

How to Study the Bible

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I. Intro

- A. Each one of us have here the most valuable book in the entire universe. It is a book that came directly from God. The one who created us gave us a book. It's a book that reveals the mind of our Father in Heaven in a way that we cannot find anywhere else. The information within this book has the keys to our eternal destiny.
1. We all understand that. We know that this book is important.
 2. That makes Bible study critical. Unfortunately, reading this book can sometimes be very difficult. Sometimes we can get confused. There are parts of this book that we read and we have no idea what it's even talking about. Sometimes we read it and we misunderstand it. Sometimes we don't read it because it just seems really dry and boring.
 3. The problem is that we know the Bible is helpful for us. We know we need to be studying it. But often times we don't know how to study it.
- B. So this evening I want to share a few ideas and tips that I think will help us all in our personal Bible study. This will help us when we're at home working over a passage by ourselves. It will help us when we're preparing to teach a Bible class or a sermon. It will also help us be more equipped to discuss things in the Bible classes here at services.
- C. Sometimes the way we're used to studying the Bible is not helpful. We have learned to study the Bible like this:
1. We read:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 2. I say, "I think it means such and such." You say, "Well I was kind of thinking it means such and such." Then someone else says, "Well I was thinking it means this over here." And while it can be very helpful to see another person's perspective, at the end of that study I may have learned what everyone thinks, but I might never have learned what God thinks.
 3. But God has an intended message. God wrote the words of the Bible to communicate something. I need to learn how to find out what God is communicating.

[Here's the foundation of everything I'm going to be talking about tonight:]

II. Written for persuasive purposes

A. The Bible was written for persuasive purposes. That fact is critical for understanding the Bible, yet we often miss it. The Bible is not a collection of facts. It is not a lot of information. It is God deliberately teaching us something.

B. We see this clearly in John:

John 20:30-31

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

1. John is deliberately saying, "I am not writing a biography of Jesus." If you wanted a biography of Jesus, you're reading the wrong book. I'm writing a sermon. I specifically included events in Jesus' life because I wanted to get you to become a Christian.
2. Now if I read the book of John to try to understand what Jesus liked to do each day of the week, then I'm misusing the Bible.

C. Most of the other books of the Bible do not explicitly state their reason for writing, but I believe all of them have a persuasive purpose. None of the books of the Bible were written for purely information purposes.

1. You might say, "Well look at Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Aren't they more of a biography?" Luke says he intended to write "an orderly account." That sounds like a biography to me!
 - a. But if you look at those books as biographies you find them to be sorely lacking. Even when you put them all together you only have a very small segment of Jesus' life. We have no idea of what Jesus did from age 12 to age 30. Even within those 3 years of ministry, most of the stories that we have recorded happened at toward the very end. In fact it's been estimated that about 40% each gospel focuses on the last week of Jesus' life. What does that tell you?
 - b. Why did they leave so much out? Why did they spend so much time on Jesus' death? Because they wanted to teach us something. They were only including the events that were essential to their purpose.
2. This goes beyond just the gospels. The epistles are certainly written for persuasive purposes. The book of Hebrews ends with this statement:

Hebrews 13:22

²²I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

- a. Exhort means to urge someone to do something. The book of Hebrews is not just a nice description of how wonderful Jesus is. It's a book designed to persuade Christians to do something. You have to look closely at the book to figure out what it is that he's trying to persuade his readers to do.
- 3. All of the epistles are that way. When Paul writes Romans he is not writing a book report on what the gospel is. He's trying to help the Christians in Rome with some specific issues and therefore he has to persuade them through doctrinal reasoning.

D. What about the rest of the Bible?

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

- 1. Every book of the Bible is written to be of use to us. Every book of the Bible is designed to train us in righteousness.
- 2. Even those Old Testament books. Some people will say that the purpose of the Old Testament is to give us a history of the Jewish nation. The Bible never claims that. And if that's what God intended, he didn't do it very well. The Old Testament leaves all sorts of gaping holes in Israelite history. The books in the Old Testament were not written to give a history lesson, they were written to teach us and persuade us of some spiritual lessons.

III. How do we find the author's message?

A. Find the context

- 1. Our Bibles are divided into chapters and verses. That's helpful for finding things, but unfortunately, it has a negative effect on how we read the Bible. When we read the Bible we tend to think of very small chunks. I'm going to read chapter 3 today. I'm going to study the story of the Good Samaritan today. I'm going to look at all the verses about faith today.
 - a. But the Bible was not written to be studied in that kind of way. The original inspired message did not have any chapters or verses in it. The epistles were letters designed to be read out loud to churches.
 - b. One of the biggest mistakes people make in Bible study is zooming in too much. If I'm reading along and I come to a verse that I have no idea what it means, what do I do? One option is to go look up each of the words in that verse in a dictionary. Then look at some other translations. Then look that verse up in a commentary. That might help. But usually that just make me more confused. The

dictionary definitions don't make the verse any clearer. The commentaries just get me confused.

