

• WORKBOOK •

The New
How to
Study Your
Bible

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THE NEW HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE WORKBOOK

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Letters (Epistles, or Correspondence)



The exercises in this chapter will take you through chapters 1 through 4 of *The New How to Study Your Bible* as well as some of the principles in chapters 6, 11, and 12. At each step, we'll refer you to the appropriate pages of that book for your review. After completing the exercises below, you can compare your responses with ours by turning to chapter 7 of this workbook.

Before you begin the first exercise, be sure you've read through chapters 1 through 4 in *The New How to Study Your Bible*. We will begin by studying a letter (the book of Colossians), so the best technique is to get an overview of the book first and then dig in and study each chapter in more detail. An overview is like a pilot's view of the landscape from 10,000 feet. In the overview, we will focus on things that are obvious and important to all four chapters of Colossians. Later we'll "land the plane" and explore each chapter in more detail.

Now, because you are about to begin studying the Bible, take a moment to pray, asking God to open the eyes of your heart and help you discern truth that you can apply to your life.

Exercise 1—The Overview

1. Read through all four chapters of Colossians. On pages 29–39 of this workbook, you'll find Observation Worksheets of the entire text of Colossians in the New American Standard translation. Of course, you can use your own Bible if you prefer to work from another translation, but be prepared to mark the text extensively. Read with a purpose, asking the 5 W's and an H (who, what, when, where, why, and how) as you go. For example, how do we know that the book of Colossians is a letter? What important events or major themes stand out? Record your findings in your notebook. Don't get bogged down; you're just trying to get a feel for the general content of the book.
2. Now read Colossians again. Who is the author, who are the recipients?

Mark the author distinctively, and mark the recipients in some other way. (Remember to mark all the appropriate pronouns the same way you mark the people they point to.) For example, you could color the author blue and color the recipients red. Or you could draw a box around the author and a circle around the recipients, or you could combine color and shape. As you go, ask the 5 W's and an H so this doesn't become simply a coloring exercise. Always read with a purpose—to understand. (See *The New How to Study Your Bible*, pages 31–33.)

3. When you've finished marking all four chapters, look at each place you've marked references to the author. Ask the 5 W's and an H at each place, and let the text provide the answers. Make a list of everything you learn about him. Do the same for the recipients.
4. Now that you are familiar with the author and recipients, you've probably also noticed a few important events and subjects. Authors emphasize their most important ideas by repeating them. Mark these repeated key words and phrases, list them in your notebook, and record what you learn. You probably noticed that Jesus Christ is very prominent. Make sure you've marked every reference to Jesus Christ (including pronouns). Some people mark this with a red cross, but of course you can choose any symbol, color, or combination you like. In your notebook, make a list of everything you learn about Jesus in Colossians. (See *The New How to Study Your Bible*, pages 35–37.) Remember not to get into too much detail—we're still in the overview process.
5. Authors use various literary tools and techniques: instructions to follow, dangers to watch out for, examples to imitate, and many more. Read through Colossians again and underline or highlight any phrases that warn the Colossians against dangerous beliefs or practices.
6. Read through Colossians one more time and underline or highlight in a different color all the instructions or commands. You're looking for the good things the readers should do.
7. Now, take a moment to notice the way you've marked your Observation Worksheets. Which chapters have the most markings about Jesus? Which have the most warnings? Which have the most instructions for godly living? What relationship do you see? In other words, have you noticed a progression of thought throughout the book? Does Paul seem to have a reason for ordering his material the way he does? (Remember, we're viewing the landscape from 10,000 feet, so try to focus on the big picture!)
8. What do you think prompted Paul to write this letter to the Colossians? (This is sometimes called the occasion for writing.) Consider the analogy of a doctor recognizing a symptom, making a diagnosis, and prescribing a treatment. What problematic symptoms did Paul see in Colossae? What was his diagnosis of the root problem? What treatment did he prescribe?

