

Bible Study Techniques

This is a practical paper which is designed as instruction with exercises to train people to study the Bible. It is intended to be utilised in conjunction with personal tuition, with the goal of helping people learn how to understand and teach scripture.

1: Simple word studies with a concordance.

What is a Bible concordance?

It is a compilation of all the references in scripture of a particular word to enable students to find specific verses. For example if you want to know where it is said that Jesus is the way, look up the word 'way' in your concordance since there are fewer verses to look up than the word Jesus; even so there are a great many. However, there are fewer New Testament ones so you soon identify the verse you require as John 14:6.

There are various concordances available these days for a variety of translations; however, the most well known are the original Authorised Version concordances of Cruden, Young and Strong. Cruden's was the original, popular, modern concordance and is only useful for the exercise above. Young's and Strong's have far more information and statistics, enabling many more useful exercises.

Young's is the best laid out with each English word reference structured under each original word. For instance: the word 'miracle' is broken down into five sections, three Hebrew words and two Greek, with the definitions ranging from: sign, to act of power. The index-lexicon at the end of the book enables further information to be gleaned. If we look up the two Greek words translated as 'miracle' in the AV New Testament we see that *dunamis* is translated by various words e.g. power, ability, miracle. Young also shows the number of times each word is so translated. This enables us to see how many times the Greek word appears in the original Greek and what is the predominant meaning in the translation. In the case of *dunamis* it appears 120 times with 'power' being the most common translation (77x), followed by 'mighty work' (11x) 'miracle' (8x), 'might' (4x) and 'virtue' (3x). The close connection in the index of other words like *dunamoo* (strengthen) and *dunamai* (to be able) shows that these are clearly related. A further benefit of Young's work is that he occasionally provides helpful background matter e.g. on Athens this runs to 74 lines of historical information. There is also very helpful information on syntax, figures of speech and idioms in the introduction. For these reasons Young's is my preferred concordance.

Strong's concordance covers much the same ground but in a different format. He developed a code system whereby each original word is numbered. The texts are not subdivided but adjacent to each reference appears its code number. In the case of 'miracle'(s) the New Testament is divided into numbers 4592 and 1411. Again we turn to the dictionary at the back and find in the Greek section that, indeed, 1411 is *dunamis*. We also learn that it is derived from 1410 (*dunamai*) and that it is variously translated ability, power etc. but there are no numbers of the times these words are so translated. Clarity on its meaning can only be found from Strong's statements in the dictionary which are fairly good but limited. In this case we see that *dunamis* means: primarily, miraculous power, usually by implication - a miracle, but there are also several other meanings. The great

benefit of Strong's concordance is that a large number of other helpful works are now available that use his code. Once this code for a given word is known, lexicons and study books can trace the word's derivation and meaning without prior knowledge of the original language.

Obviously a detailed investigation into the meaning of original words will require the Greek and Hebrew text plus a variety of lexical aids, however, the average student can find sufficient information for most uses just from Young's or Strong's concordances. Let us demonstrate this by an example.

Study of the word 'atonement'

I will limit myself to Young's concordance for this exercise.

We first see that the word only appears in the New Testament in Rm 5:11 where the word *katallage* is used. The dictionary shows that this word is also translated as 'reconciliation' three times and 'atonement' only once. Immediately we surmise that reconciliation is a part of the understanding of atonement. Looking up 'reconcile' we see that this means various things but included are: to make atonement, to cover, to change, to appease. All these verses should be looked up to help form an impression, note what strikes you as important. Returning to 'atonement', we see that the primary Old Testament meaning is: to cover (*kaphar, kippurim*). All these references should now be consulted. This alone should be sufficient to propose a reasonably accurate definition of the word without having yet had recourse to a lexicon.

A look at the Hebrew dictionary shows that the word is translated mainly as forgive, pardon (4x), make reconciliation (7x), purge (9x) but predominantly: to make atonement (72x).

There also appears the seemingly strange and isolated meaning of 'pitch'. Why on earth is this? Turning to the entry for 'pitch' we find that *kaphar* is so translated in Gen 6:14. The related word *kopher* is also translated as pitch in this verse.

The verse in question is in the story of the construction of the ark of Noah:

Make yourself an ark of gopherwood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch.

(The word 'cover' in NKJV appears in the AV as pitch, 'cover' is a better translation of *kaphar*.)

