

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Lesson One

In the lessons which follow we will seek to develop an entry level methodology for approaching and teaching the Scriptures. This series of lessons will serve as an introduction to a field of study known as "Hermeneutics." Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics defines the principles and techniques one can use to most objectively interpret any written language.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Why is God's Word important (Deut. 8:3)?
- B. Why is accurate study of God's Word important (II Tim. 2:15)?
- C. What is wrong with teaching truth but from the wrong texts of Scripture?

II. HERMENEUTICS, AN ART AND A SCIENCE

The study of Hermeneutics is referred to as "***the science and art of biblical interpretation.***" It is an "**art**" because each person must determine what hermeneutical principles should be applied and how to apply them to a given passage. It is a "**science**" because the principles are fixed and defined. As you seek to apply hermeneutics (a process called exegesis) you may find studying the Scriptures to be rigid and mechanical at first, but with practice, you will discover that applying the principles becomes natural and almost subconscious. The key is to not give up but persevere in teaching yourself to study correctly. Soon it will become a habit and you will be able to feed yourself with the deep truths of God's Word instead of constantly relying on others.

III. OTHER KEY ISSUES RELATED TO BIBLE STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

- A. **Salvation:** Why is the first mandate for understanding the Bible salvation? (see **1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:5-9; Eph. 2:1-3**)
- B. **Prayer:** When we pray we speak to God who is the author of the Scriptures and the revealer of all truth. It is always beneficial to study along with God rather than by yourself. We can get so caught up in "hermeneutical principles" that we can forget about God who imparts wisdom, truth, and knowledge through the Holy Spirit. (see **Matt. 11:25-27; I Cor. 2:6-10; I John 2:27**)

- C. **Spiritual Walk:** Another important issue in Bible study is our spiritual walk. If we are living in unconfessed sin, we need to deal with that first. It is hypocrisy of the worst sort to approach God's holy Word while entrenched in sin. Sin grieves the Holy Spirit who reveals truth. To live in sin is to live in the flesh which is antithetical to the Spirit's working. We must confess our sins before approaching God and His Word. (see **Psa. 66:18; I Cor. 2:14-3:3; I John 1:9**)
- D. **Observation Time:** This is so basic it may seem unnecessary to mention. The fact remains though that the more time you spend in study the more you usually get out of the passage you study. Don't expect to fly over the pages of Scripture and glean deep truths. Don't expect to get as much out of a passage as some one that has spent 5, 10, or a 100 more hours than you searching the same text. We must look at the Word of God as close as we look at our face in the mirror. Good Bible study is not a quick process. (see **Prov. 2:1-6; I Tim. 4:13-16**)
- E. **Training:** Another important factor to consider is the amount of training you have. A person with no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek cannot glean as much from the Scriptures as one who has mastered these fields of study. A person who has never read through the Old Testament will not be able to understand the Old Testament references in the New Testament as well as an Old Testament scholar, etc. Hence, we must not get discouraged because we didn't see everything someone more educated saw. We must also continually be students of the Word and not become complacent with our training and Biblical knowledge. (see **Acts. 20:20, 27, 31; I Tim. 4:6-16; II Tim. 2:3, 5, 6, 9, 15**)

IV. APPROACHING THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

- A. **Determine the Literary Type or Genre of the Book**
1. **Genre** means kind, sort, or style. We must first determine what kind or style of book we are studying.
 2. Examples of major classifications of Biblical literature:
 - a. **Historical Narrative** - These are books which tell of historical events and are usually in chronological order. They are not normal history books but theologies that contain selective historical accounts. God chose specific events in history to relay theological truths to those in the present. Often these books, though largely historical in nature, contain other literary types as well. Historical Narrative is usually taught in larger sections. The major historical books are Genesis - Esther, the Gospels, and Acts.

- b. **Poetical Books** - (often called wisdom literature) These books are written in Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry uses word repetition and synonyms. If read in Hebrew, similar rhythms might be heard. The Psalms are poetry and songs of worship and praise yet are very theological in content. The major poetical books are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.
- c. **Prophetical Books** - These books in part or whole are mostly prophecy. They predict God's future plan and often are restatements of previously proclaimed truths. They are also theological, emphasizing God's plan. Prophetical books also contain other literary styles. The major prophetical books are Isaiah - Malachi, and Revelation.
- d. **Personal Epistles** - These are books written specifically for the church and address specific places or people. They instruct, rebuke, encourage, correct and admonish. Often they contain other literary types. They are theological. Epistles lend themselves more readily to verse by verse exposition. Books that fall under the category of "**epistles**" are Romans - Jude.¹
- e. **Conclusion:** When coming to any portion of Scripture we must first determine the literary type. Each literary type is approached using different hermeneutical principles (Bible study techniques). Therefore it is important that we first understand what kind, literary type or genre we are studying.

