

Workshop on Language and Background

What should you study?

At times, while reading a paragraph in the epistles, you will notice a new word, or an allusion to the Old Testament, or a cultural reference that is difficult to understand. When this happens, what should you do?

Before you do anything, ask yourself if the confusing part of the passage obscures the meaning of the main or supporting points. If not, further study may not be essential. The points below will help you get a feel for what to prioritize in your own study.

1. Stay focused on the main and supporting points:

Recall this short paragraph from Jude:

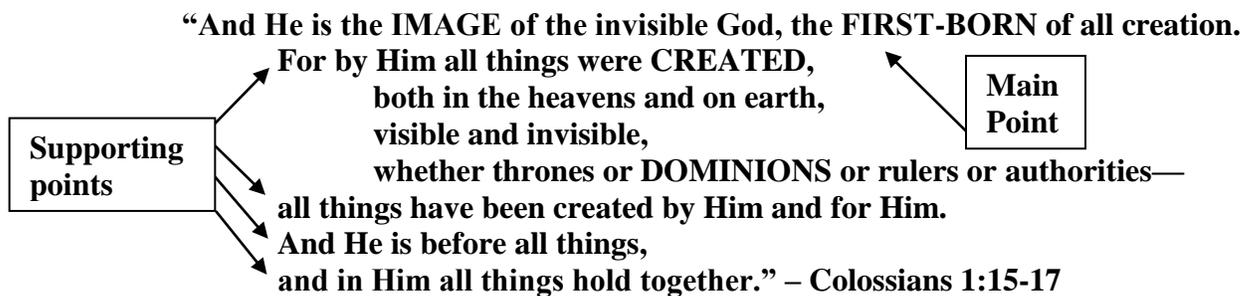
Jude 20-21 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on *your most holy faith*, *praying in the Holy Spirit*, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for *the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life*.

Jude’s main point is simple: “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” We do this by:

- Building ourselves up on our most holy faith.
- Praying in the Holy Spirit.
- Waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus.

Students of this paragraph should learn the meaning of each phrase in italics because each one explains how to “keep yourselves in the love of God.”

Longer paragraphs contain main and supporting points along with additional material that is important (all of God’s word is inspired!), but not essential for conveying the main point. For example:



We recommend focusing on words and ideas in the main and supporting points that are confusing or that lead to an interpretation that contradicts other passages.

Word	Priority	Reason
“created”	Low	meaning is clear
“image”	High	part of the main point; meaning is unclear
“first-born”	High	part of the main point; is Jesus a created being?
“dominions”	Low	unclear meaning, but not part of the main or supporting points

The word “image,” for example, is confusing. Does Paul mean a reflection or an exact representation of God? “Firstborn” seems to imply that Jesus is a created being. But other passages clearly teach he is God

(Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:8) and that he existed with God in the beginning (Jn. 1:1-3,14). Both words are also in the main point. Therefore, “image” and “firstborn” are good candidates for a word study.

2. *Understand the meaning of cultural references*

In some paragraphs, at the author makes a cultural reference that demands an explanation. In Titus, for example, Paul cites a Cretan writer:

Titus 1:12-12 “One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true.”

It would be difficult to teach this passage without taking a moment to explain what Paul is talking about. Further study is needed.

3. *Become familiar with allusions to or direct quotations from the Old Testament.*

In another passage in Jude, we find several references to Old Testament events:

Jude 5-7 Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after *saving a people out of the land of Egypt*, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe. And *angels who did not keep their own domain*, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as *Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them*, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

Jude uses these Old Testament examples to support his main point that God destroys people who don’t believe. It will be necessary to become familiar with these episodes to fully appreciate what Jude is saying.

What resources will help?

1. *Books*

Several useful study aids will help you answer questions about words, cultural references, and Old Testament citations. Some of these are available free online. Others are found in specialized books and/or bundled as part of Bible software packages. Everyone who aspires to understand the Bible should aim to gradually build a library of resources and become adept at using them.

>> I think it would help to bring students into the Study Center so they can handle some of these materials...

Resource	Function
Commentary	<p>Useful if you want a good overview of a book, or if you want to get the general sense of a passage. Commentaries also do a good job explaining why New Testament cite Old Testament passages.</p> <p>Our favourite commentaries: <i>The Zondervan NIV (or NASB) Study Bible</i> has short, useful comments and excellent charts, maps and graphs—a great place to start. <i>The Tyndale Commentary</i> is succinct. <i>The Expositors Bible Commentary</i> provides general comments on Bible paragraphs and a short discussion of confusing parts of the text. <i>The New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT)</i> is more academic.</p>

	Our favourite commentators: John Stott on the Pastoral Epistles Mark Lane on the Gospel of Mark >> We should direct people to some of the best commentaries we know on specific books.
Concordance	Designed to help you better understand the meaning of a specific word. Note that the concordance you chose should be matched to the Bible translation you are using (e.g. Use a <i>New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance</i> if you have a <i>New American Standard Bible</i> (NASB). Translations like the NASB (word-for-word) are better word studies than the translations like the NLT (idea-for-idea).
Bible Background Commentary	A special class of commentary that explains the meaning of cultural references in your paragraph. Our favourite is example is Craig Keener's <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary</i> .
Bible Dictionary	If you want a quick biographical sketch of a person in the Bible, a Bible Dictionary is your best choice. You can also find excellent summaries of important concepts like "atonement" or "sacrifice." Our favorite is the <i>New Bible Dictionary</i> .
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2. Software

Software packages are currently available that bundle many of the resources listed above, allowing you to search through dozens of books with the click of a mouse. Our favorite is the *Libronix Digital Library System (aka Logos)* available at www.logos.com. Logos contains dozens of Bible translations, several Bible dictionaries, commentaries, concordances, and other resources.¹ We also recommend the less-expensive PC Study Bible (www.biblesoft.com/new). *E-Sword* is a useful Bible software package available FREE online at www.e-sword.net.

