
Bible Study Basics

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auburn

SOVEREIGN GRACE

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Preface

There are many books available on studying the Bible and different methods for doing so. This booklet came into being as an effort to provide material that would be both theologically sound and immanently readable. It is designed for use in small groups with people of diverse maturity, intelligence and reading levels.

May God use it for the good of His people and for His glory.

Why Study the Bible?

It is not enough to simply assume that Christians should study the Bible. Understanding why we study the Bible as Christians is both absolutely necessary and supremely helpful. Of the multitude of reasons to study the Bible, here are a few to consider.

Our Fallenness

The fallenness of man means that spiritual truth is hauntingly elusive. Because of sin our hearts are deceitful, our desires are distorted, and our minds are twisted. By nature we reject the truth and cannot accept the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).

What God has revealed about Himself and His will in creation and in the consciences of men is quickly distorted, denied, and ignored because of the fall (Romans 1:18-23, 2:12-16). We need truth revealed in such a way that minimizes human interpretation and maximizes its stability. In God's wisdom the objective and written word of God in the form of the Bible provides exactly what we need (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Truth has not taken up residence inside us or in the mind of any other human being. It must come from an external source. It must come from a supernatural book written by inspiration of the infallible and truthful God (2 Peter 1:16-21). This Bible is this supernatural book and it deserves our careful study.

The Bible Reveals God

The Bible is a book about God written by God. It reveals to us who He is, what He has done, and what He thinks.

“Talking is always a revelation of the talker, and God discloses himself to us by talking to us about himself, and about ourselves as he sees us. He tells us of his own past achievements, how he has created, judged, redeemed, raised up men to serve him, and created a people for himself. He tells us of his present work: how he orders and governs all things for the fulfilling of his purposes. He tells us his future plans, sketching for us in mysterious but glowing terms the coming climax of history and the final destiny of his people. He tells us what he thinks about human life and the different ways in which men live it. He gives us directions, and counsel, and makes promises and announces warnings. He teaches us his own scale of values, detailing for us the things that he approves and the things that he hates. Thus by talking, he reveals himself.”¹

It is the Bible that informs us of the person and work of Jesus who is Himself the supreme self-

¹ J.I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Biblical Themes*, (Baker Book House, 1981), p. 19.

revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-2). Christ, the word made flesh, revealed the person of God in a unique, accessible and powerful way during His time on earth. It is through the Bible that we know the one who has made God known (John 1:1-18).

Without the Bible our knowledge of God would be sadly limited and quickly distorted. In the wisdom of His grace God has revealed Himself to us in the Bible. If we would understand and know God we must read and study the Bible.

The Bible Reveals the Way to God

Without God's self-revelation in the Bible man would have no hope of ever being in relationship with God. We would know nothing of the Savior. We would know nothing of salvation through His substitutionary death and resurrection.

The Bible not only tells us about God, it tells us how we as sinners can know and enjoy God for all eternity. At the core of the Bible is the message of the gospel- a message that not only reveals God but also the way that sinners can draw close to Him.

Speaking of Timothy's upbringing Paul notes that, "from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). We need Scripture to give us the wisdom that leads to salvation.

The Bible Serves to Fulfill God's Ultimate Purpose for the World

God's ultimate purpose for the world is to glorify Himself by revealing Himself to His creatures and satisfying His creatures with Himself. Jonathan Edwards put it in the following way:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself.²

How does God, "appear to their understanding"? How does He "communicate Himself to their hearts"? The most significant way this happens is through the Bible.

God's self-revelation in Scripture then is a means for fulfilling His ultimate purpose. God has revealed His glory in the Bible, and as we behold Him in the Bible we are satisfied and He is glorified.

² Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 13 (Yale University Press, 1994), p. 495.

The Bible Reveals God's Design for Life

Scripture not only reveals that we exist for God's glory but also how God's people can reflect that glory in the way they live life.

While the Bible is much more than a guidebook for living life it is not less than that. It does reveal God's will and design for how life is best lived. It unveils what the Bible calls "wisdom" - skill in living.

Even in our secular society we see the benefits of God's word as individuals are influenced by Christian values and understandings of God's design for life. Anyone who has experienced the challenges of life will recognize that the revelation of God's design and will for life is both necessary and valuable. In part, this is what drives us to give ourselves to the study of the Bible.

The Spirit Works Through the Bible

When the Bible is read and the Spirit works, supernatural events take place. God gives life to dead souls and transforms His people into the image of Christ. The Spirit has inspired the word and the Spirit loves to work through the word to exalt Christ in the lives of individuals (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).

