Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

How to Study Your Bible
Scripture: Psalm 1:1-2; Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 8:1
Code: P16

Introduction

Truly the Bible is magnificent. Early twentieth-century evangelist Billy Sunday pictured the Bible like a majestic palace. He wrote,

I entered through the portico of Genesis and walked down through the Old Testament's art gallery, where I saw the portraits of Joseph, Jacob, Daniel, Moses, Isaiah, Solomon and David hanging on the wall; I entered the music room of the Psalms and the Spirit of God struck the keyboard of my nature until it seemed to me that every reed and pipe in God's great organ of nature responded to the harp of David, and the charm of King Solomon in his moods.

I walked into the business house of Proverbs.

I walked into the observatory of the prophets and there saw photographs of various sizes, some pointing to far-off stars or events--all concentrated upon one great Star which was to rise as an atonement for sin.

Then I went into the audience room of the King of Kings, and got a vision from four points--from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I went into the correspondence room, and saw Peter, James, Paul and Jude, penning their epistles to the world. I went into the Acts of the Apostles and saw the Holy Spirit forming the Holy Church, and then I walked into the throne room and saw a door at the foot of a tower and, going up, I saw One standing there, fair as the morning, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and I found this truest friend that man ever knew; when all were false I found him true (*BillySunday Speaks* [New York: Chelsea House, 1970], p. 23).

The Bible is an awe-inspiring book. However, we don't want merely to admire it; we need to understand it. In fact, the majority of people who have an opinion about the Bible--either positive or negative--don't understand what it says. Such understanding is crucial because the Bible is the Word of God, a fact that becomes especially apparent as you study it. So we need to know how to study the Bible. That encompasses four things: reading it, interpreting it, meditating on it, and teaching it

Reading the Bible

Bible study begins with reading. Yet, quite frankly, a lot of people never get to that point. At best, they nibble at the text. They may read books about the Bible or devotional materials loosely based on it, but they don't read the Bible itself. Good Christian books and magazines that supplement your Bible reading are fine, but there is no substitute for reading Scripture.

The Old Testament

I believe Christians should try to read through the Old Testament once a year. There are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, and if you read about twenty minutes a day, you should be able to finish it in one year.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a comparatively simple language to understand. It doesn't have the nuances of Greek, the language of the New Testament. It isn't a theoretical or philosophical language with a lot of abstraction. It is very concrete.

The Old Testament is basically a historical narrative interspersed with biblical laws, poetry, and prophecies. I suggest you read from Genesis straight through to Malachi, indicating in your margin with a pencil the passages you don't understand. If you do that, you'll find an interest-ing thing happening: As time goes on you will be erasing many of your markings, because as you read and reread Scripture, you will have a broader perspective that will answer some of the questions you had. [What you can't answer in your reading, you can study later with a commentary or other source that will provide the meaning.]

One potential cause for confusion in reading the Old Testament is that it is not always in chronological order. Something relatively new on the market is *The NarratedBible* (Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House Publishers), which rearranges the entire Bible in chronological order, is a helpful tool. In it you'll read, for instance, the psalms of David interspersed at the appropriate times in his life and the words of the prophets as they relate to the kings in power at the time. It is helpful for those who have never read the Bible before or who want a fresh perspective.

The important thing is to be reading through the Old Testament on a regular basis. You'll be amazed at what you learn, for as the New Testament says, "For whatever was written in earlier times [the Old Testament] was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The New Testament

I have a different approach for reading the New Testament. And by the way, I think our major thrust should be reading the New Testament. In Colossians 1:25-26, Paul says, "I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out

the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints ." That mystery is the New Testament revelation. In Ephesians 3:3-5, Paul describes himself as an apostle of that mystery. The New Testament was the major thrust of his ministry. He used the Old Testament to illustrate, elucidate, and support the New.

The New Testament embodies and engulfs all that was in the Old Testament. It summarizes the content of the Old Testament, and leads us into the fullness of God's revelation to mankind. So you must spend more time studying the New Testament because it explains the Old Testament. Also, it was written in Greek, a particularly complex language that emphasizes abstract concepts and subtle shades of meaning. Therefore, studying the New Testament demands greater diligence.