The ark is a picture of salvation. Peter tells us that:

... the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. (1 Pt 3:20)

Notice that it was the water that saved Noah and his family. The water was the destruction of the wicked and the salvation of the obedient. But note, without the covering of pitch the ark would not have been safe. The covering prevented the judgment affecting those in the ark. This is a clear picture of atonement, it is a covering which protects from judgment.

Examination of all the references shows this to be the true meaning of the word. In the Old Testament sin had to be covered until the Messiah came to take the sin away. Atonement ceremonially consecrated things and made them holy (Exod 29:37). The prime example was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) once a year when the mercy seat upon the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle was sprinkled with blood to make atonement for the people

of Israel (See Lev 16, the word *kaphar* appears 14x in this chapter).

All this also helps us draw more depth from the single reference to the New Testament, Rm 5:11. In fact the NKJV translates *katallage* as reconciliation:

And not only *that*, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

In fact the cover of the mercy seat itself is a word related to *kaphar* i.e. *kapporeth* meaning a lid, a place of covering. Hebrews 9:5 calls this a place of propitiation or appeasement (*hilasterion*). The mercy seat refers us to the presence of God generally (in connection with the ark) and the sacrifice of Jesus (i.e. the place of appeasement). Perhaps we could justifiably stretch the sense of Rm 5:11 to say that Jesus is our mercy seat. He is the one who has provided propitiation (appeasement of God's wrath).

All of this serves to illustrate what the Bible means by the word 'atonement'. It is a reconciliation brought about by a covering of sin and a protection of those covered from the judgment of a rightfully angry God; a God who is wrathful towards sinners but who provides mercy to those he loves in the provision of a substitute, one who turns away God's anger by providing a sacrifice of blood. This sacrifice satisfies and appeases God who can now be fully reconciled to those who were formerly his enemies. In essence, atonement is 'satisfaction'.

Identification of original words

Finally, Young's and Strong's concordances can be used to identify the original word in the Greek or Hebrew which is translated by a given word in your Bible. This can be seen from our exercise. Simply stated, if you are reading a passage and wish to know what the original said, first you must find your equivalent word in the AV as these concordances are based on that version. Often, however, the word is the same in most translations. Then look up that word in the concordance, find the verse that you are studying and see which word is so translated. In Young's it will be the word at the head of that subdivision; in Strong it will be the particular code number which you then need to check against the dictionary entry.

For instance: in John 21 there are various references to the word love. An examination of the concordance entries shows that some are the Greek word *agapeo*, others are the Greek word *phileo*.

John 21:15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love (*agapao*) Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (*phileo*) You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."

John 21:16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love (*agapao*) Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (*phileo*) You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep."

John 21:17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love (*phileo*) Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love (*phileo*) Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love (*phileo*) You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

However, some explanations of this are very strained and there is not enough evidence to support a mystical, deep, hidden meaning in the differences as the NT uses the two words interchangeably. Jesus is said to *phileo* (Jn 11:3) as well as *agapeo*. However, it must be admitted that in John's Gospel Jesus predominantly uses *agape* (noun) and *agapeo* (verb). The key point in this interchange is Jesus' re-commissioning of Peter through a

threefold confession to correct his threefold denial. It is unlikely that it indicates that Jesus settled for Peter's lesser brotherly, affectionate love (*phileo*) because he couldn't reach Jesus' standard of committed love (*agapao*). Peter certainly affirmed *agapeo* in his letters.

With just a good concordance alone, a student is able to determine a great deal about the original words, which is essential for Bible interpretation.

Computer programs

In addition to using books, there are many Bible Study programs available these days. The best, and one that is freely available, is e-sword (from e-sword.net). This enables the student to know the Strong's number for every Bible word on screen, which can then be cross-referenced with other tools. However, there are a number of features found in Young's Concordance that are not available. Add-ons to the basic e-sword program that I would advise as a minimum for serious study include: Fausset's Dictionary, Robertson's Word Pictures, Vincent's Word Studies, Thayer's Lexicon, Brown / Driver / Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, Jamieson / Fausset / Brown Commentary and Barnes' Notes.