3. Websites

Here are three helpful Bible websites:

www.blueletterbible.com – contains some excellent Bible study tools, including help with Greek word studies and quite a few commentaries.

www.biblegateway.com – most useful for quick access to other versions of the Bible.

bible.org/netbible – in-depth, verse-by-verse comments on every book of the Bible.

>> Probably would be good here to demonstrate some of the features of Logos, E-Sword, and Blue Letter Bible. We could also warn students to not be so dazzled by all their study options that they lose sight of the main point of the passage.

How to do a Word Study

¹ Beware that some of the better commentaries may NOT come bundled with Logos or with other Bible software packages. You will probably have to purchase them as add-ons.

>> We could leave the full text of this section in the student outline for future reference.

Our English Bibles are translations—English renderings of books originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and in a few places, Aramaic. Our modern translations are very good. The translators usually pick the best English words and phrases available to convey the meaning of the original language. And in a good study Bible, they even supply alternate meanings for particular words that are unclear. But as good as our translations are, they aren't free from error. Once in a while you may need to study the original language yourself to better understand what the author is trying to say.

1. Identify the Greek or Hebrew word that your word is based on.

Take the word “strive” in 1 Timothy 4:9-10 as an example.

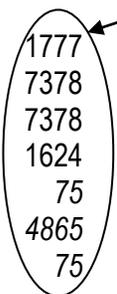
(1 Timothy 4:9-10) This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and STRIVE), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

New Testament passages are translated from Greek, therefore “strive” is translated from a Greek word. A concordance will help you identify the specific Greek word Paul is using.

In this example we will use an entry from *The New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance*. The useful resource lists every English word in the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) and the verses where those words occur.² The listing below shows every place in the NASB where “strive” occurs:

Strive

My spirit shall not s with man	Gn 6:3	1777
Did he ever s with Israel, or did	Jg 11:25	7378
He will not always s with us;	Ps 103:9	7378
Those who keep the law s with them	Pr 28:4	1624
“ S to enter by the narrow door;	Lk 13:24	75
to s together with me in your	Ro 15:30	4865
For it is for this we labor and s ,	1 Tm 4:10	75



Concordances assign a reference number to each Hebrew and Greek word in the Bible. Usually italicized numbers denote Greek words and normal font denotes Hebrew words in the Old Testament.

Two Greek words (#75 and #4865) can be translated as “strive.” Use the reference number next to your verse (in this case, #75 for 1 Tim. 4:10) to find the corresponding Greek word. If you are using a paper concordance, you will find reference listed numbers in the back. Here’s the entry for Greek word #75:

Greek word

transliteration: *agonizomai*

75. ἁγωνίζομαι *agonizomai*, from 73; to contend for a prize, struggle;— competes in the games(1), fight(1), fighting(1), fought(1), laboring earnestly(1), strive(2), striving(1)

range of meaning: different ways *agonizomai* is translated

number of times *agonizomai* is translated “striving”

Notice that *agonizomai* has a “range of meaning”—it can be translated as:

² We recommend doing a word study with a New American Standard Bible (NASB) and Concordance. You must use a concordance that is written for the version of the Bible you are using.

“competes in the games” “fight/ fighting/ fought” “laboring earnestly” “strive/ striving”

It remains to determine which of these meanings Paul had in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 4:10.

2. Find the correct meaning.

How can you determine which meaning an author has in mind for a specific word in a passage? Let's use Romans 6:6 as an example.

Romans 6:6 (NASB) Knowing this, that that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.

The underlined phrase “done away with” is a translation of a single Greek word, *katargeo*, which can be translated several different ways. Possible meanings are underlined below in the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance* entry for “katargeo.”

2673. καταργέω katargeō; from 2596 and 691; to render inoperative, abolish:— abolished (4), abolishing (1), bring to an end (1), did away (1), do away (1), done away (4), fades away (1), fading (1), fading away (1), nullified (1), nullify (4), passing away (1), released (2), removed (1), render powerless (1), severed (1), use (1).

How do you determine which one of these meanings (“abolished,” “brought to an end,” “done away with,” “fade away,” “nullified,” “released,” “removed,” “rendered powerless,” “severed,” “used”) is the best choice? **Look for clues to the correct meaning of the word in the context surrounding your verse.**

In the next chapter of Romans, Paul describes the struggle Christians have with their sin nature (7:21-24). He also says in chapter 8, that “if Christ is in us, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness.” This implies that the sin nature/body of sin is still active in the life of a Christian. Verses like Galatians 5:17 also indicate our sin nature is still active.

That makes the NASB translation, “done away with” too strong. Better to pick something like “released,” or “rendered powerless” to allow for the fact that our body of sin is still there.

Workshop

Instructors:

Let students choose one of the paragraphs below to study. Ask them to prioritize one or two words and perform a word study OR investigate the meaning of a cultural reference OR learn more about an allusion to an Old Testament passage. If there is time, encourage them to try two or three of these tasks.

If the workshop is held in the Study Center, students could use reference books and Bible study software with guidance from their instructor. Teachers might want to bring in a few knowledgeable friends to help students perform these studies.

Romans 3:21-26 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 4:1-8 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.