

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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There are many ways in which the study of the Bible and the study of any other subject are similar. Study calls for reading, and the reading must be followed by understanding. However, because of the special character of the Bible, there are certain factors which must be understood before a person can expect to study the Scriptures profitably. And so we must begin by recognizing what those truths are.

I. The Basic Truths. All of these come from the Scriptures themselves. They represent obstacles or needs which stand in the way.

A. The unique character of the Bible. The Bible is different from any other book that has ever been written, or any book that ever will be written. It is the Word of God.

See 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Corinthians 2:9, 10.

The very difficulty we confront is evidence of its divine origin. Also, its inexhaustible character.

B. The spiritual blindness of man. See 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:3, 4. See Eph. 4:18

While the Scriptures above have to do with all men, we have certain passages in the Bible which show that this condition continues to be a problem even in the lives of those who believe in Christ. See Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:18 (NASB), and the Psalmist's prayer in Psalm 119:18. Also John 14:9 Mt. 16:21-23; 26:36-46

Not only do we have inability, but often unwillingness, and sometimes open hostility. See 2 Chr. 33:10.

C. The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. See John 14:26; 16:12-15; Ephesians 1:17 (NASB).

We have two excellent illustrations of the need for this in Luke 24, verses 25 through 32, and verses 44 through 48.

D. The spiritual condition of the believer. This can vary from day to day in any believer's life. Carnality grieves and limits the Spirit's teaching ministry. The problem is very evident in two New Testament passages: 1 Corinthians 3:1, 2 and Hebrews 5:11-14.

II. Personal Preparation. This section elaborates on the last point under The Basic Truths: the spiritual condition of the believer.

A key verse for this section is Ezra 7:10,

"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and teach in Israel statutes and judgments."

See also Ezra 7:25,26.

To make sure that no one misunderstands, it must be recognized that the following is the first step in personal preparation:

A. A personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior.

Until a person receives Christ, he faces two difficulties which will keep him from understanding the Word of God:

- 1) He is spiritually blind.
- 2) He does not have the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.

On the other hand, when he does receive Christ we can be sure of the following:

- 1) He now possesses spiritual sight -- the ability to see and understand Biblical truth.
- 2) He is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

B. Preparation of heart.

1. By confession of sin. See Psalm 51:6-10; 19:14; 139:23,24.

See also Psa. 66:18.

2. By prayer for understanding. See Psa. 119:18, 33, 34; 1 Kings 3:9; Col. 1:9; Eph. 1:15-19.

3. By seeking the Lord Himself. It was "the law of the Lord" that Ezra sought. See also Psa. 27:4, 5, 8.

4. By a desire for spiritual growth. Too often we study the Scriptures just to have something to teach others. Our primary objective must be for our own profit.

This comes about through:

- a. Knowledge. A knowledge of the doctrines of Scripture is the only foundation for the life of obedience. See 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Col. 1:9, 10; John 13:17.

This will require a willingness to set aside our prejudices and preconceived ideas whenever we see that they are contrary to the Word of God.

- b. Obedience. See John 7:17. In Ezra 7:10, note the words, "and do it." Characteristically the epistles of Paul start with doctrinal teaching and end with practical application.

5. For teaching others. A healthy intake of the Word is maintained by a continuous outflow. This was Ezra's ultimate purpose. See 2 Tim. 2:2.

### III. The Right Objectives.

As in almost anything else, it is possible to study the Bible with improper motives. To do so is to fail to profit from it, and, sooner or later, to give it up. Therefore, it is extremely important that we have the objectives which are indicated in the Word of God itself.

It may be helpful to some to consider some of the things which are not the right objectives before noting what they are.

#### A. What they are not:

1. Just to prove that our beliefs are right.
2. Just to have something to teach others. As indicated before, this is certainly a right objective if it is kept in its proper place. It cannot be the only objective, nor even the first one.
3. Just to add to our own knowledge of Scripture.

Note: A good test for our motives is the place that is given to the practical application of the Word of God in our lives. This is always lacking and sometimes totally absent in the case of the three points above.

