

Eat this Book

Part Two: ***How to Study the Bible***

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INTRODUCTION

The Anatomy of Bible Study

Though reading the Bible is essential to our relationship with God, more is called for if we are to clearly understand what God is saying in his Word. **Ears** that hear and an “on-your-knees” posture help to bring understanding in the reading act (See the first study booklet, *How to Read the Bible*) however moving from reading into studying in no way lessens their importance. Listening and praying are needed more than ever but the focus in study shifts to two other anatomical parts: **eyes** wide open to see all there is to see and **brains** to reason and think through what is seen.

Eat this Book!

Before beginning these lessons think through this idea of eating the Bible.

Psalm 19:10-11; 119:103-104 – What do you learn from these psalms about the Word of God and its desirability? Do you share that feeling?

Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 – Describe God’s directives to the prophet concerning the Word given to him and comment on Ezekiel’s response.

Revelation 10:9-10 – Explain John’s polarized response to the Word of God. Why both sweet and bitter?

1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Hebrews 5:12-14 – What’s the difference between milk and meat in regards to the Word? What do they indicate in the lives of some?

1 Peter 1:23-2:3 – In these verses, milk creates a positive picture of how the Word of God should be approached. What kind of attitude is needed?

Consider this from Eugene Peterson:

“Words spoken or written to us under the metaphor of eating, words to be freely taken in, tasted, chewed, savored, swallowed, and digested, have a very different effect on us from those that come at us from the outside

. . . . Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.” (*Eat This Book*, Eerdmans, 2006, 10, 18)

Just reading the Bible to fulfill a requirement will most likely end up providing little more than a light snack. Studying the Bible has in view a more substantive meal; taking time and expending energy to see and explore, understand and deeply think about all that God is trying to communicate.

God has set the table with a sumptuous meal. This booklet will help you to study the Bible to gain deeper nourishment. With this in mind, create your personal prayer for God’s presence and help as you how to study the Bible.

LESSON ONE

Seeing What’s There

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.”
(Psalm 119:18)

Has this happened to you before? Let's say you drive the same route to work day after day or, when going to visit out of town parents or grandparents, you cover the same ground time after time and suddenly in your travels something appears that you've never seen before. "That's new!" But someone else in the car makes it clear with a "where-have-you-been" attitude how wrong you are. "That's always been there." And they're right! Our observation skills are often not fully utilized at any one time. We seldom see everything there is to see.

When dealing with the things of God and the Word of God we sometimes need to have our eyes opened for us if we are to see everything there is to see.

Read **2 Kings 6:8-17**.

Why did the king of Aram want to kill Elisha?

Why do you think Elisha could see God's protective forces but his servant couldn't? Should his servant have been able to see them?

Sometimes there are realities we are unable to see without God's help. Other times there are things we should see but are not observant enough on our own to do so. Again we need God's help.

Read **Luke 24:13-32**.

Why were Cleopas and his friend leaving Jerusalem? What was their state of mind?

Why was Jesus frustrated with them? What did he show them in their scriptures?

What did they experience as Jesus opened their eyes?

When it comes to the Bible we should not depend alone on our powers of observation. Some things we can't see without help; others we don't see even though we could. That's why "knee-time" in prayer must always precede our study: **"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."**

Learning to Ask Questions

After prayer the first task is to see all that you can see. Some would call it **observation**: what does the text say? After that comes **interpretation**: what does the text mean (see Lesson Two)? In observation you are seeking the facts. To help retain your findings, record in some way your observations. Perhaps the best way to observe the text is to ply it with questions. These are not questions of doubt but of information. A poem by Rudyard Kipling indicates what some of those basic questions should be.

