

How to Do a Biblical Word Study.

1. Make sure you understand the meaning of the word as it appears in the verse you're looking at.

In other words, what is the verse saying? Do you understand the word, and the sentence it is in? At this point *you may need to look up the word in an English dictionary* if it is not familiar to you. (For example, do you know the *English* definitions of common Bible words like *propitiation, redemption, abide, atonement?*)

2. Examine the near context to see how the word is used.

The first step to understanding the meaning of the word is making sure you look closely at how it is used in the section or paragraph in question. What does the author seem to be using the word to say?

3. Compare different English versions to see how the translators dealt with the word.

This will give you an immediate grasp on if there are any ambiguities in the language (in which case you will see different words used in the translations) and give you your first glimpse into the original language behind the English text.

4. Look the word up in a concordance (or using blueletterbible.org). Note the number (in Strong's) that corresponds to the Greek or Hebrew word you're studying.

At this point, notice if the English word you're looking up is used to translate more than one Greek word. If it is, you want to limit your study to the verses with the same number next to them. This is because *all word studies should be based on the word in the original language, not in the translation language*, since the original is the word the author actually used.

The other words translated by the same English words may be related to your word, however, so keep that in mind as you study, since you might want to use those other words to help you understand your study word.

5. Look up the number in the back of the concordance to see the Greek word that you're studying.

At this point it may be a good idea to write down both the Strong's (or GK) number from the concordance, and the transliteration of the Greek word (like "*agape*") you're studying, so that you can move quickly around the concordance and also use other reference works (especially if they're keyed to Strong's numbers).

6. Using the concordance, examine how the word is used in the rest of the book.

*Look up each English word used to translate the Greek or Hebrew word. Make sure you pay attention to the numbers by the verses, to make sure that you're only looking at the verses translating the same Greek word. One way around this is to use *The Englishman's Greek Concordance* instead of Strong's at this point. It organizes the entries by Greek word, instead of by English word.*

7. Using the concordance, examine how the word is used in the rest of the author's work.

Every word has a range of meanings, which means authors may use any or all of those meanings for the word, or may tend to only use one or a few of the words meanings (in other words, he may only use part of the range of meaning). As a consequence, there are some words that different authors use differently (such as "world" and "works"). This step will be especially important when you go to look up the word in a dictionary or lexicon: you need to make sure you notice how the author tends to use the word, since that will give you a clue which definitions in the dictionary or lexicon you can favor in your study. For instance, a dictionary may list 5 possible definitions for a word. The more they vary, the less you can assume they are *all* part of the meaning of the word as the author is using it. You need to see the author's tendency to know which definition fits you context.

John Piper explains: "Since any word or phrase may carry more than one meaning, our task is to determine precisely which meaning an author intends a given word or phrase to have. Adler calls a word or phrase a "term" when it is used with a determinate meaning in a given context. "Coming to terms" is what we do when we discover what that determinate meaning is. You cannot come to terms with a Biblical author by looking his words up in a dictionary; not even a Greek dictionary. ***Dictionaries give a list of possible meanings, but do not specify with certainty which meaning a word has in any given text.*** How then do you come to terms? ...***You have to discover the meaning of a word in its context that you do understand.*** This is true no matter how merry-go-roundish it may seem at first. The only way to know when the Greek word *zelos* means "zeal" and when it means "jealousy" is by the context in which it occurs...***We should make every effort to understand the context in which a word stands so that we ascribe to it only the meaning that the author intended.***"

In other words, this step helps you know what the author meant to say with the word you're studying.

8. Using the concordance Examine how the word is used in the rest of the New Testament.

This will give you insight into more shades of meaning, and help you place the word in the context of the New Testament revelation. In other words: what did the word mean for the first Christians?

9. Develop a working definition of the word.

Your definition should include these parts: 1) How it is used in the context, 2) How it is used in the book and by the author's other writing,) How other New Testament authors use the word, especially if it is different from or adds significantly to your author's use.

At this point you should apply what you've found to the passage you're studying. Has your reading of the verse in question changed or been enhanced?

10. Look up the word in a dictionary (like Vine's or Mounce's) or Lexicon (like Thayer's or Bauer's).

This will give you a full view of the whole range of meaning for the word. It will help you notice anything you missed in your study.

You may do this step earlier, of course, and you may want to. If you wait and do it at the end, you'll be able to evaluate the dictionary definition and know which parts of it apply most to your passage. The entry (especially if it's longer) will make more sense to you, and you'll be able to resist the temptation to "pull" all the definitions into your thinking. If you do this step earlier (which may be hard to resist) you'll just have to read the dictionary entry carefully and see

11. Now go back and read the original verses you studied, will all your new knowledge to help you.