2: The importance of our conception of God's word

Then Jesus said ... 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' (Jn 8:31-32)

This statement of Jesus demonstrates the vital importance of knowing God's word. Everyone wants to be free. All believers want to be a true disciple of Jesus. To achieve this we must know the truth. To know the truth we must continue, abide, in the words of Jesus as revealed in the Bible; not just his spoken word in the Gospels, but the entire corpus of Biblical teaching. We will not lead a balanced or safe Christian life unless we abide, or dwell, in God's word. To do this it is necessary to study it to the best of our ability.

Study

Studying God's word builds a foundation for God to speak to us and through us, therefore, it is important to know it well. It must be the foundation of all ministry. If we give advice it must be soundly based on scripture to be of any use; we must give the counsel that God would give, so we must know what God would say in this or that predicament

If we desire to know more of God, and surely that is the point of the Christian life, then we must study what he has said, especially about himself.

In order to measure and test the experiences we go through in our lives we must have a measuring rod to check against. The Bible is such a test. If we do not wish to be trapped or fooled unawares then we must learn what the Bible has to say to avoid being blown by every wind of doctrine purporting to be of God. The Bible is the litmus test for all doctrines and claims of men.

How to study

First be aware that it takes lots of time. Everything of value in life needs time to grow: friendship, learning, understanding, wisdom, love etc. Take time to study slowly and progressively. This is not meant to be a weight upon you or a hard task, each person will have different abilities and desires to study. Simply determine that you will diligently and regularly apportion what time you can to this development. If knowing God is of value to you, time can be made available. The important thing is that it is regular and a priority in your life.

Secondly, don't be shallow. Don't be satisfied with happy words that come to mind as you read; that is fine as encouragement but it is not study. Study is where you learn something new as a result of effort. The dictionary definition of the word 'study' is to learn as a result of pain or attention. Happy thoughts are not enough. You have to dig deep to excavate the best gems and digging is laborious.

Some simple study pointers

1: *First see the wood not the trees*

- **Read** it through several times if it is a New Testament book. If it is a passage in an OT book read the passage several times. Let's take the case of the letter to the Hebrews.
- **Who** was the book written to? [To Jewish believers under pressure.]
- **When** was it written? [Shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.]
- **Why** was it written? Discover the general purpose or objective of the book/passage you are studying. [To exhort these believers to not go back to Judaism but press on in faith.]
- **What** are his arguments? What is the writer at pains to say? [To prove that Christ is better than every aspect of Judaism and the Old Covenant (Moses, Angels, Abraham,

the Levitical Priesthood, the Tabernacle and sacrificial system). To prove that falling away from Christ is the end, there is no other way to be saved.]

- **Seek.** Try to find some background historical and cultural information if possible by using other books.

2: *Study the facts in detail*

Read carefully and find the facts for yourself. For example:

- What is God's plan said to be in Ephesians?
- Paul found a fact for himself when he deduced Gal 3:16 from Gen 22:18.
- Some people have questioned whether or not Peter was married; Mk 1:30 decides the issue. It also makes Peter's decision in 1:18 all the more challenging.
- Some cults are still looking for an Elijah to come. Jesus tells us that John the Baptist is the fulfilment of that prophecy in Malachi 4:5, coming in the spirit of Elijah (Matt 11:14, 17:12). Simple study would prevent making such a foolish mistake.

3: *Search*

Be like a miner avidly inspecting his gold pan in the water. View your passage from every angle. Some important aspects in searching are:

- Note the first occurrence of a word. This often illustrates shades of meaning; e.g. 'worship' and the story of Abraham at Mount Moriah.
- Compare scriptures (see 1 Cor 2:13 margin).
- Check the context.
- Analyse scriptures (dissect, examine, is it a figure of speech, a poem?).
- Make deductions from scripture e.g. 2 Cor 3:13 from Ex 34:33.
- Remember that all is inspired but not all is good advice e.g. the words of bad men and Satan are recorded; Job's friends gave lengthy advice which God condemned.

More will be said on principles of interpretation later.

4: *Depend upon the Holy Spirit*

- Pray about difficulties; expect revelation to come (Jn 16:13).
- Note every small thing learned cf. Isa 28:9-10; write it down.
- Tell someone what you have learned, act upon it, share it.

5: *Meditate and Memorise*

Meditation is reflection; prolonged concentrated thinking or infusion; like tea which having stood in the hot water is infused to change the taste of the whole thing.

6: *Work at your own pace*

To understand one verse well is better than 100 read superficially.

