



1

STUDY THE BIBLE WITH HEART AND MIND

The two-fold nature of the Scripture—divine and human—makes it of paramount importance to study the Bible with both heart and mind.

It is a fundamental belief of Christians that the Bible is a unique book, and its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is a product of double authorship—the Divine and the human.

First, the Bible had its origin in God, who took the initiative to reveal Himself to mankind. Second, in revealing Himself, God communicated through men, and chose human language as the vehicle. Biblical authors spoke from God, not from their own impulse but as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

Therefore, it logically follows that our approach and study method must be consistent with that two-fold nature of the Bible. Since it is the revelation of God, we must study it like no other book, following *the law*

of the Spirit. Also, since it is written in human language, we must study it like every other book, observing the *laws of language*. Above all, it is of paramount importance that we study the Bible with both *heart* and *mind*: an obedient heart and an active mind.

THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

The divine origin of the Scriptures makes the illumination of the Holy Spirit indispensable in Bible study.

Since the Bible is the Word of God, divine illumination is essential to an understanding of the Word. The Bible makes it clear that in order to receive that illumination one must be *born of the Spirit*. That is, we must have the Holy Spirit within us (1 Corinthians 2:11-16). Without this indwelling we have no capacity to receive the ministry of the Spirit. Second, we must have a *babe-like attitude* totally dependent on the Holy Spirit (Matthew 11:25-26). For those reasons, Bible study should at least include the following steps.

BEGIN WITH PRAYER

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law” (Psalm 119:18).

The most important step in Bible study is to pray before studying. We should ask the Spirit to teach (John 14:26), to guide (John 16:12), and to illuminate our study so that the veil may be removed

(2 Corinthians 3:16), so that we may come to see and to perceive the truth. Remember, the Word of God is spiritual and must be spiritually discerned.

Although the importance of prayer in Bible study cannot be overemphasized, the importance of having a right attitude is something that should not be ignored. In truth, our attitude will determine whether or not the Bible study is profitable. A fruitful Bible study must be accompanied with:

A teachable heart—a readiness to learn. A heart prepared to receive illumination and instructions. A heart ready to say, “Speak, LORD, for Thy servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9).

A sincere anticipation—a humble expectancy. It is an expectation to hear God speaking to us through what we study, believing that God rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

PROCEED WITH MEDITATION

“Make me understand . . . so I will meditate on Thy wonders” (Psalm 119:27).

According to Webster, to meditate is “to think deeply and continuously; to reflect; to ponder.” Let us make no mistake. To rely on the Spirit is no substitute for thinking, nor is it an excuse for laziness, and certainly it does not mean a passive attitude. Obviously, that was the mistake of the Corinthian church. They were rich in spiritual gifts (1:7), yet they lacked in knowledge

and understanding (3:16; 5:6; 6:2-3, 9, 15-16, 19; 10:1; 12:1); they had the manifestation of the working of the Spirit (12:14), yet they failed to exercise their minds (10:15; 11:13).

We must not neglect the fact that God expects us to use the mind He has given us and to use it diligently. The commands such as, "Consider what I say" (2 Timothy 2:7), or "you judge what I say" (1 Corinthians 10:15; Luke 12:57) definitely appeal to human reasoning. So, understanding God's Word actually requires more than the ministry of the Spirit; it also requires an open and active mind.

An open mind. Without it learning will be impossible. We must be open to the Spirit for correction as well as instruction. It is necessary to bear in mind that we must guard against the error of using the Bible as proof text to support our preconceived ideas. Rather, we must bring those ideas under the scrutiny of the Word of God.

An inquisitive mind. An active, inquisitive mind is essential for effective Bible study, for it enables us to get to the heart of the text. Always remember, illumination of the Spirit is enhanced rather than inhibited by an active, inquisitive mind.

CONCLUDE WITH PERSONAL APPLICATION

"Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, and keep it with all my heart" (Psalm 119:34).

The ultimate end of Bible study is not only to gain factual information, though that is basic. The ultimate aim of Bible study is to bring the newly discovered truth to bear upon our lives. Fruitfulness in Bible study depends not only on *how* we study, but also on *what* response we make to its message. An effective Bible study requires a surrendered will and an obedient heart.

A surrendered will. A will resolved to do His will is a fundamental condition of profitable Bible study (John 7:17).

An obedient heart. When the *mind* comes to understand the message, the *heart* must respond, and the *will* must act upon it. Response comes the moment we apply the message to our life situation. By the act of obedience we become doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22), and our obedience is the proof of our love for Christ (John 14:15).

So we must pray that the same Spirit who *enlightens* us will both *enable* us to obey the light, and *empower* us to translate the message into our daily life.

THE LAWS OF LANGUAGE

The human authorship of the Bible makes it mandatory that the laws of language be followed in interpreting the Bible.

In one sense the Bible is like other literature, a product of men, but it was a product of men under providen-

tial guidance. If it is literature written in ordinary language, then we must study it as we would any other book, observing the common rules of language in order to grasp accurately its meaning. In other words, if we want to know what the biblical authors really said, it is imperative that we study their writings properly. Without question that takes time and effort.

