

LESSON 1

The Value of Bible Study

“Can’t I just pick it up and read it?” Perhaps you asked yourself this question in consideration of attending a class on ‘How to Read the Bible.’ After all, reading is a basic activity of our modern education system and wider culture, and most people with any level of education have the ability to read on varying levels. But reading is not the same as reading *well*, which requires that we acknowledge the more complex elements of what we read, and work to process them. Our intentions for this class are to help create better readers of the Bible – not just people who read it more (though that is important), but people who study it with more skill and insight.

THE NEED FOR BIBLE STUDENTS

Every independent study of self-professed Christians in the last two decades or more shows that ‘biblical literacy’ is in decline. In short, Christians themselves don’t know their own Scriptures. For instance, according to the Barna Research Group:

- More than 40% can’t identify more than two of Jesus’ disciples.
- Less than 50% of Christian adults can name the four gospels
- More than 60% of Americans can’t name 5 of the 10 Commandments

“No wonder people break the Ten Commandments all the time,” says George Barna, president of the firm. “They don’t know what they are.” That statement is both funny and sad. But more distressing is Barna’s conclusion that “the Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy.” And worse yet, is that in reality, being able to name facts from the Bible isn’t actually an indication of true knowledge of the Bible. That’s because knowing the Bible is so much more.

In fact, knowing the Bible is more like being fluent in a language. Even if I know all of the vocabulary of a language, that doesn’t mean I know or understand the language. That’s because a language isn’t just a collection of words, its words *plus* a system of how to use them – what we call grammar. When a person understands the vocabulary and the grammar of a language, they can not only read or hear the language, they can actually speak it fluently, using all of its unique rhetorical functions to good effect. Speakers will find that being able to communicate is an art, not a science. Being a good Bible student is much the same. Once you immerse yourself in the practice of reading Scripture, you will not just know facts about the Bible, but will be able to understand the Word of the Living God.

So where does this growing trend of Christian Biblical illiteracy come from? While some of it is the influence of the modern anti-religious culture, unfortunately many churches today don’t engage with scripture in ways that promote healthy reading and study habits. David Nienhuis, in his book [A Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament](#), says that many students in his college New Testament classes struggle with biblical material “because they

have been trained to be Bible quoters, not Bible readers.” By this he means that many pastors and churches implicitly train congregants to know individual verses of Scripture only as a defense to a doctrinal claim, or for emotional support when life gets hard. But believing in the Bible for only those purposes doesn’t achieve the kind of engagement with the whole text of Scripture that is needed to really shape the life and faith of Christians. We need not just people who profess belief in the Bible, but who know how to read it, too.

And knowing the Bible is part of the task of God’s church (in both a universal and local sense). In the modern world where the Bible is in decline, it’s survival depends not on a select few men who preach sermons and defend doctrines, but on the ability of every day Christians to devote themselves to an *informed* understanding of the texts that they hold sacred, and then bring that to bear in the variety of church activities and ministries for the good of the whole church. This is a crucial point, and one to return to in a bit. But to appreciate this requires a bit of history lesson.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIBLE ACCESS

A key point that helps put the benefit of Bible reading into perspective is the recognition of just how unique our modern access to the Bible is in the scope of history. Consider these summary points:

- The majority of people living in the 1st century were illiterate and could not read.
- For the ancient Israelites and the earliest of Christians, there was no such thing as a ‘personal’ copy of the complete Old Testament. Scrolls or books of Scripture were only owned by the very wealthy, and even then, were almost certainly never complete sets.
- Multiple times in the first few centuries of Christianity, owning copies of the Scriptures was illegal under Roman law and punishable by death.
- After the New Testament was formally recognized in the 300s AD, the Roman Catholic church actually discouraged reading of the Scriptures, citing the need for the clergy to properly interpret the text.
- For over 1,000 years, from the 400s to the mid-1500s, virtually the only Scriptures that a person encountered were during the Catholic mass, and read in Latin, which most people did not speak.
- Eventually in the 1400s-1500s, possessing and reading the Bible other than the Latin version approved by the Catholic church, was condemned, and men attempting to translate the Bible into more common languages were deemed heretics, and punished by death.

