

Bible Study

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Bible study is a subject of intense interest for most Christians and any believer who has spent much time reading and studying the Scriptures can testify to their life-changing truth. In the Bible the character, will and purposes of the living God are revealed to mankind climaxing in God's plan of salvation which he brings to fulfillment in Christ Jesus, his Son. This central theme of the Bible is emphasized in Paul's letter to Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (II Tim. 3:14-17).

God's will is for "all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). It is the Scriptures that point the way. First, the Scriptures are intended to bring people to "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Second, the Scriptures provide "training in righteousness" for the saved people of God. In short, God's plan of salvation - both its doctrinal and practical aspects - is the main theme of the Bible around which everything else revolves. In this light, we offer some very simple principles to focus on in Bible study:

(1) Focus on the central theme of the Bible: God's plan of salvation which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The main character of the Bible is God and the main story line of the Bible is God's plan of salvation which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ. It follows that God's plan of salvation should be the central focus of all Bible study. All other biblical topics should be subjected to, and understood in the light of, this overall theme. The Bible is not a twentieth century "how to succeed" book filled with "principles for success"

based on worldly standards. Nor is it a book of esoteric mysteries designed to tickle our itching ears. Instead, it is a book about a living God and the accomplishment of his purposes for his people and creation - all to the praise of his glory. It should be read, studied and understood in this light.

The Bible points to and focuses on the climactic "mid-point" of God's plan of salvation - the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the salvation accomplished through these events. This salvation, which the Old Testament foreshadows and foretells, is announced, recorded and explained in the pages of the New Testament. Each NT "Gospel" comes to a climactic crescendo in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ because it is in these events that salvation has been "won" for the people of God. The Book of Acts and the NT Letters then set forth an explanation of the significance of these salvific events as embodied in the "gospel" message. In short, through his sacrificial death Christ has paid the ransom price for the sins of all mankind forever and through his victorious resurrection God has made him Lord over God's people and creation. This event marks the beginning of a new age in God's plan of salvation for mankind. Paul sets forth a summary of this "gospel" or "good news" in I Corinthians:

Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you, otherwise you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... this is what we preach, and this is what you believed (I Cor. 15:1-11; cf. Rom. 10:9-10).

It is this "gospel" of salvation concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is "of first importance" in the Scriptures and it should be our initial and abiding point of focus in Bible study. By focusing on this victorious mid-point of God's plan of salvation we can see the whole biblical picture in proper perspective. We can look backwards to the time of God's preparation and promises in the Old Testament and then forward to the giving of God's

Spirit on Pentecost as well as to the final consummation of God's kingdom at Christ's return.

All of the NT Letters present salvation from an "already" but "not yet" perspective of fulfillment and should be understood in this light. Believers have "already" received the firstfruits of the Spirit and are therefore "saved." But we have "not yet" received the fulness of the "salvation" that is to be revealed at Christ's return; therefore, we still have "the hope of eternal life." This is set forth clearly in Titus:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

(2) Read and study the Bible in the light of the original intent of each inspired writer and in accordance with each book's historical, cultural and linguistic background.

The Bible should be read intelligently and understood in the light of the original intent of each inspired writer. The belief that "all Scripture is inspired by God" does not mean foregoing reason or doing away with historical, cultural and linguistic study. In order to get the most out of Bible study certain facts are simply essential to know. First, the Bible is a collection of written documents of various kinds. They were collected over many centuries and

finally put in the form in which we have them today. These "books" are arranged logically. For example, in the New Testament: the Gospels, then Acts and then the NT Letters.

Originally, however, each New Testament Gospel, Letter, etc. was written independently to a specific group of people to address specific situations and needs. Each of these NT documents focused on some aspect of the "gospel" of Jesus Christ. But the inspired writers of these documents did not write them with the idea of their being put into a NT "canon" of Scripture - this occurred much later with the final form of our present canon being completed only in the 4th century. Originally each NT document was a self-contained "Gospel," "Letter," etc. and should be read as such. Since they each focus on some aspect of the "gospel" they all fit together "thematically." However, to try to make them fit together in every detail like a giant jigsaw puzzle is to go beyond their original purpose.

Let us remember, it is the "gospel" - the good news of Christ's death and resurrection - that is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). This "good news" is not a complicated message. Even a person who cannot read can understand it and live in the light of it. It is so simple, in fact, that its primary truths were all symbolized in what became the central focus of the gatherings of the early Christian churches - the Lord's Supper. The key to Bible study is to begin with and focus on this "gospel" of salvation. Then, branch out from there to gain a wider scope and understanding of the Bible as a whole.