

Excerpts from the author's syllabus on "How to Study and Interpret the Bible for Yourself."
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Helps in Bible Study

by Al Troester

Bible study will surely enrich one's life and is the means of spiritual well-being as spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ—"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the God" (Mt. 4:4). The Scriptures not only make one "wise unto salvation" (II Tim. 3:16), but also are profitable for "doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16). They are God's cleansing agent as seen in such verses as Ephesians 5:26 and Psalms 119:9.

I. The Purpose of Bible Study.

- A. The Bible gives us the knowledge of God and His will and purpose for our lives showing His plan of salvation and the working of the Holy Spirit in making a victorious life in Christ real to each believer.
- B. It nourishes the whole man in giving him food for the soul so that the living bread fills the longing of the heart.
- C. The Bible is one of the means by which God guides the believer through the leadership of the Holy Spirit.
- D. The Bible gives those principles of right living that make life in Christ successful and delightful to those who will hear it and do it.
- E. The hundreds of promises in the Bible give consolation, encouragement, and hope for the future.
- F. It is God's truth and will keep one from error.
- G. Those who study and practice it will grow in faith since "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).
- H. Man can only understand himself as he sees himself in the Word of God which alone gives the true revelation of man's real condition.
- I. The Bible teaches us how to pray. Obedience to the Word of God puts one on praying ground. Prayer is our means of contacting God and is the life line to keep us in touch with Him.
- J. The Bible tells us of our adversary, Satan, and how to have victory over him.
- K. The Bible exposes sin and warns of its eternal consequences.

- L. It is the only reliable source of future things and of the life beyond.
- M. It tells of the creation of all things, shows the sovereignty of God over it all, and reveals the new heaven and earth to come.

II. Basics in Bible Study

- A. Be assured that it is the Word of God, true, fully inspired in all of its parts.
- B. You must believe it although there will be things in it that you might not understand.
- C. It is a book not only to be read but also practiced. It is, therefore, not only God's revelation but also His reason for our living.
- D. Accept the fact that it is written to be understood although you will have difficulties with some things here and there but the Holy Spirit its author and indwelling teacher will give light and understanding. He may not, however, give you more light than you are willing to practice.
- E. Meditation is vital to its assimilation. It takes time to think it in and work it out so that it becomes a part of you.
- F. The Bible should be studied prayerfully, thoughtfully, with an open, unbiased mind, a submissive will, and a willingness to learn.
- G. It is good to learn to do independent Bible study apart from any helps. When you have difficulty, then a good commentary may be of help. A good Bible dictionary is always helpful.

Practice Four Fundamental Principles

- A. OBSERVE everything as to places, people, things, time, conditions, story, objects, verbs and tenses, grammatical construction, even commas and periods. Try not to miss anything. To practice your powers of observation can be very exciting and make the Bible alive to you. It is a living book for living people and you must learn to make it that in your experience.
- B. Study RELATIONSHIPS. One only begins to study when one understands relationships. In other words, how does one paragraph relate to the next paragraph or how does one chapter relate to the next chapter? What are the relationships between things in the chapter? How does one doctrine relate to another doctrine? What is the relationship between words—verbs, objects, nouns, adjectives, prepositions? What about geographical relationships, people, historical situations, narrative continuity? What is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament? What is the relationship between the four Gospels and the book of Acts? What is the relationship between the Jew and the Gentile, and the church, etc.?
- C. Every passage of Scripture must be interpreted. One of the basic principles

of Bible study is INTERPRETATION. In other words, what does this passage under study mean? This you must discover for yourself. Every passage has one interpretation. This is not always easy to discover and takes much prayer and searching of the Word under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the Teacher. "He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). In difficult passages, there may be the possibility of several interpretations where one may be uncertain of what a passage does mean, but there is only one final interpretation and it cannot be contradictory to the rest of Scripture.

- D. APPLICATION is a must. Every Scripture while it has only one interpretation may have several applications. In application, one asks "What does this passage of Scripture mean to me, or how may or should I apply it to myself?" It is so easy to apply a portion of the Word to someone else but one should learn to make it personal. Personal application makes the Scripture live in one's experience.

Methods of Bible Study

There are various methods of Bible study which one may use in order to understand its content and purpose in the life. Various methods are listed for you to try.