It was not until the mid-1500s, when church reformers like Martin Luther came along, that the notion of the common Christian having access to the Bible in his/her own language became acceptable. With advancements in theological conviction as well as technology, individuals were able to read and interpret the Bible on their own. In our time, the Bible has become the most popular and most read book in the world, but within the context of Christian history, the convenience of personal reading of the Bible is a unique blessing. We should appreciate and honor that blessing in our reading of the Bible.

But is there a risk to personal access to the Bible? Looking back, the reason why the Catholic church was so restrictive of the Bible to the common person was out of a devotion to 'orthodoxy,' the need to ensure that church doctrine was uniform and believed by all those who would be saved through the teaching of the church. Allowing anyone and everyone to read the Bible would mean differing interpretations, and would thus destroy the unity (or 'catholicity') of the universal church. As it turns out, those fears were not unfounded. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation with its insistence in making Scripture available to all, professing Christians have divided into innumerable factions and denominations based on those differing interpretations. And now today, every person across the globe has access to the Bible in multiple translations and formats in print or digitally. The latest research suggests that the average American household – not just Christians, but all Americans – owns 3 copies of the Bible! Access has never been broader or easier, and so everyone is their own interpreter of Scripture. Now, anyone with their own YouTube channel can be an expert on the Bible, and this has led to a state of affairs in which the collective truth of the faith is watered down by Bible teaching which is misinformed, or downright false.

READING AS A WORK OF THE CHURCH

Are we left to choose between these two options? Must we decide between giving the text to a select few to maintain unity and orthodoxy on the one hand, and allowing free reign and expression to every individual on the other? I think not... The Bible is a public document which decrees public truth – truth that speaks to who God really is and how the world really works. God could have conveyed his word to only a limited few, meaning that truth is only accessible to the 'chosen ones.' He also could have conveyed his word to everyone on an individual level, through some direct infusion of knowledge. But Christianity is neither a cult, nor is it a mystical experience. Rather, it is an announcement. It is God's declaration, in human language, that He has called sinners to repentance and to be his people. And these people gain their identity when they devote themselves to the difficult and confusing, but ultimately inspiring task of reading the Book (Acts 17:11).

This is where reading *as a church* becomes so significant. In the context of a local (autonomous!) congregation where all members are Bible readers, no single person can claim authority for themselves. And conversely, the collective reading of the community where all are responsible readers means that every interpretation is held in check by the interpretations of others, so that the church comes to a collective consciousness about the meaning of Scripture, and is able to identify and reject readings which run contrary to the sound teaching of the Gospel. It is as if we are all individual threads making up a single strong cord. All of this is guided by church leaders of course, most especially Elders, but the reading of Scripture – through bible studies, sermons, and even hymns (which are reflections on Scripture) – becomes an activity in which the whole church participates.

If this is a proper way to think about the task of reading Scripture, it not only gives support to God's design for the local church, but it makes for the type of unity and humility which signals to others that following the Bible is a new and different way of overcoming the divisions of our world.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some of the blessings we have for Bible study given where we are in history?
2. What is it about the Bible that makes it hard to read sometimes? Conversely, what is it about discovering something in Bible study that is so encouraging?
3. What do you feel are some weaknesses in your Bible reading/study? Are there weaknesses beyond just how much time you spend doing it? For instance, do you find particular books of the Bible challenging? Do you wish you understood connections across the Bible more?

LESSON 2

The Writing(s) of the Bible

In the previous lesson, we talked about the value of reading the Bible, both individually and for the good of the church. With that established, we move forward in this lesson toward understanding how one might go about the practice of Bible reading. The suggestions we offer in the next two lessons are of first importance, and are foundational for later discussions of techniques for Bible study. Ultimately, all interpretations follow in some way from the issues and choices we discuss in these lessons. In this lesson, we take a broad look at the content and purpose of the biblical writings.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible itself claims to be the divinely inspired Word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Pet 1:16-21). But for anyone who has read Scripture for long enough, it is obvious that the Bible shows signs of obvious human activity to produce the Bible as we now have it. The crucial point to be made about this is that, to the contrary of some skeptics who would play these off against each other, these two claims are complimentary. *God expresses his divine word in human language, and God reveals this word through earthly activity.* As a result, we must not only respect the content of the message, but the form and means by which it comes to us. We can still have a 'high view' of Scripture by looking at from the bottom up.