When I was in seminary, I decided to read 1 John every day for thirty days. That's a good place for you to start, too. The first day--the beginning of the month--simply read all five chapters of 1 John. It will take you only twenty to thirty minutes. Do the same thing the next dayand the next. About the seventh or eighth day you will say to yourself, "This is getting old. I think I understand 1 John by now." That's the hard part. But if you push through and stick with your reading for the rest of the month, you'll have a tremendous comprehension of 1 John.

That is the method I use to prepare my messages. I read through the passage I'm studying over and over again until it fills my mind. I suggest that as you read, you jot down the major themes of each chapter on a three-by-five card. Every day as you read the book, look at the card and read through your list. You will soon know by heart the main points of each chapter.

When you finish reading I John, go on to a large book in the New Testament--the gospel of John is a good choice since you've already become familiar with the apostle John's writing style. Divide the twenty-one chapters into three sections, reading the first seven for thirty days, the second seven for thirty days, and the third seven for thirty days. At the end of those ninety days you will have mastered the content of John's gospel. And all the while keep noting the major themes on three-by-five cards and reading straight through the Old Testament.

After finishing the gospel of John, you might want to go back to reading a short book, say Philippians, and then go to Matthew, then to Colossians, then to Acts. By alternating your reading like that for thirty days at a time, you will complete the entire New Testament in about two and a half years. If you're going to read the New Testament anyway, you might as well read it so you can remember it. You won't find yourself forgetting what you read a few days ago, and you won't be dependent on a concordance because you'll know where to find what you're looking for. Scripture will stick with you for life if you keep up this practice of refreshing your mind with the text.

In using this repetition method of reading, I recommend you stay with the same version and the same Bible. That way you will visualize the precise wording and location of a passage. However, once in awhile, it's good to read your text from another version to get a fresh perspective. By habit, I normally read the King James Version, but I will invariably read the passage I'm studying in the New American Standard Bible, which is especially faithful to the Greek and Hebrew texts, and the English Standard Version, which is very well worded and easy to read.

By reading the Bible repetitiously, you will find that your total comprehension increases dramatically. That's because the Bible explains the Bible. God didn't write it to trip us up; He wants us to understand it. Yet invariably you'll hear people say things like, "Whatever you do, don't read the book of Revelation; it's so confus-ing." However, the first chapter of Revelation says, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy" (v. 3). Ob-viously, God intends for us to read it. But you'll never fully understand Revelation unless you have read through Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. It all begins to come together when you read the Word of God in its entirety.

Interpreting the Bible

Once you read the Bible and know what it says, the next step is to find out what it means. Only when you've correctly interpreted a biblical passage can you apply it to your life and bring glory to God.

Nehemiah 8 shows us the science of interpretation at work: " And all the people gathered as one man at the square ... and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it ...from early morning until midday" (vv. 1-3). Reading the Bible is where understanding begins. Verse 3 continues, "And all the people were attentive to the book of the law...Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground" (vv. 3-6). The people responded to the reading of Scripture by wor-shiping the Lord. Verse 8 is the key: "And they [the Levitical instructors] read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." That's what's involved in interpreting the text.

In 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul says to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation [application] and teaching [interpretation]." That's what "handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) is all about. Anything else leads to misinterpretation, and misinterpretation is the mother of all kinds of mania. For, example, some people are teaching that since the patriarchs practiced polygamy, so must we. Others say that women should suffer in childbirth as a divine punishment and not use anesthesia. Such misinterpretations arise when someone doesn't understand what the Bible is really saying or the specific situation involved.

Things to Avoid

Don't make a point at the cost of proper interpreta-tion . In other words, don't make the Bible say what you want it to say. That's like the preacher who proclaimed that women shouldn't wear their hair on top of their heads. His text was "Top Knot Come Down," supposedly from Matthew 24:17, which says, "Let him who is on the housetop not come down" (King James Version). Obviously that's not what the passage is about! Don't try to find verses to support a preconceived idea. I know if I try to *make* a sermon, I end up forcing the Bible to fit my sermon. But if I try to comprehend a passage, a message will flow out of the understanding that follows.

In 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul says, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God." The Greek word translated "peddling" is *kapeleuo,* which referred to selling something deceitfully in the marketplace--something that wasn't what it claimed to be. You must not force the Bible to illustrate your preconceived notions. Be careful not to interpret the Bible at the cost of its true meaning.