Paul makes this connection in Ephesians 6:17 when he calls believers to take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." From creation to redemption, to consummation, the word of God is the Spirit's chosen instrument for accomplishing God's work in the world. Certainly this is a compelling reason to spend time studying the Bible.

The Bottom Line

The secret to the Bible's supreme value, transforming power, and compelling beauty is found in God. It is because it comes from Him, reveals Him, and leads to Him, that we are drawn to study the Bible.

I love the Bible the way I love my eyes—not because my eyes are lovely, but because without them I can't see what's lovely. Without the Bible I could not see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). Without the Bible I could not know "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). Without the Bible I would not know that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. I love the Bible because it gives the wisdom that leads to salvation, and shows me that this salvation is nothing less than seeing and savoring the glory of Christ forever. And then provides for me inexhaustible ways of seeing and knowing and enjoying Christ.³

³ John Piper, *Good English with Minimal Translation: Why Bethlehem Uses the ESV*, a sermon delivered January 1, 2004.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What words would you use to describe your current practice and pattern of Bible study?
2. Which of the reasons for studying the Bible listed was new to you? Which stood out to you the most?
3. What other reasons can you think of for studying the Bible?
4. Do you find the reasons given for studying the Bible compelling? Why or why not?
5. Are you ready to commit to developing a practice of Bible study in your life? What will this look like?

Seeing the Big Picture

Attempting to put a puzzle together without a picture of the whole is exceedingly difficult. Anyone with experience doing puzzles knows that keeping the box top handy is a strategic step in completing the puzzle. The picture of the puzzle gives an idea of where the pieces go, how they fit together, and what the whole is supposed to look like in the end.

In many ways the Bible is like a puzzle. In order to even begin to understand individual paragraphs and verses in the Bible one must have some grasp of what the Bible as a whole is all about. While in one sense this is part of understanding the context of a passage (chapter 4), it is significant enough to have a section devoted to it.

The following is an attempt to summarize the major themes of the Bible's storyline.

God

The Bible, as we have already seen, is a book about God. It reveals His person, His plans, His thoughts, and His activity in the world. From the earth's primordial beginnings in the opening verses of Genesis to the prophetic visions of the eternal heavens and earth at the end of Revelation the Bible is about God.

In one way or another God is the main character in every portion of Scripture. God is the sovereign King behind every event, He is the Judge of every sin, He is the Giver of every good gift, He is the Source of every prophecy, He is the Recipient of every prayer, He is Sustainer of all life, He is the Giver of every command, and He is the Spring of all mercy and grace. There is nothing recorded in all of Scripture that does not touch the person and activities of God in some way.

Man

The Bible is a book written to us, for us, and in part about us. Man is the centerpiece of God's creative activity and the subsequent focus of His redemptive work. The Bible tells us where man came from, why he was brought into being, what man is like, why man is like he is and where he is going.

God made man for His own pleasure, in His own image, to worship Him and yet man now rejects his Creator, lives out a distorted picture of His image, and turns away to worship anything but His Creator. As sin brings death man faces an eternal destiny characterized by either eternal suffering under God's just judgment or eternal joy and delight in the presence of God as one of His people. These truths about man are all over the pages of Scripture.

Jesus

As a self-revealing God, God displays Himself. He has chosen to display Himself most clearly and brilliantly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who is the great prophet, king, servant, deliverer, and priest. He is the man who succeeds where all other men fail. It is in the crucifixion and resurrection that He conquers sin, redeems creation, and purchases a people for His eternal praise. It is here that God most fully displays His power, grace, goodness, patience, justice, wrath, mercy, holiness, and love. As one moves through the pages of Scripture the Bible repeatedly points to man's need for Christ, God's nature revealed in Christ, and Christ's perfection and provision where man fails.

Even in the Old Testament, where we might think Christ is absent, is full of references to Him and His work. The apostles were constantly referencing Old Testament prophecies and fulfillments. The author of Hebrews' main objective is to show that Christ is the fulfillment and culmination of the entire Old Testament system of worship. Christ's words in Luke 24:27 highlight this reality as well. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Whenever we study the Bible we must have our eyes open to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In studying a portion of Scripture we must relentlessly look for these themes. What does this passage reveal about the nature of God? What does this passage tell me about God's view of man? How does this passage point to and communicate God's plan of redemption ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ?

Understanding these overarching themes is crucial for understanding the individual passages we will study. If we neglect these themes we will end up distorting Scripture, embracing moralism, falling into licentiousness, and pursuing lesser pleasures for satisfaction. If we are going to put the pieces of Scripture in the right places we must understand the big picture.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What are major themes of Scripture that have previously stood out to you in your reading and study of the Bible?

