

Improving Bible Study

Brothers and Sisters,

If you're a single person and there's a girl or guy you kind of like, you'd want to get to know her or him, right? If there's ever going to be a serious, meaningful relationship, you've got to talk to her, you've got to have conversations with him – in other words, you need to communicate. Without communication, there will be no relationship and whatever you have will dry up.

Well, it's the same between us and God. We already have a relationship with God – He sought us out at our baptism already, as babies – but if we are to keep this relationship and grow this relationship, we need to speak to God and we need to hear God speak to us. And God has given us the ability to do this – we may talk to the Lord in prayer and we may listen to Him speak to us in the Bible. The single most important reason for you and me to study the Bible is to get to know our God and Saviour! To get acquainted with Him, and develop our love for Him!

When you talk with your girlfriend (or boyfriend), you get to know what she's like, what kind of character she is, what kind of man he is, what are his likes and dislikes, what he stands for, what qualities and talents she possesses, the way she thinks, what kind of wisdom and understanding he has, his sense of humour, what opinions she has about important matters in life – and as you listen, as you take in this information, your love for her (or him) grows! The more often you talk, the deeper your conversations go, the more you understand the kind of person she (or he) is, the more you want to be around her, spend time with her – the closer you become!

It's just like that with our covenant God – the more we spend time getting to know Him through His Word, the more impressed we will be! The more touched we will be, the more humbled and awed and full of joy we will be that this God is actually interested in me, cares about me, and wants a relationship with me! The more we discover who Father, Son and Spirit are, what they have done, what they continue to do in our lives today, the deeper our love for God becomes! The more you want to spend time with the Lord and the closer you become to Him!

That's the #1 reason why we all should read and reflect on the Bible day after day – because we desire to know God better and love Him more deeply. Now, before we get to the *how* of Bible study, we need to know *what kind of book* God has given us. What can we expect to get out of reading it? If we go in with the wrong expectation, we may be sorely disappointed or even turned off. If I think the Bible holds all the answers to my specific personal problems, I will be frustrated. If I think the Bible is like a text book which lays out in a system (from A-Z) all there is to know about God, the world, and our salvation, I will be discouraged and not stick with it long. The Bible is not a self-help manual or a how-to book. It's not a novel or essay. It's a special book, even a collection of 66 books, written over 1600 years by more than 36 men, through which God speaks a particular message to us.

God's purpose in giving us the Bible is so that we may get to know Him and how He saves us. From creation we can know that God exists and that He is majestic, but it's only from Scripture that we can know Him personally, what He's like, what He's done and specifically all

that He has done and still does to work out our salvation. We confess this in Belgic Confession Art. 2 but you can think of passages like Psalm 98:2, “The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.” Whether it was through the Law of Moses or the miracles in Egypt or the calling out of the prophets, the LORD made known His own character (righteous, faithful) and His amazing, gracious saving work.

And because the LORD’s salvation is centered in the work of Jesus Christ, the Bible itself has Christ at its center as well. The Lord Jesus says it himself in Luke 24:44 (after his resurrection), “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Or again in John 5:39 (to the Jewish leaders), “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” Jesus emphasizes his personal role in making God known to His people in John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent... (v.6) I have manifested [or: revealed] your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.”

So, whenever you read the Bible, you should expect to find out more about your God and your salvation in Jesus Christ. Those are two questions you can ask of every passage you read: what does this say about God? How does this connect with Jesus and His saving work for me? Remember, God *wants* you to know Him and His Son Jesus Christ. He *wants* you to experience salvation and be transformed into His son or daughter who walks closely with Him each day. The Bible presents much information but it’s much more than mere information! God’s Word has power to change us and God has designed His Word and sent His Spirit to powerfully change us into the image of Christ Himself (see Eph 4:22-24; 5:1; Lord’s Day 32). When we read Scripture we should expect and we should desire to come to know God better, to know Christ better, and to know our salvation better – and to be changed into the new creatures God is making us to be!

How to Do Bible Study

Okay, so we have a sense of the *need* for Bible study and what we should be *looking to get out* of it – but how do we actually do it well? Effectively?

Easing False Guilt

Before we get into that, it’s important to recognize that there is a natural range of intensity and depth in our Bible studies. This range spans our ages, our abilities and our occupations. What I mean for example is this: Bible study can be anywhere from brief Bible reading all the way to hours-long sermon-making. Bible reading at the breakfast table on a school morning will necessarily only be a few minutes long but, when we listen carefully, still a time to learn about God. On the other hand, when I take half an hour to prepare for tomorrow night’s Bible study, I will take time to dig deeper, look up more passages, use tools like a

concordance or a Study Bible or commentary and come to a greater awareness of the Lord and my salvation.

