
How to Outline the Bible

Into Thy Word Ministries www.intothyword.org

Outlining the Text of Scripture

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2

The Big Idea

Outlining the Bible is the primary means to prepare you to teach the precepts of Scripture in a clear and logical way. This is designed for the pastor, Bible study leader or curriculum writer to examine the text and then draw out what is there in a logical and systematic way. In this way you can develop well crafted sermons and studies that are personally edifying and impacting to your congregation. This form of study can even be used for a mature Christian wanting more out of the Word for their personal edification. Outlining will enable you to 'exegete' and then write out what the Bible is saying.

"Exegeting" is digging out from the passage the principles and ideas that are represented there. This helps prevent us from adding our own thinking, prejudices and ideas into the mix that take away from what God is actually saying. Our thinking is to ponder upon, examine and expound on God's Word, not add in what is not there. Nor are we to lead out what we want and thus miss what He clearly has for us. This is a tool to help us stay focused and centered upon Him and His precepts and then be edified so we can edify them to others too.

"Outlining" is taking what we have learned and then laying it out in an orderly and efficient way so we can understand it better. Then in turn be able to teach it to others in a more profound and impacting way. Keep in mind that Scripture is the source of our teaching; all we do is tap into it and pour out His most precious precepts for all to drink from.

Why Should we Make an Outline?

An outline is an essential tool. It can be used for any form of text, whether it is a Bible passage or any other form of literature, from Shakespeare, a text book to a magazine article. This is the way any good writer or researcher does to prepare and organize their materials.

I developed this curriculum for you to use from over twenty years of research. I sought what are the principles and resources a good "sermonizer"

uses to teach. Why is one preacher bad and another good from the same seminary and denomination? From my original mentorship under Francis Schaeffer, studying under Ray Stedman and interviewing hundreds of excellent Bible teachers for my book, "Into Thy Word." From Charles Swindoll to R.C. Sproul it is my quest to see what secretes and means can be best had to learn and then teach His Word. I learned that an outline is essential after a good inductive and or exegetical study, to lay out what we ate to learn and then to teach. By the way, every good preacher is first a learner before they are a teacher! Being a learner, doing an inductive approach and then outlining is the common denominator what a good Bible centered pastor uses to prepare sermons or a tool that a Bible teacher prepares their lesson. Outlining will be your primary means of producing quality Bible centered lessons, talks, sermons or even research papers.

The Basic Idea of an Outline

Outlining the Bible is not very different from outlining any other form of writing. Thus, there are many ways in which you can do it. And I give you several ways below, and you may come up with your own. The main purpose is to break down and isolate from the text the various ideas or categories it is representing. Consequently, each paragraph may have several ideas that relate or add to the main theme of the paragraph. So the task of outlining is to 'isolate' and then lay out these ideas in a systematic and logical manner. And the goal is to represent and teach the passage in the way it is intended, in its context and power. (If this is for a class project or assignment, first find out from your professor/ teacher the form they want and use it, follow the assignment and class guidelines, even if you know a better or easier way).

Where to begin

To start out, just recall what you may have learned in those grammar lessons in school, which is to simply go through your passage and pull out the themes, concepts, illustrations and ideas presented. First, look for a general theme, then the sub themes and ideas. Such as where each idea begins and then ends and how it is sustained. Search for what are the principal themes and the logical order of each subjunctive idea, then when you see another principal/primary theme, you place it in the next category or section.

An outline is basically a help for you to lay out the percepts and reasons of your sermon, study or paper in a systematic easy to use and read structure. It helps you as the writer and others as the reader to identify the general ideas and then the key thoughts of your line of reasoning. The basic thought is for you to define the main idea then the subordinate ideas:

1. **How to do a basic Outline:** First you have your Main thought or principle

- a. Here is where you place your first supporting concept, precepts or idea
 - b. Here is where you place your second supporting concept, precepts or idea
 - i. Here is where you place your further supporting idea, example or illustration
 - ii. Here is where you place more of the ideas and principles you have gleaned from the text
 - c. And so forth...
2. **Main thought:** A structured outline typically uses a descending numbered structure to disseminate (distribute, lay out) the information you have researched and learned.
- a. **Supporting concept:** The numbers are in a logical indention and order to indicate various levels of subsidiary interrelation (describing precepts in a descending logical order from major idea to lesser points from the main ideas).
 - b. **Supporting idea:** Look at it as a “story arc” from you Major Idea, then the supporting ideas and in each subordinate idea category and the further deals thereof.
3. **Why we do an outline:** There are many good reasons for outlining.
- a. An outline helps your learning and teaching progress
 - i. An outline helps you organize your thoughts and ideas
 - ii. An outline will show the flow of principles the conflict, transformations and resolutions.
 - b. An outline guides your ideas into coherent groupings
 - i. An outline helps you organize the precepts of Scripture
 - ii. An outline shows the logical relationship between ideas
 - iii. An outline has a logical ordered overview and flow of your arguments
 - c. An outline will help you prove your point or show you when and where you are in error
 - d. An outline will help show the developments in your labor.
 - i. An outline will help you learn and teach better.
 - ii. An outline will help you grow in humility and cultivate Fruit because you are focused on His precepts and not your own (1 Pet. 5:6).
4. **How to construct and outline:** Basically you are making a framework with the following components (Main or general idea):
- a. Start with an introductory paragraph or sentence (First supporting concept, precepts or idea)
 - i. Keep it short and concise (Further supporting idea, example or illustration)

