

The Broad Context

1. Start by reading through the whole book in some quiet place of your home. During this first reading, it is important not to allow yourself to get bogged down in all kinds of problems. If you don't understand something immediately, don't worry about it. Just keep reading. Your goal during this first reading is not comprehension of all the details, but only a general "feel" for the book

2. Wait a day or two and read it again. This time, you can go a bit slower. Now it's time to start asking some questions. Too many people read the Bible in the same way they watch TV; passively. If we want to honour the author of Scripture, we will have to read actively and that means asking many questions. During the second reading, you want to ask yourself questions like this:

- When was this book written?
- To whom was it written?
- What does the book tell us about the author?
- Why was the book written?
- What was the purpose of the author?
- What kind of literature do we find in this book?
- Is it poetry? drama? historical writing? a letter?

Watch for the major divisions of the book. Watch out for points when the author seems to move into a new topic or a new phase of the discussion.

3. Start to make notes. At this point, your task will be to write a paragraph or two which describes the overall message of the book. The point of this exercise is to state the key thoughts of the book. When you read a novel, you should be able to summarize the plot. If you read a short story, you will be able to state the theme of this story. In the same way, a very important part of personal or group Bible Study in Young People's Society is the ability to state the theme of the Bible book in discussion.

4. Get out your reference books.

A. A Bible dictionary – One of the most helpful volumes at this stage of your study will be a Bible Dictionary. The standard Bible Dictionary is called The New Bible Dictionary (2nd edition), edited by J.D. Douglas, and published by Tyndale (retail cost around \$30.00).

B. A Bible encyclopaedia – A very excellent tool for your personal or study society or church library is the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible (5 volumes, edited by Merrill C. Tenney, published by Zondervan, retailing for about \$195.00).

C. Study outlines and commentaries – Consider the study outlines published by InterLeague-Publication Board, as well as other commentaries and outlines. Most of these outlines and commentaries have introductory chapters which you should read at this time. You can also read the introductory articles to each Bible book in Study Bibles like the New International Version Study Bible.

5. Hints for using the Bible dictionary and encyclopaedia – If you plan to study Genesis, you can look up the articles under "Genesis" in your dictionaries. Or, if you are studying 1 Corinthians, you can look up articles

under "Corinth" (city), "Corinthians, Epistles to," and even under headings like "Paul." Or, if you are studying Daniel, check articles under "Daniel," "Babylon," "Nebuchadnezzar" and so on. If you are going to study the Psalms, check the Bible Dictionary for a description of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry and for a classification of the different kinds of Psalms

6. Make your own outline of the book – Hopefully, you will have noticed the basic structure of the book when you read it from beginning to end. For example, if you read Genesis a couple of times, you will notice the repeated phrase "these are the generations of" You can use this phrase to make an outline of Genesis. If it seems too difficult to create your own outline of the book, use one provided by the various Study Bibles or Study Guides. Note: if you read such an outline without having first read that book carefully, it will seem rather uninteresting. If, however, you have first read the whole book through and through, the outline will really come alive and will be of great help in your Bible Study.

The Narrower Context

7. Analyze the first section of the book – Start your study with the first section indicated by your outline (usually this will be a chapter or two, though sometimes longer). Get out your Bible Study Notebook. Write down in a few sentences what seems to be the main point of the first section of the outline.

8. Analyze the paragraphs – After this, it will be very helpful to divide the first section of the outline into even smaller units, namely, into paragraphs. Again, write down the key thought of each paragraph. Don't be afraid to write in your Bible. For example, you can number the paragraphs in each section of your outline. Or, you can number the central points in each section of the outline, which show the flow of thought.

9. Analyze the sentences – Who or what is the subject of each sentence? What is the main verb? Often this will be obvious, but still, taking the time to think about it may clear up some confusion.

10. Analyze the words – The last stage of analysis brings us to the level of individual words and phrases of the text. If there is a word you don't understand, you simply must look it up in a Bible dictionary (or, in some cases, in a regular dictionary).