Or take another example: a 12 year old's Bible study is, generally, going to be simpler and not go as deep as a 25 or 35 year old's Bible study. The time and extent that a busy mother of three can put into daily Bible meditation will be different than a 55 year old empty-nester or a retired person. One person might be a keen reader and love to study multiple commentaries on a given passage while another person might have trouble concentrating on getting through one paragraph of Bible Study footnotes. Depending on our God-given talents as well as the season in our lives or even the rhythm of life within the span of one week, Bible study can look different and be more or less intense as the situation allows.

Now, I'm not saying this to let lazy people off the hook. God tells us in Scripture that we should meditate upon His Word – think of Psalm 1. God blesses the man whose “delight is in God's law; all day and night he ponders it with awe.” If we love God, we'll love His Word – remember, no communication, no relationship. Every Christian should desire to know God better and love Him more deeply and walk with Him more closely, and it's impossible to do that with your Bible closed. So every believer should *want* to be busy in God's Word and should be *looking* for opportunities and *creating* time in the schedule, and yet in the circumstances of life that desire may in practice look different for one person than for another. And then we shouldn't heap false guilt upon ourselves or one another for not achieving a standard of so many minutes which God has *not* commanded of us and when in fact we are sincerely doing what we can to hear God speak to us and when we do think about His Word even when we are busy doing other things.

Timing and Regularity

One of the most helpful things to make your Bible study effective is to do it regularly, daily, and to do it when your mind is alert. A tired body and a sleepy mind does not make for effective Bible study. Some people are night owls and can literally meditate on their beds without falling asleep – great! But, if you're like me, it's a struggle to stay awake at bed-time devotions. Choose a time of day where you are fresh – and can dedicate 10-15 minutes of quiet Bible reading and thinking. If you can spend more time studying God's Word, great, but a daily dose of 10-15 minutes would draw you close to the Lord and impact your life in significant ways.

Be creative – if you're a truck driver, you could listen to the Bible being read and explained on a CD or iPod or even on the radio as you drive. Take along a sermon CD. If you are a student on a long bus-ride, that might be a good time to open your Bible. Or find a quiet corner of the library at lunch time. Or maybe 15 minutes right after supper. If you are a mother of young children, set them off playing or in front of a nice video and give yourself time to meditate over a morning coffee. Take a small passage and let it sink into your mind. Better a small passage digested thoughtfully every day than one chapter once a week that is forgotten soon after it is read. Whatever time you choose, try to stick to that schedule and let it become part of a good,

healthy, daily routine. Remind yourself that Bible study is very important and your other obligations can wait while you stop to hear God's voice speak to you.

If you're having trouble understanding what you are reading, choose a Bible book that is easier to understand. Over time, as you become more knowledgeable about Scripture, you can tackle the tougher sections. We know that all of Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching and learning from, absolutely, but some parts are harder to understand than others. The book of Revelation and the last half of Daniel are not easy to interpret whereas the 4 Gospels are much more accessible. The book of Genesis is easier to gain from than the book of Leviticus. Ezekiel is a tougher read than Isaiah. The Psalms connect with us more easily than the prophecies of Obadiah or Zephaniah. If you're frustrated with not getting what you're reading, set it aside for a time and choose a different Bible book. Come back to it with a good study guide in hand.

The COMMA Method

So now you've set aside the time and you're ready to read and reflect – how do you go about it? I'm going to suggest a basic approach for personal, family as well as group Bible study. If the goal is to understand what God has revealed about Himself and our salvation, the basic way to achieve that will be the same in all settings.

Before you open the Bible, **begin with prayer** asking God to help you understand what He is saying – not what you think it says (Greijdanus, Rule #1). The Bible itself says that unless the Holy Spirit opens our eyes, we cannot understand God's Word. Even if all you do is sincerely pray, read and then pray about what you've read, you will have gained by having the Lord go to work on your heart.

Next, select a Bible book and start at the beginning. If possible, spend your first devotional time reading through the whole book to get the flow of thought. If not, read the first few chapters. If there is no time, just read the first section and proceed bit by bit, section by section in your daily devotions. That's how the Holy Spirit wrote the Bible and it's the best way to try to understand His message. You can study the Bible topic by topic, but as the main-stay of your meditation, take God's Word as He has written it. Most Bibles place subheadings over new sections – take one section and read it over carefully and think through these 5 areas of the **COMMA** method:

The first is **Context**. The meaning of any given passage is always tied to its context. Think here in concentric circles. There's the context of the chapter but also the whole book and even the testament and the whole Bible. The Bible presents a unified message from God, so think of your passage in relation to the rest of Scripture (Greijdanus, Rule #2).

