



Week 5 - Bible Study Methods and Tools

Principles

Interpret Scripture in light of its context.

Context means “that which is with the text.” The words of Scripture don’t hover in mid-air. They were written at a specific time, about specific circumstances, to specific people, in a specific tone, with a specific language, and for specific purposes. Passages of Scripture have also other text before and after them. All of these elements together are the context. For example, the Bible tells us in Psalm 14:1, “there is no God.” But don’t ignore the words directly before these, “The fool says in his heart...” Read Scripture in its context to see the Author’s intent!

Interpret Scripture with the whole Bible in view.

People often choose an obscure verse to build a major doctrine upon. This leads to fruitless speculation, imbalance and even heresy. Every cult group does this. Paul said he taught the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Considering the full scope of the Word protects us from careening off into spiritual tangents. To prevent Scriptural myopia, read the Bible in a systematic and comprehensive way.

When possible, interpret the Bible literally.

This is the perspicuity, or clarity of Scripture, principal. We can usually interpret the Bible at face value. “Jesus wept” (John 11:35) means Jesus wept. “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) means just that. Of course, the Bible contains literary devices such as metaphors, similes, hyperboles, anthropomorphisms, etc. “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy” (Psalm 98:8) is obviously metaphorical. By and large, however, the Bible has straightforward instructions and historical accounts. Most of the Bible is just clear and simple!

Interpret the Bible with respect to those before us.

Reliable commentaries, and trustworthy pastors and teachers can help us understand the Word. If your understanding of a text differs drastically from what your pastor and respected Bible teachers are saying, chances are that you’re wrong. Be sensitive to what others are saying and try not to be dogmatic about what you believe to be true, especially when your view stands alone.

Interpret the Bible with humility (exegesis).

We are tempted to read into the Bible what we want it to say instead of seeing what it actually says. Proper reading, exegesis, draws out of the Word what is written there. Improper reading of the Bible, eisegesis, reads our own presuppositions and desires into the Word. We must approach the Word with a humble heart and try to set aside our personal biases. Tradition, speculations and biases can blind us to the power of God. As Peter of Damaskos said, “We should search the Scriptures carefully, in humility and with the counsel of experienced people, learning not merely theoretically but by putting into practice what we read.” (The Philokalia)

Strategies

The ongoing presence and help of the Holy Spirit makes our Bible reading a life-giving and enjoyable experience. The useful tools of hermeneutics help us to reliably understand the message of the Bible. Remember the promise of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit “will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

As we develop good study habits, we will eventually be able to reach biblical conclusions on our own. Pray before reading the Bible to grasp God’s Word for you (John 16:13-15; Ephesians 1:17). In the book of Acts, the Bereans were honored for their diligence in seeking truth on their own by searching the Scriptures.

There are a number of ways to study the Bible, including:

Systematic Read-through of the whole Bible

You can read the whole Bible in a year by reading three to five chapters a day. Use a one or two-year devotional guide. The One Year Bible from Tyndale House Publishers separates the entire Bible into 365 reading sections.

Topical Study

A topical study explores what the Bible says about a given topic. A concordance or Bible dictionary can help this process. Look up “marriage,” for instance, and explore what the Bible instructs regarding that topic.

Word Study

Look at the various occurrences of one word in the Bible, make notes, and outline what you learn. For instance, look up the word, “faith,” and discover what the Bible teaches about it. For maximum benefit, use an expository dictionary as well as a concordance. These tools explain the various nuances contained in the words of the Scriptures’ original languages.

Book Study

Choose a book of the Bible, then read through it with an eye on both its historical setting and its implication for your life. Good Bible commentaries can help with this type of study. When studying each passage in a book, first look at the passage in its proper context. Then seek to understand what message the author wished to convey to his readers. Finally, determine how that message could be applied today in your own life. Remember, there is one interpretation, but multiple applications to our lives.

Devotional-Meditational Reading

Read through a passage of Scripture slowly, pausing regularly to ponder every word or thought. Memorize selections, and review them when you have insomnia, or are waiting in line. The Bible is real food for the soul! (Matthew 4:4)

Review:

1. Why should we interpret Scripture in light of its context?
2. Name some other principles of interpreting Scripture?
3. Which of the strategies for Bible study is most appealing to you?⁴
4. Have you ever read through the Bible in one year?