

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE BIBLE

Copyright © Rosemary Bardsley 2004

STUDY SIX: BE GUIDED BY SOUND PRINCIPLES WHEN READING AND STUDYING THE BIBLE

We have already seen in studies One to Five that the Bible claims for itself:

- Inspiration – it is the Word of God
- Relevance – taking its nature from the nature of God
- Authority – speaking with the authority of God
- Christo-centricity – revealing Christ in anticipation and fulfilment
- Unity – giving us a cohesive, undivided message.

From these attributes of the Bible we can establish a number of principles to guide us as we read and study the Bible:

A. TRUST WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

If the Bible is what we have seen it to be, then several attitudes to the Bible are outlawed:

- Doubting the validity or accuracy of statements in the Bible
- Doubting the relevance of the Bible
- Doubting that its commands apply to me today

If the Bible is the final, complete, inspired, authoritative Word of God, then the onus on us is to believe it and obey it – unchanged, without addition or subtraction – whether we fully understand it or not.

Task 1: Applying the principle of trust to this verse, write its meaning below: Ephesians 5:4

B. LISTEN TO THE MEANING OF THE TEXT

When we read the Bible we should listen to what it is saying, asking ourselves:

- What is the meaning of the words themselves?
- What did it convey to those who originally read or heard it?
- What (if in the Old Testament or Gospels) is the meaning in the light of the fulfilment of all of God's purposes in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Only after having identified these three, should we then ask the personal question:

- What is this passage demanding of me in faith or obedience?

Task 2: Apply the three questions listed above to this passage, then write your answer to the fourth below: Exodus 12:17-27

C. RESPECT THE TYPE OF LITERATURE YOU ARE READING

The Bible tells us that its writers were borne along by the Holy Spirit to write the word of God. This means that when they wrote in prose that was the kind of literature God intended them to use; when they wrote in poetry, that was the kind of literature God intended them to use, and so on. To ignore the kind of literature they used is to overlook and despise God's hand in the choice of writing genre, and to stand in danger of misunderstanding his message.

In the Bible we have the following literary genres:

- **Historical reports** [usually in prose, but sometimes in poetry]; these records include *documentary accounts* of historical incidents and *genealogies*. Examples of history include: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Judges to 2 Chronicles; the four Gospels and Acts. There are also a lot of historical records in the prophets – Isaiah to Malachi.
- **Law:** Accounts of the giving of law are embedded in the Historical reports. The first five books of the Old Testament are commonly called ‘the Law’, ‘the books of Moses’, ‘the Torah’ and ‘the Pentateuch’ – and it is to these that the New Testament refers when it speaks of ‘the law’ or ‘Moses’, not just to the Ten Commandments or any other sub-section.
- **Prophecy:** Specifically, the books of the prophets are all of the books from Isaiah to Malachi. They contain history, poetry, immediately relevant messages, and predictive prophecies. Predictive prophecy is, however, contained in every part of the Old Testament, as we have seen. In the books of the prophets it frequently has a two-fold application: the immediate application to the sin and immanent judgement of those hearing the message, along with promises of physical deliverance; and its ultimate application to the sin of all mankind, the judgement that hangs over all, and the coming of Jesus Christ as Saviour. There are also predictive elements in the New Testament, looking ahead to the second coming of Jesus Christ.
- **Poetry:** The Psalms and the Song of Songs are completely Hebrew Poetry. But poetry is also found scattered here and there in almost every book of the Old Testament – in the five books of Moses, in the histories, in the prophets and in wisdom literature. An understanding of the mechanics of Hebrew poetry gives us great insight into the meaning of the writers. Hebrew poetry was never written in rhyming words like traditional English poetry – it was written in ‘rhyming’ or parallel thoughts: in couplets of two parallel thoughts each expressing the same truth in different words. [On a few occasions the two thoughts are the expression of opposites.] And there is also a progressive parallelism in which three thoughts are placed side by side, each expressing the same thought, but each also adding intensified information or perspective to the previous thought.
- **Wisdom literature:** Wisdom literature is a form of literature from the Ancient Middle East in which [1] human speculations about the meaning of life and God’s governance of the world are put forward [examples of this are Job and Ecclesiastes] and [2] long lists of short pithy sayings are recorded [example – Proverbs]. It is very important when reading Job and Ecclesiastes to remember that they are wisdom literature, that is, that they are providing us with *an accurate record of the speculations that men put forward about the meaning of life*, etc. This means that not everything that is written is what God himself says. [In the same way the gospels *accurately* reported the *inaccurate* words of those who believed, for example, that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan.]
- **The Gospels:** The Gospels are historical records of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are not detailed records of everything that he did and said, but what they report is fact. They are, as John reported [John 20:30-31], written so that people will believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and by believing have life through his name. Thus they are selected history with a spiritual purpose.
- **The Letters:** From Paul’s letter to the Romans to Jude’s letter these books are letters written to Christians by respected Christian leaders to encourage Christians to remain steadfast in their faith in Christ, to maintain their confidence in the original gospel, and to display in their lives the appropriate obedience to Christ that would cause him to be honoured. Almost all of these letters were written to correct either false teaching or errant behaviour.
- **Apocalyptic literature:** The book of Revelation is for the most part written in coded imagery. It was written as a message of encouragement to Christians who were enduring extreme persecution. Its words were clear and meaningful to them. The symbolic imagery spoke to them about their perilous situation and the ability of Christ the Victor to sustain them. It speaks also of his victory through the cross and his final victory when he returns.

