

Powerful Christian Living

Chapter Five

How to Understand the Bible, Part 1

In the nineteenth century there was a Danish philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard. Although I do not agree with everything he thought about Christianity I do agree with what he had to say about people in the church.

Too often in their church life people adopt an attitude of the Theatre, imagining the preacher is an actor and they his critics, praising or blaming the performance. Actually, the people are the actors on the stage of life. The preacher is merely the prompter, reminding the people of their lost lines.

I think Kierkegaard is correct in his assessment. It is all too easy for people to come to church, treat it like a show and then criticize the preacher. But the purpose for the ministry of preaching is to stimulate YOU to live according to God's Word. One of the reasons that I study and obey and teach the Scriptures is to encourage you to study, obey and share the Word of God. Too many people simply play church and thus lose the blessings of being committed to Christ.

In the Old Testament the prophet Hosea was called of God to bring the people back to their faith. Even though they were religious and went through the formalities, they had all but abandoned God in their hearts. Consequently they fell into all kinds of sin and their society into chaos. But what was their basic problem? How did this tragedy occur? Hosea, by divine revelation declared,

Hear the word of the LORD,
You children of Israel,
For the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land:
"There is no truth or mercy
Or knowledge of God in the land.
2 By swearing and lying,
Killing and stealing and committing adultery,
They break all restraint,
With bloodshed upon bloodshed.
3 Therefore the land will mourn;
(Hosea 4:1, 2)

Hosea put his finger on the problem right at the very start. There was no truth or mercy in the land because there was no intimate knowledge of God. When our hearts are not full of the living Word of God then evil swiftly fills the void. Our society today is basically in the same shape as in the days of Hosea. We have violent crimes, failing families, failing schools and government corruption. And it is all due to a lack of knowledge or a rejection of the knowledge of God. God said, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."¹

What a powerful statement this is! God's people are destroyed because they do not seek nor understand Him. On the other hand the Lord Jesus Christ said, "blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"² If we are going to hear the Word of God and keep it we will need to know some keys to help us understand the Bible³. The first key is to simply read it.

- **Read the Bible**

If you eat physical food every day to stay alive and healthy, then you need spiritual nourishment too. As you read the Bible much of what you read will be easy to understand. You can usually understand each verse as you read it for example,

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
(Psalm 23:1)

I sought the LORD, and He heard me,
And delivered me from all my fears.
(Psalm 34:4)

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.
10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.
(Romans 10:9, 10)

These verses of Scripture are all easy to understand and to believe. The point is made clear right in a single verse or two. At other times you will need to read several verses together to better understand the context of the verse. It would be good to read a chapter of the Bible every day from both the Old Testament and the New Testament,⁴ and as you read ask yourself these questions:

- What is the main theme of the verse or chapter?

¹ Hosea 4:6

² Luke 11:28

³ Besides the keys presented in this chapter, please read Appendix one for a fuller presentation on how to understand the Bible.

⁴ You can discover a variety of Bible reading plans at www.biblegateway.com

- Is there something unusual about what is said or the way in which it is stated?
- Is there a truth here for me to believe?
- Is there an action for me to take?

A second key to understanding the Bible is to pray. Ask God to give you insight into His will.

- **Pray when you read Scripture**

Deal bountifully with Your servant,
That I may live and keep Your word.
18 Open my eyes, that I may see
Wondrous things from Your law.

Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,
And I shall keep it to the end.
34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law;
Indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart.
35 Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.
(Psalm 119:17, 18, 33-35)

I guarantee you that if your heart yearns to understand the Bible so that you can apply it in your life God will show you wondrous things. The third key to understanding the Bible is that we need to know to whom a section of Scripture is addressed.

- **Understand to whom a section of Scripture is written**

Not everything in the Bible is written specifically to you. For example there is an Old Testament and a New Testament. The way in which God worked with the people of Israel under the old covenant is different than how God works with you under the new covenant. For example, in the Old Testament there are laws and commandments about sacrificing animals as an offering for sin. Those laws do not apply to you because in the new covenant Jesus Christ is the full and final payment for sin.⁵ But this does not mean that you are wasting your time if you read the Old Testament—far from it. The Old Testament is the root of the New Testament flower. We need to understand the Old Testament to truly grasp the great realities of the New Testament. Paul wrote,

For whatever things were written before were written for our
learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures
might have hope.
(Romans 15:4)

⁵ Hebrews 9:11-15; 10:11-14

The fourth key to understanding the Bible is that you need to understand the biblical meaning of words and figures of speech.

- **Understand word meanings and figures of speech**

In 2 Corinthians 12 there is a verse of Scriptures that has suffered from bad interpretation. The problem concerns something called Paul's thorn in the flesh. Many Bible expositors do not know what the phrase means. Here is the verse.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.
(2 Corinthians 12:7)

What is this thorn in the flesh? Some people have speculated that Paul had some kind of sickness or disease. Others have guessed that Paul may have faced great depressions of mood or that he was regularly tempted to doubt God. The verse does not tell us what the thorn in the flesh was. And you can read from verse 7 on, but it will not tell you what Paul's problem was. So how do we discover what the answer is?

The Bible is often its own best dictionary. And by doing a word study we can often discover the meaning of a word or phrase. In a word study you look up all the places where a word or phrase is used. To do this there is a wonderful tool called a concordance. A concordance is a book (or an online computer program) that lists all of the words in the Bible in alphabetical order. When you look up the word "thorn" you can develop an accurate definition of what Paul meant by a "thorn in the flesh." Here are a few examples of how this term was used before 2 Corinthians.

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain *shall be* irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.
(Numbers 33:55)

know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.
(Joshua 23:13)

From these two examples alone it seems that Paul's thorn in the flesh was related to people and difficult circumstances. But let's look at one more Old Testament example to seal the deal on its meaning.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 21 “Son of man, set your face toward Sidon, and prophesy against her, 22 and say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD:

“Behold, I am against you, O Sidon;
I will be glorified in your midst;
And they shall know that I am the LORD,
When I execute judgments in her and am hallowed in her.
23 For I will send pestilence upon her,
And blood in her streets;
The wounded shall be judged in her midst
By the sword against her on every side;
Then they shall know that I am the LORD.

24 “And there shall no longer be a pricking brier or a painful thorn for the house of Israel from among all who are around them, who despise them. Then they shall know that I am the Lord GOD.”
(Ezekiel 28:20-24)

In this prophecy God says that He will execute judgment against the city of Sidon. When he does it will no longer be a “painful thorn” against the people of Israel. Now, from the examples we have just read we can deduce that the phrase “thorn in the flesh” is a figure of speech indicating troublesome people. For Paul, it was the troubling persecution that he faced as he made known the good news of Jesus Christ. We can better see this now if we look back at the preceding context in 2 Corinthians 11.

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I *am* more:
in labors more abundant, *in* stripes above measure, *in* prisons more frequently, *in* deaths often. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of my own countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.
(2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was the intense persecution and troubles he faced as a minister of Jesus Christ. We would never have understood what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was if we had not done a word study to understand the biblical meaning of a word.

But now that we understand what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. We need to know how he faced all this persecution, stress, loneliness and pain. The answer is that he trusted in Christ and committed himself to the Lord.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

In all his troubles, Paul went to the Lord in prayer. And the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you." Indeed so it was. And so is the Lord's grace sufficient for us. That is why we must take knowledge of and comfort from the following sections of Scripture.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

(Ephesians 6:10, 11)

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷ and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

(Philippians 4:6, 7, 13)

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

(1 John 5:4, 5)