

Understanding the Bible

(And You Don't Need a Ph.D.)

Lesson I

GROW Discipleship Curriculum

Engaging the Learner

Barry tossed down the black leather book, shook his head and let out a long sigh. While searching for a Bible at a local Christian bookstore, he had been assured by the sales clerk that this translation would be easy for a beginner. He'd pointed out the concordance, "So you can look up any problem you've got and get the answer." Plus, footnotes explain tough words and lead him to other verses with similar theme. Bible studies were even arranged by topic and scattered throughout the pages.

Now, alone in his apartment and without a salesperson to explain things, this new Bible was as bewildering as the old King James he'd received from his grandfather. He thought back to his "Grampy," as he and his cousins had called him. Grampy seemed to hear straight from the mouth of God when he read his "Good Book." "Barry," he'd say, patting his worn version, "this is the road map. Everything you need to make it in this world is right here." And when he said it, you wanted to believe.

Grampy and Granny celebrated their fiftieth anniversary the year Granny passed away. Barry hadn't been able to hold his marriage together five. The divorce lay at the root of Barry's desire to return to church, but Grampy's death seemed to drive him back that much faster.

How he longed to be sure of something! More than anything else, Barry wanted to believe. But where his grandfather found a roadmap, he found pointless stories, bizarre instructions on ceremonial baths and animal sacrifice, and teachings on talking in church and food devoted to idols.

"You're flawed, Barry, and you always were. Janet knew it. God knows it. Grampy probably knew it, too." The thoughts inhabited his mind for a moment before he shook his head to free himself. He took the Bible in his hands once more. Leafing through the pages, he half expected some word or sentence to catch his eye. Nothing did. He wanted to call Pastor Larry, but he felt stupid. Finally, he started reading again, this time in Revelation.

Exploring the Lesson

Sometimes it's hard to understand the Bible. Barry's difficulty is one shared by many new and even veteran Christians. The education system teaches us how to read scientific text for information, read literature for symbolism and theme, and read textbooks for facts. But school doesn't teach us a system for reading and understanding the Bible. Just as time is needed to develop the reading skills taught in school, new believers need time and practice before the Bible truly comes alive for them.

The psalmist knew the difficulties in grasping the Bible. While no one knows for certain who wrote many of the Psalms, we do know why they were written. Among other reasons, the Psalms were composed as teaching songs for worship services, containing practical advice on living a godly life. Psalm 119 is this type of teaching song, giving several steps to better understanding God's Word and decrees. In this chapter, you will learn how to understand the Bible and incorporate it into your life. Take a moment to read Psalms 119:9-16.

Memorizing

The first step in the psalmist's system for knowing the Word of God is memorization. Verse 11 reads, "I have hidden your word in my heart." Once scripture moves from being in a book to being incorporated into our thoughts and lives, it guides us at all times. Memorization is an important part of that process, preventing us from being led away from God.

Memorization also fortifies us against temptation and sin. It does this by giving us a living library of knowledge to be recalled in a moment. The Holy Spirit brings to mind this memorized scripture during moments of temptation. Over time, as we commit more passages to memory, we build a solid resource to draw upon when we struggle.

Learning

Secondly, we must develop a strong desire to learn. In verse 12 the psalmist pleads, "Teach me your decrees." We must become God's pupil. If we allow Him, the Holy Spirit wants to teach us through scripture. Although many people are fearful of having religion or faith used to take advantage or mislead them, if God is tutoring us, we don't need to fear being deceived.

While the Holy Spirit wants to teach us through the Bible, and God as our teacher will never lead us astray, we cannot be taught apart from our willingness to learn. We must begin praying the prayer of the psalmist, "Oh Lord, teach me your decrees."

In Psalms 19:7-11, God shares with us many of the benefits of learning His Word. First, God's word refreshes us, "reviving our soul," according to verse 7. God's Word gives us wisdom, "making wise the simple" (19:7). His Word makes us happy, "giving joy to the heart" (19:8). Finally, in verse 11, God's Word both protects us ("by them is your servant warned") and brings success ("there is great reward").

Speaking

A third step in learning God's Word is repeating scripture out loud. Verse 13 reads, "With my lips I recount all the laws." We can be tempted to passively drink in God's Word. The psalmist knew this temptation and forced himself to actively participate in the learning process.