#### B. What they are:

1. To please God. See Deut. 6:4-9; Joshua 1:8; Psa. 1:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:2, 15.
2. To know God. This is the primary reason for the revelation of God's Word -- that we might know Him. See John 5:39, 45-47; Rom. 1:1-7. See also John 17:3; Phil. 3:10,11; 2 Pet. 3:18. To know Him is to love Him.

This point applies equally to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

3. To become like God, that is, for our own spiritual growth. See 2 Cor. 3:18. See Rom. 8:28, 29; 1 John 3:1-3.

This includes four things:

- a. We must know the Word. This includes all of the books from Genesis to Revelation, and thus it takes in all of the great doctrines of Scripture.
- b. We must believe the Word. See Rom. 10:17. Also see Heb. 4:2.
- c. We must obey the Word. Cf. John 14:21; 13:17.
- d. We must worship the Lord -- which is expressed in prayer. If the study of the Word is not having a beneficial effect upon our worship and upon our prayer life, something is wrong with us and with our study.

4. To serve God. -- our ministry to others. See Col. 1:27-29. Although not the first, this is the one which ultimately enables us to minister to others.

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At this point we need to recognize what we are seeking to do in our study of the Word of God. 2 Tim. 3:16, 17 indicates that it is the Word of God that prepares us to be the servants of God. But how?

Here we need to keep four clearly defined objectives before us in our study of the Word. These are life-long goals. Each of the following objectives can constantly be improved upon as our knowledge of God's Word grows.

- a. An overview of the entire Bible.

Some knowledge of the Bible generally, from Genesis to Revelation, should precede the study of individual books. This does not have to be extensive, but should include such basic things as knowing that there are two Testaments and the various divisions into which the books of the Old and New Testaments are divided.

All of this should be examined in the light of the place that Christ has in all of Scripture.

Nothing will contribute to our knowledge of the whole Bible more than reading the Bible through again and again -- at least once a year!

- b. A knowledge of the individual books of the Bible.

We should aim at two things:

- (1) Recognizing the distinctive message of each book and, in doing so, to be able to trace the development of the theme in each book.

It is easy to be discouraged in this because we may not make the progress to begin with that we would like to make. It is good to be able to check with what others have discovered, but it is far more of a blessing if we read and re-read each book until the message really becomes clear to us.

- (2) Recognizing the place that each book has in its relationship with the other books of the Bible.

For example, Genesis is the foundational book of all of Scripture. The remainder of the Bible would be incomprehensible without it.

Another example: Sometimes we find that two or more books will have a special relationship to each other -- like Romans and Galatians. These are important features to learn.

- c. A systematic understanding of the doctrines of Scripture.

This is probably the main thought of 2 Tim. 2:15.

Doctrine in Scripture, moving from Genesis to Revelation, proceeds from incomplete to complete -- never from what is inaccurate to what is accurate. This means that the whole account of salvation is not completed until you get into the

New Testament Epistles, but every detail which is given in a progressive way by the Spirit of God throughout the Old and New Testaments contributes in a vital way to our final comprehension of that doctrine.

Practically all false teaching that comes from the Bible is due to a failure to have this point as a major objective in our study of the Word.

Both in the study of the books of the Bible and in the study of doctrine we are comparing Scripture with Scripture -- an absolute must if our conclusions are to be right!

d. A careful concern for the practical teaching of Scripture.

Everything that we learn under the three preceding points has some practical bearing upon our lives.

Some people in their study of the Bible are just concerned about the doctrines of Scripture. Others are concerned only about practical matters. The Spirit of God clearly indicates in the Word of God itself that He is concerned about both.

To study only the doctrines of Scripture without the practical emphasis leaves a person hard and critical. To study only the practical leaves a person weak and uncertain. The doctrinal gives us the foundation; the practical leads us into the enjoyment of what we have learned.

IV. The Requirements.

It should always be remembered that we do not have one set of principles which applies to what we might call our quiet time, or devotional time, and another set of principles for what we have in mind when we think of study. Study has been defined as the act or process of learning. We need to be devotional, prayerful, meditative in our study, and we also should learn in our devotional times. Therefore, while we might call one study (because we go more in depth into what we are considering in the Word) and the other our quiet time (because we are primarily reading), yet there is just one set of principles which applies to both.

