

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

Attributed to Siegbert W. Becker

The question proposed in our topic might well be answered in two or three words. The answer to the query, "How shall I study my Bible?" might well be: "Diligently, reverently fully, and believingly." These are answers that all of us know well, but which we too often take for granted, and it would surely not be out of place to speak a word of admonition even to pastors and teachers, or should we say, especially to pastors and teachers on this subject.

When we survey the extent of our Bible knowledge, we find usually that we all know the stories of the Bible well which are included in the *Comprehensive Bible History*, those which make up the Sunday School curriculum, and those which form the standard pericopes of the church year. The Bible passages that we know and can quote without difficulty are those which form the proof texts of the catechism.

But sadly enough, when we leave that familiar territory, we are often woefully ignorant. We know that Jesus fed 5,000 men with five loaves and two fishes, but how many of us know which of the prophets fed a hundred men with twenty small loaves and a few ears of corn. We all know of the faithfulness and the loyalty of Ruth who said to her mother-in-law, "The Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me," but how many of us know the name of that example of devoted loyalty, who, when David fled from Absalom, was given permission to return to his native Gath, but who, though he was a stranger in Israel, replied, "As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be."

And when we preach and teach and feel the need for establishing the point at issue with a Bible passage, we are often in the habit of quoting the same Bible passages over and over again, as though these passages which we learned in confirmation instruction are the only passages which we can find to establish this doctrine. We shall not deny that there is great value in keeping these same passages always before our people, for what is not often reviewed is not long remembered, but at the same time there is value also in the unfamiliar, and many a person who is lulled to sleep because the ears of his heart have built up a resistance to a certain series of sounds may well be pulled up short by the same truth in a new dress. When we warn against the danger of falling away from the faith, for example, we are perhaps all prone to quote, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall," and we point to the example of Peter, who denied his Lord, and David, who committed adultery and murder. But occasionally, at least, we might speak of Hymenaeus and Alexander, who made shipwreck of the faith, and surely once in a great while we might quote that passage which pictures the plight of the apostate Christian in the words, "The dog is turned to his own vomit again, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

We all know, too, that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags, but how many of us, to show the moral filthiness of man, would think of quoting Job, "If I wash myself with snow water, and make my hands never so clean; yet shalt thou plunge me in the ditch, and mine own clothes shall abhor me," or Jeremiah, "Though thou wash thee with niter and take thee much sope, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord God."

We should like to stress once more that we are not pleading for a moratorium on the old familiar passages and stories. It would be a tragedy to forget all about them now and concentrate only on what is unfamiliar, but surely a little variation in the spiritual diet that we feed our people is as welcome and as wholesome as a little variety in the food that we eat. These are perhaps some of the thoughts that prompted the program committee to suggest that we study the question before us, "How to Study your Bible."

There is significance in the title itself. It is "How to Study Your Bible." In the early days of my ministry I used to follow all the directions that we had received in homiletics to the letter. Dean Fritz had taught us that we should first of all read the text in English and in the original Greek or Hebrew. After this the parallel passages were to be examined. Then we were to read what the commentaries had to say, and last of all he suggested that it might be well to read a few sermons on the text. In those days, however, I never felt that I was

getting very far until I began to read what P. E. Kretzmann and Stoeckhardt or Metzger and Luther had to say about the text. And sometimes I would skip the first three steps and after I looked into my little red book to see where the text for next Sunday was located, I would proceed immediately to the commentaries and the sermons and sermon studies. Perhaps many of us are just a little too inclined to reach too soon for the commentaries, and while it is true that the message of the Lord can come to us through the commentary, yet it may also be that in this way we often dry up the wells of the Spirit and permit the Word of the Lord to be covered with the excessive verbiage of men and our attention to be diverted to bootless questions. Often we would make greater progress and build more solidly if we would study our Bibles instead of reading commentaries. Again, I should not like to be understood to say that the reading of commentaries is a disgrace or even a sin or even that it is inadvisable. But this is only a plea that we should make some effort to do a little of our own digging in the Word. It would be a mistake to neglect and ignore what the great Bible students have had to say, but we ought not to let them do all our thinking for us.

