

## How to Study the Bible Profitably

### Introduction

From the very beginning, Christianity is **a religion with a book** (Gresham Machen, *The New Testament, An Introduction to its History and Literature*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, 13). It was revered and read by devout men of the day. Upon the Old Testament the Jews based their entire life on it. It was to them the sum and substance of education and the supreme judge in every controversy. Upon the Old and New Testament, the Christians consider it to be the **ultimate and sufficient authority and rule of faith and practice for their daily Christian life**. The cry of the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was Sola Scriptura. The 66 books of the Bible which is also called the canon (the rule) is the inerrant, infallible, verbal and plenary inspired Word of God, providentially preserved for us today (2 Pet 1:20,21; Ps 12:6,7). The uniqueness and coherence of the Scriptures despite its diversity is simply astounding.

The Scriptures was written over a 1,500 year span, over 40 generations written by 40 authors from all walks of life written in different places at different moods on three continents written in three languages; Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and its subject matter covers many controversial subjects yet it has an amazing harmony and theme "God's Redemption of Man" (Josh McDowell, *Guide to Understanding Your Bible*, Here's Life Publisher, 1982, 4). The veracity and authenticity of the Holy Scriptures is attested by its **internal and external consistency and its amazing accuracy and fulfilment of the prophecies** that are found in this peerless book. The authority of the Scriptures is clearly stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap 7, Part IV.

IV. **The authority of the Holy Scriptures**, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or Church, but **wholly upon God** (who is truth itself), **the author** thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God (2 Pet 1:19,21; 2 Tim 3:16, 17; 1 Thess 2:13).

### The Goal of Bible Study

The example of Ezra is given clearly for us in Ezra 7:10 says, "*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.*" The order is important here; to study, then to apply or do and finally to teach. Paul said to 2 Tim 2:15, "*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*" and Jer 15:16 says, "*Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.*"

What do you consider to be the ultimate objective of Bible Study either personally or corporately as a Bible Study group, in NBC, Sunday School or Church? The final goal of any Bible Study endeavour should not be just mere intellectual knowledge or fellowship or for the sake of interpretation alone but a practical appreciation and experiential application of it in our lives to the glory of God. In other words, the ultimate goal of Bible Study is a changed life in the will of God. What does this mean to me today? Much practical insights that one learns from the Scriptures are from his daily Quiet Time, a personal Bible Study programme when one meditates on certain passages for about an hour a day. It must be said here also that a meaningful Bible Study is a laborious task. It requires honest hard work to dig, delve and search out the deep gems and treasure of God's Word (2 Tim 2:15). There are no short cuts to a meaningful exercise of the word. We have to use the stairs of diligence and then reap and enjoy the delights of understanding the eternal truths of God (Jer 15:16; Ps 119:105).

## **Helpful Pointers to Bible Interpretation**

The general three pointers are:-

1. Observation: Study the biblical facts; Be attentive to notice details and sieve out the important from the incidentals (see)
2. Interpretation: Understanding the biblical facts; and we need to make sense out of the facts and get the right meaning of it correctly (learn)
3. Application: Practising the biblical facts. The most important is to apply it finally which is the purposes of studying the word to us (do)

If the plain sense of the Bible makes common sense, seek no other source. If not, then, look out for the figures of speech and interpret them correctly

### **Content**

There is direct relationship between the immediate content and the spiritual meaning. The actual content of a passage is the raw material, the database with which you will interpret the text. Observe and scrutinise every word, phrase, conjunction, preposition, verb or noun or adverb and the structure of sentences, literary form and ask the 5Ws (ie Why, When, Where, Who and What) and 1H (How). Look for things that are emphasised, repeated, related, alike, unlike (antithesis or ironies) etc. (Eg. see Prov 4:22-25 and Ps 136 and 2 Cor 6:10-18).