We cannot take the time to go through a full description of the origins of the Bible. One thing we can definitively say is that even though God's Word was often conveyed by a direct, miraculous encounter, the transmission of that word into the written form of the Bible was a much more organic process. The Bible was not delivered to Earth by a band of heavenly angels, bound in leather and with 'Holy Bible' stamped on the front. Instead, our Bibles are the result of human activity to write, compile, edit, shape, preserve, translate and publish the text of Scripture. Rather than being a source for a crisis of faith, Christians can be assured that all of this activity is guided along by the Holy Spirit to ensure that God's Word can find its way in the hand, and ultimately the hearts, of his people.

One of the ways we could betray a normal understanding of the Bible is when we refer to it as 'The Bible.' Of course, the Bible is a single, continuous entity, but it becomes that through the way the various independent texts of Scripture are inter-related and organized. We should remember that in a key sense the Bible is not one text, but sixty-six. In fact, the best metaphor for the Bible is that of a library. The books of the Bible are sixty-six independent, self-contained books with their own ideas and intentions that have been collected and placed on the same shelf, based on their independent authority and divine origins. Our

Bibles are the assembly of these various 'Scriptural books' into the same binding, based on their independent authority as the Word of God.

THE LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE

So what are these texts? Well, for starters, these texts are old – ancient, in fact. And, they are written in ancient dialects of Hebrew and Greek, neither of which are spoken today. The (mostly Jewish) cultures and issues to which the texts were written have long since passed and have been replaced by modern concerns. All of these are unavoidable challenges of the Bible, and ones we will address later in the class – but nevertheless, *these are the types of texts that God has given us as His written word*. Christians would maintain that even though these texts were not written to us, they were written *for us*, that is for our benefit as God's people (1 Pet 1:10-12, Rom 15:4, 1 Cor 10:11).

How can we make the most of these ancient Jewish writings? First, we should note three broad types of literature which make up the Bible. In a future lesson, we will discuss different genres of biblical literature, but all of those can be categorized into one of the following:

- Narrative – almost half of all the Bible is 'story-telling.' Narrative writing is used for recording historical events, retelling of meaningful experiences, and sometimes even using creative story-telling to teach lessons (e.g. Parables). All types of narratives allow readers to reflect on their own lives through the events and characters told in story.
- Poetry – about one-third of biblical writing is poetry. Poetry intentionally uses imagery and metaphor to affect the emotions and imagination of the reader. Far from a more sequential style of writing like narrative, or logical writing like discourse, poetry communicates by trying to expand the mind of the reader to understand things in deeper and more meaningful ways
- Discourse – a final quarter of the Bible can be labeled as 'discourse.' This typically consists of speeches, letters or legal codes. Discourse literature typically tries to persuade or prove a set of ideas which the author/speaker believes to be important for the hearer, and calls the reader to respond affirmatively.

Readers should keep in mind that even though these are more or less easy to identify, any given book of the Bible may contain any or all of these types of writing.

Second, we should be aware of a broad purpose which all of these texts share. No matter what type of literature we find ourselves reading in the Bible, there is an implicit (and occasionally explicit) purpose for God's people to return to these words as a source of truth and insight. The Bible calls us not just to read it once and move on, but to meditate on it to learn about God, the world, and ourselves. Psalm 1 says of the 'Blessed man' that "...his delight is in the Law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." And the introduction to Paul's famous statement about the inspiration of Scripture to make God's man complete in 2 Timothy is to remind him how "from childhood you have been

acquainted with the sacred writings,” with an implication that Timothy had read them all his life. A meditative reading of Scripture also requires us to read texts slowly and with focus, perhaps in combination with prayer. Sometimes this is just to understand the message of the author, but other times to allow the Bible to ‘read’ our own lives by expressing our own joys or failures through the characters or audience of the text (Heb 4:12-13)

A COMMON BODY OF TRUTH

A third important consideration for the understanding the literature of the Bible is to return to the issue of how the Bible is organized. This is known as the ‘Canon’ (or ‘measure’) of Scripture. Again, we have to shortcut any discussion of this broad topic, but the result of God’s preservation of his written Word is the collection of those texts which bear the marks of His authority. In the ‘inter-testamental’ period, the scribes of Israel put the finishing touches on the long process to unite the books of the Law, Prophets, and other Writings to form the ‘TaNaK’ which is the basis for our modern Old Testament. These scriptures record the history of God’s covenant relationship with the Israelites, leading to their eventual exile due to their sin against God. Then, in the early centuries of the spread of Christianity, the writings of the eye-witnesses and Apostles of Jesus were collected together into the New Testament. These scriptures witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Israel, and his ultimate purpose to redeem the whole world.