There are certain basic tools that we need for the study of Scripture. First of all, we need a Bible, and many of us will find it very helpful to choose one standard edition of the Bible and use it for all our Bible reading and Bible study. By such a course we will develop what is called in German a *Lokalgedächtnis*, that is, we will gradually, through repeated reading, develop a mental picture of the pages of Holy Writ so that we will know exactly where on the page a certain passage is found. It is true that there is no great spiritual value in knowing this, but it has a certain practical value in enabling a pastor or teacher to find passages quickly which he may want to use in a given situation. This memory for places some pastors have found to be a special value, for example, in making sick calls. If the visit discloses that the passage which had been chosen as the basis for the bed-side meditation is not particularly apt, and if the discussion with the patient indicates clearly that he is troubled by a particular problem, it is often possible to find just the right passage which fits the situation if we have a good acquaintance with the Bible and at the same time have some idea of just where on the page a certain passage is to be found. There was once a pastor who had prepared for a sick visit on the basis of his knowledge of the patient as a confident, carefree child of God, only to hear the bitter complaint from her lips that the Lord had forgotten all about her. Happily the pastor remembered that in one of the last chapters of Isaiah there was a passage which he had not at that time committed to memory but which he knew was to be found in the left column of the right-hand page, and in a few seconds he could read to the woman, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me." This *Lokalgedächtnis*, or memory for places, will automatically be developed without special effort if the same edition of the Bible is used regularly.

The next most important tool for a study of the Bible is a dictionary, not a Bible dictionary, but a language dictionary. And the dictionary ought not to be used only for totally unfamiliar words such as "hardly bestead and hungry," or "earing time and harvest time." But often we assume that we know the meaning of a word, and because we do not look up its exact significance we miss some rather significant lessons. For example, we all know that the word "seer" is generally defined as a "prophet," but a glance into the dictionary will make it clear that a seer is really a see-er, one who sees. This is a literal translation of the original Hebrew. When we know then that a seer is one who sees, we can understand a little better why the book of Isaiah is called the "Vision of Isaiah... which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." And when we have learned this, we will be in a better position to understand what is meant by the passage which is so often misunderstood and misapplied, even by pastors and teachers, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." This passage does not mean, "Where there is no foresight, things will go badly," as is so often implied by the way the passage is used, but rather it signifies that where there is no prophetic message, where there is no revelation of God, where there is no Word of the Lord, the people perish. My dictionary does not give "foresight" as one of the definitions of this word, but it does indicate that it may refer to the revelation given to a prophet. Unhappily wrong meanings and usages of a word have a habit of becoming right.

The second most important tool required for the study of the Bible is a concordance. The meaning of words is not established by dictionaries, but by usage, and the meaning of a word in a particular place can be determined only by the context. Sometimes, however, a particular context fails us. The passage just alluded to, "Where there is no vision, the people perish," stands in a context which gives us absolutely no help in determining the meaning of the word "vision," but when we use a concordance and find passages such as these, "God spake to Israel in the visions of the night," (Gen. 46:2); "The Word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision," (1 Sam. 3:1); "Thou spakest in vision to thy holy one." (Ps. 89: 19); "A grievous vision is declared unto me," (Isa. 21:2); and "They speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord," (Jer. 23:16); and when we notice further that books of the prophets are called the "Vision of Isaiah," the "Vision of Obadiah," and the "Vision of Nahum," we are left in no doubt whatever about the meaning of this word.

The concordance may also serve in other ways. If we are to prepare a lecture on a doctrinal topic or a sermon on some special subject, the concordance will serve to supply us with material by leading us to the Bible passages which have a bearing on the matter. For example, a great deal of the difficulty in an adequate presentation of the doctrine of justification is resolved when the word "Justify" is clearly and correctly defined. Nothing serves better to make clear the meaning of the word than to read it in context as it is used in Scripture. Or, to take another example, if we are called upon to present a sketch of the life and work of the apostle Peter, or one of the other great men of God who are mentioned in the Bible, a concordance will immediately help us to find all the passages in which Peter or the others play a part. Incidentally, we may say that the concordances printed as an appendix to some Bibles are almost worse than useless. It may be said that the Bible student without a concordance is like a carpenter without a hammer.

Serving almost the same purpose as the concordance are the parallel passages printed in most Bibles. Often a passage will become clear and a reference will become definite if we will take the trouble to look up these parallel passages. A few days ago, in one of my classes at Concordia, we had occasion to deal with the question of James and John, "Wilt thou that we call down fire from heaven to consume them as Elias did?" All the members of the class who had an opinion on the subject felt that this was a reference to Elijah and the prophets of Baal. But it is clear that that story says nothing about fire falling from heaven to consume men. The parallel passage, if it had been looked up, would have given the members of the class the correct reference, for it refers us to 2 Kings 10, which tells how Elijah called fire from heaven to devour the soldiers who had come to take him prisoner. Often the Bible is not clear to us because we fail to do what might be expected of us in the reading of any other book.

