

Study Aids

With this lesson, we want to briefly discuss some of the multitude of study aids that are available to the Bible student. We must begin this part of our discussion with a stringent warning: When we talk about study aids, we are talking about helps that are composed by men, and therefore fallible. Most if not all of the study aids available (including this book) will have faults because men are fallible. Everything written by men must be examined closely to ensure that it is in fact reflective of what is taught in scripture. Even the apostle Paul went through this scrutiny:

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so (Acts 17:10–11).

We should never simply take a man's word for what the scripture says (or means) without examining it closely. There is no man who has perfect knowledge, and therefore, we must be willing to check every word against what is revealed in the will of God.

Having said that, there are a great number of study aids that can help us to understand the meaning of the word of God. We want to consider several of these aids, and see how they can benefit us.

Group Studies

Perhaps this is not something many would consider as an “aid” to Bible study, but in fact it can be a valuable aid! When we study by ourselves, there is obviously great value. However, when we study with others, we can often see much more in the scriptures. Why is this? Probably because our minds all work a little differently. Experiences in our lives can make us think differently, and therefore see something a little differently in a given passage. It is not that the passage means something different for different people, but rather that we may be able to understand something more fully because of our experiences.

Group studies provide an opportunity for us to talk through what is in a passage with other people. It is not uncommon, for many people, to see something more clearly in a passage simply because they have talked about it. The process of communicating with others can make it much easier to understand difficult passages or teachings. This process is shown throughout the scriptures with the idea of *reasoning together*. Luke, throughout the book of Acts, writes about Paul going to various places and reasoning with the people. This reasoning process made it possible for those he studied with to understand the gospel message, and know what God expected of them. The same thing is true today. Whether we are studying with those who have not yet obeyed the Lord, or with those who are already Christians, the process of reasoning together provides an opportunity for all involved to come to a more full understanding of God's word. We help one another to learn, understand, and follow His will for us.

Group studies can take place in any number of settings, both formal and informal. It is beneficial to challenge one another to learn more, and grow in knowledge and understanding.

As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend (Proverbs 27:17).

Computer Software

We live in a truly amazing time for compiling information. We have the ability to sit at a computer and pull together an amazing amount of information in a short period of time. There are now many different Bible programs available to help in the study of God's word. In fact, many of the computer programs that are now available have most of the resources that we will discuss through the rest of this lesson. These resources, which used to have to be kept in physical books, are now easily searchable on a computer. This makes the information easily accessible for most people!

Bible software has been developed to be accessible to anyone with a computer. Some has been made free by the developers, while others can be quite expensive. Usually, the resources that are being made available determine the cost of the product. For a simple electronic Bible and a few beneficial resources, one can use something like e-Sword, or Olive Tree Software. These programs, available for both a computer and for mobile devices, provide access to various Bible translations, and some free resources. Programs like Logos Bible Software provide (at a price) a nearly unlimited number of resources, that are fully searchable, and can be linked across devices.

For those who are merely looking for an electronic Bible to keep on their tablets or phones, there are multiple applications available. YouVersion, and Logos both have multiple Bible versions available electronically, and allow you to make highlights and notes in the text, and save them across devices through an account. This is particularly useful if you use multiple devices, and want to have those notes available! You can also search in the application store for your device and find that many of the publishers for individual versions have developed their own applications for their translation. Most of these are free, and provide a great way to be able to read various translations without having to purchase a physical book.

Having these resources available with such easy access is truly a blessing to us today. We have the ability to conduct study, and gain information at a much quicker rate than any Bible students living in times before us. Surely, there will be even greater advancements in this technology, to make even more information available at a faster rate.

Concordance

One of the most useful tools in Bible study is the Concordance. A concordance will list words used in scripture, and cite all the references in which that word is used. This is helpful when trying to conduct a topical study, and you want to make sure that you find all of the verses that might impact your understanding of the topic.

One must be careful when using a concordance to compile information on a given topic. One problem that sometimes arises is that a person pulls every citation of a word used in scripture, and compiles them into a list, believing that every one is pertinent to the study. The problem often is that the word, though the same, may not mean the same thing in every passage. Without further study, it would also be impossible to see that different words in the original language may be translated by the same English word. One can easily draw a faulty conclusion concerning a particular passage or topic because they have not differentiated between the context of a word used.

This is one area that computer software has become invaluable. It is now quite easy to do a search in Bible software to find every time a word is used. The search can be expanded now to search for phrases, and some software even has the ability to include boolean search phrases. This helps when you cannot remember exactly how something is phrased in the passage you are looking for, and can include various options to help pinpoint the passage. This type of search would not be possible with a printed book!