Soaking up the Text

The first step in studying the Bible is to read it. As simple as this may be it is far from unimportant. This step is like the foundation for a house. If it is skewed the whole rest of the Bible study process will be stunted and misdirected.

The size of the passage one chooses to study will vary. At certain times one may want to get a broad overview of a portion of Scripture while at other times narrowing the focus to a couple of verses may be helpful. In narrative texts (historical accounts) a larger section is often ideal. In epistles and sections of the gospels a paragraph (containing one main idea) is preferred.

As we begin to the process of soaking up the text there are several principles to remember.

Read Prayerfully

If we understand the beauty and value of Scripture we will be quick to praise God as we hold it in our hands. Thanks will flow from our lips as we grasp God's grace in revealing Himself to us in Scripture.

In addition to thanks and praise, Bible study must be saturated with prayerful dependence. We are dependent on God for the ability to see the words on the page, for the literacy to read the words, for the intellectual comprehension of those words, and for the spiritual understanding of those words.

We are reading God's words and are dependent on His Spirit throughout the Bible study process.

Without the Spirit's illumination our minds will be cloudy and our hearts hard to the text of Scripture.

The prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 119:18 expresses the heart of the believer as they come to Scripture: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law."

Read Thoughtfully

No doubt most of us can relate to reading through a passage of Scripture and suddenly realizing that we have no idea what we just read. If we are going to profit from the reading of Scripture our minds must be fully engaged.

Even when following the process described in the following chapters (or one like it) we can easily find ourselves giving minimal attention to the text. By God's grace we must forcefully direct our minds to focus on the text and strive to understand the words before our eyes. Distractions must be actively and ruthlessly avoided. Time must be taken for thoughtful reflection.

Reading thoughtfully may mean choosing smaller portions of Scripture for study at times. Taking a smaller portion of text and spending significant time meditating and praying through it, is far more valuable than simply rushing through a larger portion of Scripture with little to no thought.

Read Repeatedly

As the old adage states, “repetition is the mother of learning.”

Read the text over and over again. Repetitive reading will aid in the thinking process and solidify the content of the passage in one’s mind. It will open the door for meditation throughout one’s day.

It may help to read the text in different translations or even to emphasize different words and phrases in one’s reading. Reading the text aloud or listening to someone else read it may also be helpful.

The COMA Study Method

The particular method of Bible study described in the following chapters is one of many. It is not perfect but hopefully will serve as an aid as you pursue God in His word. Most of what are known as “inductive” Bible study methods follow something similar to what you will find here.

The acronym for this method of study is COMA-

C- context

O- observation

M- meaning

A- application

These divisions are not airtight and you will find that there is a certain amount of overlap between each step in the study. While it may seem somewhat artificial, it is often helpful when developing a habit of studying the Bible to use a method like the one presented here. The point is not to follow these steps rigidly but to bring the reader to place where skillful handling of the word becomes second nature.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Why do we sometimes see Bible reading as a kind of magic pill? What is the remedy for this kind of perspective?

2. Where does the sense of desperation expressed in Psalm 119:18 come from? How might you cultivate that in your own life?

Context

Taking in the context of a particular portion of Scripture is a little bit like an army general sending out scouts on a reconnaissance mission. It involves getting lay of the land, understanding what's going on in the general area, and gathering information pertinent to the mission. This is essentially what we do when we take in the context of a passage. We seek to gain an understanding of the environment or setting of the passage.

Some of the aspects described below will necessitate the use of tools such as a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or perhaps a commentary. Don't be intimidated by this. These tools can help in giving us an initial idea of what we are looking at when we approach a particular book or passage in the Bible.

The Historical Context

Consider at what period in history the events took place and the text was written. Know whether it is Old or New Testament. Take into account what else was happening in the world at that time and what technology and culture was like on a broad scope.

On a more specific level one may need to consider what was happening in the lives of the original readers. Knowing what difficulties they were facing or the kind of culture they lived in often helps prepare you to understand what was written and why.

In Luke 7:11-17 we find the account of Jesus raising the widow's son. In recording this event Luke seems to be highlighting Jesus' compassion (v. 13), power (v. 14-15), and identity as a (or more properly *the*) great prophet (v. 16). The compassion of Jesus in this passage will not be fully grasped unless one understands the helpless state of widows in first century Jewish culture. Widows were entirely without means of sustaining themselves and this widow was no doubt dependent on her only son for support. Jesus' compassion was drawn out not only by the tragedy of death but also by the tragedy of economic impoverishment and desperation this widow would face without her son.

