

Understanding the Bible

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Most of us are not Bible scholars nor do we need to be. The "gospel of salvation" (Eph. 1:13) is a simple message and when explained correctly it is easy to understand. All of the NT books revolve around this same theme. However, if we are going to teach the Bible in our fellowships, churches, Bible studies, etc. then we have a responsibility to be as accurate as we can in what we present. To do this it is helpful to not only read the Bible itself but also to consult Bible study aids that are prepared by experts in biblical studies. The last half of the 20th century - especially the last 25 years - has seen a virtual explosion in such study aids and this will be our focus in this article.

First though, a few preliminary comments may be helpful. It is common knowledge that many Bible believing Christians prefer to "just read the Bible" rather than to use Bible study aids. The fact is, however, that we all read the Bible under the guidance and tutelage of others whether we know it or not. To begin with, every version of the English Bible that we use today - i.e., KJV, NIV, etc. - is the result of a painstaking effort by the translators and editors of that version to understand the "original" text and to translate it into equivalent English that communicates its message faithfully. This very process requires knowledge of the original biblical languages, history, culture, etc. and - unbeknownst to many - forces the translator to make *interpretive* choices in the words he or she chooses for the translation. In addition, it is even more obvious that most people who read the Bible also listen to sermons, teachings, etc. - all of which are aids for helping us to understand the Bible. The question is not then, *if* we should use study aids? Rather it is, *which* study aids will we use and/or *which* teachers will we choose to listen to?

In this light, the Book of Acts presents a wonderful record that is very instructive for those of us who are interested in coming to a better and more detailed understanding of the Bible:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go South to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he started out and on his way he met an

Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Who among us has not felt at times like the Eunuch as we endeavor to read and understand the Scriptures? Who has not at times felt like he needed help? In this light there are three specific points in this record that can serve as basic principles for us in our own reading and study of the Scriptures:

(1). Read, study and memorize the Bible. This is the first thing that should be noticed about the eunuch. He was reading the Scriptures in order to gain an understanding of them. He was searching for truth. This is so very important for no matter what else you do you must read the Scriptures if you want to understand them. Without doing this there is not much point in trying to proceed any further. For it is impossible to gain a good knowledge of the Bible as a whole without putting forth a great deal of time and effort.

Few things in life that are worthwhile come easy and biblical understanding is certainly not one of them. In this light it must be emphasized: *any sincere quest for understanding the Bible must rest on the foundation of one's own reading, study and memorization of the Scriptures.*

(2). We should seek help in understanding the Bible from those who are better trained in the Scriptures. Is there any other field of study where this is not true? The Eunuch in the passage above needed help in understanding the Scriptures from someone who was better trained in the Scriptures than himself. First, he read them for himself. Then he sought help from someone else. The principle responsibility lies upon ourselves for making the necessary effort to study the Bible and then to seek out those resources or teachers that/who can best help us. They don't just automatically or instantaneously appear on our desks, beside our easychairs, or under the Christmas tree.

(3). The focus of our study should be God's plan of salvation which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ - both its doctrinal and practical aspects. The focus of what Philip taught "beginning from that very Scripture" was "the good news about Jesus." This is where all biblical study should begin and where its central and abiding focus must be. The purpose of Bible study is not to find things that will tickle our itching ears. It is to enable us to understand and live in the light of God's wonderful plan of salvation. Keeping this focus will help us avoid all kinds of charlatans who would have us believe and follow "some new thing" which they have just discovered in the Bible.

In the light of these three basic common sense principles we will now set forth a listing of recommended aids for Bible study - focusing on the New Testament. All of the works listed are works by Bible scholars of outstanding abilities who are experts in the original languages, history and cultures of the Bible. These authors are all believers and range from conservative to somewhat liberal in their Scriptural viewpoints. They encompass many different denominations from evangelical Protestant

to Roman Catholic. The works chosen are chosen solely on the basis of the quality of the scholarship.

