start, host, or lead a group bible study, **visit www.thecharaproject.com/groups**

Context

THE TEXT

The Bible is a collection of 66 books that tells one unified story. Context helps us discover how each verse and story harmoniously fit in the overall big picture of the Bible.

If you start with just one verse, begin to work your way out by reading the immediate context - looking for the complete thought found in the surrounding text. Immediate context is essential and may be enough to uncover the intended meaning of a verse. But there will be times that you'll want to consider its context within the book and the Bible to make sure your interpretation is in harmony with the rest of Scripture (find using cross references and Study Bible notes!).

***Immediate Context:**

- What is the theme or main idea found in the surrounding paragraph(s)?
- How are connective words used to develop a complete thought (e.g. *therefore, and, but, however*)?
- How does the immediate context help determine what the verse means?

Book Context:

- Is the theme from immediate context repeated throughout the book?
- How does the theme fit within the overall purpose of the book?

Bible Context:

- Does my interpretation hold true throughout the rest of the Bible?
- Does another passage in the Bible provide clarity? Does the text quote or allude to another passage in the Bible and what understanding does that give?
- How does this passage fit into the big story of the Bible? Why is it included in the Bible?

KEY PRINCIPLE: **The Bible cannot contradict itself.** Your interpretation of a passage cannot be in conflict with what is clearly taught somewhere else in the Bible. When it comes to confusing or seemingly contradictory passages, let clear Scripture interpret unclear Scripture, by turning to passages that make it abundantly clear.

History

THE CULTURE

Written thousands of years ago, the Bible reflects the culture of its day.

Today we're inclined to interpret Scripture through the lens of our Western individualistic culture, which is very different from the culture of the Bible's day. With help from a Study Bible, commentary, or the text itself, journey into the ancient world and watch Scripture come alive as you hear the message the way the original audience would have heard it.

***Who** was it written to? Who was it written about? How does the Bible describe them?

Where does the narrative take place? Where was it written? What can you learn about their town and travel?

When did the events take place? When was it written? What was going on in history at that time?

Why was this message given to those people at that time?

***What** worldview, cultural, religious, political factors and experiences were a part of their world and how did that influence them? What was their understanding of God at that time?

***How** would the original audience have heard this message?

KEY PRINCIPLE: **Before you understand it today, understand it back then.** Practice exegesis (think exit), to *pull out* how the original audience would have heard its message. Avoid eisegesis, which is *reading into* the text your own presuppositions and bias.

Author

THE PURPOSE

The Bible was written over a 1500 year period by around 40 authors from different walks of life. While the writing and editing process was inspired by God, it retains the humanity and style of its authors. Get to know the author (and/or speaker), their purpose and uncover how they communicated in a unique and understandable way.

***Person:** What can you learn about the author? How did the author's experiences influence what they communicated?

Structure: What is emphasized by:

- Related Text: such as 1) Questions & Answers, 2) Compare & Contrast, 3) Cause & Effect?
- Order: the order of events, ideas, people, etc.
- Space: the amount of space devoted to a person, theme, or circumstance (which can indicate the importance of a subject)
- Layout: how the book is organized (e.g. chronological, biographical, ideological)?

***Purpose/Point:** What was the author's purpose (see book intro in a Study Bible)? What was the author/speaker's point in communicating this message? How does this help you understand the passage?

Speech: What is being communicated through figurative language or symbolism (e.g. metaphors, hyperbole, idioms, and rhetorical questions)?

Patterns: What is highlighted through the use of repetition and other patterns such as parallelism, alliteration and chiasm?

Style: What literary style(s) did the author use and how should that affect the way you read this passage? (See page 11 for the list of styles and more questions)

KEY PRINCIPLE: Don't shout where the author whispers or whisper where the author shouts. Be careful not to proof text or cherry-pick Scripture, by turning something mentioned in a single spot into a belief or doctrine the author never intended. Always consider how a passage fits within the author's overall purpose throughout the book.

Research

DIGGING DEEPER

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek (and some Aramaic). Unless you are reading the original languages, your Bible is a translation. The Bible is the most influential book in history and has been translated into more languages than any other book. It has stood the test of time and it can withstand your questions too. Reading with curiosity can guide your research as you dive deeper into the text and is the best way to learn and grow in your understanding of God's Word.