The Literary Context

Note what kind of literature you are dealing with. Is it poetry, narrative, parable, letter, prophecy? Knowing what type of literature you are dealing with will help you know whether to expect figurative or literal language, whether the content is more descriptive (what happened) or prescriptive (what you should do), whether the events have already happened or are to happen in the future, whether to look for meaning in every detail or only to look for the main point, etc.

In considering the record of the demise of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, it is important to recognize that Luke is describing what happened rather than prescribing what should happen in the church at all times in all places. It would be imprudent to assume that church leaders today should

expect to receive such direct revelation from the Spirit and effectively hand down death sentences for offending church goers. Even the pattern or method of giving in this text should not be seen as a binding ordinance for the church. This is not to say that principles can't be drawn from this text but we must be careful how quickly and directly we jump to application. If we are going to understand the purpose and meaning of this passage we must begin by understanding the literary context of the passage at hand.

The Immediate Context

This addresses what comes immediately before and after the text before us. What was the author talking about in the previous verses and how does it relate to what he says in this passage? What is the author's point in the larger section we find this text in?

In dealing with the immediate context we are seeking to see how our text fits into the author's flow of thought. Why did he include it here and not somewhere else? The authors of Scripture did not arrange their material in an accidental or random way. While this is often easier to see in the epistles it is also an important part of understanding narrative, prophetic, and poetic portions of Scripture.

Many biblical authors have a clear agenda and argument that flows through their writing. It is helpful to observe how a passage fits into what the author is seeking to accomplish in the book as a whole or in a larger section of Scripture.

Paul's well known declaration of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me," is written in the immediate context of learning to be content in plenty or in poverty. The "all" in this text is specifically referring to "all" the possible economic conditions in which Paul might find himself. Because of Christ he can survive, be content, and even rejoice in any and every economic condition. If we are to understand clearly what Paul means in this verse we must keep in mind the immediate context.

The Gospel Context

Every passage of Scripture has a gospel context. We cannot separate passages from the message of the Bible and the overarching plan of God to glorify Himself by saving a people for Himself.

"The gospel is the heart of the Bible. Everything in Scripture is either preparation *for* the gospel, presentation *of* the gospel, or participation *in* the gospel." ⁴

Every passage conveys truth about one of the main themes of the gospel- God, man, Jesus, or salvation. Every passage has in view, whether near or distant, whether future or past, the work of Christ on the cross.

⁴ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say I Do*, (Shepherd's Press, 1997) p. 24.

The Bible doesn't give a command without pushing the reader to their need for the grace of the gospel or motivating the reader with the gospel. The Bible doesn't proclaim a promise without calling for dependence on the grace provided by the gospel. The Bible doesn't recount history without the gospel in some way serving as the culmination, the solution, the driving force or the substance of that history. The Bible doesn't describe the glorious character of God without the gospel in view as the message that brings sinful man into communion with God. We must constantly ask ourselves how a particular passage relates to, reflects, points to, communicates, or springs from the gospel.

Consider Leviticus 13. This chapter is a thorough explanation of laws and regulations regarding leprosy and uncleanness. If we understand rightly the primary role of the law as pointing to man's sinfulness and need for Christ's saving work, this passage will begin to make sense. The issue of physical cleanliness and purity was a powerful illustration to God's people of God's holiness. Leprosy was a physical effect of the fall into sin and as such was not acceptable among the people of God or in the tabernacle of the infinitely holy God. If this is how God views the relatively minor physical uncleanness of leprosy, how will we ever stand before God in light of the dark sinfulness of our hearts? We desperately need to have our sin removed, to have our inward impurity washed away and to be declared clean. The blood of Jesus and *only* the blood of Jesus is what we need (Hebrews 10:19-22).

These principles of context are crucial in studying Scripture. As we put them to use we will find they will become an ingrained and indispensable part of our thinking.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Which aspect of context was new to you? Which do you think you need to consider more carefully in your study of the Bible?

2. What dangers arise if one neglects a consideration of context? Give an example of how a failure to consider context can negatively affect one's doctrine or understanding of a text.

Observation

In 1987 the first "Where's Waldo" book was published. This series of books invited readers to find Waldo (and other hidden objects) in the midst of intricate and colorful illustrations. Gazing at the book for long periods of time readers scanned the pages to find the items listed. At times the items were in plain view and other times they were hidden or camouflaged among the many details of the illustration.

The step of observation is comparable to finding Waldo. It involves searching for meaningful aspects of the text both obvious and hidden. Observation is the raw data gathering stage in the process of Bible study. It is an analysis of the words, phrases, and paragraphs of the passage. Simply stated, observation asks, "what does the passage say?"