Note: The Inter-Varsity booklet, The Quiet Time, has some excellent suggestions on this particular question of requirements.

Specifically, these are the main things we need to be concerned about:

A. Personal determination which is based upon dependence upon God.

Satan does not want us to study. Our flesh (the old nature) will oppose it. Only God can make us and keep us faithful. See Ezra 7:10. It is only through His faithfulness to us that we can be faithful to Him.

B. A definite time.

C. A definite place.

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This should be in as quiet a location as possible. The quietness of a place may be determined somewhat by the time that is chosen. The early hours of the day are generally the quietest.

It is good to sit at a table or desk where you will have room for books and paper for making notes.

The place should be well lighted and well ventilated -- which will help you to stay awake!

D. The books you will need:

### 1. The Bible.

Perhaps it needs to be said more often than it is said because the only book a person really has to have is the Bible. Other books can definitely be helpful, but, if they are not available, this should not discourage any Christian from studying the Word. Each child of God is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is our Teacher. Therefore, with the Holy Spirit and the Word any child of God can profitably study the Word of God. See 1 John 2:20,27.

More will be said about other books later.

In selecting a Bible, the following things should be kept in mind.

- a. For study, use only a translation. A translation is referred to in contrast with a paraphrase.

Paraphrases are, in a sense, commentaries, and should be classed with commentaries. They interpret thoughts, not limiting themselves to the actual words of the Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek New Testament. The Biblical doctrine of inspiration teaches us that God directed the writers of Scripture as to the very words which they used. He did not just give thoughts, leaving the writers to express the thoughts in their own words. At best, any English translation is still a translation -- one step removed from the original text (apart from Greek and Hebrew studies) by getting the most accurate translation possible.

- b. Select a good translation.

There can be room for a difference of opinion on this. The following are the translations which I have found most profitable:

- (1) The King James Version. This is a good translation. The main objection that most people have is the obsolete expressions which are used. These are minimized with frequent use. Remember that there has to be a reason for its continued use since it was completed in the middle of the 17th century.

- (2) The American Standard Version. Translated at the beginning of the present century, many still consider this the best. It is an excellent translation.
- (3) The New Scofield Reference Bible. Either the original Scofield Bible, or the New Scofield, is very helpful in Bible study. No serious student of the Word of God should be without one or both of them. But, at the moment, we are speaking of translations. The editors of the New Scofield Reference Bible have <sup>done</sup> a very valuable thing with reference to the text. Without changing the basic King James Version (which was used throughout for the original Scofield Bible), they have changed the Old English words and have put up-to-date words in their places. This removes the most important objection which people have had to the King James Version.
- (4) The New American Standard Bible -- an excellent translation. It gives us the basic interpretation of the original text in modern English, translated by scholars who firmly believed in the inspiration and inerrancy of the original manuscripts.
- (5) The New International Version -- available now in only the New Testament. Conservative Old Testament scholars are now working on the Old Testament. It, too, is a very fine, reliable translation.

c. Choose a Bible with good, clear print.

This will keep you from tiring as quickly as you would with smaller, poor print.

d. Plan to use two Bibles.

- (1) An unmarked Bible without notes for reading. This will be the best for allowing the Holy Spirit to give you fresh impressions and insights from the Word.
- (2) A second one -- unmarked (which you would probably carry and use most of the time) which you can underline, make notations in the margins, and add your own cross references.

These two can be of the same translation, or different. For example, use two copies of the King James Version, or a copy of the New Scofield Bible and the New American Standard Bible.

2. Other books.

There is no limit as to recommendations that could be made under this heading. However, for a start we mention those which will be especially helpful.

a. An exhaustive concordance.

There are three for the English Bible that are the most popular: Strong's, Young's, and Cruden's. My vote goes without hesitation to Strong's.

What is a concordance?

It is "an alphabetized list of the important words" of the Bible, "with references to the passages in which they occur" (Webster's New World Dictionary, p. 156). This is what you may have in the back of your Bible.