***Observations & Questions:** What observations or questions do you have? What stands out to you when you reread the passage?

***Translations:** Does another Bible translation add perspective or clarity on what the original language was trying to communicate? Visit www.thecharaproject.com/translations to learn more about Bible translations.

Original Language: What does a word mean in the original language? Check out a Hebrew/Greek lexicon, such as blueletterbible.org or biblehub.com.

Resources: What insights do you learn from Biblical scholars provided in Study Bibles, commentaries, and credible online resources?

Paraphrase: How would you rewrite the message of the passage into your own words?

KEY PRINCIPLE: Vet your resources carefully. Study Bible notes and commentaries are not Scripture, but are carefully curated by groups of Biblical scholars. Yet not all resources are created equal. Be sure the insights you find don't contradict the rest of the Bible and are stated in several reliable resources. To view our recommended resources, visit www.thecharaproject.com/recommended.

Apply

MY RESPONSE

From cover to cover, the Bible is a book about God. Therefore we should look for God on every page. Much like a conversation, a response is needed to fully engage in a deeper relationship with God through His Word. The goal when reading the Bible is not just to be smarter, but to be transformed. So make sure to pray for understanding and a renewed mind every time you open your Bible.

***Pray:** “Lord, what do you want me to learn and how should I apply this to my life?”

Reflect: What specific questions do you have upon further reflection of the passage?

***Ask:** What do you learn about God - His character, attributes, or desires?

Yield: What personal, cultural, or religious bias and assumptions do you bring to the text? What do you need to surrender, if anything, to be in harmony with the Bible?

Express: What fears or concerns do you have about applying what you’ve learned?

Respond: What was expected of the original audience and what principles make sense for us now (is it a cultural or timeless truth)?

KEY PRINCIPLE: Although the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. Therefore, you must first determine the original meaning of a verse or passage before applying that same meaning to your life today. Because the Bible cannot mean now what it didn’t mean then, save application for last, as you first consider the Context, History, what the Author meant back then, and Research deeper into the text.

Literary Styles

God masterfully used about 9 distinct literary styles (genres) throughout the Bible to communicate in a way people would understand and remember. More than one genre may be found throughout each book. Below is a key question for each to guide your Bible study. To learn more about each genre visit www.thecharaproject.com/literarystyles

Law - The first five books of the Old Testament.

What is the spirit of the law? What does God desire for His people?

Narrative - Stories of God's people throughout the Bible.

What can you learn from the actions & mistakes of the characters in the story?

Poetry (Psalms) - Expresses truth, feelings, or experiences in imagery and symbolic language.

What is the intended meaning of the symbolic language used? How did the psalmist relate to and affirm God?

Wisdom - Guidance on developing character and living life well found primarily in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

What can you learn about living life well in this world?

Prophecy - Messages from God communicated through prophets.

Why did God speak this message to those people at that time and how does this reveal God's heart?

Gospels - Four books sharing the "good news" about Jesus

What emphasis does the author place on Jesus?

Parables - Stories and illustrations that evoke a response.

How does the parable influence/challenge the original audience's thinking?

Letters - Epistles from apostles to early Christians and churches.

What instruction was given and what prompted it?

Apocalyptic - Prophetic writing found in Revelation and Daniel.

What do you learn about God's sovereignty and triumph over evil?

CHARA in Action

EXAMPLE VERSE: JEREMIAH 29:11

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (NIV)

APPLY

Yield: What personal, cultural, or religious bias and assumptions do you bring to the text?

Is God promising me that I will prosper and not experience harm?

CONTEXT

Immediate: What is the theme or main idea found in the surrounding paragraph(s) (Jeremiah 29:1-14)?

The theme is restoration and hope to the Jews exiled in a foreign land.

Book: Is the theme from immediate context repeated throughout the book? How does the theme fit within the overall purpose of the book?

Hope is not the only theme, as Jeremiah also emphasized judgment against Judah for their unfaithfulness to God's covenant.

HISTORY

Who/When: Who was it written to? When did the events take place? What was going on in history at that time?