I keep six honest serving men,
 (They taught men all I knew.)
Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
 I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
 I give them all a rest.
(*"The Elephant's Child"*, in *Just So Stories*, Macmillan, 1902)

1. **Who** wrote this? To whom was it written? Who are the people in the text? What can you discover about them?
2. **Where** is this taking place? What do you know about the city, the country, etc.? Is place significant to the meaning of this text?
3. **When** is it happening? Not just the year but when in the flow of scripture and in the flow of the immediate narrative? Never neglect what comes before and after your specific text.
4. **What** kind of literature is it: a poem, a story, a teaching segment, etc.? What's happening in the text? What is the text saying? What is the atmosphere of the passage: joy, grief, uncertainty, etc.? What words are used? What do they mean? Is the grammar and structure of the passage significant?
5. **Why** is this text here? Why is it important? If narrative, why is this happening? If teaching, why now and in this context?
6. **How** should we understand the passage? How would the readers then have understood it? How do you understand it?

You can't "over-observe" your text. You will often be missing something. Go through it several times with eyes wide open seeing all you possibly can.

"The more time you spend in Observation, the less time you will need to spend in Interpretation, and the more accurate will be your results. The less time you spend in Observation, the more time you will need to spend in Interpretation, and the less accurate will be your results." (Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book*, Moody Press, 1991, 39)

Practice A Little.

Observe first an Old Testament passage and then a New Testament one. Jot down your key observations. If you are in a group compare what you discover.

Read and observe **Genesis 3: 1-13.**

Now read and observe **Acts 12:1-19.**

Think About It

Do you find observation difficult or easy to do? Whichever, why is that so? Do you understand and accept the importance of observing the text? Where's the balance between our responsibility to observe and God's responsibility to open our eyes to help us see? Can both be overemphasized to the neglect of the other? How so? Observing the text is almost like being in school pouring over the books. Does that picture energize or de-energize you?

LESSON TWO

Understanding What You See

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

(2 Timothy 2:15)

How do we study the Bible? First, there’s **observation**; we open our **eyes** and gather the facts of the passage, all that we can discover. Then comes **interpretation**; we put our **brains** in gear to discover the meaning of the facts trying to understand what the text is saying. Not that we close our eyes and stop observing when we begin to interpret. No, the two are intricately intertwined. We do some interpreting in our observing and keep on observing in our interpreting.

This lesson is designed to help you think through interpretation, to come to an understanding of the text.

Accept the Study Challenge

Study requires an investment of both time and effort; commodities we don’t easily dole out in our fast-paced, pressurized worlds. Paul offers Timothy reasons why it is worth the effort.

Read through **2 Timothy, chapter two**, focusing on **verses 14-19**. The verses before and after provide context for this scriptural unit.

In **verse two**, what kind of people are to be entrusted with truth to then be taught to others? Why do you think Paul insists on this (see verses 14-19)?

What is said about the Word of God in **verses 8-9**? Why is this significant in light of verses 14-19?

What do **verses 20-26** contribute to your understanding of verses 14-19?

In **verses 14-19** who are the approved ones? Why are they approved? Who approves them?

In **verses 14-19** who are not approved? Why? What happens to them?

Approval is linked directly to one's ability to "correctly handle the word of truth." The idea in picture form is to cut a straight road through difficult terrain in order to arrive without deviation at the correct destination.

"The word of truth' is the apostolic faith which Timothy has received from Paul and is to communicate to others. For us it is, quite simply, Scripture. To 'cut it straight' or 'make it a straight path' is to be accurate on the one hand and plain on the other in our exposition To handle the word with such scrupulous care that he both stays on the path himself, keeping to the highway and avoiding the byways, and makes it easy for others to follow." (John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, InterVarsity Press, 1973, 67-68)

With this passage of scripture in mind, how would **you** now answer the question, "Why study the Bible?"

Follow the Guidelines

On the bookshelf next to me I see eleven books, 200 to 400 pages each, presenting guidelines as to how one should go about interpreting and understanding the Bible. For our purposes in this short study let's identify three basic guidelines to keep in the forefront when seeking to understand the text.

