

A Practical Method of Bible Study for Ordinary Christians

by Denis Haack

II SAMUEL 1

sent of the spoil unto the elders of Jô'-dâh, and to his friends, saying, Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the

7 To them which were in Bêth'-êl, and to them which were in south Râ'-môth, and to them which were in Jât'-tir,

8 And to them which were in Æ-rô'-êr, and to them which were in Siph'-môth, and to them which were in Râ'-phâl, and to them which were in the cities of the Jê'-rah'-es, and to them which were in the cities of Kê'-nites,

9 And to them which were in Hôr'-mâh, and to them which were in Chôr'-âsh'-ân, and to them which were in Æ'-thâch,

10 And to them which were in Hê'-brôn, the places where Dâ'-vid himself is wont to haunt,

11 The Phil'-is-tines fought against him; and the men of Is'-râ'-êl fled: and the Phil'-is-tines, and fell down at Gil'-bê'-â.

12 His sons followed hard upon Ash'-îr'-rôth; and they put his armour upon the wall of Bêth'-shân,

13 And when the Phil'-is-tines had done of that night, and took the bodies of his sons Jôn'-thân, and came to Jerusalem,

14 And they took them under a tree seven days.

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afraid. Therefore Sâul took a sword, and fell upon it.

5 And when his armourbearer saw that Sâul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him.

6 So Sâul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together.

7 ¶ And when the men of Is'-râ'-êl were on the other side of the valley, the men of Is'-râ'-êl fled, and that day they forsook them; and the Phil'-is-tines carried them.

8 And it came to pass on the morrow, that the Phil'-is-tines came to strike the mount Sâul, and his three sons, at Gil'-bê'-â.

9 And they cut off his head, and sent into the house of their idols, and told the king of Ash'-îr'-rôth; and they put his armour upon the wall of Bêth'-shân,

10 ¶ And when the Phil'-is-tines had done of that night, and took the bodies of his sons Jôn'-thân, and came to Jerusalem,

11 And they took them under a tree seven days.

Death of Saul and His Sons

THE SECOND BOOK OF
Samuel

OTHERWISE CALLED
THE SECOND BOOK OF THE

6 And the returned from the death of As I happy sites, and Dâ'-vid and, lo, the third day, hard ent, and earth when he can earth, and

HOLY BIBLE

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RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATIONS

Denis Haack

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**Ransom Fellowship
Publications**

A Practical Method of Bible Study for Ordinary Christians
by Denis Haack
Edited by Matthew Hundley
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Introduction

Consider the classic definition of “thinking Christianly” formulated by Os Guinness and notice the central relationship the Christian mind has to the Word of God:

Thinking Christianly is not simply thinking by Christians, nor is it thinking by Christians about Christian topics, nor is it thinking by Christians about or in order to develop a ‘Christian line.’ Thinking Christianly is thinking by Christians about anything at all in a profoundly Christian way. Where their minds are so informed and influenced by the truth of God in terms of their principles, perspectives, and presuppositions that they begin to see as God sees, though it will be in an imperfect way.

Or, as Dr. Steven Garber puts it, “our minds must be steeped in the Scriptures, like tea is steeped in hot water, until the word of God permeates our minds, our hearts, our imaginations, our very consciousness.”

The blessed person, the psalmist tells us, is not only to *avoid the pattern of the world* (1:1), but to *delight in God’s law, and meditates on it day and night* (1:2). The wise believer, then, is the woman or man who desires to be blessed of God will seek to spend unhurried time in the Scriptures. The relationship of God’s word to the renewed mind is so central that it can be stated simply: regular and serious Bible study is foundational to significant and sustained growth in Christian discernment.

John Stott defines a “Christian mind” as “a mind which has firmly grasped the basic presuppositions of Scripture and is thoroughly informed with biblical truth.”

This is why Ransom Fellowship places such a high emphasis on Bible study and on training in study skills. We encourage believers to plan rigorous and disciplined study into their schedules and to include regular times of corporate study, since the Scriptures are addressed to the people of God.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalms 1:1-2 ESV)

Hindrances to Bible Study

There are a whole series of hindrances to Bible study and we hear them repeated often when we encourage believers to dig into the Scriptures. In fact, they are so common that some of them are worth addressing directly.

“I don’t know how.”

You aren’t alone. We encourage you to consider attending a Bible study training seminar. Reading books and articles on how to develop, practice and use skills on your own is important; but working on them in a group with other believers, under the guidance of an experienced leader, will help you sharpen your understanding of and use of the skills.

“Bible study is boring.”

Read *Psalms* 1 again: it speaks of delighting in the “law of the Lord”—in the word of God. The psalmist took delight in God's law—and the law is a section of Scripture which most people would suspect is the most boring of all! Serious study can be hard work, and it certainly takes discipline, but the word of God is not boring. You’ve probably been in studies that were boring—we all have—but that wasn’t the fault of the Scriptures.

“I prefer to use Bible study guides.”

We encourage the use of Bible study good guides. Using them exclusively, however, means your reading of the Scriptures is always being filtered through the mind of another. Going to the Scriptures directly means the agenda for our study is set by God himself.

“I’m not smart enough; never was much of a student.”

Read *Proverbs 9* and notice who Wisdom—here personified as a woman—invites to her table: “Let all who are simple come in here,” she calls out. “Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.” If you want a New Testament reference read *1 Corinthians 1:20-2:5*. To the extent that God has given us minds, to that extent we are to love him and his word with our mind (*Matthew 22:37*). The study skills we’ll be outlining here are simple enough to be taught to children, and yet basic enough that we can develop them to whatever extent we are capable.

“I can become discerning by reading books.”

We’d be the last to discourage reading good books, but they can’t take the place of the Scriptures. We go to the Scriptures not primarily to grow in discernment but to meet God. Growth in discernment is a by-product.

“I don’t have time.”

Though it sounds like a cliché, it is true: we have time for the things that are important to us. We encourage you to do two things. First, read Charles Hummel’s classic little booklet *Tyranny of the Urgent*. Second, memorize *Psalms 1* and meditate on it, particularly the contrast between the fruitful tree and all that chaff being blown around by the wind. In the end, we are faced with a very simple but vital principle. If we wish to be wise and discerning as Christians, we must discipline ourselves to spend regular, serious, and unhurried time in the study of the Scriptures, which are God’s Word in written form.

[Source: John R. W. Stott in his book *Involvement (volume 1): Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H Revell; 1984, 1985) p. 56.]

We'd like to let two well-known Christian theologians have the final word on the topic.

R. C. Sproul

I could plead with you to study the Bible for personal edification; I could try the art of persuasion to stimulate your quest for happiness. I could say that the study of the Bible would probably be the most fulfilling and rewarding educational experience of your life. I could cite numerous reasons why you would benefit from a serious study of Scripture. But ultimately the main reason why we should study the Bible is because it is our duty. If the Bible were the most boring book in the world, dull, uninteresting and seemingly irrelevant, it would still be our duty to study it. If its literary style were awkward and confusing, the duty would remain. We live as human beings under an obligation by divine mandate to study diligently God's Word. He is our Sovereign, it is his Word and he commands that we study it. A duty is not an option. If you have not yet begun to respond to that duty, then you need to ask God to forgive you and to resolve to do your duty from this day forth.

James I. Packer

In thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore (Psalm 16:11). I hold the heady doctrine that no pleasures are so frequent or intense as those of the grateful, devoted, single-minded, whole-hearted, self-denying Christian. I maintain that the delights of work and leisure, of friendship and family, of eating and mating, of arts and crafts, of playing and watching games, of finding out and making things, of helping other people, and all the other noble pleasures that life affords, are doubled for the Christian; for, as the cheerful old Puritans used to say (no, sir, that is not a misprint, nor a Freudian lapse; I mean Puritans—the real historical Puritans, as distinct from the smug sourpusses of last-century Anglo-American imagination),

the Christian tastes God in all his pleasures, and this increases them, whereas for other men pleasure brings with it a sense of hollowness which reduces it. Also, I maintain that every encounter between the sincere Christian and God's Word, the law of thy mouth (Psalm 119:72), however harrowing or humbling its import, brings joy as its spin-off... and the keener the Christian the greater the joy. I know for myself what it is to enjoy the Bible—that is, to be glad at finding God and being found by Him in and through the Bible; I know by experience why the Psalmist called God's message of promise and command his delight (Psalm 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174—ten times!) and his joy (vs. 111, cf. 162; Psalm 19:8), and why he said that he loved it (Psalm 119:47, 48, 97, 103, 113, 119, 127, 140, 159, 163, 167—eleven times!); I have proved, as have others, that as good food yields pleasure as well as nourishment, so does the good word of God. So I am all for Christians digging into their Bibles with expectations of enjoyment...What is enjoyment? Essentially, it is a by-product: a contented, fulfilled state which comes from concentrating on something other than enjoying yourself... Bible study will only give enjoyment if conforming to our Creator in belief and behavior, through trust and obedience, is its goal. Bible study for our own pleasure rather than for God ends up giving pleasure neither to Him nor to us... what brings joy is finding God's way, God's grace and God's fellowship through the Bible, even though again and again what the Bible says—that is, what God in the Bible tells us—knocks us flat.

Sources:

R. C. Sproul in his book *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1977) p. 31.

James I. Packer in his book *God Has Spoken* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1979) pp. 8-9.]

