

DIGGING DEEPER

Closer Week 2 – Sunday October 25, 2020

Learning God's word

Many people read the Bible, but we are not really listening for God's voice and therefore we do not understand what He wants to say to us. We are easily distracted by busyness and the countless distractions all around us. God has spoken, and He wants to speak to you, but are you listening for His voice? Are we tuned in?

The Bible is a book like no other. It's a book of 66 books, written over a period of 1500 years, by over 40 different authors from 10 different countries, on 3 different continents, in 3 different languages, yet with one message and without contradictions from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

You cannot be a true disciple of Christ apart from His Word. You cannot grow as a Christian without the Bible. Why would God go to supernatural lengths to give us His Word, and then make it difficult for us to understand? Many sincere believers feel intimidated when they open their Bibles. Every Christian, at some point in his or her life, has asked, "How can I understand the Bible?" or, "How can I know what the Bible really means?" or, "How do I study the Bible?"

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

Here's the simple truth: God said what He meant in Scripture, and He meant what He said.

Grasp what God says about Scripture:

Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:20-21.

The truth is, we can understand what God means in any passage of the Bible. While Christ has given the church pastors and teachers to help us understand His Word, the Lord gave each of us an even greater Gift: the Holy Spirit. He is our Helper in understanding the Bible:

Our goal when studying the Bible is to draw the meaning out of the text, and not to force our own understanding into it. Remember, while any passage of Scripture can be applied to our lives in many ways, every passage has only one meaning intended by God when He gave it through the human writer. Memorize this simple rule: One meaning, many applications.

Context

Many people fall prey to the idea that the reader's perception of a biblical text determines its meaning. Nothing can carry you farther from the truth of God's Word than this fallacy. The cardinal rule of biblical interpretation is the meaning of the text is established by what the original author intended. The writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), established the meaning of the passage the day he wrote it. Our role as students of the Bible is to uncover what the original author intended to

communicate to his original audience. A text cannot mean something today that it did not mean when it was originally written. The primary key to understanding the writer's intended meaning of a text is identifying its context. Simply defined, the context of a statement, verse, or passage is the setting in which it is spoken or written.

Every verse of the Bible is connected to the verses around it, the book in which it appears, the Testament in which it is set, and the message of the entire Bible. Additionally, the context includes to whom it was originally written or said, and the time and circumstances in which it was said.

Identifying the context is like using the zoom feature of a camera. The more you zoom out, the more you are able to see. To fully understand the meaning of a verse or passage, you have to zoom out enough to see the complete picture. By studying a passage of the Bible in its correct context, you will discover what the original author intended to communicate to his original audience. When we fail to identify the context of a passage, we will likely misunderstand it.

Here is the system, observation, interpretation, application.

Observation - What Does the Text Say? In order to familiarize yourself with the text, begin by reading, rereading, and reading again the passage at hand. "How many times should I read the text?" you may ask. The answer is, as many times as it takes for it to begin to sink in to your spirit. After familiarizing yourself with the text, engage the text by asking the six basic investigative questions about the passage: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Here are some examples of how to use investigative questions to make observations: Who is the author? Who are the recipients? Who are the main characters involved in the text? What is happening in the text? What is the author intending to communicate? What are key words in the text? What is the context of this verse? This stage of study is like an investigator collecting evidence to construct a case. Study the scene of the crime, so to speak, gather all the evidence, and be careful not to overlook anything that is significant to the passage at hand. In the next step, you will examine the findings, so only concern yourself with highlighting key insights in the text at this stage.

interpretation - What Does the Text Mean? In the second step of the process, you will study the facts that you gathered during the observation stage. Out of these facts, a scriptural truth will emerge. This truth, called a theological principle, is a summary of the same truth conveyed by the author to the original audience. In their book *Grasping God's Word*, Duvall and Hays outline five criteria that every theological principle must meet: (1) The principle should be clearly reflected in the text. (2) The principle should be timeless and not attached to a specific situation. (3) The principle should not be culturally bound. (4) The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture. (5) The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience.

