

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

76.1 How Can I Profitably Study the Bible by Myself?

Part I

Scripture: Psalm 119:1-16; II Timothy 3:14-17:

The question we have before us is an important one because our bias is that a proper study of the Bible is a most worthwhile endeavor. Christian people declare unashamedly that the Bible is the greatest book in the world. No book has ever stood in as vital a relationship to civilization and man's mind and heart as has the Bible. An interest in studying the Bible goes beyond the usual stimulus of reading for information, enjoyment or, merely the passing of time. The Bible provides a source of inspiration, direction, and certainty as no other book. It is the world's greatest book because it has God behind it as author, because of its supreme spiritual value, because of its unique understanding of life, the cure it provides for the ills of mankind, the way it meets every condition of one's life, and because of the light which it sheds on the future. Indeed, such a book is worthy of study.

Christianity has through the centuries held three convictions regarding the Bible: **First**, that God has spoken; **second**, the spoken word has been put to writing (inscripturated) by inspiration; **third**, that recorded word is both authoritative and needful for faith and life. All of these things are implied in the lesson we have before us but our main concern has to do with the fact that the Bible, properly read and understood, is sufficient for our wellbeing. The Bible thus becomes a vehicle of faith through which God's power works in our lives.

Our question has to do with individual or personal Bible study. I believe this to be the most beneficial form of reading and inquiry. It is not possible for the Christian life to be what God intends it to be apart from a personal reading and grasp of God's Word. In fact, the Bible was written to be read in this way. The Apostle Paul instructed young Timothy, "*Study to show **thysself** approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*" II Timothy 2:15) The Bible was written to be read and understood by everyone. It was not written principally for the academic community or for those unusually qualified to read its original languages. The Bible was not written for people who sit behind desks in classrooms with a certain expertness in Biblical

knowledge any more than it was written for that novice who is able to bring faith and a willingness to obey to that Bible he or she holds in hand. The Christian faith knows nothing of a clandestine spirit in regard to Scripture. From the first book of the Bible to the very last the message is open and available to all. The Bible has nothing in common with the atmosphere of secrecy which marked the mystery cults existent at the time of its writing. The Bible's invitation to learn and profit is given to all. Notwithstanding this truth, the Bible will speak to the lives of some as it is unable to do toward others. There is a certain fitness involved, an ability to grasp the message and materiel which some have and which is hindered in the lives of others to varying degrees. This is the purpose of our attempting to discern ways to profitably study the Bible. It is difficult to know where to begin. I have chosen several texts from the Word of God which will help us in our flow of thought during these studies.

I. OBTAIN YOUR OWN BIBLE - Psalm 1:1-3: Acts 17:11:

I realize that these verses do not explicitly teach that anyone has to own a Bible. Implicitly they may by virtue of the fact that possessing a Bible of ones own is the only realistic way of doing what they suggest. The Psalmist describes the blessed man as one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and in that law he meditates day and night. The Bereans of Acts 17 were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were true. Those were Old Testament Scriptures. They were first written in Hebrew upon scrolls or rolls of parchment. Later they were translated into Greek. The oldest translation is known as the Septuagint or "Version of the Seventy." It was made at Alexandria for the Alexandrian Library by a company of seventy learned scholars under the patronage of Ptolemy Philadelphus about 285 B.C.. But the point here is that the existent Scriptures were read daily by the Bereans.

This practice of regular Bible reading and study is possible when you have your own copy. We may be thankful that copies of the Bible are readily available to us for this is not true everywhere. A congregant reminded us last Sunday evening upon her return from Russia that many believers there were without Bibles of their own. God will doubtless minister to their needs but they suffer a great deficiency in being without copies of the Bible. The Word of God is of utmost importance. We may question if it is possible to be a strong and effective Christian apart from the grace of God which is mediated to our lives through Scripture. I, for one, have never met such a person.

1. **The Well Bound Bibles of Today With Varying Size Print:**

The first complete English printed Bible was that of Miles Coverdale. The Bible was printed in Zurich Switzerland in 1535. It was known as the “Great Bible” and this period also saw the Genevan New Testament which first incorporated the division of the text into verses. It was John Wycliffe who first translated the Bible into English in 1384. A few hundred copies were laboriously made of which 170 are still in existence in the English style of “Canterbury Tales” by Chaucer. Twentieth Century English Versions of the Bible are plentiful and come in all colors and sizes. They are in paperback form and some are well bound and strong. It is wise to have such a Bible which will stand the test of wear and tear. Old family Bibles with faded print and threadbare pages may have sentimental value, but belong best behind glass and protected rather than subject to the daily rigors of study and transportation. A sturdy, easy to read study Bible is a must.

2. **Bibles With Concordances:**

Foremost among aids in profitably reading and studying the Bible is the concordance. About 700 years ago, scholars set themselves to the task of arranging the words of the Bible and their appearance in Scripture in alphabetical order. This was but an extension of the earlier effort of arranging the Scripture into chapter and verse divisions. The Scriptures were divided into chapter form in 1250 and a year later into verse form. We do not always realize that the original forms were without such divisions. The Hebrew language was originally written entirely in consonants and without spacing between the words. The most complete concordance on the Bible in use today is that of James Strong called the “**Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,**” published in 1894. It has every word in the text in alphabetic order and in addition contains some information on the original word, the Greek or Hebrew.

Another fine concordance is the **Analytical Concordance to the Bible** by R. Young. It is in its 24th American edition and is published Funk & Wagnels and Eerdmans. Its 311,000 references subdivide under the Hebrew and Greek original words with English pronunciation. Smaller concordances are also available such as **Cruden's Concordance** which was originally published in 1737 and has more than 220,000 references to both the King James and revised versions of the Bible. Perhaps the most helpful

concordance the diligent student will have is the one found in the back of his Bible. The best copies of the Bible usually have a concordance and the best students of the Bible use a concordance.

