

2: How Should I Read The Bible?

Last week we thought about what the Bible is and I left you with a question to consider: How does your understanding of the nature and authority of the Bible help you to study it? This week we are going to answer that question.

The Bible is unique — there is no other book like it —so it cannot be read in just the same way you would read any other book. What you know about the kind of book it is affects the way you read.

Read It With Respect

First, since we know that the Bible is the Word of God, we ought to read it with the kind of respect we would show if we were to hear God's voice from Heaven: paying attention to every word, treasuring it.

“I rejoice at Your word
As one who finds great treasure.”

Psalms 119:162

Reading the Bible must take priority over other activities. If at times it is difficult to comprehend, we must be prepared to devote time and effort and not be satisfied until we have done everything possible to understand what God is saying.

“My son, if you receive my words,
And treasure my commands within you,
So that you incline your ear to wisdom,
And apply your heart to understanding;
Yes, if you cry out for discernment,
And lift up your voice for understanding,
If you seek her as silver,
And search for her as for hidden treasures...”

Proverbs 2:1 – 4

We will meditate upon what we read and at times memorise it. Above all, we will make whatever response it demands, applying every detail of what we learn from it to our lives in every way we can: obeying its commands and following its guidance.

“We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

2 Peter 1:19

Respect also means reading with an attitude of submission: remembering that what God says takes priority over our own thoughts. We must certainly not come to the Bible with that critical attitude that looks for faults and problems. Rather we must approach anything we find it hard to make sense of with faith, in the knowledge that the difficulty comes from our inability to comprehend, not any failing in God's Word.

Question: Why do you think God has made some parts of His Word difficult to understand?

Remember You Need Help

“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

1 Corinthians 2:14

Unlike any other book you may read, reading the Bible is never merely an intellectual exercise in which you are depending on your own ability to understand. Something extra is needed: the help of the Holy Spirit. We must read it prayerfully — asking for that help — and as those who are living in fellowship with the Spirit.

Read It Like It Was Meant To Be Read

Our understanding of how the Bible was given — the men who wrote its books although carried along by the Holy Spirit were giving their own accounts of events they witnessed and truths they had come to know — we ought to read it as they intended it to be understood. Like every other author, the writers of the books of the Bible had only one meaning that they set out to put across with their words and that is the one we ought to look for. What would it have meant to its first readers? is the important question to keep in mind.

That is not to say that the Bible writers always fully understood what they were writing. Sometimes they were passing on things God had revealed that they could not fully understand.

“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.”

1 Peter 1:10 – 12

The meaning of the message they delivered was not fully understood at the time, not because it was obscure or mysterious but because it was only part of the story. In many cases, God made its meaning perfectly clear later.

Question: Why do you think God only partially revealed some things to His people? Can you think of anything that has still only been partially revealed? How should we deal with those partial revelations when we come across them?

This all reminds us of something else that we can usefully keep in mind. Because the Bible is a progressive revelation of truth, later bits add to our understanding of earlier bits. That points to a helpful rule which will often stop you going wrong in your understanding of difficult passages: earlier parts of the Bible must always be understood in the light of what comes later.

Keep It All In Context

The meaning the original writer intended to convey by any passage is most often made clear by the context it comes in. The context includes what is written before and after, the general theme of the whole book and indeed the teaching of the rest of the Bible. Anything that does not fit the context is wrong — it is not what the writer intended to say.

Although it was written over fifteen hundred years by more than forty writers the Bible is one book. Every part is consistent with every other part. Every part must be understood in such a way that it does not contradict any other part and that is a good test of whether or not you understand it properly. If you are finding a lot of contradictions between different parts of the Bible or if you are coming up with doctrines that are inconsistent with one another you have probably got something wrong.

Beware of the danger of reading selectively and never take verses or passages of Scripture out of the context in which they appear. To do that is to run the risk of imposing a meaning that was never intended: it is to attribute to God words He never uttered.

