

Effective Bible Study: Lesson 1

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Off and on for the next who's-to-say-how-long, I will be posting some helpful information on interpreting and understanding your Bibles. I am going to share with you some exercises that can help you sharpen your Bible interpretation skills. Since you are all stuck at home, perhaps this can give you some skills to help you more deeply engage the word of God. A lot of what I will be sharing with you stem from some of the notes I took in a class with Charles Speer called Effective Bible Study. Some of you know Charles from one of our Equip workshops, so some of you know I will be sharing some good and valuable nuggets.

As a way of kicking this off, I would like to remind you of the proper attitude one should have when approaching an interpretive study of the Bible. The Bible isn't just some book to read. It's not intended to be read through like one might read a crime or mystery novel. The word of God is intended to illicit a response from the reader (Hebrews 4:12-13). One major response is a decision to change the course or direction of the reader's life into a direction that follows God. The reader is expected to be one who understands that the Bible comes from God and therefore respects the Bible as such. One who is reading and interpreting the Bible needs to have a proper attitude. The following are some things to consider when approaching the Bible.

1 - The Bible is a "peerless" book. In other words, the Bible is unique amongst all the ancient "religious" texts. Do your research. The Bible was written by dozens of different authors, from multiple different cultures, lands and backgrounds, with various genres of writing, over a period of over a thousand years... and yet it tells one story from the beginning to the end. It is the Word of God, yet God employs various styles of writing through His various human authors, to bring out the fulness of His message. When you are studying God's word, you need to consider what kind of text you are reading. Is it Narrative like Genesis or Luke? Legal like Deuteronomy or Leviticus? Didactic like the some of the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament Epistles? Apocalyptic like Revelation or parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah? Is it Poetic literature like the Psalms, Job or some of the prophets? We need to consider the style and genre of text we are reading. But remember that the Bible stands alone. Put it up against the other religious texts of the ancient world and nothing, absolutely nothing, compares with the Jewish texts' anticipation of a coming kingdom and reign of God in the world, and the New Testament's revelation of that anticipation's powerful fulfillment in the church of Christ (1 Cor 2:6-10; Eph 3:10-11).

2 - The Bible is also full of truth. A sincere believer should have no problem with this. We accept the Bible as God's word and therefore the truth. Yet, when engaging the Bible in an interpretive way, we also remember that the Bible records false observations and lies made by others. For example, read Job 4:7-8. The point is just like we need to carefully consider the genre of the book, we also need to "look-at-who-is-speaking." When is God speaking and when is God quoting somebody else? Ultimately, we learn about everything we know to live godly lives from reading and understanding God's word (2 Peter 1:3).

3 - The Bible is also complete. We have no more need for new revelation. God has told us everything we need to know to live faithful to Him in every culture under every circumstance. A sincere student of God's word understands that the Bible is the final say on ideas of morality and religious activities and commitments. (Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 4:6; 2 Tim 3:16-17). What would be the point pursuing an understanding of the Bible as God's word if a person is not convinced that it is complete, adequate and applicable to life?

4 - The Bible is also relevant and fresh. First of all, the Bible is relevant for all times. As was mentioned in the last point, it is relevant in every culture and every circumstance. The cultures and societies of the world are always the ones doing the changing. Ever evolving into newer and different ideals and practices. God's word is solid. An anchor. And it has relevance and application to every life under the heavens. Secondly, it is fresh. Even though some texts were making observations about Middle Eastern life 3,000 years ago, we know it still has some form of spiritual and practical application to people in Fresno, CA in 2020. The word of God becomes "fresher" within cultures that largely reject godly principles and forget about God's expectations. Certainly, God's word can be fresh and exciting to a new Christian.

5 - Ultimately, we understand that the Bible is God's book. It is His own book and it is His only book for humans. It is indispensable and is intended to transform the reader's mind and outlook on life. God's word is powerful and active. Many of those who frequent this webpage can attest to God's power in their lives, giving further credence to the reliability of God's word. Every person's faith and changed life is further evidence that God's word can be trusted. God's word reminds us of God's goal to work in us to help us share the image of His Son. (Romans 8:28-30). While many unbelievers freak out and lose their mind at the first sign of trouble in this world, God's people, though alarmed, can also have a peace that knows all things in life are in the hands of a loving and caring and competent God who promises to work all things out, in the end. (Revelations 21:5-8). We learn so much about God, and His promises, and His intentions through a devoted and sincere study of God's word. We learn God can be trusted.

So, with all of that in mind, here is your first exercise. It's no small feat. It'll take some time. Read carefully and deliberately through Psalm 119. You could even make this a family activity. It's the longest chapter in the Bible. A steady, out-loud reading can take about 20 minutes. But here is what I want you to pay attention to and take note of as you read it.

- Nearly every verse mentions God's word. Write down the various terms (syllables) for God's word. What does each of those words individually say about God's word?

- Next, as you read, write down any verse that jumps out at you. God's word is intended to prompt and stir us, so what were some verses or phrases in this Psalm that prompted or stirred you?

- Finally, in one paragraph, summarize the Psalmist's view of God's word and how their view may have affected and/or helped you to see something new about God's word. If you feel like sharing your thoughts or conclusions, please feel free to share them here. You might bring something to attention that others never even noticed.

Stay tuned for more lessons.