Questions For Reflection and Discussion

1. *What, if anything, hinders you from regular serious Bible study? What will you do about it?*
2. *Examine in detail the amount and depth of Bible study you've engaged in over the past year. What do you conclude?*
3. *What, if anything, will you need to change in your schedule in order to make time for regular serious Bible study? What plans should you make?*
4. *Would it help motivate and discipline you to study the Scriptures if you had a Christian friend to whom you were accountable? Is there someone you could approach to establish such a relationship, perhaps in the context of a prayer partnership?*
5. *Did Sproul or Packer say anything (in the above quotes) that surprised you? Why? Is this what is usually heard about Bible study in Christian circles? If no, why not?*

Preparing to Study Scripture

When we set out to study the Scriptures it can be instructive to first consider three things:

1. *What is our attitude as we approach the sacred text?*
2. *What is the goal of our study?*
3. *By what method we can best study the Bible?*

Our Attitude

Our attitude makes a difference in what we read and how we read it: the morning newspaper will never be as compelling as a letter from a lover, nor will it be read and savored—and re-read—with the same care or attention to detail. If we believe the Bible is the Word of God written, we can hardly approach the Scriptures simply as we would any other book—even in a world that is happily filled with books which are worth reading. To read, meditate on, delight in, and study this Book must be a priority even in busy lives if we are convinced that it is the very self-disclosure of the living God. The psalmist strikes exactly the right chord:

I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. (Psalm 119:14-16).

Six Characteristics for Approaching Bible Study

When approaching study of Scripture a believer must be:

Submissive

The believer comes to the Scriptures recognizing that they carry the full weight of our Lord's authority.

Christians are people under authority, bond-slaves of the One who loved us unto death. Our freedom and fulfillment is not found in carving out a way for ourselves, but in submission to the will of our Master. "One cannot seriously contemplate the first elementary truths of Christianity," Harry Blamires writes, "the doctrine of the divine creation of man and his world, the doctrine of the Redemption, and the doctrine of the Church, without realizing that here is something which is either authoritative and binding or false; deserving of submission or of total neglect. Reason allows no place for a casual, one-man-to-another approach to God and his demands. It is either the bowed head or the turned back." We must approach the Bible recognizing that He is God and that our proper posture before Him is one of adoring submission.

Obedient

We need to be committed to the truth of God's Word, realizing that knowledge implies responsibility, and believing that obedience will not harm us because, in fact, we were created for it. The wonder of Christianity is its insistence on truth. The same God who spoke, calling all things into existence, has spoken in the Scriptures in a way that can be understood. We were created by and for the Word of God, and find life and fulfillment only as we are obedient. The Old Testament people of God had it exactly right when Moses read the Scriptures to them: We will do everything the LORD has said, they responded, we will obey (*Exodus 24:7*). And so should we.

Humble

We must always remember that studying revealed truth does not mean all our opinions or interpretations are equally true. The Westminster divines sounded a warning that we are prudent to heed: All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.7). Questions will remain, difficult passages will continue to challenge, and some of what we're convinced of will be shown to be in error. In this fallen world, a lack of humility in finite creatures is both foolish and wrong.

Dependent

Every time we study the Bible we should remind ourselves of our desperate need for the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth and to save us from folly. Our fallenness cuts through every part of our being and life, including our study of the Scriptures. John R. W. Stott has for many years repeated a simple yet profound prayer each time he has entered a pulpit to preach. It is a prayer worth praying each time we set out to study the Word of God:

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Expectant

After all, aren't we convinced that All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for

every good work (2 *Timothy* 3:16-17)?

This isn't to suggest that each period of Bible study will be equally eye-opening or that we will always be able to point to amazing lessons learned. God has not given us His Word in written form in order to supply us with a string of spiritual experiences, but to reveal Himself to us. Expect to meet Him in the pages of Scripture.

Disciplined

Bible study involves serious work, but is not impossible for any believer, and disciplined study must be a regular part of our lives and schedule. "Read the text, re-read it, re-read it, and read it again," John Stott advises.

Turn it over and over in your mind, like Mary the mother of Jesus who wondered at all the things the shepherds had told her, pondering them in her heart (*Luke* 2:18-19). Probe your text, like a bee with a spring blossom, or like a hummingbird probing a hibiscus flower for its nectar. Worry at it like a dog with a bone. Suck it as a child sucks an orange. Chew it as a cow chews the cud.

It is simply impossible to be a faithful disciple without discipline.

Our Goal

Why do we bother to study the Scriptures; what do we wish to accomplish?

At least four things, by God's grace:

1. To know God.

We do not seek merely to learn about God, but to know Him. As we study the Bible we hear His voice in His Word, and allow God's revelation of Himself to set the agenda for our life and thinking.

Listen to the Word of God spoken through the prophet:

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-34).

May we study the Scriptures regularly and rigorously, not to excel at "Bible Trivia," but to know God in an ever deepening personal relationship through Christ.

2. To have the mind of Christ.

Thinking Christianly is not merely thinking by Christians, since it's possible for Christians to have minds that are conformed to the world. Neither is thinking Christianly thinking by Christians about "Christian" topics—Christ is Lord of all. Nor is thinking Christianly thinking by Christians in order to develop a single "Christian position" on every conceivable topic or issue. Rather, thinking

Christianly is thinking by Christians about anything and everything in a consistently Christian way—in a manner that is shaped, directed, and restrained by the truth of God’s Word and God’s Spirit. If we are to have the mind of Christ, Bible study will, of necessity, be a part of our lives.

3. To grow a Christian world and life view.

Becoming steeped in the Scriptures means that the biblical story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation will increasingly be our framework for thinking, doing and feeling. As C.S. Lewis said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen; not only because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

The apostle Paul spoke of taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 *Corinthians* 10:5). “I urge you,” he wrote in *Romans* 12:1-2, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. We have a world and life view—the only question is to what extent it is a Christian world and life view.

4. To be faithful.

We can do no better than to recall the answer to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever. The serious study of the Scriptures has long been recognized by the people of God as an essential discipline in the life of godliness. If we desire to be faithful across the full sweep of our lives, we will want to regularly dig into the Scriptures in a rigorous and reasonable way. How else will we know the mind and heart of God?

The Method

Having considered our attitude concerning Bible study and our goals as we approach the Scriptures, we can now reflect on the method of study to be used. And our method of study should meet at least four qualifications:

First, it should be simple enough to be taught to children, yet it should have enough depth that it can be developed to the full extent of our intellectual abilities and scholarly interests.

Second, our method of study should be natural, or common to human learning. Nowhere in Scripture are we asked to approach the Bible in a manner which is uniquely “religious,” or otherwise contrary to how people normally seek to learn.

Third, our Bible study should be not be individualistic, which is the spirit of the modern age, but pursued in the context of Christian community. Our recommendation is that each believer be involved in a small group that regularly studies the Scriptures with care.

And *fourth*, if it is to be Bible study, it must be more than simply using the text as an opportunity to share our opinions, even if our opinions happen to be rather good. Too much of what passes for Bible study is actually better described as Stream-of-Consciousness-Sharing, where people allow the text to trigger thoughts which they then verbalize, whether or not those thoughts are relevant to the text, or even contradicted by it. Our method of study must help discipline us so we actually study the text itself—since that’s what we’ve set out to accomplish in the first place. The Bible study method we outline here meets these qualifications. What we will explain here is a series of study skills that can be learned, practiced, and used both for individual study as well as for Bible study in groups. The skills can be taught to children, and yet

can be used on a scholarly level. They take us to the text, and into it, allowing us to escape the trap of meeting to share our ignorance. And though these skills can be learned through these articles, they are best practiced under the tutelage of a trained Bible study leader. Work on the method we are outlining here, read the articles, use the charts, and practice the skills involved. And then, at the first opportunity, join a Bible study or training workshop where you can be part of group that uses these skills under the direction of a teacher.

Our method of Bible study utilizes six practical skills. They are listed here briefly, and then you can go on to learn about each one in detail.

The S.O.A.R. Model of Bible Study

Survey

This involves getting an overview of the whole book or section of Scripture being studied. A Survey reveals something of the background and the main divisions of the book, and allows us to go on to study the details without losing sight of the whole.

Observe

There are specific skills that we can use in order to see what the text is actually saying. Many Christians are weak at Observation, assuming they “know” what the text says and so they launch directly into what they think it means. That’s a mistake, however, and we’ll find that patient Observation richly rewards the student of Scripture.

Analyze

Once we’ve determined what the text says (observation), we are ready to begin working on what the text means, which is to analyze it. We can learn to analyze with care, using skills to guard us from error.

Respond

Part of the process of analysis involves figuring out how we are to respond, after relating the text to its context and to the rest of Scripture. This means allowing the truth of God’s Word to order our lives. Once we have determined what the text says, what it means, and how it fits into the rest of Scripture, we are in a position to seek to be faithful to it. We can ask: Since this is God’s Word, what do we hear Him saying to us, and what are we going to do about it?

Christians in modernity tend to be profoundly individualistic. Our

application of the Bible thus tends to be privatized, while the teaching of Scripture is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. In this final skill, then, we will seek to flesh out the truth of God's Word in our modern world, applying it to society and culture.

Once again the Westminster divines summed it up well:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9).

Sources:

Harry Blamires from *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant; 1963) p. 132. Rev

Stott's prayer from *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* by David Edwards and John R. W. Stott (Downers

Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1988) opposite title page. John R. W. Stott on meditation from *Between Two Worlds: The Art of*

Preaching in the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1982) p. 220.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- 1. What training have you had in Bible study skills? How helpful was it? How regularly do you use the skills you learned?*
- 2. Is there something in your attitude concerning Bible study which should be changed? Why? What are you going to do about it?*
- 3. What goals for Bible study appear to be most common in small group studies that you are familiar with? How do they compare to the goals outlined above? To what extent are these goals being realized in the wider Christian community?*
- 4. Consider using the points listed under “Our Attitude” and “Our Goal” as a guide for prayer.*

The Survey Method for Bible Overview

Getting an Overview of the Whole

Surveying something—whether a room, or a piece of art, or an acre of land—simply means looking it over in order to try to comprehend it as a whole. Do a good job surveying something, and you'll have an accurate picture of it in its entirety. The survey sets the stage for the rest of your study, and gives you a context in which to place the details you observe, interpret and apply.