Ask questions like: what sort of Bible book is this? (a letter? History? Poetry? Prophecy? Gospel account?). Just like different columns in a newspaper, you need to know what kind of a column is being written – a news column, reporting a world event (e.g. ISIS advances); an editorial offering an opinion on a current topic; a social commentary column (e.g. Robert Fulford or Barbara Kay); satire (Matt Selley). You wouldn't want to interpret the editorial in the same way as the lead story about ISIS. Editorial opinions need to be thought through and weighed

carefully. They're not necessarily correct. A story – at least one that has its facts verified – can be taken as basic information you believe to be true. And so on.

Once you know the kind of book you're dealing with, ask questions of your passage – to whom was this written? Why? When? What came before this passage in the book and what comes after it? What is the flow of thought? Most often, the main line is clear. The more time you have, the more you can research these questions and the more clear the passage will become. If time is short, read the introduction to the book in a Study Bible. When you work through a book passage by passage, you build an understanding of the context as you go.

The second thing to do is make **Observations**. Here you don't ask questions in the first place but rather think about (or, in group settings, discuss) the things that strike you in the passage. Did something surprise you? Catch your eye? Jump out at you for whatever reason? Let your eye run over the passage and point out what you see going on, what you think is significant. At this stage, there are no wrong answers – just statements about what you see before you. The point of observing things is to become familiar with all the elements in your passage so that you can move on to discuss the meaning of all that you've observed.

The third thing is to arrive at the **Meaning** of the passage. This is where you interpret the message of this section. Ask questions like: what is the inspired author's main point? Pay attention to key words that are important to the meaning. If you have time and opportunity, use a concordance (e.g. Biblegateway.com) to look up those key words in other parts of Scripture to get a sense of how the word is used and what it means. Then ask of your passage: What is God saying here? How would the first readers have understood this passage? What's the meaning for us Christians today? What can be learned about God or our salvation?

Don't get lost in the details. Sometimes in our Bible Study groups, we focus so much on the finer details that we never get back to the big picture. If all we do is learn lots of interesting things about 10 details (for example) but don't discuss how those details connect together in the overall message, our Bible study becomes glorified trivia. Everyone should be able to leave Bible Study knowing what the main message of this passage is.

When looking at your particular passage, remember how it fits into the overall story or message of the Bible. Most of us have grown up with the Bible so we know that big story of God setting out to save His chosen people by sending a Saviour. The Old Testament leads up to the Saviour's coming while the NT reveals His arrival and the beginning of the New Covenant. Ask yourself: how does this passage fit into that big story?

The fourth thing to think about is the **Messiah**, Jesus Christ. This is connected to the meaning. Since all of Scripture points us to Christ in some way, we should ask how each passage connects with Christ. What do we learn about the Messiah? Does this passage shed light on God's plan to save sinners in Jesus? Is the human need for the Messiah present (if so, how so)? Do we learn about man's inability to save himself and the need for grace? Is Christ mentioned

explicitly? Is He in the text personally? If so, what is He doing and what does this say about His Person and/or work?

The fifth thing to ponder and discuss is **Application**. This is the part where we ask: so what? What's the value in knowing all these things? What's the point for us? What difference does God want this passage to make in my life? This, I think, has been a weakness in our group Bible studies and perhaps also our personal and family devotions. We seem to spend a lot of time talking about the finer points of what the text says, maybe even what it *means* but by comparison very little about how that meaning applies to us believers today, here, in our real-life situation. Too many people walk away from Bible Study groups feeling frustrated that they did not benefit from the Bible study. Yet, God has designed His Word to be an active force in our lives, to direct us and shape us and guide us – so we need to give serious time to this part!

I suggest looking for application along three lines: **Perspective, Attitude, Lifestyle (PAL)**. Ask three basic questions:

1) Does this text shape our perspective – if so, how so? In what ways does it alter my perspective on God, on life, on the world, on the church, on me, on my family, on my goals in life?

2) Does this text shape our attitude – if so, how so? In what ways should it affect my attitude (or: feelings) toward God, church, our family, ourselves, our friends, our work?

3) Does this text shape our lifestyle – if so, how so? Is there a command for us? Are we being urged to do something? Is there an example we are meant to follow? Or not to follow?

A general question to ask is: what is my life like at the moment compared to what this text tells me it should be like?

The COMMA method can be used by any individual, family or group, just with the Bible in hand and maybe a concordance. I would encourage you to first work through a passage yourself before turning to the notes in your Study Bible or commentary. Without the use of a devotional or some kind of Bible study tool, you may only get so far, but the advantage will be that you will have worked it through for yourself and it will be fresh in your mind. If you then consult commentaries or other tools, you can judge their accuracy better. There's nothing like interacting directly with God's Word and asking Him to help you understand it. You'd be surprised how far you can come on your own.

