

Effective Bible Study: Lesson 4

Successive Readings With an Angle

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A lot of what this study involves has to do with what is known as "exegesis." In simple terms, "exegesis" comes from Greek words that mean "to draw out" or to pull a message out of a text by thoroughly analyzing the text. If you've been following along, you've probably noticed that some of these exercises can take a while and require some thought. Well, we're not finished yet.

So, let's talk about successive readings. If you really want to study the Bible, it's not enough to merely read through it without any thought. God wants us to take His word in and live it out. James 1:22-25 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do." Hebrews 4:12-13 says, "For the word of God is alive 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. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." God's word is intended to get inside of us. That's what Jesus was figuratively describing in John 6 when He spoke about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He wasn't even talking about the Lord's Supper. He was talking about taking in who He is and allowing Him to run the direction of our lives. That is partly what Scripture aids us in doing, if we are really paying attention and wanting to learn.

Therefore, we need to dig. And in order to dig into the Scripture, you have to read it more than once and you have to read it thoughtfully each time. In the previous lessons, we've already given you a number of questions to ask and things to consider when you enter a text. In this lesson we will focus on intentional, successive readings of Biblical texts which can help us draw conclusions about the text. There are three successive readings to focus on.

Reading # 1 – This is all about first impressions. Read through it once paying attention to the words. Pause and write a paragraph recording whatever occurred to you. Your first impression doesn't have to "right" nor does it have to agree with others. It's what you think as you read that text. Right that down.

Reading # 2 – The second reading is for the purposes of establishing the mood or atmosphere of the text. There are a number of questions you can ask that will help you to determine this?

- What is the language like? Quick, fast-paced, slow moving, methodical?
- Are there any familiar references or does it seem distant or unfamiliar?
- Is it hard-hitting or is it personal and tender? Super intense, or is it laid back and gentle?

- Is the author chastising the readers or is he gently encouraging them?
- Is the text draw more on intellectual levels, or is it emotional? Emotional/academic/combo?
- How does it make me feel as I read it? Does it make me feel happy, sad, angry, frightened?

Take all of that and write a paragraph. **I told you you'd need to record notes** Write a paragraph about what you perceive to be the atmosphere and mood and use plenty of adjectives to describe your perceptions (e.g. mad, happy, sad). Within the paragraph, write some kind of analogy to describe what you've read (e.g. It feels like a bird flapping around a tree because a snake is crawling towards her chicks). Think of songs or films you are familiar with that you could imagine playing while this text was being played out, using song and music or TV and film to describe the mood. Take all of that and write and summarize it with a statement of what you think (again, this is your impression) the mood or atmosphere of this text is intended to convey to the reader.

Reading # 3 – This is about trying to establish who were the original recipients. With some books this will be easier (because they're spelled out) and with others this will be more difficult. All books of the Bible have an original intended audience. It's good to understand the audience because in understanding them, perhaps that sheds more light on the mood/atmosphere, and "occasion and purpose" which we spoke about in Lesson 2. Now, even if the name of the recipients is spelled out, we still need to look for further clues in the text which may shed light on the mood/atmosphere, occasion and purpose. In order to establish the audience and/or their situation, the following are some things to look for in the text during this reading.

- Is the human author mentioned? His relationship to the readers?
- Are any recipients mentioned? Anything that tells us who they are? Adjectives?
- Are there any allusions or mentions of the reader's knowledge level? New/recent converts? Are these 1st, 2nd, 3rd generation Christians?
- Is a specific situation (or multiple situations) mentioned? Life threatening, spiritual, etc?
- Is there a location given? Recipient's? Author's? Is there any town or geographical location mentioned?
- Is it clear if the recipient is an individual or a group? If it is distinguishable as a group is it clear if it is heterogeneous or homogeneous? In other words, is it a mixture of Jews and Gentiles or different cultures?
- Are any conflicts mentioned? Spiritual? Worldly?
- Are cultural customs mentioned?
- Are there any "religious" rituals, customs or acts mentioned?
- Does the author focus on specific character traits or virtues? What are they? Context?
- Are strengths or weaknesses of the readers or others mentioned?
- Are there any political or governmental situations mentioned?
- Are there any profound or notable references to the spiritual world?
- Do we know who taught the readers or where they came from?
- Is there any leadership mentioned directly or indirectly?

All these questions can help us to better identify, not only the mood, but also the purpose and occasion (read more about this in lesson 2). After the 3rd Reading, write another paragraph summarizing what you think you know about the original recipients based on what you were able to deduce from the questions. Understand, the point is not to definitively state who these people are, you are merely attempting to identify them and their situation in order to identify how it applies to us today.

It needs to be stated that the goal of studying Scripture is not to simply know what it says and understand what it means. No! We want to come to a point where we are asking ourselves, "If I were to take this passage/text seriously, what about my life would need to change?"

So, for this assignment go to the book of Jude. In fact, we will likely spend the next couple of lessons in Jude until we move on to other things. Here's what I want you to do this week. I want you to go through Jude using all three of the successive reading practices above.

After you have done that, I want you to go back to lesson 2 (the study about Occasion and Purpose) and apply some of those same questions we discussed there, to the book of Jude in order to better establish the occasion and purpose of the book of Jude. Or at least what YOU perceive the occasion and purpose to be.