To illustrate the importance of observation consider Jesus' interaction with the Sadducees in Luke 22:23-33.

"But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ³² 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

In refuting the Sadducees belief that there is no spiritual world or resurrection of the dead Jesus makes one simple observation. Jesus simply observes that when God reveals Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:6 He uses the present tense to speak of His relation to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The fact that He is at present their God indicates that they are indeed alive and exist as spiritual beings awaiting the resurrection.

Careful observation of the text of Scripture is vital if we are going to be prepared to properly understand it. What follows are some simple ways to thoroughly observe a text of Scripture.

Questions to Ask

Who?- Who wrote the text? Who was it written to? Who is referred to in the text? Who are the main human characters in the text?

What?- What happens in the text? What is the subject of the text?

When?- When was the text written? When did the events in the text occur? What period of Israel's history? When in the life of the church?

Where?- Where did the events occur? Where was the letter written from?

Why?- Why was this text written? What was the occasion? Why did the individuals do what they did?

How? How did events come about? How will it happen?

Ask your own questions of the passage as you come across significant or difficult words or phrases. Question the text as if you were a detective seeking to gather every pertinent piece of evidence and information.

Things to Look For

- Repeated words or phrases- These often reveal the main subject of the text.
- Comparisons- Will often use the words “like” or “as.” Observe what is being compared.
- Contrasts- Look for the word “but.” Note what is being contrasted.
- Commands- Consider who the command is given to and what its basic point is.
- Promises- Note the basic content of the promise.
- Emphasis- “Truly, truly,” “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance,” etc. At times the author gives a clue when a particular verse or phrase is important to his point.
- Connectors- “Therefore,” “because,” “for,” “as a result.” These are especially prominent in the New Testament letters. They often reveal a flow of thought through a passage.
- Context- at this point simply note the historical, literary, immediate, and gospel context of the passage.
- Problems/Solutions- Look for these especially in narrative texts. Note the plot and how the problem develops and is solved.
- The Shock Factor- Look for things that may seem normal to us because of our culture or familiarity with Scripture but which would have shocked the original hearers.

Not all of these questions and items will be helpful or will even pertain to every passage. Over time you will learn which questions to ask and what aspects of the text deserve attention.

In this process some find circling, underlining, highlighting, boxing, drawing lines useful as they observe significant aspects of the text. It might be helpful to experiment with these sorts of things and find out what is most helpful for you.

The key to observation is to shed the old familiarity with the text and examine the passage with fresh eyes. Use your imagination. Try to put yourself in the place of the original readers. Make sure you don't simply skim over sections that you don't understand. At the same time make sure you don't skim over parts you think you *do* understand. Be thorough in picking apart the passage.

The step of observation in particular may seem rather tedious but keep in mind that 1) it will become easier with time, 2) it probably sounds more difficult than it actually is, 3) hard work is a necessary part of studying Scripture and 4) the fruit of understanding the Bible is of surpassing value.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. In what other areas of life is diligent observation especially important? Give an example to illustrate the importance of careful observation.
2. Why is it important to take this step of observing what a passage says before dealing with what the passage means?
3. How can one develop a practice of coming to a text with fresh eyes and perspective? How important is this?
4. Choose a passage from what you studied in the Bible this week and carefully work through this process of observation. In what ways did you find this exercise helpful? Explain.

Meaning

In addressing the meaning of a passage we are moving from what a passage says to what it means by what it says. We want to know the significance of our observations and the answers to our questions.

Seek the normal and natural meaning of the text. Based on the normal usage of language what is the essence of what is being said? What point is the author trying to get across? What does God intend to communicate in this text? If we thoughtfully examine the text using common sense we will find that interpreting most passages is often not as difficult as we might think.

Here are some specific items to consider in seeking the meaning of a text.

Comeback to Context

At this point in the process of uncovering the meaning of a text it is important to recall the context of the text. Consider again the historical, literary, immediate and gospel context of the passage you are studying. This is imperative if you are going to overcome the various barriers that stand between you and the ancient near eastern text sitting in front of you.

The immediate context is especially important at this stage. One helpful practice in understanding how a section fits into the author's flow of thought is to use what Gregory Koukl calls "the paraphrase principle." As you begin to study and understand the text take time to paraphrase it. Koukl then instructs the reader to "replace the text in question with your paraphrase and see if the passage still makes sense in light of the larger context. Does it dovetail naturally with the bigger picture?"⁵

Remember, the text of Scripture is not a random collection of words and phrases. It was divinely inspired and written at a specific time in a specific place for a specific purpose.

