

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

76.2 How Can I Profitably Study the Bible by Myself?

Part II

Scripture: I John 2:15-27:

The Christian has been given a wonderful vehicle through which individual faith can be increased, made rewarding, and rendered productive. This channel comes in the form of a book. In fact, that is its very name. We use the name "Bible" which comes from the Greek "Biblia" meaning books. Centuries ago the Greeks renamed Gebal, a Phoenician port (twenty-five miles north of Beirut), Byblos, because it was a city famous for processing papyrus printing material. The inhabitants of Byblos were also pioneers in the development of writing and even invented one of the early alphabets. Biblos meant a document which was written on papyrus, a kind of paper made from an Egyptian plant. Our word "Bible" (Biblia) simply means "books" or any form of written document (Biblion/singular form).

This book is to be taken very seriously by the Christian. It is interesting to note Augustine's (354-430) expression, "Tolle lege! Tolle lege!" The words mean, "Take and read: Take and read:" That sounds, like a very worthwhile admonition, but the fact of the matter is that we are not asked to read the Bible. Reading can be a very superficial exercise and may well be one of the reasons so many have found their relationship with the Bible or their experience of the Bible a rather disheartening one. Nowhere in Scripture are we enjoined to simply read the material which is written on the pages. What we are directed to do is to hold the Scriptures in awe (Psalm 119:161), to treasure them more than food (Job 23:12), to love them (Psalms 119:97, 113, 140, 163), to hide them in our heart (Psalm 119:11), to delight in them (Psalms 1:2, 119, 24, 35, 77, 143, 174), to rejoice in them (Psalm 119:14), to meditate upon them (Psalms 1:2, 119, 15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148), to praise God for them (Psalms 56:4, 10), to study them (Isaiah 34:16; John 5:39; II Timothy 2:15), and to share them (Acts 4:29, 31, 8:4, 25; II Corinthians 2:17; I Thessalonians 1:8).

Some people do come to the Bible as readers only. The Scriptures to them are mere words. To others, these same words burst with life. They speak, not to outside and physical ears only, but inner and spiritual ears primarily. I believe

that the latter group brings to the Bible two basic qualifications. One is the matter of attitude and the other has to do with one's approach or skill in meditating upon Scripture. These two prerequisites will occupy our attention in this study.

III. FOUR BASIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BIBLE CAN BE NOTED:

From the verses cited above it is reasonable to conclude that attitude is of great importance if the study of Scripture is to return a profit upon the time and effort invested. If our attitude toward Scripture is wrong or faulty, we will be much less able to study the Bible with profit. Faulty attitudes have to do with one's conviction as to the authenticity (the truth of its content), authority and apprehension of the Bible.

In terms of faulty attitudes let me say that there are many people for whom this class is of no interest. It isn't a matter of the teacher or even the fact that it is being held in a church building. It has to do with the subject being studied and the fact that it is a Bible class. They do not assign that much importance to the study of Scripture. That book does not embody spiritual authority for their lives. Let me describe these people to you and also to mention that attitude which draws others to be here and to desire a greater understanding of the Bible.

1. Some People Are Rationalists:

In terms of religious belief this person frames his or her conviction in the words, "What my mind accepts is authoritative to me." Extreme rationalists are atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists and radical theologians and do not take the Bible seriously at all. This is not to suggest that people who do accept the Bible are irrational. Moderate rationalists do accept parts of the Bible which appeal to their sense of reasonableness. All rationalists combine reason with conscience and religious sentiment, or lack of it, to form their view of life coupled with what they have observed from history, philosophy, religion and science. Having been taught that the Bible is not a reliable guide, rationalists turn to what they believe to be the best option available, truth which can be discerned on the basis of evidence which is available. In all fairness to believers, we must say that nowhere is a person asked to believe in his heart what his head tells him is wrong. There is enough evidence to convince the honest and seeking doubter. Few, if any, are won by argumentation.

2. Some People Are Mystics:

This person's belief is embodied in the words, "What I feel within is what God says to me." Mysticism undermines the Bible's authority by claiming direct access to divine truth apart from the Bible or by claiming infallible illumination on the meaning of Scripture by minimizing historical methods of interpretation or by substituting application for interpretation. It is encouraged by the feeling that Bible study skills are somehow unspiritual and an obstacle to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the discovery of truth. Thus, a complete distinction is made between the academic study of Scripture and the devotional study of it. Many people do not look upon themselves as mystics but pretty well live according to the way they feel.

3. Some People Are Traditionalists:

The person feels that "The Bible is the child of the church, not its mother." The conviction is, "What church tradition says is what God says." Here the church and its traditions make up that which holds final authority. The position has been classically stated in the words, "The Scripture is neither sufficient nor clear, and must be interpreted and amplified by the church, drawing from tradition built upon councils, church fathers, dogmas, and papal pronouncements." This has been not only the stance of the Roman Catholic Church but is shared also by people in the Protestant community as well. The feeling obviously is that the truth of Scripture cannot be apprehended on an individual basis. Many people who are not traditionalists share this belief. They feel that whatever conclusions they come to through the study of the Bible will only prove to be wrong as regarded by people who have given their entire lives to its study.

To summarize up to this point regarding attitudes toward the Bible. The question is one of authority and apprehension. The rationalist says, "I know whatever my mind tells me is reasonable." The mystic exclaims, "I know truth intuitively." The traditionalist affirms, "I know whatever the church tells me is true." None of these people will be inclined or highly motivated to become involved in serious Bible study. But there is another attitude.

