

## INTRODUCTION

The previous nine lessons in this series were devoted to a study of the qualities of Scripture. We covered nine primary characteristics that define what the Bible is. It is:

- **“revelation”** – the *origin* of the Bible’s message (the Bible originates in God Himself, not man);
- **“inspired”** – the *communication* of the Bible’s message (God’s communication of His Word in human language was verbal, plenary, and confluent in nature);
- **“clear”** – the *accessibility* of the Bible’s message (God intends that the meaning of His Word be understandable to all those who have ears to hear; it is a demonstration of His goodness);
- **“true”** – the *reliability* of the Bible’s message (the Bible is completely trustworthy in all it describes and all it intends to convey);
- **“sufficient”** – the *adequacy* of the Bible’s message (the contents of the Bible are exactly what God’s people need in order to live faithfully in His sight in the present age);
- **“necessary”** – the *urgency* of the Bible’s message (the Word of God alone provides the solution to the spiritual problems of humanity—both for the lost and for the saved);
- **“authoritative”** – the *obligation* of the Bible’s message (because the Bible is God’s Word, it obligates humanity to believe it and to obey it; it cannot be subjected to man’s adjudication);
- **“powerful”** – the *efficacy* of the Bible’s message (the Bible never fails to accomplish the purposes which God has for it—whether for blessing or for judgment); and
- **“complete”** – this *completion* of the Bible’s message (God’s Word has been completely delivered for the present stage of redemptive history—the age of the church).

But more is needed with respect to Scripture than a study of its qualities. The contents of this marvelous book must be studied. Therefore, the second half of this series will be devoted to the practical aspects of effective Bible study.

To begin with, we must consider the personal prerequisites for the faithful study of Scripture. As the saying goes, **“Attitude affects interpretation.”** In other words, the student’s spiritual state and his preparation for study will have an immeasurable influence on the fruitfulness of such study. A survey of Scripture itself suggests seven essential prerequisites.

## I. DIVINE REGENERATION

The first and fundamental prerequisite for biblical interpretation is that of ***divine regeneration***. For one to have the capacity to study and understand Scripture appropriately, he cannot be one who is still dead in his sins and hostile to God. The student of God’s Word must be spiritually *alive*.

- **1 Corinthians 2:14–15** – “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.”

The Apostle Paul makes this often-neglected assertion in the context of a broader argument about the revelation of God. From 1 Corinthians 2:6–13, Paul extols the manner in which God has made His knowledge known. But the impeccability of that revelation does not guarantee all will receive and understand it. In particular, Paul makes two assertions in v. 14 regarding the “natural” or “unregenerate man”: (1) he does not accept or welcome the Spirit’s revelation due to his ***moral bias***; and (2) he is unable to understand the Spirit’s revelation due to his ***intellectual inability***. In other words, the unbeliever can recognize enough of the meaning of God’s Word to scoff at its message (v. 14a), and yet he is utterly incapable in his natural state of spiritual deadness to understand the meaning of Scripture truly (v. 14b). Paul repeats this same truth elsewhere, including Romans 1:18–32; 2 Corinthians 3:14–15; 4:3–4; and Ephesians 4:17–19. Jesus similarly states that “the Spirit of truth . . . the world cannot receive” (John 14:17).

Therefore, for a man to accept and understand the Word of God, he must be “born again.” It is precisely the supernatural act of *regeneration* that overcomes the blinding effects of the sin nature and the enslaving power of Satan, enabling the once-dead sinner “to see” on the pages of Scripture that which he could never see before.

Scripture speaks of regeneration as being “born of God” (John 1:12–13), being “born again” (John 3:5–8; 1 Pet 1:3, 23), having “the veil lifted” (2 Cor 3:12–18), being made “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), being “made alive” (Eph 2:5), and being “taught by God” (Eph 4:20–21). A. W. Pink summarizes this miraculous and monergistic work of God well when he writes, “Regeneration consists in a radical change of heart, for there is implanted a new disposition as the foundation of all holy exercises; the mind being renovated, the affections elevated, and the will emancipated from the bondage of sin.”

Thus, the most crucial prerequisite for the study of the Bible is *new birth*. “You must be born again.” Without it, there is no hope for understanding and appreciating what God has revealed in Scripture.