Context also includes the culture and history of the time the passage was written and the personalities of the people involved. If God has told us about these things elsewhere in the Bible we can make use of them to help us understand what we are reading. For example, it is not possible to understand the Minor Prophets unless you know about the historical context they were writing about. God has told us about that in other parts of the Old Testament.

Clearly, all of this means that you have to build up a broad knowledge of the Bible in order to be able to understand it properly.

Question: Why should it ring warning bells for you when someone says "God gave me a verse?" What is wrong with the common practice of opening the Bible at random to find guidance on a particular issue?

Read It On Its Own

Perhaps now you are beginning to understand what we mean when we say that the Bible is its own interpreter: one part can help us understand other parts. Because we believe that the Bible is a complete and sufficient revelation from God, we know that we do not need anything outside of the Bible itself to enable us to make sense of it. Neither should we judge the Bible in the light of any other teaching or information.

However, that does not mean that we cannot benefit from the wisdom, experience and insight of other people who have studied the Scriptures, perhaps in more depth than we are able to. However, we must always remember that these aids are nothing more than tools to help us: they are not infallible and they do not have any authority.

Question: What are the dangers in depending on commentaries to help you understand the Bible?

Getting The Best

Here are some notes to help you get the best from your Bible reading.

Building An Overview

Build up a good degree of familiarity with the Bible and a broad overview of its content. This is something you will only build up over time but get to work on it by reading large portions at a time in a translation you find easy to follow.

- Draw up a disciplined programme of reading: why not read through the Bible in a year — every year?
- Ask yourself questions as you go along to make sure you are taking in what you are reading. This will improve your ability to concentrate.
- Do not skip over things you do not understand. Be inquisitive, but do not get too bogged down in detail.
- Make notes: making your own notes is better than using someone else's. It helps you to concentrate and it is a good way to make sure you understand what you are reading. Draw some simple maps or time charts if they would be helpful and try to come up with a brief outline of each book by writing down the main subject of each chapter or section in it. Make a note of any themes that catch your interest every time they come up. Your notes will be useful when you come back to study a passage in more detail, so keep them safe.
- Memorise important passages — not just verses.

How To Study A Book Of The Bible

A broad overview of the Bible is not enough. You also need to study Bible books in detail.

- Choose a book and become familiar with it. First, if possible, read through it, at one sitting and then read it again in a different translation. Then read it more slowly,

making notes about its content and themes and remember to test yourself by asking yourself questions like, “What is each chapter about?”

- Make an outline of the book, begin with its divisions and then subdivide them, giving each part a heading that sums up what it is about. In that way you will divide the book into manageable chunks and you will still be able to see how those chunks relate to each other.
- Try to answer these questions about the book you are studying.
 - Who wrote it?
 - When was it written and what was its historical setting?
 - Why was it written?
 - What type of literature is it?
 - Is it a narrative?
 - Is it poetry?
 - Is it a letter?
 - Does it use figurative language?

Now you are ready to study the book verse by verse.

- First find out the meanings of all the main words in your chosen verse or sentence. An English dictionary on its own is not the best thing to use here. You should also compare a few different Bible versions in case some of the meaning of some words has been lost in translation. You could use a Bible dictionary or a lexicon or concordance.
- Next think about how the words relate to one another: the grammar of each sentence, the tense of the verbs and so on?
- Now work out the writer’s intended meaning. Ask questions of the text and meditate on it until you draw out every grain of truth. Remember the principle of simplicity — what you are looking for is the plain sense — and always keep an eye to the context. How does your verse relate to the verses that come before and after? How does it fit into the theme of the whole book?
- Remember to test your conclusions in the light of your knowledge of the rest of the Bible and use texts with clear meaning to point you to the meaning of those which are obscure (never the other way round).
- If you get stuck use a commentary to give you some ideas but remember they are not inspired!
- Lastly, always apply what you learn. Reduce every passage to specific, practical steps that you can take. Reading the Bible should change you noticeably.

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

James 1:22 – 25

Memory Verses

- ☺ Proverbs 2:1 – 5
- ☺ Isaiah 8:20
- ☺ James 1:22