The one common denominator in all of these scholars - in addition to their scholarly abilities - is their "already" but "not yet" viewpoint of the fulfillment of "salvation history" in the New Testament. In other words, all of the scholars below view the NT as presenting the culmination of God's OT promises to his people through the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. With Christ's first coming the power of God's kingdom was manifested on earth; through the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost the firstfruits of God's kingdom has already been received; and finally, the second coming of Christ will usher in the final establishment of God's kingdom in a renewed and glorious earth.

One should choose from these works carefully. Before buying any of them look them over in bookstores or borrow them from libraries to see if they'll be useful for you. As with any book, one should read the preface and introduction of each work listed in order to most effectively use them in the light of their plan and purpose. The following listings are our *top* recommendations but this does not imply that we agree with all that is said in any of them or that there are not many other useful works as well. It is assumed that our readers are able to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions as they use these works. Each study aid will be listed by either author or title or commentary series. Well known titles are abbreviated for the sake of space. All books listed are available from CBD (Christian Book Distributors) unless otherwise noted. Call them - ph. 1-978-977-5000 - for a free catalog and information on membership, etc. through which you can get even more discounts. Out of print books are listed (OP) and must be found in used bookstores or wherever you can find them. They will only be listed if they are of exceptional quality. The recommendations below are based on the quality of the particular work, their availability and the price. Choose wisely according to your own needs.

Recommended New Testament Study Aids:

1. Bible Versions:

The Bible can be understood in any of the major English versions that are used today such as the NIV, NASB, NRSV, KJV, NKJV, NAB, etc., - if they are diligently read! Since all of these versions are fairly accurate, the number one guiding factor in choosing a version should be that it is "reader-friendly" - i.e., it is a version that *you* can and will read!! The KJV is certainly beautiful, reverent, even majestic, but it is also archaic and *by far* the least accurate of any of the versions above. Beyond that, they all have their strong and weak points. Whichever version is chosen as your main text annotations may be necessary for accuracy sake. Several other versions should also be used for comparison purposes. It is also useful to have a Greek-English Interlinear to help you get a sense of the underlying Greek text. I recommend *Marshall's* which comes in several formats with certain major versions in the margin. Read the "Introduction" in each Bible version and interlinear so as to understand and use it properly.

2. The NIV Study Bible:

The NIV Study Bible is the single most useful and complete study aid that I know of for the non-technical student of the Bible. It is full of useful information - background, word definitions, maps, diagrams, commentary, short concordance, scripture cross-references, etc. It is conservative in its outlook towards Scripture but recognizes the necessity for historical, cultural and linguistic study to properly understand the Bible. This is a good place to start when looking for word definitions, background information, etc. There are also other good Study Bibles keyed to other versions which can be used.

3. New Bible Dictionary:

Next to a good Study Bible this is by far the best study aid for the general student of the Bible. It should be the first study aid to turn to when studying any topic. The NBD is conservative in outlook and the articles are written by many outstanding biblical scholars. There are a lot of other good Bible Dictionaries - both single and multi-volume - which you can choose from to supplement this one.

4. Word Meanings: Strong's or NIV Concordance; Vine's; Thayer's; BAGD and NIDNTT:

Study Bibles have concise definitions of most key words and this is all most people need. Beyond this the most useful method of studying individual words is through the five works listed above, all of which are linked by Strong's numbering system. The works above are listed in order of increasing complexity. You should look these over in a bookstore before buying them to see if they'll be useful for you and also to be sure that you get the edition that has the Strong's numbering system in it. They don't all have this. As always, read their Introductions. Vine's and Thayer's are both somewhat out of date and Vine's is also biased by its dispensationalist views; but, they are both still a good starting place in studying a word. The two best works on words linked to Strong's numbering system are the one volume *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature* by Bauer, Arntd, Gingrich and Danker (BAGD) and *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT) - in 3 volumes plus one volume of extremely useful indexes. These are more complex but are very useful, highly regarded by scholars and are widely referred to in other Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other references. Very basic Greek - at least the alphabet - is helpful or necessary with some of these.

