



Lesson 2

Reading the Bible

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In our last lesson we saw that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that it applies to all people of all time. We also learned that the main message of the Bible is that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all people. Now, in this lesson, we turn our focus on how to use the powerful Word of God. The questions we need to answer in this lesson are...

- ◆ How does the Bible effect faith?
- ◆ How should I read the Bible?

HOW DOES THE BIBLE EFFECT FAITH?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

Romans 10:17 Consequently, *faith comes from hearing the message*, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2 Timothy 3:15 From infancy you have known *the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus.

- 1) According to the italicized portions of those verses, how is faith created?
- 2) Incidentally, does the passage from 2 Timothy give us any insight as to when we should start getting people into the Word?

Psalm 119:28 My soul is weary with sorrow; *strengthen me according to your word.*

1 Thessalonians 3:2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading *the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.* (Note: Paul is not saying that Timothy himself has the power to strengthen faith. Rather, the Gospel that Timothy shares strengthens faith.)

2 Peter 3:17,18 Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

- 3) According to the italicized portions of those passages, what value does studying God's Word have for those who already have saving faith?
- 4) According to the underlined portions of those passages, what does a personal knowledge of God's Word help protect us from?

How is this possible? How can the Bible have such great power? Please read the following passage and then answer the corresponding questions.

1 Corinthians 12:3 No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 16:16,17 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for *this was not revealed to you by man*, but by my Father in heaven.

1 Corinthians 2:12-14 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, *not in words taught us by human wisdom* but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

- 5) **According to the italicized portions of those verses, who is NOT responsible for creating saving faith in our hearts?**

- 6) **According to the underlined portions of those verses, who IS responsible for creating saving faith through God’s Word?**

On the basis of the passages we have looked at please answer the question, “HOW DOES THE BIBLE EFFECT FAITH?”

God’s Word has the power to accomplish monumental tasks — creating and strengthening faith. But there are obstacles that can get in the way of our Bible study — lack of time, difficulty in understanding the translation, etc. In the remainder of this study we will look at ten principles of reading the Bible. Some of them are found in the Bible. Some of them are simple common sense. Together these principles help to remove some of the obstacles that can stand in the way of fruitful Bible study.

HOW SHOULD I READ THE BIBLE?

1 Begin every Bible study with prayer.

2 Peter 3:16 [Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand...

Psalms 119:18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

God’s Word is clear. It contains everything we need to know about how we are saved. The main message of Jesus’ payment for our sins is simple to see. But parts of God’s Word are challenging to our simple, sinful minds. The psalmist’s prayer listed above will be our prayer as well. We begin our Bible study by asking the Holy Spirit to “open our eyes” so that we might understand and love everything we read.

2 Use one, appropriate translation.

Nehemiah 8:7,8 The Levites... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

The Levites were the tribe of the Israelites that served as priests. In these verses the Levites need to clarify some things from the ancient Hebrew text to the people. We said before that there are obstacles to our studying God's Word. One obstacle is using a translation that is difficult to understand. Picking a translation that is written in straightforward, modern English can make Bible study much easier and more enjoyable. (For examples of various Bible translations see Appendix II.)

3 Set a specific time each day for study.

Daniel 6:10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

We know how well we accomplish tasks when we say, "I'll get to it when I have time." Setting aside a specific time slot in your day for Bible study helps insure that you will cover a fair amount of material in a short amount of time.

4 Always pay attention to the context of what you are reading.

Consider each passage in light of the verses that surround it. Consider the paragraph that it's in. Consider the book of the Bible that it comes from. Doctrinal errors often are the result of Bible passages that are ripped out of context. So as you read ask yourself questions such as, "Who is the speaker in this verse?" "Who is being spoken to?" "What just happened to make the person say this?" "Under what circumstances was this passage written?"

5 Always consider parallel passages and cross references.

You can't determine what God has to say on a subject until you've looked at every passage that deals with that subject. Scripture helps us interpret other portions of Scripture. Here's an example. Consider the following two passages.

James 2:20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Ephesians 2:8,9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

If someone wanted to find out how we are saved and all that they looked at was James 2:20, they might get the impression that our good works play a part in our salvation. But when you look at the fuller context of James (cf. principle #4), you realize he's addressing a specific problem. People were claiming that if you had faith in Jesus, that gave you a license to sin. When you look at cross references such as Ephesians 2:8,9 — other passages that deal with the relationship between faith and works and salvation — it becomes overwhelmingly clear that our works play no part in our salvation. Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture further helps to safeguard Bible truths for us.