Words

What do specific words mean? We may have initial impressions but if we have observed that a word is significant in a passage it is often helpful to dig a little deeper. Sometimes just stopping and thinking about what a word actually means is helpful. A basic English dictionary, Bible word study books, and concordances can also be helpful in this.

Observing the context is again vital in determining what an author means when he uses a certain word. Words like "flesh," or "world," are often used in different ways by different authors at different times. Be careful not to assume too quickly the meaning of a word.

⁵ Gregory Koukl, *Never Read a Bible Verse*, (Stand to Reason), p. 3.

Sentences

What do the words mean when put together? How do the words in a sentence relate to each other? What is the author trying to say in this sentence?

Take what you have observed and come to a conclusion as to its significance. If you have observed connectors now is the time to consider how they explain an idea or reveal a flow of thought. If you have observed a comparison think carefully about how it helps to shed light on the author's topic.

Paragraphs

How do the sentences relate to each other? What is the main point of the paragraph? What is the one theme that unites the author's discussion in this section? It is often helpful here to attempt to summarize the passage in a single sentence.

Even in texts where certain words and phrases are difficult to understand the main point of the passage will almost always remain clear. Keep in mind the big picture. Don't get lost in the details and lose sight of the main point.

Gleaning Principles

In seeking the meaning of the text a large part of the task is to move from the words given to the readers in their specific situation to the universal truths that stand behind those words. Ask not only what the author is saying but why he is saying it.

Often underlying principles will begin to be uncovered when the context of the passage is investigated. As one peels away the historical or cultural context, the truth or point behind a certain action or command becomes clear.

This step of gleaning underlying principles from a passage is especially important in preparing for application. It guards against well intentioned but often erroneous attempts at application.

Scripture Interpreting Scripture

After carefully examining a passage and considering the author's overall point it can often be helpful to consider passages that also deal with the biblical teaching on the subject at hand. This step will both help to clarify difficult passages as well as broaden and balance one's understanding of the issue the passage addresses.

Be aware of the danger of assuming that two passages are dealing with the same topic or situation when they aren't. Be sure to understand the parallel text, its main point, and how it is using words and phrases.

Help from Your Friends

In light of both our mental and moral weakness it is wise to check your understanding of a passage with other believers. Friends for this purpose can be found both on the bookshelf and in your church.

Carefully chosen commentaries and study Bibles can be of great assistance in clarifying difficult passages and affirming one's understanding of a text. As we read the observations others have made and various conclusions others have reached we will find there are things we have overlooked, misunderstood, or wrongly emphasized. This process will both check and enlighten our understanding of the text and may often send us back for further study.⁶

Discussing passages with others in your church body serves both to guard against error and to stimulate rich spiritual fellowship. As you come to difficult passages and seek to avoid errors, the leadership of the church in particular should be seen as a gift from God for your good.

While friends are no substitute for the illuminating work of the Spirit, it is worth noting that the Spirit does in fact work in other believers and often gives us guidance through them. If you are the first and only one to come to a particular conclusion on the meaning of a text, it is probably a indication you should rethink your conclusions.

Digging into the meaning of the text is one of the richest aspects of Bible study. As truth comes to light understanding begins to dawn the Spirit works and affections for God are stirred anew.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Think of a conversation you have had recently about a specific topic. How did you know what the person you were talking with meant? What principles from this chapter aided your communication?

2. Give an example of how looking to other parts of Scripture could be both helpful and dangerous?

⁶ See the appendix for a list recommended commentaries and study Bibles

Application

In application we seek to uncover how principles revealed in a portion of Scripture transform and impact our lives here and now.

If digging into a passage of the Bible and uncovering its meaning does not result in some effect on our hearts and lives we have stopped short of truly studying the Bible. The Bible is full of strong exhortations to real application and warnings for those who merely hear God's word without putting it into action (Matthew 7:24-27, Matthew 12:49-50, James 1:22-25, 1 John 2:3).

Submission

True application will take place only in so far as we are truly submitted to God and His authoritative word. There is a tendency in studying the Bible to make oneself into the authority rather than retaining an attitude of submission to God as the supreme Authority.

With the growth of analytical skills, some interpreters cease to stand under the text's authority and begin to stand over it as critical analysts.⁷

As believers we are to come ready to sit at the feet of our Master and learn. When our King speaks we listen, trusting His words more than our own opinions.

As the believer studies the Bible they must be ready to believe whatever the Bible says and do whatever the Bible commands. As Daniel Doriani asks:

Are you committed to believing and applying whatever you discover as you study the Bible, regardless of the cost?⁸

Are you?