5. A Theology of the New Testament :

It is vital to properly understand the New Testament perspective of "Salvation History" in order to understand NT concepts and words properly. *A Theology of the New Testament* by George Eldon Ladd is an excellent tool for doing this. This work explains the NT perspective of salvation history in clear terms and then goes through the entire NT in a logical manner dealing with almost every important NT word, concept and issue. The indexes in this work are also excellent and make it possible to look up almost any verse, subject, etc. of importance and to study them in-depth. Though this book is a little out of date, it is still the best single work on NT theology for the general student of the Bible. It is considered a classic by most evangelical scholars and offers a good bridge into the world of more detailed New Testament commentaries.

Recommended New Testament Commentaries:

Bible commentaries are indispensable for serious study of the individual books of the Bible. But, they are not for everybody. They should be used as *references* to help with background, word meanings, setting, etc. in order to understand a book or section of scripture *in its original context*. Some are written well enough to be read straight through but they should never take precedence over your own reading, study and memorization of the Scriptures themselves. The commentaries below are listed in order of increasing complexity under each NT book as well as by the author and title of the series in which they appear. The Tyndale, NIBC, Expositors and NCBC series can be understood by any reasonably educated person with a little effort. They're also very inexpensive. The others become increasingly complex and costly. See a CBD catalog for prices. All abbreviations are explained at the end.

Matthew:

1. Richard T. France, Tyndale
2. Donald A. Carson, Expositors

These are both excellent commentaries that complement each other well throughout. I generally prefer France's because it is a clearer format but Carson's is more detailed. It's good to compare their views of the eschatological discourse of Matt. 24. The most detailed commentary on Matthew is the ICC contribution by Allison and Davies which is in three volumes for the exorbitant price of \$160.00!!

Mark:

1. Larry Hurtado, NIBC
2. William Lane, NICNT

Hurtado's commentary is somewhat dry but it is solid in background material with good end-notes after each chapter. Most people wouldn't need more than this together with *The NIV Study Bible*. Lane's commentary has more detail and a real reverence for the subject but I'm not sure many really need a commentary of this size on Mark. Mark is pretty straightforward except for sections like chapter 13.

Luke:

1. E. Earl Ellis, NCBC (OP)
2. Joseph Fitzmyer, Anchor, 2 Volumes

E. Earl Ellis' commentary on Luke is a classic and though the NCBC series is (OP), it is well worth trying to find this particular volume. There is a lot in this commentary that you won't find anywhere else. It is written in a succinct style with an excellent Introduction. Fitzmyer's commentary is the standard: very detailed with lots of learning. The format is clear and the Introduction ties together Lucan theology in Luke/Acts. But conservative students of the Bible may have a hard time with his source criticism. It is always of interest to see what Fitzmyer has to say on any subject, but this two-volume set is also quite expensive.

John:

1. F.F. Bruce, Eerdmans (not part of a series)
2. Raymond Brown, Anchor, 2 Volumes

Bruce's work is a straightforward commentary of the biblical text that emphasizes the new age of salvation from John's perspective. It also contains a good deal of pertinent background information that relates to the context. For the most part it avoids reading Nicean ideas back into the text. Brown's commentary is something of a classic and comes in two volumes that are filled with many insightful comments and very good notes on the text. Brown also aims to summarize and interact with all major commentaries on John before his. Be prepared for a lot of speculation on setting, sources, etc. as well as a major dose of sacramentalism in this work.

Acts:

1. F.F. Bruce, NICNT

Comparatively speaking, there are not that many good commentaries available on the Book of Acts but this is one. It is a solid commentary by Bruce in a clear format. It is especially good at showing the NT fulfillment of OT themes throughout. This commentary also provides an opportunity to tap into Bruce's wide and deep knowledge of the historical background of the NT which is so necessary to understanding both Acts and the NT Letters.

