

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?

LESSON 4

Getting Started With a Bible

To read the Bible, what you need is...a Bible. But even that is not so straightforward. In our modern world, the Bible is not only the Word of God, and a collection of ancient writings as we have already seen – it is also a published document. This means that human beings and publishing houses are responsible for transmitting God’s Word to us in the final form that we have it. And obviously, not all Bibles are the same – the texts of Scripture come in different versions, and published Bibles come with different features for the benefit of the reader. In this lesson we look at what our Bibles contain and the beginning steps for starting to read it.

CHOOSING A BIBLE

What Bible should you read? That’s a relevant question and one that people coming to Christianity for the first time often ask. The truth is that most versions of the Bible are helpful in their unique ways. Of course, the best option, is to own or access multiple versions so you can compare/contrast them. Here are some things to consider about your Bible:

- **Translations** – The various texts of Scripture were not written in English, but in Hebrew and Greek. The ancient manuscript copies of the biblical writings have been collected and translated into English. No translation can perfectly encapsulate the meaning of the text in its original language, but scholars can use a couple of methods to accurately convey the text to us. A ‘word for word’ rendering, like that used in the New King James, New American Standard and English Standard Version among others, are formal attempts to translate the text literally so that the English text is a verbal parallel to the Hebrew/Greek. Another method is ‘thought for thought’ translation, like the Living Bible or New Living Translation, which attempt to paraphrase the meaning of the Hebrew/Greek in order to accommodate easier modern language. Both of these are helpful methods in rendering the text, but accomplish different purposes, and so understanding how a Bible translation works is worth knowing once you start reading.
- **Introductory & Concluding Materials** – Almost all Bibles contain some amount of introductory material. This may include articles on who the translators were, a discussion of the manuscripts from which the original text of Scripture was derived, how to use the reference apparatus, or other contextual notes, etc. You should read this material to give you some context into the translation process. In addition, most Bibles have some kind of concordance or index in the back, and some maps to provide the reader with a few study tools.
- **Marginal Notes** – Most Bibles contain a section on each page of the text that is separated off to contain footnotes, parallel references, etc. Often times, these occur in the margins of the page. Being able to use this to identify parallel passages, passages with similar words or ideas, and references to scriptural citations can be very useful in study of the Bible. Additionally, the margins can give notes about textual variations and alternate translations.

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- Section Headings / Paragraph Breaks – The Bible was not written with chapter and verse breaks. Nevertheless, all Bibles follow traditional pattern of dividing the text into chapter and verse breaks. For example, no matter what Bible you look at, Genesis has 50 chapters and Matthew has 28. However, some Bibles go beyond these and shape the text with paragraph breaks and section headings. While these can be very useful, you should keep in mind that these divisions are at the discretion of the translators and publishers, and could also be misleading.
- ‘Red-Letter’ Editions – These versions of the Bible print the words of Jesus during his earthly ministry in distinctive red ink. This is done as a way of emphasizing the importance of Jesus’ words and teachings. A person must consider the potential benefit of having these emphasized against the potential for seeing these words as more important or more authoritative than the rest of Scripture, which is not the case.
- Study Bibles – Study Bibles have more features than ordinary Bibles, including introductions to each book of the Bible, book/chapter outlines, specialized contextual notes, and often a small-scale commentary alongside the biblical text. The advantage of study Bibles is that they put a wealth of information at your fingertips without reference to separate reference materials. The drawback is that these materials are not inspired, and their proximity to the Scriptural text makes it easy to conflate them together so that you always read the Bible in light of the study materials. These can help or hinder independent personal study.

TAKING NOTES

Next to your Bible, the most important study tool for Bible study is a notebook. A notebook can be used to record all of your observations from your studies. Writing down your thoughts helps to sharpen your mind, and focus your efforts, giving it more purpose and direction. It can also be a place to record your conclusions and devotional reflections. There are no rules on what notes to take, but some of the exercises to be done in future lessons will provide suggestions in this regard.

One decision you might have to make is whether to write in your Bible or not. In fact, some Bibles are made for that very purpose, giving enough room in the margins to allow all of your observational note-taking to occur there. There are many people who find this the most efficient way to record their thoughts and conclusions about the Bible. On the other hand, many prefer to keep the text clean to allow them to look at a text with fresh eyes upon each reading, or in case their change their mind about a previous conclusion made.

THE RIGHT SETTING

When preparing to read, it is really important to find a setting that is conducive to the task at hand. Because we are so prone to distraction in today’s world, there needs to be a time and place that we can set to avoid interruption. This is one benefit of reading Scripture as worship, wherein we can be attentive to the words as they are read aloud to the church.