### **Context**

The content refers to that which goes before and after the text given. So do not only read the stipulated passage given to you, read before and beyond what you have to in order to fully understand the context of the passage. Without a proper understanding of the context, our interpretation of the passage can be erroneous. For example, do you know that the Bible tells us that there is no God. Technically, this is true but I forget to tell you the context and that is "The fool has said in his heart there is no God" (Ps 53:1; Ps 14:1). Watch out for these five kinds of context. Figures of speech like metaphors, parables, hyperboles, synecdoche, similes, allegories, personification, etc. The phrase as patient as Job or as wise as Solomon is a simile and the talking donkey to Balaam is a good example of personification and a parable is an extended metaphor often with various points of reference (ie tongues of angels in 1 Cor 13:1 is an exaggeration or hyperbole or when Jesus said He is a Door, is a metaphor).

Examples include the following:-

1. Literary Context

What is the genre or type of passage you are reading. Is it narrative or poetic or prophetic? Some background and Word study are also important. Understanding the original languages in Greek and Hebrew is an advantage though not a must. For example, the word gymnazo in 1Tim 4:7 reminds us of the vigorous and strenuous effort that we should put in developing holiness (ie Song of Solomon is different from Book of Acts is poetic vs narrative).

2. Historical Context

Is there an important historical fact or events existing preceding the passage? For example, to understand why king David wrote the penitential psalms of psa 51 and psa 32 ,we need to read and know the historical background of 2sam 11 and 12 (Incident of Jeremiah preaching before the Babylonian captivity in Jer 6).

3. Cultural Context

What is the social norm and cultural distinctives at that time? To appreciate why the prophet emphasised on modest dressing of his times for the ladies was because prostitutes and immoral women would make up heavily on the streets and as believers we are to be different from them (ie ladies wearing veil, a holy kiss, washing feet of travellers).

4. Geographical Context

Where is it found? What are the salient topographical features, ie rivers, seas, distance, landscape, mountain, When you read Jos 1 ,you can see the geographical demarcation of the boundaries of the land of Israel (ie Elijah running all the way from Mount Carmel to Beersheba in 2 King 19:1-2 or the route of the Exodus by Israel).

5. Theological Context

Is there a doctrinal basis in this text here, that influence our understanding of the whole passage. For example ,when we read 1Jn 4 and his strong words we noted the theological implications of the false teachings of Gnosticism and Docetism of the first century that John was defending against (ie doctrine of election in Rom 8:29-39 and justification by faith in Rom affecting the understanding of sanctification in Rom 12:1 beyond).

Comparison

Scriptures corroborates Scriptures (Westminster Confession of Faith, Part IX).

- IX. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the **Scripture itself** and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly (2 Pet 1:20,21; Acts 15:15,16).

**The most accurate interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself.** Someone once said that you very rarely have to go outside of the Scripture to interpret Scripture. The entire canon has only one real author, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Writ is interpreted in a coherent whole. Look at other cross references that are relevant to comment and complement the text that you are dealing with. For example, to understand Abraham's faith in the Lord in the sacrifice of Isaac, it would be necessary to look into Rom 4:16-24; Heb 11:8-19, in addition to Gen 22:1-14. Check out also on the kings and Chronicles for cross reference on the different kings during the Divided Kingdom period. To understand David's feelings and response after the sin with Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11, it is best to read the penitential Psalms of Ps 32 and 51 and the harmonisation of the four gospels.

Culture

A careful understanding of the socio-cultural context of the times mentioned in that particular text is vital to a accurate interpretation of Scriptures. Let me illustrate by turning to Ruth 1:1-18. The story of Ruth is famous for its import of love and courage of a young woman. But most people overlook that it takes place during the period of the Judges, one of the darkest period in the Old Testament History. In Judges 21:25, we discover that the nation is in a cesspool of iniquity as every man did what was right in his own eyes. This book has to do with God's covenantal plan of redemption. In the midst of the sins of Israel, the rays of God's salvation shone on a Gentile Moabitess and later selected her to be an ancestor of King David and

more importantly of the Greater David that is to come in the fullness of time which is Christ Jesus our Lord. Keep a sharp lookout for the historical and cultural context of the texts and study it with its proper usage and application.