6 Take a passage literally unless the Bible itself tells us it's figurative.

Don't look for hidden meanings in God's Word. If the passage is meant to be taken figuratively either the passage itself or the context of the surrounding passages will indicate it is figurative speech. For example, a metaphor or simile is clearly figurative.

Matthew 13:24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field." *A simile uses the word "like" or "as" to make a comparison.*

Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. *A metaphor makes a comparison by making a symbolic connection without the words "like" or "as." Obviously, the Bible does not give off light. But the passage figuratively describes how God's Word gives guidance in life.*

Matthew 19:24 "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." *This is a figure of speech known as hyperbole — exaggerating a statement for effect. Jesus' point is that a rich person's love of money can very easily supercede their love for God, which is idolatry.*

The type of literature we're reading will also help us determine if something is literal or figurative. Poetical writing (the Psalms, for example) will often be figurative. Apocalyptic writing often uses very vivid picture language to make a point. The book of Revelation would be a good example.

7 Consider all passages in light of the clear, chief truths of God's Word.

No correct interpretation of a portion of Scripture will contradict the doctrines that are easy to see and often stated in Scriptures (for example: mankind's sinfulness, salvation by grace through faith, the deity of Jesus Christ, etc).

8 Plan out a method of Bible study.

It is especially difficult to get a flow of thought and determine context if you study the Bible by randomly choosing what you are going to read. One good method of studying the Bible is book by book. You can get a sense of progression through the book, and maybe you can even outline what you've read. Introductory information from Bible handbooks might be useful. Another way to approach study is topically. Pick a topic and then look at all the passages in the Bible that deal with that topic. A good concordance would be helpful for this approach.

9 Familiarize yourself with an overview of Bible history.

This will take time, so don't rush yourself. But the Bible becomes even richer when you can arrange events in some sort of chronological order. The Biblical accounts become more vivid when you begin to grasp the historical context and customs of the day. For example, the sacrificial system of the Israelite's worship seems, at face value, overly complex and even somewhat barbaric. But when you come to understand how each sacrifice somehow foreshadowed the work of Christ, your appreciation for Old Testament worship life is greatly enhanced.

(For aid in increasing your knowledge of Bible history, try using *The People's Bible* series for your personal Bible study from time to time. Sunday morning Bible classes on Bible history are also very beneficial.)

10 Meditate on what you read.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Psalms 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

The Bible is unlike any book you've ever read. Therefore we don't read it like we would read a novel or a newspaper. You want more than simple knowledge of what it says. You want to *use* what it says — to apply what it says to your life. Focus on every word. Ask yourself questions like, "What do these verses tell me about God? What does this tell me about myself? What here makes me happy — or sad? How does God want to use this portion of his Word to change me to be more like him?" Throughout the day, turn that portion of Scripture over and over in your head. As you study, don't be afraid to take notes or write in your Bibles. It helps reinforce what you've read. And don't be afraid to come to your pastor with any questions you might have.

May God bless your study of his Word. May it equip you with the tools you need to get through this life. May it fill you with joy as you realize you have eternal life!

TAKING IT DEEPER

- A) Agree or Disagree — All Bible translations are difficult to understand.
- B) Agree or Disagree — If you share your faith with an unbeliever and they come to saving faith, you deserve credit for creating faith in that person's heart.
- C) Agree or Disagree — Bible passages can be interpreted a number of different ways.
- D) Agree or Disagree — It is more important for unbelievers to hear God's Word than for believers to study God's Word.
- E) Question: We said that we understand passages literally unless the Bible itself tells us they should be understood figuratively. What would happen to the Bible's message if a person would pick and choose which passages they wanted to understand literally and which passages they wanted to understand figuratively?
- F) Exercise: Over the course of the last two lessons we have looked in depth at God's Word and how to approach the study of God's Word. In Appendix III you will find statements from a number of different denominations about how they approach God's Word. In the space provided make note of what you see as a correct approach to God's Word, and what you see as an incorrect or improper approach to interpreting God's Word.

(For a closer look at different methods that people use to approach Scripture, some of which are inappropriate, please see Appendix IV.)