

LEARNING FROM BIBLE WORDS

Lynn Gardner

Learning about words can be fascinating. Words get married. Over the years they may grow or decrease in meaning. Learning the history of some words is very interesting.

To be a good reader or thinker, one must give attention to words. If we care about truth we must care about words, because truth is expressed in words. If we care about persons we must care about words, because most communication between persons is expressed in words.

God has revealed His great love in words. Understanding the Word of God begins with understanding the words arranged into sentences written by the inspired writers.

Word study is not the exclusive right of scholars. Every Christian with a few basic Bible study helps can learn the meaning of Bible words.

No one authority has the final say on the meaning of a word in a given text except the author of that text. The true meaning of the word in that text is what the author used it to mean. As students in the twentieth century seeking to learn the meaning of a Bible word, we need to seek out all pertinent evidence concerning the meaning of that word. The purpose of this chapter is to describe five steps of study that can help one in learning the meaning of a Bible word.

STUDY THE WORD IN CONTEXT

Very few words have an unvarying meaning irrespective of context. In each given use a word means what it is used to mean.

The same word may mean several different things depending on the context. Notice the word *faith* in the various uses: "But without faith it is impossible to please him [God]" (Heb. 11:6). "Contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). "But the fruit of the spirit is . . . *faith*, meekness and temperance" (Gal. 5:22,23). In the first text *faith* means trust. In the second it indicates the gospel, the body of doctrine. In Romans 14:23 *faith* is used in the sense of good faith or good conscience. Faithfulness seems to be the meaning in the fruit of the Spirit.

A word may have widely differing meanings in different contexts. The word *leaven* in "Purge out therefore the old leaven" (I Cor. 5:7) carries the idea of negative influence. But in Jesus' parable "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven . . ." (Matt. 13:33) the thought is of a good influence spreading throughout the world.

Frequently the best help in understanding the meaning of a word is an intelligent reading of the context and understanding the word in the light of context. In most cases the best technical reference books can only list possible meanings. The usage in the sentence in context decides which meaning the word has in that verse.

COMPARE TRANSLATIONS

Even if one does not possess Bible reference works he can find help in understanding word meanings in other translations. The older translations use some obsolete words that may be unclear to the reader. To learn the meaning of these words one can read the same verse in a more recent translation which often will clarify the meaning of the unclear words. In this way one can use other translations as a dictionary to help define the words not understood in one's own translation.

As suggested in Chapter 8 making a chart itemizing how each key word is translated in three or four other versions can be a good approach.

A translation that is too loose and not a literal translation of the original language is less useful for this purpose. A paraphrase such as the *Living Bible* is not as reliable a guide to word meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek word as is a standard literal translation such as the *New American Standard Bible*.

USE A CONCORDANCE

Since a word means what it is used to mean it is desirable to study all of the word's usages in the Bible. An exhaustive concordance is an alphabetical listing of all the words in the Bible indicating each book, chapter and verse where each word is used. A concordance is a valuable tool in doing a word study.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible and *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* have been the best choices for the King James Version and are published by several companies. They can be used profitably by one who does not know the Hebrew and Greek languages.

Strong's lists a number with each usage of each word. One can find this number in the Hebrew or Greek dictionary in the back to find a transliteration of the Hebrew or Greek word and also a brief

definition of the word. To learn more about the word *worship* used in John 4:24 one would look up the number 4352 in the Greek dictionary in the back. *Strong's* as a rule has better definitions than *Young's* but *Young's* has a better arrangement.

Young's lists all the occurrences of each English word. They are listed in groups according to the Hebrew and Greek words from which they are translated. A brief definition and transliteration is given with each Hebrew and Greek word. In *Young's* fifteen Hebrew and Greek words are listed under *worship*. One can learn which Hebrew or Greek word was translated *worship* in a given text. An appendix lists all English words used in the King James Version for each Hebrew and each Greek word. It states how many times it is translated each way.

