

Profitable Bible Study

by

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There are many profitable methods of Bible Study. There is something, however, in Bible study more important than the best methods, that is, the fundamental conditions of profitable study. He who meets these conditions will get more out of the Bible, while pursuing the poorest method, than will he who does not meet them, while pursuing the best method. Many a one who is eagerly asking, "What method shall I pursue in my Bible study?" needs something that goes far deeper than a new and better method.

1. The first of the fundamental conditions of the most profitable Bible study is that the student must be born again.

The Bible is a spiritual book, it "expresses spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:13), and only a spiritual man can understand its deepest and most characteristic and most precious teachings. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Spiritual discernment can be obtained in but one way, by being born again. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

No mere knowledge of the human languages in which the Bible was written, however extensive and accurate it may be, will qualify one to understand and appreciate it. One must understand the divine language in which it was written as well, the language of the Holy Spirit. A person who understands the language of the Holy Spirit, but who does not understand a word of Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic, will get more out of the Bible than one who knows all about Greek and Hebrew and cognate languages, but is not born again, and, consequently, does not understand the language of the Holy Spirit. It is a well-demonstrated fact that many common men and women who are entirely ignorant of any knowledge of the original tongues in which the Bible was written have a knowledge of the real contents of the Bible, its actual teaching, in its depth and fullness and beauty, that surpasses that of many learned professors in theological faculties.

One of the greatest follies of the day, is to get unregenerate men to teach the Bible because of their rare knowledge of the human forms of speech in which the book was written. It would be as reasonable to set a man to teach art

because he had an accurate technical knowledge of paints. It requires esthetic sense to make a man a competent teacher of art. It requires spiritual sense to make a man a competent teacher of the Bible. The man who has esthetic discernment but little or no technical knowledge of paint would be a far more competent critic of works of art than a man who has a great technical knowledge of paint but no esthetic discernment; and so the man who has no technical knowledge of Greek and Hebrew but has spiritual discernment is a far more competent critic of the Bible than he who has a rare technical knowledge of Greek and Hebrew but no spiritual discernment. It is exceedingly unfortunate that, in some quarters, more emphasis is laid on a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew in training for the ministry than is laid on spiritual life and its consequent spiritual discernment.

Unregenerate men should not be forbidden to study the Bible, for the Word of God is the instrument the Holy Spirit uses in the New Birth (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18); but it should be distinctly understood that, while there are teachings in the Bible that the natural man can understand, and beauties which he can see, its most distinctive and characteristic teachings are beyond his grasp, and its highest beauties belong to a world in which he has no vision. The first fundamental condition of the most profitable Bible study is, then, "You must be born again." You cannot study the Bible to the greatest profit if you have not been born again. Its best treasures are sealed to you.

2. The second condition of the most profitable study is a love for the Bible.

A man who eats with an appetite will get far more good out of his meal than one who eats from a sense of duty. It is good when a student of the Bible can say with Job, "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my daily bread" (Job 23:12), or with Jeremiah, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty" (Jeremiah 15:16). Many come to the table God has spread in His Word with no appetite for spiritual food, and go mincing here and there and grumbling about everything. Spiritual indigestion lies at the bottom of much modern criticism of the Bible.

But how can one get a love for the Bible? First of all, by being born again. Where there is life there is likely to be appetite. A dead man never hungers. This brings us back to the first condition. But going beyond this, the more there is of vitality, the more there is of hunger. Abounding life means abounding hunger for the Word. Study of the Word stimulates love for the Word. The author can well remember the time when he had more appetite for books about the Bible than he had for the Bible itself, but with increasing study there has come increasing love for the Book. Bearing in mind who the

author of the Book is, what its purpose is, what its power is, what the riches of its contents are, will go far toward stimulating love and appetite for the Book.

3. The third condition is willingness to do hard work.

Solomon has given a graphic picture of the Bible student who gets the most profit out of his study, "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:1-5). Now, seeking for silver and searching for hidden treasure means hard work, and he who wishes to get not only the silver but the gold as well out of the Bible, and find its "hidden treasure," must make up his mind to dig. It is not glancing at the Word, or reading the Word, but studying the Word, meditating on the Word, pondering the Word, that brings the richest yields.

The reason why many get so little out of their Bible reading is simply because they are not willing to think. Intellectual laziness lies at the bottom of a large percent of fruitless Bible reading. People are constantly crying for new methods of Bible study, but what many of them wish is simply some method of Bible study by which they can get all the good out of the Bible without work. If someone could tell lazy Christians some method of Bible study whereby they could put the sleepest ten minutes of the day, just before they go to bed, into Bible study, and get the profit out of it that God intends His children shall get out of the study of His Word, that would be just what they desire. But it can't be done. Men must be willing to work, and work hard, if they wish to dig out the treasures of infinite wisdom and knowledge and blessing which God has stored up in His Word.