3. Other Tools:

Other helps for the student of Scripture are Bible Dictionaries and encyclopedias. These aids provide definitions of difficult words and valuable information about persons, places and things mentioned in the Bible. These items are listed alphabetically. Henry H. Halley has written a most helpful **Pocket Bible Handbook**. It first appeared in 1927 and there have been many revisions since that time. Other helpful sources are **Handbook To The Bible** published by Eerdmans of Grand Rapids (1973); J. D. Douglas, **The New Bible Dictionary**, Eerdmans; and G. A. Buttrick, **The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible**, Abingdon Press, 1962. For years I have used with enjoyment **The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible** by John B. Davis and published by the Westminster Press of Philadelphia, 1944. Other relevant and helpful material might include books dealing with Biblical history. Two I might suggest are B.K. Kuiper's **The Church In History**, Eerdmans, 1951; and **Handbook To The History of Christianity**, also Eerdmans, 1977. Word study books should also be included in this paragraph dealing with the students tools. Marvin Vincent's **Word Study of the New Testament**, Moody Press, 1946; and **Wuest's Word Studies**, Kenneth Wuest, Eerdmans, 1950, are helpful.

Now, just a word about commentaries. These compose the insights and writings of spiritual leaders through the history of the church. As they have accumulated a great deposit of understanding which is made available to the student. I had an interesting experience in regard to commentaries many years ago. I was in the library of a man who I respected as one of the most Godly men I had ever met. As I looked at the books I became aware of the absence of commentaries. When I asked my friend about this I was told that he had found it more helpful through the years not to depend on commentaries. He discovered that the Bible was its own best commentary and with the use of cross reference material found in his Bible he was able to discern to his enjoyment and edification what the mind of the Lord was on a given matter for the most part. There are so many commentaries available today that an analysis of every verse in the Bible is surely available to the student. The material is endless and should one wish to check the validity of

his thoughts on a given text, the commentaries are valuable. But I am suggesting that it is not in one's best interest in the study of Scripture to let someone else do all the thinking for you. It is very easy to come to the place where you rely on the views and opinions of others. We ought to be able to go to the Scripture and discern its meaning ourselves as we are guided by the master teacher, the Holy Spirit. Once having done this and still not being thoroughly convinced concerning the meaning of passage, it may be helpful to refer to the wisdom of spiritual leaders who have gone that way before. In ancient times, men dedicated themselves to interpreting the Scripture. They were called Scribes. They gave accurate information to Herod in Matthew 23, but it was said of Jesus that He spoke with authority and not as the Scribes who were forever quoting their predecessors. In our study of the Bible let us not become exclusively dependent on others though we may, with reservation, enter into their labors. (John 4:38)

4. Cross Reference Bibles:

Next to the concordance, Bible Dictionary and word study material, cross reference information is important to the lay student of God's Word. These references take different forms in different Bibles. The most common, fall in the center or to the right of the page forming a column of Scripture listings which identify in some way with the message of the text on that particular page. Alternate translations are sometimes given in the reference column. The reference area may direct the reader to other parts of the Bible where additional information can be found. Statistical, geographical, and information critical to the understanding of the text at hand is also found there. Most commonly the reference column cites additional locations throughout the Bible where the thought being studied can be found. This enables the student to employ one of the basic principles of Bible study, the comparing of Scripture with Scripture. It would seem to me that every earnest Bible reader should own a reference Bible.

II. THE TRANSLATION YOU CHOOSE IS BASICALLY THE WORD OF GOD: II Timothy 3:16

Here it is well to define a few terms. The word translation means to render a literary work in another language. A rendering of the Bible from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek into Latin or English is a translation. A perfect translation may be humanly impossible. There are thus faults and virtues in all

of the translations. In the strict use of the word, God does not inspire translators although He may give particular illumination and insight to the those who are called to this ministry. A “version” is a translation from the original language and a revision is the corrected or adjusted, or what remains of a scrutinized version. We must remember that flaws in translations at best form an insignificant part of the whole. We may be confident that no major doctrine of the faith is effected granting the observance of time honored concepts regarding Biblical textual criticism. When selecting a Bible it may be advisable to choose one which is the product of a number of scholars rather than the work of one man. Proverbs 11:14 speaks of safety in a number of counselors. This is not to say that a one man translation may not be helpful.

Many feel that the **King James Version** of 1611 will never be surpassed particularly with the updated revision by Jay P. Green which corrects the archaic language. The **Revised Standard Version** may be the best translation in the English language for general use, The **New English Bible** is fresh and stimulating and extremely readable, but with defects which accompany the adoption of modern language. **The Living Bible** is a paraphrase by one man. Fidelity to the original language is poor. It is best used for devotional reading with the KJV or the RSV. The **New American Standard** is exceptionally faithful to the Greek and Hebrew. It is a nine year effort by superior scholars. Not much change from the ASV of 1901. It is a good version for serious Bible study. The **Jerusalem Bible** is the finest Catholic Bible in the English language. It was produced by the Dominican scholars at St. Stephen's School in Jerusalem. It includes the Apocrypha, but is an excellent all purpose translation. **Good News For Modern Man** is a fine and accurate translation of the New Testament and we need not be fooled by the juvenile format. **J.B. Philips** is a paraphrase by a competent Greek scholar. It has a distinct British flavor. The **Berkeley Version** is also a one man effort with a high degree of faithfulness to the original languages. It is an excellent version for public reading as well as for devotional insights. This concludes our first study on how to profitably understand the Bible. Secure your own Bible and read it with the conviction that you possess God's words to you.

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