Surveying a piece of land, for example, will tell you where the borders are, how much is wooded, and whether the spring is included in the property. The survey won't answer all your questions, but it's the essential first step. You'll need to go on to study things in more detail—like whether it's possible to drink the spring water—but the survey has to come first. There's no point worrying about the spring if it's on the neighboring piece of property.

Like the rest of these study skills, surveying is something we tend to do as a normal part of life and learning. When we moved to Rochester, MN, in 1981, for example, one of the first things we did was to survey the new city in which we were to live. We took a map of the community and looked it over. We noticed the streets were laid out in a grid, the Avenues running north/south and the Streets east/west. We saw that most of them were numbered, with the zero block in the heart of the downtown area. We discovered a few landmarks, like the huge water tower in the shape of an ear of corn (this is the Midwest, after all!), and the convent of the Sisters of St. Francis (“a nuclear-free zone,” their sign says, which is good, since I don't think I'd trust them with nukes) perched high on a hill. Noting the layout of the streets and a few landmarks was part of surveying our new community. We still didn't know it well, of

course, and we still got lost, but the survey was part of learning “the lay of the land.”

Surveying is an activity we undertake many times a day without realizing it. “Many of us read a magazine the same way,” Irving Jensen points out, “first we take a quick glance at the whole magazine, turning the pages quickly, and catching the theme. Then we go back and start reading the articles.” Finding what you’re looking for in a large discount store can be speeded up considerably if you pause near the door and survey the layout of the store.

In a similar way, the first step in careful Bible study is to Survey the book we wish to dig into. The Survey won’t answer all our questions—it may even raise more than it answers—but it will help us to comprehend the book as a whole, and will give us a context in which to proceed with our study.

Five Simple Steps

As with all Bible study skills, surveying is something children can learn to do, and adults can always sharpen their surveying skill to whatever level they desire. The more you use this skill, the better you’ll become at it. We highly recommend that you survey Scriptures with a group of fellow Christians. We are intended as believers to live in community, and learning from one another is a delight. Taking a survey of a book of the Bible, getting an overview of the whole, involves following five simple steps:

1. Read

Read the entire book through, at least once, preferably in one sitting. If possible, it’s best to read it through several times, using a different translation each time. A few of the translations you might find helpful include the:

New International Version (NIV)
English Standard Version (ESV)
Revised Standard Version (RSV)
New American Standard Version (NASV)
New English Bible (NEB)
Phillips (New Testament only)
King James (KJ)
New King James (NKJ).

Sometimes longer books will need to be read over a couple of days, but it is always best to plan for at least one reading to occur without interruption—say on a day off, when you might have a bit more time. If a group is planning to do a Survey of a longer book together, you might have to do it in sections over the course of several meetings.

2. Distinguish Main Divisions

This step involves three tasks:

- a. *First*, divide the book into its main divisions. In some books of history like Genesis or Acts, that might involve making chronological divisions. Other books like Romans might divide according to the flow of ideas the author addresses. Some like Judges might be divided according to the people whose lives it records. In each case, however, there are many different ways a book can be divided—doing a Survey does not mean finding the “one correct way.” Limit yourself to the main divisions—perhaps 3-8 divisions at the most. You can subdivide those main divisions later during your study.

- b. *Second*, give a brief title (1-8 words) to each division. Your title can be drawn from the text or it can be something you've made up yourself. The title should summarize for you the content of that division of the book. Put your divisions and their titles into outline or chart form.
- c. *Third*, compare and contrast your divisions and titles to those found in commentaries by thoughtful biblical scholars. Most commentators include outlines of the book of Scripture they are covering. Answer the questions: How are they similar? How do they differ? What difference does it make?

3. Determine Main Theme

Each book of Scripture usually has a central theme around which the author has structured their material. The theme is like the “melodic line” of a piece of music, the melody which runs through the entire work and around which the piece is constructed. Write out the main theme or “melodic line” of the book in a sentence or phrase, and include it in your chart or outline.

4. Note First Impressions

Note your first or general impressions of the book—anything that stands out to you as you read. These might include: names of persons or places you might wonder about, interesting facts or ideas, themes or arguments raised in the text, the tone the author appears to adopt, or anything else that comes to mind. Talking over your impressions with people in a group study is always interesting—the Scriptures are so rich that often different people notice very different

things as they read.

5. Research Background Information

Using commentaries, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, an atlas, handbooks, or other reference works, track down whatever background information you can find on the book. Once you begin to do this, you'll often discover a great deal of information that will help shed light on your study.

Look for such things as:

- Information on the author;
- The date the book was written, and how this was determined;
- The history or culture of the period;
- Significant extra-biblical events or persons of that same period in history;
- Maps covering the geography mentioned in the text;
- Facts about the book's significance in history or literature;
- Some of the history of the book's inclusion in the canon of Scripture;
- Other biblical passages which cover the same period as this book or the book's author.

When you've completed those five steps, you've completed your survey. Now you can go on to study the book in detail.

Getting an overview of the entire Bible

What we've covered so far is surveying a book as the first step to studying it in detail. There is, however, another good use for Surveys. And that is to use a series of Surveys to gain an overview of the entire sweep of history contained in the Bible.

Many Christians are intimidated by the Scriptures because they haven't been introduced to the history the Bible contains. They may be relatively young believers, and so haven't had a chance to get acquainted with the Bible. Or they may have been a Christian for some years, but have approached the Bible piecemeal, and so haven't been introduced to the entire story from beginning (Genesis) to end (Revelation). As a result, they aren't sure whether Samson came before Bathsheba, or how the history books, prophetic books, and poetry books actually fit together.

One way to gain an understanding of the history covered in the Bible and an overview of the different types of literature contained in it, is to do a series of Surveys which take you right through the Scriptures. The best plan, naturally, would be to Survey every book of the Bible in turn.

At a minimum, though, here's the books we'd recommend you Survey. We've broken them into four groups:

- (1) *Genesis, Job, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth*
- (2) *1 & 2 Samuel; 1 & 2 Kings; Proverbs; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs, Ezra*
- (3) *Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Habakkuk, Malachi, Mark, John, Acts*
- (4) *Romans, Colossians, 1 Timothy, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation*

Source

Irving Jensen from *Independent Bible Study* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press; 1963, 1991, 1992) p. 79.

Survey Skills *At-A-Glance*:

The First Step in Bible Study

Why?

To get an overview of the whole book. Read the entire book or section of Scripture through at least once, preferably in the same sitting. If possible read it several times using different translations.

Main Divisions

Divide the book into its main divisions and give each one a brief title. Put this material into outline or chart form. Compare your outline to those found in commentaries by biblical scholars.

Main Theme

Write out the central theme or “melodic line” of the book in a sentence or phrase and include it in your chart.

Impressions

Note your first or general impressions of the book—anything that stands out to you as you read: questions, facts, tone, etc.

Background

Using Bible tools (commentary, dictionary, atlas, handbook, etc.) track down whatever information you can find on such things as:

1. the author,
2. the date the book was written,
3. the history or culture of the period,
4. significant extra-biblical events or person of that time,
5. maps covering the geography mentioned in the text,
6. facts about the book’s significance in history or literature,
7. the history of the book’s inclusion in the canon,
8. and other biblical passages covering the same period.

Observation: Seeing What the Text Says

Observation skills involve examining the text carefully and patiently to see what it says. Our interpretation and application of the text will be in error if we fail to determine first what it actually says. This isn't simply true for the study of Scripture, but for all human learning. We must always begin with careful observation if we wish to study something or understand it accurately. A good physician always examines the patient before performing surgery.

Observation takes time, energy, patience and persistence to do well. That isn't necessarily very appealing to busy people who would far rather find time to relax than expend effort in serious study. We often assume we already know what's in the text, especially if we've read it before and are familiar with what it contains.

As a result, observation is one of the weak links in Bible study today. Few bother to observe the text with care, and the result is biblical illiteracy in a generation of believers who pride themselves in their regular "study" of the Scriptures.

Instead of carefully observing what the text says most Bible studies simply involve a quick reading of the passage followed by a barely controlled engagement in what I would call a "stream of consciousness" discussion. The text isn't so much studied as it is used as an excuse for people to think or share their ideas and opinions about things. In many cases the text may not even address these topics, or perhaps even teach something which is directly opposite to what is confidently asserted.

How NOT To Study the Bible

Most “stream of consciousness” Bible studies go something like this. The text (in this case, *Mark 4:2-8*) is read: *He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”*

And then the discussion begins...

“Have you ever noticed,” someone says, “how often Jesus talked about farming? He was always talking about trees, fruit, vineyards, weeds. I think he must have known how healthy working the soil can be. Besides, Adam and Eve’s first job was gardening.”

“That’s right,” someone else chimes in. “You know, I can remember visiting my grandparent’s farm when I was a kid. That was always a great way to spend the summer. We’ve been trying to do the same for our children, besides having them help with the gardening at home. Jesus was so practical about what is good for children.”

“And speaking of thorns,” another member adds, “boy, can friends from bad families ever be a thorn in your side when you’re a parent. Our Rick started hanging around with some boys whose parents never disciplined them, and before we knew it, Rick was picking up their habits...”

And so on...

Unfortunately, this discussion has nothing to do with the passage—which simple observation of the text would reveal. Jesus is not teaching about parenting in *Mark 4*, nor does he instruct us to involve our children in gardening nor to have them spend their summers on a farm. On the contrary, this text is about the word of God, and four different types of people who hear it.

Observe verse 14: The farmer, Jesus says, sows the word. And though disorderly friends may be a “thorn in the side” to parents, Jesus is not talking about that at all. He specifically defines what he means by thorns in verse 19: the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Discussing the influence of farms and bad friends on our children may be both helpful and interesting, but that is not what this text is addressing. This discussion is following the stream of consciousness of the participants, rather than allowing the Scriptures to set the agenda for what is covered. Stream of consciousness discussion—or simply reflecting on a passage in such an undisciplined manner—is not Bible study, even if people happen to call it that.