A business friend once asked me in a hurried call to tell him "in a word" how to study his Bible. I replied, "Think." The Psalmist pronounces that man "blessed" whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2). The Lord commanded Joshua to meditate on it day and night, and assured him that as a result of this meditation, "you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:8).

Of Mary, the mother of Jesus, we read, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). In this way alone can one study the Bible to the greatest profit. One pound of beef well chewed and digested and assimilated will give more strength than tons of beef merely glanced at; and one verse of Scripture chewed and digested and assimilated will give

more strength than whole chapters simply skimmed. Weigh every word you read in the Bible. Look at it. Turn it over and over. The most familiar passages get a new meaning in this way. Spend fifteen minutes on each word in Psalm 23:1 ("The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."), or Philippians 4:19 ("My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."), and see if it is not so.

4. The fourth condition is a will wholly surrendered to God.

Jesus said, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17). A surrendered will gives that clearness of spiritual vision which is necessary to understand God's Book. Many of the difficulties and obscurities of the Bible rise wholly from the fact that the will of the student is not surrendered to the will of the author of the Book. It is remarkable how clear and simple and beautiful passages that once puzzled us become when we are brought to that place where we say to God, "I surrender my will unconditionally to You. I have no will but Yours. Teach me Your will." A surrendered will will do more to make the Bible an open book than a university education. It is simply impossible to get the largest profit out of your Bible study until you do surrender your will to God. You must be very definite about this.

There are many who say, "Oh, yes, my will, I think, is surrendered to God," and yet it is not. They have never gotten alone with God and said intelligently and definitely to him, "O God, I here and now give myself up to You, for You to command me, and lead me, and shape me, and send me, and do with me, absolutely as You will." Such an act is a wonderful key to unlock the treasure house of God's Word. The Bible becomes a new book when a man does that. Doing that brought a complete transformation in the author's theology and life and ministry.

5. The fifth condition is very closely related to the fourth. The student of the Bible who would get the greatest profit out of his studies must be obedient to its teachings as soon as he sees them.

It was good advice James gave to early Christians, and to us, "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). There are a good many who consider themselves Bible students who are deceiving themselves in this way today. They see what the Bible teaches, but they do not follow it, and they soon lose their power to see it. Truth obeyed leads to more truth. Truth disobeyed destroys the capacity for discovering truth. There must be not only a general surrender of the will, but specific, practical obedience to each new Word of God discovered. There is no place where the law, "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an

abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him," is more gloriously certain on the one hand and more sternly unavoidable on the other than in the matter of using or refusing the truth revealed in the Bible.

Use, and you get more; refuse, and you lose all. Do not study the Bible for the mere gratification of intellectual curiosity, but to find out how to live and please God. Whatever duty you find commanded in the Bible, do it at once. Whatever good you see in any Bible character, imitate it immediately. Whatever mistake you note in the actions of Bible men and women, scrutinize your own life to see if you are making the same mistake, and if you find you are, correct it immediately. James compares the Bible to a mirror (James 1:23, 24). The chief good of a mirror is to show you if there is anything out of order about you; if you find there is, you can set it right. Use the Bible in that way. Obeying the truth you already see will solve the mysteries in the verses you do not yet understand. Disobeying the truth you see darkens the whole world of truth. This is the secret of much of the skepticism and error of the day. Men see the truth, but do not follow it--then it is gone.

I knew a bright and promising young minister. He made rapid advancement in the truth. He took very advanced ground on one point especially, and the storm came. One day he said to his wife, "It is very nice to believe this, but we need not speak too much about it." They began, or he, at least, to hide their testimony. The wife died and he drifted. The Bible became to him a sealed book. Faith reeled. He publicly renounced his faith in some of the fundamental truths of the Bible. He seemed to lose his grip even on the doctrine of immortality. What was the cause of it all? Truth not lived and stood for flees. Today that man is much admired and applauded by some, but daylight has given place to darkness in his soul.

6. The sixth condition is a childlike mind.

God reveals His deepest truths to babes. No age needs more than our own to lay to heart the words of Jesus, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25). We must be babes if God is to reveal His truth to us, and we are to understand His Word. A child is not full of its own wisdom. It recognizes its ignorance and is ready to be taught. It does not oppose the ideas of its teachers to those of its own. It is in that spirit we should come to the Bible if we are to get the most profit out of our study.

Do not come to the Bible full of your own ideas, and seeking from it a confirmation of them. Come rather to find out what are God's ideas as He has revealed them there. Come not to find a confirmation of your own opinion, but

to be taught what God may be pleased to teach. If a man comes to the Bible just to find his ideas taught there, he will find them; but if he comes recognizing his own ignorance, just as a little child to be taught, he will find something infinitely better than his own ideas, even the mind of God. We see why it is that many persons cannot see things which are plainly taught in the Bible. The doctrine taught is not their idea, of which they are so full that there is no room left for that which the Bible actually teaches.

