

## LEARNING FROM BIBLE PASSAGES PART I

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What a delight to enjoy a good meal! A delicious and nutritious meal takes planning and effort. Someone must acquire the skill, gather the ingredients, do the planning, and prepare and serve the meal.

What a delight to enjoy a good meal from a paragraph of scripture! What a blessing is a sermon or lesson that leads the hearers to understand and apply the author's intended meaning in a passage of Scripture.

Every Christian can follow basic steps and guidelines and come to an understanding of a Bible passage through his own study.

The writers of the Bible did not divide their books into chapters and verses. The modern chapter and verse divisions were introduced over a thousand years after the writing of the last book in the Bible. Therefore in studying a section of Scripture it is

best to ignore chapter and verse divisions and seek to see the natural paragraph divisions.

Careful, inductive study of a passage or a paragraph is important in personal study and in preparing for a lesson, a sermon or a devotion. Even in verse-by-verse study each verse should be read in the context of its paragraph or section.

The purpose of this chapter is set forth ten steps in the study of a Bible passage. The goal of our Bible study is understanding the truth the author intended to communicate and obeying that truth in our daily lives.

In order to gain the most benefit from this chapter choose a Bible passage to use as your laboratory experiment. As one best learns swimming by swimming, not reading about it, one best learns how to do Bible study by doing it. Select an important passage consisting of three to five verses. After each section in this article is read then do that step in the study of your chosen passage. It will take time but it is worth it. By doing a careful, thorough study of a passage you will develop a method of study which will be a valuable skill for you in all your Bible study.

## OBSERVATION

In the study of a text we must first look, look, look. The reader must give his mind credit for being able to learn the meaning. One should not begin by going to his preacher or a commentary. He should determine to learn everything he can from the passage.

The passage should be read several times with the object of learning exactly what is said. What is observed should then be itemized on paper. Writing it down forces you to be more exact in your thoughts and aids the memory. The passage should be approached as if it were seen for the first time. As the passage is read each piece of information should be recorded as it unfolds.

Making observations does not mean simply rewriting,

paraphrasing or summarizing the text. It is not just writing what one has heard from others. One should write down only what he sees stated or implied in the text. Key words and connecting words such as *if*, *but* and *therefore* should be noted. Attention should be given to any unusual or significant grammatical structures. Note the type of literature.

The passage should be reread many times. Each reading may yield new information overlooked in previous readings. One may set the project aside and return to reading it again. Look. Concentrate. Think. It is amazing how much more can be seen in a passage when one keeps looking.

## QUESTION

In this step factual questions should be asked about what has been observed. Such questions can be the bridge leading from what is stated to the goal of understanding what is meant by what is said.

One should ask all the "who" questions he can. Who are the persons named in the text? Who is speaking? To whom? About whom? To whom do the pronouns such as *he* and *they* refer? Is a promise or command limited to a certain people or time?

Next, ask "when" did the event occur? Is there any mention of time — day, week or year? Does any statement such as "eight days later" relate the incident in time to other events?

"Where" did the event occur? What is said in the text about the city or area and the lay of the land? Seek to learn any information about direction, distance and relationship with named landmarks.

"What" questions may deal with the meaning of words and with the grammatical relationships between words. Single out key words and answer these questions. What does each one mean? What do the tenses convey? What word is modified by what? What type of literature is the passage — history, doctrine or

poetry?

"Why" questions probe for reasons and purpose. Why did the author write this paragraph? Why did he write in the manner he did? Why did he place it in this position in his book?

Ask your passage all the questions you can. Don't try to answer all these questions at this point in your study. Some answers will be obvious. Some will be found in further study. The answers to some of our questions may not be found in this life. But asking good questions as you read helps your mind to focus on intended meaning.

## WORDS

In this step one should try to learn the meaning of each word in the passage. One does not have to be a Greek scholar before he can do competent Bible study.

Other translations can function as a dictionary in defining and clarifying words which may be obscured in one's own translation. A good exercise is to list the main words in the text down the left hand side of a paper. Then list how several other versions translate each word.

In the chart on page 77 other translations help one understand the words used in Ephesians 4:19, King James Version.

A person who does not know Greek can still learn the meaning of the Greek words by using the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance*, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* or *Young's Analytical Concordance* and *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

Several questions need to be asked about each key word. Is it literal or figurative? Is it limited or unlimited in meaning? Does it have its usual meaning or is it used with an unusual or technical meaning?