Now ask yourself some questions about the individual words. Are there certain words which are repeated in the course of the book? Are there key words which take you to the heart of the book? Perhaps you could make a list of key words for each book you study. These would be unique words which center around the theme of the book.

An important step of word study involves the use of concordances. A concordance lists all the places in the Bible where a particular word is used. Comparing the various references will give you a flavour of the possible meanings, and purposes which the word has in your passage. There are many concordances on the market. Make sure you find one that corresponds to the Bible translation you use.

You may also want to consult alternate translations of the passage in other Bible versions.

11. Check the commentaries – This should be the last step of serious Bible Study. Otherwise you will get lazy and will never develop your own ability to hear the Word of God.

12. Application – You might use the following questions as a guide:

- What does the Lord show us about Himself in this passage?
- What promises are given in this passage, whether explicitly or implicitly, which ask for our faith?
- Do we really believe these promises?
- What does this passage show us about my Saviour (whether explicitly or implicitly)?
- What warnings are there in this passage?
- With what sins in our own lives does this passage confront us?
- What commands of God are there in this passage which we must obey?
- What must change in our lives because of what we have learned in this passage?
- What does this passage say about the task of the church, or, my task in the church?

In thinking about "application," we must remember that the Bible is the account of God's mighty deeds. Not man, but God is the central character. What God does comes to a focus in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we may ask at any given time: where is Christ the Lord in this passage? Once we can see an answer to this question, we will soon know the answer to a further question: where am I, a Christian in this passage? For where Christ is, there are His people, too.

13. General comments

A. The Bible as literature

The whole Bible is really one story, the true story of the saving work of God in Christ Jesus. When you come to understand this, you soon feel yourself caught up in the story. When the Lord speaks about Christ, He is addressing you, too!

There is a way in which it is not only permissible, but appropriate to approach the Bible as literature. God has taken up human literary forms as the forms in which He has cast His revelation – history, poetry, proverbs, allegory, apocalypse. So we may ask, What is the author saying? (i.e. we may identify the content) and second, How is he saying it? (We pay attention to the method, style). Of course, these two can never be separated. Often we don't know what an author is saying until we pay attention to his style. For this reason, I would urge you to become more sensitive to matters of style. We need to learn to read the Bible as literature. This will also help us to avoid misinterpreting or misapplying the message of the passage we're studying. For example, we won't read the book of Revelation, or, the book of Psalms, as though they were to be understood in a literal sense.

We should never forget, of course, that though the Bible displays human literary forms, it is inspired, and so, the history, for example, that it reveals is told for a certain purpose. Think of Psalm 78, which speaks about fathers telling their children the stories of Israel's history as "parables" and "hidden things" - i.e. not only the facts, but, the lesson, the point, the truth revealed by those events.

In our study of literature in school, we learn to analyze and understand different types of literature. We learn about drama, poetry, short stories, novels etc. We learn about symbols, allegories, imagery, metaphors, repetition, parallelisms, hyperbole, theme, climax, and much, much more. Understanding literature is important for many reasons, but also for this reason: the Bible is literature! When you sit in English class, you may think that poetry is irrelevant. But then I would remind you that it has pleased the Lord to speak to us also by way of poetry. If you want to understand the Lord's revelation (and who dares say he doesn't), you will simply have to grasp the basics of poetic style and form.

B. What commentaries may we use?

The big question is: what commentary of Study Guide should I use? For a general one volume commentary, the New Bible Commentary is still hard to beat (published by Eerdmans, editor D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, cost around \$30.00). Besides interesting introductory articles on topics like "The Authority of Scripture," "Revelation and Inspiration," "The History of Israel," and even, yes, "The Poetry of the Old Testament," this Commentary contains short comments on every passage of the Bible which are often helpful to clear away difficulties.

Other commentaries:

New International Version Study Bible

(also: Light of the Reformation edition - also with ESV text)

The Bible Speaks Today - O.T. portion edited by J.A. Motyer, N.T. by John R.W. Stott

Westminster Daily Study Bible Series

Inter-League-Publication Board

Promise and Deliverance, by S.G. DeGraaf – Inheritance Publications

Search the Scriptures (ten volumes) by C. vanderWaal