9. Now you're ready to determine the main theme of Colossians. How can you summarize Paul's message to the Colossians? What's the bulk of the book about? Does a subject appear more often than any others and seem to be foundational for all the other ideas in the book? Once you've determined the main idea of the book, try to find one phrase or verse that summarizes that main idea. Use those words from the text as your theme for the book. The shorter your theme is, the easier it will be to remember. (See *The New How to Study Your Bible*, pages 35–36).
10. Now you can begin to build a sort of table of contents for Colossians by creating an At a Glance (AAG) chart. You'll find a blank one on page 39. The first step is to record your book theme on the top of it. Then, from what you've seen so far, what are the chapter themes? Record them. You'll complete your chart by looking for segments of the book—groupings of chapters that deal with the same topic or employ the same kind of writing. Paul commonly began his letters with a doctrinal section and then moved on to practical applications based on that truth. Do you see anything like that in Colossians? If so, divide the vertical bars into segments and label each one.

Exercise 2—Chapter Study

After you complete the overview of a letter, you're ready to study each chapter in more depth and detail. We'll use Colossians 1 as an example. You have already determined the context of the chapter—the overall flow of thought in Colossians—so in a chapter study you focus only on things that are key to that one chapter.

1. Begin your study with prayer and then read through Colossians 1, asking the 5 W's and an H. Focus on the message of this chapter. You have already marked the Observation Worksheets, noting the author, the recipients, and Jesus, and you have recorded the themes of the book and chapters on the Colossians At a Glance chart.
2. Now read through Colossians 1 again, marking all the references to God the Father and to the Holy Spirit. You marked references to Jesus Christ during the overview, but check now to see if you missed any. One way to mark God the Father is with a purple triangle shaded yellow in the center, and the Holy Spirit with a blue cloud.
3. Did you notice any key words or phrases as you read and marked? Read the chapter again, marking references to *the Word of God* and *hope*. Keep asking the 5 W's and an H as you go. Stay engaged with the text.
4. Now make lists of what you learned about Jesus, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and hope. Remember that you simply look at each place you've marked these words and then write down what the text says in answer to the 5 W's and an H.

If you had trouble determining which pronouns pointed to God the Father and which ones referred to God the Son, see chapter 16 of *The New How to Study Your Bible*

for an introduction to a technique called *structuring*. We will practice using this tool later in this workbook.

5. When looking at a chapter in detail, always look for contrasts, comparisons, conclusions, and time references. When you find one of these, apply the 5 W's and an H to see what the author is communicating through this literary device.

Read Colossians 1 again, looking for these devices. Mark them in any manner you choose. Some people like to mark conclusions with three dots forming a triangle, the mathematical symbol for “therefore.” You might choose to draw a green clock on any time references. Think about what you learn from each.

6. Chapters are usually composed of paragraphs. Look for the paragraphs that make up Colossians 1, and discern the theme of each. Write those paragraph themes in the left margin of your Observation Worksheet. If you like, compare your themes with the ones we list on page 78.
7. Finally, review the chapter theme on your AAG chart. You can change it if you want to since you've done further study or determined the themes of the other three chapters.

Exercise 3—Interpretation: Word Studies

Good translations carry the sense of the original languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. However, sometimes you will find an extra gem of truth by studying the meaning of a word or the grammatical construction of a sentence. Commentaries give help with some words but not all of them. Let's look at a few simple tools that will help us understand the text by revealing the meaning, mood, tense, and voice of Greek words.

1. Using online sources, a program on your computer, or printed word study tools at your disposal, look up the Greek word translated “manifested” in Colossians 1:26. Consider the definition in its various contexts: How does it fit into the verse, the paragraph, the chapter, and the book? How does this definition in these contexts increase your understanding of the word “manifested”?
2. Using online sources, a computer program, or printed word study tools at your disposal, look up the Greek verbs translated “were created” and “have been created” in Colossians 1:16 and their moods, tenses, and voices. See *The New How to Study Your Bible*, pages 177–192, as you consider the implications of their constructions. What is implied by the differing mood, tense, and voice combinations? In other words, what does “have been created” emphasize that “were created” does not emphasize? What is the significance of this in Paul's message to the Colossians?