1. Honor the Author

Recognizing the dual authorship of scripture, the human author writing and God the ultimate author, what do they intend the readers to understand from the text? Always start with "them" before moving to "us."

2. Respect the Story

Be careful not to isolate and cut off the text being studied from the immediate context – what comes before and after – and the larger story of the Bible. They are always connected. Isolation tends to breed a narrow and sometimes inaccurate interpretation.

3. Imagine the Text

Where possible, put yourself in the story. Connect with the people of the passage, their circumstances and what they are hearing. Tie your imagining to the facts. If you imagine beyond the facts keep it in proper perspective as “what might have been” not “what was.”

Seek the Big Idea

One help in understanding a text is attempting to distill it down into a central basic idea. Ask yourself, “What is this text talking about?” and then, “What is it saying about what it is talking about?” Don’t push this so far that you artificially force every passage to produce a one-sentence big idea. Not all passages will lend themselves to this; but many will.

Try this out on **Joshua 1:1-10**. In this text what needs do the circumstances bring to light? Are there repeated phrases? Are there answers given for meeting the need?

What are these verses talking about?

What are they saying about it?

Can you put this into a one-sentence statement of a big idea? Give it a try.

Practice A Little

Read through and observe **2 Corinthians 1:1-11**. Bombard it with your observational questions and record what you discover elsewhere. Now, keeping

the three previously mentioned interpretive guidelines in mind, answer the following questions:

What is the text talking about?

What is it saying about it?

Can you put this into a one-sentence statement of a big idea?

Think About It

Are there multiple interpretations of a passage or just one? What roles might cultural differences between then and now play in interpreting a passage? How could we go about testing whether our interpretation is correct or not?

LESSON THREE

Accepting Help

For many of us admitting we need help isn't something we readily do. There seems to be something innate in North American culture that demands we should be able to figure it out and do it ourselves.

My wife and I just purchased a wireless printer for our home computer. Reading the instructions we realized that setting it up and linking it so that we could print from our desktop and from our wireless tablets was not a job for the computer naïve. We couldn't even understand the terms in the manual let alone follow the

instructions. So we called in a friend who knew about these things. We now have a functioning printer.

When it comes to interpreting and understanding scripture we should be willing to access all the help we possibly can.

Read **Nehemiah 8:1-10**. What did their “Bible” consist of? Why did they have to stand together as a group for hours listening to a reading of it?

What was their attitude concerning the Word of God? Why do you think they wept at the reading of the Word?

What was the function of Ezra and the Levites in the reading of the Word? Note particularly verse eight.

Now work through **Acts 8:26-35**. How did Philip find his way to the Ethiopian? What do you know about the Ethiopian?

The “Bible” had now grown beyond the Torah, the Law as found in the days of Ezra. Where was the Ethiopian reading in the Scripture? Why was this passage significant to him?

What did he ask Philip to do? What did Philip do?

So needing and asking for help in understanding the Bible is not a new phenomenon. The help we need comes from two directions.

Divine Help

Consider **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**. Why is the wisdom of God so difficult for men and women to understand? See verses 6-9, 13.

How does the Holy Spirit help us understand the Word of God? See verses 10-12.

Examine **John 2:22; 14:25-26; 16:12-13**. What did Jesus promise the Holy Spirit would do?

See also **1 John 2:20-21, 26-27**. What is the anointing spoken of here? What does it give us?

This is why “knee-time” or prayer is so important to a study of God’s Word. It’s not about pleading with God to do what he has promised. It’s about surrendering to this work of God through the Holy Spirit.

Human Help

This is another way in which our brains come into play in studying the Bible. Others have walked the interpretive trail before us. What they have discovered can help us understand the text. Here are three ways this happens.

1. The **sermon** you hear when you join with others to worship is more than just something to do in a congregational gathering. The preacher/teacher is being used by the Holy Spirit to explain the text helping you to understand both what is being said and what you might do with it.