Romans:

1. F.F. Bruce, Tyndale

2. Douglass Moo, NICNT
3. Joseph Fitzmyer, Anchor

Here are three first class commentaries in ascending order of technicality. Bruce's commentary is compact and concise but in no way lacking in theological content. It is a wonderful exposition of the gospel message throughout with an extremely helpful Introduction. Moo's massive commentary is well written, readable, thorough and presents all the reasonable views on the various issues while still firmly supporting his own. Most of the technical matters in this commentary are kept in the footnotes at the bottom of each page. I have a hard time with his Calvinistic interpretations of Rom. 9-11 but on many other issues he is very good indeed and this will surely become a standard for evangelicals. Joseph Fitzmyer's commentary on Romans is simply the best. It is a masterpiece of learning, precision and sound judgment. Though detailed, it is presented in a very clear format. The Introduction offers a superb summary of Paul's theology. Of the many other commentaries on Romans that truly have something to offer Fitzmyer's contribution stands out for its overall clarity and its scope and understanding of every aspect of the subject. Any student of Romans should have this commentary for constant reference.

I Corinthians:

1. Richard B. Hays, Interpr.
2. Gordon Fee, NICNT

These are two outstanding commentaries and both are highly recommended for those who have a special interest in this book of the Bible. Hays' commentary is full of insightful and forceful remarks from beginning to end with a lot that you won't find anywhere else. It's easy to read and a joy to read. Fee's commentary is a blend of extremely detailed scholarly work and pointed comments that need to be heard by many in the church today. Both commentaries are very good on the "spiritual matters" of I Cor. 12-14 and on "eschatological" thought throughout - esp. chap. 15. In short, students of I Corinthians are very well served by these two commentaries.

II Corinthians:

1. Colin Kruse, Tyndale

This is a brief, solid commentary that is easy to read and follow but not lacking in insightful commentary. Well written with sound judgment throughout.

Galatians:

1. R. Alan Cole, Tyndale
2. Ronald Y. K. Fung, NICNT
3. F.F. Bruce, NIGTC

Cole's commentary is a clear and excellent exposition of the heart of the gospel as set forth in Galatians despite its brevity. Fung's work offers a detailed exposition of justification by faith together with a good understanding and presentation of the many other issues in Galatians as well such as the role of the Spirit, continuity between the OT and New, etc. Bruce's commentary is detailed and extremely precise. The NIGTC format in this case is not difficult to follow even if you can't read Greek.

Ephesians:

1. Francis Foulkes, Tyndale
2. F. F. Bruce, NICNT with Colossians & Philemon
3. Andrew Lincoln, WBC

Foulkes' commentary is quite good and a good value despite its brevity. For insightful understanding of Paul's thought Bruce's commentary is first class and it comes together in one volume with his commentary on Colossians and Philemon. This is my favorite and its a super value! Lincoln's commentary is both detailed, massive and theologically rich. It is loaded with valuable information but also loaded with Greek and the WBC series, though excellent for serious students, is not easy to follow.

Philippians:

1. Gordon Fee, NICNT
2. Gerald Hawthorne, WBC

These commentaries have a lot to offer in understanding Paul's theology and thought within the setting of this Letter. Unfortunately, they both offer only the traditional understanding of Phil. 2:5ff. but their comments on 1:21ff are more open in noting the difficulties of this text in light of Paul's statements elsewhere. Anyone who can find G.B. Caird's *Paul's Letters from Prison* (OP) would be

well advised to do so. This is one of the best commentaries on Philippians by a noted NT scholar and is also an excellent commentary on Paul's other prison Letters.

Colossians:

1. N.T. Wright, Tyndale
2. F.F. Bruce, NICNT with Ephesians and Philemon.
3. James D.G. Dunn, NIGTC with Philemon

Wright's commentary is a good introduction to his understanding of Paul and is full of insightful comments. Wright is one of the chief debaters with and opponents of the ridiculous theories of the Jesus Seminar. Though he goes beyond the text in reaching some Nicean conclusions at times there is much to be learned in this commentary. Bruce's work is solid as usual and comes in one volume with his commentary on Ephesians and Philemon. James Dunn offers a great deal in his commentary that you won't find anywhere else - especially in his understanding of Col. 1:15ff. Above all, he offers a solid and consistent exposition of the text in the light of true Jewish/Christian monotheism.