B. **Discover the Historical Setting or Background**

It is also important to determine the historical context of a book. We need to answer questions like, "**Where** was the book written?", "**When** was the book written?", "**Who** was the book written to?", "**What** was the political situation of Israel at the time the book was written?", "**Why** was the book written?", or "**What** were the recipients of the book going through at the time the book was written?"

Understanding the historical background and setting will help you understand the Scriptures better because it allows you to mentally put yourself into the situation of the audience being written to. Scriptures must be interpreted in the historical setting in which they were given, not our present times. Historical setting and background can be found in Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, Commentaries, Manners and Customs books and books focused on special introduction.

¹ **Note:** There are many other literary types (like parables) but those mentioned above are the most prominent in the Scriptures. We will have a separate section devoted to studying parables later in the course.

1. **Example:** When studying **I Cor. 1:17-2:16** it is important that we understand the historical background of Greek culture at Corinth. One must understand the Jewish and Greek thought and the role of logic, rhetoric, reason, and philosophy at the time Paul wrote the book. Jews wanted to see signs and wonders, Greeks wanted to argue, debate, and loved worldly wisdom.
2. **Example:** When studying the letter to the church of Laodicea in **Rev. 3:14-22** it is important to understand that Laodicea was the richest commercial city in the entire region and their three major industries were 1) banking, 2) black wool, and 3) medicinal eye ointment. The city did not have a good water supply so an aqueduct was built to carry water from a nearby hot springs but by the time the water reached the city, it was lukewarm.

C. Find the Theme

Another step in studying a passage is to **discover the theme of the book**. Knowing the theme of a book may help you more easily come to a correct interpretation of your passage. In each book of the Bible the individual sections or passages are smaller building blocks of the overall theme. Sometimes a section will be a building block of a section which is the building block of another section which is the theme. The author uses many smaller sections which stress a certain point which is the theme of the whole book. You can usually discover the theme by reading, looking in commentaries, or books devoted to special introduction.

1. **Example:** Genesis has a twofold theme. **Beginnings and the sovereignty of God**. In **chapters 1-11** the basic theme is beginnings. We have the beginning of creation, beginning of sin, murder, sacrifice, judgement, flood, tower of Babel leading to the beginning of the different races, the beginning of the genealogy of the father of Israel - Abram etc. In **chapters 12 - 50** we have the sovereignty of God working to preserve the line of Abraham through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Each person's life is a building block of how God began to produce a line of people who would some day become the nation Israel.
2. **Example:** You are studying the book of **I Peter**. You look up in a study Bible, a Bible Dictionary, a commentary, or a book that specializes in giving introduction to specific books of the Bible and you discover that the theme of **I Peter** is **suffering**.
3. **Warning:** In some books the theme is stated or is so clear that there is little disagreement among students of the Bible as to what the theme is. In other instances, such as in the book of **Philippians** there are several possible themes that might be emphasized. You will have to read the book yourself and choose what theme you think is best.

D. Study the Outline of the Book

It is very helpful to examine the outline of the book which contains your passage. By looking at the outline of your book you can visually see the progression of thought and how the text you are studying fits into the whole. Commentaries and special introductions are the best places to find good detailed outlines.

1. **Example:** You are studying the book of Ephesians and look in a scholarly commentary and find the outline of the book. You notice the book has two main divisions. Chapters 1-3 deal with the believer's position or possessions in Christ and chapters 4-6 deal with the believer's walk or obedience in Christ. Armed with this information you can determine immediately if your text in Ephesians is addressing the believer's position or walk in Christ.
2. **Example:** You are studying Isaiah 40:31 and you discover in any study Bible, Bible dictionary, commentary, or introduction book that there are three major sections in the book of Isaiah. Chapters 1-35 speak primarily of judgment. Chapters 36-39 are a historical narrative of the reign of King Hezekiah. Chapters 40-66 emphasize God's salvation for His people. You discover that your text is at the beginning of the "salvation" section of Isaiah's prophecy.

V. HOMEWORK

- A. Read the entire book of I Timothy and pick a favorite verse.
- B. Determine the literary type or genre of the book.
- C. Determine the historical setting of the book.
- D. Determine the theme of the book.
- E. Determine the major outline of the book and how your favorite verse fits into the outline.