

Preparing to Study the Bible, Part 1

Some years ago a seminary graduate asked me to accompany him when he was candidating at a church in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The church was looking for a new senior pastor. This man was their first choice and so they had asked him to visit the church and preach. He had asked me to help him evaluate the church. When we arrived, we were introduced to various people of the church including the elders. Sometime that morning, one of the elders asked me privately, “Why are there so many interpretations of Bible verses?” I could sense that he was somewhat embarrassed to ask the question, but he was very troubled. So, I explained there is only one legitimate interpretation for each Bible verse.

Problem Existed in Christ’s Day. It is clear from the New Testament that this issue existed in the time of Christ. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revealed the Pharisees had wrong interpretations of Scripture when He repeatedly said, “You have heard.” Here is one example. In Matthew 5:33-35 we are told that Jesus said this,

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.’ But

I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Matthew 5:33-35 (NASB)

Why did Jesus say this about the Pharisees? The answer is found in Matthew 23:16-22. There we read that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for swearing by the gold on the temple and by the offering on the altar. Imagine, how did they reach those conclusions? Now it is easy for us to agree they were wrong. We ask what Scripture did they think supported those beliefs? But the Pharisees were not primitive. They were educated men in the Old Testament scriptures. Some of them were leaders in Israel. Other disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees are revealed in Matthew 5:38-41 and verses 43-50.

Matthew 22:23-30 describes a direct confrontation between Jesus and the Sadducees. Here is the passage,

On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus and questioned Him, asking, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘IF A MAN DIES HAVING NO CHILDREN, HIS BROTHER AS NEXT OF

KIN SHALL MARRY HIS WIFE, AND RAISE UP CHILDREN FOR HIS BROTHER.’ Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to

his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had married her.” But Jesus answered and



said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Matthew 22:23-30 (NASB)

Now we may not respect the Sadducees for their question. But one thing we know for sure about them. They were sincere. Notice what Jesus said about their beliefs. He said, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures.” That is, they were wrong. They did not understand what they had read! This is truly amazing because the Sadducees had memorized their Old Testament. Yet, they had a different view of many of the Scriptures than Jesus had. I want you to notice something very important. Both Jesus and the Sadducees were not correct! Jesus authoritatively tells us they were wrong!

The church elder in Philadelphia, who wanted to know

why there were so many different interpretations of Bible verses, was struggling with an issue that existed in Jesus’ day. The answer to his question was found in the fact that when Paul wrote Ephesians 5:17, he did not intend for everyone to rewrite his message. I do not believe that Paul intended for Ephesians 5:17 to have one meaning for me, another meaning for everyone sitting in this room, and another for those who will hear my voice at a later time. Jesus made that point very clear in this passage. He said, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures.”

Problem Existed in the Early Church. In Acts 23:6-8, we learn that the Sadducees and Pharisees are like many today. They quarreled over the meaning of Scripture.

Here is the passage,

But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. Acts 23:6-8 (NASB)



This passage reveals the problem existed during the time of the apostles.

Paul’s letters also reveal there were differences of interpretation of Scripture. Galatians and Colossians were written to refute wrong views of salvation and of our Lord Jesus

Christ. 2 Thessalonians refutes wrong teachings of eschatology, or future things, even after Paul had taught them. Someone in the church was distorting Paul’s teachings (2 Thessalonians 2:2). 1 Timothy 1:3-4 rebukes those who pay attention to strange doctrines, myths, endless genealogies, and speculations. I call them the silly and unprofitable things of Scripture.

2 Timothy 2:16-17 and 2 Peter 3:16 demonstrate this problem of many interpretations existed in the early church. 2 Peter 3:16 warns about the untaught and unstable distortions of Scripture. That implies differences of interpretation. Galatians, Colossians, 2 Peter, 1 and 2 John, Jude and Revelation 2-3 reveal that false teaching was a problem in the early

church. Revelation 2:20-23 reveals a false teacher existed in the church in Thyatira, and many people were following her. The point is that the problem of many interpretations of different Bible verses existed in the time of the apostles. They were battling for the truth.

Problem Existed in the Reformation. The problem of many interpretations of the Bible existed during the reformation too! That is why Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Wesley, William Tyndale, and other reformers had different followers. They had some differences of interpretation about Scripture.