Placing these texts together into one volume implies that these texts can be read in conjunction with one another to express a common body of truth about God and a common account of His action in the world. The biblical writers show a keen awareness of this as they frequently quote and allude to other texts of scripture to weave various ideas and themes across the biblical canon. As just two obvious examples, remember that the Psalms and Prophets call Israel to devotion to Israel’s Law, or how the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament in support of their various claims about Jesus and the church. From this we can conclude that what the biblical literature provides us is a common story and a unified worldview, and each of the biblical authors is intentionally making their own contribution to the whole.

And so, to use the same metaphor for a different purpose – the Bible is also like a cord made up of many different threads. Though they have their own independent message, those messages converge into the single story of God and his salvation of the world through Jesus Christ. This story is the bond that holds all the threads together.

It is crucial that we understand the Bible in a way which respects the inter-related content, form and context of the Scriptures. The Bible has often been viewed as just a moral handbook, or a reference work to look up the answers to religious questions. The Bible

does offer moral guidance and answers to our religious questions, but not in the same way that an encyclopedia can tell you about historical dates, or that a rulebook can tell you what the rules of a game are. Rather, those answers come from a proper understanding of what the texts of Scripture are, and how they function according to the purposes of the authors. The aim of this class is to help us be more attentive to these issues as we practice our Bible reading.

QUESTIONS:

1. If someone you don't know came up to you and asked 'What is the Bible?' how would you answer them?
2. Turn to a book of the Bible which you have never read before (or haven't read in a long time). Skim the book and identify the type of literature it is. Are there multiple types?
3. How does this statement from Scripture apply to the Bible?
"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Is 40:8)
Does the fact that the Scriptures were written in a particular time, place, culture and audience impact this? Why or why not?

LESSON 3

Approaches & Assumptions

Having discussed in the last lesson what the Bible consists of, the kind of literature it contains and the implications of its composition, this lesson takes the next step into determining some basic principles for how to read. We will discuss different ways that the Bible can be read for different goals, and the important implications of reading the Bible in different ways.

READING AS AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY

Even though this class is centered on Scripture, reading is actually something we do all of the time with all kinds of things. When someone or something communicates to us in any written (verbal) form, we automatically and subconsciously start making decisions about what is being said, and what is meant. Because the Bible communicates in human language, it is really no different than any other writing, whether that be one of Shakespeare's plays or an article in the newspaper, and so is subject to the same kinds of review and analysis of any other kind of writing. This allows us to briefly summarize some important things about reading that especially apply to our reading of Scripture:

- Reading is an active (not passive) skill that can be improved.
- The purpose of reading expands the deeper we read. Some reading is purely for information, but deeper reading is for understanding the mind of the author.
- Experienced readings allow the reader to learn by self-discovery rather than by instruction. This advances the reader to the point of drawing their own interpretive conclusions on the subject matter.

This in turn allows us to talk about an important principle of reading that we should follow in our readings of Scripture. The technical term for reading a text of Scripture up to the point of interpretation is *exegesis*. The word comes from the Greek verb '*exogeomai*' (literally, 'to lead out'), meaning 'to expound, or to relate in detail.' Exegesis describes the process whereby a reader critically assesses a text. The important point of this is that the interpretation is drawn out from the content of the text itself. It is an exercise in discovery of what the text itself says.

The opposite of exegesis is *eisegesis* (literally, 'to lead in'). This is a process of interpretation in which the presuppositions of the reader are brought to bear on the text, often with the

result that conclusions are skewed to only confirm those presuppositions. In this case, the interpretation is an exercise of imposing a human idea onto the text.

Because all human beings have particular points of view, and inevitable presuppositions, it is impossible to eliminate all of those from our practice of 'exegeting', or interpreting, Scripture. Nevertheless, an honest critical assessment demands that we be attentive to our potential blind spots in an attempt to find out what the text actually says, not what we want it to say. Our first purpose in Bible reading should be simply to listen to God's Word.