- c. The problem is that I'm just zooming in more. Instead, I need to zoom out. I need to step back, see the entire context, and understand what the overall section is saying.

2. Seeing the immediate context

- a. The first challenge is to see the immediate context. What is this section of the book about?

- b. Let's practice this.

1 Corinthians 15:33

³³Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

- i. We typically use this to talk about why you shouldn't hang out with drunks because you might become a drunk. That is a true principle from scripture, but this verse is talking about something much more specific than that.
- ii. Let's take two minutes to speed read this chapter. Then let's talk about what is the context here.
- iii. The context is some false teaching about the resurrection. People are teaching that there is no resurrection. Paul's point is that if we hang out with false teachers they will corrupt our morals. That is a much more specific application than what we sometimes emphasize here.

3. Seeing the larger context

- a. To really understand the context we have to look at the whole entire book. What is the author saying in this book?
- b. As we study a book it's very helpful to see what is this overall book about? What is the author trying to accomplish in this book? How does he develop those thoughts throughout the book?
- c. I think the best way to do this is to create an outline or a map of the book.

Romans

Intro (1:1-17)

Doctrinal Section (1-11)

- The need - Everyone is sinful (1-2)
 - o Gentiles have sinned (1)

- Jews have sinned (2)
- The solution (3-5)
 - Jews & Gentiles are justified by faith
- So should we, as Christians, continue to sin? (6-8)
- What about Jews who haven't become Christians? (9-11)

Daily Living Section - Loving each other (12-15)

- Practical ways to show love (12-13)
- Dealing with differences (14)
- Christ's example of loving the Jews & the gentiles (15)

Greetings (16)

- d. How do we create that map? Read the book all the way through from beginning to end very quickly. Then write down some observations and read it through again a little more slowly. Then read through it, dividing it into sections as you go.
 - i. That takes a lot of time. But you will learn so much. Another solution is to look at a map that someone else has written. Most commentaries have an outline of the book at the beginning. But keep in mind the map is only as good as the person who made it. Maps are not always entirely accurate.
 - ii. The best solution is to do both. Create your own map and look at other people's maps.
- e. That map will determine how we see each section of the book. It helps me see how everything connects and is related to the other parts.
 - i. The book has two sections, but the question is how are these connected? How is loving each other related to what he said in the first half of the book? You'll notice that there is a real emphasis on Jews & Gentiles. Paul was writing to a church that was split along racial lines. Jews think they are better than Gentiles. Gentiles think they are better than Jews. From the very beginning to the very end of the book Paul is writing about this issue. If I see that as one of the major themes of the book I will interpret these sections in light of that.
- f. Now let's see how this map helps us.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

- i. What does the map tell you about this verse? This is a hinge verse in the book. It connects the first half of the book with the second half. It is a very important verse.
 - ii. Paul shows how everything that he talked about in the first half of the book connects with everything he's going to talk about in the second half. Because of God's mercy (what we saw in the early part of Romans), we should become living sacrifices for God (love each other). That's how we worship God.
- g. Example 2:

Romans 9:14

¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

- i. This is the kind of verse that is taken in all sorts of crazy directions. And no wonder, when you isolate it, it's a very troubling verse.
- ii. But if we look at our map, then it's much clearer. He'd dealing with the question of will my nice grandmother who's Jewish and goes to the Synagogue every Sabbath be saved? Paul, says, "No," salvation comes only through Christ. The Jews say, "Well then God's unfair!" Paul says, "You can't say that to God. He's God. He gets to make the rules. If he says, 'Only people who have faith in Christ are saved,'" then that's the way it is."

IV. Techniques for finding the author's message

A. When you read a section of scripture how do you know what the author's main message is? We often read a passage and say, "Well I think the lesson we're supposed to learn is _____." How did you come up with that? I don't know, it's just what I think. That's not a good way to study the Bible.

B. Summary & Purpose statements

1. Sometimes this task is really easy, because the author specifically tells us what he's trying to teach us. That doesn't happen real often, but it's something we should always be looking for.

