

4 Ways to Read the Bible for Personal Application

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God's Word for You

It is a marvel how personally the Bible applies. The words pointedly address the concerns of long-ago people in faraway places, facing specific problems, many of which no longer exist. They had no difficulty seeing the application. Much of what they read was personal application to actual situations they were facing. But nothing in the Bible was written directly to you or specifically about what you face. We are reading someone else's mail. Yet the Bible repeatedly affirms that these words are also written for us: "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" ([Rom. 15:4](#)) ([Deut. 29:29](#)) ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)) ([2 Tim. 3:15-17](#)). Application today discovers ways in which the Spirit reapplies Scripture in a timely fashion.

Furthermore, the Bible is primarily about God, not you. The essential subject matter is the triune Redeemer Lord, culminating in Jesus Christ. When Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" ([Luke 24:45](#)), he showed how everything written—creation, promises, commands, history, sacrificial system, psalms, proverbs—reveals him. We are reading someone else's biography. Yet that very story demonstrates how he includes us within his story. Jesus is the Word of God applied, all-wisdom embodied. As his disciples, we learn to similarly apply the Bible, growing up into his image. Application today experiences how the Spirit "rescripts" our lives by teaching us who God is and what he is doing.

"Personal application" proves wise when you reckon with these marvels. The Bible was written to others—but speaks to you. The Bible is about God—but draws you in. Your challenge is always to reapply Scripture afresh, because God's purpose is always to rescript your life. How can you expand your wisdom in personal application? The following four ways are suggested.

1. Consolidate What You Have Already Learned

Assuming that you have listened well to some parts of the Bible, consider these personal

questions. What chunk of Scripture has made the most difference in your life? What verse or passage have you turned to most frequently? What makes these exact words frequently and immediately relevant? Your answer will likely embody four foundational truths about how to read the Bible for wise application.

First, this passage becomes your own because you listen. You remember what God says. He is saying this to you. You need these words. This promise, revelation, or command must be true. You must act on this call to faith and love. When you forget, you drift, stray, and flounder. When you remember and put it to work, bright truth rearranges your life.

The foundation of application is always attentive listening to what God says.

Second, the passage and your life become fused. It is not simply a passage in the Bible. A specific word from God connects to some pointed struggle inside you and around you.

These inner and outer troubles express your experience of the dual evil that plagues every human heart: sin and confusion from within; trouble and beguilement from without ([1 Kings 8:37–39](#)) ([Eccles. 9:3](#)). But something God says invades your darkness with his light. He meets your actual need with his actual mercies. Your life and God's words meet.

Application depends on honesty about where you need help. Your kind of trouble is everywhere in the Bible.

Third, your appropriation of this passage reveals how God himself does the applying. He meets you before you meet him. The passage arrested you. God arranged your struggle with sin and suffering so that you would need this exact help. Without God's initiative "I will write it on their hearts," ([Jer. 31:33](#)) you would never make the connection. The Spirit chose to rewrite your inner script, pouring God's love into your heart, inviting you to live in a new reality. He awakens your sense of need, gives you ears to hear, and freely gives necessary wisdom. Application is a gift, because wisdom is a gift.

Fourth, the application of beloved passages is usually quite straightforward. God states something in general terms. You insert your relevant particulars. For example:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ([Ps. 23:4](#)).

What troubles are you facing? Who is with you?

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all ([Isa. 53:6](#)).

What is your particular way of straying? How does the Lamb of God connect with your situation?

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" ([Phil. 4:6](#)).

With what are you obsessed? What promises anchor your plea for help ([Phil. 4:5, 7–9](#))?

Such words speak to common human experiences. A passage becomes personal when your details participate in what is said. The gap across centuries and between cultures seems almost to disappear. Your God is a very present help in trouble—this trouble.

Application occurs in specifics.

2. Look for the Directly Applicable Passages

How do you widen your scope of application? Keep your eye out for *straightforward passages*. Typically they generalize or summarize in some manner, inviting personal appropriation. Consider the core promises of God, the joys and sorrows of many psalms, the moral divide in many proverbs, the call of many commands, the summary comment that interprets a story. As examples of the first, ([Exodus 34:6–7](#)) ([Num 6:24–26](#)) and ([Deut 31:6](#)) state foundational promises that are repeatedly and variously applied throughout the rest of Scripture. Pay attention to how subsequent scriptures specifically reapply these statements, and to how the entire Bible illustrates them. Make such promises part of your repertoire of well-pondered truth. They are important for a reason. Get a feel for how these words come to a point in Jesus Christ and can rescript every life, including yours.

Consider how *generalization* occurs. In narratives, details make the story come to life. But psalms and proverbs adopt the opposite strategy. They intentionally flatten out specific references, so anyone can identify. David was troubled when he wrote ([Psalm 25](#))—his emotions are clearly felt. But he left his own story at the door: "For your name's sake, O

Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. . . . Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins" (Ps. 25:11, 18). He gives no details. We are given a template flexible enough to embrace any one of us. As you reapply, your sins and sufferings make (Psalm 25) come to life as it leads you to mercy.

In matters of obedience, the Bible often proclaims a general truth without mentioning any of the multitude of possible applications. When Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13), he leaves you to puzzle out the forms of money-worship particular to your personality and your culture. In such cases, the Bible speaks in large categories, addressing many different experiences, circumstances, and actions. Sorting out what it specifically means is far from being mechanical and automatic, but the application process follows a rather direct line.

If you have a favorite Bible passage, it is likely one of these parts of Scripture whose application is relatively direct. But our experience of immediate relevance can skew our expectations for how the rest of God's revelation applies to our lives.