2. The **Bible studies** you participate in whether in small groups or larger give you opportunities to learn and understand and to test and compare what you have learned on your own with others.

Acts 17:10-12 identifies a safeguard for insuring what we are being taught by others is accurate and trustworthy? What is it?

3. There are numerous **study helps** to assist your exploration of the Word. Whether you access them digitally through computers, phones and tablets or hold actual books in your hands, they are invaluable in developing your understanding. Consider these.

Different translations – Seeing a text in more than one translation helps see the different ways words can be translated or nuanced. Some useful translations are *The New Living Translation* (Tyndale), *The New International Version* (Zondervan) *The English Standard Version* (Crossway). A good paraphrase/translation is *The Message* (NavPress).

Study Bibles – These are Bibles with helps and notes included in them. A comprehensive Study Bible is essential for your studies. If you can only possess one of these study helps choose to have a Study Bible.

Concordances – These contain listings of all the words in the Bible allowing you to cross reference where a particular word is used throughout the Bible.

Bible Dictionaries – They are a cross between a dictionary and an encyclopedia giving you concise articles on background, history, definitions, etc. They contain a wealth of information not readily available elsewhere.

Bible Atlases – They show the geography of the Bible with maps to help you see where things are happening.

Commentaries

“A commentary is like sitting down with a godly saint and letting him or her explain the Bible to you. Commentaries are great for four things. They provide the historical context of each book and passage. They answer questions you can’t figure out for yourself. They shed light on important words from the original languages and they discuss various interpretations of a given passage. One mark of a good commentary is that it will give you all the various interpretations and

their strengths and weaknesses, rather than just describing the interpretation the author favors.” (Hal Seed, *The Bible Questions*, InterVarsity Press, 2012, 160)

Think About It

Are you one of those reluctant to seek help? The Holy Spirit stands ready to do so. Why not ask? Humanly, we have almost an embarrassment of resources available to us. Why not use them? Are you afraid they might replace your personal study? That’s a legitimate concern but they don’t have to. Used with wisdom they will greatly enhance your study of the Word.

LESSON FOUR

Keeping Perspective

Maybe you’ve heard it said, “Perspective is everything!” But is that really true? At some times and in some ways, yes it is, but at other times not so much. Is perspective important? Absolutely!

There are two ways to look at perspective. First, it can be a point of view, an outlook or subjective evaluation of something. When songwriter Irving Berlin said, “Life is 10 percent what you make it and 90 percent how you take it” and boxer Muhammad Ali said, “Often it isn’t the mountains ahead that wear you out, it’s the little pebble in your shoe”; they were expressing perspectives on life.

On the other hand, perspective can also be the weighing of the relationship of aspects of a subject to each other and to a whole; seeing something with the bigger picture in mind. In Bible study, perspective is not about expressing a personal opinion about something discovered in the Word; it’s about seeing what’s there in the bigger picture of God’s point of view or perspective.

Return again to the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in **Luke 24:13-22**. Read it through with open eyes observing all you can.

From verses 13-24, what was their perspective of what had happened in Jerusalem? Was it accurate to the facts? Was it accurate to what really happened?

From verses 25-32, what was Jesus' perspective of what had happened in Jerusalem? How was it different from their perspective? How did Jesus convince them they were wrong?

Seeking Perspective

There are three perspectives to check with each text for study. They will help you situate your passage in the bigger picture of God's perspective.

The Story – This is what is directly presented in the text, what happened. Even this however should be broadened out into its immediate context, what happens before and after.

“We must be committed to a *totally contextual* reading of scripture. Each word must be understood within its own verse, each verse within its own chapter, each chapter within its own book, and each book within its own historical, cultural and indeed canonical setting.” (N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, HarperOne, 2011, 128)

The Redemptive Story – This is God's story encompassing the whole of the Bible, his plan to fix and restore a broken world and a broken people. Some see this as a four-act drama (creation, fall, redemption, restoration), some five (creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, the church) and some six (adding restoration after the church). How does ***the story*** you're studying fit into ***the redemptive story***?