4. Some People Are Biblicists:

Biblicism is the position that what God says is what the Bible says. This is the view of evangelical Protestantism. The importance of reason is recognized. The value of subjective religious experience is granted. The time honored

convictions of the Church Fathers during the ancient period and of the reformers are highly regarded. But reason, feelings and the church are all subordinate to Scripture in matters of faith and practice. Only the Bible is supreme.

This view further holds that Scripture was written to be read and understood by everyone. Scholarship does afford levels of understanding, but the Bible was not written primarily for the highly trained. We know that teachers are to be recognized, “especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine.” (I Timothy 5:17) The Bible was written for everyone not because it would be fully understood, not because it has been earned or it is deserved or even wanted. The Word comes to all because it is needed. The presence and power of God is mediated to our lives through the Bible. If we seek the presence of God we must seek where He has chosen to be found. This is the significance of the well known statement found in Deuteronomy 8:3, *“Man does not live by bread alone but...by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”*

There are other qualities which must be brought to Scripture which are much more important than classroom learning if the Biblical message is to be properly interpreted and understood. These qualities, I believe, are best understood in terms of the heart, which the Bible refers to as the center of our personality and being. When we read about the heart in the Bible we are immediately confronted with that part of us which is of greatest importance in terms of a relationship with God. People who study the Bible profitably bring to the Bible a **new heart**. The message is spiritual and only the spiritually qualified are able to understand the Bible as it was written to be understood. (I Corinthians 2:14) It is the **longing heart** which is rewarded, nourished and fed. (I Peter 2:2) God knows the person who cares. The **willing heart** further enhances one's appreciation of Scripture. This thought is emphasized again and again. Bible study was meant to be profitable. It is not for purposes of speculation or accumulation of knowledge only. We will find it rewarding only when the study of its pages leads us to do what Paul calls *“good works”* in II Timothy 2:15 and 3:17. Here lies the prime guide to all worthwhile Bible study. Here we are at a crossroads. Here the Book lives or dies for us. God has sent His Word into this world for our ‘profit.’ This profit is realized to the degree that it leads us to good works. (Colossians 1:10) We must be willing to obey the Lord. Lastly, we read of a **trusting**

heart. (Proverbs 3:5-6) Here is the kind of teachable spirit that does not find its ultimate confidence in human understanding. To this fully teachable, childlike attitude God will cause His Book to speak. Biblicists are believing, longing, willing and trusting people. I believe the first step in profitably studying the Bible is attitudinal in nature. I might also say that Biblicists are a **working people**. The word Paul uses in II Timothy 2:15 is for being approved unto God is “dokimos.” It means one who has stood the test. The rest of the verse handling properly the truth, or driving a straight road through the truth. This is the test of time and energy spent in diligent study of the Word. You get what you pay for. Dig deep and the treasure will not elude you. Scratch the surface and miss the blessing.

Having contrasted the various attitudes which are common among people and granting the importance of coming to the Bible with at least a sincere desire to profit from it, we may go on to establish some guidelines which are most important. You may remember the words of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8:30-31. This man had Philip by his side and the Word of God in his hand. He was asked, “*Understandest what thou readest?*” The answer came, “*How can I except some man guide me?*” Guidelines to profitable study of the Bible are not unspiritual or a negation of the Holy Spirit's ministry. It is possible to learn certain skills and possess only an intellectual knowledge. This does not have to happen. Skills or mechanics in any discipline soon become second nature to those who go on to work and play at their best. I believe skills in handling the Word of God actually free the Holy Spirit to do greater things in our lives when we are obedient to the understanding we have. What, then, is the most helpful approach to the Bible? How can we best develop our ability to receive what the Word has for us? The remaining part of our study will have to do with one particular approach and the various steps which are a part of this method.

IV. THE BIBLE CAN BE STUDIED PROFITABLY IN AN INDUCTIVE WAY:

If you have ever taken a course in logic you may remember your text or teacher talking about inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. In deduction the thinker begins with certain established truths which are held as basic premises and then goes on to draw conclusions from them. It has often been pointed out that you can prove just about anything by the deductive method granted certain premises to begin with. The Christian is often accused of reasoning this way. There really is no problem with a Red Sea being divided if an Almighty God is granted to begin with. Bible students do use deductive reasoning, but it is not at

the point of first establishing basic premises. Truth is established by the processes of induction and deduction is most useful in the application of those truths.

Inductive study of Scripture means, simply speaking, that you do it yourself. As a good detective surveys the data at hand, the good Bible student examines all the relevant information available in order to arrive at the truth of a given passage. The method has to do with drawing conclusions from particular observations. It is the privilege of every believer to go directly to the Bible to discover eternal verities for himself. The inductive method is a way which enables one to develop rapidly in the ability to do independent Bible study.

Induction reasons from the particular to the general principle. Deduction reasons from the general principle to the particular case. As a student of the Bible the inductionist will study all of the relevant material for himself. The Holy Spirit who resides within will then, and can be trusted to guide you in determining the meaning of the Word. The illumination is thus provided to enable one to correctly interpret the Scriptures. There is a certain methodology to the inductive method which involves five different steps. I have chosen the following words which lead us into a progressive and methodical approach to establishing general principles from individual and particular passages. The words are recognize, analyze, perceptualize, summarize and personalize. Our next study will deal with these steps in the inductive Bible study method.

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