- ii. Stay true to your subject (Further supporting idea, example or illustration)
 - b. Write out supporting ideas (Further details or ideas)
 - c. Write out more further details or ideas
 - d. Have a concluding paragraph or sentence (Second supporting concept, precepts or idea)
 - There are also many different ways to built point or number your outline. (Main thought)
 - if this is for academic purposes find out the official school or teachers requirements and follow thusly (Supporting thoughts)
 - Examples or ideas
 - More Examples or supporting ideas
 - Details or illustrations
 - Second main thought
 - Details or examples or illustrations
 - Supporting ideas
 - More ideas
1. **How to do an Outline of Scripture:** (principal idea/ theme) (Formatting can became distorted during conversion from Word to HTML)
 - a. First make use of steps II & III from 'Into Thy Word.' (principal idea/theme)
 - b. This is where you make use of 'Observation.' This is carefully going over the text to see what is going on, the "who, what, where, when, how, and why." This is how to pull out the facts through the nature of Scripture and how to avoid presumptions and fallacies, because God's Word speaks for itself.)
 2. **Read the text in its context several times.** (Sub-themes and ideas)
 - a. Such as if you are studying the Book of John, begin with reading the whole book, then the chapter you are outlining at least three times in a good translation such as the NIV; NASB, or NKJV. (Additional Sub-themes)
 - b. You can start out by reading a paraphrase first for your overview then go to the good translation. (Even further sub-themes)
 - i. Make sure you are going into your relationship with God's Word in a meaningful manner (see step I).
 - ii. If you start too hastily, thinking you already know the passage, you will not gain the insights and depth because your haste will make waist. (Sub-themes)
 - iii. Even Billy Graham, R.C. Sproul and Chuck Swindoll, and other great and experienced exegetes with many times more experience than what you or I may have, do it this way! (Further sub-themes)

- iv. Never let your pride clog your vision and keep you in the dark from discovering all you can. (Even further sub-themes)
3. **Write a summary for your passage in your own words** (3rd main idea/principle idea/theme). If you are stuck, try reading it in various translations. If you know the original languages, then you know what to do...Do not forget to check out a paraphrase such as the New Living Bible, CEV, Phillips, Moffit, or the Message.
- a. Then you may start to look for the principal theme and idea. (1st idea/principle idea/theme)
 - b. **Start with an introduction; it needs to state the main topic or idea of the outline.** This is the general principle/idea that represents the passage you are studying.
 - c. Then write a short description of that idea. (3rd Idea)
 - i. Make sure it is accurate to the text. (Sub-themes and ideas).
 - ii. Make sure you write down the verses next to each idea.
 - d. The chapter and verses were added by the publisher and are not part of the original text or are inspired. So do not constrain yourself to them. You will find that sometimes they cut off at key ideas in mid thought that are still in 'thread,' that is still going on.
4. **Then you list all of the various ideas/points in sequence.** (4th main idea/principle idea/theme)
- a. This is where you use 'Interpretation' (Steps IV, V & VI) after you finished the outline! This is taking what is said and finding out what does the text mean. How to interpret literally in the correct context.
 - b. **This is where the supporting information and details go.** This is called your 'sub-topic;' these are commonly listed under the idea/topic with each piece of information listed separately.
 - c. Always, always go in the sequence of the text. Do not jump around!
 - i. Go verse to verse.
 - ii. In your teaching you can call attention to other supporting verses from other parts of the Bible and use illustrations.
 - d. Never take out of God's Word what is not there, or read in our will as His.
 - e. **Each sub-topic describes the main ideas from the paragraph/passage.**
 - i. When supporting information is listed under a sub-topic, there is a sequence that follows a logical order, especially in the Epistles.
 - ii. In the narrative passages, you will also find a logical order of events. However, Hebrew literature does sometimes jump points around. It is best just to stick to the text and in the opening, summary or conclusion draw attention to the general context.