Besides these basic tools, the Bible student would do well also to possess a Bible Dictionary, preferably a good conservative one, such as Davis, which has been reprinted, a good commentary or two, and a few of the modern translations, which will sometimes prove helpful in providing hints which will lead to an understanding of the text. So much for the equipment with which the Bible student will operate.

When it comes to methods of Bible study, there are many ways of proceeding. Some general remarks, however, may serve to preface our discussion. First of all, one of the greatest hindrances to the proper study of the Bible is the horrible way in which our Bibles are printed. Somehow or other some of us were brought up on the idea that the ideal way to read the Bible is at the rate of a chapter a day. Like the proverbial apple, this is enough to keep the devil away. I can still remember how, as a boy, I was finally convinced by my conscience to read a chapter of the Bible every evening before I went to bed. As though it were yesterday I can remember also how I read Acts, chapter 21, which ends with the words, "He spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying," and having read those words, I closed the book wondering what it was that Paul said. It was the next night that I discovered that the chapters of the Bible are not isolated units but that they belong together. It is no wonder the people find it difficult and stale to read the Bible. If you would treat the most interesting detective story as we treat our Bibles and read a page or two a day, it would be rather difficult to sustain interest for very long.

We ought to form the habit of reading longer sections, if not whole books. Try reading all the words which Jesus spoke on the evening of His betrayal, as those words are recorded in John 13-17, and then compare

the impact of these words when they are read in this way with the impression that they make when they are read at the rate of a chapter a day. The remarkable thing is that the Bible can be read in this way and still be profitable. But many of the books of the Bible can be read in less than a half hour, and many of the longer books fall naturally into two or more sections which can easily be read in one sitting. For example, the first twelve chapters of Acts form one unit, telling the story of the church in Palestine, the next eight and a half chapters tell the story of Paul's missionary journeys, and the last seven and a half chapters present the account of his imprisonment and the journey to Rome. Each one of these sections can easily be read in about a half hour. And there is no better way to an understanding of the Scriptures than this constant reading. If a man will live in France for a year, he will learn to understand French. If a man will live in his Bible, he will learn to understand both the language and the message of Scripture.

And as you read the Scriptures, keep a pen or pencil in your hand. For some reason or other, some people have a distaste for marking up their Bibles, but there is no reason why we ought not to underline the passages which have special meaning for us. Underlining them will help to fix them in our memory; it will enable us to find these passages with greater ease when we want to use them again, and they will be the passages that we remember and will want to find often, and sometimes in days of great trial and distress we may find great comfort just in reviewing some of these passages. (Illustrate Isaiah 40-51).

Besides underling such passages, we may want to underline significant words and phrases which will help us to recall the content of a certain chapter, or which mark the theme of the book, or which mark certain divisions of the book. For example, in one of my Bibles all the words which speak of the joy of the apostle and the people to whom he wrote are underlined in the epistle to the Philippians. In the epistles of John, the word "love" is underlined. In the book of Job, the various speeches are indicated by underling the names of the speakers as they occur. You will be surprised how your familiarity with Scripture will grow as you make use of these devices.

There are also other ways of using a pen while we read. One of the Bibles that I use has an "M" in the margin wherever a miracle is found, a "P" next to every general prophecy, a cross next to every Messianic prophecy, and "FP" wherever the fulfillment of a prophecy is referred to. There is also series of number which mean certain things to me, but which would take too long to explain here, but suffice it to say that the numbers have reference to certain thoughts which occur again and again in certain books. For example, in the book of Judges the number 1 might indicate the thought that the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, the number 2 might refer to the punishment that God sent them, the number 3 to the repentance of the people, and the number 4 to the deliverance provided by the Lord. Those four thoughts sum up the message of the whole book, and they provide a mirror of the Christian life with its tensions between sin and grace. In addition to this, usually the main divisions of a book are indicated by Roman numerals. In many places in the historical books of the Old Testament and in the Gospels and Acts of the New Testament I have written in the dates of certain events as they have been established by the best recent scholarship. At other places I have written in references to books in which I have found some material having a bearing on this text. At other places I have written in the information itself. For example, the margin of my Bible at 2 Kings 17 tells me that according to the Khorsabad inscription of Sargon, 27,290 of the inhabitants of Samaria were deported, and it warns me against ever again giving the impression that all the members of the ten northern tribes were carried off to Assyria. At other places I have written in the margin the names of the doctrines for which good proof passages occur. Generally speaking, it would be of value to fill up the margins with anything that you feel might be of value to you. Right here it might be said that Bibles which have a topical index in the margin, as it were, are of value, but surely the notes that we have written in ourselves will be of greater significance and value to us in our teaching than the work of others made ready to our hand.