Symbols of scripture

- 1 Mirror (Jm 1:25)
- 2 A Washing (Eph 5:26)
- 3 Lamp, light (Ps 119:105)
- 4 Food (Heb 5:12, Ps19:10)
- 5 Gold (Ps 19:10)
- 6 Fire (Jer 23:29)
- 7 Hammer (Jer 23:29)

- 8 Sword (Heb 4:12, Eph 6:17)
9 Seed (Jm 1:18, 1 Pt 1:23)

What do these symbols tell you about the Bible?

Methods of bible study

There are a wide variety of methods which different books will advise. There are also a large number of study guides for you to choose from on any Biblical doctrine or book. I would advise against using these for this reason - they tend to make you learn too mechanically. First you read a selected passage, then you answer a number of questions from that passage in front of you. Someone else has done the work; you haven't really studied anything for yourself. There has been no pain and little effort involved. Real study should involve your own work and it should cost you something, but what you learn will remain part of you forever. It will change the way you think and help develop character.

Of the various methods the following will be of use at different times, sometimes you will use several of these in one particular study.

- Study of a book.
- Study of a verse.
- Study of a word.
- Study of a topic or theme.
- Study of a type or symbol.
- Study of a doctrine.
- Study of a verse or passage by marginal references.
- Study of a person.
- Study of a duty.

Note:

Jer 15:16; cf. eating: We all eat what we like, how we like. We don't all eat the same food at the same time in the same way. Likewise, all scripture study must be individual and personal to feed us.

3: Exegesis

What is exegesis?

Exegesis simply means: 'to guide out', 'to explain' and 'to interpret'. It is the technical word used to describe the act of studying a Biblical text to understand its meaning and determine the basis for its interpretation.

It is a word that describes the technical side of Bible study. Exegesis examines the text to establish what the words really mean and what the passage in view is actually saying. It is taking a document that is ancient and enabling us in the 20th century to understand what the original hearers would have understood. We can then decide how to interpret that; i.e. what does it mean for me now, what action must I take, how should my beliefs be challenged, what must I put right?

Tools of exegesis

The point is to find out what the passage means. This requires:

Defining the words it contains

Don't trust translations when conducting a detailed study; several are just not up to it as they are paraphrases. These Bible versions are not worth using for study purposes (some are not worth reading at all due to their many errors).

- Check the Greek text and your dictionaries to establish the true meaning of the words.
- Study important words separately, especially if there is no modern equivalent e.g. *paidagogos* in Gal 3:24-25.
- Do not presume that a modern use of a Greek word is what was meant in the 1st century. E.g. *hilaros* does not mean 'hilarious' in 2 Cor 9:7.

Relating the words to each other (i.e. grammar)

You will really need a commentary to do this properly or a study Bible like Zodiates' *Hebrew Greek Key Study Bible*. For instance,

- Which words are emphasised in the sentence?
- What tenses are used? The use of the Greek aorist tense can be very important.
- The proper understanding of pronouns can be vital.

Relating it to historical facts

Again a commentary is helpful here. What ancient practices are involved? How are they relevant? What cultural customs are involved? What was the historical setting?

- E.g. the type of armour in Eph 6 - is the shield large or small; is the armour Roman, Greek or Hebrew (a clue, Paul was chained to a Roman soldier at the time)? What difference does this make?
- Is a sword short (*machaira*, e.g. Eph 6:17 – for cutting, thrusting, stabbing at close quarters) or long (*rhomphaia* e.g. Rev 1:16, a long sword worn on the shoulder or a Thracian javelin; (a clue, *rhomphaia* only appears in Lk 2:35; Rev 1:16; 2:16, 6:8, 19:15, 21). What difference does this make?
- What chronological system does John use in his Gospel? Is it different to the way time is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels? Does this help correlate supposed contradictions?

- What benefits did the Roman Empire bring that aided the spread of the Gospel?

This then enables basic interpretation to take place which:

- Relates it to the writer's purpose in the book.
- Relates it to Biblical theology.
- Relates it to the Holy Spirit's purpose now.

(We will deal in more detail with the various rules of interpretation in another section.)

Without saying any more let's look at an example of a Biblical writer doing this himself.

Hebrews 7: Study of Melchizedek based on Gen 14:17-20

What does the apostle do?