Preparing to Study the Bible. The problem still exists today too! A current day example of this problem is found in 1 John 1:9. Most believers who have a high view of Scripture believe that at the moment of saving faith, all our past, present, and future sins are forgiven because God declares us to be righteous. We believe that 1 John 1:9 teaches

into a pit and later sold him to some Midianite traders who sold him in Egypt. This is a great story that teaches us that our enemies can attack us and throw us into a pit, but we should not fear because God is the God of comeback and favor. God will never allow us to remain in a dirty pit of depression, despair, and depravity because his purpose is one of blessing, purpose, and breakthrough. It is time to overcome our pits! What is the pit that is facing your life today? Maybe it is a financial pit. Maybe it is an emotional pit. Maybe it is a pit of sickness? Maybe it is a relational pit. Well, prepare yourself while you are in that pit because God is about ready to bring you from the pit to the palace!

That is neither the interpretation or the application of Genesis 37. Genesis 37 is background information that prepares the reader for what follows.

First Step — Be a Believer. How can this problem

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that Christians need to confess any sins they commit daily to restore the day-to-day relationship and to not grieve the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:1 says there is now no condemnation in Christ. So, 1 John 1:9 is about a clean-up of our relationship and not a statement about salvation.

But recently, those involved in the movement known as Hyper-Grace Movement believe 1 John 1:9 is a call to salvation. They believe that a Christian never needs to confess any sins after placing faith in Christ for salvation. After salvation there is no need to confess our sins. Sadly, that will result in many believers grieving the Holy Spirit and being very sad.

The Roman Catholic Church believes this verse is about confessing our sins to one another and not to God. This would give support to confession to priests.

It is common for believers to confuse interpretation and application. One author offers this interpretation of Genesis 37. He wrote this,

Genesis 37 tells us that Joseph's brothers threw him

be avoided in Bible study? We are going to discover five steps that we must take to prepare for Bible study in this study and the next. Then the following studies will help us to discover how to understand the Bible.

The first step in preparing to study the Bible is to make sure you are a Christian. Malachi 2:7-8 is an illustration of who cannot completely understand the Bible. In this passage, the Holy Spirit speaks through the prophet Malachi and rebukes the priests,

“For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” says the LORD of hosts. Malachi 2:7-8 (NASB)

Why were the priests rebuked? First, they were rebuked because they did not preserve knowledge. They misinterpreted Scripture. Why did this occur? Malachi 3:16-18 reveals these priests were unbelievers. 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 explains. The passage says that Satan has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. Unbelievers cannot understand. So, if unbelievers study the Bible or teach it, they will not completely understand it. The only exception is that the Holy Spirit may give them a limited understanding that leads to salvation.

1 Corinthians 2:14 and 1 John 2:20-21 remind us that it is the Holy Spirit who helps believers understand the Bible. We depend upon the Holy Spirit to help us understand the interpretation and correct applications.

Therefore, the first step to studying the Bible is to be a believer. Otherwise, it is impossible to accurately learn to know its meaning and apply it correctly.

Second Step — Have an Intense Desire to

and not the entire Bible book by book. They were taught a theological system. Then they rely on that system to understand the Bible. Not all seminaries use the same systematic theology textbook. It is important to remember that they are not taught all sixty-six books of the Bible in seminary. They must learn the Bible day by day as they struggle with the text in order to teach it accurately once they are pastors.

When a pastor or a teacher does encounter a difficult passage or a passage that disagrees with what they remember from seminary, they often open their systematic theology to look for help. They want to know how they should understand the passage!

Laymen and women do this too! Pastors and graduates of Bible universities and seminaries are not the only ones who do this. Some of us reach for our Westminster Catechism, our favorite systematic theology book, some theological website, or we rush to the pastor, or to someone who has disciplined us.

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Know the Truth. The second step to studying the Bible is that the believer must have a strong passion to know the truth. Now I did not say the Bible. I said to know the truth. So let me illustrate. A man once asked, “Why do men who go to seminary disagree about the interpretation of the Bible if they have the same Holy Spirit?” That was an insightful question. He struggled with the issue why men who graduate from various Bible-believing seminaries disagree about some Bible passages since they have the same Holy Spirit? Why does that happen if they are filled with the Holy Spirit?