Commentaries

Commentaries are books written by various men about books of the Bible, or topics found within the Bible. Commentaries usually take a verse-by-verse approach to studying the scriptures, with the author providing his understanding of each passage. Commentaries can provide some good information about the background of the book that is being studied, as well as some insight into the passages themselves. However, it is important to realize that commentaries are written by men (as are all of these resources). Commentaries especially must be used with great caution, as they often reflect a given theology, rather than a simple interpretation of what is in the scriptures themselves. In other words, many commentaries express a doctrine not found in the scriptures, but rather developed in a denomination. Bible students must always remember that men are indeed fallible, and that means their writings must be read with caution. They must be checked against the scriptures, to ensure that what they say are true. Those things that are not true must be filtered out! Many people have been led away from truth because they are unable to filter out the error from the truth in these books. The assumption is made that someone who has written a commentary must be an expert, and therefore must be right. This is simply not the case!

Having given the warning, there is much value that can come from commentaries. Often, information that would take (and has taken) a great amount of time to research and compile is summarized in a commentary. We can learn a lot about a place that is mentioned in the Bible, or the historical significance of a particular location, by reading the materials that have been compiled into the commentary. Often, the author of a commentary has already tackled difficult words or phrases in a context, and can provide definitions and nuances of words as used to help us to understand the passage.

For the discerning mind, commentaries can be a good way of seeing how others have misused or misunderstood a passage. One can read the writings of a person from a particular denominational background and see how they have looked at a passage, which may help us to understand how to approach someone of that type of belief, and show them the truth. Again, we must be careful not to be deceived by their false doctrines! Those who are not yet grounded in the truth should not be immersing themselves in these false doctrines, as they haven't yet gained the ability to discern between that which is truth, and that which is error! There are some commentaries that have been written by conservative Christians, and they can be the most beneficial, as the authors would take the same approach to scripture that we would. Even these (and even when we may know the men who wrote them) may have some doctrines in them that are not true to the scriptures. So, one must always be careful when using these resources!

Lexicons

Lexicons are books that help us to understand the original languages in the scriptures. They provide for us the word in the original language, usually some amount of information as to its etymology, and a definition of what that word meant when it was used. There are several good Lexicons available. Two that are quite popular are *the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, and *Thayer's Lexicon*. Most of the time, these resources will only provide the factual information, but occasionally they will insert their own opinions as to the doctrines involved with the words.

These resources are invaluable to the Bible student who has not learned the original languages. Much like having an English dictionary to look up words we do not understand, a lexicon provides opportunity for us to look up the meaning of words in their original context. This can give us great insight into the author's initial meaning. If we do not understand what the original author meant when he penned a passage, we cannot know what God expects us to learn (and apply) from that

passage.

We do need to realize that looking up words in a lexicon does not make us experts in the original language. Sometimes, a lexicon cannot even capture all of the nuance of a particular word in a particular passage. We may need to get some help from someone who has learned the language when we run into some difficulty, to help us to understand some of the finer points of a passage.

We do not want to leave the impression that one must be able to understand the original language of the scriptures to be able to understand God's will for us today. The Bible has been translated into many different languages, and the translators for the most part have done a very good job! Usually, only when dealing with very difficult passages, or digging very deeply into a passage of scripture, will one feel the need to turn to the original languages for answers.

Various Translations

As just mentioned, the scriptures have been translated into many different languages. As electronic Bibles become more readily available, translations into even obscure languages has become prevalent. Here in the United States, we have a wide variety of English translations. Of course, some of these translations are better than others. The way that a translations should be judged is by its accuracy to the original languages. The translators needed to have a philosophy of translation that kept them as close as possible to the words of the original text. Variations will occur, of course, in the process because the translators much choose what words in English most closely convey the words in the original. They will also have to alter sentence construction to reflect the language of today. This accounts for differences between various translations.

There are some very good translations available today. Those that are known for being very closely translated from the original text include: The New King James Version, the King James Version, the American Standard Version (1901), the New American Standard Version, and the English Standard Version. We are not trying to provide an exhaustive list, but these are a very good place to start! One must be careful when choosing a Bible translation to ensure that it is an accurate translation, and not some corruption, like a paraphrase, which conveys a man's interpretation of the scriptures rather than a true translation. The Message Bible is an example of this. According to *the American Bible Society*, there are approximately 900 different English Bible translations, whether complete or partial.¹

Study Bibles are a slight variance from the basic idea of translation. They are a mix of the Bible text and commentary in one book. The author will place short comments about various passages usually at the bottom of the page of scripture text. While this can be helpful on some occasions, I am not aware of any Study Bibles that have been authored by conservative Christians, and therefore they all have a denominational bent. They are, unfortunately, full of false doctrine, and information. While it is nice to have much of the background information, charts and maps that are found in many Study Bibles, one must be very cautious concerning the doctrines taught. It is not uncommon to find those that have purchased a Study Bible, and cannot distinguish between the actual text and the added commentary. "But, my Bible says that it means this!" There are Study Bibles available with nearly every English translation, and written with varying levels of details in the notes. These Bibles can be useful in understanding how people have come to some of the faulty conclusions they have, as they have explanations for difficult passages. While these can be valuable tools, these Bibles should not be the first choice of a Bible student for their own personal study. One should not use the thoughts and writings of others to formulate their first impressions and understandings of what the scriptures say! Study Bibles should be used like other resources in study, not a first take!