As in the observation stage, ask the text a series of questions to help you arrive at its meaning. Here are a few questions that are helpful. Discerning the answers to these questions will help you discover the theological truth of any passage you are studying: What do the key terms mean? How do the verses or phrases relate to each other? How does this passage fit into the larger story of the book it is in? How does this passage relate to the story of the Bible as a whole? How does this passage point to or speak of Jesus Christ? What are the differences between the biblical audience and me?

Application - How Does the Text Apply to Me? The Bible is not merely a book to be learned, but a book to be lived. God has something to say to you through His Word, a truth that, when practiced faithfully, will make a difference in your life. This truth, called the application of a text, is the valuable payoff for

all of your hard work in the first two steps. When we apply the Bible, we focus God's truth upon our specific, life-related situations, helping us understand how to use what we have learned.

We must not be satisfied only with identifying key ideas from Scripture. We must proceed to discover how these truths apply to our lives. The goal of learning the Bible is not the accumulation of knowledge about the Bible but living out what we have learned. James warned us of the danger of learning Scripture, but not applying it to our lives:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:22-24).

Our ultimate goal in studying the Bible is to become more like Christ. Therefore, it is essential that we apply what we learn in God's Word to making us more like Jesus.

Here are some questions to help you discover the application of a verse or passage of Scripture: Is there an application already in the text? Is there a command or exhortation for how we should live? What does this biblical principle mean today? What would the application of this verse look like in my life? What difference does this make in my life?

Question: "Is the Bible relevant for today?"

Answer: [Hebrews 4:12](#) says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." While the Bible was completed approximately 1900 years ago, its accuracy and relevance for today remain unchanged. The Bible is the sole objective source of all the revelation God has given us about Himself and His plan for humanity.

The Bible contains a great deal of information about the natural world that has been confirmed by scientific observations and research. Some of these passages include [Leviticus 17:11](#); [Ecclesiastes 1:6-7](#); [Job 36:27-29](#); [Psalm 102:25-27](#) and [Colossians 1:16-17](#). As the Bible's story of God's redemptive plan for humanity unfolds, many different characters are vividly described. In those descriptions, the Bible provides a great deal of information about human behavior and tendencies. Our own day-to-day experience shows us that this information is more accurate and descriptive of the human condition than any psychology textbook. Many historical facts recorded in the Bible have been confirmed by extra-biblical sources. Historical research often shows a great deal of agreement between biblical accounts and extra-biblical accounts of the same events.

However, the Bible is not a history book, a psychology text, or a scientific journal. The Bible is the description God gave us about who He is, and His desires and plans for humanity. The most significant component of this revelation is the story of our separation from God by sin and God's provision for restoration of fellowship through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. Our need for redemption does not change. Neither does God's desire to reconcile us to Himself.

The Bible contains a great deal of accurate and relevant information. The Bible's most important message—redemption—is universally and perpetually applicable to humanity. God's Word will never be outdated, superseded, or improved upon. Cultures change, laws change, generations come and go, but the Word of God is as relevant today as it was when it was first written. Not all of Scripture necessarily

applies explicitly to us today, but all Scriptures contain truth that we can, and should, apply to our lives today.

Question: "How can we know what parts of the Bible apply to us today?"

Answer: Much misunderstanding about the Christian life occurs because we either assign commands and exhortations we should be following as "era-specific" commands that only applied to the original audience, or we take commands and exhortations that are specific to a particular audience and make them timeless truths. How do we go about discerning the difference? It seems that much of contemporary evangelical preaching is so concerned with the practical application of Scripture that we treat the Bible as a lake from which to fish application for today's Christians. All of this is done at the expense of proper [exegesis](#) and interpretation.

The top three rules of [hermeneutics](#) (the art and science of biblical interpretation) are 1) context; 2) context; 3) context. Before we can tell 21st-century Christians how the Bible applies to them, we must first come to the best possible understanding of what the Bible meant to its original audience. If we come up with an application that would have been foreign to the original audience, there is a very strong possibility that we did not interpret the passage correctly. Once we are confident that we understand what the text meant to its original hearers, we then need to determine the width of the chasm between us and them. In other words, what are the differences in language, time, culture, geography, setting and situation? All of these must be taken into account before application can be made. Once the width of the chasm has been measured, we can then attempt to build the bridge over the chasm by finding the commonalities between the original audience and ourselves. Finally, we can then find application for ourselves in our time and situation.