1. The writer translates the name and finds that it means 'King of Righteousness' (v 2).
2. He then translates the city name, which means that he was 'King of Peace' (v 2).
3. He examines the background and finds that Melchizedek has no genealogy. He sees this as a type of eternity i.e. he has no beginning and continues forever (v 3).
4. He notices the action that occurred: Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham and was, therefore, greater than Levi and the Aaronic priesthood (v 4). He blessed Abraham and was greater for this reason also (v 1, 6, 7).
5. He looks for other references to Melchizedek in the Bible and finds Ps 110:4 (v 17).
6. He draws conclusions and deductions from all this (v 9, 11, 15, 18, 22, 25, 28).
7. He draws in more information from additional references (v 20).
8. He relates the whole thing to Jesus (v 14, 22, 25, 26-28).
9. He proceeds to give encouragement to his hearers (v 18, 24).

This is a Biblical example for us to follow in making a study. Note that he doesn't stop with making his deductions but continues to relate his study to Jesus. Our discoveries should always lead us to Christ for the whole Bible speaks about him. If our studies lead us away from him then we should be very wary.

4: Understanding and applying the word

For as yet they (the disciples) did not know the Scripture. (Jn 20:9)

Introduction

This study is more an exhortation than a technical discussion, but I trust it contains helpful principles to aid all types of Bible study.

The disciples here were confused (Jn 20:9). They had doubted and behaved wrongly (fled) because they were unprepared - they did not know the scripture, ('know' = Greek: perceive, see). Despite this failure to see, Jesus had explained the matter fully, as recently as three months previously and on at least three occasions:

Mt 28:6 'He is risen, as he said.'

Lk 24:5-7, 9:22,44

Mk 8:31-32, 9:9-10,30-32, 10:32-34

(OT scriptures involved: Ps 16:9-11, 110:1,4, 118:22-24; Isa 53:11-12.)

The failure to act properly in a crisis resulted from a failure to perceive the truth. For us to avoid such a failure, we must: look, perceive, understand, hold and apply the truth.

To live a godly and obedient life with power we must	
LOOK	We must read the Bible regularly (daily) and feed from it. Gain information.
PERCEIVE	We must not read superficially or rely on the study of others, but must work at understanding it for ourselves by searching; we must really see what it says to us by diligent research. Spiritual apprehension of truth by investigation.
UNDERSTAND	We must strive to understand the doctrines affirmed by the truth. Comprehension and methodical apprehension of what we study. Learned truth becomes spiritual knowledge in us.
HOLD	We must maintain the truth that we learn in our lives, and hold it in our hearts. Let the word develop faith in the heart and lead to worship.
APPLY	We must obey and apply the word in our lives in practice.

All these blend into one another. Don't stop short.

- *Some people don't even look*; if a person has no desire to read the Bible at all, then there is little chance that they are truly saved. They may claim to love Jesus, but this is just emotionalism and not salvation. Those who are genuinely converted receive a love of God's word. Leaders who denigrate the Bible can only be charlatans and false prophets.
- *People can look but not perceive*; these just have some basic Bible facts. There is a danger that folk who stop here may not even be converted.

- *People can perceive but not understand*; they just know some interesting facts, not understood by some, which they have investigated. Such folk may, for instance, understand the types or symbols better than others. But they have not turned Biblical information into doctrinal truth held in the heart and mind. They do not know how to be spiritually effective. They can explain what the Tabernacle is but not control their temper or differentiate doctrinal error from truth.
- *People can understand but not hold*; these folk have a doctrinal understanding based on study but it has not yet led to heart and mind renewal and worship (Rm 12:1-2).
- *People can hold the truth but not apply it*; they have doctrinal understanding and a measure of spiritual knowledge, they even worship and are thrilled with God, but they do not walk in the truth and manifest it in their lives. They stay closeted and the truth has no expression in the world. There are some academics in this category whose life is in the study but who do little in church.
- Those who apply and manifest the truth are the ones that truly honour God and bear fruit.

We must read the scriptures - LOOK

Ex 15:26 Diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God.

Jn 8:31-32 We must hear the truth if we are to be delivered.

Mt 4:4 Life comes from hearing God's word.

We only hear God's voice if we read his word. To fail to read the Bible at all will result in spiritual starvation and uselessness in the kingdom of God. It is having a name of being alive but in fact being dead.

We must know the scriptures - SEE, PERCEIVE or INVESTIGATE

This refers to diligent searching. It is methodical investigation to understand scripture by comparing texts.