A word means what it is used to mean. From the usage in the passage one should try to understand what the author used the word to mean.

## LEARNING FROM BIBLE PASSAGES, PART I

King James Version	Revised Standard Version	New American Standard Bible	New International Version	New English Bible	Good News Bible
"Who being <i>past feeling</i>	callous	callous	having lost all sensitivity	dead to all feeling	lost all feeling of shame
have given themselves over unto <i>lasciviousness</i>	licentiousness	sensuality	sensuality	abandoned themselves to vice	give themselves over to vice
to work all <i>uncleanness</i>	uncleanness	impurity	impurity	stop at nothing to satisfy	do all sorts of indecent things
with <i>greediness.</i> " (Eph. 4:19)	greedy	greediness	continued lust for more	their foul desires	without restraint

A concordance, or center references in a study Bible can direct one to other Bible uses of a given word. More information on word study will be given in Chapter 10.

## SENTENCES

Thoughts are expressed in words. Words are the basic units or building blocks of thoughts. Words are arranged into sentences in order to convey the thought intended. To correctly understand the meaning of a sentence we need to understand how words are related to each other.

Each sentence should be read carefully. What is the subject of the sentence? What is asserted about the subject? Is something suggested about the time or manner of the action? Try to see what function each word has in the sentence.

Determine if the sentence is a statement of fact, a question, a command or an exclamation. Identify the persons, places or things referred to by pronouns such as *he*, *they* and *it*. If possible diagram the sentence to see more exactly what the sentence is really saying.

The grammar of the sentence in an English translation may not perfectly reflect the grammar of the original language. However, the standard translations generally do an adequate job of faithfully restating in our language what the original language conveyed. Comparing translations will often help when the arrangement of the sentence or the wording in one's own translation is unclear.

Each statement of fact should be read understanding its logical force. Hasty generalization and other illogical conclusions must be avoided. For example, we should not infer from "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30) that repentance and baptism are not required for salvation. It is also wrong to conclude from "God is love" (I John 4:8) that love is God. Let each verse say what it says and logically implies, not more, not less.

## CONTEXT

The immediate context of a word or sentence is made up of the words or statements surrounding it. A word means what an author in a given statement uses it to mean. Merely going to a dictionary to find the definition of a word does not establish what it means in a given passage.

The word *cross* can mean many things. The usage in a sentence determines meaning in each case. Notice how the surrounding words made clear its meaning in each sentence. "Jesus died on a cross." "Do not cross the street." "Why is he so cross this morning?" "Don't cross her, she is in a bad mood." "Her necklace has a gold cross." "Joe's blindness was a cross he had to bear."

The whole book is a context in a larger sense. To interpret in the light of context, the whole book should be read which contains the passage under study. The reader should look for the overall theme and basic outline of the book. Seek to learn how

this passage fits in with the purpose and plan of the book.

Determine the subject under discussion in the section of the book where your passage appears. How does the passage fit into the development of this subject? Is the text a parenthetical expression or does it express the main thought of the section? Does it build upon what is stated before? For example, the Sermon on the Bread of Life in John 6 builds on the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6).

One must make sure his understanding of the passage fits with what the author is saying in his book. A correct understanding grows out of the passage. Meaning forced onto a text is illegitimate and unreliable.

### *HISTORICAL SETTING*

Information concerning historical setting can be gained from these sources: the book containing the passage; other Bible books; a Bible dictionary and a Bible handbook.

One should try to learn everything he can about the historical setting and the origin of the book. Who wrote the book? To whom did he write? What problem or situation occasioned the book? What is the purpose of the book? What kind of literature is the book — history, doctrine or poetry? Where was the author when he wrote? What do we know about the location of those addressed in the book? When was the book written? Was the book written during the Mosaic or Christian dispensation?

Next, investigate the historical setting of the events in your text. A knowledge of the geographical setting and social customs can bring a passage to life and help one to appreciate the historical reality of the events.

Note in the text who is speaking and to whom they are speaking. The Bible records what the devil says, but what he says is not God's truth on the subject. Do not quote Job's friends as giving God's final truth because in the book of Job God condemns what

the friends said as wrong. The reaction of the person or persons addressed at times can give a clue to the meaning of a question or a statement.