Avoid superficial Bible study . Unfortunately, some Bible studies consist of nothing more than person's saying, "I guess this verse means..." or "What does this verse mean to you?" Basically that's a pooling of ignorance--a lot of people sitting around telling what they don't know about the verse. To have a successful Bible study, someone has to study the passage beforehand to find out what it really means. Only then can you discuss it intelligently and apply it. Interpretation requires work. Don't take the easy way out and believe what everyone tells you the Bible says. Check the facts out yourself. Don't assume there are many interpretations of a biblical passage. There may be many applications, but there is only one true interpretation. God's Word is precise. It is not ambiguous. God has given us the ability to discover its meaning.

Don't spiritualize the text . The first sermon I ever preached was really bad. My text was, "The angel rolled the stone away" from Matthew 28. I entitled my sermon, "Rolling Away the Stones in Your Life." I talked about the stone of doubt, the stone of fear, and the stone of anger. Doubt, fear, and anger are all legitimate topics, but they have nothing to do with that verse! I call that "Little Bo Peep Preaching" because you don't need the Bible; you can use anything--even "Little Bo Peep."

Picture a preacher saying this: "Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep. All over the world people are lost. And can't tell where to find them. But they'll come home--ah, they'll come." Then you hear a tear-jerking story about sinners who came home "wagging their tails behind them!" Ridiculous? Yes, but unfortunately not too hard to imagine.

Many people tend to do that with the Old Testament. They turn it into a fairy tale with all kinds of hidden meanings--anything but what the text plainly states. Don't spiritualize the Bible. It deserves more respect.

Gaps to Bridge

To interpret the Bible properly we have some gaps to bridge:

Language . We speak English, but the Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (which is similar to Hebrew). Many of the Bible translations available today are excellent, but no translation can get across everything that the original language conveys. For example, in 1 Corinthians 4:1 the apostle Paul says, "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ." When we think of the English word *minister,* we think of a prime minister or a minister of defense. It is a lofty term. However the Greek word translated "minister" (*huperetes*) originally spoke of a third-level galley slave--hardly a lofty concept. Paul wanted it to be said of him that he was nothing more than a third-level galley slave for Jesus Christ. You would never get that out of the English term. That's why you need to bridge the language gap.

There are some excellent tools available. W. E. Vine's *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) is helpful for someone who doesn't know Greek. In addition, there are several language helps that are keyed to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,* which has a numerical code to English definitions of all the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic words in the Bible. You'll learn to trace how a particular word is used throughout the entire Bible, or just in the passage you are studying. Bridging the language gap will bring you to a new level of understanding.

Culture .Parts of the Bible may have been written as long as four thousand years ago. Times have certainly changed since then! If you don't understand the culture of the time in which your passage was written, you'll never understand its meaning.

John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Why didn't John simply say, "In the beginning was Jesus"? By studying the culture of the time, we discover that the term "the Word" [Gk., *ho logos*] was highly significant to both Greekand Hebrew culture. To the Greeks, it was a philosophical term representing the sum total ofcosmic energy, or that which causes everything to exist. To the Hebrews, the Word ofthe Lord was the personal expression ofGod. John drew in both audiences by describing Jesus as the personal manifestation ofthe Almighty Creator.

Similarly, if youdon't know anything about the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other aspects of Jewish culture, you won't understand the book of Matthew. If youdon't know something about Gnosticism, you won't understand the book of Colossians. Some books to help bridge the culture gap are *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) and Eerdmans's varying handbooks on Bible culture.

Geography . There are many geographical references in Scripture. For instance, we read of going *down* to Jericho and *up* to Jerusalem. In 1 Thessalonians 1:8 we read, "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth." From other portions of Scripture, we learn that Paul was just recently in Thessalonica. Knowing something about the geography of the area explains how the word spread so fast. The Ignatian Highway, the main concourse between the East and West, ran through the middle of Thessalonica. Whatever happened there was passed down all along the way. Do you see how an understanding of geography can enrich your comprehension of the text? Consult a good Bible atlas (Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1985]) or geography text and reap the benefits.

