

## How to Study the Bible

I would like to begin by looking at two passages that help us to have the correct mind set when studying the Bible. Isaiah 66:1-2.

These verses declare two important truths to us. The first is this. God is the creator of all things and as such needs nothing. Yet by His grace and mercy, still values men and women who are humble, contrite and tremble at his word. **God esteems, those who with humility and a sense of their own unworthiness, reverence His revealed word to mankind.**

The next verses come from Psalm 119:11,24. These verses show us that the word of God is given us to guide us into righteousness or right living. When we make God's word our delight and hide it in our heart, it directs us in how to live in a manner that pleases God and brings goodness and blessing into our lives.

These ideas are what lie behind this series of sermons on the Bible, God's word. Today I've been asked to speak on the topic, how to study the Word.

How we approach the Bible in large part determines the benefit we receive from it. What one believes to be true concerning the Bible affects the benefit derived. Having a high view of the Bible, that is to say believing the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, will allow one to receive life-giving, life changing truth. The converse is also true. If one believes the Bible is simply a man made book with no divine inspiration, the benefit to be found is small.

So what you bring in large part can determine what you receive. Also, when studying the Bible, keeping the correct goal in mind is essential. The goal of all Bible study is to grow closer to God, to love Him more, to be yielded to Him more **to be conformed to His image**. This is the purpose of Bible reading, Bible study. Gaining practical knowledge may be a side benefit but is not the goal. (being able to answer Jeopardy questions about the Bible is not the goal) The goal is to be changed by the Holy Spirit. Consider these words from A.W. Tozer.

*"It may shock some readers to suggest that there is a difference between being Bible taught and being Spirit taught. Nevertheless it is so.*

*It is altogether possible to be instructed in the rudiments of the faith and still have no real understanding of the whole thing. And it is possible to go on to become expert in Bible doctrine and not have a spiritual illumination, with the result that a veil remains over the mind, preventing it from apprehending the truth in its spiritual essence.*

*That truth in its essence spiritual must constantly be kept before our minds if we would know the truth indeed. Jesus Christ is Himself the Truth, and he cannot be confined to mere words even though, as we ardently believe, He has Himself inspired the words. That which is spiritual cannot be shut in by ink or fenced in by type and paper. The best a book can do is to give us the letter of truth. If we ever receive more than this, it must be by the Holy Spirit who gives it."*

So, three things are essential when studying the Bible. First, we need to approach the Scriptures with humility and reverence. Second, we should understand that truth is spiritual and as such we need the Holy Spirit to enlighten our hearts so we are able to gain more than mere knowledge. Thirdly, our goal in all Bible study is to become more like Him, to be conformed to His image.

Now, before we look at some principles about studying the Bible, let's consider what the Bible says about itself.

- A. 2 Peter 1:20-21 – God's word came into being by men inspired by God's Spirit, and not from their own will.
- B. 2 Timothy 3:14-17 – The Bible can lead us to salvation through faith in Jesus. All of God's word is "God breathed". God inspired the words that were written. The Bible should be used to teach, correct and train us in right living before God.
- C. Hebrews 4:12 – The Bible has life in itself, given from God. It has force to act and can reveal to us our true motives.

When studying the Bible keep in mind these two principles of interpretation.

1. What did the text mean to those to whom it was written?

It can be easy to interpret the Bible from a 21<sup>st</sup> century western mind set. We see the world and the Bible from the view point of an American and capitalistic democracy. For an example, let's consider Matthew 16:24-25. What does Jesus mean when he tells us we must "take up our cross." For many people today, taking up your cross might mean going through some difficult experience, others might see some religious significance in those words, yet for others it might have no meaning at all. But for those to whom Jesus spoke and for those who first read the gospel of Matthew, it would have been very clear. For them, the cross was a means of execution. It meant inescapable and certain death. It meant death and nothing else. It would have been clear what Jesus meant; to follow him one would have to die. There was no religious significance to a cross, only a cruel means of execution.