Those who use the *New American Standard Bible* will use the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Holman, 1981), which follows the basic format of *Strong's* and has all its advantages. Westminster Press has published *An Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (1979). It is organized in the same manner as *Young's*. Zondervan carries *The NIV Complete Concordance* (1981), which does not identify the word in the original language or give definitions of the words. The King James Version can be used as an index so students with other versions can still use *Strong's* and *Young's*.

After using a concordance to find the uses of a word it is important to read the sentence in context in each use. Study the other uses by the author of the text under study. The other uses should be studied in the rest of the testament whether old or new. The uses which are closest in time or in subject matter should be given greater weight in understanding word meaning than more remote usages.

should be studied in the rest of the Old or New Testament, in which the passage is located. The uses which are closest in time or in subject matter should be given greater weight in understanding word meaning than more remote usages.

USE A DICTIONARY

An English dictionary may not help much in learning the meaning of a word in the Bible. It lists current usage of the English word. *Webster's Dictionary* defines *perfect* as "being entirely without fault or defect: flawless." Is that what Jesus required when He calls for us to be perfect in Matthew 5:48? *Strong's* and *Young's* define the word as complete not flawless. We must base our study of word meaning on the word in the original language, not on the English word.

For many Christians *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, available from several publishers, is the best tool to learn the meaning of Greek words used in the New Testament. One does not need to know Greek in order to use this book. This book lists English words (in English alphabetical order) and beneath each word lists the various Greek words translated by that English word. The meaning of the Greek word is discussed with attention given to some of the texts where it is used.

One needs more help than the too brief, and at times misleading, definitions in an exhaustive concordance. For example, *Vine's* makes it clear that the meaning of the New Testament word *mystery* is not mysterious in the popular sense but it is truth unknown by human means that has been revealed to man by God. The concordance may identify the word used in the original language but *Vine's* can give one a much more adequate understanding of the meaning of the word.

An excellent companion volume to *Vine's* is *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980). This work discusses the meaning of about 500 Old Testament terms for readers not familiar with the Hebrew language. This work helps the reader learn the range of meanings of the Hebrew word so he can try to see which meaning best fits the text under study.

Help in word study can be found in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. Good judgment must be exercised in reading such

articles because at times they are colored by theological bias.

USE GOOD COMMENTARIES

One should consult commentaries toward the end of doing a word study rather than at the beginning. Some commentaries give excellent explanation and background information on words. Yet some commentaries are published which do not reflect careful research. Not every commentary or sermon is accurate in what they assert the Greek or Hebrew really means.

An intelligent student of the Bible must weigh the evidence and the reasons given for conclusions in reference books. A good commentary should reflect careful research and logical conclusions from the evidence presented. Further study can help one to make better judgments about the credibility of commentaries and other study aids.

AN EXAMPLE OF A WORD STUDY

A student in Bible college told his roommate that Christian leaders should read widely in books and current magazines because Paul told Timothy, "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (I Tim. 4:13). What did Paul mean by the term *reading*?

The context in I Timothy 4 shows Paul giving directions to Timothy for his personal life and his leadership ministry. Paul tells him what he is to teach (4:11). Timothy is not to let people despise his youth, but he is to set a good example in his life (4:12). Until Paul comes he is to concentrate on three things: reading, exhortation, doctrine or teaching (4:13). He is not to neglect the gift given to him by prophecy (4:14). The context for verse thirteen seems to concern public leading rather than personal habits.

Four other versions (RSV, NASB, NIV, TEV) translate as follows: "the public reading of scripture."

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance indicates two other places where the Greek noun translated *reading* is used. In Acts 13:15 the synagogue officials in Pisidian Antioch read publicly from the law and the prophets then called on Paul for a word of exhortation. In II Corinthians 3:14 Paul says the Jews have a veil over their minds at "the reading of the Old Testament." He probably means the public reading of scripture in the synagogue. However, the affirmation he made was true of their private reading as well.

A careful student will learn that the verb translated *read* in the New Testament is very similar to the noun translated *reading*. The verb appears 33 times in the New Testament. Each time in the King James Version it is translated *read*. In at least thirteen cases public reading is indicated: Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 4:16; Acts 8:28,30 [twice] 32; 13:27; 15:21,31; II Cor. 3:15) and Paul's Letters (Col. 4:16 [3 times]; I Thess. 5:27).