History . Knowing the historical backgroundofthe text also enriches your understanding. In the gospel ofJohn, the key to understanding the interplay between Pilate and Jesus is knowing what happened beforehand. When Pilate was first assigned to Judea, he infuriated the Jewish population by trying to force pagan culture and emperor worship on them. There were several incidents, and Rome was displeased with Pilate's inability to keep the peace. Pilate was afraid ofwhat the Jewish leaders might instigate, and that's why he let Christ be crucified. He already had a rotten track record and his job was on the line. Bible dictionaries and *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) are good sources for historical background.

Steps to Follow

Be literal . Seek to understand Scripture in its literal, normal, and natural sense. Although symbolism and figures ofspeech appear in the Bible, they will be obvious from the context. When you study apocalyptic passages in Zechariah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Revelation, you will read about beasts and images. Those are symbols, but they convey *literal* truth. Interpret the Bible in its normal, natural sense. Otherwise you're taking an unnatural, abnormal, nonsensical interpretation. For example, some rabbis were zealous advocates of *gematria*, assigning numerical values to the Hebrew letters to interpret the text. For instance, they said if youtake the consonants ofAbraham's name--*b, r, h, m*--and add them up with their numerical equivalents, you get 318. Therefore, when you see the word *Abraham* it means he had 318servants! No, it means Abraham,period. Interpret Scripture in its literal sense, as you would any other piece of literature.

Know the context . The Bible must be studied in its historical context. What did it mean to whom it was spoken or written? You must also study its literary context. How does the passage or verse you're studying relate to the surrounding text? It has been well said that a text apart from context is a pretext.

Analyze the sentence structure . In school, we learn how to diagram a sentence--identify the verbs, nouns, prepositions, and other parts of speech to find out what it is saying. Apply that to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." As you first read it, "Go", "make disciples", "baptizing", and "teaching" all sound like verbs. But when you study the sentence structure, you find there's only one verb, *matheteuo,* "make disciples." "Go", "baptizing", and "teaching" are only participles, which means they modify the main verb. So the Great Commission is to make disciples, which involves going to them, baptizing them, and teaching them. You have to examine the grammar carefully to fully comprehend and appreciate the meaning of the text.

Compare your interpretation with the totality of Scripture . This vital principle of interpretation is what the Reformers called *analogia Scriptura*, meaning that all Scripture fits together. One part of the Bible doesn't teach something that another part contradicts. So when you read 1 Corinthians 15:29, which speaks of baptism for the dead, you know it can't mean one can get someone out of hell and into heaven by being baptized on his behalf. That interpretation contradicts the clear teaching of salvation by grace through personal faith in Christ alone.

Look for principles to apply . Reread the text and find out what spiritual principles there are that apply to you and fellow believers in Christ. You can do that only after you have literally interpreted your passage, analyzed its context and sentence structure, and compared your interpretation with the totality of Scripture.

Meditating on the Bible

Don't be in a hurry when you study God's Word. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 says, "These words...shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." In other words, God's Word ought to occupy your mind all the time. And if you're steadily reading through the Old Testament, and if you're reading the books of the New Testament thirty times, that's exactly what will happen!

Meditation is the process that molds the individual parts into a cohesive comprehension of biblical truth. It's another word for deep thinking and reflection. Meditation--in the biblical sense of the word--is a contemplative, intelligent process, where Eastern meditation attempts to disengage the thinking processes.

Psalm 1:1-2 says, " How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. " Like a cow chewing its cud, something it does over and

over, we should repeatedly meditate and reflect on Scripture.

Teaching the Bible

I have discovered that the best way to retain something is to give it away. That's because the only way you can effectively explain a subject is if you thoroughly understand it first. As a teacher, you are forced to master your subject. Find someone with a desire to learn who knows less than you do, and pass on what you know in a systematic way. By feeding someone else, you'll feed your own heart. I believe that the motivation for studying Scripture largely comes from one's responsibility in this area. If I didn't have someone to teach, I might not produce.

Conclusion

Now that you've learned some practical steps to reading, interpreting, meditating on, and teaching Scripture, my charge to you is to make each one a lifelong habit. But should you begin thinking you know it all, remember Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." We can only scratch the surface of the infinite mind of God, but even that is a worthy pursuit because He has given us His Word so we might know Him. Our purpose in learning the Word of God is not to have knowledge for its own sake. As Paul said, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8:1). Our purpose is to know God, and to know God is to learn humility.

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