Learning to Observe

My dictionary defines observe as “to notice or perceive, to pay special attention to.” It involves carefully considering something, marking it attentively. “In view of its meaning,” Robert Traina writes, “the general function of observation is to enable one to become saturated with the particulars of a passage so that one is thoroughly conscious of their existence and of the need for their explanation. Observation is the means by which the data of the passage become part of the mentality of the student. It supplies

the raw materials upon which the mind may operate in the interpretive process.”

Observation may appear to be a rather unexciting task, but don't allow appearances to fool you. Observation is vital. And when you begin observing you'll soon discover how rich the text of Scripture really is, because you'll notice things even in well-known passages that you've never noticed before. Instead of simply recycling insights, you'll increasingly make progress in knowing God, his word, and what it means to be faithful in this sad and rebellious world.

We may not be always conscious of it, but observation is a natural step in learning about something. A scientist searching for a virus, a teacher examining a sonnet, a young man gazing at his lover, or a believer studying the Scriptures all use the same skill if they wish to really know their subject: they observe with care, patience, and practiced skill.

What To Look For in the Text

Since the Scriptures are the word of God written, our observation will require us to take the words of the text seriously.

Once we begin doing that, there are a host of things we can look for. If possible, get a copy of the text which you can mark, using colored pencils to keep track of your observations. You might wish to purchase a Bible with wide margins for this purpose, or use a photocopier to copy the text into the center of a sheet of paper, or you can generate a double-spaced copy using a computer if you have the appropriate software.

Here are a few examples of what to look for in the text:

Observe Facts

To look for facts in the text, approach it as a journalist might, by asking:

Who?	<i>names mentioned, major & minor characters;</i>
Where?	<i>places, travels, geography;</i>
What?	<i>actions, events, situations;</i>
When?	<i>time, sequence of events;</i>
Why?	<i>explanations, statements of purpose.</i>

Observe Repetitions

Note identical words or phrases, or similar ideas and themes that appear in the passage. For instance, the Lord's repeated use of the word blessed in the Beatitudes (*Matthew 5:3-11*).

Observe Contrasts

These are often easily identified by the use of "but" or "rather." For instance, Jesus' teaching on righteousness in the Sermon on the

Mount, as in: You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matthew 5:27-28*).

Observe Cause and Effect

This is where one thing causes, affects, or changes another. In *Matthew 5:19* there are two: Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Observe the Need for Definitions.

Mark words or phrases the meaning of which should be carefully explored. For example, the less-than-commonly-used description of Christ used by the apostle John: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world (*1 John 2:2*).

Observe Explanations

This is where something is defined, examined, explained, or analyzed within the text itself. Like the Apostle Paul’s discussion of love in *1 Corinthians 13*, or in *Mark 4* where Jesus first tells a parable and then explains what he means: Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed... The farmer sows the word (vs. 3 & 14).

Observe General/Particular

Identify where there is movement in the text from a broad idea or concept to a specific one (or vice versa). For example, when the apostle James first states a general principle and then discusses a particular illustration: My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into

your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in... (2:1-2).

Observe Interrogation

This involves any use of questions and/or answers within the text. As in when the Lord God asked Job a whole series of questions: Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand” (*Job 38:1-4*).

Observe Descriptions

Note the adjectives, adverbs, or any other modifiers used. There are a lot of these in the *Song of Songs*:

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes behind your veil are doves.

Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead.

*Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.*

Each has its twin; not one of them is alone.

Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely.

*Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate
(4:1-3).*

Observe Climax

This involves any arrangement of material in a progression. Like Peter’s discussion of Christian maturity:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge,

self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love
(2 Peter 1:5-7).

Observe Verbs

Verbs used throughout the text often provide insight into the action and/or characteristics of the subject being discussed. Tracing the verbs in a passage is crucial to unpacking the text's meaning.

Observe Pronouns

Use of pronouns is often crucial to identifying the narrator and/or understanding the perspective inherent in the text. For instance, just who is declaring the rather chilling conclusion in Psalm 137:8-9? Is it God? Or the grieving parent?

*O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—
he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

Observe Interchanges

This refers to any alternating or exchanging of elements in the text, so that persons, events, or ideas end up being compared or contrasted, implicitly or explicitly. The first few chapters of 1 Samuel tell the stories of Hannah and her son Samuel, and Eli and his sons. The contrast, though implicit, is unmistakable.

Observe Quotations

Identify where the text contains quotations of other passages of Scripture, or extra-biblical books, or where this text is quoted elsewhere in the Bible. For instance, Paul quoted (and agreed with) the Stoic poet Aratus in Acts 17: "For in him we live and move and

have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” (vs. 28).

As you make these observations in the text, you will begin unpacking and identifying what is there so you can begin interpreting its meaning (which is, of course, the next step in the process of Bible study). In fact, as you observe you’ll probably note that interpretation comes naturally. You’ll wrestle with what the observations mean, look up words with which you are unfamiliar, and begin to note the flow of thought of the author. Sometimes, just spending time in careful observation will open the text to you in fresh and wonderful ways.

Sources

Webster’s New World Dictionary, College Edition.

Robert Traina from *Methodical Bible Study: A New Approach to Hermeneutics* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury; 1952, 1980) pp. 31-32.

Observation Skills *At-A-Glance*: Seeing What the Text Says

Why Observe?

To examine the text carefully to see what it says.

Observe Facts

Who?	<i>names mentioned, major and minor characters</i>
Where?	<i>places, travels, geography</i>
What?	<i>actions, events, situations</i>
When?	<i>time, sequence of events</i>
Why?	<i>explanations, statements of purpose</i>

Observe Repetitions

Note identical words or phrases, similar ideas and themes.

Observe Contrasts

Contrasts are often identified by the use of “but” or “rather.”

Observe Cause/Effect

Where one thing causes, affects, or changes another.

Observe Definitions

Mark words or phrases that should be carefully defined.

Observe Explanations

Where something is defined, examined, explained, or analyzed within the text itself.

Observe General/Particular

Identify where there is movement in the text from a broad idea or concept to a specific one (or vice versa).

Observe Interrogation

The use of questions and/or answers within the text.

Observe Descriptions

Note the adjectives, adverbs, or any other modifiers used.

Observe Climax

This is any arrangement of material in a progression.

Observe Verbs

The verbs used throughout the text often provide insight into the action and/or characteristics of the subject being discussed.

Observe Pronouns

The use of pronouns is often crucial to identifying the narrator and/or understanding the perspective inherent in the text.

Observe Interchanges

This refers to any alternating or exchanging of elements in the text, so that persons, events, or ideas end up being compared or contrasted, implicitly or explicitly.

Observe Quotations

Identify where the text contains quotations of other passages of Scripture, or extra-biblical books, or where this text is quoted elsewhere in the Bible.

Interpretation

The interpretation of a scripture passage flows naturally from our observation of the passage; once we see what it says we can begin working on what it means. Once again, however, note the importance of careful observation. If we are mistaken in what the text says—in what is there—no doubt we will also be mistaken in our understanding of what it means.

When a passage is difficult to understand, don't immediately begin to puzzle over its interpretation. Instead, spend some time first in further observation. Though observation will not necessarily solve every question that arises from our Bible study, it will provide the solution to many of our questions, and, in the difficult passages will help to clarify what, exactly, we don't understand.

How To Interpret

The skill of interpretation involves reflecting prayerfully on the text in all its aspects to determine what it means.

Obviously, we must approach interpretation with care, with prayer, and with much humility. The reason is that even in the best of circumstances (on this side of heaven), our understanding of what is not immediately plain in the Bible will always be incomplete (because we are finite creatures) and at least partially mistaken (because we are not only finite, but fallen as well).

Still, this doesn't mean that Bible study is impossible. Nor need it be left to the "experts," though help from the world of scholarship should be eagerly sought at each step and greatly appreciated. We need to remember, though, that there will always be some sort of bias in our understanding of the Bible. We may, for example, tend to ignore certain sections simply because we find them too convicting. Or we might unconsciously read into the text something

from our own culture. Yet, as Richard Lints reminds us, “the meaning of the biblical text is not hidden from the ordinary layperson. It was the conviction of the Reformers that God has endowed humanity in such a manner that when the Bible is translated into our native tongues, a plain sense of the text will arise naturally in the mind of the reader. The individual does not create that meaning but rather discovers it plainly in the pages of the text.”

Approach

There are a number of things we can do as we study in order to help us get at the “plain sense of the text.” Here are a few of them:

Determine how the text should be divided or outlined.

It can be helpful to divide the passage into its subsections or paragraphs, and then give a brief title to each one (of, say, 1-8 words). This forces us to examine the flow of thought found in the passage which, in turn, will help unpack what it means.

Define terms.

Taking time to carefully define the key words found in the text—regardless of whether we think we already know what they mean—can be an important step in understanding what the author meant. Using a dictionary, a commentary, or some other reference work will allow you to find the definitions you need.

There are a number of fine reference works on the market which can be used, but here are two we would recommend:

New Bible Dictionary, Second Edition, edited by Douglas et al, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House; 1962, 1982) 1,326 pp.

“As a basic book for every thinking Christian’s library,” John R. W.

Stott says, “it is indispensable.” Good for looking up words, names, places, and other biblical terms.

Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance.

Allows the reader to look up every English word in the Bible (King James translation), define it, identify the term in the original languages from which it was translated, and see where else in Scripture the same term appears.

Reflect on your observations.

Beginning with the most key observations of the text, try to determine their significance or meaning. The easiest way to do this is to turn the observation into a question. (Note the example below.) If you observe, for example, that the author repeats a term throughout the passage, ask why he would do so. What does the repetition teach or emphasize; how does it affect the flow of thought in the passage? What would be changed if the author had only mentioned it once? Thinking through the answers to such questions will cause you to reflect on the meaning of the passage.

Determine the theme of the passage.

Closely related to the process of dividing the passage into its logical parts or paragraphs, determining the theme of the text causes us to identify the major ideas and the flow of thought or argument of the author.