APPROACHES TO READING THE BIBLE

This class proposes 3 main approaches to studying the Bible. Each of these corresponds to a different goal on the part of the reader.

- 1) Literary – Note, the word here is not 'literally,' but '*literary*,' an adjective meaning 'pertaining to literature.' This way of approaching the Bible is meant to get you reading the texts of Scripture on their own terms. In its most basic form, this simply means that you read a book of the Bible as an independent unit, studying it for its own structures, themes and meaning. Importantly, this involves an attempt to understand the original intent of the author of the book. This approach can then be expanded out to read the entire Bible in a variety of systematic ways (e.g. reading through the entire Bible, reading the Minor Prophets, reading Paul's Prison Epistles, etc.)
- 2) Topical – This approach tries to use the Bible to provide information about a certain topic. This typically includes going through the entire Bible to gather information so that it can be synthesized to form a conclusion. This might take the form of a word study, or to answer a religious question. As hinted at above, there are potential pre-suppositions in this approach which could have pitfalls if the literary work is not done to understand each relevant verse or section that comes up over the course of the study. Nevertheless, this approach is useful and necessary for understanding the will of God.
- 3) Devotional – Application is the ultimate goal of any Bible study. Reading devotionally is done with a mind toward application. It doesn't pass over the informational aspect of a text that is prevalent in the literary and topical approaches, but it is a personal reflection upon the text with the goal of improving the reader's disposition toward God. Again, there are pitfalls with this approach if done without doing literary work on the text before-hand. Devotional readings can be done within one text of scripture, or across multiple texts based on what is being applied.

In the lessons going forward, we will consider the literary approach as a 'first-level' reading, because it allows the best opportunity for the reader to understand the text strictly in the mind of the author. Thus, most of our classes will take this literary approach to the Scriptures, focusing on reading a single book or passage for meaning. The exercises we do should help to develop a better understanding for the ways that this approach benefits anyone who reads and studies God's Word. With the principles and skills learned in those lessons, we can then take those forward to discuss topical and devotional readings as 'second-level' readings. This in no way implies that these are more or less important, only

that these require some input by us as readers to be able to gain from this type of reading. These 'second-level' readings can and do greatly benefit the reader.

ASSUMPTIONS FOR BIBLE READING

The points made above in this lesson and in the previous lesson lead us to a set of assumptions about the Bible to be made in this class. None of these are *necessary* assumptions to properly exegete what the Bible says in all cases, but all of them are critical for reading faithfully to the text as the inspired Word of God.

- 1) The Bible is able to be understood. Note, this is not the same as saying that the Bible is simple, or easy to understand for anyone or everyone who attempts to read it. Still, human language is a foundational element of almost all human culture, and to the extent that the Bible is written in human language, we can ascertain the meaning of the text.
- 2) The text of Scripture should first be understood according to the meaning intended by the author. This does not mean that the meaning of a portion of scripture cannot be applied to other contexts, but it does mean that such applications should be connected to original authorial intent. (The use of the Old Testament in the New complicates this somewhat, but we will address that in a future class.)
- 3) The unity of the Canon of Scripture is constituted in its overarching worldview and coherent narrative which tells the story of God's redemption of the world through the history of Israel, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.
- 4) Each book within Scripture represents a single contribution to this overarching worldview and narrative, and can be treated as having its own integrity in its teaching and purpose.
- 5) The primary figure made known in Scripture is God Himself. God is not a projection or construct of human social psychology by which we only gain introspective knowledge of ourselves. Whatever reflections we gain about ourselves through the reading of Scripture are only truthful in the light of who God is through his self-revelation.
- 6) The text of the Bible as possessed in its translation into English is sufficient in its representation of the original text of the Bible authors. There are situations in which this may not, or should not, be assumed, but since we are not working with original languages in this class, we will assume the sufficiency of the English text.
- 7) The Bible is written by men inspired to accurately reveal the mind of God. As such the Scriptures are true to the historical and spiritual realities they describe, and are authoritative for all Christian belief and practice.

QUESTIONS:

1. When you study the Bible, how do you usually go about it? Why do you do it that way?
2. What do you see as pros and cons of each approach to bible study outlined above?
3. Why is it important that the Bible be written in a form that all people can understand?