The Redeemer Story – This is the story within the redemptive story. Jesus Christ is the redeemer. In what way does ***the story*** you are studying point to Jesus Christ? What does it tell you about Jesus?

Practice A Little

Use **Matthew 4:1-11** as a practice text. Read it through several times. Listen for God's voice as you read (as per booklet one, *How to Read the Bible*). Now study the text.

THE STORY – Observe the text; ply it with questions remembering the three interpretive guidelines from Lesson Two.

Place these verses in immediate context. What is the significance of the baptism of Jesus being right before the temptation of Jesus? Note the last verse of chapter three.

What did Jesus do after the temptation? Why could he now do these things?

We sometimes use these verses as a model for how to fight temptation in our lives. What lessons might you draw from these verses for doing so?

But as helpful as this is, is it the true purpose of the passage?

THE REDEMPTIVE STORY – How do you see this story fitting into the bigger story of God fixing a broken world and a broken people? Where would you place this in that drama?

Think back to **Genesis 3**, another temptation story. Do you see connections between the two? In this bigger context what is the purpose of our passage here in Matthew?

THE REDEEMER STORY – These verses aren't just pointing to Jesus but telling us important things about him. What do you learn about Jesus?

What from these verses qualifies him to be the redeemer?

Think About It

“We must re-turn to these stories and events to remember not just the Bible stories, but the story that contains them all – the One Story of God’s incomprehensible, outrageous acts of redemption, the stories of a God gathering a people for his name. Here in its pages appear fierce and unlikely heroes, terrifying battles, pilloried prophets, resistant saints, miraculous healings, a foot-washing King, a bloodied God on a cross, a hollow tomb, the final wrath and glory judgment, and a denouement that ends more miraculously than anything we could imagine: the coming of a new city with open gates and a purified people now called sons and daughters who, needing no other light, will enter and walk by the light of the Lamb.” (Leslie Leyland Fields, “The Gospel Is More Than A Story”, *Christianity Today*, Volume 56, Number 7, July/August, 2012, 43)

APPENDIX

Tips for Small Group Leaders

Pray (*Phil 4.6-7*)

This is vital. Taking the time to pray in anticipation of the meeting will help to focus you on the task of building disciples. The act of prayer helps to remind us that we are God’s servants and that this entire project of leading a study is vitally dependent on God’s presence and power. Do not take this activity lightly. Try to remember to pray throughout the week for each member by name that they would be open to God’s work in their life and that they would be willing to let God make them more and more like Christ. Also, pray for yourself that you would have boldness to lead the study, confidence in the message and sensitivity to God’s Spirit at work.

Preview the Material (*1 Pet 4.10*)

No study guide is perfect (unless of course, you write it). It was written by someone else who is most likely not part of your group and so does not know what you like when you lead, nor does the author know all the details of your group. That is your business. As a result, you have the opportunity to make this study your own. If you want to use this study effectively however, you need to

become familiar with it. You will only get frustrated if you review it an hour before people arrive and expect that everything will slide into place. Rather, read the entire thing as soon as you can. Use it as your own private devotional. Then think about your group and ask God to help you to interpret the guide for them. Determine which questions are helpful, which need more follow-up and which ones to avoid altogether. If you feel like you have to say something like, “I’m not sure what he meant by that question.” then don’t ask it. Ask a better question. You’ll only know what a better question looks like if you have an idea of the entire study. Figuring out how to use this study guide is a service to the members of your group. In most study guides there are quotations from other material. Note these sources and check them out of the library or purchase them for yourself. Furthermore, if you are using this guide as a part of E Free Lethbridge then you have the opportunity to interact directly with the author. Call the church office and talk to Dave Acree directly.