The Danger of Moralism

It is frighteningly easy in this step of Bible study to subtly leave behind an attitude of dependence and drift into the realm of moralism or legalism. We want to check off a list, cut through all the "unnecessary stuff" and just do what we are told. Often we will understand how a passage applies to our lives (or think we do) and our first instinct is to do it. This kind of reaction is frequently a self-centered attempt to make ourselves feel better, impress other's and presumably placate God. This kind of thinking nullifies grace, bypasses the cross, and ignores the heart. Unchecked this is the stuff of dead religion.

⁷ Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996), p. 24

⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

True application occurs when we truly comprehend the principles of Scripture, carefully examine our hearts, admit our shortcomings, look to the cross for forgiveness and grace, and move forward towards transformation in humility and dependence.

Primary and Secondary Application

In general the primary point of the passage should furnish the primary point of application. Secondary points of application should come from secondary points within the passage. While jumping immediately to secondary applications may seem easier and more direct they must be kept in their place as secondary.

In light of the God-centered nature of Scripture we will find that often the main point of application is simply to love and treasure God more deeply. While this may seem impractical, a little reflection reveals that it is actually highly practical. The more we grasp the surpassing value of knowing God the less appealing sin will appear to us. The more we come to understand the love and grace of God towards us as sinners the more we will be prepared to turn from loving ourselves to loving others. This is the stuff of genuine sanctification.

This is not to say that secondary points of application shouldn't be examined or pursued- in fact they should be. Secondary points of application are both legitimate and profitable, but only as they are put in the context of the character of God and the gospel as revealed at the center of every passage.

Beyond the Surface Level

Our goal in application must be to go beyond surface change to real heart transformation. We must seek to understand the deep roots of sin and to deal with both the roots of that sin as well as their outward manifestation.

When we come to particular principles in Scripture, we have to continually look past surface actions to underlying hearts issues. We don't obey God because we have other non-negotiables in our lives, other things that are more important to us than pleasing Him.

In biblical terms, those are "idols", false gods. When we read a passage, we need to ask what underlying heart issues (idols) are exposed. Armed with that, we can look to our own heart idols and expose them with the truth. We then can replace our desire to serve that idol ("I must have it to be happy") with the Gospel ("Christ has me, that's the only way to be happy"). When our desires have been replaced by Christ, we then ask "how can I serve the one I love? What can I do to express my love?"⁹

⁹ Timothy J. Keller, *Fellowship Group Handbook: A Manual for Leaders and Coordinators*, (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 1997), chapter 3.7, p. 2-3.

Various Realms of Application

Going beyond the surface in application leads to understanding that there are various realms to consider in application. A text may have something to say regarding our desires, our words, our beliefs, our actions, our affections, or our thoughts.

While Colossians 1:15-19 primarily has applications to our beliefs about and affections for Christ, it will inevitably and lead also to our desires, words, actions, and thoughts (in fact, we see this in the context of the following verses and chapters in Colossians).

Be careful not to limit yourself to one realm in considering how a text applies. Think creatively, use your imagination, consider a multitude of potential applications.

Application Summarized

The Fellowship Group Leader's Manual put out by Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York summarizes the process of application in the following way:

How does the passage apply? Application falls into two types. First, ask whether there are any direct applications in the text itself? Are they for the first hearers only, or for all time? Second ask whether there are any principles you learn from the main points. How do they apply specifically and concretely to you?

- What does it show us to praise God for?
- What does it show us to confess? (look for behavioral sins, heart idols, inordinate desires)
- What does it show us to aspire to or ask for?
- Is there an example for us to follow?
- Is there a command for us to obey?
- Is there an error for us to avoid?
- Is there any sin for us to forsake?
- Is there any promise for us to claim?
- Is there any new thought about God himself?¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid, chapter 3.7, p. 2.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Are there areas of your life that you are hesitant to submit to God's word in? What keeps us from a truly submissive attitude in our approach to Scripture?
2. How do we guard against the danger of moralism in application and yet follow Scripture's exhortation to be "doers of the word"?
3. Why is it so important to go beyond the surface level in our application? What is the result if we don't? What is the result if we do?
4. What weaknesses do you see in your practice of application? Where will you take these weaknesses and what adjustments will you make?
5. How does the call to apply the Bible help you see the beauty of Christ's perfect life and the value of His substitution on your behalf? Explain.

Just Do It

You may be asking yourself at this point, “all of this sounds great but how do I actually do it?” How do I incorporate this into my life.

Desire, Faith and Determination

If you desire God deeply enough and affirm that we know Him most fully through His word you will study the Bible. There are a million different reasons we give for why we don't study the Bible but they all come back to a lack of desire.