Maintain interpretive accountability.

“It is a piece of modern arrogance,” Michael Horton argues, “held by liberal and fundamentalist alike, to suppose that one’s own reason and experience can search out the Scriptures afresh and discover the real meaning of faith and revelation, apart from the guiding light of the ‘cloud of witnesses.’” The Scriptures are God’s

revelation of himself, in written form, given to the people of God. To interpret the Bible as if we are the only ones who have studied it is nothing more, in practice, than a denial of the unity of Christ's body in the church. It is simply wrong to charge off developing doctrine as if we were the only Christians alive under God's blue sky.

One way to be accountable is to check whether our interpretation or understanding of the text is affirmed by the great secondary standards of the church. If this is a new concept for you, we recommend beginning with these four documents:

The Apostles Creed

The Nicene Creed

The Westminster Standards

(Confession + Larger & Shorter Catechisms)

The Heidelberg Catechism

The issue can be framed another way: If, in the course of our Bible study we come up with an understanding of Christian belief that is completely novel in all of history, we would be wise to assume that we are probably mistaken. It is contrary to the teaching of Scripture concerning itself to discover that its truth is hidden from all except us.

The Scriptures, as God's word written, are my final or primary standard or authority as a believer. They are not, however, my only standard—the historic statements of Christian doctrine listed here are secondary standards or authorities to which I am happy to hold myself accountable.

Ask four key "Why" questions.

The four questions, all of which are worth exploring in every text, include:

Why is this said?

Why is it said here?

Why is it said in this way?

Why is it a surprise?

Ask five more questions.

These questions help you determine what the text implies teaches concerning:

Who or what is involved?

How is this accomplished?

When is this accomplished?

Where is this accomplished?

Why is this accomplished?

Identify the type of literature.

Given the genre (history, poetry, proverb, parable, epistle, prophecy, etc.) of this text, what principles must be kept in mind in the process of interpretation? The type of literature will naturally affect our study—and our interpretation—of the passage.

Consider, for example, this statement made by a Christian concerning parenting: “We are given wonderful promises that cannot fail to bring about good behavior in fallen children when applied in love and with much prayer out of desire to be obedient to God’s Word (*Proverbs 22:15*).” The main problem with this statement (there are actually several) is that the verse on which this remarkable assertion is based is not a promise, but a proverb. The author is approaching his interpretation of this verse as if the type of literature involved makes no difference—and as a result ends up with an interpretation which is, in fact, contrary to Christian belief. “Proverbs are catchy little couplets designed to

express practical truisms,” R. C. Sproul reminds us. “They reflect principles of wisdom for godly living. They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life situation.” If the author had been careful to identify the passage as a proverb, he would never have interpreted it as he did. Besides, as a review of the secondary standards would have reminded him, the Fall cuts so deeply into life and reality that the dream of finding something which “cannot fail to bring about good behavior in fallen children” is nothing short of utopian.

For a practical and readable introduction to interpreting the Bible, we recommend the book in which we found the quotations on proverbs:

Knowing Scripture by Dr. R. C. Sproul (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1977) 125 pp.

A must for every believer’s library.

Determine what text teaches about the Christian world view.

Once again, there are questions we to help us figure this out.

a. Creation

What really exists? What is really real? What is the nature of God? of human beings? of family? of society? What is the origin and nature of the world around us? Why is it possible to know anything at all?

b. Fall

How do we know what is good and what is evil? What is wrong with humankind? with the world? What are the effects of the Fall?

c. Redemption

What is the solution to what's wrong? How can we work against the effects of the Fall? What do we learn about the people of God?

d. Consummation

What is the meaning of life? of suffering? of death? What happens at death?

If the notion of a world and life view is new to you, we strongly recommend:

The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog, updated & expanded edition, by James W. Sire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1976, 1988).

This is another of those “indispensable” books for thinking Christians.

Ask what the text teaches us concerning theology.

In other words, what do we learn in the passage concerning:

- Scripture: revelation, truth, and final authority
- God: his nature, attributes, trinity, & work
- Mankind: origin, calling, & nature
- Sin and the Fall
- Salvation
- Christ: his nature, incarnation, life, & work
- The church
- Human history and where it is headed

(As you might have noticed, these questions are designed around the traditional categories of systematic theology.)

Determine what we can learn about idolatry.

We know from Scripture—and from common sense—that every person believes something, everyone worships something. As we study the Bible, we not only learn about truth, we are given much insight into non-truth, and into the false systems of belief that sinful people create for themselves in rebellion against the revelation of God. The question to ask, then, is what insight does this passage give concerning non-biblical world views, beliefs, values, and practices?

Sources:

F. F. Bruce in “Interpretation of the Bible” in the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology edited by Walter A. Elwell

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; 1984); The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation

by Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1991); Knowing Scripture by R. C. Sproul (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press; 1977); The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology by Richard Lints (Grand Rapids, MI:

Eerdmans; 1993); “My Room With a View” by Mike Horton in The Horse’s Mouth (a newsletter of Christians United for

Reformation, July 1994) p. 1.

Interpretation Skills At-A-Glance: Determining What the Text Means

Why?

To reflect prayerfully on the text to determine what it means.

Divisions

Divide the passage into its subsections or paragraphs and give a brief title to each one (1-8 words).

Define Terms

Use Bible reference books to define important words or concepts.

Reflect on your observations

Ask questions to determine the significance of key observations.

Define the Theme

Identify major ideas and flow of thought or argument.

Accountability

Affirm that your interpretation is correct through use of secondary standards—confessions and creeds (i.e. Westminster Standards).

Why Questions

Why is this said? Why is it said in this way? Why is it a surprise?

Additional Questions

Who is involved? How/When/Where/Why is this accomplished?

Type of Literature

Given the genre of the text, what principles must be kept in mind in the process of interpretation?

Christian World View

Creation:

What really exists? What is real? What is the nature of God? ...of human beings? ...of family? ...of society? What is the origin/nature of the world around us? Why is it possible to know anything at all?

Fall:

How do we know what is good and what is evil? What is wrong with humankind? ...with the world? What are the effects of the Fall?

Redemption:

What is the solution to what's wrong? How can we work against the effects of the Fall? What do we learn about the people of God?

Consummation:

What is the meaning of life? ...of suffering? ...of death? What happens at death?

What Do We Learn About

<i>Theology</i>	Scripture: revelation, truth, and final authority
<i>God</i>	His nature, attributes, trinity, & work
<i>Mankind</i>	Origin, calling, & nature
<i>Sin & The Fall</i>	
<i>Salvation</i>	
<i>Christ</i>	His nature, incarnation, life, & work
<i>The Church</i>	
<i>Human History</i>	...and where it is headed
<i>Idolatry</i>	

What insight is given into non-biblical world views?

Correlation: Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

Each Bible study skill, though separate, tends to flow naturally into the next. The more familiar we are with each one, the more the process of study will be a unified whole rather than a series of six distinct steps.

After gaining a snapshot of the entire biblical book (survey), we begin to move through that book passage by passage. We discern the meaning of the passage (interpretation) based on what the passage says (which we determine in the process of observation). Correlation is actually part of the process of interpretation, but is so essential that it is best understood as a distinct step or skill in the process of study. In correlation we seek to discern the meaning of the text not as an isolated passage, but as part of the whole of Scripture. This is important because not only does Scripture interpret Scripture, but the message of God's Word is a single story centered in the person and work of Christ.

Correlation as a Bible study skill is a bit like corresponding with a friend. Let's say we receive a letter from some friends in which they say they can come for a visit in June. So, we check our calendar, find we can take vacation then too, and reply positively. Then, let's say we receive a postcard in which our friends suggests we go camping together. Now—and here's where the correlation comes in—even if our friends fail to mention the June dates in the postcard, we would correlate, or relate, the two and assume they are suggesting we go camping during their visit in June. Normally we would not assume our friends are now proposing a second visit. The postcard's meaning is interpreted in the light of the previous letter.

How Do We Correlate?

Let's begin with a definition. Correlation involves relating the text to its context and to the rest of Scripture.

We can correlate Scripture with Scripture with confidence because, though penned by many individuals over many centuries, we believe the Scriptures have, finally, one author, and are the Word of God. The Bible is, in James I. Packer's words, "more than a library of books by human authors; it is a single book with a single author—God the Spirit—and a single theme—God the Son, and the Father's saving purposes, which all revolve round Him."

"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself," the Westminster Confession reminds us, "and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." Our Bible study must be detailed and vigorous, but always with the goal of seeking to understand the whole, and of allowing the whole to shed light on the details of each text.

There are several reasons correlation is an important—in fact, vital—step in Bible study.

First, correlating Scripture with Scripture can bring clarity to passages that by themselves may be less clear. For example, James 2:24 seems, at first glance to contradict the biblical teaching that we are justified by faith alone. "You see that a person is justified by what he does," James writes, "and not by faith alone." He even uses Abraham as an example, appearing to contradict Paul's great teaching in Romans 4 that Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (*Romans 4:3*).

There is no contradiction, however, if we simply correlate *James 2:24* with its immediate context, particularly with verses 14-18 in the same chapter. James' concern is not to define the doctrine of justification, but to argue that justifying faith always is accompanied with obedience. The biblical understanding of justification is Faith = Justification + works. If there are no works, if there is no evidence of God's grace in repentance and obedience, then there is every reason to question whether true faith is present. James' argument is designed to lean against the unbiblical notion that *Faith = Justification - Works*.

James does not contradict Paul concerning justification but rather unpacks the meaning of faith, and it is correlation which makes that plain.

