

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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"How to" could refer to programs, methods and helps, or to principles and skills and practices by which it is done right. Various methods are available. But the goal remains the same: to understand what God offers us and teaches us, and to use it to please Him and to glorify Him. In this chapter we will not deal so much with methods as with principles and practices which lead to correct interpretation and use of the Bible.

However, principles and rules will not do the work for you. They do help to guide our efforts. They are guidelines which keep us from wandering away from the paths in which true communication is made in the form of human language.

### METHODS WITH WHICH TO START

1. *Set a time for study; put it into your schedule where less*

important things cannot continually crowd it out.

2. *Prepare a place.* It helps to have favorable conditions and a place where your habits of study grow.

3. *Get some tools. A Bible you can read.* Constantly comparing different translations can be of much value. Alternate wordings help to bring the right idea to mind. Their agreements indicate what is clear and sure in the text. *Get a Bible printed in paragraphs.* Avoid ones printed with each verse indented and capitalized as if it were a paragraph. If you use one like this, be very diligent to note where real paragraphs begin. Do not read each verse as a separate unit of thought. Read whole sentences, and read them in their connections with one another in the continuing line of the author's thought. You will discover that many wrong ideas have become common by the practice of trying to amplify and apply one verse without seeing the author's line of thought in which that one verse is only a limited part of his expression. (The American Bible Society has Bibles in the King James Version in paragraphs. The Holman Bible Company has New American Standard Bibles paragraphed, in at least one edition, a high quality paperback at a reasonable price.)

Bible dictionaries can help, and occasionally they mislead. Human reference books are not infallible. Bible handbooks usually give helpful information about each book of the Bible, which can add significantly to a reader's interest and understanding.

4. *Work on a plan;* and set some goals. Make these flexible.

5. *Make notes.* Provide notebooks or files for making, keeping, and using notes on your studies.

6. *Give adequate attention.* Be diligent and persistent.

7. *Review and use what you have learned.*

8. *Find and correct your mistakes as you learn more.*

9. *Study together.* It is helpful to study the Bible with other Christians. We actually understand it better when we try to help others see in the language what the author was saying. Interest in helping each other furnishes a good Christian motivation for effort and encouragement when the work might seem dull or get

neglected. God intended for us to learn and practice His teachings in fellowship with one another.

### RIGHT ATTITUDES FOR BIBLE STUDY

1. *Desire to know what the Bible teaches.*

2. *Expect to find something understandable.* Expect to learn and to use what God gives to us. Use your intelligence to see each truth. Then put together in your mind all the ideas and facts with expectation of building up an increasing comprehension.

3. *Be willing to let it be what it is and say what it actually was meant to say.* You may wisely investigate the evidence that the Bible is the Word of God, but we should not read it with the attitude that we can judge the truth of God's Word, rejecting what we do not like and refusing to learn from it what we did not know before. We cannot tell God when He is right or wrong. He must tell us.

4. *Have a humility and honesty* that is not willing to dictate to the Bible what it should say, or to distort its intended meaning. We should actually distrust our own thinking more than we distrust any clear message from the Bible.

5. *Find the facts before you form your views.* Do not form a view and then look only for the words and phrases which seem to support your view.

6. *Seek answers to questions from the Bible itself, honestly read.* Be not satisfied with human traditions, especially when they seem to be poorly supported by the texts attached to them.

7. *Have confidence that it is true,* that it is consistent and harmonious, that it was meant to be understood, so that we patiently keep on reading in hope of understanding and getting it together.

8. *Recognize that it is a covenant from God* for us to receive and to live by, for us to rely upon for our future inheritance and for victories in this present life.

9. *Realize that the Bible writers had a meaning in mind,*

*which we need to find*; that anyone has a right to find the author's intended meaning, but no one has a right to give it a meaning that is different. The original meaning does not change, although our understanding of it may improve, or the current usage of its words and sentences may be different. If the words by which we have translated the Bible (or expressed its meaning) change in meaning among people to whom we speak, then we must choose other words to use in our expositions which will preserve the original meaning of God's revelation.

### THE RIGHT INTERPRETATION

The right interpretation is what the author intended to say. Our goal is to read the thinking expressed for us by one who had a meaning in mind. At least at first, we should be thinking not of our desires or what the word does to us, but of making good use of the author's language in which he is giving us truth and understanding. Interpreting is not elaborating and explaining (certainly not revising) what the author said; it is getting the message given to us. Further investigation of the subject of the message may be desirable after we have read it, even may help us to be sure how well we read it. But the interpretation, strictly speaking, is simply reading well what he wrote.