Saying scripture aloud causes us to physically involve ourselves in learning. This aids our understanding in a couple ways. First, we remember things longer when we say them. Speaking leaves vocal impressions upon our mind when we talk. We recall these vocal impressions more readily than things we only read silently, reinforcing God's Word. Second, voicing God's promises tends to make them "real" for us. In speaking we are forced to think through these promises and decide whether or not to embrace them.

Meditating

While "meditation" is the spiritual buzzword for the 21st century, the psalmist understood its importance 2,500 years ago. "I meditate on your precepts," he wrote. Precepts are instructions. To meditate on God's instructions is to dwell on scripture. To think about it and mull it over. To decide how it fits in your life. Meditation constantly keeps God's ways before us as we look for opportunities to incorporate it into our lives. Later in Psalm 119 (verse 100), we learn that meditation will increase our understanding. Furthermore, both Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2-3 tell us that we will prosper and succeed in life, if we take the time to meditate.

Rejoicing

"I delight in your decrees!" exclaimed the writer (119:16). We must celebrate as we grow in our understanding of God's Word. Just as we experience joy in our mate or child, joy in God reflects our deep commitment to Him. Praising God may take discipline in the beginning, but as we see changes in our lives, rejoicing becomes a natural outgrowth of godly living. The exercise of rejoicing may be the single most important component to a positive life.

Reviewing

The final step in the psalmist's model for knowing God's Word is review. After studying the Bible for several years, it may seem to us we've learned all we need to know. For this reason, reviewing scripture is essential for continual spiritual growth. As we have lived obediently in old truths, the Spirit reveals new truths to us. Life's experiences and situation cause even memorized stories and passages to have fresh insights for us when we review them.

I had an English teacher in high school who claimed that every time she read Hamlet, she learned something new. What is true of one of Shakespeare's plays is doubly true of God's Word. We will be richly rewarded if we consistently review His directives.

Enhancing our Lives

Do you wish you could make the Bible foundational in your life? Do you want to understand its "meaningless" stories and teachings? As Barry's grandfather believed, God's Word can be the "road map" for you! But you have to discipline yourself, make goals, and stick to them. It's trite, but nothing worth having is free. Like playing an instrument or learning a sport, reading the Bible is a skill you must commit to and practice. The good news is that if you discipline yourself and practice the following techniques, scripture will spring to life before you!

How to Memorize

A. Read it aloud over and over. Saying a verse forces your mind to process the information, the muscles in your mouth and throat to form the words, and your ears to hear them.

B. Take one section at a time. Break up a verse at punctuation points or into phrases. The bite-size pieces are easier to memorize and will naturally fit together.

C. Repeat it frequently. Make a habit of repeating the verse you're learning before meals, as you exercise, or before bed.

D. Write it down. This adds physical and mental variety to your memorization technique.

E. Visualize it. Try to make the words take shape in your mind's eye. Practice reading them. This exercise strengthens your memory.

F. Know the meaning of the verse. Learning a concept is easier than learning a random string of words. Once the words move from a hodgepodge collection to a coherent idea, memorization is quicker and more meaningful.

G. Set reasonable goals. You may want to start with two or three verses a week. Like any discipline, it's consistency and steadiness that pay in the long run.

H. Review. Make a quiet review time on Sunday part of your Sabbath worship.

I. Pick a meaningful passage. Romans 12 is a good place to start. Other strong selections include I Corinthians 13, Philippians 4, I John 3, and Matthew 5, 6, and 7.

How to Learn

A. During your personal study, ask questions of the passage.

- What might God be saying to me?
- What is the tone? It could be any of the following: Take my advice. Obey my command. Listen to my promise. Heed my warning. Follow this example.
- How does this describe my situation? Think of an issue in your life and look for parallels in the text. How do the people of God react in the text?
- How can I apply this truth to my everyday life? This is the crux of your study. If the passage teaches honesty, in what areas of your life are you not being honest? The answer might be work, family, taxes, or some other part entirely.
- What is confusing to me? If you don't understand a word, look it up in a dictionary. Use a Bible commentary to discover the thoughts of others. (You can get a basic commentary at your local library). For

further study, a concordance in a chain reference Bible will lead you to other scriptures dealing with the same theme.

B. Paraphrase Scripture. Put it in your own words. Once you understand the meaning of a text, make it your own by rewriting it.

