

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

76.4 How Can I Profitably Study the Bible by Myself?**Part IV**

Scripture: Hebrews 5:12-14

I invite you to follow me in a venture deep into human experience. In a word, it is an exploration into the phenomenon of growth and development. As Christians, our experience of the Lord is fluid rather than fixed. The life that is called Christian reaches its fullest expression through the proper regard for and study of the Word of God. Two possibilities confront those who take the Bible in hand to study its meaning and message. There is the possibility that Bible teaching can be corrupted or spoiled. Such a thing takes place when the Scriptures are not allowed to speak for themselves and meaning is brought to them. Paul refers to this in II Corinthians 2:17. He writes, *“For we are not like many, **peddling** the Word of God.”* The underlined word is “kapeleuo” and it means to huckster, corrupt or spoil.

Rather, we are to discern properly what is being said. Paul had this in mind in writing to Timothy and urging him to rightly divide (Orthotomeo) the Word of Truth. (II Timothy 2:15) Originally the word was used metaphorically to picture the cutting of a straight line, the laying of a road, or the plowing a furrow. In Paul's time it signified that of proper management or treatment without falsifying. In the third century Clement of Alexandria took the word as being akin to orthodoxia or orthodoxy, which means straight thinking. The Word of God or truth is to be laid out straightly, not to be falsified by one who veers in his thinking.

The context of these passages in Corinthians and Timothy has to do with the proper handling of God's Word by leaders. This is also true of the Hebrews 5:12-14 passage. Actually, the teaching has application for all believers. Every Christian is in his or her own right, a leader. A simple example of this is the fact that people are led to Christ by other people. Such a ministry calls for the *“rightly dividing”* of the Word of Truth. We would not be among those who spoil the truth. This is so important in our time. We need no new gospel and we had better not invent one. Our business is to be a community of learners and leaders who have come to see ourselves, others, the universe in which we live, and God, as the Scriptures reveal they can be seen. Such a profitable study of the Bible is

a wise investiture of time and effort.

We have spoken together of the inductive approach to Bible study. It is a method wherein the student makes a maximum use of his powers of observation. Five interrelated steps are involved. We have said that one must study to **recognize** what is actually being said; Secondly, one must **analyze** what is actually being said. Thirdly, one must **perceptualize** what is being said. Perception has to do with understanding and this brings us to one of the most difficult aspects of Bible study for some people, that of interpretation.

Interpretation has to do with understanding the meaning of something. Biblical interpretation deals with discerning what God wants us to know through the words He has caused to be put in written form. When we interpret Scripture we seek to determine what the author meant by the words used. The study of those principles which pertain to the interpretation of the Bible is known as hermeneutics. It is a science inasmuch as it reduces interpretation to certain time-honored rules. It is an art because there are those occasions when the text will not lead itself to such formulas. The purpose of our study today is not to make divinity school students out of ourselves. It is rather to merely become familiar with those helpful rules which will cause our minds to move in the same direction or line of thought as that of Scripture. Our thinking is against the oft repeated feeling that people can make the Bible say anything they want it to say. People who feel they are at liberty to interpret the Bible any way they want to interpret it simply do not know what they are talking about. No one has that option. Just as there are certain fixed principles which govern the interpretation of all language, there are those guidelines which help us to understand the meaning of God's language.

3. Study to Perceptualize What Is Actually Being Said:

In our last study we introduced this third step in the inductive method of Bible study. Having taken careful note of the words before us and having asked certain questions (What-Where-When-How-Why-Who) about those words, we are now ready to attempt to interpret those words. Consider the following hermeneutical principles.

A. Interpret by Determining the Correct Meaning of Words:

We will surely want to give careful attention to word meanings in interpreting the Bible. Keep in mind that the Bible was written in Hebrew (the primary language of the Old Testament), Aramaic, and Greek (the basic language of the New Testament) Aramaic was the language of

the Syrians and during the 6th century B.C. it became the language of the entire Near East. Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic as their native tongue. There were also certain Latin words which appear in the New Testament. Examples of these are "tribute," "legion," and "centurion." Greek was an intellectual language and was universally known during the New Testament period. We are one step removed from the original languages and are therefore dependent on versions and translations which have come to us. However, words slip and slide. Often they change in meaning with the passing of time. An example of this is in the use of the word "*prevent*" in I Thessalonians 4:15. Over 300 years ago it meant "to go before." Today it means to hinder or to stop. Words can be looked up in the dictionary and they can be studied in context. (II Samuel 2:14; Psalm 1:6; Revelation 5:5; I Peter 5:8) One important consideration here is also to interpret words used in a particular verse according to their overall usage in Scripture. When in doubt about the exact meaning of a word in the Bible, go to a concordance and find there every verse in the Bible where that word is found. You will be able to find the Biblical meaning by those comparisons. (Romans 6:23; Revelation 21:8) Also, we should interpret words according to their exact force where possible.

It was the work of the Holy Spirit to guide the Bible writers in the choice of words they used so that the mind of God was expressed exactly. Paul mentions this in I Corinthians 2:13, "*Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual words.*" (RV) An example could be taken from Revelation 2:10. "*Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.*" The verse tells how to obtain the crown, not salvation.