### Consultation

Consultation involves the use of secondary resources like concordances, commentaries, dictionaries and atlases. They can shed light on the text that will help you make more sense of out of what you are looking for. But one word of caution. Never forget the order, first the text of Scripture, then the secondary sources. To go direct to the secondary sources without consulting the Bible is unhelpful and do not honour and give the Word of God its rightful priority and place. There are eight helpful tools that are given below.

- a. Concordances: Strong's and Young's Concordances, etc.
- b. Bible Dictionaries: The New Bible Dictionary, Hastings Dictionary, Illustrated Bible Dictionary.
- c. Bible Handbooks: Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible.
- d. Atlases: Zondervan Pictorial Bible Atlas, Moody Atlas.
- e. Bible Commentaries: Mt Henry, Calvin's, Eerdman's Bible Commentary, Preacher's Homiletics, Tyndale, Expositors, Matthew Poole, Evangelical Commentary on the Bible.
- f. Study Bibles – Thomson Chain, KJV, The Parallel, KJV Commentary Bible.
- g. Encyclopaedias – Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible, etc.
- h. Additional Resources: Willmington Guide, Archaeology Reviews, relevant reference books of the Bible and journals.
- i. Relevant books on the subject under study.

Be prepared to invest in some of these resources (see Maranatha Resource Ministry) if you are serious about studying the Bible. A good study Bible like the Defender's bible or the Geneva study bible is a great help for a start (and use it for life). I have more than 4,000 books in my personal library for my reference on all the major themes of the bible and beyond. The better half of knowledge is knowing where to find it. You never know when you will need that book and have the library properly organised as well along different themes or genres. Always study the Bible with a pen or pencil to jot down salient points learnt along the way on the borders of the Bible. Remember short notes are better than long memories (Acts 17:11). Someone once quipped 'Dirty Bible, Clean Christian'. There is some truth in it.

## Conclusion

Paul says in 2 Tim 3:16,17 that there is one thing that will equip us for every good work and that is the inspired sacred Scriptures. In another section he told Timothy to be diligent to study the Scriptures as a workman that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15). Ezra in Ezra 7:10 has the right principles in Bible Study and in the right order and sequence as well. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). The Psalmist calls this a Lamp unto his feet and a Light unto his path (Ps 119:105). The Word of God is likened to a Sword (Heb 5:12,13). Jesus says in John 8:31, if we continue in His Word, we are His disciples indeed.

Luke says of the Berean Christians in Acts 17:11. That they received the Word with readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to see if those things taught by the Apostle Paul were so. Do you check up the Bible on what you did in other books if it is consistent with Scriptures. What place and priority has the Word of God in your life now? Do you begin the day with and end the night by reading it as well (Ps 5:3)?

To grow in your faith and be more like Christ, study, meditate and memorise and apply His Word in our lives daily (Josh 1:8; Rev 1:3). May this informative study or booklet be a turning point in your life to give a firm commitment to the veracity, sufficiency, inspiration, authority and providential preservation of the Word of God and study it well to the spiritual nourishment and for the health of our souls.

## The Principles of Effective Bible Study

1. Read the passage objectively and clearly (at least twice).
2. Reflect on your life meditatively.
3. Realise the principle learnt practically.
4. Respond to the message/lesson learnt personally.
5. Resolve to act soberly.
6. Recollect the changes/results joyfully.

Consider this below (adapted )

To know God as far as He can be known  
is the noblest aim of the human understanding.  
To serve Him is the most honourable  
and delightful purpose to which we  
can devote our time and talents.  
To love Him is the most worthy  
exercise of our affections.

Dr Jack Sin

(Bibliographic Sources Consulted : Josh McDowell, *Guide to Understanding Your Bible*, Here's Life Publisher, 1982, Gresham Machen, *The New Testament, An Introduction to its History and Literature*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1976 and The King James Bible (Nashville: Thomsa Nelson Publishers, 1988)