Much that has been called "interpretation" of the Bible has been based on the assumption that it could not be taken at face value, that it did not express directly and plainly what is true or what we ought to believe about it. Men have tried to find behind its words a "meaning" different from that which was expressed. Some of these men reject its claim to be a supernatural revelation from God. They "interpret" a statement of fact as not a report of what happened but as a clever fable, the real meaning of which must be decided on the basis of our philosophy of reality, not in accord with the sober statements of the Biblical writers. This kind of "interpretation" begins with rejection of the account and

its obvious meaning, then tries to make it into something it was never intended to be.

There are others who believe the Bible has supernatural origin, but with special hidden meanings beyond what is openly expressed by its language. Any interpretation is unreliable which takes a meaning from somewhere outside the passage and drags it into the passage instead of finding the author's message in his words.

### *IDENTIFYING THE AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING*

He expressed it for us in his words, in the form of his sentences (the way the words are put together in relation to each other) — which is his syntax, and in the line of thought followed in the context or the course of his writing. We can improve our concept of his ideas by knowing the circumstances of his situation and finding his purposes or aims for writing. We can test the accuracy of our ideas by comparison of parallel passages, other statements on the same subject by equal authority.

The true interpretation is the one that *fits* the author, the readers intended, the situation addressed, the words as used, the grammar of his sentences, the course of thought, the antitheses which he expressed or implied, the rest of the Scripture. When we find a meaning which fits so well and seems so surely the only one which can fit in all ways, we get the feeling that this interpretation is necessary, the only one which we must believe to be true. Any interpretation which is not at all necessary is highly doubtful.

Interpretation by strictly reading the author's sentences is rather like playing a mental game of "follow the leader." If we follow exactly the path he takes, we share his experiences in it. If we go off the path of thought which he marks out for us, we break the rules of the game, because by doing this we do not share his experiences. We tend to become another leader instead of a

faithful follower. When we take off on our own line of thought instead of following his, we are writing our own script in competition with him. Using his words for our ideas instead of his meaning is not fair, not skillful, not intelligent, not honest. Try hard not to step out of his tracks. The better you know the leader and the ground he is covering, the better you can follow.

### HELPFUL PRACTICES

1. *Make a preliminary study of the book.* Find out as well as you can who wrote it? To whom? When? For what purpose? To fit what situation? Under what covenant or dispensation of divine grace?

2. *Read in quick survey,* an airplane view of the whole book, to find the subjects dealt with, the general plan of coverage, the main emphasis and central idea of the whole, and indications of the author's purpose.

3. *Make an outline* of the main sections and line of development.

4. *Read a section to find the question being dealt with,* and look for all the answers you can find.

5. *Note any words, phrases, or ideas that are difficult to understand,* so that you may look them up in reference books and watch for them in further reading, or discuss them with other students.

6. *Observe the punctuation and follow the grammatical structure of the sentences.* Not words, but sentences are the real units of meaning. The meaning and force of a word is greatly affected by the connection which it has with other words, by the purpose of the author at the time, and by the opposite which he has in mind for it in each instance. Words are the bricks and boards of which a house of meaning is built; grammar is the design by which they are put together to make a house instead of a heap. What the author thinks about things designated by his words is

shown by the grammar he uses. His sentence structure also show how he feels about the things of which he is speaking.

7. *Look for the author's line of thinking*, the particular area of thought which he has in view. Keep your thoughts within the frame of the window he is opening for you with his sentences and line of thought.

8. *One of the best practices for studying any book or section is to make outlines of it and write a shortened paraphrase of what it is trying most to say.* Then keep improving the outline and keep expanding the paraphrase to say all that he said with the same purpose and emphasis in mind.

9. *Let the Bible interpret the Bible.* Improve your understanding of a word by observing all its uses and meanings in the Bible, noting the differences in separate passages, and not expecting a word to mean the same thing every time. Add to your concept of one passage what another passage says on the same subject; but be careful not to use one passage to cover up another and keep it from saying what it was intended to say. Let each passage say what it has to say and thus fill out our understanding of the subject with which they deal.

Keep on practicing, growing and accumulating a true knowledge and understanding of God's Word.

### **Study Questions**

1. List nine steps suggested for an approach to a method of study.
2. What nine attitudes will help one be a better interpreter?
3. How does one's expectation influence what he or she learns from personal study?
4. What should we distrust before we distrust the message of the Bible?

5. "Anyone has a right to find the author's intended meaning, but no one has a right to give it a meaning that is different." What does this statement mean?
6. What is the right interpretation?
7. Show how some use the word *interpretation* to mean finding a meaning other than what the author intended.
8. The true interpretation is the one that fits what eight things?
9. How is interpretation like "follow the leader"?
10. What nine practices are helpful as one conducts a study of a Bible book?
11. How should one let the Bible interpret the Bible?

### **Project**

Write a brief description of your current method of Bible study.

List ten methods, attitudes or practices discussed in this chapter which you intend to use in your personal Bible study.