I & II Thessalonians:

1. David Williams, NIBC
2. F.F. Bruce, WBC

The NIV Study Bible has excellent notes on I and II Thessalonians and most people won't need much more than that. Williams' commentary is good, especially if it is used with, and compared with, The NIV Study Bible notes. The end-notes after each chapter are especially good. Bruce's detailed work is first class and is a model of sound scholarship. It is cautious in judgments about matters that are debatable from the text. He sets forth the major alternative views, then his own judgments and usually states clearly what is, and is not, known for sure.

I & II Timothy and Titus:

1. Gordon Fee, NIBC

Generally good commentary with a strong defense of Paul's authorship and a good Introduction and Notes.

Hebrews:

1. F.F. Bruce, NICNT

An excellent commentary throughout with the usual solid emphasis on the continuity and liberating effects of the new covenant gospel message that is so characteristic of Bruce.

James:

1. Douglas Moo, Tyndale
2. Peter Davids, NIBC

The notes in the NIV Study Bible are excellent on James. Moo's work is solid and doesn't go in for speculation beyond the plain meaning of the text. Davids' is good, with good end-notes, but should be compared with Moo's, especially on the subject of "works" and on the setting of the Letter.

I Peter:

1. Peter Davids, NICNT
2. J. Ramsey Michaels, WBC

Both of these are excellent commentaries on I Peter with a good grasp of the main themes and are very helpful on the more difficult sections. Davids' is much easier to read and follow but Michaels' has a lot of interesting detail and sound comments.

II Peter & Jude

1. Richard Bauckham, WBC

Its better to use Study Bibles, etc. for help on these short Letters unless one really wants to dig deep. For those interested there is much to be learned from Bauckham's massive work.

I, II & III John:

1. I. H. Marshall, NICNT

A straightforward exposition of the text with a good presentation of the balance necessary in understanding the semitic language of John with his use of absolutes such as "light and darkness," "love and hate," etc.

Revelation:

1. Robert Wall, NIBC
2. Robert Mounce, NICNT

From these two commentaries you'll get most of the different points of view that are worth considering about the Book of Revelation. No book of the Bible is more controversial and no book has been more

divisive for Bible believing Christians. The Book of Revelation must be understood in the light of its original intent and setting. When it is not possible to do this because of lack of understanding of background, symbolism, etc. then it should be frankly admitted and all speculation should be clearly labeled as such. Simply put, any interpretation of the Book of Revelation should not be allowed to override the clearness and simplicity of Christian beliefs and practices that are set forth consistently throughout the rest of the NT. Both Robert Wall and Robert Mounce each do a good job of keeping things in balance in their commentaries on Revelation. Both have good introductory comments on the book as a whole as well as before each individual chapter. Wall's end-notes after each chapter often cull the best from the works of other commentators who preceded him. But his commentary is less than thorough on some points of controversy. Mounce's recently revised commentary is generally considered the standard among conservative evangelicals. It is generally solid throughout, though one could certainly wish for

more detailed and open minded exposition on certain sections. The major detailed scholarly commentaries on Revelation by Charles (ICC), Ford (Anchor), Aune (WBC), et al., are loaded with information but are also loaded with speculation - mostly about source critical matters - some of which is nonsense and most of the rest of which is simply impossible to verify.

Abbreviations (in order of increasing complexity):

Tyndale: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
NIBC: New International Biblical Commentary
Interpr: Interpretation
Expositors: Expositors Bible Commentary
NCBC: New Century Bible Commentary (OP)
NICNT: New International Commentary on the NT
Anchor: Anchor Bible Commentary
WBC: Word Biblical Commentary
NIGTC: New International Greek Testament Commentary
ICC: International Critical Commentary