We have an illustration of this in the apostles themselves at one stage in their training. In Mark 9:31, we read, "He was teaching his disciples. He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.'" Now, that is as plain and definite as language can make it, but it was utterly contrary to the ideas of the apostles as to what was to happen to the Christ. So we read in the next verse, "But they did not understand what he meant." Isn't that amazing? But is it any more amazing than our own inability to comprehend plain statements in the Bible when they run counter to our preconceived ideas?

Problems many Christians find with portions of the Sermon on the Mount would be plain enough if we just came to Christ like a child to be taught what to believe and do, rather than coming as full-grown men who already know it all, and who must find some interpretations of Christ's words that will fit into our mature and infallible philosophy. Many a man is so full of an unbiblical theology he has been taught that it takes him a lifetime to get rid of it and understand the clear teaching of the Bible.

"Oh, what can this verse mean?" many a bewildered man cries. Why, it means what it plainly says; but what you are after is not the meaning God has manifestly put into it, but the meaning you can by some ingenious trick of exegesis twist out of it and make it fit into your scheme. Don't come to the Bible to find out what you can make it mean, but to find out what God intended it to mean. Men often miss the real truth of a verse by saying, "But that can be interpreted this way." Oh, yes, so it can, but is that the way God intended it to be interpreted? We all need to pray often if we would get the most profit out of our Bible study, "Oh, God, make me a little child. Empty me of my own ideas. Teach me Your own mind. Make me ready like a little child to receive all that You have to say, no matter how contrary it is to what I have thought before." How the Bible opens up to one who approaches it in that way! How it closes up to the wise fool, who thinks he knows everything, and imagines he can give points to Peter and Paul, and even to Jesus Christ and to God Himself! Someone has well said the best method of Bible study is "the baby method."

I was once talking with a minister friend about what seemed to be the clear teaching of a certain passage. "Yes," he replied, "but that doesn't agree with my philosophy." This man was sincere, yet he did not have the childlike spirit, which is an essential condition of the most profitable Bible study. But there are many who approach the Bible in the same way. It is a great point gained in Bible study when we are brought to realize that an infinite God knows more than we, that, indeed, our highest wisdom is less than the knowledge of the most ignorant babe compared with His. But we so easily and so constantly forget this that every time we open our Bibles we would do well to get down humbly before God and say, "Father, I am but a child, teach me."

7. The seventh condition of studying the Bible to the greatest profit is that we study it as the Word of God.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Church of the Thessalonians, thanked God without ceasing that when they received the Word of God they "accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Well might he thank God for that, and well may we thank God when we get to the place where we receive the Word of God as the Word of God. Not that one who does not believe the Bible is the Word of God should be discouraged from studying it. Indeed, one of the best things that one who does not believe that the Bible is the Word of God can do, if he is honest, is to study it. The author of this book once doubted utterly that the Bible was the Word of God, and the firm confidence that he has today that the Bible is the Word of God has come more from the study of the Book itself than from anything else. Those who doubt it are more usually those who study about the Book, than those who dig into the actual teachings of the Book itself. But while the best book of Christian evidences is the Bible, and while the most utter skeptic should be encouraged to study it, we will not get the largest measure of profit out of that study until we reach the point where we become convinced that the Bible is God's Word, and when we study it as such.

There is a great difference between believing theoretically that the Bible is God's Word and studying it as God's Word. Thousands would tell you that they believe the Bible is God's Word who do not study it as God's Word. Studying the Bible as the Word of God involves four things.

(1) First, it involves the unquestioning acceptance of its teachings when definitely ascertained, even when they may appear unreasonable or impossible.

Reason demands that we submit our judgment and reasonings to the statements of infinite wisdom. There is nothing more irrational than rationalism, which makes the finite wisdom the test of infinite wisdom,

and submits the teachings of God's omniscience to the approval of man's judgment. It is the sublimest and absurdest conceit that says, "This cannot be true, though God says it, for it does not agree with my reason." "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?" (Romans 9:20). Real human wisdom, when it finds infinite wisdom, bows before it and says, "Speak what You will and I will believe." When we have once become convinced that the Bible is God's Word its teachings must be the end of all controversy and discussion. A "thus says the Lord" will settle every question. Yet there are many who profess to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and if you show them what the Bible clearly teaches on some disputed point, they will shake their heads and say, "Yes, but I think so and so," or "Doctor -----, or Professor this, our church doesn't teach that way." There is little profit in that sort of Bible study.

(2) Studying the Bible as the Word of God involves, in the second place, absolute reliance on all its promises in all their length and breadth.