The second reason to correlate is that the unity of Scripture means that our study should not result in a mass of knowledge and facts, but the development of a Christian mind and life centered in a living relationship with Christ. Correlation will help us focus on the great central themes of God's revelation, bringing structure and order to our study. The biblical message is the unfolding story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation—and each of these four great themes are woven throughout the Scriptures like threads in a great tapestry. Tracing those threads is vital if our minds are to be renewed, and the more we trace the details, the more we'll appreciate the glory of the complete story. The great doctrines of the faith are unpacked throughout the narrative of Scripture, requiring that our study range back and forth throughout the Bible if we are to understand them correctly.

And third, correlation can help check errors in interpretation because new light is shed on the text when we compare Scripture

with Scripture. Many who study the story of Lot in *Genesis*, for example, conclude he is devoid of grace, an unrighteous man who shows no evidence that he knows or loves God. Yet, Peter tells us something about Lot in *2 Peter 2:7-8* that must guide our interpretation of the story in *Genesis*: “Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard).” If our interpretation of Lot in *Genesis* is contrary to that of the Apostle Peter, there is no doubt as to who is mistaken.

Correlation, then, brings clarity to unclear passages, helps us focus on the central message of God’s Word, and sheds light on texts we might otherwise misunderstand.

Correlation is a principle or skill of proper biblical interpretation, not an excuse for those who do not know the Scriptures to refrain from studying the Bible. If you are young in faith, or perhaps poorly taught, you may not know very much concerning the Scriptures. You may even have difficulty finding some of the books of the Bible, to say nothing of knowing what they contain or teach. At times in Bible studies and discussions you may feel more than a little intimidated by believers who are able to refer to passages in other books, and who flip back and forth through their Bibles with ease. To you I would say: Don’t give up, don’t quit, and refuse to be intimidated! Ask them to slow down, to help you find each passage, and to explain why these passages are, in fact, related. Besides studying the Bible, read through it again and again. Over time, as you read and study the Scriptures and hear them preached, you will grow in your ability to correlate Scripture with Scripture, understanding each part in light of the whole of God’s Word.

It is helpful to imagine the skill of correlation as involving a series

of concentric circles, with the specific text you are studying as the bulls-eye. Each circle radiating outward from the bulls-eye represents other passages, beginning with the immediate context and moving outward from there. Correlation uses the skills of observation and interpretation to examine how the text is related to the rest of Scripture, beginning with the passages closest to it, and then moving out to the rest of Scripture. So, if we are studying *Colossians 1:15-20*, our series of concentric circles would include: What comes prior to the text in the same book? In this case, *Colossians 1:1-14*.

What comes after the text in the same book? The rest of Paul's epistle to the *Colossians*.

Other passages in the Bible that address the identical topic(s), for example *Psalms 89:27*, *Romans 8:29*, and *Hebrews 1:6* which also have to do with the idea of the firstborn, which Paul refers to in *Colossians 1:15 & 18*.

Other passages in the Bible address similar or related topics, such as *John 1* which is also concerned with the person, work, and divinity of Christ.

Always begin with the immediate context and move out from there. As common sense should tell us, it is a mistake to jump to another text when the immediate context provides what we need to interpret the meaning of the passage.

One author, for example, commented on *Colossians 1:10*, that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him by writing this: "Had the Colossian saints wondered how they were to accomplish this, all they needed to do was to go back by faith to the Lord's baptism and hear the Father declare from the opened

heavens, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Here the author is correlating two passages each of which contains the notion of “pleasing God.” But is this really the first step to take as we attempt to figure out the meaning of Paul’s phrase? It is most assuredly not the place to begin. If the Colossian believers wondered what Paul meant by “pleasing God” they needed to simply pay attention to the immediate context of this phrase—where Paul clearly defines what he had in mind: And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light (vs. 10-12). Once we have examined the immediate context, we might wish to also look at other passages in which the notion of pleasing God is mentioned—but that is not where correlation begins. Begin with the immediate context and move out from there.

More specifically, we can correlate Scripture with Scripture by prayerfully using the study skills of observation and interpretation correlating words, history, and theology/world view.

Correlate Words

This involves following a particular word or phrase through the Scriptures—such as firstborn in Colossians 1 (see correlation example below). A word or phrase that is relatively unclear in one passage might be clarified in another. And because of the unity of the Scriptures, richness of meaning is often revealed as we allow the Bible to unfold its own teaching.

The actual process of correlating words involves four simple steps:

Identify a word or phrase in your text that you wish to study in more depth. This might be an unfamiliar term or it might be so central to the text that exploring its meaning is of significance if we are understand the text's meaning.

Find other passages of Scripture in which the identical word or phrase appears. (It is helpful to use a concordance that lists the words in the original languages. Since Greek and Hebrew words can be translated using a number of English words, a concordance will allow you to correlate texts that use identical words in the original languages.)

Carefully identify similar words and/or phrases which, though not identical, are closely related. Terms like salvation, redemption and justification, for example, are very closely related, even intertwined, but they are not identical.

Understanding both the inter-related meaning of each term as well as how they are distinct from one another will greatly increase our comprehension of God's grace to us in Christ.

Finally, after identifying all the correlated passages, study them with care—using observation and interpretation—to see what light, if any, they will shed on the meaning of your original text.

Correlate History

The story of Scripture is set in the flow of history, and as we study Scripture we are granted insight into the unfolding of God's purposes for His people in time. The keen Bible student, then, will not ignore the history involved, but will attempt to understand the message of the Bible in the light of that history.

Simply identify other passages of Scripture that cover the same period of history, or refer to the same characters or events as the text you are studying. Study these passages with care to see what light, if any, they will shed on the meaning of your text. Some biblical characters and events are spoken of in various parts of the Bible, and in some cases a number of books fit into the same historical period. If you are studying the Old Testament book of Haggai, for example, it is helpful to know that Zechariah was prophesying at the same time, and that both these prophets were ministering during the period of history recorded in the book of Ezra. Thus, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra can be correlated, each helping to interpret the others.

To help identify the passages that are related historically to the text you are studying, the following reference works may prove helpful:

Commentaries

Often they include a whole section on the author, dates, and the wider historical setting for the book.

Concordance, Bible Handbooks and Dictionaries.

The concordance can help locate passages in which the same characters or events are mentioned. Bible handbooks are designed to include charts, historical time-lines, and background information on authors, books, and events. And Bible dictionaries are a good place to look up specific names (of people or places) for summaries of what is known about them.

Study Bibles

Check the notes in a good study Bible, where you can sometimes find a wealth of information in a small space. One word of warning: Study Bibles are excellent tools, but there is a subtle danger. They contain so much information that it can be a temptation to

substitute reading these notes for careful study. Use the study notes as a supplement to, not a replacement of, your own careful study of the text.

Correlate Theology and World View

This final type of correlation is the broadest: we first correlated words and phrases, then historical characters or periods, and here we correlate broad ideas and themes.

Part of interpretation involved identifying the theological and world view categories which the passage addressed. Now you can identify other passages of Scripture that address the same areas. Study these passages with care to see what light, if any, they shed on the meaning of your text. And once again, to help identify these related texts, the following reference works may prove helpful:

- Westminster Confession & Catechisms
- Heidelberg Catechism (and other Reformed Creeds and Confessions) which include Scripture texts.
- Commentaries, which often refer to related texts and explore the great themes touched on in the passage(s).
- Concordance, Bible handbooks, and dictionaries.
- Books of theology and/or world view.
- Notes in a good study Bible.

A Few Concluding Thoughts

“The Bible is a unity,” Dr. Packer reminds us. “That is, perhaps the most amazing of all the amazing things that are true of it. It consists of sixty-six separate units, written over more than a thousand years against a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, by people who for the most part worked independently of each other and show no awareness that their books would become canonical Scripture. The books themselves are of all kinds: prose jostling poetry, hymns

rubbing shoulders with history, sermons with statistics, letters with liturgies, lurid visions with a love song.

Why do we bind up this collection between the same two covers, call it *The Holy Bible*, and treat it as one book? One justification for doing this—one of many—is that the collection as a whole, once we start to explore it, proves to have an organic coherence that is simply stunning. Books written centuries apart seem to have been designed for the express purpose of supplementing and illuminating each other. There is throughout one leading character (God the Creator), one historical perspective (world redemption), one focal figure (Jesus of Nazareth, who is both Son of God and Savior), and one body of harmonious teaching about God and godliness.”

It is this great unity that we celebrate, expect, and explore as we seek study God’s Word.

Sources:

James I. Packer in “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans;

1958) p. 84; and in *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* by Edmund Clowney (Colorado Springs, CO:

NavPress; 1988) p. 7-8. Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter I Section IX. James Comte (April 5) and Arnot McIntee (August

14) in the 1995 *Choice Gleanings: Devotions with a Christ-Centered Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press).

For Reflection and Discussion

Read Exodus 14. Consider the following three verses from this chapter.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD (v. 10). Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again” (v. 13). And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant (v. 31).

Read the following comment based on those three verses: “Fear leads to grumbling and complaining; faith stills the troubled heart. Fear looks at the circumstances, problems, and difficulties; faith looks at the God of those circumstances and believes! Fear keeps us in bondage; faith enjoys the fruits of victory.” Determine whether the comment is based on good skills of Observation, Interpretation and Correlation. Why or why not? If not, correct the comment as needed.

Resources To Help With Correlation Study Bible

Bible

New Geneva Study Bible (published by Thomas Nelson). The notes were prepared by a group of evangelical Reformed theologians, including James I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, James Montgomery Boice, Leon Morris, and Roger Nicole. Complete with maps, charts, illustrations, footnotes, introductions to each book, and articles on a variety of topics.

Worldview

The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog by James W. Sire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1976, 1988). A classic that needs to be in every believer's library. The author introduces and defines the concept of world view and then outlines how each of the major world views answer the Big Questions of life. Covers Christian theism, deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, Marxism, eastern pantheistic monism, and the New Age.

Building a Christian World View (I): God, Man and Knowledge

Building a Christian World View (II): The Universe, Society, and Ethics edited by W. Andrew Hoffercker and Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed; 1986). Two professors from Grove City College prepared these textbooks for classes in which they seek to train students to think Christianly.

