

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

76.6 How Can I Profitably Study the Bible by Myself?

Part VI

Scripture: Psalm 19:7-11

It was Patrick Henry who said, "The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed." Doubtless, there are many who share this conviction by the American statesman and orator. My reason for mentioning this high view of the Bible is because there is something most unusual about the popularity the Scriptures enjoy. In spite of the fact that the Bible may be the most loved of books, it is at the same time the most neglected. It is the most widely known book in the world and the least understood. There are millions of people who know what the Bible is without knowing what it says or what is the true wonder of the book.

We conclude our series of studies today having to do with how the Bible can be profitably studied. Our stress has been upon the input one brings to the Scriptures in terms of observation. Five interrelated steps can be noted in making the maximum use of one's powers of observation. We have said one must study to **recognize** what is actually being said. Secondly, one should **analyze** the material. We spoke of Rudyard Kipling's six faithful men. These men taught him all he knew. Their names were What and Where and When and How and Why and Who? Then we called for the student to **perceptualize**. Perception has to do with understanding. This is actually the discerning of what God wants us to know from the passage. It is the act of interpretation. Eleven guidelines or principles of interpretation were noted. This morning we will think about **summarizing** and **personalizing** the meaning of a particular passage.

4. Study to Summarize What Is Actually Being Said:

The fourth step in profitable Bible study is a most important one. There is a danger in using the skills we have already discussed if at some point there is not the effort to understand the entire message the author was attempting to convey. Words, phrases, and verses are not ends in themselves, regardless of how interesting and meaningful they may be. We study the parts of a passage in order to understand the whole. The

necessity of this step might be illustrated by the presence of motorcycle parts in my basement. One of our sons has dismantled two motorcycles and the various pieces appear to be scattered all over the place. If I invited you to see the spectacle you would see the wheels, fenders, frames, in addition to hundreds of engine parts. Were I to say to you, "Here are two motorcycles," no doubt you would reply, "I see the parts that make up the bikes, but I do not see what the motorcycles actually look like." It is the same with the study of the Bible. It is not enough to see parts or even to understand parts. We must see the parts in reference to the whole before the message can be properly understood. Summaries crystallize the teaching. We are to relate verses to paragraphs, paragraphs to chapters, chapters to books. We should always think of summarizing what we have been studying, to concisely formulate in our minds the truth set forth. A summary statement might include the words, "Therefore, it seems to me that the author is saying this."

Another feature of summarizing has to do with testing conclusions which have been drawn regarding interpretation. Here one struggles with the information which has been gathered. There is reflection, comparison and evaluation. Conclusions are tested by first seeing if they are true to what the passage itself is saying, as well as by being consistent with what the Bible says in other places. An example of internal validity is found in Matthew 14:28-31. A fiction writer notes: The Hebrew word "al" was always translated as "on," so that the Scriptures tell us that Jesus walked on the water. However, the Hebrew word "al" also has another meaning, which is "by." Therefore, the translations could have as correctly read that Jesus walked by the water, in short, took a stroll by the seaside. But perhaps the early Christian propagandists deliberately sought a miracle rather than a pedestrian. (Irving Wallace, **The Word**, N.Y. Simon & Schuster, 1972 p.150) This interpretation of the passage is not internally valid as seen by Peter's request and subsequent fear of drowning.

Another example of failing to check within the passage, the chapter, and the section, has to do with the report of the liberal scholar regarding the floating axe head in II Kings 6:1-7. The professor explained the incident by saying that the axe head probably fell on the back of a turtle dozing at the bottom of the river. Awakened by the sudden weight on his back, the

turtle rose to the surface just as Elisha arrived. Thus, the young man was able to reach out and gain possession of the axe head. Here again, no consideration is given to the fact that the whole section abounds with miracles. This was one of the miracle periods that are to be found in the Bible. In this example we have gone from the part to the whole. Thus far in our approach to profitable Bible study we have examined the material carefully, we have sought to ask certain questions and by research to answer them about the data. We have applied many time honored principles of interpretation to the passage, and we have summarized our conclusions and subjected them to certain tests. Yet, there is another step in the process. Without it the Bible study we do can prove to be a spiritually lifeless experience. We have already said that the most spiritually dead people described in the Bible were those who had a head full of Scripture. They were able to quote verse after verse. They were the Scribes and Pharisees, outstanding students of the Bible but without spiritual life and understanding. What was true of those men so long ago is true of some Christians today. They have lost the wonder of spiritual realities. There is no spiritual glow. They know their Bibles but have discovered the truth of Paul's words in II Corinthians 3:4, *"The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."* The letter of the Word, the cold, literal letter, has somehow ministered a kind of deadness to their spiritual lives, Bible knowledge has never been a guarantee of spiritual life. Academic and theoretical knowledge can harden our spirits.

5. Study to Personalize What Is Actually Being Said:

Learning about Bible truths is very important and up to this point we have been suggesting ways to learn these truths. But the purpose or goal of Bible study is not to make scholars out of us, it is rather to bring us to God in a kind of relationship which glorifies Him and changes us. It is the Word which restores the soul and rejoices the heart. (Psalms 19:7-8) Profitable Bible study takes place when I personally respond to what has been made known to me. I would like to make several suggestions as to how we might study our Bibles in a way that enables us to personalize what is being said rather than merely analyzing the meaning of the words.