¹ <http://news.americanbible.org/article/number-of-english-translations-of-the-bible>

Bible Encyclopedia

Bible encyclopedias, much like their secular counter parts, provide factual information about different topics. Of course a Bible encyclopedia will focus its attention on biblical information. These encyclopedias can be great resources for background information, geographical information, and historical information. These books often have pictures of the places, or things that are discussed in the passage. Being able to see pictures of biblical locations helps to visualize what is being described in a passage.

Encyclopedias can also provide information about cultural aspects of the various places found in scripture. While this may not impact the understanding of the passage, it may help us to understand why some particular passage was being penned. For example, when Paul described the city of Athens as having been “given over to idols” (Acts 17:16), an encyclopedia can show us more information concerning that idolatry. We can learn quite a bit about the background of the city of Athens, the idols that were present there, and the corruption that was caused by it. So, while none of that is necessary for understanding what happened in this chapter, being able to see those influences at that time can help us to understand Paul’s mindset.

As with all of the other resources, warning is necessary to protect against the insertion of false doctrine into the factual information. Sometimes men insert their own doctrinal views into the facts!

Bible Dictionary

There are a couple of types of Bible dictionaries. The first is much of like what we think of with an English dictionary. The words used in the English translation are given, and then a definition of how that word was used when it was translated. This type of Bible dictionary may or may not have reference to the words in the original language. A good example of this type of dictionary is *the Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. The greatest difference between this resource and the lexicons mentioned earlier is that there is far more commentary inserted into the definitions. The author did not simply provide the definition, but goes on to advise the reader on how to interpret those definitions. While there can be some benefit to this, one must be cautious not to think that this commentary is a part of defining the words under consideration!

The second type of Bible dictionary is quite similar to the Bible encyclopedia, only scaled down. There are not complete articles addressing the various topics, but rather only a brief description. *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, *The New Bible Dictionary*, and *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* are examples of this type of dictionary. They will provide English references, and then a brief definition or article about the words. These resources will include places, names, words, and ideas. The articles provide commentary on the particular topic under consideration, and as such must be evaluated for accuracy and truthfulness against scripture!

Topical Books

Solomon wrote:

And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

Certainly, nothing has changed since Solomon penned that! Books have been written on every Bible topic, and some of them can be very useful to us. In fact, we can gather the writings of many authors on one topic and compare what they have to say to gain a better understanding of that topic. Of course, there will be much in these books that do not reflect the truth of scripture, and must be rejected! Each book must be read with a discerning mind, and be filtered through the screen of

truth.

Topical books can be found on every Bible subject one would want to study. These will follow the topical or thematic method of study we looked at in the last lesson, rather than the verse-by-verse approach (such as a commentary). Topics might include such things as the family, creation, examining denominations, avoiding sinful practices, character studies, and any number of other topics. One can even find study books (such as the one you are reading now) that are designed to help one study a particular topic with others.

Conclusion

We live in a time when study resources and helps are readily available. Good books and/or computer programs are available for reasonable cost. We can compile more information than we can possibly read or digest in a very short amount of time. Most of us have access to good libraries, which have more materials than anyone could read in a lifetime! All of this is a great blessing to us, if we have the ability to discern the truth in the materials. Far too many people have been led astray because they began to accept the teachings of the writings of men, rather than abiding only by the scriptures. When men write things that are in accordance with the scriptures, they can be helpful. When they write things that are contradictory to the scriptures, they lead men away from God. The danger is that their writings still sound like they teaching truth. These resources do not openly proclaim their divergence from truth, but rather present their corruption as truth!

So, as you use these materials produced by men, remember to search the scriptures daily to ensure that the things you read therein are so!

Questions...

1. How can group studies be particularly helpful in the growth of the individual?
2. What computer software do you use to help in your Bible studies? How does the advancement in technology improve Bible study?
3. What are some of the dangers associated with the various resources that are available to aid us in Bible study?
4. What is the difference between a Bible encyclopedia and a Bible dictionary?
5. What translations do you use for your typical Bible study? Why did you choose that translation?
6. In what ways could a Study Bible be a good aid? In what way might it be a poor aid?
7. What topical books have been beneficial to your study?