He who studies the Bible as the Word of God will not discount any one of its promises one iota. He who studies the Bible as the Word of God will say, "God, who cannot lie, has promised," and will not attempt to make God a liar by trying to make one of His promises mean less than it says. He who studies the Bible as the Word of God will be on the lookout for promises, and as soon as he finds one he will seek to ascertain just what it means, and as soon as he discovers what it means, he will step right out on that promise and risk everything on its full meaning. That is one of the secrets of profitable Bible study.

Search for promises and appropriate them as fast as you find them, which is done by meeting the conditions and risking all on them. That is the way to make your own all the fullness of blessing God has for you. This is the key to all the treasures of God's grace. Happy is the man who has so learned to study the Bible as God's Word that he is ready to claim for himself every new promise as it appears, and to risk everything on it.

(3) Studying the Bible as the Word of God involves, in the third place, obedience--prompt, exact obedience, without asking any questions to its every precept.

Obedience may seem hard, it may seem impossible, but God has commanded it and I have nothing to do but to obey and leave the results with God. If you would get the very most profit out of your Bible study resolve that from this time you will claim every clear promise and obey every plain command, and that as to the promises and commands whose intent is not yet clear you will try to get their meaning made clear.

(4) Studying the Bible as the Word of God involves, in the fourth place, studying it in God's presence.

When you read a verse of Scripture hear the voice of the living God speaking directly to you in these written words. There is new power and attractiveness in the Bible when you have learned to hear a living, present Person, God our Father, Himself talking directly to you in these words. One of the most fascinating and inspiring statements in the Bible is, "Enoch walked with God" (Genesis 5:24). We can have God's glorious companionship any moment we please by simply opening His Word and letting the living and ever-present God speak to us through it. With what holy awe and strange and unutterable joy one studies the Bible if he studies it in this way! It is heaven come down to earth.

8. The eighth and last condition of the most profitable Bible study is prayerfulness.

The Psalmist prayed, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:18). Every one who desires to get the greatest profit out of his Bible study needs to offer that or a similar prayer every time he undertakes the study of the Word. Few keys open so many strong boxes that contain hidden treasure as prayer. Few clues unravel so many difficulties. Few microscopes will disclose so many beauties hidden from the eye of the ordinary observer. What new light often shines from an old familiar text as you bend over it in prayer! I believe in studying the Bible a good deal on your knees. When one reads an entire book through on his knees--and this is easily done--that book has a new meaning and becomes a new book. One ought never to open the Bible to read it without at least lifting the heart to God in silent prayer that He will interpret it, illumine its pages by the light of His Spirit.

It is a rare privilege to study any book under the immediate guidance and instruction of its author, and this is the privilege of us all in studying the Bible. When one comes to a passage that is difficult to understand or difficult to interpret, instead of giving it up, or rushing to some learned friend, or to some commentary, he should lay that passage before God, and ask Him to explain it to him, pleading God's promise, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt" (James 1:5-6). It is simply wonderful how the seemingly most difficult passages become plain by this treatment.

Harry Morehouse, one of the most remarkable Bible scholars among unlearned men, used to say that whenever he came to a passage in the Bible which he

could not understand, he would search through the Bible for some other passage that threw light on it, and lay it before God in prayer, and that he had never found a passage that did not yield to this treatment. The author of this book has had a quite similar experience. Some years ago, accompanied by a friend, I was making a tour of Franconian Switzerland, and visiting some of the more famous zoolithic caves. One day a rural letter carrier stopped us and asked if we would like to see a cave of rare beauty and interest, away from the beaten tracks of travel. Of course, we said, yes. He led us through the woods and underbrush to the mouth of the cave, and we entered. All was dark and uncanny. He discussed greatly on the beauty of the cave, telling us of altars and fantastic formations, but we could see absolutely nothing. Now and then he uttered a note to warn us to have a care, as near our feet lay a gulf the bottom of which had never been discovered. We began to fear that we might be the first discoverers of the bottom. There was nothing pleasant about the whole affair.

But as soon as a magnesium taper was lighted, all became different. There were the stalagmites rising from the floor to meet the stalactites as they came down from the ceiling. There were the beautiful and fantastic formations on every hand, and all glistening in fairy like beauty in the brilliant light. So I have often thought it was with many a passage of Scripture. Others tell you of its beauty, but you cannot see it. It looks dark and intricate and forbidding and dangerous, but when God's own light is kindled there by prayer how different all becomes in an instant. You see a beauty that language cannot express, and that only those can appreciate who have stood there in the same light. He who would understand and love his Bible must be much in prayer. Prayer will do more than a college education to make the Bible an open and a glorious book. Perhaps the best lesson I learned in a German university, where I had the privilege of receiving the instruction of one of the most noted and most gifted Bible teachers of any age, was that which came through the statement of one who knew him that Professor Dehtzsch worked out much of his teaching on his knees.

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