As we read each book of the Bible we should acknowledge the kind of literature in which God moved the author to write it, and read and understand it accordingly. In this way we will not only get the meaning God put in it, but also avoid imposing on it a meaning far from his purpose.

Task 3: Apply the above information about different types of literature to your understanding of and attitude to the message of God in the two texts below:

Poetry: Psalm 32:1,2 -

Wisdom: Job 8:4 -

D. REMEMBER THAT THE BIBLE IS CHRIST-CENTRED

The Bible is not about 'me and my life': it is about Jesus Christ and what he did. It relates to me only secondarily, in such ways as:

- While learning about *him* I learn also that he created me – and therefore, that I am dependant on him.
- While learning about *him* I learn also that he cares for me – and therefore, that I should trust him.
- While learning about *him* I learn also that he is the Lord, the King – and therefore, that I should obey him.
- While learning about *him* I learn also that he died to save me – and therefore, that I should cease trying to defend, justify and preserve myself.

Thus my goal in reading and studying the Bible should never be with myself and my affairs dominant in my mind, but with Christ in my mind, with my primary goal being to understand more and more about who he is and what he has done, and only secondarily to find out what he requires of me as the appropriate response to his person and his work.

E. LET THE BIBLE INTERPRET ITSELF [the self-sufficiency of the Scripture]

This principle recognizes a number of facts:

- That the message of the Bible is essentially clear [the principle of the clarity or 'perspicuity' of the Scripture].
- That the New Testament throws light on the meaning of the Old.
- That the 'easy' passages help us to understand the 'hard' passages.
- That the Bible does not contradict itself – any apparent contradiction is because of our incomplete understanding.

F. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PERSONAL SIN AND IGNORANCE

When we read the Bible we must remember that:

- *We are sinners* whose minds are in the process of being transformed by the Holy Spirit [2 Corinthians 3:18], and our understanding, just like our behaviour, retains a lot that needs to be changed [Romans 12:1,2]. Therefore we should read the Bible with a willingness to be taught God's truth and to hear God's commands, and praying for his help.
- We all have, in addition, a *great bagful of supposedly 'religious' presuppositions* inherited from our family or society or church; many of these are actually not gained from the Bible. We need to be careful not to import these religious presuppositions into the Bible and assume that the Bible is affirming them. It is very easy to find in the Bible affirmation of anything we want to believe– remember that false 'christian' cults quote from the Bible.
- Because we are all *self-centred by nature* we will be tempted to make the Bible mean what we want it to mean – to give us merit points, to use it to justify something we plan to do, or something we have done, or some errant belief we have. The Bible's purpose is not to affirm us, but to expose our sinfulness and drive us to faith in Christ where we can find authenticity and forgiveness.

G. TRUST GOD TO TEACH YOU FROM HIS WORD

Task 4: Discuss the relevance of these verses to reading and studying the Bible:

Psalms 119:18

Matthew 11:25-27

Matthew 13:13-17, 34-45

John 14:26

John 20:20,31

Romans 1:16-17

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

H. AVOID SUBJECTIVE AND MYSTICAL USE OF THE SCRIPTURE

Here are a few misuses/abuses of Scripture to avoid:

- Using the Bible like a lucky dip to find God's 'will for my life' about a pressing decision.
- Waiting for verses to 'jump out' of the text with a message for the day.
- Always asking 'what does this mean *to me*'?

- Mixing the Bible with 'co-incidences' to validate my actions and choices.

All of these, and more, treat the Bible with contempt, taking no regard for its own self-affirmed absolute, objective purpose and focus; they have more in common with superstition and post-modern relativism than with Biblical faith and obedience.

I. ADOPT A SYSTEMATIC READING PROGRAM AND STUDY METHOD

Some suggestions:

- Have a Bible *reading* plan that will enable you to progressively read the whole Bible every one to three years.
- In addition, always be currently *studying* a book of the Bible, either with a good study guide or with your own study plan.

- **Suggested study plan #1:**

Read the book right through, at one sitting if possible.

Read again, looking out for recurrent or dominant themes. Jot these down.

In an exercise book – write these dominant themes at the top of the page – allowing an appropriate number of pages for each theme.

Now go slowly through the book, looking at each verse or section, and noting what it says about each of these themes under the headings in your notebook.

- **Suggested study plan #2:**

Read the book right through at one sitting if possible.

Read the book section by section.

As you read each section, ask: What are these verses teaching me about who God (Father, Son or Spirit) is and what he is like? What are these verses teaching me about what God [Father, Son, or Spirit] has done or does? What do these verses teach me about salvation? Is there a promise that I must trust? Is there a command that I must obey?

Write all of your answers in a notebook.

Review each session [Scripture and your study notes] of study before you start the next.

- Make use of a good Bible Dictionary, a good concordance, and good Bible commentaries. Ask your pastor about reliable authors and publishers. It is also good to compare various *translations* of the Bible. But be aware also that a '*paraphrase*' of the Bible is not a 'translation' – it is one person's personal interpretation of the Bible.