Another important thing to note is that each passage has only one correct interpretation. It can have a range of application, but only one interpretation. What this means is that some applications of biblical passages are better than others. If one application is closer to the correct interpretation than another, then it is a better application of that text. For example, many sermons have been preached on [1 Samuel 17](#) (the David and Goliath story) that center on "defeating the giants in your life." They lightly skim over the details of the narrative and go straight to application, and that application usually involves allegorizing Goliath into tough, difficult and intimidating situations in one's life that must be overcome by faith. There is also an attempt to allegorize the five smooth stones David picked up to defeat his giant. These sermons usually conclude by exhorting us to be faithful like David.

While these interpretations make engaging sermons, it is doubtful the original audience would have gotten that message from this story. Before we can apply the truth in [1 Samuel 17](#), we must know how the original audience understood it, and that means determining the overall purpose of 1 Samuel as a book. Without going into a detailed exegesis of [1 Samuel 17](#), let's just say it's not about defeating the giants in your life with faith. That may be a distant application, but as an interpretation of the passage, it's alien to the text. God is the hero of the story, and David was His chosen vehicle to bring salvation to His people. The story contrasts the people's king (Saul) with God's king (David), and it also foreshadows what Christ (the Son of David) would do for us in providing our salvation.

Another common example of interpreting with disregard of the context is [John 14:13-14](#). Reading this verse out of context would seem to indicate that if we ask God anything (unqualified), we will receive it as long as we use the formula "in Jesus' name." Applying the rules of proper hermeneutics to this passage, we see Jesus speaking to His disciples in the upper room on the night of His eventual betrayal. The immediate audience is the disciples. This is essentially a promise to His disciples that God will provide the necessary resources for them to complete their task. It is a passage of comfort because

Jesus would soon be leaving them. Is there an application for 21st-century Christians? Of course! If we pray in Jesus' name, we pray according to God's will and God will give us what we need to accomplish His will in and through us. Furthermore, the response we get will always glorify God. Far from a "carte blanche" way of getting what we want, this passage teaches us that we must always submit to God's will in prayer, and that God will always provide what we need to accomplish His will.

Proper biblical interpretation is built on the following principles:

1. Context. To understand fully, start small and extend outward: verse, passage, chapter, book, author and testament/covenant.
2. Try to come to grips with how the original audience would have understood the text.
3. Consider the width of the chasm between us and the original audience.
4. It's a safe bet that any moral command from the Old Testament that is repeated in the New Testament is an example of a "timeless truth."
5. Remember that each passage has one and only one correct interpretation, but can have many applications (some better than others).
6. Always be humble and don't forget the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. He has promised to lead us into all truth ([John 16:13](#)).

Question: "Why should we read the Bible / study the Bible?"

Answer: We should read and study the Bible because it is God's Word to us. The Bible is literally "God-breathed" ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). In other words, it is God's very words to us. There are so many questions that philosophers have asked that God answers for us in Scripture. What is the purpose to life? Where did I come from? Is there life after death? How do I get to heaven? Why is the world full of evil? Why do I struggle to do good? In addition to these "big" questions, the Bible gives much practical advice in areas such as: What do I look for in a mate? How can I have a successful marriage? How can I be a good friend? How can I be a good parent? What is success and how do I achieve it? How can I change? What really matters in life? How can I live so that I do not look back with regret? How can I handle the unfair circumstances and bad events of life victoriously?