- A. Book study. Rapid reading of a whole book at one sitting will give you an idea of its content. This will also give you the plan of the book or its structure which is basic in understanding the whole book.
- B. Chapter study. In this method, one chapter at a time is studied. Discover the main theme of the chapter, its key idea, major verses, how Christ is seen, things to do, things to avoid, lessons to learn, promises, people, places, doctrines, etc.
- C. Paragraph study. A paragraph is the basic unit of Bible study, it has one complete thought and may cover one verse or several verses. It is like a piece of a jig saw puzzle. One piece is joined to another until the whole is seen. Paragraphs are joined to paragraphs to make a larger unit of thought until one discovers the picture of the whole book. However, one may do a paragraph study for his own personal enrichment from the Word without seeking to analyze the whole book. This is good for a devotional study. In so doing, give the paragraph a title according to the content. Then list all the facts of the paragraph whatever they may be—geographical, historical, physical, spiritual, grammatical, food, places, or things, etc. Having done that, list all the spiritual lessons you can learn from the paragraph and apply them to your own heart and life and you will find the Word of God will come alive to you with new meaning.
- D. Character study. In character study, you meet yourself in the Bible in the lives of its characters. In studying a particular character, see if you see his good points and his bad points so that you may use him or her as an example

to add or subtract things from your own life. This can be very personal. In one sense you may see yourself in a mirror in the life of another. The Bible shows us ourselves as we really are.

- E. Subject study. The Bible obviously is filled with many subjects such as sin, redemption, love, prayer, the second coming of Christ, guidance, faith, the will of God, Heaven, Hell, judgment, the resurrection, marriage, joy, sorrow, pleasure, and many, many others. You might use a concordance here and trace through the Scriptures a particular subject either in one book alone or go through all the references given in the concordance.
- F. Word study. Some particular word may be studied. This could again be done with the use of a good concordance. A good Bible dictionary may come in handy here too. The word should be studied as to its basic meaning and how it is used in any given context. The context in which the word is found really establishes its meaning.
- G. Verse study. There are many precious verses in the Bible that are good to feed the soul and give encouragement to the believer. Analyze the verse as to its content, basic meaning, the context in which it exists, the grammar in the verse, doctrinal teaching, is Christ mentioned, is it a promise you can appropriate, is there a lesson to learn from the verse, etc.

Principles of Interpretation in Bible Study

- A. This is called in schools—HERMENEUTICS, and in brief is simply—"The Science of interpretation."
- B. Every Scripture passage must be interpreted, which simply means—"What does it mean?" The following suggested principles will help you to understand the meaning of a passage. They are not exhaustive but workable.
 - 1. Interpret every passage of Scripture in its primary, literal, grammatical, historical sense. Seek no other meaning than the literal one unless the passage itself or other Scripture indicate otherwise. If it makes common sense, do not seek any other sense.
 - a. To accept a passage literally means, you accept it just as it is. Miracles are so understood.
 - b. Grammatical refers to interpreting the Scripture according to the laws of grammar. Pay attention to subject and predicate, prepositions, verb tenses, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and so forth. Shades of meaning are conveyed by the use of modifiers.
 - c. Take special note of the historical setting. Every Scripture has a historical setting and you must view any subject from the writer's historical point of view.
 - 2. Interpret every Scripture in light of its context, scope and plan.

- a. The scope of a book has to do with the purpose of the book that the writer had in mind.
 - b. The context is that which immediately precedes or follows a given word or verse.
 - c. The plan of a book is the arrangement of its several parts or the order of thought by which the writer is presenting his message. This has to do with its structure or outline.
3. Pay attention to the literary form of a passage of Scripture. Literary form is the vehicle of truth whether it be narrative, poetry, biography, parable, apocalyptic, or figures of speech.
- a. Hebrew poetry of which there are five books in the Old Testament uses parallelism of thought as its main characteristic rather than meter or rhyme. In other words, one line of poetry is balanced with the other and is opposite to it, or adds to it, or the second line repeats the thought of the first in different words.
 - b. A parable is spoken of as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It consists of three parts, the spiritual truth illustrated, the narrative itself, and the occasion it was given. In interpreting parables, study the historical occasion of the parable, analyze the subject matter and note the imagery that is used, and discover the central truth. Interpret the several parts in light of the over all central truth. A parable usually has one main truth. Do not get lost in its details or the imagery and make it say more than is intended.
 - c. Apocalyptic literature such as in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation for example have much symbols, visions, dreams, types, figures, and is predictive in character.
 1. A type is a figure of thought by which a material object of whatever kind is made to convey a spiritual concept to the mind. It essentially prefigures something future from itself. In other words, it is a figure of that which is to come as for example Adam is said to be a figure of Christ in Romans 5:14. See also I Cor. 15:45.
 2. A symbol on the other hand represents something and has no reference to time. By a symbol one thing is said or seen and another is intended. The bread and the fruit of the vine for example in the Lord's supper represent His body and His blood. The image of Daniel chapter two for example represents the Gentile nations. A symbol denotes something different from itself. In Revelation 17:18 for example the woman "which thou sawest" represents "that

great city". A symbol always denotes something other than itself.

