

How Should I Study the Bible?

Practical Steps for Bible Reading

Discussion Questions:

1. What was Pastor Steve wearing today during the sermon?
2. How many worship team members were on stage today?
3. What instruments did they play?

How Come I Don't See Anything? A Lesson from Sherlock Holmes

Earlier in my ministry, I've stared at a Bible passage that I was supposed to preach and think, "There's not much here. How can I talk about this passage for 30 minutes?" But having gained some helpful instruction and experience, I now look at Bible passages and think, "How can I possibly talk about all the wonderful things in this passage in only one sermon of just 30 minutes?" What changed me? I learned to see more of what's in the Bible and what it has for us. Consider a story on this idea of seeing all that's there from a master of observation, Sherlock Holmes.

One night--it was on the twentieth of March 1888--I was returning from a journey to a patient (for I had now returned to civil practice), when my way led me through Baker Street. As I passed the well remembered door, which must always be associated in my mind with my wooing, and with the dark incidents of the *Study in Scarlet*, I was seized with a keen desire to see Holmes again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers. His rooms were brilliantly lit, and, even as I looked up, I saw his tall, spare figure pass twice in a dark silhouette against the blind. He was pacing the room swiftly, eagerly, with his head sunk upon his chest and his hands clasped behind him. To me, who knew his every mood and habit, his attitude and manner told their story. He was at work again. He had risen out of the drug-created dreams and was hot upon the scent of some new problem. I rang the bell and was shown up to the chamber, which had formerly been in part my own.

His manner was not effusive. It seldom was, but he was glad, I think, to see me. With hardly a word spoken, but with a kindly eye, he waved me to an armchair, threw across his case of cigars, and indicated a spirit case and a gasogene in the corner. Then he stood before the fire and looked me over in his singular introspective fashion.

"Wedlock suits you," he remarked. "I think, Watson, that you have put on seven and a half pounds since I saw you."

"Seven!" I answered.

"Indeed, I should have thought a little more. Just a trifle more, I fancy, Watson. And in practice again, I observe. You did not tell me that you intended to go into the harness."

"Then how did you know?"

"I see it, I deduce it. How do I know that you have been getting yourself very wet lately, and that you have a most clumsy and careless servant girl?"

"My dear Holmes," said I, "this is too much. You would certainly have been burned, had you lived a few centuries ago. It is true that I had a country walk on Thursday and came home in a dreadful mess, but as I have changed my clothes I can't imagine how you deduce it. As to Mary Jane, she is incorrigible, and my wife has given her notice; but there, again, I fail to see how you worked it out."

He chuckled to himself and rubbed his long, nervous hands together. "It is simplicity itself," said he. "My eyes tell me that on the inside of your left shoe, just where the firelight strikes it, the leather is scored by six parallel cuts. Obviously they have been caused by someone who has very carelessly scraped round the edges of the sole in order to remove crusted mud from it. Hence, you see, my double deduction that you had been out in vile weather, and that you had a particularly malignant bootslitting specimen of the London slavers. As to your practice, if a gentleman walks into my rooms smelling of iodoform, with a black mark of nitrate of silver upon his right forefinger, and a bulge

Trellis: College Sunday Gathering

on the right side of his top-hat to show where he has secreted his stethoscope, I must be dull, indeed, if I do not pronounce him to be an active member of the medical profession."

I could not help laughing at the ease with which he explained his process of deduction. "When I hear you give your reasons," I remarked, "the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe that my eyes are as good as yours."

"Quite so," he answered, lighting a cigarette, and throwing himself down into an armchair. "You see, but you do not observe." (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia")

A Suggested Approach

One of the most helpful methods of Bible study is this three step (sometimes four) method:

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. (Meditation)
4. Application

Observation asks the question "What does the passage say?"

Interpretation asks the question "What does the passage mean?"

Application asks the question "How does this passage apply to my life?"

Meditation asks the question "What does this passage mean for my life?"

Numerous books use this method, and indeed, it is very helpful in its simplicity and application. But over the years as I have used this, I've found some limitations and even significant weaknesses. In my own training, studying, practicing, and reflecting, I would suggest a different set of steps. And I was most pleased when I found some books taught these steps (so that it saved me lots of time!).