2. The end of Joshua

- a. Joshua 13-21 are just huge lists of cities. This seems extremely boring to read. Why would God waste so much ink on a list of cities?
 - i. Helps us draw maps
 - ii. Helps us see how large the land is
 - iii. Puts it in a historical context
 - iv. How much work it must have been to take all that land
 - v. Helps us see how many people there must have been
- b. We don't find the answer until the very end of the section:

Joshua 21:43-45

⁴³Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. ⁴⁴And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

- i. God was faithful. Everything God had promised was fulfilled. What promises is he talking about? The promises way back to Abraham. God fulfilled every last detail of the land promise.
- ii. This becomes a very helpful, encouraging section of the Bible. It's something that teaches us about the character of God. As we've talked about, a lot of the Bible message is about God.

3. Sometimes these statements are at the end of section. Sometimes they are in the middle, sometimes at the beginning. They are especially useful in the Old Testament stories where we're not sure what exactly God's trying to teach us.

1 Kings 16:29-33

²⁹In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³⁰And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. ³¹And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. ³²He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³And

Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

- a. What do we learn from this?
 - i. He was worse than anyone before him
 - ii. Not only did he commit the same sins that we've read about earlier in the book, but he do something much worse
 - iii. He married a heathen woman.
 - b. What are we supposed to learn from the stories of Ahab? One of the biggest lessons is don't marry people who aren't trying to serve God. It's going to end in disaster.
 - c. Now, I could have read some of the stories of Ahab and I could have assumed that was the lesson of the story. But now I can say with confidence that God's put these stories in here to teach me that, because that's what God says.
4. So look for those kinds of statements.

C. Inclusios (bookends)

1. The writers of the Bible did not use chapter breaks. So they had to use other kinds of methods to divide their books into sections. One of those techniques is when the author begins and ends a sections with a similar topic.
2. A simple example is in Luke when Jesus is a boy. The section begins with:

⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

 - a. Then the section ends with:

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.
 - b. Those are bookends. That's Luke telling us, "I'm going to tell you a little story here. Ok, that's the end of that story now we'll move on to the next thing." He's make a section break.
 - c. And many times these inclusios define what's within them. Luke is emphasizing that when we read this story we are to see that Jesus increased in wisdom and God was with him even as a child.
3. Here's a larger example:

1 Corinthians 8:1

8 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.

- a. What he talking about in this section? Food offered to idols.
- b. What he talking about at the end of chapter 10?

1 Corinthians 10:23-28

²³“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. ²⁴Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. ²⁵Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶For “the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.” ²⁷If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.²⁸But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—

- i. What’s he talking about now? The same thing! But we’re two chapter later. And in the middle he talked about whether it was right for him to accept money for preaching the gospel. He talked about the race metaphor. He talked about the connection between the Israelite Exodus story and our own Christian journey. We thought he was on completely different topics.
 - c. But in fact all of this section was about the question of whether he should eat food sacrificed to idols. He was teaching us that just because we think we have the right to do something doesn’t always mean it’s a good idea.
 - d. If I’m studying 1 Corinthians that’s really important for me to see that connection. Instead of treating each of those chapters separately, I need to see that they are all a part of one thought.
4. The Bible also has very large inclusios. You can see this in Romans.

⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,

- a. Then at the end of the book we see the phrase:

²⁶but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

- b. Why did Paul begin and end with that same phrase? That's the only places that phrase is found in the entire Bible. Paul is signaling that's an overarching theme in this letter.
- c. We do the same thing when we're talking. When I preach a sermon sometimes I begin with our focus verse and then come back to it again at the end. That gives a signal that that's the overarching theme.

D. Patterns and Repetition

1. Finally we should look for patterns and repetition. That will give us a big clue of what the author is trying to communicate.
2. You see this real clearly in Genesis 1.

⁶And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so.¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God

saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

- a. What's emphasized?
 - i. "God" – Repeated over and over throughout the chapter. God is obviously the main character. If I make this chapter about something other than God, I'm probably missing the main point.
 - ii. "God said" – The power of God's word. This chapter is guided by a monologue from God.
 - iii. "Saw that it was good" – Good is very important. We can look at the context of the book to determine the significance. The earth is about to turn not good. Moses is emphasizing the original goodness of this planet. Then it ends with, "God saw that it was very good."
 - iv. "There was evening and there was morning." The passage of time is very important to the writer. That was very significant to the Sabbath day.

V. Conclusion

- A. God has given us an incredible gift. He has revealed a part of his mind to us.
- B. Let's use that word correctly. Let's learn to understand God's mind and never twist it to become our mind.
- C. If you're not a Christian then you can come and follow God's word and commit your life to him.