From the text itself learn everything you can about the location where the event occurred. Then search for other Biblical information and consult a Bible dictionary. The Bible talks about going up to Jerusalem even when the person was heading south because Jerusalem is built on mountains.

As one studies the Bible it is helpful to learn about the rulers and the political situation and the social customs, such as in betrothal and marriage, and the economic practices, such as the nomadic shepherd in Abraham's day and the Roman slavery system in the first century.

One should vividly reconstruct in his mind the events of the passage. Knowing about fish nets, ovens and leaven, etc., can greatly aid one's enjoyment and understanding of Jesus' teaching. Bible history can come to life when you realize the people really lived in actual places.

### *OTHER SCRIPTURES*

All truth ultimately harmonizes. Most of the time God did not locate, in one passage, all His revealed truth on a subject. Most study Bibles have center references or cross references. They will direct the reader to other passages that relate to a given text. The choice of the center references was made by the editor of the study Bible, not by the inspired author. At times these choices reflect bad judgment but usually they are helpful.

Strictly speaking, parallel passages must deal with the same event or subject. Not every passage is a parallel passage that uses the same word. In one passage the word may be used with a different meaning. Do not impose a meaning upon the passage because of an idea you are importing from a supposed parallel.

One should carefully read all other passages that relate to his



text. Center references, a concordance and some commentaries will direct one to these scriptures. Let these other scriptures throw as much light as possible on the meaning of the text.

Allow passages which give more exact information to explain those which are brief or general. Use the ones which are literal to explain the figurative ones. We can better understand the statements about Christ being lifted up in John 3:14, 15 and 8:28 in light of John 12:32-34 where this is explained as indicating the manner of death He would die.

### *EXPLANATION*

In this step of the study the student should write his own comments on the passage. All previous study of his text has prepared him to write an accurate explanation of each phrase. In explaining the meaning of the text he can draw upon the insights gained from word study, grammatical analysis, context, historical setting and other scriptures.

### *PARAPHRASE*

When the reader has understood in his mind the exact thought intended by the author then he has interpreted correctly. In this step one tries to restate as clearly and accurately as possible what he has understood the author to say in the text. Restate the author's intended meaning in terms used and understood by our generation.

### *APPLICATION*

True learning does not end with understanding but moves to application. We must ask how the passage applies to our lives.

Not "every promise in the Book is mine." God promised Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age. God did not promise that to couples living in the twentieth century. Yet that promise has relevance to us because the promised son, Isaac, was an ancestor of Jesus who is our Lord and Savior. The fulfillment of that promise shows us that God keeps His Word and such fulfillment strengthens our faith.

One should reread his passage seeking answers to these questions. What lesson do I need to learn from this text? Any promise I can claim? A command to obey or an example to follow? A warning to be heeded or an error to be avoided? What in my life needs to be changed because of the truth in this passage? What insight and inspiration have I gained from this passage?

Jesus said the good hearer of the Word of God hears, understands, accepts, holds it fast and bears fruit (Matt. 13:23; Mark 4:20; Luke 8:15).

When you carefully and prayerfully prepare and partake of a meal from a Bible passage as outlined in the above ten steps you will learn from your Bible. We can be like the Chinese student who said, "I am now reading the Bible and behaving it."

### **Study Questions**

1. How is a good Bible lesson or sermon like a good meal?
2. Why is it best to ignore chapter and verse divisions?
3. List and briefly define the ten steps given for the study of a Bible passage.
4. Why is it helpful to write down what one observes in a Bible passage?
5. How does asking good questions help one read a passage with the right understanding?

6. What questions should be asked about each key word?
7. How does it help to determine if a sentence is a statement of fact, a question, a command, or an exclamation?
8. Show how the other words in the sentence give us the meaning of the word *cross* in the several sentences given.
9. How does learning about the political history, social culture and customs, and geography of Bible times help us better understand the Bible?
10. What is a parallel passage, and how can a parallel passage help in interpretation?
11. What are some questions that can aid one in applying a Bible passage?

### **Project**

Choose a Bible text (a short paragraph, for example Philip-  
pians 1:3-6 or I Thessalonians 5:16-21 or even a single verse, for  
example Hebrews 11:6 or Matthew 16:24). Study your passage,  
following the first five steps given in this chapter. Record on paper  
your research on each step. The project for Chapter 9 will be to  
complete the last five steps of study on your passage.