Search As the Bereans did (Acts 17:11), i.e. like a gold pan; view all angles.

Check Check out everything with the rest of God's word; he commends this. Even check the words of God's messengers (as the Bereans); confirm it for yourself. In order to help retain the truth, pass it on to others.

Dig The best gems are deeply hidden and require effort to be extracted. Use study aids as well as elbow grease.

Example

Mt 26:15, 27:3-6 Factual event: Jesus is sold for 30 pieces of silver.

Zech 11:12-13 This was the fulfilment of OT prophecy.

Ex 21:32 Typology: it was the price of a wounded slave.

Typology: The one (an ox) that wounds must die (i.e. Judas).

Isa 53:3 Prophetic statement: Jesus will be wounded for our transgressions.

Silver Typology: Is a type of atonement (the 'cost' of Jesus' death).

Ex 26:19 Typology: The foundation (40 bases) of the tabernacle was silver.
 40 bases Symbolism: The number of testing, trial; involves grace.

OT Type	OT Prophecy	Fulfilment
Silver foundation in Tabernacle	30 pieces of silver	Jesus sold by Judas
The wounded slave	Isa 53:3	Jesus wounded at the cross

This reveals

- The unity of the Bible.
- The sovereignty of God.
- The foreknowledge of God.
- The importance of prophecy.
- The importance of types and symbols.

We must understand and believe the scriptures - KNOW or UNDERSTAND

- **Make me understand the way of your precepts; so shall I meditate on your wondrous works. (Ps 119: 27)**
- **And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. (Lk 24:45)**
- **My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. (Hos 4:6)**

Understanding is the turning of Biblical truth into systematic doctrine so that the believer has a Biblical worldview and knows how to act in the kingdom. Scriptural facts have become doctrinal truths to undergird life and fellowship. This is the beginning of making the believer spiritually effective.

- It is the truth that sets free, not the reading.
- Reading and study are important but they only prepare the heart and mind. We must believe what we see so that the truth becomes part of us.
- Knowledge is vital since it is understanding God's heart and will for us as revealed in his word
- Knowledge must not be rejected in favour of 'spiritual experiences'; true spiritual experience is rooted upon the word. The Holy Spirit leads into truth and establishes us in sound doctrine. **'Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.'** (Titus 1:9)
- NB All is inspired but not all is good advice. The Bible records the words of bad men, false prophets, demons and Satan. Several chapters of advice from Job's friends are condemned by God as false or wrongly applied facts (Job 42:7).
- Depend upon the Holy Spirit for light.
- Pray to see through the words to what God wants you to see.
- What does it mean for you?

Meditate on the truth

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2)

Meditate literally means: 'to mutter', i.e.:

- Reflection, prolonged concentrated thinking.
- Infusion, like tea affecting the whole.
- Ruminant, as a cow eats, chewing over and over.
- You need to sit before you can walk; you need power before you can serve.

We must remember the scriptures - HOLD

- Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 1:13)
- But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience. (Lk 8:15)
- Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you! (Ps 119:11)

What we know by learning must pass from head-knowledge to establishing the heart. Truth established in the heart gives us faith to be able to walk properly. It is one thing to have a good understanding of doctrine and another to be filled with truth in the heart in a way that leads to worship and righteous thinking.

We must be changed by the scriptures – OBEY, OBSERVE, PRACTICE AND APPLY

- All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17) It is sufficient for all things.
- Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Ps 119:105). It shows me how to walk, where to walk and when to walk.
- If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments, and perform them, then I will give you ... (Lev 26:3)
- Because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them ... the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which he swore to your fathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you. (Deut 7:12-13)
- Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. (Deut 28:1)

Confess the scriptures

Having learned the truth in the mind, and then having it established in the heart, it must be confessed in the life. Confession is faith in verbal and physical expression, even if it seems impossible, e.g. Abram (Rm 4:16-21 cf. Gen 17). At this point Abram's name was changed. His obedience was expressed with circumcision.

Learn through affliction

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. (Ps 119:67)

Just as God tested Abraham, God will always test the truth that we hold. Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that ensues; it comes in order to make the truth really effective in you as you hold it in faith and obediently apply it in your life. The testing of truth held in the heart leads to truth applied in the life.

Truth expressed by the tongue

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Prov 18:21). See also Jm 3:1-12.

