

Interpreting Scripture #2: Interpreting & Applying the Bible

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

1. Effective Bible reading includes prayer. (Luke 24:45)

“Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” (Luke 24:45)

2. Effective Bible reading involves repetition.
 - Read the same passage or book several times and in different translations.
3. Effective Bible reading involves reading both quickly and slowly.

- Reading quickly gives you an overview of the material.

The objective is general knowledge. Read the Bible at a faster pace and focus on the facts of Scripture. Read entire books of the Bible straight through without frequent pauses for reflection. Read broadly in the Scriptures to gain a greater perspective of the overall framework, historical development, and message of the entire Bible.

- Reading slowly gives you insight into the material.

The objective is greater understanding. Read the Bible at a slower pace and reflect on small portions of Scripture. The focus of slow reading is on the rich, eternal truths of the Bible which feed the heart and fill the soul with understanding and wisdom.

4. Effective Bible reading involves careful observation of details.
5. Effective Bible reading involves interaction with the text through writing.

Take notes regarding your observations. Write down questions.

6. Effective Bible reading involves systematic reading.

A reading plan helps us move through the Bible in a thorough way.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN YOU READ THE BIBLE

1. Effective Bible reading is active Bible reading, and active Bible reading involves bombarding the text with questions.
2. Below are examples of some questions we can ask the text.
 - Who is writing?
 - Who is he writing to and why?
 - What is the author's subject?
 - What is the life situation of the author?
 - What is the life situation of the hearers?
 - How does the author's cultural and historical setting affect his writing?
 - How does the grammatical structure of the verse, passage, or book affect the message?
 - What is the point of the verse, paragraph, chapter, or book?
 - What is the flow of thought?
 - What important words or phrases are repeated? What do they mean?
 - What did the passage mean to the first hearers?

SOME GUIDELINES TO INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

There are several general guidelines we should follow to interpret the Bible accurately.

1. Context. Any text must be understood in light of its given context.

A verse should never be taken out of its context and given an imposed meaning. We must consider the flow of thought in the verses before and after the text, as well as the overall content and themes of the biblical book in which it occurs.

2. Comparison. Any text must be understood in light of other relevant texts.
 - This is best understood by the simple statement: Scripture interprets Scripture.

Because God is the divine author of all Scripture, the Bible possesses an overall unity. Therefore, comparing texts which address similar topics, themes, and principles is helpful to gaining greater understanding of any given text.

- No doctrine (authoritative teaching) should be formulated on the basis of one verse or passage of Scripture.

The clearer passages should provide the interpretative key for the more obscure ones.

To develop an authoritative doctrine on any given biblical topic, it is necessary to consider every relevant text throughout the Bible.

3. Progression. Any text should be understood in light of the historical, progressive nature of Scripture.

God did not give the full truth at once, but unfolded it progressively step by step, with each portion giving further amplification and clarification without contradicting what came before. When we interpret a passage we must consider the level of revelation that was available at the time it was written.

4. Background. Any text should be understood in light of its historical, cultural, political, and geographical background.
 - Historical background.

This involves questions such as: Who was the author? To whom did he write and why? What was happening to the people he wrote to?

- Cultural background.

This involves the various aspects of family, social, religious, and civil life in the different societies in which the events and writing of the Bible took place. The two broad categories involved are the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world.

- Political background.

This involves the arrangements and affairs of civil governance that existed in the different settings of the Bible's recorded events. It also includes the relationships between cities, nations, and empires.

- Geographical background.

This involves the ways in which the natural topography and climate of the land and sea settings affected the peoples of the biblical stories.

LEARNING TO APPLY THE BIBLE

1. Our primary reason for studying the Bible is to know and love God, and because of this, to discover God's will and obey it.

We need to ask: "How should my understanding of the text affect my life?"

2. Some questions we can ask of the biblical text are:

- What is revealed about God's nature?
- What is revealed about God's character?
- What is revealed about God's covenants?
- What is revealed about God's heart toward His people?
- What is revealed about God's plan?
- Is there an example to follow?
- Is there a sin to avoid?

- Is there a promise to claim? Are there conditions to meet?
- Is there a prayer to adapt and pray?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there wrong thinking to correct?

TWO BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

1. One basic way to study the Bible is to do expository studies.

- An expository study is one that examines what a particular section or book of the Bible teaches.

Most of the books of the Bible were deliberately composed as complete units, and thus should be studied as such. Each book has its own unique purpose, message, and core themes and subjects.

2. Here are some steps you can take to do an expository study.

- Select a section of Scripture (or an entire book of the Bible).
- If it's a section, familiarize yourself with the broader flow of thought in the biblical book in which it is situated.
- Read through the section or book several times from several quality translations.
- Observe the words and phrases that seem to be key to understanding the author's purpose.
- Observe the author's logical thought progress. What is he trying to say and why? What is his central theme?
- Write a summary of your overall understanding of the text.

3. Another basic way to study the Bible is to do topical studies.

- A topical study is one that examines what the entire Bible teaches about a particular subject. It cross-references many verses from Genesis through Revelation.

A word study is similar to a topical study. It examines how a particular word (instead of a particular topic) is used throughout Scripture.

4. Here are some steps you can take to do a topical study.
 - Select a topic to study.
 - Look up all the relevant verses you know on that topic.
 - Follow the cross-references in your Bible or in a Bible software program.
 - Write out the verses that are particularly insightful.
 - Record your observations, especially for the verses deemed especially important.
 - Analyze and group the material into related subtopics.
 - Write out a summary of your overall observations and insights.

TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE BIBLE STUDY

1. The most important tool for your study of the Bible is a good Bible.
 - There are many good contemporary translations of the Bible available in English today. Some examples are the ESV and NIV.
 - Many Bible educators consider the ESV Study Bible to be perhaps the best study bible available today.
2. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia provides background material on persons, places, subjects, and books in the Bible.
 - A Bible dictionary is a great help to bridge the historical and cultural gaps between the original authors and us.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

1. Have you or someone you heard ever taken Scripture out of context, and given it an imposed meaning? Why do you think this happens? What is the danger of doing this?
2. What are some potential problems of formulating doctrine based on one verse or passage of Scripture? How should we avoid the practice?

HOMEWORK

Select one of the following:

1. Choose a topic that interests you and follow the steps outlined above. (Note: You may need to narrow the range of Scripture you research.)
2. Read Paul's letter to Philemon, and answer the following questions.
 - What were Paul's circumstances?
 - Who was Onesimus and what was the nature of Paul's relationship to him?
 - Who was Philemon and what was the nature of Paul's relationship to him?
 - What was the nature of Onesimus's past and current relationship to Philemon? What had transpired between them?
 - What did Paul request of Philemon?
 - What are some important principles found in this letter, and how do they apply to your life?