Historic Creeds and Confessions, Councils and Christ by Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1984). A good introduction to the topic, giving an overview of the history involved, and showing how the orthodox historic creeds of the early church are helpful and important summaries of biblical truth.

The Heidelberg Catechism with Scripture Texts. An inexpensive paperback version available from CRC Publications, 2850 Kalamazoo SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

Westminster Confession of Faith. A modern version (paperback) is available from Summertown Texts, P.O. Box 453, Signal Mountain, TN 37377.

Theology

Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology by James Montgomery Boice (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1986). Easy to read and biblical, this is one of the best overviews of theology available. The place to begin if you haven't done much reading in systematic theology.

Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs by James I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House; 1993). Brief, readable summaries of Christian doctrine.

Essential Truths of the Christian Faith by R. C. Sproul (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House; 1992). Brief, readable summaries of Christian doctrine.

Systematic Theology by Louis Berkhof (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans). A comprehensive, academic treatment.

Manual of Christian Doctrine by Louis Berkhof (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans). A 361 page summary of his Systematic Theology, which weighs in at 784 pages. **Summary of Christian Doctrine** by Louis Berkhof (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans). A 198 page summary of his Manual.

Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief by Bruce Milne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1982). A readable introduction, complete with questions for reflection and discussion.

Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine by A. A. Hodge (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust). A series of popular lectures on select areas of theology. Hodge was one of the best at being able to present doctrine in a winsome and understandable way.

Correlation Skills At-A-Glance: Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

Why?

To relate the text to its context and to the rest of Scripture.

The Basic Method

Determine how the text is related to the passage(s) that immediately surround it in the same book. Identify other passages that address the identical issue(s) in other books of Scripture. Identify other passage(s) that address related issue(s).

Correlate Words

Identify words or phrases to study in more depth. Trace other passages of Scripture in which the identical word or phrase appears. Use a concordance that lists the words in the original languages since Greek and Hebrew words can often be translated into a variety of English words. Identify similar words and/or phrases that are not identical but are closely related. Study these passages to see if they shed any light on the meaning of your text.

Correlate History

Identify other passages of Scripture that cover the same period of history or refer to the same characters. Study these passages to see if they shed any light on the meaning of your text. To help identify these related texts, use commentaries, a concordance, Bible handbook and dictionary, and the notes in a good study Bible.

Correlate Theology and World View

As part of interpretation, you identified the theological and world view categories addressed by your passage. Identify other passages of Scripture that address the same areas. See if they shed any light on your text.

Application

Application allows us to move from knowing and understanding the Scriptures to obeying them. This obedience can take many forms. It may involve bringing our behavior into line with God's law. Or it might require repentance because we discover we've broken his command. Or it might involve changing the way we think so that we think about things in biblical categories.

Our obedience might involve changing how we vote because of the biblical teaching concerning the nature and purpose of the State. Regardless of what our application of Scripture happens to require, the goal of Bible study is not simply to gain biblical knowledge, but to gain knowledge of God's Word in order to flesh it out in daily life.

"There is not a condition into which a child of God can fall," the Puritan Thomas Gouge said, "but there is a direction and rule in the Word, in some measure suitable thereunto." We share that conviction, and believe, in fact, that Bible study without holy spirited application can be a form of disobedience.

The Scriptures, God's Word written, are always relevant, powerful, and alive. At no time, and under no circumstances, are they unable to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. They are always God-breathed and always useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15-17). This was not just true for Timothy—though it was originally written specifically to him—but is also true for us. "Although various parts of the Scripture were written upon a special occasion and were directed to particular men or assemblies," William Ames wrote, "in God's intention they are equally for the instruction of the faithful of all ages, as if specially directed to them." It is not just

that we can look over Timothy's shoulder and benefit a little from what was written to him; rather we can read the epistle addressed to him with the assurance that it is God's Word to us.

Application is the final skill in the series of Bible study skills we are considering. All six skills fit together into a seamless whole; each one leading naturally to the next; each one essential to the process of knowing, understanding, and obeying the truth of Scripture.

In the same way many Christians do a poor job of observation, many believers shortchange application as well. Serious Bible study is hard work, and since coming to understand a text can be deeply satisfying in itself, it is tempting to just stop with interpretation. Application can also be very convicting; applying the truth of God's Word to our lives can be a painful experience, and considering his law reveals how we fall short of his glory. Sometimes we apply the text, but far too narrowly: to me instead of to all of life and culture. The Scriptures—God's written Word—apply to the same breadth of reality over which Christ—God's living Word—is Lord. All of which is why we will consider application in such detail and in two parts (though it is a single skill), first to the people of God and second to the wider culture.

What do we mean by that? Here's a simple definition: allowing the truth of the text to order our thinking and our lives. "The ultimate purpose of Bible study," James Nyquist and Jack Kuhatschek write in *Leading Bible Discussions*, "is not simply to educate us but to transform us." Our desire is to be incarnational in our Bible study, fleshing out God's truth before a watching world.

Application to the People of God

The key question we should ask, therefore, is this: Since this is the Word of God, what do we hear him saying, and what are we going to

do about it? Repeat this question often, every time you read Scripture, whether alone or in a group. Keep a record of what you are hearing in God's Word by using a notebook or journal. Review what you record. Pray over what you hear and what you determine, by God's grace, to do. Be in accountable relationships with other believers. We are responsible, as God's people, for what we know to be true.

Since this is the Word of God, what do we hear him saying, and what are we going to do about it? There are a number of specific things we can consider as we reflect prayerfully on how to answer that question. thus engaging in the process of application.

The Main Principle

The goal in application is to determine what truth(s) the text reveals, and what difference that truth makes. This involves two steps:

First, draw a primary principle from the main theme, main teaching, or main point of the text.

Second, determine how we can make this general principle both personal and particular in our daily lives.

In *Leading Bible Discussions*, the authors express this in the form of "two rules for biblical application:"

Rule #1. Whenever our situation corresponds to that faced by the original readers, God's Word to us is exactly the same as it was to them.

Rule #2. Whenever our situation does not correspond to that faced by the original readers, we should look for the principle underlying

God's Word to them. We can then apply that principle to comparable situations today.

When we are studying to know and understand the text (using the first four skills), our primary goal is not creativity—in the sense of novelty—but accuracy. “The exegete who is doing his work properly,” Gordon Fee writes, “is forever asking the question: But what is the point? What is the author driving at? That is, he is always raising the question of the author's intent. At the same time... he is wary of over-exegeting, for example, finding something that would stagger the author were he informed someone had found it in his writing, or building a theology upon the use of prepositions, or discovering meaning in what was not said.” Then, having determined the author's meaning or the point of the passage, the believer can creatively apply the principles derived from Scripture to their feeling, thinking, and doing.

Relationships

Another way to reflect on how to apply the Scriptures to our lives is to consider the text's teaching in terms of the relationships of which we are a part. In other words, what does the passage teach us concerning our relationship to:

God

Is there a command to obey? a promise to claim? Do I need to pray about something from the text? What should I give thanks for?

The Enemy

Does the passage tell me about something to resist? Or a tactic to recognize? A piece of spiritual armor to wear? Or a temptation to recognize?

Others

Within the church? Within the home? Within the wider community, and the world?

Ourselves

Does the text shed light on our experience? Or our use of time? Our work, rest, or leisure? Our values, goals, expectations, or priorities? On sins to avoid, or weaknesses to be aware of?

World View

As we steep our mind in the Scriptures, one result will be that increasingly our view of life and reality will correspond to the truth of God's Word. This is a never-ending process on this side of heaven, for our perspective will always be somewhat less than it should be, distorted in some measure by sin. Christian faithfulness means thinking and living biblically, seeing all of life and reality through the "spectacles" of Scripture (to use John Calvin's term). The Bible, in other words, is to form our world view, molding our assumptions, values, and beliefs, so that how we see and live life conforms to the truth of God's word. Believers must be characterized by viewing and thinking about reality in distinctly biblical categories.

Throughout history the people of God have always held this high view of biblical revelation, submitting themselves to the Scriptures, in the words of Calvin, "as if they heard the very words pronounced by God himself."

The story of Scripture—summed up in the four great themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation—should form our world and life view. Therefore, as we study the Bible, we should reflect on how the teaching of the text should effect the way we view things.

We can do this by the following three steps:

1. Reflect on the insights concerning Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation that are found in the text.
2. Determine their practical implications.
3. Consider how these insights should change and/or determine our view of and approach to life and reality.

Meditation

Finally, if we are serious about applying the Word of God to our lives, we will need to spend time in the text, waiting on God, mulling it over in our minds in the same way a cow chews its cud. This is a leisurely yet intense process, unhurried yet disciplined. It isn't difficult to meditate, but it can be excruciating, in our busy lives, to set aside the time which meditation requires. Still, our faith requires it.

Jack Kuhatschek reminds us: Apart from the Lord, our thinking will get us nowhere. We must handle the Bible prayerfully, asking the Author of Scripture to grant us understanding in everything. He must open our eyes to see clearly what he is saying. The psalmist realized this when he wrote Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Ps 119:18).

Application, therefore, begins on our knees. We must ask the Lord to reveal those areas of our lives that need to be transformed by his Word and his Spirit. We need the light of Scripture to shine in the dark recesses of our hearts. We need the Spirit of God to point out our areas of hardness and rebellion. We need the Great Physician to bind up the broken places in our lives and to heal our aching wounds.

Prayerful thought and thoughtful prayer—these are the vital components of meditation."

To meditate on the text follow these two simple steps:

First, ask God that this Word of His might renew your mind and transform your life.

Second, spend time reflecting, thinking, reviewing the passage. Savor it. Go over it. Pray over each part. Let it sink deeply into your consciousness. Then reflect on it and pray over it some more. And after that, reflect prayerfully on the text some more.