B. Interpret by Understanding the Grammar:

Grammar deals with word forms and relationships. These sometimes have an important influence on meaning. Labeling words grammatically as to what part of speech they are and just how they relate to each other in a given text simply means we are attempting to understand the Bible in the light of the customary laws of human language. Examples of interpreting the Bible in the light of grammar may be drawn from I Corinthians 11:27; John 21:15 and I John 3:6-9.

C. Interpret in the Light of Context:

The word “context” simply means what is “con” or with the text. Perhaps you have heard the familiar axiom, “A text without a context, is a pretext.” One reason why people are of the erroneous opinion that the Bible can be made to say anything one wants it to say is because statements are lifted from the pages of Scripture and made to stand alone without any consideration to either the immediate surrounding truth or for what the rest of the corpus of Scripture is saying. The fact of the matter is that we interpret Scripture by comparing one passage with another. One part throws light on another part. In this way Scripture becomes its own interpreter.

The reformers of old employed their “*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres.*” What this meant was that the whole of Scripture gave meaning to the **part** of Scripture. No part of Scripture could be interpreted to shape the whole of Scripture. This logic meant that doctrine could not be drawn from the minor points of Scripture. As an aside I might say that this is the mistake the cults of our time have made. A cult is a system of belief which is contradictory to the teachings of historic orthodox Christianity but which traces its origin to orthodox sources. The departure often can be traced to the misinterpretation of a part of Scripture with no thought given to parallel or related passages. Context, as I am speaking of it here, exists on two levels. There is the immediate point of reference which has to do with surrounding verses or paragraphs. Extended context may make reference to a preceding or following chapter or another part of the same book. There is no question that many verses might possibly have several meanings if they stood alone; but in relation to what is found before and after, only one meaning is acceptable. Examples of the importance of this interpretative principle are found in John 9:3 and Romans 3:9-10, 23. See also I Corinthians 10:23; Acts 2:39; Luke 14:26-27; Matthew 10:37-38. It has been said there is not a doubtful or difficult passage in the Bible anywhere but that some other passage somewhere is able to shed great light upon it, if we look long enough for it. Context, and related passages are to be considered.

D. Interpret So as to Recognize the Unity of Scripture:

The Bible was authored by the Holy Spirit who employed 36 or more holy men from Moses (or someone earlier) to the Apostle John. (Exodus 34:27; Revelation 1:19) The period of coverage ranges from the time of creation to eternity future. (Genesis 1:1; Revelation 22:5) The date of writing is from about 2000-1500 B.C. (Job) to about 96 A.D. (Revelation) The circumstances of writing have to do with the revelation of truth to man so that man might know God, himself and Christ. The theme of the Bible is the justice, grace and glory of God as expressed in Christ. The Bible is a library of 66 books divided into two sections. One deals with all that happened before Christ came and the other has to do with what transpired after he came. Though written over a period of hundreds of years by men from all walks of life there is a unity of thought and purpose from the beginning to the end. About one tenth of the New Testament is Old Testament material.

There are some 295 references to the Old Testament in the New Testament and these are put forth in about 352 verses. Truly, the Old Testament is in the New revealed. This unity escapes many for some reason. We have our modern day Marcionites. There was a second century scholar by the name of Marcion of Pontus. He became a Christian and began to read the Old Testament. Marcion was an influential member of the congregation at Rome. (A.D. 139) From his reading Marcion concluded that the God of the Old Testament differed from God spoken of in the New Testament. The Old Testament God was a "wrathful Deity" whereas grace and love were the characteristics of the New Testament God. Well, Marcion finally rejected the whole of the Old Testament. He was excommunicated in A.D.144. One thing important about Marcion. He realized that by rejecting the Old Testament his view of the New Testament would be greatly effected. He went through the New Testament and carefully removed everything that reminded him of Old Testament teaching. He was left with a small volume consisting mainly of his reworked letters of Paul. Even Marcion the heretic acknowledged the unity of Scripture.

E. Interpret With Regard for the Author's Purpose in Writing:

The purpose an author has is the object he has in mind for writing. Perhaps the most obvious example is that of John as he states in his

gospel, *“But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”* (20:31) This is also true in I John 5:13, *“I write this to you...that you may know that you have eternal life.”* We might interpret properly by discovering whether or not the purpose is specifically stated or not. (See I Corinthians 1:11; 3:4; 4:6; II Corinthians 2:3-4; 7:5-8) Paul does not mention his purpose directly, sometimes there are hints to be discerned. When the purpose of a book is understood, each passage is studied with this in mind. Our interpretation of that passage must be in keeping with the purpose. Passages which this principle of interpretation may be applied to are Philippians 2:1-8.

F. Interpret With a View of What the Writer Opposed:

For instance, when interpreting John in his first Epistle, we should keep in mind that he was opposing the Gnostics of his day. They believed that salvation came through the enlightened intellect. They claimed to possess special, mystical and supernatural knowledge. They subscribed to the notion that matter was evil. They thus concluded that Christ could not have been a real man with a real body. John writes, *“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist.”* (I John 4:2-3) Sometimes it is helpful to be mindful of what the author opposes.

G. Interpret Carefully What Belongs to the Believer Only:

One of the most common errors in interpreting the Bible is the assigning of what the Bible says to one particular group, to another. We might take for example Romans 8:35 which reads, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?”* Who is this written to? The context clearly shows it is written to the believer, to the one who is called “foreordained,” “called,” “justified.” The suggestion that nothing can separate anyone from the love of Christ is simply not true. The promises of Scripture are, for the most part, directed to the people of God.

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