3. Recognize the Sorts of Passages where Personal Application Is Less Direct

Here is the core dilemma. Most of the Bible does not speak directly and personally to you. How do you "apply" the stories in Genesis? What about genealogies and census data? Leviticus? The life stories of Esther, Job, Samson, or Paul? The distribution of land and villages in Joshua? The history of Israel's decline detailed through 1 and 2 Kings? The prophetic woes scorching Moab, Philistia, Egypt, and Babylon, fulfilled so long ago? The ruminations of Ecclesiastes? The Gospel stories showing Jesus in action? The New Testament's frequent preoccupation with Jew-Gentile relations? The apocalyptic images in the Revelation?

This Lord is your God; this history is your history; these people are your people; this Savior has brought you in to participate in who he is and what he does.

The Bible's stories, histories, and prophecies—even many of the commands, teachings, promises, and prayers—take thoughtful work in order to reapply with current relevance. If you receive them directly—as if they speak directly to you, about you, with your issues in view—you will misunderstand and misapply Scripture. For example, the angel's command to Joseph, "take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt" (Matt. 2:13), is not a command to anyone today to buy a ticket to Egypt! Those who attempt to take the entire Bible as if it directly applies today end up distorting the Bible. It becomes an omni-relevant magic book teeming with private messages and meanings. God does not intend that his words function that way.

These passages do apply. But most of the Bible applies differently from the passages tilted toward immediate relevance. What you read applies by extension and analogy, not directly. Less sizzle, but quietly significant. In one sense, such passages apply exactly because they are not about you. Understood rightly, such passages give a changed perspective. They locate you on a bigger stage. They teach you to notice God and other people in their own right. They call you to understand yourself within a story—many stories—bigger than your personal history and immediate concerns. They locate you within a community far wider than your immediate network of relationships. And they remind you that you are always in God's presence, under his eye, and part of his program.

4. Tackle the Application of Less-Direct Passages

Application is a lifelong process, seeking to expand and deepen wisdom. At the simplest level, simply read through the Bible in its larger chunks. The cumulative acquisition of wisdom is hard to quantify. A sense of what truth means and how truth works is overheard as well as heard. But also wrestle to work out the implications of specific passages. Consider two examples. The first presents an extreme challenge to personal application: a genealogy or census. These are directly irrelevant to your life. Your name is not on the list. The reasons for the list disappeared long ago. You gain nothing by knowing that "Koz fathered Anub, Zobebah, and the clans of Aharhel" (1 Chron. 4:8). But when you learn to listen rightly, such lists intend many good things—and each list has a somewhat different

purpose. Among the things taught are these:

The Lord writes down names in his book of life. Families and communities matter to him. God is faithful to his promises through long history. He enlists his people as troops in the redemptive reconquest of a world gone bad. All the promises of God find their "Yes" in Jesus Christ ([2 Cor. 1:20](#)).

You "apply" a list of ancient names and numbers by extension, not directly. Your love for God grows surer and more intelligent when you ponder the kind of thing this is, rather than getting lost in the blizzard of names or numbers.

The second example presents a mid-level challenge. Psalms are often among the most directly relevant parts of Scripture. But what do you do when ([Psalm 21:1](#)) says, "O Lord, in your strength the king rejoices"? The psalm is not talking about you, and it is not you talking—not directly. A train of connected truths apply this psalm to you, leading you out of yourself.

First, David lived and wrote these words, but Jesus Christ most fully lived—is now living, and will finally fulfill—the entire psalm. He is the greatest human king singing this song of deliverance; and he is also the divine Lord whose power delivers. We know from the perspective of NT fulfillment that this psalm is overtly by and about Jesus, not about any particular individual.

Second, you participate in the triumph of your King. You are caught up in all that the psalm describes, because you are in this Christ. So pay attention to his experience, because he includes you.

Third, your participation arises not as a solo individual but in company with countless brothers and sisters. You most directly apply this psalm by joining with fellow believers in a chorus of heartfelt gladness: "O Lord, we will sing and praise your power" ([Ps. 21:13](#)).

The king's opening joy in God's power has become his people's closing joy.

Finally, figuratively, you are also kingly in Christ. In this sense, Jesus' experience of deliverance (the entire psalm) does apply to your life. Having walked through the psalm as an expression of the exultant triumph of Christ Jesus himself, you may now make it your experience too. You could even adapt ([Psalm 21](#)) into the first person, inserting "I/me/my" in place of "the king" and "he/him/his." It would be blasphemous to do that at first. It is fully proper and your exceeding joy to do this in the end. This is a song in which all heaven will join. As you grasp that your brothers and sisters share this same goal, you will love them and serve their joy more consistently.

God reveals himself and his purposes throughout Scripture. Wise application always starts there.

Conclusion

You started by identifying one passage that speaks persistently, directly, and relevantly into your life. You have seen how both the direct and the indirect passages intend to change you. Learning to wisely apply the harder, less relevant passages has a surprising benefit. Your whole Bible "applies personally." This Lord is your God; this history is your history; these people are your people; this Savior has brought you in to participate in who he is and what he does. Venture out into the remotest regions of Scripture, seeking to know and love your God better.

Hopefully, you better understand why your most reliable passage so changed your life. Ponder those familiar words once more. You will notice that they also lift you out of self-preoccupation, out of the double evil of sin and misery. God brought his gracious care to you through that passage, and rearranged your life. You love him who first loved you, so you love his other children. And that is how the whole Bible, and each of its parts, applies personally.

This article is by contributor David Powlison and is adapted from the [ESV Study Bible](#).



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