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THE ART OF LIVING OUT THE WORDS, WAYS, & MISSION OF JESUS

2.2 Studying the Words of Jesus

Reading and Studying

David Schmidgall, Dream Co, Director of Impact and Mission
National Community Church

Our goal is to help people better read and understand the Bible. I'm Pastor David. I love studying the Bible. I have more questions about the Bible. It is more perplexing, enlightening, confusing, and nutritional all at the same time. It's more dimensional than oftentimes a very flat reading tends to be when we approach the Bible.

We want to invite you into how to study the Bible in a richer way. There are two essential questions that we often encounter when we're studying the Scriptures. Those two questions are very essential. One is: what did the Bible mean? And what does the Bible mean for me? For us?

I think too often we skip over what the Bible means, and we run to what it means for me, and oftentimes, it's where we get into some pretty bad interpretations. So how do we help you? How do we approach studying the Bible where we ask, "What does the Bible mean for me?" more effectively? I think it's most effective in a come-and-see culture.

Oftentimes, I'll just invite people into studying together and wrestling. I know that's what you're doing, and that tends to be the most effective way in which we grow and sharpen. In fact, studying — you and your Bible by yourself — is a pretty new phenomenon throughout history. It was always meant to be studied together. This is where we're sharpened together; this is where we grow. But I believe that when we approach, "What does the Bible mean for me?" In order to understand the words of Jesus, we have to enter into the world of Jesus and the Bible.

We believe there's a four-dimensional approach to that that I think it's necessary for understanding God's revelation in time and space. These four windows function like four lenses. Think of it this way. When pointed and focused upon an object, they're adjusted until the picture comes into focus. In other words, they provide windows so that we can understand the world of the Bible written so long ago and understood within a much different culture than the modern Western world.

I want to simply introduce you to these four lenses. My encouragement is, they take a lifetime of practice, especially within the community. I hope it's not discouraging that you're not going to just "get it" right away. It takes discipline and diligence, and I think those are two things that move against us all the time in a "solve it now" and "figure it out now" consumer-kind-of-way. This is very invitational. I'm just opening you up to this space. Let me go through the four.

The first is spatial. Space, place, and geography is the stage of the biblical story, but it's more than just places on a map or roadways. They're constantly teaching us and showing us something, because the Bible speaks of truth often in words and pictures rather than simply words and ideas. The spaces and places in the Bible are as much of a character as David, Mary, and Paul. Part of growing in study of the Bible means learning to recognize that spaces, places, flora, and fauna are showing and revealing something to us, often teaching us deeper layers of spiritual truths.

The second is historical. The Bible reflects the history of the Jewish people over thousands of years. It wasn't a book dropped off from outer space with a set of abstract truths. The Bible is intensely soily — full of images of the day and reflecting the ancient Near East history over the centuries. God meets people in particular times and places. In other words, the history of King David's reign in 1000 BC, for instance, is vastly different than the prophet Isaiah, which is vastly different than the world of the Greek-speaking, Roman-occupied Israel in the time of Jesus. Seems pretty obvious, right? To understand the moment now, if we didn't understand how the pandemic was impacting things, for instance, we'd be hard-pressed to understand some of the words written today. History and context helps provide a deeper understanding of why things are set.

Third is cultural. The Bible must be read within the context of its contemporary culture. In the Old Testament, we refer to the ancient Israelite culture within the larger context of ancient Near East culture. In the New Testament — like Acts 15 and 16, we see ancient Judaism within the larger Greco-Roman culture. For instance, there is a great debate about what's called the Jerusalem Council around what is happening. What was a Jewish movement of restoration through Jesus, they're now witnessing Gentiles, which are non-Jews, receive Christ, they're filled with the Spirit as evidence that God was at work, and it's causing all sorts of confusion and questions. This is a really big deal. Verse 20 comes along, in chapter 15 it says, so great debate happens, "Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood." This is so loaded with cultural context that I don't have time to fully unpack, but one thing you'll encounter is these three things are mentioned to Noah. In Noah's day, this precedes the Torah. So as they're wrestling with, "How do Jew and Gentile come together?" They come to the conclusion: since they don't have to follow the laws of the Torah, what precedes that is something that they can all be in agreement on. Again, lots of questions out of that, but at least it gives us a sense that these three things have a lot of meeting, and they tend to be very cultural.

Lastly, spiritual. The Bible reflects the spiritual beliefs and outlooks of ancient writers. Religion was part of everyday life in the ancient world and not negatively perceived as it is much in the modern Western world. The Bible is God's revelation in time and in place and in culture. For this reason, location and history have played a uniquely important role in Judaism and Christianity.

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My invitation is this: begin to think of these four lenses as you're listening to the words. I invite questions: what does circumcision have to do with anything? Why should I care about that? What does Judea and Antioch have anything to do with that? That's a spatial question. What does, "You cannot be saved," mean in that period of history? That's a spiritual question. These questions become part of our quest that invite us into a deeper understanding of the Bible, which invite us into a deeper intimacy with who God is. I hope this is a beginning point of invitation as you begin to explore what it looks like to study the Bible in a deeper way.

Peace be with you.