What is an exhaustive concordance? It is a book with every word in the Bible listed in alphabetical order with a reference where each word is found.

- b. Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. In most Bibles there is a center margin, or (as in the case of the New Testament in the New Scofield Reference Bible) a margin down the outside of each page. The margin gives for the most part, cross references, i.e., other verses in the Bible that are related to the verses on that particular page. These (like your concordance in the back of your Bible) are limited because of the space which can be used. The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, on the other hand, is more complete and will give you many verses to supplement your study of any particular verse.

Note: In your reading of the Bible, add your own cross references. They can be written down in the margin of your Bible with a good Bible marking pen. Your own references will probably be the most helpful.

- c. A Bible Dictionary. Many good ones are available. This can vary from the one-volume dictionary, such as Unger's Bible Dictionary, or Smith's, to encyclopedias of several volumes. The latter would include ISBE or the new Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, published by Zondervan. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia can be used to look up people, or places, or particular subjects which we are concerned with in the study of the Bible.
- d. A Bible Handbook. Again - there are many good ones available. Two of the best are Halley's and Unger's. The purpose of a handbook is to give some background information on each book of the Bible - such things as who wrote it, when, why, etc. In addition, an outline of the book is given with a brief commentary. A Handbook is very helpful in giving us information about a book of the Bible which may not be included in the book itself.
- e. Other reference works: Commentaries on individual books of the Bible, books which will help in word studies, etc.

There is no limit as to what could be said here. As a general rule, select a particular commentary for each book studied. Few men have written on every book of the Bible. Even when a man has written on many or all of them, he will probably do a better job on some than he does on others. One-volume abridgements of commentaries on the whole Bible should, in most cases, be avoided.

Note: Always remember to use commentaries last. Do your own work first. Open your heart to the Holy Spirit. Let Him teach you. Then you can confirm and/or question what you have learned, and also get new insights which the Lord has given others, as you consult good commentaries.

E. A file system.

It is important to form the habit of writing significant things down immediately. These will generally be things that you will observe as you read your Bible, but they can be notes from any source that have to do with the Bible.

A 3 x 5 card system is good. You will need two sections: 1) for each book of the Bible; 2) for doctrines and other Biblical subjects arranged in alphabetical order. The first section would be Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, etc. The second would be A, B, C, etc.

This will give you a constantly increasing source of information which will prove very helpful when you take up the study of any particular book or subject.

V. The Procedure.

Some of that which has already been given in the notes up to this point has to do with procedure. However, we are now going to take up the subject of how to go about the study of a particular book of the Bible.

A. Pray. (See notes on Page 2 under "B.")

Never undertake the study of the Word of God without spending a brief time in prayer. Pray that the Lord will teach you through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It can be a very brief prayer, even a sentence prayer.

Some examples of the kind of a prayer we have reference to are found in Psalm 119: 12, 18, 26, 27, 33, 34, 64, 68, 73, 108, 125, 135, 144, 169. See the entire section in Psa. 119:97-104. See also Psa. 25:4, 5; Eph. 1:17, 18a.

B. Read the Bible itself.

See the Scriptural examples in Ex. 24:7; Deut. 17:19; 31:11; Joshua 8: 32-35; Neh. 8:8, 18-9:3; Luke 4:16; Acts 8:28-32; 2 Cor. 3:14; Eph. 3:4; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:3.

1. Select a good translation. (See notes on Pages 6, 7.)
2. Form the habit of reading the Bible through systematically at least once a year.

This is in addition to any study that you might do of individual books of the Bible.

There are several reasons for this. (See notes on Page 4.)

- a. It gives us an overview of the Bible.
- b. The Bible is its own best commentary. The more you know about all of the Bible, the more accurately you will be able to interpret the book of the Bible you are studying.