- d. Figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, analogies, personification add vividness to language expression and give freshness of insight into what is being said. For example when Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (John 15:5), He was using a metaphor to show how real the Christian's dependence is upon Him in fruit bearing. Figures of speech do not detract from the truth. They enhance it.

C. Give special attention to the meaning of words in any passage.

1. The context determines the meaning of a word.
2. The current usage of a word may be learned from the examination of parallel passages.
3. Some words have many meanings. For example the word flesh is used in several senses. In Gen. 6:12 "all flesh corrupted itself upon the earth" refers to all mankind whereas in Romans 9:3 when Paul refers to "my kinsman according to the flesh" he was referring to the flesh as blood relationship. Flesh in Romans 8 refers to sin entrenched in the body.
4. Study words as to their root meaning. This can be found in a good dictionary.
5. The usage of a word may be learned by the manner and connection in which the word is generally used.

D. Compare Scripture with Scripture

1. Compare parallel passages for enlightenment.
2. Old Testament references in the New Testament should be studied in the light of their Old Testament context.
3. Jesus said, "Search the Scriptures" (John 5:39).
4. The Bible is its own best commentary.
5. The Scriptures are only understood in light of the Cross and resurrection of Christ. After He had risen from the dead, He told His disciples that all things that had been written concerning Him must be fulfilled and then "opened he their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

E. There is the principle of progression by which God makes a truth increasingly clear as progress is made toward its consummation. For example, in Christ we first see the seed of the woman, then the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, and then the virgin birth.

- F. The full mention principle is the principle by which God somewhere in the Bible expresses His full mind on some particular truth as love in I Cor. 13, the tongue in James 3, or faith in Hebrews 11.
- G. Do not read a meaning into a portion of Scripture but find out what the passage says.
- H. Give preference to the clearest and most evident meaning of any text.
 - I. No statement should be construed with more than one meaning.
 - J. Interpret every passage in harmony with all the Scripture.
- K. The meaning of a passage which most readily suggests itself to a reader is in general to be received as the true meaning and that alone.
- L. The easiest explanation, that is, the one which grows out of all the facts most naturally and without correction is usually the most accurate explanation. It is not true that the trickiest interpretation or the most mysterious one is the soundest.
- M. The first mention principle.

This is the principle by which the first time a thing is mentioned in Scripture it carries with it that same meaning throughout the Scripture. The first occurrence of a word, or expression is the key to its meaning thereafter.
- N. The double reference principle.

This is that principle by which the Holy Spirit may make mention of a person or event close at hand and used by Him later as applying to Christ or things pertaining to His prophetic kingdom. This might be seen in such passages as Hosea 11:1 and Mt. 2:14,15 with reference to Israel and Christ or to II Samuel 7:12-16 where we have reference to Solomon and on beyond that to Christ.
- O. The ethnic principle.

This has to do with the fact of recognizing the distinction between the Jew, the Gentile, and the Church (I Cor. 10:32). This is especially vital in prophetic teaching and keeping one's theology straight between the Church and Israel lest there be confusion. Some put the church in the Old Testament and so interpret the Bible as to spiritualize Israel out of existence in the New Testament as to make the church recipient of all of Israel's promises and erase the need for any future dealings with Israel.
- P. In interpreting prophecy, be careful to interpret literally but remember that some of prophecy is in the form of symbols which need to be understood and interpreted Scripturally. Observe perspective and be careful of time relationships. Be consistent and do not switch back and forth from the literal to spiritualizing and vice versa. Seek to find out the biblical interpretation of that which is symbolic. There is a harmony in prophecy that should be retained.

- Q. Seek to understand the covenants of God with Israel and how they fit into progressive revelation especially, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant.
- R. Interpret the Bible in light of dispensational truth and especially with respect to the prophetic truths lest you fall into the fallacy of spiritualizing the nation Israel.

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