## II. SPIRITUAL ILLUMINATION

But once the Holy Spirit has brought life to the sinner through regeneration, His ministry to the new believer does not end. While regeneration is that decisive, once-in-a-lifetime event, ***spiritual illumination*** is that on-going work of the Spirit throughout the believer’s life.

What is “illumination”? John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue provide a basic definition: Illumination is “the work of the Holy Spirit giving understanding when the Scripture is heard or read” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 931). Furthermore, illumination can be contrasted with regeneration as follows: “Regeneration transforms the individual in totality, making him a new creation, resulting in a new nature. In other words, regeneration involves a dispositional change. Illumination, properly speaking, is the light seen by the one who is able, through regeneration, to see” (Stephen Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty*, 69).

A survey of the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination reveals that illumination involves four primary functions:

- it *expands* the believer’s *understanding* of God’s Word;
- it *endows* the believer with *assurance* in the importance and truthfulness of God’s Word;
- it *enlarges* the believer’s *hunger* for God’s Word; and
- it *enables* the believer to *appropriate* God’s Word.

Insight into this ministry of the Holy Spirit is particularly rich in the Bible’s recorded prayers—especially in the prayers of Psalm 119 and the prayers of Paul:

- Psalm 119:18, 27, 34, 73, 125, 144, 169, etc.
- Ephesians 1:17–19a; 3:14–19; Philippians 1:9–10; Colossians 1:9–12.

These and other biblical texts which describe the Spirit’s work of illumination lead to certain implications: (1) Illumination is *not* revelation—the giving of new divine knowledge; instead, it works in tandem with the Word of God already given (remember, the Bible is complete). (2) Illumination is *not* inspiration—the Spirit’s work of ensuring that divine knowledge was captured perfectly in biblical writer’s understanding and language; illumination is not a guarantee that the interpreter will arrive at a perfect understanding. (3) Illumination does *not* occur apart from the Bible; the Spirit works with the Word and through the Word, but never without the Word. (4) Illumination does *not* negate the role of pastors and teachers or the need for disciplined study; it works together with other God-ordained means for the sanctification of His people.

## III. GENUINE DESIRE

Appetites dictate actions! We all know that hunger is what prompts us to eat, and the appetite for certain foods motivates us to do what it takes to find and prepare such food. But appetites are not arbitrary; they are developed over time. Appetites are forged out of *settled convictions* and *repeated consumption*. This is certainly true regarding the study of God’s word. It must be founded upon ***genuine desire***, and that desire requires development.

→ Matthew 4:4; 1 Peter 2:2  
→ Psalm 19:10; 119:16, 20, 24, 131

As John MacArthur has written, “Halfhearted Bible study is a bore. If you come to the Scriptures legalistically, ritualistically, or because you are intimidated by your peers or your pastor, you won’t get much out of it. What you need is a hunger in your heart, a passion for knowing God through His Word” (*How to Get the Most from God’s Word*, 153–54).

What, then, must the believer do when the desire is weak? In the same way that the unhealthy man who craves junk food cannot wait until he *wants* to eat his vegetables but must first train his mind (settled conviction) and then train his tastebuds (repeated consumption), so the Christian must constantly recall the truth that “man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (settled conviction) and press ahead with regular study (repeated consumption). Most of all, his constant prayer should be, “Lord, make me see that Your Word is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey.”

#### IV. CONSISTENT PRAYER

**Consistent prayer** is an indispensable prerequisite for Bible study. Not only is prayer the means to request from God the appropriate desire and perseverance for study, it is the means to express our dependence on Him for the understanding and appropriation of His Word. John MacArthur rightly states, “No Christian should ever look down at the Word without first looking up at the very Source of the Word and asking for guidance. To engage in Bible study without prayer is presumption, if not sacrilege” (*How to Get the Most From God’s Word*, 155).

