

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

A Framework for Personal Time in the Word

1. Observation – Read it slowly!

- The goal of observation is to answer the question, “What does this text *say*?”
- Two Parts to Observation
 - Comprehension
 - Read the passage in its entirety.
 - Read the passage with attentiveness.
 - Read the passage in multiple translations.
 - Look up words that you do not know.
 - Context
 - Authorship – Who wrote it? When and where did they write it?
 - Audience – Who was it written to?
 - Occasion – Why was it written?
- Tools to Assist Observation
 - Wide Margins/Double Spacing – copy and paste text or book of the Bible into a document, make it double-space with wide margins, and print it out. You can use www.biblegateway.com to copy a book of the Bible chapter by chapter
 - Paraphrasing
 - Good Bible Dictionary
 - John Piper’s Arcing Method – biblearc.com

2. Interpretation – Study it deeply!

- The goal of interpretation is to answer the question, “What does this text *mean*?”
- Two Parts to Interpretation
 - Examination
 - Specific Context – What was said immediately before? What is said next? What larger argument is being developed by the author?
 - Repetition – What words are repeated? What ideas are repeated?
 - Themes – What larger themes are being developed? How does this specific text develop the larger passage from which it comes? (Circle them!)
 - Ask questions! (why was this word used? Any symbolism/figurative language – why? Where else is that used? How does this connect to the rest of the passage?)
 - Cross-References – What other passages in scripture relate to this one?
 - Conclusion
 - What does this passage reveal about God (his nature, purposes, work)?
 - What does this passage reveal about man?
 - What commands, promises, or warnings are given to man by God?

- Remember to make all conclusions firmly in original context as you seek out the authors original meaning. **A text cannot mean what it has never meant.**
- Tools to Assist Interpretation
 - Study Bible
 - Bible Commentary
 - Concordance
 - www.biblehub.com

3. Application – Obey it Carefully!

- The goal of application is to answer the question, “What does this text *mean for me?*”
- Two Parts to Application
 - Repentance – What sinful thoughts and behavior in my life is revealed by this text?
 - How am I sinning against God?
 - How am I sinning against others?
 - What specifically needs to change in order for me to obey?
 - Faith – Who alone has the power to procure obedience to God’s word in my life?
 - Pray for God to provoke change in your heart.
 - Pray for God to provoke endurance in your obedience.
- Tools to Assist Interpretation
 - Prayer
 - Biblical Community
 - Meditating on the text
 - Journaling

Various Genres in the Bible

Each genre has its own rules for interpretation

Old Testament Genres:

1. Narrative
2. Law
3. Poetry
4. Prophecy
5. Wisdom

New Testament Genres:

1. Gospels
2. History (Acts)
3. Letters
4. Apocalyptic (Revelation)

Basic Guidelines for Interpretation for Each Genre

Old Testament Narrative:

- Focus on the plot, how each scene moves the story
 - o What is happening in the chapter you're reading?
 - o What about the previous chapter? And the one after?
 - o Pay attention to the larger story, the metanarrative (individual story -> larger story that one is a part of -> overarching story/narrative of scripture)
- Comparison and Contrast – used a lot in OT narrative to develop plot and move story forward
- Explore the plot – answers the What? and How?
- The setting – answers the When? and Where?
- The Characters – answers the Who?
 - o Pay attention any detail given about him or her
 - o Main characters are not always the “good guys”
- The viewpoint of the narrator – does the narrator take a side on any issue?
- Narratives are not usually allegories – what did it mean to the original audience?

Old Testament Law:

- The purpose of the law – the covenant given to Israel to help them be the people of God, to live holy lives, to point out their sin and need for God
- The law is fulfilled in Christ – no direct commands for us, unless given in the New Testament as well
- Remember the context – the law is part of the narrative journey of the Israelites in the Torah (first five books, AKA The Pentateuch)
- Look for information about how this law would have been applied and understood to original audience – are there any theological principles we can take from that?