Examples:

- (1) It will help you to avoid confusion in dealing with such passages as Psa. 51:11; Luke 11:13; John 14:16, 17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20. How can these verses be harmonized?
  - (2) It will help you to define doctrines. What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit? See Acts 1:5 and Acts 2:4. They seem to indicate that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the same as the filling of the Spirit. But read 1 Cor. 12:13. Contrast it with Eph. 5:18. You could not get at the true meaning of these important truths if you stayed only with the Book of Acts.
  - (3) It will give you illustrations of truth. Concerning the truth of the Church as the Bride of Christ, how wonderful to discover the picture of it in Genesis 24!
  - (4) It will show you how the New Testament explains the Old Testament. See the relationship between 1 Cor. 5:7 and Exodus 12. See also 1 Cor. 10:1-11.
- c. It will enlarge your interests in the Word to include subjects which may not have an immediate appeal to you. It will keep you from spending your time only on what you like instead of going on also to other things that you need.
3. Read accurately. Think about what you are reading. Much misunderstanding comes from careless reading. Concentrate on getting the meaning.
4. Read any Book of the Bible that you are studying over and over -- as many times as possible. You may not be able to set this as your goal, but it is said of G. Campbell Morgan, formerly the Pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, England, that he would read a book 40 times before beginning to study it in detail! Not everyone can do that, but it helps to explain why Dr. Morgan was such an excellent teacher of the Word.
- Do what is possible for you. But read the book you are studying as often as you can -- not just in the beginning of your study, but all of the time you are studying it.
5. Have the following questions in mind as you read:
- a. Who is doing the writing, or the speaking?
  - b. To whom is he writing or speaking?
  - c. What does it mean?
  - d. How is it important to me?

Do not hesitate ever in your reading to stop for a moment to thank the Lord for what He is teaching you. It will serve to remind you that you are not discovering truth on your own, but that the Holy Spirit is teaching you. And such an attitude will tend to keep your heart open for more instruction from the Spirit of God.

6. Seek to discover the main divisions of the book. There is no better way to see the development of the thought in the book than by reading the book over and over.

As the divisions become clear, write them down and begin your broad, general outline of the book.

7. Complete your outline with more detail. But a word of caution is appropriate here: Do not make your outline so detailed that it will turn out to be longer than the book you are studying! An outline should be the book at a glance. Therefore, just make it detailed enough to enable you (or anyone else) to see the main things the writer has taken up in writing the book.
8. Be sure you know the meaning of all of the words in the book. You will be doing this as you get into the various sections of the book.

Another word of caution: Do not assume that words in the Bible always have the same meaning we give to them in everyday usage.

Examples:

- (1) "Mystery." As used in Ephesians, this does not speak of something mysterious, but of truth which God has kept secret until it was revealed in the New Testament.
- (2) "Hope." In everyday speech this expresses uncertainty. In the Bible the predominant idea is absolute certainty! See 1 John 3:3.
- (3) "Communicate" (a popular word today) does not mean verbal communication in Heb. 13:16. It means giving.

To check on the above, the modern translations recommended on Page 7 of the notes will be helpful. Also, this is where good commentaries can be of great assistance. Otherwise, use Bible lexicons or dictionaries. Oftentimes a concordance like Strong's or Young's will give you the information that you need. In some cases the context in which a word is found will indicate its true meaning, as will the usage of the same word in other parts of the book you are studying, or as it is used in other books of the Bible.

9. Make sure you know the meaning of the verses so that you can understand the development of the thought. Often a verse which may even seem like it does not belong in a chapter will actually be very important in revealing the thought behind what has been written. See Eph. 3:13 as an example.
10. In passages where the historical background has some bearing on the passage, be sure to check that out in either commentaries, Bible dictionaries, or Bible encyclopedias. The time and circumstances involved in the writing of any book of the Bible can be most easily obtained from Bible handbooks or from the introduction to the books given in commentaries.

11. Pay particular attention to the practical meaning of the book for us today. Even Old Testament books which may not have been written to us in the same sense that the New Testament epistles were written for us today, but every book of the Bible is important for us today, both with regard to its teaching and to the practical help that each book gives.
12. Always be ready to revise what you have done. Continued study will enable the Holy Spirit to give you great<sup>e</sup> insights. The Bible itself is perfect, but our work with the Word can always be improved.
13. Thank the Lord for all that the Holy Spirit has taught you. He gets all of the glory for every bit of Scripture which we understand.