It is well to remember that our dependency on the illumination of the Spirit is not incompatible with the effort on our part to understand the Bible. On the contrary, the divine illumination and human effort must go hand in hand if we are to accurately understand its message.

Paul wrote to young Timothy, “*Be diligent* to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, *handling accurately* the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, italics added). Timothy must make every effort (“be diligent” is imperative in Greek) to handle rightly the Word of God (“handling accurately”—the Greek word means “to cut straight”; thus, “to guide the Word of God along a straight line”), so that he may win God’s approval as a workman, and have no reason for shame before his Master. The same diligence required of Timothy is also required of us today. The Word of God must be handled correctly. Here are some essential rules that will help us in that regard.

OBSERVE THE CONTEXT

We must interpret a given text (whether a word, a sentence, a paragraph, or a passage) in the light of its context.

A context is what goes before and after a text. The importance of context cannot be overemphasized, since thought is usually expressed in a series of related ideas. Many would agree that neglect of the context is a common cause of erroneous interpretation and irrelevant application. It becomes obvious that our responsibility is to study the context first, observing the train of thought, and then to interpret the text in that light.

Some helpful guidelines:

Always observe the context first. A careful study of the context often sheds light on the meaning of the text under study. As a rule, start with the immediate context, then the remote context, and finally the total context.

- Immediate context—what precedes and what follows.
- Remote context—If the immediate context gives no help, then we go to the remote context, the chapter or the book where the text under study is found.
- Total context—Again, if the remote context sheds no light, then we must interpret the text in the light of the total teaching of the Bible, the total context.

This procedure is based on the principle of harmony, that the revelation of God is self-consistent.

Get acquainted with the outline of the book in which the text is found. It enables us not only to discover the context of the text, but also to see the objective the author had in mind in composing that particular portion of materials.

Pay attention to the connectives. The connectives may seem insignificant, yet they often reveal the development of thoughts and how verses, paragraphs, and passages are related to each other. As a rule, a connective connects a thought with the one immediately before it, though there are exceptions to the rule. In the gospels we may find passages grouped together without connectives. In such cases, we must not always assume that they are not related. Some, indeed, are not logically related to one another, but others are clearly related in spite of the absence of the connectives.

Study parallel passages carefully. Study of the parallel passages may prove to be helpful in determining the context and the meaning of the text as well.

STUDY THE BACKGROUND

We must interpret the text in the light of its original historical-cultural setting.

We must remember that the Bible was originally written to a particular people of a particular age in a

particular land, and often to meet a particular need. To be more precise, the Bible was written originally to Jews (the Old Testament) and Gentile Christians (the New Testament) of the first century A.D. or much earlier in Palestine and its surrounding countries. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Bible reflects a culture unfamiliar to us. For that reason, we must study the world of biblical authors in order to interpret their writings correctly. Knowledge of customs, culture, geography, religion, and the life situation of the first century and Old Testament times is not only helpful, but also essential. A word of caution! We must carefully guard against the error of interpreting the text against the twentieth century life setting.

Two sources of information are helpful.

Internal. The Bible is the principal source of essential background information. Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Read the Bible. The more we are familiar with the Bible, the more background knowledge we gain.
2. Take notes. Systematically file the acquired information. It will prove to be very useful later.

External. Bible dictionaries, good commentaries, and Bible handbooks are very helpful sources of information in external background study.

UNDERSTAND THE WORDS

We must interpret the words according to the sense in which the author used them.

Words are important because they are the basic unit of meaning. Thus, by understanding the words, we understand the Bible. In general, each word has several meanings. But under normal circumstance, in a given situation, that word has only one meaning, whether literal or figurative. Therefore, our responsibility would be to discover the sense in which the author used a particular word.

Some helpful guidelines:

Recognize the literary type. First, recognize the literary form of the passage (or the book), because it determines the frame of reference in which the word is used. There are a variety of literary types found in the Bible, such as prose narrative, poetry, parabolic literature, and apocalyptic literature.

Look for the natural sense. Always look for the natural and obvious meaning. Keep in mind that the natural meaning is not necessarily always the literal meaning. Sometimes, it is figurative. As a rule, follow the literal meaning unless it makes no sense and leads to absurdity.

Observe the context. Determine the meaning of a word by the context in which it occurs. As a rule, a given word usually has the same meaning in all of its

occurrences in a single passage. Yet the same word may have different meanings in different passages. In one case it may be used in a literal sense, and in another passage in a figurative sense. Again, the context will provide the answer.

Study words. Studying the given word and its synonyms in other passages enables us to determine the meaning. An unabridged English dictionary, a Bible dictionary, a good concordance, and a reference Bible are invaluable tools for studying the words.

Study the figures of speech. A figure of speech is an expression that uses words in a “nonliteral” sense to give vividness and to arrest the attention of hearers. Examples include similes, metaphors, and personification. Since the Bible abounds in figurative language, it is important that we study biblical hermeneutics and learn the principles that govern the interpretation of the figurative expression employed.