The ultimate goal in studying and understanding the Bible is living to the glory of God. Spiritual challenges are always being made and personal responses are

expected. Consider the following ways in which we may answer God's call upon our lives.

A. By Believing What We Are Asked to Believe:

A reasonable question to ask when studying a passage from the Word is, "Are there some truths here for me to believe?" Many portions of Scripture contain no direct command to be obeyed or example to follow. There is however, an appeal to believe. John 1:12 is an example of this *"But as many as received Him to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."* The familiar expression, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," applies here. Many times I have tried to assure a person from this verse. But they must believe it for themselves. Another verse which is appropriate here is Hebrews 11:6, *"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."* The truths of the Bible are there whether we believe them or not. Our unbelief does not altar their fact. It is our experience of their truth which is effected by the way we react toward them. It is imperative that we believe God when such belief is called for.

B. By Obeying Direct Commands and Instructions:

Some commands in the Bible were given to a particular person or group in a particular situation. At Pentecost time the disciples were told to remain in Jerusalem. (Luke 24:49) Jesus told a particular individual to go and sell his possessions. (Matthew 19:21) The surrounding verses indicate that this man's possessions were a god to him. Not everyone is commanded to remain in Jerusalem or to sell every possession. Of course, there was a principle involved regarding the young man which is binding on everyone. The possessions were to be sold because they were a hindrance. Other commands are direct and clear. Sample readings are, *"Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord."* (Philippians 3:1) *"So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."* (I Corinthians 10:31)

C. By Responding to Indirect Teachings:

This instruction does not come by way of specific command but the indirect challenge is very strong. An example of this might be found in I Corinthians 13 which tells what love is like. The Apostle Paul does not say to the Corinthian people, *"You must love like this."* What he does is to describe love to them and they were to realize that Corinthian religion was to be like that.

D. By Claiming the Promises of God in Scripture:

Some promises in God's Word are without condition. In Genesis 9:11, God makes the unconditional promise that He will never destroy the earth again by flood. Most promises appear to be conditional. An example might be II Chronicles 7:14, *"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."* (See Deuteronomy 28:2-3; Romans 10:9; Samuel 2:30) Promises in Scripture are to be studied, and claimed. We should take to heart the words of Joshua 21:45. What God promised with His lips He went on to provide. *"Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass."*

E. By Learning from the Example of Those Who Have Gone Before:

The Bible is a book about people. The Scriptures afford answers to our problems not only in teaching but also through the experiences of the people who make up its cast of characters. There are about 3000 of them mentioned. Bible truth often comes alive in terms of people and experiences rather than in doctrine and idea. Biblical examples are for us to study and to profit from. I Corinthians 10:11 reads, *"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."*

F. By Recognizing that the Bible Is Necessary to Us:

It is a natural law that a person must either eat or die. People do starve. Their bodies waste away and they do not survive for want of food. What is true in the natural realm is no less true in the spiritual. Unless the inner man, the new nature of the believer is fed, spiritual malnutrition will set in and faith will become weaker with the passing of time. The Old Testament book of Lamentations speaks about such a people. (Lamentations 4:4-5) *"The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst; the young children ask bread, and no man breaketh it unto them. They that did feed delicately are desolate in the streets; they that were brought up in scarlet embrace dung hills."* Who are those brought up in scarlet? Those who are covered by blood. This is a picture of God's children. It is a picture of them eating that which is not food. They are undernourished and spiritually starved. Such are many of God's children today.

It is for this reason that we say the Bible is necessary to us. It is a spiritual book and in some way ministers to our spiritual needs. The Word of God is the food of life for the believer. Jeremiah cried, *"Thy words were found, and I did eat them."* (15:16) Jesus said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God."* (Matthew 4:4) The Bible says; *"The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. "Jesus said, "I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit and they are life."* (John 1:14; 6:51, 7) It is the Word of God which is the spiritual food that our soul so desperately craves.

When is it that the Bible becomes as food to us? I believe this happens when we meditate upon it. In Psalm 39:3 David said, *"While I was musing the fire burned."* It was when he meditated that the spiritual fires were aglow. To meditate is to contemplate and ponder passages from the Word in a quiet and unhurried manner. This is not easy in this day of hurry and worry. We do a little bit of reading and a little bit of praying and we wonder why God seems so distant. We seldom sit long enough to give him time to speak to us. But the only way to establish and enjoy a relationship is to spend high quality time with that person. The only way to get to know God is to do the same. People who know their God, whose new nature is being fed, by Him day by day, are those who commune with Him daily in prayer and the meditative study of His Word. It makes little difference if you use the labels **quiet time** or **devotional**. The important thing is that one has a time or times with God each day. One of the Psalmists expresses it *"As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?"* (Psalms 42:1-2) When we spend time alone with God, reflecting upon His Word and letting Him sneak to us through it, the Holy Spirit begins to change us. We become more and more like the Lord. Others notice it. Its reflected in our face, our manner, our words. God is glorified. Bible study has become to us most profitable.

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