Jews who were deported from Jerusalem to Babylon (597 BC).

Why: Why was this message given to those people at that time?

To give them hope that God would bring them back to their land after 70 years in exile and to instruct them on how to live life in Babylon.

AUTHOR

Style: What is communicated through the literary style the author used?

Prophecy & Letter. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter (291) revealing God's heart for His people - God had a good plan for their future and had not abandoned them.

Patterns: What is highlighted through the use of repetition?

Plan, Plan, Plan (vs 11) - repetition emphasizes that God is in control—He had a plan and a purpose for His people even when it didn't look like it.

RESEARCH

Observations & Questions: What observations or questions do you have?

What does "prosper" mean?

Translations/Original Language: Does another Bible translation add perspective or clarity on what the original language was trying to communicate? What does a word mean in the original language?

*Translation variations of the word "prosper": Well-being (CSB), Good (NLT), Welfare (ESV), Peace (KJV). In Hebrew (*šālôm*): Welfare, Peace (blueletterbible.org).*

APPLY

Yield: What personal, cultural, or religious bias and assumptions do you bring to the text? What do you need to surrender, if anything, to be in harmony with the Bible?

I need to surrender my assumption that this is God's promise to me, when it's not. Because this verse is collectively for the Jews in exile, I may not personally prosper in my finances, family, or career and I may experience harm or suffering. To assume otherwise would not align with the rest of the Bible.

Express: What fears or concerns do you have about applying what you've learned?

I'm afraid that if I surrender to God's plan and let go of control, I may lose the things I care about most and experience pain and suffering.

Respond/Ask: What was expected of the original audience and what principles make sense for us now (is it a cultural or timeless truth)? What do you learn about God - His character, attributes, or desires?

This is a cultural truth for the Jews in exile, but there is a timeless truth about God's character - He is sovereign and we can trust and find hope in God's faithfulness and purpose, even in difficult times.

Pray: "Lord, what do you want me to learn and how should I apply this to my life?"

Lord, I praise you for your faithfulness. Help me to trust your unchanging character and know your love when life doesn't make sense.

CHARA in Action

PRACTICE VERSE: JOHN 3:16

This Bible study leverages questions from the **CHARA Bible Study Guide** for you to do on your own or with a group. Open up your Bible and read the verse before getting started with the questions below. For help with the answers check out Episode 78 of The Chara Project Podcast available on YouTube and most any podcasting site.

CONTEXT

Immediate: What is the theme or main idea found in John 3:14-18? How does that help determine what the verse means?

Bible: Does the text quote or allude to another passage in the Bible and what understanding does that give? Use cross references that will likely point to Numbers 21:4-9 to understand the history of “*just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness*” in John 3:14.

HISTORY

Who was it written about? How does the Bible describe them? Read John 3:1 & 10 to learn more about who Jesus was speaking to.

How would the original audience have heard this message? What parallel did Jesus want Nicodemus to see in John 3:14-15? (Hint: How does the snake lifted up on the pole foreshadow Jesus being lifted up on the cross?)

AUTHOR

Patterns: What is highlighted through the use of repetition in John 3:14-18?

Purpose: What was the author's purpose? Check out what John emphasized at the beginning and end of his gospel in John 1:1-3 and John 20:30-31 to get a better understanding of his purpose. (Hint: you can also refer to the intro of the book of John in a Study Bible)

RESEARCH

Translations: Does another Bible translation add perspective or clarity on what the original language was trying to communicate in John 3:16? If your translation uses the word "begotten" (KJV) be sure to look up the verse in a modern translation such as the NIV (New International Version) or CSB (Christian Standard Bible).

Resources: What insights do you learn from Biblical scholars provided in Study Bibles, commentaries, and credible online resources? The CSB Study Bible includes a Greek word study on "one and only" meaning *the only one of its kind*. And clarifies that Jesus is unique as "God's *one and only* Son in that his essential nature is the same as the Father's." **How does this impact your understanding of John 3:16?**

APPLY

Ask: What do you learn about God - His character, attributes, or desires?

Pray: "Lord, what do you want me to learn and how should I apply this to my life?"



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