2. Interpret the Bible by the Bible.

In Matthew 7:13 Jesus instructs his listeners to "enter through the narrow gate.... and "small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life". So when you look at this passage and ask yourself what is the narrow gate, or narrow road that leads to life, you must answer that question with the Bible. In John 10:9-10, Jesus declares, " I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved..." Again in John 14:6 Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." We use Jesus' words to understand Jesus' words.

When studying the Bible use "Inductive Bible Study". That is to say, ask questions of the text you are reading. Specifically ask these three questions. What does the text say? What does it mean? How does it apply to my life? When you approach the Bible this way, you let the Bible speak for its self. It is a tool to help you look deeper at the text. It also helps you to think through what the text means for you specifically. For example, what patterns of thought do I need to change based on this passage. What habits do I need to give up or do I need to begin? What beliefs do I need to accept or reject?

Another point, it is always crucial that you approach the Bible with no pre-conceived ideas. One should never approach the Bible to find a text to support a belief that was accepted apart from the Bible. Don't read the Bible to find passages that would support your belief, let the Bible tell you what to believe. Perhaps you believe red roses are the prettiest flower that exists; it would be an improper use of the Bible to try to find a verse that proves your belief.

Now, there are many, many resources to help you in your study of the Bible. I am going to recommend four.

First you should have a good Study Bible to read from. While you may have your favorite Bible that you have used for years, you will want a Study Bible to reference. It will provide you with historical, cultural and geographical information that will aid you in your understanding.

Second you should have a Bible Dictionary. This is a dictionary of almost anything mentioned in the Bible. Again this is a great resource that enables one to find names, places, rivers, mountains, and cultural items, such as forms of money and articles of clothing all explained.

Third, you should have a concordance. This is a resource that enables you to find Bible verses you remember but don't know where in the Bible they are found. So you may remember pray is in the verse you want to find. The concordance will show you every where the word pray is used in the Bible.

Finally, I want to recommend a specific resource called "The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge". It functions something like a concordance. However, it takes each book of the Bible in the order it appears and then each verse, and provides parallel passages for each verse. So if you read a verse and see a specific idea taught you can look up that verse in this resource and it will provide several other verses that teach the same concept. I have found it to be one of the most helpful resources available.

Now let's take the idea of inductive Bible study and look at a passage together. One final suggestion, when studying the Bible always read it slowly, thoughtfully and in various translations.

I would like us to consider one of the best known, if not the best known passage in the New Testament. That would be John 3:16. However, I want us to look at this verse in its proper context. The paragraph to which this verse belongs is actually verses 14 through 17. I am aware most translations do not separate the paragraph that way although some do. Nonetheless the complete thought is found in these verses.

Now let's read these verses and then ask the Inductive Bible Study questions of these verses.

John 3: 14-17. First, verses 14 and 15

What does it say? – 1. Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness 2. The Son of Man must be lifted up 3. All who believe in him can have eternal life

What does it mean? – 1. A study Bible or the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge will point you to the book of Numbers and chapter 21. There you will discover that the people of Israel sinned by complaining against God and Moses. As a punishment for their sin God allowed poisonous snakes to come among them and some died from being bitten. Moses was then instructed by God to make a metal image of a snake and place it on a pole. So that anyone who had been bitten could look up to the image of the snake and by looking would be healed from the bite.

So 2. in the same way that the metal snake had to be put on a pole so Jesus must be lifted up on a pole.  
So 3. so that all can look to him and find power to save them.

How does this apply to me? – If I recognize I have need of salvation, I can look with faith to Jesus lifted up on the cross and find the power to save me.

Second, verses 16 – 17

What does it say? – 1. God loves the world, 2. He gave his one and only Son, 3. Whoever believes on Jesus will not perish, 4. Whoever believes on Jesus will have eternal life, 5. God did not send his Son to condemn the world, 6. God sent his Son to save the world

What does it mean? – 1. God loves all people, 2. Jesus is God's ONLY son, 3. There are those who will perish, 4. Whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life, 5. Jesus did not come to condemn people, 6. Jesus came to save people

How does this apply to me? – 1. I am loved by God, 2. He gave his son for me, 3. If I believe in Jesus I will live forever, 4. Jesus didn't come to condemn me, but to save me