It is obvious that differences of interpretations of Scripture were not acceptable to Jesus nor to the apostles. So, if the men graduating from seminary are Christians, that is they have the same Holy Spirit, why do they disagree?

I want to offer one reason. Then we will consider more reasons in our next study. The first reason seminary graduates disagree is that they were taught a systematic theology

Now there is nothing wrong with doing that if the systematic theology is biblically accurate. I am only trying to describe what we tend to do. In fact, I think this is a good first step. But we must not stop there.

Now I have just illustrated a serious problem. This gives us the first thing we need to remember. That is, “We desperately cling to what we were first taught.” The second thing we need to remember is, “We are teachable if we are more interested in the truth than having our beliefs reinforced.”

Are we more interested in truth? If so, then we must allow what we think is true to be challenged. We must be willing to change what we believe is truth, or we will never learn the truth. Why? Because as we study Scripture, we will be constantly refining our understanding of the truth of Scripture. This gives us a third thing to remember, “We must have a strong passion to know the Truth in order to find the Truth!”

Only then will we find the Truth. Remember God said

that we must seek and search for Him with all our heart. Then He will let us find Him. That begins with Bible study, because that is how we find Him!

My Personal Experience. I have followed this principle. When I am reading or studying a passage of Scripture and I find something that seems to challenge what I was taught, I ask God to help me know if I was wrong. Then I get my “shovel, pick, and work gloves,” and start digging to learn the truth.

On one occasion I was teaching through the book of Hebrews. When I came to Hebrews 6, I asked God to help me understand if I could lose my salvation. I did that because some teach that Hebrews 6:1-8 reveals Christians can lose their salvation. Now I did not believe that. But nevertheless, I told the Lord that if a Christian could lose their salvation, then I wanted to know the truth. I was not interested in col-

... examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Acts 17:11 (NASB)

The verb tense of “examining” is a present participle. It reveals they were constantly studying the Scriptures. They are a wonderful example of those who intensely study the Scriptures.

Conclusion. In our first study, we learned a person must be a believer in order to understand what they are reading. We also learned that we must have an intense desire to know The Truth in order to find The Truth. Without an intense desire to study the Bible, your journey will not last long. We also learned that the Bereans pleased the Lord by studying the Scriptures.

In the second study, we found that the book God wants us to study is the Bible. It is inspired by God. Even the plural

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lecting all of the arguments to defeat this threatening view. Instead, I wanted to seriously know what God was teaching in the passage. After I finished the study, I still believed a Christian cannot lose his salvation. But I learned much as a result of my serious study. I wanted to be teachable.

Biblical Principles. We have already discovered the biblical principle in 1 Peter 2:2 which says,

Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.
1 Peter 2:2 (NASB)

The Greek word for “long” is *epipothéo*. The word has the sense of “an intense desire.” That is, believers are commanded to have an intense desire to know the Word of God. If you do, you will seriously read it. You will seriously study it. You evaluate what you are taught just as the Bereans did in Acts 17:11. In that verse we are told the Bereans were . . .

endings of the words are inspired. There are no other books or revelations given by God. Consequently, it is the book that we should devote ourselves to during our lifetime. When it speaks, it speaks absolute truth.

In this study, we have discovered that as we grow spiritually from a baby Christian to a young man, and then to a father of the faith, we should expect that our understanding of this book, the Bible, will change. We will toss some wrong doctrines. We will refine our understanding of other doctrines. We may add new doctrines previously unknown to us. The goal must be to discover the meaning of what the Holy Spirit has written. That is the path that leads to spiritual maturity. It is the path that pleases God the Father.

In our next study, we will learn three more steps to Bible study. I will close with this story. An unknown author has written this,

A little boy was sitting on a curb reading the New

Testament when a priest came by and asked him what he was reading.

“It’s the New Testament,” he said.

“But that’s not for a little ignorant boy like you to be reading,” the priest said.

“Oh, but I have a search warrant to read it,” the boy replied.

“A search warrant! What do you mean?”

“It says here, ‘Search the Scriptures,’ and I’m doing what I’m told.”¹

1. Roy B. Zuck. *The Speaker’s Quote Book*. Kregel Publications. 1997. p. 39.