The training of the tongue is vital since it is the expression of the heart. It must be disciplined by the word. The practical expression of truth in one's life begins with the tongue. A man who obeys the word will restrain his tongue and use it to express wisdom and righteousness.

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver ... The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom ... The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly ... a wholesome tongue is a tree of life. (Prov 10:20, 31, 15:2, 4).

Obey the scriptures

Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God. (Deut 12:28)

We don't need special, powerful experiences of the Spirit but we do need to obey the word. We will never have a deep relationship with the Spirit guiding us into truth if we fail to study and obey the words that he inspired. A spiritual life is one that is devoted to God's word. Only a fool seeks experiences of dubious origin when he has the most powerful thing in the universe in his hands – the very words and law of God to man.

Conclusion

Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. (Jos 1:6-8)

The result of understanding and applying the word is prosperity (NB prosperity is not the result of faith) and good success; in other words, a fruitful life.

5: A basic list of important principles of interpretation

The unity of scripture

The place of the New and Old Testaments.

Understand that the OT illustrates and prepares the way for the NT. The NT explains and expounds the OT. [*The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed* attributed to Justin Martyr and Augustine.]

All interpretations must be Biblical.

They must conform to what scripture says elsewhere. They must be in line with true Biblical doctrine (the 'analogy of faith'). See 'context'.

Observe the context.

Perhaps the most important principle that summarises all others.

- A verse must be interpreted in the light of surrounding verses.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the surrounding passage.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the whole book.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of all the writings by the same author.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the Testament it is found in.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the whole Bible.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of Biblical doctrine.

Thus, verses must not be made to contradict what the same author has said clearly elsewhere. For instance, since Paul clearly affirms the election of some by God's predestination (Rm 9:22-23; Eph 1:4-5; 2 Thess 2:13), he cannot also teach universalism in the Gospel message (1 Tim 2:4; Titus 2:11 etc.). These supposedly universalistic passages must be carefully interpreted in their context.

Interpret scripture by scripture.

Do not lean on human methods from any source, especially rabbinical. Let the Bible interpret itself.

Interpret the difficult and obscure by means of the clear.

For example, don't begin to develop a doctrine of eschatology by first making interpretations of apocalyptic prophecies. Rather start with the clear statements of Jesus and the apostles.

Interpret brief statements by means of fuller ones.

A simple and short statement in one place can be given an entirely different meaning by comparing it with a fuller statement on the same subject elsewhere. The teaching on that topic is not regulated by the short ambiguous statement but by the fuller, more carefully written statement. The short statement may be written for entirely different reasons than explaining the topic; such as condemning a practice.

The unity of doctrine

Understand the limits of the verse under consideration.

What is the scope of the author's intention? What is he trying to teach? Is the verse limited by the writer's purpose in the book?

Doctrinal study must collate all the key scriptural mentions.

When formulating a doctrine, it is vital to examine all the scriptural mentions of that subject. This may mean evaluating different words that relate to that subject. Thus the doctrine of justification will also require looking at the words, pardon, righteousness, forgiveness, condemnation, judgment, holiness etc.

Note any limitation.

General statements are frequently limited in purpose (Prov 3:16, 10:27; Rm 3:10-11; Mk 16:17-18; 1 Cor 7:32). Words that seem to have a universal or eternal extent may well be limited. For instance, some things in the Old Covenant were said to be everlasting (*olam*) but have been cancelled under the New Covenant; e.g. the Levitical priesthood. The Hebrew word 'everlasting' can have set limits and refer to a given period or dispensation.

Understand and identify progressive revelation.

There is a development of ideas and doctrine in Scripture as God makes them more clear over time. The fulness is usually in apostolic teaching – the final words of Jesus from heaven.

The use of special literary forms

Carefully note the use of figures of speech.

For instance, do not take metaphors literally. Carefully observe the limitations of figures of speech. Note: personification, simile, irony, a part put for the whole or the whole for a part etc. The name 'Christ' frequently means Christian doctrine.

Observe the special rules that apply to poetry and psalms.

Observe the special rules that apply to prophetic writings.

Observe the special rules that apply to apocalyptic literature.

Interpret typology, numbers and symbols with caution and with reference to the rest of Scripture.

Do not let your imagination run away with you. The types are all interpreted elsewhere in Scripture, most often in the NT. In narratives, numbers are sometimes rounded up; while in typology and symbolism numbers are very definite.

Interpret parables in a simple way.