We should read and study the Bible because it is totally reliable and without error. The Bible is unique among so-called "holy" books in that it does not merely give moral teaching and say, "Trust me." Rather, we have the ability to test it by checking the hundreds of detailed prophecies that it makes, by checking the historical accounts it records, and by checking the scientific facts it relates. Those who say the Bible has errors have their ears closed to the truth. Jesus once asked which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or "Rise, take up your bed and walk." Then He proved He had the ability to forgive sins (something we cannot see with our eyes) by healing the paralytic (something those around Him could test with their eyes). Similarly, we are given assurance that God's Word is true when it discusses spiritual areas that we cannot test with our senses by showing itself true in those areas that we can test, such as historical accuracy, scientific accuracy, and prophetic accuracy.

We should read and study the Bible because God does not change and because mankind's nature does not change; it is as relevant for us as it was when it was written. While technology changes, mankind's nature and desires do not change. We find, as we read the pages of biblical history, that whether we are talking about one-on-one relationships or societies, "there is nothing new under the sun" ([Ecclesiastes 1:9](#)). And while mankind as a whole continues to seek love and satisfaction in all of the wrong places, God—our good and gracious Creator—tells us what will bring us lasting joy. His revealed Word, the Bible, is so important that Jesus said of it, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" ([Matthew 4:4](#)). In other words, if we want to live life to the fullest, as God intended, we must listen to and heed God's written Word.

We should read and study the Bible because there is so much false teaching. The Bible gives us the measuring stick by which we can distinguish truth from error. It tells us what God is like. To have a wrong impression of God is to worship an idol or false god. We are worshiping something that He is not. The Bible tells us how one truly gets to heaven, and it is not by being good or by being baptized or by anything else we do ([John 14:6](#); [Ephesians 2:1-10](#); [Isaiah 53:6](#); [Romans 3:10-18](#), [5:8](#), [6:23](#), [10:9-13](#)). Along this line, God's Word shows us just how much God loves us ([Romans 5:6-8](#); [John 3:16](#)). And it is in learning this that we are drawn to love Him in return ([1 John 4:19](#)).

The Bible equips us to serve God ([2 Timothy 3:17](#); [Ephesians 6:17](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#)). It helps us know how to be saved from our sin and its ultimate consequence ([2 Timothy 3:15](#)). Meditating on God's Word and obeying its teachings will bring success in life ([Joshua 1:8](#); [James 1:25](#)). God's Word helps us see sin in our lives and helps us get rid of it ([Psalm 119:9](#), [11](#)). It gives us guidance in life, making us wiser than our teachers ([Psalm 32:8](#), [119:99](#); [Proverbs 1:6](#)). The Bible keeps us from wasting years of our lives on that which does not matter and will not last ([Matthew 7:24-27](#)).

Reading and studying the Bible helps us see beyond the attractive "bait" to the painful "hook" in sinful temptations, so that we can learn from others' mistakes rather than making them ourselves. Experience is a great teacher, but when it comes to learning from sin, it is a terribly hard teacher. It is so much better to learn from others' mistakes. There are so many Bible characters to learn from, some of whom can serve as both positive and negative role models at different times in their lives. For example, David, in his defeat of Goliath, teaches us that God is greater than anything He asks us to face ([1 Samuel 17](#)), while his giving in to the temptation to commit adultery with Bathsheba reveals just how long-lasting and terrible the consequences of a moment's sinful pleasure can be ([2 Samuel 11](#)).

The Bible is a book that is not merely for reading. It is a book for studying so that it can be applied. Otherwise, it is like swallowing food without chewing and then spitting it back out again—no nutritional value is gained by it. The Bible is God's Word. As such, it is as binding as the laws of nature. We can ignore it, but we do so to our own detriment, just as we would if we ignored the law of gravity. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough just how important the Bible is to our lives. Studying the Bible can be compared to mining for gold. If we make little effort and merely "sift through the pebbles in a stream," we will only find a little gold dust. But the more we make an effort to really dig into it, the more reward we will gain for our effort.

Questions to consider

What is the difference between reading the bible and studying the bible?
Does the bible mean whatever the reader believes it means?
Why is it so important to understand the context of the text?
Because it was written so long ago, is the bible relevant to me? See above
How do you study the bible?
What are your goals for studying the bible?
How do I apply what I study in the bible? See above
Why should I study the bible? See above