- iii. By being aware of the different genres of the Bible (that is types of literature), you will be able to outline more effectively. See 'Appendix A' from "Into Thy Word."
 - f. **There are normally two ideas of information that should be listed.** If there is only one piece of information to support a sub-topic, traditionally that information is included in the sub-topic.
 - i. Do not be so concerned with your form that you neglect your principal duty, which is exegeting the text in a logical and systematic way.
 - ii. Outlining, like any new activity, will take practice. Be persistent and do not get frustrated. It will take time and practice!
 - g. Being true to the Lord's Word and the Divine Author's intent is paramount!
5. **Then you write a summary and the conclusion to your passage.** (5th main idea/principle idea/theme)
- a. This is where you use 'Application' after you finished the outline (Steps V & VI)! This is taking the plain meaning and putting it to practical use. This is the, 'how shall I respond' to the Word. What sin to get rid of, what commands to yield too, the pitfalls to avoid, the actions to engage in, and the promises we are to keep.
 - b. The summary should be done first. However, you can incorporate it in your teaching at the end.
 - c. As you dig into God's Word, you are to be listening for His voice, so you can trust and obey His voice
 - i. Always make sure you are surrendered to His Truth and not your truth!
 - ii. Beware that false knowledge *puffs up* gives us pride (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 2:18).
 - iii. Beware that false or misleading teaching will cause strife and conflict.

Outlining Examples

Text Outline of James 1:1-3

Text: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.* (NIV)

- 1. James, (Proposition)
 - a. A servant of God (Predicate)
 - b. of the Lord Jesus Christ, (Primary Object)
- 2. To the twelve tribes (Secondary Object)

- a. scattered among the nations
- b. Greetings.
- 3. Consider it pure joy (Subject)
 - a. my brothers,
 - b. whenever you face trials of many kinds,
 - c. because you know that the testing of your faith
 - d. develops perseverance.

(Grammar terms applies more to theme and precepts than to actual English standard grammar, because Scripture was not written in English but originally in Hebrew and Greek with have different grammar settings)

James Chapter 1 Conceptual Outline Example (the concepts and precepts):

Theme: How do we react to pressure? Faith will not break when it is real, even when times are dire. We are stable because who we are in Christ and not because of our circumstances.

I. Trials are a part of life.

1:1 Greetings

1:2-4 Seeking Jesus to deal with problems! We can declare them joy (Matt. 5:11-12; Luke 6:22-23)

1:5 Seeking wisdom to deal with life; receiving from God (Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:19)

1: 6--8! Asking for faith and not doubting (Matt. 21:-22; Mark 11:22-24)

II. Temptations will come.

1: 9-11 Humbleness, and seeking the proper perspective on life (Matt. 13:6; 23:12; Mark 4:7; Luke 14:11; 18:14)

III. How will you handle trials and guard against impurity?

1:12 Importance of perseverance (Matt. 5:11-12)

1:13-18 Holding on to the goodness of God (Matt. 7:12; 19:16; Luke 6:27, 35)

IV. We have to be doers of the Word, not just hearers.

1:19-20 The importance of listening (Matt. 7:11; Luke 6:46-49).

1:21-27 Our call to be compassionate toward those who hurt (Matt. 25:34-36)

Specific Inductive Outline of James 1:1-3

The General Idea (What does it Say): James begins his Epistle in a very direct and blunt way.

- Seeking Jesus to Deal with Problems!
- He tells us that the key to dealing with our problems is to keep our eyes upon Christ, allowing Him to be not only Savior but also Lord.

The background: James is addressing the new Church.

- They were starting to become complacent when suddenly Steven was martyred (Acts 7:54-60).
- A wake up call is being pronounced that Christianity is dangerous and requires a level of faith that some may not be willing to give.

What does it Mean: James simply tells us we can actually profit from trials. He starts out his book by massive humbleness in confessing who Jesus is.

- James realized that his life and purpose was all about who God is, and not who he is (The passages in parentheses are cross references, most Bibles have them, other places in Scripture the precepts can be found. These can be used to draw out more information: Psalm 15; 101; 2 Thess. 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1).
- James desire was to communicate with passion, conviction, clarity, and truth.
- We are to look at whatever situation we face and say this is good, this will better me, or this will help me. I may not understand it, but I can trust God.
- He is there and He will carry me through it!

Key Words: (Look them up and define them and use the ones to fit your message that support your theme.)

- *James* is a form of Jacob (Gen. 49) (see introductory article).
- *Bondservant*, in Greek times, meant the lowest form of a slave, totally at the master's disposal and even expendable. For us, it means total, surrendered devotion to the Lord.
- *Twelve tribes*, refers to all those who are Jewish.
- *Count it joy* refers to declaring our situation as happy and fulfilling. It is to change our mindset and focus. It is realizing the sovereignty of God and that He is in control, even when life seems to be turned upside down and inside out!
- *Trials* refer to persecution or any harsh circumstance or adversity or temptations.
- *Testing* refers to the circumstances that God allows so we will learn perseverance, produce our fruit, and prove and develop our faith further.