Promote Discussion (*Jas 1.19*)

As you know, sometimes we need to spend some time talking about a concept before we are able to begin to apply its truth. Discussion can be an important catalyst for this to take place. As you may also know, discussion can be easier introduced than actually achieved. There are some things that are out of your control that can make discussions difficult to get going (e.g., some people are naturally quiet; people might not have done the assigned preparation). Some things, however, are within your control when it comes to promoting good, healthy discussion. Here are a few:

1. Ask good questions

“Yes” or “No” questions can be good to test for a certain level of comprehension but they are not good at promoting discussion. “Why” questions tend to act better at evoking discussion. Other good sorts of questions include:

- a. Explain what you mean.
- b. Can you give us an example?
- c. How does work in your life?
- d. What do the rest of you think?

2. Be open and listen.

Don’t keep your head buried in the study guide jumping from question to question. Listen to the answers offered because there might be opportunity for follow-up questions to get at the heart of the matter. Listening also offers the opportunity for you as a leader to see if the Holy Spirit is guiding the meeting in a different direction. If a person brings up an issue or a heart-ache that seems to be significant, you are free to explore that as a group. Others in the group will pick up on a “heart” answer, don’t be left out because you are trying to find your spot

in the guide and rehearsing the next question in your head already. Being familiar with the guide also helps free you to ask follow-up questions without losing sight of the main point.

3. Allow for silence

Don't be quick to assume that just because nobody answers right away it means nobody wants to answer. It could be that someone is just digging deep for the courage to speak. If your group knows that you will jump in if nobody answers right away, they will rarely take advantage of the positive pressure that silence sometimes contains to offer their ideas. The discernment to know when to expand the silence becomes sharper the more you get to know your group.

4. Affirm (be an encourager)

Be ready with thanks for whenever anyone speaks up but be careful with endorsements. Determine how you will respond to statements made by group member that may or may not be true. In other words, do just jump to a casual comment like, "good" or "that's right" unless you sincerely agree. There can be a tendency for leaders to overreact when someone speaks just because they are happy someone finally said something. We still need to make sure that we are responsible with our comments and our perspective. Regardless, always express gratitude for comments. One way to bridge a comment like this would be:

"Thanks so much for your comment. Does anyone have a different perspective on this matter?"

5. Hold your opinion

Don't be too quick to state your position because in some groups, it can be interpreted as the final word on the matter. This is especially true for newer groups. You are the leader and they expect that you have answers and it is easier for some if the leader just tells them what they should think. Of course, easier is not always better. In fact, if you find your group looking to you too often, don't give an answer at all for some questions. Let your strategic silence elicit some curiosity in the minds of the group.

6. Manage when necessary

You might find some extremes in your group. You might have someone that just loves to talk and is able to find something to say on almost every topic. On the other hand, you might have people in your group that will sit the entire time and not say a thing. As a leader you are there to serve your group members and sometimes you might have to set parameters during a meeting if you find someone talking too much. You can say something like, "Thanks for your thoughts, but I'm really interested in what the rest have to say." Or if it is the other case, "We haven't heard from everyone tonight. [name], what thoughts have been going through your head tonight?" If things get too difficult (e.g.,

someone just talks too much), you might have to find the time away from the group time to ask them for help. Say something like, “I really appreciate your willingness to talk but I really want time for everyone to share so that each person can grow. Can you help me encourage others to share?”

Finally, here is a great summary of the purpose of trying hard to promote discussion in the context of the purpose of small group ministry:

“... your primary role is that of a friend and a servant. It is not the leader’s job to judge someone else’s status ... It is the leader’s job to provide a safe place where participants can honestly explore their relationship with Jesus. It is the leader’s job to model Jesus by being genuinely concerned about the thoughts, questions and struggles of the group members” (Idelman, Not a Fan, 10).

Thanks so much leaders, for what you do in the name of Jesus for His kingdom!