

Question: Do you have any suggestions to help me read and better understand the Bible?

Sometimes we make Bible study more difficult than it should be, but we can also make it overly simplistic. The Bible was not intended just for scholars. Its essential teachings can be grasped by almost any thoughtful reader. At the same time, it provides more than adequate challenge to the greatest of intellects. Thus, without intending to get too complicated, I offer the following helpful principles for personal Bible study. However, I caution you not to allow any difficulty with understanding these principles to keep you from continuing to read and study the Bible for yourself. The more you read the Bible, the more you will understand and discover for yourself how to interpret it.

(1) *Begin by reading the Bible itself.* Bible commentaries, study guides and other Christian books can be helpful; but they are only secondary. After reading the Bible for yourself, you should be able to better evaluate whether the observations of others are accurate or not.

(2) *Those of us in the English-speaking world need to remember that we are reading the Bible in translation.* The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew and Greek. Since words in one language do not always have an exact equivalent in another language, a comparison of different versions can often help get a broader understanding of the original words. However, make your primary Bible a translation by a group of recognized scholars like those who translated the Revised Standard, the New American Standard or the New International versions instead of a one-man translation or a Bible paraphrase like the Living Bible or The Message. While all of these can be helpful, one's primary Bible should be a translation that is intended to stay as close to the original wording as possible.

(3) *Approach the Bible in the same way that you would any book in human language.* Although the Bible is the divinely-given word of God, it was also given to us in ordinary human language with both figurative and literal wording. Our Lord wanted ordinary human beings to read and understand his word.

(4) *As you study the Bible, pray for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.* The apostle Paul wrote: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

(5) *Remember that the purpose of scripture is that we may know God and live by what he has taught us.* Our reading of scripture should help us come to know how God not only thinks but also his heart and the purposes for his creation. The Bible was not intended for mere mental gymnastics but to learn to love, trust and obey our Heavenly Father. An unwillingness to put what we learn into practice will hinder the ability to understand God's word (John 7:17).

(6) *Study each individual passage of scripture in the light of the whole of each book of the Bible.* Try to determine who wrote or said what, when and where it was said, and under what circumstances. Words can be made to mean almost anything when separated from the context that shows the writer's purpose in what is said.

(7) *Find out all you can about the historical background of the writings in the Bible.* While the Bible has application to all people in all ages, it was originally written to a people who lived in a different time and place with different ways of doing things from what we have today. Commentaries and Bible dictionaries can be helpful at this point.

(8) Finally, *respect the nature of different kinds of literature in the Bible.* Almost instinctively we understand the difference between a fairy tale and a newspaper report or poetry and narrative in today's world. The different books of the Bible also have different types of literature: narrative, law, poetry or wisdom literature, gospels, letters and apocalyptic literature. Each book of the Bible should be read according to the nature of the literature in which it is written.

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