Leading a Group Bible Study

Before I say something about the leaders, let me say this to all participants: the best thing you can do for your leaders and the group is to study the passage yourself in advance (pre-study). You will only get out of Bible study what you put into it, so while leaders have a responsibility to guide the discussion in a profitable, upbuilding way, participants need to come ready to

contribute. If you are fighting for time, take one of your daily devotions and give that time to fore-study. It will bless both you and your group.

Leaders need to absolutely come prepared, having done fore-study. Whether or not you use a discussion guide, you should have spent time on your own thinking through the passage. You should know more than just what the study guide says. You need to be ready to lead the discussion with questions beyond what the study guide offers, to bring out the fuller meaning and the deeper application of the passage. Many of the study guides we use are evangelical in origin and don't bring out biblical hallmarks like God's covenant, or election or sovereignty or the antithesis, teachings we are familiar with in Reformed churches. Study group leaders should be prepared to broaden the discussion to bring out what might be missing from the guide.

Leaders have to keep one eye on the clock and another eye on the progress of the discussion. In other words, if your meeting has a normal closing time, the leader needs to make sure the discussion gets beyond the points of Observation, Meaning and Messiah to include a healthy time allotment for Application. Just like you wouldn't be satisfied if the preacher in a sermon told you what a text meant but never explained what difference that should make in your life, so the Bible Study meeting is unsatisfactory if it does not get to the part of application. I would say it stronger: it has failed in its purpose, same as a sermon without application. The leader needs to make sure the discussion doesn't get bogged down and that serious time and attention is given to the Application.

Related to this, the leader needs to be wise in keeping the discussion on track, focussed on the meaning of the Bible passage and its application. I hear lots of people complain that meeting discussions go way off topic and disappear down a rabbit hole chasing topics that are only distantly related to the passage. Leaders should steer the participants back on track. On the other hand, a leader should not be a slave to the guide book being used or cut off a discussion which may not have been planned but is in fact related to the text and is fruitful for the meeting. This takes wisdom and tact. People sometimes raise good questions which bring up points of application that many people wrestle with. So long as it connects with your text, let it ride for a while and let people benefit from the group's conclusions. If it is not related to your text, as a leader tell the person it's a good topic for discussion when you have a free topic night, but for now we need to keep listening to what God is saying in this text. In the end, the whole group will benefit from a rich, robust discussion of the Word of God that is before you.

Leaders need to be wise in handling opinions. One frustration I keep hearing about is that many meeting participants offer opinions, "I think this..." or "I feel...". When this is done by many people, you get a lot of opinions but no clarity, nothing solid to hang on to. People leave without a sense of direction. This does not serve to build faith or love for God. Opinions and viewpoints have their place but participants need to support their opinions with reasoning from the text. "I think Paul is saying x because in the previous paragraph he writes such and such..."

Make your case and present it to the meeting – that’s good, that’s valid, that’s healthy. And the leader should let the meeting arrive at a consensus as to the meaning of the passage. While there may be many legitimate applications of a text, usually there is one clear meaning. In cases where the meaning could be one or the other, then too the “opinions” need to be backed up with good arguments.

Home Bible Study

Let me end with a comment or two on the importance of family Bible study or devotions. This is the training ground for our kids and teenagers and future leaders of the church. If we can develop our family devotions into vibrant interaction with the Bible, where Dad and Mom get into discussions with the teens and answer the curious questions of the younger children, where the family takes an interest in what God is saying and wants to understand it and put it into practice, then our teens will take that passion into YPS and we as parents will take that hunger for God’s Word into Men’s Society, Women’s Society, and Couples’ Club. Conversely, if love for God’s Word is not shown by Dad and Mom – and especially by Dad as the head of the house – it’s going to be an uphill battle to stoke the fire of love for the Bible in the belly of our children.

This is a big challenge with busy families and busy schedules. If you’ve already got this kind of pattern going on, great! Keep it up! If not, I would suggest starting small. Let your reading of the Bible at meal times with the family be a smaller portion and give time for some questions. Simply start asking your children a few questions. Ask about the context. Ask about some of the details of the text – what did they observe? What jumped out at them? Ask the older ones about what it means, ask the “so what?” question too. What is the take away for us in daily life?

When Dad or Mom slows down and spends a bit of time asking questions, the mindset of the family will begin to change. Now it’s not just read the Bible and move on because that’s we do but it’s read the Bible thoughtfully and think about what it means. The children will begin to anticipate the questions and so they will learn to listen more carefully. And as they listen more carefully, they will come with questions of their own! They may put Mom and Dad on the spot, which is good, and if you as parents can’t answer it right away, promise that you’ll look into it and then come back as family on another occasion when you have more time and explain what you’ve learned!

Much more could be said on this point, but if Mom and especially Dad, as leader, is not leading by example and showing a love to study God’s Word, we can hardly expect our children to do so either.

Let me finish there. Thank-you for your attention!

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