Old Testament Poetry:

- OT Poetry typically uses few words – not very descriptive
- Parallelism – structured around poetic lines of verse, not sentences; usually grouped in twos or threes to express the thought
- OT Poetry uses a lot of figurative language – key to interpreting the passage
 - o Localize and visualize each figure of speech
 - o Enter into the emotional world of the image
 - o Then try to summarize what this might have meant for the original audience
- OT Poetry is not trying to give direct, obvious doctrinal or theological statements – it is very emotional

Old Testament Prophecy:

- Historical/cultural context is extremely important
 - o Who is the prophet?
 - o Who is he speaking to?
 - o Why did God send him to those people? And why did He give the prophet that message?
- Basic message of the prophets:
 - o First – you have broken the covenant and you should repent! (note how the audience has broken the covenant)
 - o Second – No repentance? Then judgment
 - o Third – Yet, there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious future restoration
- To interpret, follow the prophet’s message:
 - o First – what sin is he charging the audience with? Do you struggle with this sin? If so, how? Where else do we see this sin talked about in scripture?
 - o Second – how did the audience face judgment, or how were they spared from judgment? How has Christ absorbed the judgment due our sins?
 - o Third – How has God or how is He going to restore Israel? How is this glorious future fulfilled in Christ?

Old Testament Wisdom:

- Purpose of OT wisdom books – listen, look, think, reflect
 - o Not a collection of universal promises
 - o Rather, they are a collection of valuable insights into godly living
- Big Picture of each book:
 - o Proverbs – Basic Approach to Life – represents the basic, rational ordered norms of life (things that are normally true)
 - o Job – suffering of the righteous
 - o Ecclesiastes – failure of the rational, ordered approach to provide ultimate meaning to life
 - o Song of Solomon – irrationality of romantic love between a husband and wife
- What is the context of the book? Author? Purpose?
- What are the theological principles being given?

New Testament Gospels

- Just like OT narratives – focus on the story/plot
 - o What is happening in this particular story? What about the one before it? The one after?
 - o What is the author telling us about Jesus?
 - o Ask who, what, when, where, how
 - o Plot clues from the author – why is he telling us this particular story
 - o What is repeated?
 - o How does the story change/move

- Look for connections between the different stories – how is what you’re reading connected to the context?
- What is the meaning for the original audience?
- What are the theological principles we can apply to us?

New Testament History (Acts)

- Acts is written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel story
- History of the early church, the coming of the Holy Spirit, saving of Gentiles, Paul’s missionary journeys
 - o Acts 1:8 shows this purpose – gospel message moves from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to ends of the earth
- What was Luke trying to communicate to his readers?
 - o Look for patterns and connections to the stories
- Look for the positive and negative examples in the characters
- Read individual passages in light of overall story of Acts, as well as rest of NT
- Look to other parts of Acts to clarify what is normative
- Look for repeated patterns and themes

New Testament Letters

- What is the context?
 - o Author? Occasion?
- Read the entire letter in one sitting, multiple times
- Take note of themes laid out by the author
- Read/think in terms of paragraphs – how are paragraphs connected? What comes before? What comes after? When is there a shift in thought?
- Words and order of words matter
- What did this letter/passage mean to the original audience?
- What theological principles can we apply to us?

New Testament Apocalyptic (Revelation)

- What is the context?
 - o Author? Time of writing? Purpose of writing (letters to the churches)?
 - Revelation is a letter to the 7 churches of Asia Minor
 - o What is the message to John’s original audience?
- Don’t try to discover a strict chronological map of future events – this is not the author’s purpose
- Not always meant to be taken literally – John uses a lot of figurative language, very symbolic
- Pay attention when John identifies an image
- Seek to identify images/symbols – images are fluid, might not always correlate to other parts of scripture where same image is used

- Hold conclusions in open hands – be humble, focus on main idea/theme
- Revelation is ultimately about how Jesus is going to defeat all sin/evil and make everything right when He returns – should give us and original audience strength and faith in times of persecution