Application to the Wider Culture

Up to now, we've applied the passage by and large to ourselves—to our thinking, lives, and behavior. We've considered application in terms of applying the text to the people of God. Now we need to widen our approach, seeking to apply what the text teaches to life and culture beyond ourselves, not just in terms of our involvement in society, but also in terms of the meaning and structure of culture and life itself. Our concern can be defined simply: we are seeking to apply the teaching of Scripture in order to faithfully live out and communicate the truth of God in our modern world.

Applying God's Word to the wider culture may take many forms. It may involve developing a distinctly Christian understanding of and approach to our vocation, so that our work is built on a biblical instead of a secular foundation. It may include sorting out what rest means, and comparing that to our modern notions of leisure and entertainment. We may be faced with some particular question or issue which challenges our faith, and which deserves a thoughtful and honest response. Regardless of the details, though, the central

point is clear: if Christ is Lord of all, his Word must be applied to all.

In order to help us apply the text in this way, there are a number of questions to ask:

What is the text teaching?

Why do we believe it to be true?

How can we live it out before a watching world?

How can we communicate it in a winsome way?

Always be prepared, Peter tells us, to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15). Paul gave similar instructions to the believers in Colosse. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders, he told them. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know to answer everyone (Colossians 4:5-6). It is relatively easy to study the Bible in terms that other believers will understand and accept. That, in most cases, is hardly challenging at all. Far more challenging, however, is to consider how we should live out and communicate its truth among unbelievers.

Identify Spheres of Life

Identify principles in the text to be applied, not simply in terms of our personal involvement in the various spheres of life, but in terms of the meaning and structure of those spheres of life in themselves. In other words, the physician needs to apply the Scriptures to her whole approach to medicine as a vocation: to her understanding of illness, health, death, and treatment. The salesman must sort out where sales descends into manipulation, and how he can pursue his work in a culture given over to consumerism. The teacher must not only consider the content of what they teach, they should think and live Christianly in terms of their approach to grading,

instruction, and theories of education. And we must all understand the State, not primarily in Democratic or Republican terms, but in biblical categories.

Obviously, we will have to do some prioritizing here. We can easily determine those spheres that we intersect in a primary way, and we have special responsibility here. All of us do not need to think through politics, for example, to the same degree or in the same amount of detail. Our responsibility is determined by the extent our lives and calling intersect with the political sphere—it is a matter of stewardship. Still, even if my involvement with the political sphere is minimal, I should be alert to what the Scriptures teach concerning this sphere as I study them.

Some of the spheres of life, culture, and reality which you will want to consider include:

- Government, politics, society, nations & the state
- Economics, business, consumerism, & poverty
- Leisure, entertainment, time, health, humor & sports
- Education, history & learning
- Work, calling, & vocation
- Family, home & relationships
- Arts & creativity
- Church, ministry & spirituality
- Law & justice
- Etc...
- Examine Alternative World Views

Every person, religious or irreligious, Christian or non-Christian, holds certain beliefs that they are convinced are true.

These beliefs form their way of viewing things, their world view. To the extent their thinking is in rebellion to God's Word, to that extent their world view will be contrary to a proper or realistic view of life and reality. The Scriptures reveal God's Word, and so as we study them our world view can increasingly conform to the truth. The Scriptures also give us real insight into erroneous thinking, into how the world view of unbelievers can be distorted by non-truth. Part of application involves being alert to these insights so we have a window of insight into the thinking and lives of our unbelieving neighbors and colleagues.

With care, identify some common non-Christian answers often given in place of the biblical position.

- Where everything came from (v Creation):
- What really exists? What is really real?
- The nature of God? human beings? family? society?
- What is the origin/nature of the world around us?
- Why is it possible to know anything at all?
- What, if anything, is wrong (v Fall):
- How do we know what is good and what is evil?
- What is wrong? What are the effects of this problem?
- How the problem(s) can be corrected (v Redemption):
- What is the solution to what's wrong?
- How can we work against the effects of what's wrong?
- How can virtue be encouraged and nurtured?
- Where is it all headed (v Consummation):
- What is the meaning of life? of suffering? of death?
- What happens at death?
- Find Understandable Terms

One of the problems believers face in conversation with unbelievers is that we tend to use terms they don't understand. As fewer and

fewer of our neighbors and colleagues have church backgrounds, we can expect this problem in communication to continue—and probably increase. Obviously, we can not—and must not—simply continue to speak Christian-ese, expecting outsiders to learn our language. We must learn, rather, to speak the truth, without compromise, in terms they can understand. This is part of the process of applying the truth of Scripture to the wider culture.

Though the process is challenging, it really only involves two simple steps:

- Identify which words, terms, or concepts may not be fully understood by non-Christians.
- Define each one, using simple words or ideas a non-Christian would easily understand.
- We should all do this whenever we study Scripture, but wrestling with this can be especially helpful when done as a small group exercise.

Speak the Truth Winsomely

Practice communicating the truth of the passage by developing questions that reveal the weakness of the non-Christian position.

Practice communicating the biblical position—both what we believe, and why we believe it—in terms a non-Christian can easily understand.

Identify common objections a non-Christian might raise and develop reasonable answers.

Sources:

John Calvin quoted in *Calvin's Wisdom* by Graham Miller (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth; 1992) p. 20.

John R. W. Stott's prayer from *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* by David Edwards & John Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1988) p. v.

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Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 1980) quoted in "The Preacher as Theologian" by J. I. Packer in *When God's Voice is Heard* edited by Christopher Green & David Jackman (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; 1995) p. 94. Jack Kuhatschek in *Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1990) pp. 83-84. John Calvin in *Institutes* I.vi.1; I.vii.1.

Application At-A-Glance:

Part I, The People of God

Our Goal

Allow the truth of the text to order our thinking and lives.

The Key Question

Since this is the Word of God: What do we hear him saying? What are we going to do about it?

Main Principle

Draw a primary principle from the main theme, main teaching, or main point of the text. Determine how we can make this general principle both personal and particular in our daily lives.

Relationships

What does the text teach us concerning our relationship to:

God

Is there a command to obey? A promise to claim? Do I need to pray about something from the text? What should I give thanks for?

The Enemy

Does the passage tell me about something to resist? Or a tactic to recognize? An armor to wear? Or a temptation to recognize?

Others

Within the church? Within the home? Within the wider community and the world?

Ourselves

Does the text shed light on our experience? On our use of time? Our work, rest, or leisure? Our values, goals, expectations, or priorities?

On sins to avoid, or weaknesses to be aware of?

World View

Reflect on the insights concerning Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation that are found in the text.

Determine their practical implications.

Consider how these insights would change and/or determine our view of life and reality.

Meditation

Ask God that His Word might renew your mind and transform your life. Spend time reflecting, thinking, reviewing the passage. Savor it. Go over it. Pray over each part. Let it sink deeply into your consciousness.

Application At-A-Glance:

Part II, the Wider Culture

Our Goal

To live out and communicate the truth of God in our modern world.

Ask Four Key Questions

1. What is the text teaching?
2. Why do we believe it to be true?
3. How can we live it out before a watching world?
4. How can we communicate it in a winsome way?

Identify Spheres of Life

Identify principles in the text to be applied, not simply to our involvement, but also in terms of the meaning and structure of the various spheres of reality including:

- Government, politics, society, nations, & the state;
- Economics, business, consumerism, & poverty
- Leisure, entertainment, time, health, humor, & sports;
- Education, history, & learning; Work, calling, & vocation;
- Family, home, & relationships;
- Arts & creativity; Church, ministry, & spirituality;
- Law & justice

Examine Alternative World Views

With care, identify common non-Christian answers often given in place of the biblical position.

- Where everything came from (v Creation):
- What really exists? What is really real?
- The nature of God? human beings? family? society?
- What is the origin/nature of the world around us?
- Why is it possible to know anything at all?

- What, if anything, is wrong (v Fall):
- How do we know what is good and evil?
- What is wrong? What are the effects of this problem?
- How the problem(s) can be corrected (v Redemption):
- What is the solution to what's wrong?
- How can we work against the effects of what's wrong?
- How can virtue be encouraged and nurtured?
- Where is it all headed (v Consummation):
- What is the meaning of life? of suffering? of death?
- What happens at death?

Find Understandable Terms

Identify which words, terms, or concepts may not be fully understood by non-Christians. Define each one using simple words or ideas a non-Christian would understand.

Speak the Truth

Winsomely Practice communicating the truth of the passage by:

Developing questions that reveal the weaknesses of the non-Christian position.

Practice communicating the biblical position--both what we believe and why we believe it--in terms a non-Christian can easily understand.

Identify common objections a non-Christian might raise and develop reasonable answers.

About Denis Haack

Denis is the author of *The Rest of Success: What the World Didn't Tell You About Having It All* and has written articles for such journals as: *Reformation & Revival Journal*; *Eternity*; *Covenant*; and, *World*.

He is currently working on his Master of Theological Studies at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis. His undergraduate studies were done at the University of Minnesota and University of New Mexico.

After a few years of living in a Christian commune (yes, that's right, they were hippies), he staffed a church as a youth pastor and was recruited by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship where he eventually became area director of New Mexico, Arizona, and part of Texas. To support himself and his family, he did everything from pumping gas to delivering flowers to starting a janitorial business that didn't boom until he gave the business to a friend who took the idea and ran with it.

Before he and Margie owned a home, he always declared that their lawn would be made of rocks so he wouldn't have to mow, but he's now the proud owner of a self-propelled Honda lawnmower which he also uses to mulch every leaf that blows into the yard.

Denis, along with his wife Margie, operate their ministry--Ransom Fellowship--from their home in Rochester, Minnesota.

About Ransom Fellowship

Ransom Fellowship is a writing and speaking ministry designed to help Christians develop skill in discernment-by which we mean skill in studying the Scriptures and applying the truth of God's Word to all of life and culture.

For more information or to receive a sample copy of Ransom's two publications: *CRITIQUE* and *Notes from Toad Hall*.

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