C. Listen to God's Word preached. Go to church. Find a preacher who clearly speaks to you. Listen to the points of the sermon. Jot down notes of important words and phrases. Review them later and determine to apply them to your life. Seeing how a good preacher finds meaning in Scripture will help you learn to find meaning in the text.

How to Speak Scripture

A. Read the Bible during family devotions. Block off time during the week for family devotions and take turns reading the Scriptures out loud. This will strengthen your family through both a community-building time and a shared spiritual experience.

B. Read Scripture in Sunday School or Bible study. Class teachers are usually searching for someone to volunteer to read Scripture. Take advantage of these opportunities

C. Testify using biblical passages. Whether sharing your faith with a friend or in a church service, look for opportunities to share aloud passages that have spoken to your life.

D. Pray passages to God aloud. Many passages, especially the Psalms, are prayers. Speak them aloud to God during your personal devotional time.

How to Meditate

A. Personalize it. You can do this in several ways:

- If possible put your name in the verse. e.g., "God so loved Sam..." (John 3:16)
- Change the wording to the first person. For example, instead of "Love is patient, love is kind," try, "I am patient, I am kind" (I Cor. 13:4)
- Use personal possessive pronouns. e.g., "My love is patient, my love is kind"

B. Pray it! Once you've personalized a passage, incorporate it into your prayers. For example, using again John 3:16, "Thank you, God, for so loving me that you gave your only Son that if I believe..."

C. Meditate throughout the day (Deuteronomy 6:7). Learn to focus your mind on Scripture whenever you have small breaks during the day. These times may include over breakfast, during a walk or exercise, while stuck in traffic, when going to bed at night or when getting up in the morning.

How to Rejoice

A. Claim the promises of Scripture as yours! Some situations in Scripture are for a particular person in a particular place (such as Peter walking on the water), but many promises are open-ended to all God's people. These include "I will never leave you nor forsake you," and "The LORD is my Shepherd." Celebrate these promises God has made to you!

B. Thank God for His directives. One reason many people are drawn to the Bible is the instructions and direction it provides for life. Thank God specifically for instruction as you find it. Examples might be, "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths," and "Love one another."

C. Keep a journal of the prayer requests and situations you are seeking God's direction in. As you discover answers to these needs, right out the verse. Then, give thanks to God specifically for His help in that area.

How to Review

A. Read it again and again. Many people read through the Bible in a year, every year. Mark passages that are

specifically significant to you and review them often.

- B. Take the scriptures you have memorized in the past and speak them aloud then meditate on them.
- C. Write out scriptures you are studying. This further lodges the meaning in your mind.
- D. Use Sundays as a weekly review of everything learned the past seven days.

Expanding our Love

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, an individual learner can easily modify the exercise for his or her personal study.

Engaging the Learner

Why was Barry reading the Bible?

What problems was Barry having in his study of the Bible?

Have you had similar problems in understanding the Bible? What are some of these?

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing your life

Read Psalms 119: 9-16 to the group.

Memorizing

How does God work through Scripture memorization?

*Challenge the group to come up with a goal for Scripture memorization in the next week. Use Psalm 119: 9-16 as the passage. Every member of the group must agree to the goal—whether it is one verse or all eight—and the specific verse(s) chosen.

Learning

What are the benefits of learning from God's Word?

*Distribute paper and pencils to everyone in the class. Have the members examine Psalms 9:7-11, asking the following questions of the text:

- What might God be saying to me?
- What is the tone?
- How does this relate to my problems or situation?
- Specifically, how can I apply this passage to my life?
- What confuses me here?

Give about five to seven minutes for work. Then, review answers as a group.

Speaking

What benefits accompany speaking Scripture aloud?

*As a class read aloud Matthew 5:11-16

Meditating

When is a time you can set aside for meditation?

*Using the paper and pencils again, have each person write a personalized version of Matthew 5:11-16.

*Divide the group into pairs (you may need to have one group of three).

Have each person pray Matthew 5:11-16 to God. It might start like this: "Lord, thank you for so richly blessing me when people insult me because of you..."

Rejoicing

Is rejoicing in God something that is easy for you?

*What are some scriptures through which God has directed you? Share these as a group.

Review

Why should we review scriptures we've previously read?

Close in prayer

Be certain to remember to celebrate the scriptures reviewed in the "*Rejoicing*" section