

How to Study the Bible

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Question: “I have a great desire to know more about God, and should so like to know about God’s plan. What book with you advise me to get, that would help me? I should esteem it a favor if you would advise me about the books on God’s plan; and also what books are best to help me to study the Scriptures.”

The best thing in the world to enable one to understand the Scriptures is the Bible itself. There are books that lead one to the Scriptures, opening them up to the understanding, just as it is the mission of *Present Truth* to do; and of these I cannot think of any that will help you to trace the one purpose running through the whole Bible better than the three following: *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *The Great Controversy* (by E.G. White); and *The Everlasting Covenant* (by E.J. Waggoner).

The Bible is the Source

But the Bible itself is the book that has to be studied in order to get an understanding of it; and these that I have mentioned are valuable simply because they lead the reader to the Scriptures as the source of all knowledge.

It is a mistake to suppose that the Scriptures are hard to understand. How can they be, when they give understanding?

Psalm 119

¹⁰⁴ Through Your precepts I get understanding.

The Scriptures are the Word of the Lord; and,

Proverbs 2

⁶ The Lord gives wisdom; out of His mouth comes knowledge and understanding.

Patient Effort

The trouble with most people is that they have not patience to study the Bible. They want to understand it without taking the trouble to become familiar with it. People will ordinarily spend five times as much time reading what somebody has said about the Bible as they will to learn what the Bible itself says.

You can see that this is unreasonable. How can one expect to understand the meaning of any book with which one is unfamiliar? It is self-evident that if you wish to know what anybody means, you must know what he says. Now I can assure you that if you will just give your attention in earnest to the Bible, reading it indeed, not merely pronouncing the words, you will understand it. But perhaps I should explain a little further.

One Piece at a Time

In the first place, do not think to grasp the entire Bible at once. You cannot do it, anymore than you could pick up and carry ten thousand blocks of wood in your hands at one time. But by taking only one or two pieces at a time, you could move a whole timber yard; and so you can grasp the Bible.

By taking one step at a time one can go from London to Edinburgh; but no one can cover it all at one step. So the way for one to do, who really wishes to understand the Bible, is to

start with some portion of it, and some book, to which one is especially attracted, and make a thorough study of it.

How shall you do this? You will say, as so many others do, that this is just what you want to know: How to study the Bible. Well, there is no magic, no mystery, in it. Simply go to work to store your mind with what it says. The Apostle Paul gives the rule, in writing to the young man Timothy:

2 Timothy 2

⁶ Consider what I say, and the Lord give you understanding in all things.

This will require more close and careful reading than to master a newspaper article; just as a close-grained, hard piece of wood requires more strength to cut than a soft piece does; but you know from what you get the most service.

Seek for Understanding

Having settled on the portion of Scripture to which you intend to devote special study, begin at the beginning, and read. Here I must explain what I mean by reading. As already stated, I do not mean merely to pronounce the words. There are some things that can be grasped at a glance; even some parts of the Bible can be understood (superficially, of course) by the most cursory reading; but whether it requires little or much time and application, real reading means the intelligent grasping of the thought expressed by the words.

Here is where reading becomes study, and not simple recreation or amusement. You must read again and again until you remember; for it must be evident to you that one reads to no purpose unless one remembers. To read that which one does not wish to remember is a waste of time, and mere intellectual dissipation, unfitting the mind to lay hold of that which is useful; just as the eating of that which does not build up the system, weakens the digestive powers, and makes one less capable of enjoying real food. So as we should not waste

time reading what we do not wish to remember, when we read what is worth remembering we must read it so attentively that we shall certainly remember it.

Reading to Obtain the Thought

This means repetition, but not slavish parrot-like repetition. Keep this distinction in mind: We read for the thought, and not for the mere words; but since the Scriptures are given by inspiration of God, the thought is put into language that will best express it (barring defects in translation); therefore in our effort to get the exact thought fixed in our mind, we insensibly get the exact form of words there also. In short, we simply more or less consciously analyze the sentences and paragraphs as we read them, thus perceiving the relation of each part to every other part, and do this so thoroughly that they stay with us by the power of association.

Read an entire book through in this way, until you can, without it, recall its entire contents in the course of a morning's walk,—until you can see it spread out as a whole before your mind's eye, just as you can the town in which you have lived for years. Now you know what the writer says; you have it all in connection; and now you cannot fail to see that there really is a connection in it,—that there is a continuous thread running through the whole. The meaning reveals itself. Now you see that the reason why you did not understand the book before was that you did not really know what it said.

You can see, provided you believe what I have here written, that one must proceed with the Bible just as one would with a law book. The law student knows that there is but one way to an understanding of law, and that is by actual mastery of the contents of the law books; by close application to what they say.

Only there is no manner of comparison between the study of human law and Divine law. The same amount of study put

on the Bible, that the law student puts on his text books, will yield infinitely greater returns. One can master the contents of a portion of the Bible in less time than is required for the same amount in any law book of purely human production; and then we have this advantage, that we are sure that everything we study does really mean something. The Word of God is good seed; it is pure life, that germinates and multiplies.

An Unfathomable Well

I have several times spoken about mastering the Scriptures. I do not wish to be understood as conveying the idea that one can master them in the sense of knowing all that they have to reveal. That can never be done; and in another article in this number it is shown why this is impossible.

The better acquainted one becomes with the Bible, or any part of it, the more will one see that only the outer edge of the surface of it has been touched. The Bible is a well of infinite, unfathomable depth,—an immeasurable expanse; but we can master it in this sense, that we have a clear and firm grasp of what it says, and may know that we know what we do know of it.

Understanding One Book Opens Up Others

When you have done the work that I have indicated with a single book of the Bible, you will find to your delighted surprise that every other book of the Bible is more open to your understanding; for the Bible is one whole, having a single purpose, which may be likened both to a thread and to a broad, measureless plain; and the life and the fulness of all whole is in each part. This study will have given you a love for Bible study, such as you never had before, and you will by far prefer to search out its treasures for yourself, to having somebody else dig them out and present them to you.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit

I should not leave this subject without saying that in order to get the perfect understanding of the Scriptures one must continually seek and depend on the Holy Spirit, whose testimony they are. Without the Spirit's aid, all our zeal and application will be in vain.

Job 32

⁸ There is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty gives them understanding.

But while everything depends on the Spirit, we must work as though everything depended on us; for the Holy Spirit is not given to save people the trouble of making exertion, but, on the contrary, to stir them up to activity. We may, then, in a word, say that the helps to an understanding of the Bible are the Spirit of God and application.