

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

"I was *wr-wr-wrong*." Fonzie on Happy Days could hardly say it. Few freely admit they held incomplete or inaccurate information, and have to change their mind, attitude, plans. It happened to me this week! We always need to be willing to examine our beliefs, and our behaviors. In Mark 12:24, Jesus said, "*Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?*"

Jesus said this to religious people with strong opinions about their beliefs. But they were wrong. How could they get right? The same God who breathed the world into existence at creation also resurrected Christ, and breathes His new life into believers, enabling them to understand and obey what He has written down. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible seems little more than dry ink on dusty pages.

1- Scoping the terrain. We recently completed our study in the letter of 2 Peter, which closed with a look at how the ignorant and unstable twist the Scriptures, trying to make it say what they want it to say. How can you be better informed? And stable? How can you read and understand the Bible? Scholars identify four primary easy-to-follow steps to understanding the Bible. But you must do each in turn. You can't leapfrog or get out of order. It's like following a map, instead of following your own "shortcuts."

The four principles are observation, interpretation, application, and transformation. We'll look at each over the next few weeks. We begin like you begin a hike. You get out a map and scope out the terrain. What's the big picture of where you're going? What you will encounter on the journey?

2- Get some instruction. God makes it clear that the purpose of His written-down Word is to change the lives of His people. To get us on track with what God is like, and how we are re-born to become more like Him. Romans 15:4 says, "*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*"

The Bible often speaks of itself as a sort of instruction manual for life. God's people are on a journey of faith through this earthly life and into the promise of eternity. When we begin our steps of faith, based on God's clearly written instructions, we have a reliable guide. We can also persevere through difficulties, which are sure to come, because we are following God's steps in a world that is opposed to Him.

3- Make some observations. The Bible encourages us to follow God's truth instead of the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the indwelling Holy Spirit enables us to understand God's truth, and empowers us to live it out. Psalm 119:10-16 says, "*with my whole heart I seek You; let me not wander from Your commandments! I have stored up Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You. Teach me Your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of Your mouth. In the way of Your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts, and fix my eyes on Your ways. I will not forget Your word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Your law.*"

Much like reading a map, when you read the Bible, you are first scoping the terrain. Your key activity is "*observation*" as you are looking for instruction. Your key question is "*what does the text say*" because first and foremost, it's all about "*content*," the actual words in the verse or passage you are reading. Your key activity is "*look*" much like you learned as a child: stop, look, listen. This applies to all of life, and especially when you try to make sense out of life by understanding the instruction manual.

4- What does the text say? Over and over, that's what my seminary professors would stress. Look at the text of Scripture. What does it actually say? Look at the text, and let the clear literal meaning come out, by observing what the text says, as it is written, in its literary context. Look at the genre, style, figures of speech, language, grammar, terms, culture, history, geography, etc. Depend on the Author of Scripture to illuminate and interpret His inspired words, so that you can know and grow in His truth.

That's the process, and the goal. God wrote it all down so you won't forget it or overlook it or ignore it. The Bible is a lot like a letter you find in your attic from a great-grandfather. He wrote it in his original old-country language, to his immediate children, explaining who he was and why he came and his plans for his descendants. It is written not directly "*to*" you, but directly "*for*" you. So you can know and grow.

The Bible is a lot like that, a record of who God is and how He has worked through history to accomplish His purposes. The Bible presents itself as literature, written down for you, with the storyline of redemption. From creation to the fall to the cross and resurrection. Full of complex characters, historical drama, incredible imagery, etc. It's the story for the ages. It's so you can learn the truth, endure the hardships, and be encouraged by what God plans for you. This hope, based on God's truth, will enable you to persevere through difficult days, as you press on toward the goal. Read your Bible today! □