The writer of Psalm 119 is exemplary in this regard:

→ Psalm 119:12, 18, 33, 38, 66, 68, 108, 131, 135, 144, 169

At the same time, it must be emphasized that *prayer* is not a substitute for *study itself*. Various movements in church history have advocated an *anti-intellectual approach* which argues that prayer (speaking to God) is a higher spiritual discipline than studying His Word (hearing from God). But pitting these disciplines against each other is unbiblical and irrational. Prayer must include study, and study must be prayerful. Benjamin Warfield expressed this as follows:

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. ‘What!’ is the appropriate response, ‘than ten hours over your books, on your knees?’ Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology. (“The Religious Life of Theological Students,” 182)

#### V. DISCIPLINED STUDY

Hand-in-glove with prayer is the necessary prerequisite of a commitment to **disciplined study**. The text that expresses this prerequisite most poignantly is found in Paul’s last letter to Timothy:

→ **2 Timothy 2:15** – “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

The first portion of Paul’s instruction expresses the *command* for discipline: “Be diligent!” (v. 15a); the middle portion of the verse contains Paul’s description of the *character* of the disciple: “as an unashamed workman” (v. 15b); the final portion of the verse describes the *course* of this discipline: “accurately handling the word of truth” (v. 15c). True, as an expression of His benevolence, God has given us a clear, accessible Bible. But this accessibility does not mean God has suspended the need for learning through careful, disciplined, and even strenuous study. That which we value most is always that which comes at the greatest cost. This same is true of Bible study.

#### VI. PERSONAL OBEDIENCE

The Word of God is not merely an object that is to be examined. A student who approaches the Bible with only this objective misses the Bible’s purpose. God has given His Word to *transform us*. As such, a commitment to **personal obedience**—to *applying the Bible’s message*—is essential.

→ Deuteronomy 29:29; Joshua 1:8; Ezra 7:10; Psalm 119:4; James 1:22–25

Ezra's example in Ezra 7:10 is the model for all faithful students of Scripture. First and foremost, Ezra was committed to *studying the Word of God*. But Ezra didn't stop there. He then sought to *practice* what he learned. And only once he had appropriated the message of the text to his own life did he open his mouth to *teach others also*.

We must have the same heart of submission in response to Scripture that the German preacher Baldusgar expressed when he stated, "Let the Word of the Lord come, let it come. We will submit to it if we had many hundred necks to put under it" (cited in Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Fear*, vii-viii).

## VII. FEARFUL REVERENCE

The final prerequisite is really the product of the previous six prerequisites: the student of God's Word must approach the text with **fearful reverence**. Charles Bridges provides a very helpful definition of this reverence when he writes, "But what is this fear of the Lord? It is that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law" (*Proverbs*, 3–4). In other words, what is needed for faithful Bible study is the exact opposite of that "healthy dose of skepticism" recommended by many so-called "expert scholars" today.

→ Psalm 25:9; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Isaiah 66:1–2

Once again, Charles Bridges writes, "It is most important to study the Bible in the spirit of the Bible—to exercise a critical habit in a spiritual atmosphere. Prayer, faith, humility, diligence, will bring rest and satisfaction to minds exercised in the school of God."

**"The more reverence we have for the Word of God, the more joy we shall find in it."  
—Matthew Henry**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. In light of 1 Corinthians 2:14, how are we to assess the interpretations of the Bible by those who have not believed in the gospel?
2. According to this study, define the Holy Spirit's ministry of "illumination." What are the characteristics of this ministry? What portions of Scripture speak most of this ministry? List several misunderstandings of this ministry—things which illumination is *not*.
3. What actions can be taken when the desire to study God's Word is weak? What are some wrong responses to this common experience?
4. It is not uncommon to hear people pit prayer and study against each other. They claim that *to pray over* the text of Scripture is more important than *to study* the text of Scripture. Why is this claim incorrect and unhealthy?
5. In light of the exhortation of 2 Timothy 2:15, what are some practical steps you need to implement to incorporate more discipline into your study of Scripture?
6. What are practical ways that the Christian can manifest "fearful reverence" to the Word of God?

## FURTHER STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Isaiah 66:2 and 2 Timothy 2:15.
2. Read Psalm 119 carefully over the next week. From this psalm, compile a list of essential characteristics for every student of God's Word.
3. Is there unconfessed sin in your life that is preventing you from getting the most from God's Word? Spend time confessing that sin (1 John 1:9) and beseeching the Lord for His gracious enablement to mortify that sin in your life.
4. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled "Longing for the Word" (*Grace to You*), preached March 8, 2015, available here: [Longing for the Word](#).
5. Listen to the sermon by Tom Pennington, entitled "Bible Study for Every Christian: Preparation" (Countryside Bible Church), preached June 26, 2011, available here: [Bible Study for Every Christian \(Part 1\): Preparation | Countryside Bible Church](#).

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** [www.gracechurch.org/motw](http://www.gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** February 26, "I Am the Good Shepherd" (Chris Hamilton)