Most parables make a single point by means of an illustration or story.

Interpret allegories within the limits of the text.

Do not go further than the explanation given in scripture.

The use of words

Note the properties of words.

Some words can have a different meaning in different passages, or even within the same verse (Lev 6:8; Matt 8:22; Rm 4:25). Some words can have several quite different meanings.

Understand the meaning of the word(s) in the original language.

Get sound help from recognised lexicons to do this. Discover the origin of the word. Do not read a modern understanding of a word into the original meaning.

Understand the grammar.

The use of grammatical understanding is fundamental and often enables us to make sense of difficult passages. Grammar is the structure of a language, based upon morphology (forms of words) and syntax (arrangement of words and phrases). For example:-

- Tenses of verbs, or the use of prepositions, can be extremely important.
- Sometimes the definite article is omitted from the translation (e.g. Matt 1:23. the virgin). At other times it is wrongly inserted (Matt 1:20; Lk 2:9).
- Repetition often means superlative degree.
- Be careful to note parentheses (e.g. Gen 13:10; Isa 52:14; Rm 1:2-6).
- A relative pronoun often refers to a remote antecedent.
- When two nouns are coupled with a conjunction, the second = an adjective. E.g. Lk 21:15, mouth & wisdom = wise words; 2 Pt 1:3, life & godliness = godly living; Jer 29:10, future & a hope = a hopeful future.

Seek to find any special emphasis in the sentence.

There is often an emphasis upon certain words in the Greek text.

Where is the word or doctrine first mentioned?

The setting of the first mention of a word often gives important information about the Biblical use of that word.

Where is the word or doctrine fully mentioned?

All words and doctrines have a full mention to explain the Biblical import at some point. Find it.

Note the use of idioms.

There are very many, especially in Hebrew. Some include:

- The words of a messenger often glide into that of the sender.
- Opposite statements must be carefully compared.
- A definite number is sometimes given for an indefinite one.
- Threats are sometimes conditional.
- The order of events is sometimes ignored.
- A difficulty is often spoken of as an impossibility.
- Something is said to be done when it is only promised.
- Plural nouns are often used for the singular.
- 'Cannot' sometimes means 'will not'; 'some' and 'many' sometimes mean 'all'.

- ‘Father’ and ‘mother’ sometimes mean ‘ancestor’, while ‘son’ and ‘daughter’ sometimes mean ‘descendant’.
- The word ‘god’ is sometimes used to refer to men, angels, prophets, judges, idols and leaders.
- There are many examples of play on words (e.g. Amos 5:5, 8:1-2) which are usually only noticed in the original language.

Understand the use of original language words.

Hebraisms (e.g. *amen, acaldama, corban, ephphatha*), Latinisms (e.g. *praetorium, legion, forum*), Syriacisms (*Rabshakeh, Tartan, Rabsaris*) and Hellenisms (Greek: e.g. *Areopagus, ekklesia, paidagogos*) are often used in the original text without translation. E.g. *Rabshakeh* means a captain, vizier or chief cup-bearer; *Tartan* is the commander-in-chief or field marshal; *Rabsaris* is a chief eunuch.

Understand the use and limits of names.

- Names often (especially in Hebrew) give an understanding of the person’s character.
- Note especially name changes (Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul).
- Some persons have different names (Abiathar = Ahimelech, Abiu = Meshallum, Ahaziah = Azariah = Jehoahaz, Cephas = Peter = Simon = Simeon).
- Some people have the same name as others; do not confuse them. (E.g. there were three Herods, several named Abimelech, Agag, James, Mary.)
- Some places have different names (Sinai = Horeb, Caesarea = Dan = Laish, Jebus = Jerusalem).
- Sometimes there are two places that have the same name (Bethlehem, Cana).

The use of background information

What is the cultural background?

What cultural forms are used? What is the cultural setting that may affect interpretation? E.g. Jewish betrothal is not like an English engagement at all, but as much a commitment as an English marriage.

What is the historical background?

Before starting an examination of any passage, seek to understand the setting in which it was written. E.g. the historical setting of Revelation is persecution by the Roman Empire, but that of the Gospels is toleration by it.

What is the theological background?

For instance, the theological background and the purpose of the writer make a great difference in understanding difficult texts in the letter to the Hebrews.

What would the original hearers have understood by the verse?

Their view is not conditioned by the same things as yours.

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