As far as special methods of Bible study are concerned, the possibilities are without number. You have all heard of some of the methods that can be employed, the book method, the topical method, the biographical method, and so on. Here we intend, however, to point out only a few things which we have found helpful.

There are some things that cannot be done very well by underlining and writing in the margin, but which can be done on separate sheets of paper. Charts and diagrams will prove to be of great value, especially when they are constructed by the student himself. The man who has drawn an outline map of Asia Minor, and with that map before him has sketched in the location of all the cities visited by Paul on his first missionary journey, and has retraced the steps of the great apostle on this journey, as he has read the account in the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of Acts, will not find it too difficult to remember that the chief cities visited by the apostle on this first journey are Antioch in Syria, Salamis and Paphos on Cyprus, Attalia, Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and back again through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Perga, to Antioch. If the map is large enough he might write in the significant events that happened in each city, or if he has some artistic ability he might sketch in symbols or pictures to call attention to the events in the various cities.

It would be profitable, at another time, to study the Bible from the standpoint of chronology, so that we gain some conception of the sequence of events and of the interval between them. If the student will draw a line graph of the chronology of the Old Testament, he may be amazed to realize as he looks at his completed chart that at least half of the Old Testament period is covered by the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and that the book of Genesis in its entirety covers a longer period of time than all the other books of the Old Testament combined. He may be interested in the chronology of the divided kingdom, or the chronology of the Pentateuch, and once charts have been drawn up from the Biblical sources they will serve well to give the student a chronological perspective of the period involved. This might be done for all the historical books of both Testaments, with the prophetic, poetic, and doctrinal books appended at their proper place in the history.

Or if the student wishes to gain a clear picture of the divided kingdom, he might well draw up a more or less elaborate chart listing the names of the kings of Israel and Judah, the number of years each king reigned, the prophet or prophets active during the reigns of the various kings, the main events in the reign of each king, and so on. If, then, the history is reviewed on the basis of this chart, the student will gain a comprehensive overview of the entire period. In this way the fragmentation of Biblical knowledge, which is so often evident in the minds of some of our young people can be overcome.

Another project that might be profitable and which may serve as an illustration of projects of like nature would be to take, for example, the book of Isaiah, or the Messianic Psalms and draw up a list of the works and attributes of the Messiah as he is pictured in these books.

Or perhaps at another time, there might be great value in simply drawing up an outline of a book as we read through it. Or a book might be read with a view to discovering what the book says about any given subject, and every reference to this subject might be marked in some way, to be reviewed separately after the entire book has been read. But as we said, the possibilities along this line are endless, and a little imagination will discover many more profitable projects in Bible study.

Just one final word. It is a good thing, whenever you sit down to read the Bible to read purposefully. A book may be read over and over again dozens of times, without losing its appeal if each time we read it we look for something specific. I may read a book through once just to see how many passages I can find to prove and to illustrate the doctrines of the catechism. At another time I may read the same book to see what the author has to say about the Savior. At another time the book may be perused to discover what the author has to say about the times and the people among whom he lived. At another time special attention may be paid to the social and economic conditions which prevailed. At still another time the reader may look particularly for passages of comfort and encouragement. And always, every time we read we ought to keep in mind what we might learn for our own faith and our own life from these things that we have read. In other words, our study of the Bible ought always to be devotional. A purely academic interest in the Scripture is surely out of place for the child of God. And above all else, we must strive to see how everything in this book is intended somehow to bring us to Christ and to learn to know Him better as our Savior and Redeemer, as our Lord and our God, in whom we have forgiveness and salvation through His blood.

And may the Holy Spirit Himself rouse in us a real desire to learn ever more and more of these blessed truths which were written for our learning that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Amen.