Young's Analytical Concordance defines the Greek noun used in I Timothy 4:13 as "a reading, knowing again." *Strong's* also defines it as *reading*.

Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words gives more light:

in non-Biblical Greek denoted recognition or a survey (the latter found in the papyri); then, reading; in the N.T. the public reading of scripture, Acts 13:15; 2 Cor. 3:14; I Tim. 4:13, where the context makes clear that the reference is to the care required in reading the Scriptures to a company, a duty ever requiring the exhortation "take heed" (Revell, 1940, p. 250).

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, in an article on reading, cites the three New Testament usages and a usage of the word *reading* in Nehemiah 3:8, observing that in each case the reference is to the public reading of the Divine Law, (Eerdmans, 1939, Vol. IV, p. 2534).

Don DeWelt makes the following observations in his commentary on I Timothy 4:13:

The general consensus of opinion among commentators is that the public reading of the Scriptures, the public exhortation, and the public teaching from the preacher, is referred to here. . . . We are reminded of the order of service in the synagogues. In the synagogue, after reading a portion of Scripture from the Old Testament, its application to life was pointed out; following this, the finer points of meaning from an exegetical viewpoint were given. It is quite possible, such was also the order in the congregation of Christians in Ephesus. Timothy was to carefully supervise each portion of the service in each congregation. Compare Luke 4:16 and Acts 13:15 for examples of the services in the Jewish assemblies (*Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus*, College Press, 1961, p. 87).

From all the evidence presented above one could agree with A.T. Robertson on the meaning of the word translated *reading* in our text. He says it designates "probably in particular the public reading of the Scriptures (Acts 13:15), though surely private reading is not to be excluded" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Harper, 1931, Vol. IV, p. 581).

Learning the meaning of Bible words is basic to all Bible study whether we are studying books, passages or topics. Word study should be distinguished from the study of a Bible topic or doctrine. For example, the word *inspiration* is used only once in the King James Bible in reference to the origin of scripture (II Tim. 3:16). But a study of the topic or subject of the inspiration of the Bible would be a much more extensive study than studying the word *inspiration*. Looking up all verses that use the word *holy* or *coming* does not exhaust the Bible's teaching on holiness or the second coming.

Merely learning a definition of all the key words in a text or scripture is not sufficient. Defining each word in the phrase "Christ in you the hope of glory" is not our final goal. It is a means to the goal of understanding and appropriating the thought God

intended to convey to our minds through that phrase.

Word study is a valuable step in understanding the thoughts of God revealed in the Bible. Our goal in Bible study is not to study words but to learn the mind of God and to respond to His truth in joyful obedience. Our ultimate purpose is to know God and to share His favor forever.

Study Questions

1. Why is it important to understand the meaning of words?
2. What is the true meaning of a word?
3. List the five steps given for studying the meaning of a Bible word.
4. Show the various meanings of the word *faith* in several Bible verses.
5. Does a Bible word always have the same meaning? Use *leaven* as an example.
6. How does comparing translations aid one in learning the meaning of Bible words?
7. What tool can help a Bible student find other uses of a word and also learn the meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew word?
8. Why is an English dictionary not always helpful in learning the meaning of a Bible word?
9. For those who do not know the Greek language, what book is helpful in learning the original meaning of New Testament words?

10. What conclusion is reached on the meaning of the word *reading* in I Timothy 4:13?

Projects

In the King James Version we read that Jesus promised His apostles that He would send the Comforter (John 15:26). Do a study on the meaning of the word *Comforter* by following the five steps given in this chapter.

Have class members bring several copies of exhaustive concordances and *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* to class. Have each person on their own use the concordance to find the location in the Bible of this verse: "Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh." Then use the concordance and *Vine's Dictionary* to learn the meaning of the Greek words which are translated *blessed*, *weep* and *laugh*. Have a person prepared to show how to use these helpful tools.