Suggested Approach: 4 Questions of the Interpretive Journey (Much of this is adapted by *Grasping God's Word* by Duvall and Hays, chapter 1)

Duvall and Hays use the image of two towns: the town of the biblical audience, and the town of the contemporary audience. Let me illustrate this for you.

Step 1: Grasping the text in their town.

Question: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

Step 2: Measuring the Width of the river to cross (between our towns)

Question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

Step 3: Crossing the Principaling Bridge

Question: What is the theological principle (or timeless truth) in this text?

Step 4: Grasping the text in our own town.

Question: How should people apply the principles today?

Four images: their town, a river, a bridge, and our town...

Question 1: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

The first part of this step is to look at the text and make observations. Look, look, and look at the words, sentences, structures, arguments in the text. Consider the historical context, literary context (genre), and cultural context. Basically, how was the original audience supposed to respond to the text? You must know how they were to respond in order to accurately know how we should respond. Then

boil this down into one or two complete sentences using past tense words and referring to the biblical audience.

Step 1: Make observations

Step 2: Study the context (historical, literary, cultural)

Step 3: Figure out how the biblical audience was to respond.

Step 4: Boil this down to one or two sentences.

Do not try to apply, generalize, or “make it relevant” to us.

Question 2: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

We reading the Bible today are separated from the original audiences in many ways:

- language
- culture
- time
- situation
- “covenant”
- Etc.

Some passages have a little separation, like a narrow creek. Consider the genre of a proverb. It’s true and immediately applicable without much need to study biblical culture or language. (Though such study could still significantly enrich it.)

“A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1, NIV)

Other passages have huge separations, more like a wide ranging river. Consider a prophecy:

“Judah’s sin is engraved with an iron tool,
Inscribed with a flint point,
On the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars.
Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles
beside the spreading trees and on the high hills” (Jeremiah 17:1-2)

Without studying the differences and culture, we may find such passages much harder to understand. Who is “Judah”? And, what are the Asherah poles?

Question 3: What is the theological principle in the text?

You can’t get away from it and it’s not something we should avoid. The Bible gives us theology. That word “theology” may scare some, bore some, or anger some. But that’s what it does. Theology is truth about God and the world we live in. And in each passage there’s a theological principle that is true for all times, all places, and all cultures. (That sentence may offend many people!) The key is discerning what that is from the text.

Question 4: How should people apply the principle today?

Often, this is what people want from a Bible study: how do I apply this to my life? We’ve said in earlier lessons why this is an unhelpful starting question. (See previous lesson “How do I get more from the Bible?”) But can you see how starting Bible study with this question not only may not get you the correct application, but even the wrong application?

How To Read and Make Observations

Look, look, look! Here's a story that shows how important it is to look, look, look.

The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire and finally, whether I wished to study any specific branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specifically to insects.

"When do you wish to begin?" he asked.

"Now," I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic "very well," he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

"Take this fish," said he, "and look at it; we call it a Haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen."

With that he left me. In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dried all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of a normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; look it in the face--ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters view--just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my fingers down its throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me--I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

"That is right," said he, "a pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked."

With these encouraging words he added, "Well, what is it like?"

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: fringed gill-arches, fleshy lips, lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and the forked tail. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment:

"You have not looked very carefully. Why," he continued, more earnestly, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again; look again!" and he left me to my misery.

I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish? But now I set myself to the task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when towards its close, the professor inquired, "Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied. "I am certain I do not, but see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of the fish all night, studying without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact accounting of them the next day.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically--as he always did upon the importance of this point--I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good, that is good!" he replied, "but that is not all; go on." And for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had--a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part. (Cited by Howard Hendricks, *By the Book*.)

Practice Assignments:

Matthew 6:1-4

1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

2 "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

HW: Print out Matthew 6:5-8 and 6:16-18 and do the same exercise.

Next time: (in two weeks)

How to read and observe.

Going through all 4 questions (after we've practiced observation)

Using resources to answer the questions.

Preunderstanding

Three Outlines

The first outline is most important

The second outline is most challenging

The third outline is most visible, but it's fate is mostly sealed in the first two outlines.

Practical Exercises