Applications (How am I changed how can I challenge others to change): We are called to declare our situation, whatever it may be, as joy!

- Because, it is not a question of if we have problems but when, as we all will face them.

- As Christians, we are all brothers and sisters under God. We are family, and need to treat others in Him with the same reverence and endearment as Christ has given us!
- Joy will allow us to enjoy our relationship with Christ and others.
- Joy helps us develop authentic happiness that comes from and with harmony with God and others.
- Joy helps us understand God's perspective and gives us the confidence and patience to endure anything!
- Joy is not happiness, because we may not be content and pleased with it; rather, joy is hope; it is our hope.
- Our pleasure comes from knowing He is in charge and caring for us (Psalm 34:1-8; 1 Thess. 5:18)!
- This gives us our maturity, our character, and enables our fruit to benefit others. These are for our direct benefit and growth that He works out for our benefit and for His glory (Romans 5:3; chap. 8).

(See more on our James Study, James 1:1-4 on the Bible Study Channel)

Learning Outcomes

To further help you, develop “learning outcomes” of what you want to teach from the precepts found in the text. Such as what are the precepts you want your people to know and learn? Remember you first need to know and apply them before you ask it of others and be “real” with it! How will you communicate them? What is simple so a child can learn it? What is challenging that they may need help with? There are four primary categories that relate to how people learn and process information. The basic Learning Outcomes are: Cognitive, Affective, Behavior, and Existential.

- First is the “**Cognitive**,” which is basic concrete principles and information that they need to know to have a healthy productive Christian life. What is it? What is going on? Contrasts, precepts, principles... This is where you can summarize the passage and lay out the basic principles, the “who, what, where, when, how and why.”
- The second is called “**Affective**” this is about how the information connects to their feelings and experiences and how they are expressed. This is where you help your people identify with the precepts, build values and relate them to their life. Hence why personal illustrations, authenticity and being “real” from the pastor / teacher is paramount. If they can't identify with you they will not learn from you!
- The third category is called “**Behavior**” this is about being examples of Christ, applying righteousness and our spiritual growth to our life and what needs to challenge and spur it on further and deeper. Removing what get in the way of our faith and maturity. This is the area we all struggle with

how our faith collides with our life, feelings and society that affects our attitudes and deeds. To be a healthy church, our beliefs, mindset, learning, attitude and behaviors must challenge our feelings and culture! If our attitude and way of doing our church tends to be from the attitudes and trends of the culture, we are very wrong and headed for personal and collective ruin!

- The fourth category is called “**Existential**” this is about our conviction and commitment, allowing Christ to transform, challenge and grow us His Way in our daily life. This is about making our faith real and purposeful and effectual so it is also edifying to others around us too. The Christian life needs to go beyond just knowledge. It must transform and renew so we are a changed person. Our Lord does not need fat sheep; He needs and desires us to exercise our faith and knowledge!

Write out a sentence from your passage on each of the following categories of Learning Outcomes, Cognitive, Affective, Behavior, and Existential.

Here are some examples, Learning Outcomes from Romans 1:16-17:

Cognitive: What does it mean to live by faith and express it, and to look for it in others for finding a mentor for yourself. A life that is dictated and expressed by what Christ has done for you.

Affective: Be confident to share your faith, regardless of our past failures and experiences.

Behavior: Christianity is not just fire insurance from Hell. Be able to identify false judgments in others and how you interact with God’s children (we are all God’s children, elect or not). Learn to be patient and be a listener.

Existential: Be committed not to bear or bring false judgments on others.

Some more Learning Outcome examples from Romans 5 and 11:

- Know how to build and apply a value system to last a lifetime.
- Know the value of God’s love and allow it to effect us and flow to those around us. That we are living in response to His love, in the value of love.
- Know what it means to rejoice in suffering (Phil. 3:10f; Rom. 8:28; I Cor. 10:13)
- Be able to surrender your attitudes and experiences to Christ, whatever the cost, even if it means suffering.
- Be committed to surrendered prayer bringing all problems, joys and concerns to the Lord.
- Be willing to be mentored by a more mature and experienced Christian.
- Surrender your pride and self-determination.

- Desire to grow and mature in the faith, and know that Christianity is not a spectator sport.

Conclusion

Now you will have some more tools for your sermon and teaching arsenal to use as is or as a platform to build more on top of. It can be a discipline for your writing so you can place key biblical precepts in a format you can continue to use, update and improve upon while maintaining the continuity and logic. Then make sure you have a file system to store them for future use.

Do not rest in your pride what you think you know, rest in Him and draw out what He wants you to know!

May God Bless you on your endeavors to know and grow in your knowledge and teaching of His Most Precious Word!

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