For personal Bible reading, there are no rules to when and where this could be. It is a matter of personal preference. For some it might be a coffee shop, for others a favorite

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chair at home. However, some consideration might be made to disengage from personal technology to avoid distraction. Also, a setting where others are not around is often the best choice. And while this setting might change from time to time, establishing a fixed time and place will help develop a routine which will make for a more disciplined practice of study. Think of this as a metaphorical 'sanctified' space where you can focus in on the reading of God's Word. Many of these suggestions work well for prayer too, and we should not forget that prayer and reading are Christians disciplines that go hand in hand.

CLASS ACTIVITY (A)

- A. Read Mark 1:1-8 in a 'word for word' translation (e.g. NKJV, NASB, ESV, NRSV), and contrast that reading to a paraphrased 'thought for thought' version of that same passage (e.g. The Living Bible or Phillips' *NT in Modern English* – both can be found through www.biblegateway.com).
1. Share with the class your impression of the paraphrased version. How is it different? Is it easier to read? What value do you see in it?
 2. Look for any textual footnotes in your own Bible for Mark 1:1-8. Share with the class at least one piece of information gained from those notes.
 3. Look up any cross-references cited in your Bible's marginal notes. Share with the class whatever you found interesting or helpful.
- B. Read through your own Bible's introductory material. Share with the class two pieces of information you learned from reading over this material.

LESSON 5 & 6

Reading as Observation: Level 1 - Flyover

With a good Bible in hand, we can begin our reading. As indicated in Lessons 2&3, our beginning approach is to understand the Bible at the level of the individual books that make up the entire Bible. In doing so, our first task is not to jump to conclusions about the meaning or an interpretation, but simply to observe what is going on in the text. The next three lessons will explore different 'levels' of observation that are important in determining what the text actually says. After all, it is necessary to be certain about what the text *says* before we can say what it *means*.

A FLYOVER VIEW

"Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your Law." (Psalm 119:18). As a skill, observation is about training your eyes and mind to see things you don't normally notice. One of the things that is true for many people when it comes to reading the bible (especially those that are raised going to church and Bible classes every Sunday!) is that they, according to the old saying, 'lose the forest for the trees.' That means that we often get blinded into thinking a verse is saying one thing, when it may be saying something more. Or we get wrapped up in understanding the application of one single verse, or even a single word, so that we lose sight of the meaning of the whole. These are our biases creeping into our reading.

To avoid that kind of error, we propose here that the best first step in bible study is to take a flyover, or bird's eye view, of the text. Before we examine individual verses or even chapters of a book we should read the book in its entirety first. Shorter books can be done in one sitting. Longer books like Isaiah or Luke may take multiple days to read through.

This kind of reading is the way many of the books of Scripture were intended to be read. For instance, when Paul wrote the Philippian letter, he surely expected the church to have the letter read all the way through in the assembly. Could you imagine it being read like we sometimes do in our bible classes, one sentence at a time and then after each one someone asking, "Now what do you think Paul meant by that?" That kind of method would be frustrating and absurd. When we first approach a text, we should first consider it as a whole unit.

UNDERSTANDING THE GENRE OF SCRIPTURE

A word we have already used in this class is 'context.' Becoming better readers necessitates that we understand the context in which the text is written. All texts have a context. A

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context is a network of connected factors and circumstances that provide the background through which we understand the text itself. These factors and circumstances are many and various. Some of them may require a higher level of knowledge and expertise, and may require outside study tools to provide relevant information. But to start in our flyover view of the text, we will focus on the *literary* context. By this, we primarily mean the *genre* of the text we read. *All meaning is genre-dependent*, because genre answers the most fundamental question in the practice of reading and study: 'What am I reading?' Without a firm grasp on the answer to that question, the reader is open to misinterpretation of the entire text.

As we have seen, the Bible contains primarily three types of writing: Narrative, Poetry & Discourse. In some respect, those are broad categories of genre. But in this discussion, we will look at these and a few related genres which are specific to the biblical writings. The variety of the biblical writings is manifested in the number of literary genres it contains. A few of the larger genre categories in the Bible include:

- Narrative – ex. Genesis, 1-2 Kings, Jonah, Acts; this is the literary genre that we are probably most familiar with. This is 'story-telling,' which includes features like narration, character, setting, conflict and resolution (or 'plot'). As with most stories, the point of these narratives is not just to record events, but to teach a lesson through the re-telling of the events. Biblical authors convey meaning in narratives by presenting their version of the stories with the details that are significant (both historically and symbolically) to the divine message that the author wants to convey through the story. As individual events are re-told alongside other events, a biblical author forms a large-scale story to show readers something about God, the world, humanity, or their relationships to each other.
- Gospels – ex. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; the gospels are a particular type of narrative within Scripture. In one respect, these have all the hallmarks of narratives; but these go a bit deeper by focusing around the life and death of a single individual, in each case Jesus of Nazareth. These are thus what we might call biographies. They aren't the same as modern biographies which might attempt a full reconstruction of an individual's life, but they do describe Jesus' work and persona in terms of why he is important. And while the Gospel writers accomplish this in different ways, with different stories about Jesus, they all conclude that he is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and known to be God in the flesh through his death and resurrection. But even more critical, they are presenting Jesus' life as a means of persuading the reader to believe in Jesus' accomplishment and join his cause for the salvation of the world – in other words, the Gospels tell 'The Gospel.'
- Parable – ex. 2 Samuel 12, Isaiah 5, Jesus teachings in the Gospels; Many places in the Bible use parables, but the most prominent are those of Jesus who seems to have used them frequently in his regular teaching. Parables are stories meant to conceal the truth in the guise of a simple, earthy tale. And while some of Jesus parables are given explanations by the Gospel writers, for the original hearers parables function like riddles, meant to provoke the imagination to understand what such a strange story might mean for the coming of God's Kingdom. Even where those explanations are given, they are often surprising or further confounding. Ultimately, discerning the parables comes down to making a decision to follow Jesus, or denying him and thus choosing not to understand their meaning and power.

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- Poetry – ex. ‘Song of Moses,’ Psalms, Job, Hosea, Joel; this genre is most prevalent in Scripture in the specific form of Hebrew poetry. Like our modern notions of poetry, Hebrew poetry also includes features like parallelism, wordplay, and poetic imagery. But they don’t contain rhyme or meter like most of our more famous poems. At a technical level, Hebrew poetry mostly functions as couplets, wherein a line is constructed to make a statement, only to be completed, deepened, or countered by the next line. This allows authors of poetry to say things in ways which force a reader to grapple with the connections between ideas, and to think through the deep truths being described, thus expanding their knowledge of God. Poetry is employed by Old Testament writers for many reasons, including as an interlude within narratives, as the ‘lyrics’ of Jewish song, and for recording the speech of God. In fact, when counting the frequent use of poetry among the prophets, the majority of God’s speech in the Bible is in poetic form. While there are no extended examples of poetry in the New Testament, there are some short examples where the language suggests that poetry or song is being cited – for example, Philippians 2:5-11 or 1 Timothy 3:16.
- Wisdom Literature – ex. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes; Wisdom Literature consists of practical, spiritually motivated, advice which is meant to convict a person toward knowing God. But rather than accomplishing this through extended discourse to try to persuade a person through argumentation, the biblical writers expressed God’s truths in this regard as poetry. Wisdom Literature is actually a subset of biblical poetry, since all of it is written in poetic form. Much biblical wisdom of this type is practical, outlining the principles for a good life in God’s sight. Other wisdom tries to tackle the big philosophical questions such as the meaning of life or the cause of suffering.
- Prophecy – ex. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Malachi; Often misunderstood, prophecy is not simply ‘making predictions’ like a fortune teller, but ‘forth-telling’ of the future based upon divinely-inspired insight into religious and/or political current events in the prophets own time. Prophets often have unique encounters with God to commission them to speak His word to Israel. These ‘prophecies’ – typically expressed as spoken poetic oracles, but sometimes as symbolic actions – accused Israelite nation(s) of breaking their covenant with God, and called the people to repentance or face God’s coming judgment. For this reason, prophets were mostly marginalized in their own time, but their words became respected once these forecasts of God’s wrath actually came true when Israel went into exile. Fortunately, many of Israelites prophets also gave assurances of a future salvation beyond judgment, in an act of God to redeem and restore his people. These were the very promises to which the early followers of Jesus latched on to in explaining Jesus’ identity and accomplishments.
- Apocalyptic – ex. Daniel, Revelation; Apocalyptic is a unique genre which tends to break all of our modern categories for writing style. These writings claim to be the revelation of divine secrets, usually in the form of a vision, dream, or angelic visitation. They are categorized by grandiose esoteric symbolism of cosmic destruction – but where many people might misunderstand this as predictions of the end of the world, that isn’t really the point of the highly symbolic language of apocalyptic writing. Rather, this highly stylized speech and writing is meant to attribute spiritual significance to current events. It does this because it makes a worldview assumption that heavenly and demonic forces which we cannot see stand behind the actions that we can see in our world, and so apocalyptic often describes a religious or political activity as an act of God (or Christ) or an act of Satan. Another telling feature of formal apocalyptic writing is that it conveys the moral superiority of an oppressed people. Apocalyptic is always written from the perspective of the person

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who is suffering at the hands of some larger power. As a result, the highly evocative language is an expression of feelings of suffering, longing and hope which are meant to be shared by the reader.