Most of us have observed this in other areas of our lives. Whether enjoying entertainment, competing in a sport, or engaging relationally with our spouse all else is put on the back burner when a certain level of desire is involved.

Desire for studying the Bible will ultimately spring from understanding and considering the reasons for studying the Bible covered in Chapter 1. The more we desire what the Bible reveals- God's glory, the gospel of Christ, etc.- the more we will desire the Bible.

This is not to say that we will or must experience an emotional or spiritual high every time we sit down to study. In faith we must give ourselves to the word believing that the treasures to be had in studying the Bible are of surpassing value. Even as we do this we may find the need to be confessing to God the coldness of our hearts and begging Him to give us affections for Him and desire for His word.

Desiring the Bible won't be easy. It is a fight. We must feed ourselves the truth, walk by faith, seek help from fellow believers and move forward in desperate dependence on God and the working of His Spirit in our hearts.

Plan

As the old saying goes, “if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” While it doesn't need to be complicated, having a plan is tremendously helpful in developing a habit of studying the Bible.

Most Christians neglect their Bibles not out of conscious disloyalty to Jesus, but because of failure to plan a time and place and method to read it.¹¹

Plan when you will spend time in study. Will you set aside time in the morning, in the evening, on your lunch break, etc.? While it will depend on the person and circumstances, the morning is probably most strategic for orienting our hearts and preparing for a day of worshiping God with our lives. The important thing is to plan ahead to set aside the time.

¹¹ John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, Crossway, 2004), p. 116.

Plan where you will study. Will you study at the mall, in your office, at the park, at the kitchen table? For most people a more isolated location with fewer distractions is ideal. Having a consistent location is not necessary, but for most it is helpful in building a habit of Bible study.

Plan what you will study. Will you study the Old or New Testament? Will you study one book at a time or two or three? The gospel of John, the letter to the Philippians, and the book of Psalms are all be good places to start if one needs direction. If you are just beginning to develop a habit of Bible study it is better to pick a book with content that is easier to grasp.

Plan how you will study. Will you use some sort of study guide? Will you use the COMA method? Will you write things down in a notebook? These details will differ for each person and it usually takes some trial and error to find a method that is most advantageous.

You may find it helpful to write down your plan and put it somewhere where you can review it. Having someone who will encourage and hold you accountable for your plan is another aid to consider taking advantage of.

Keep it simple, but do *something*. Take some portion of time each day to allow God's word to turn your affections towards Him and transform you into the image of His Son.

Pray

Developing a healthy and God-honoring habit of Bible study will not come about through sheer will power. We desperately need God's grace to give us the desire and the ability to study Scripture.

Without God's grace our efforts at studying the Bible will become a lifeless exercise, a rare or even extinct practice, or an occasion for promoting self-righteousness. Only as God's Spirit works within us both to will and to do Bible study will we experience the richness of God's word and the sweetness of transformation.

Specific Bible study methods, Bible study in general, and even the existence of the Bible are not ends in themselves. They are means to bring us to know, love, and enjoy God- that is the ultimate goal. We must never allow our practice of Bible study to eclipse that goal.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What should a person do when they are lacking desire for God and His word? How would you encourage a friend (or yourself) in a time like this?

Appendix: Recommended Resources

The list of resources in this appendix is not meant to be exhaustive or perfect. It is meant to be a realistic place to start in collecting tools that will assist one in studying the Bible.

Recommended Books on Studying the Bible

Getting the Message by Daniel Doriani. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1996

Living by the Book by Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1991

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993

Recommended Bible Study Tools

Biblestudytools.com

Biblegateway.com

Nelsons Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts Revised and Updated Edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994 (or the condensed version *Bible Doctrine*)

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible by James Strong. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007 (updated edition)

Talk through the Bible by Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983

The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept by Mark Dever. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005

The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made by Mark Dever. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2006

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words by W.E. Vine. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996

Recommended Commentaries and Study Bibles

New Bible Commentary, edited by G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson and R.T. France. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994

New Testament Commentary Set, 12 vol by William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002

The Bible Speaks Today New Testament Commentary, 22 vol. edited by John Stott. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2001

The ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008

The Expositor's Bible Commentary. 12 vol. edited by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992

The MacArthur Study Bible edited by John MacArthur. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006

The Reformation Study Bible edited by R. C. Sproul and Keith Mathison. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2005

Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (set) edited by R. T. France, R. Alan Cole, Leon Morris, and Colin G. Kruse. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2007

Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (set) edited by D. J. Wiseman. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1991