- Law – ex. Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; a significant portion of the Pentateuch is written as God law's for the people of Israel. But far from just being a kind of arbitrary code of things God likes and doesn't, these laws are set in the larger context of God's covenant with Israel, constituting them as his representative people to the rest of humanity. Thus, the laws are themselves Israel's terms of the covenant to be God's chosen nation. These laws are generally of two kinds. On one hand, many of the laws included in the covenant are ancient ritual symbols to reflect the holiness of the people. At the heart of this were the rituals for the regular sacrifices to symbolize purity and atonement for the people. On the other hand, many laws speak to how Israel should enact both mercy and judgement to reflect the character of their God.
- Epistle – ex. Romans, Philemon, 1 John; Epistles, or letters, are written correspondence from one party (usually one of the Twelve Apostles, but not always) to another, characterized by formal greeting and conclusion, and personal information or request. Many of the letters are also attempts to persuade the audience of a stated idea or set of ideas, and so letters may contain logical argumentation about an aspect of Gospel teaching, or appeals to common interests in Christ. All of the letters collected as part of Scripture are – directly or indirectly – written to a local church community, and were expected to be read aloud to the congregation, presumably within their meetings for worshipping God. Many times the letter would be read and explained by the recipient who carried the letter to its destination (the Post Office did not exist in the ancient Greco-Roman world!), and sometimes this would entail a kind of rhetorical 'performance' of the letter on behalf of the author. Thus these letters often work as speeches as much as letters. Most, if not all, were written for a specific purpose – to address some pressing need or circumstance within the church which needed to be resolved. This resolution was always a calling for God's new people in Christ to maintain their characteristic unity and holiness in the face of people (either the pagan world outside, or false teachers inside) who were ignorant or contemptuous of Christians.

Of course, all of these categories, have their own nuances and what we might call 'sub-genres.' In addition, one particular book of the Bible might encompass multiple genres, so there is some overlap here. But these basic kinds of writing can help set in our mind how to approach the text we will read. As you read within each genre-type, you will become more familiar with the way that the language works so as to better understand the meaning of the text.

FLYOVER CONSIDERATIONS

When reading through a book for the first time, its always best to 'feel out' what you'll be reading. At the beginning it is often helpful to notice how many chapters a book has to understand the scope of the writing. You might read the first 1-2 paragraphs and the last 1-2 paragraphs to get a sense of where the book starts and ends. You may even peruse section headings in your Bible to get a sense of what is involved, keeping in mind those are added by the publisher.

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Once you start reading the book in full, you may need to resist the temptation to stop and re-read through something you don't immediately understand. Inevitably, this will happen from time to time, but try your best to keep moving all the way through. As you read through, consider the following high-level points. At the end of your reading you should be able answer these questions:

- *Who is the author?* Think about not just the name of the person who writes the book, but why that person is important – Is that person involved in the action, or an independent narrator? Are they an authority figure, or are they anonymous? Also, note that 'authorship' doesn't always take the form of composing a text; rather sometimes, as is the case with the Gospels, the majority of the task of putting together a text is compiling, editing, and organizing pre-existent material.
- *Who is the audience?* Who the book is written to may offer clues to the purpose of the book – Is it written to a specific individual, or a group? What do you know about their identity or circumstances? Can it be deduced from the content of the text? Or is the audience more general and abstract?
- *What are the intentions of the author?* Along with identifying the genre, this is the most revealing question you can ask of a book. Another way of asking is 'Why does the author write this book?' or more pointedly 'What is at stake for the author in writing this book?' This can be a complex question, and borders on making an interpretive judgment, but having a least a basic idea at this point in your observations is a good step.
- *What is a synopsis of the message?* This question is about being able to boil down the entire book into 2-3 summary sentences. If you can do this, this summary will serve as an anchor-point for reading all of the smaller sections and individual verses in the book.

In addition to these questions, do not be afraid to write down other questions you have. One of the best study habits you can implement is to write down your questions alongside your conclusions. These also set you up for better understanding as you work through Scripture.

CLASS ACTIVITY (B)

- A. Choose one book of the Bible that you can read all the way through before our next class. Preferably, this is a book you have not studied before (or at least in a long while). After reading through in as few sittings as possible, attempt to answer the following, and be prepared to share with the class:
- a. What is the genre of this book? How did that affect the way you read the book?
 - b. Who is the author?
 - c. Who is the audience for whom (or to whom) the book is written?
 - d. Why does the author write this book? Do the identities of the author and/or the audience have any impact on how you answer?
 - e. How would you summarize the entire book in 2 or 3 sentences?
 - f. What are some remaining questions you have about this book?