

THE WORD

How to get more out of your Bible

2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Acts 17:11 The Bereans... examined the Scriptures everyday...

A lot of Jesus followers let someone else have all the fun of reading and studying the Bible. It's a shame, really, mostly because it is fun, and rewarding to learn God's book for yourself.

Don't be a sea gull!

One of the coolest things about the beach is the sea life that you don't get to know in the inland locales. While not really a bird enthusiast, I noticed right off the two most prominent birds on the Californian coast – sea gulls and pelicans. I mention them together because the different ways these particular birds feed themselves illustrates to me the two different ways Christians take in spiritual food.

Pelicans are great fishermen (I mean, birds). They fly straight upwards, then in what looks more like an epileptic fit, they fall out of the sky and into the water, in an awkward dive of sorts. Almost invariably, they come to the surface with at least one fish in their enormous bill. It's impressive – how they see the fish in the first place, how they dive with such lack of grace, and how they seldom fail to make a catch.

Sea gulls, on the other hand, are known as “rats with wings.” Nobody really likes a sea gull. They're scavengers of garbage (mostly generated by people) and leeches off of the more skilled fisher(fowl), the pelicans.

I was watching some pelicans in an epileptic fishing spree, successful as usual, each coming up from their dive with a fish in their bill. Gulls hovered by the dozens, waiting for the pelicans immerge with their catch in their bills and accosting them to steal the fish they'd caught. They're thieves, dive-bombing the bills full of fish, hoping to take advantage of the work of the pelicans. The pelicans do all the work, the gulls, who outnumber them, hang around uninvited for breakfast.

I thought, “I refuse to be anyone's pelican!” Though I love to study and teach the Word of God, I don't want people coming to church, listening to messages getting the only spiritual food they've gotten all week from my efforts. My job is not really to feed people as much as to teach them how to feed themselves. You know the old adage that compares giving a man a fish versus teaching him to catch fish for

himself. Don't just be hanging around me and other Bible teachers stealing our fish! In this paper, I'd like to give you some pointers on how to fish for yourself.

Here we'll propose a way of studying the Bible called "Inductive." In it you're doing three essential things: *investigating* what it says, *interpreting* what it means, and *integrating* its meaning into your daily life. [The more common terms that people use are: Observation, Interpretation, and Application. I came up with these others that I like better. I like that they all start with the same letter, "I." But, "Investigation" has a more active and intentional connotation to me than, "Observation." And I prefer, "Integration," because what we're really trying to do is "integrate" the message of the Bible into our daily, modern lives.]

**I refuse to be
anyone's pelican!**

If it seems like this is going to be too complicated and actually detract from your appreciation and understanding of the Bible, instead of enhancing it, take hope. It's sort of like learning how to drive a car. At first, it can be a bit tedious, since you have to concentrate on the steps and the process. But after a while you don't have to think about putting your hands at the "10:00 and 2:00" positions on the steering wheel like they taught you in Driver's Training. After a while you just do it. It becomes second nature to you. Studying God's Word, mining its meaning, and applying it to your life may at times be hard work, but once you learn how to do it (at least the study part), it will become more and more natural to you.

One more thing about pelicans...

They're fun to watch. They are great at fishing. But theirs is not a "catch-and-release" kind of angling. They don't do it for fun. They need to eat. If they don't catch fish, they die. In the same way, we're not readers and students of the Bible for recreational purposes. We're trying to survive and even thrive spiritually. We'll die spiritually if we don't get to know God through his Word. On the other hand, the consequences of being avid students of the Bible are pretty awesome. I guarantee you that learning how to read and study Scripture will change your life, make you more like Jesus, and help you become more and more intimate with Him.

Investigation: What does it say?

The first thing we want to do is *investigate* the contents of the Word. Like an *investigator* on a case in search of a criminal, we're looking for clues. The clues we're looking for are the ones helping us to understand the message of the Bible and implement it in our

daily lives. So, here are some simple steps to this investigation phase of studying the Bible.

1) Ask God to help you understand His Word.

Since the Bible comes from God, He's the only one who can reveal its message to us. Ask Him to help you get the message that He wants you to get.

- *John 14:26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*
- *1 Corinthians 2:12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.*

2) Ask the questions... who, what, where, when, why?

These are the questions of an investigative reporter trying to get a handle on a story.

- **Who** is addressing who in this passage? Who is He talking to here? Who is this guy, named _____ ?
- **What** is happening here in what I'm reading? What is transpiring in this passage? What details do I need to notice?
- **Where** is this happening? What country, region, city is this? Where is the story taking place?
- **When** did it happen? Which part of history is this? When was this written? When does this happen in relation to other things that occurred in the Bible?
- **Why** did it happen? Why did God include this in the Bible? Why did He do or allow this particular thing? What is the message of this passage?

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3) Identify the context.

Every passage of the Bible has a context. It has a macro-context and a micro-context. For instance, I once lived on a street called Navarra, in the city of Scotts Valley, which is in the county of Santa Cruz, which is located in Northern California, which is part of the state of California, which is part of the United States, which is in North America, part of

the Northern Hemisphere, on planet earth, in our solar system... You get the point. Every sentence of the Bible is part of a paragraph, which is part of a chapter, which is found in a particular book of the Bible, which is part of a particular genre of biblical literature (poetical, historical, didactic...), which is found in one of two Testaments (the Old or the New). All of this helps you think through what the passage that you're studying might mean.

4) Observe the obvious.

Investigating the message of Scripture is kind of like putting a puzzle together. You usually begin with the four corners. Why? They're the most obvious and easiest to find. What do you look for next? The rest of the edge pieces. That provides a framework for doing the rest from there. So, when you look at a passage, what stands out to you? What's obvious about it? You can work from there to the less obvious, with the Holy Spirit's help.

5) Mark repeated or key words in your Bible.

That's right! Write in your Bible. I always say that if you have a Bible that's too special to write in, put it on a shelf, and get one you can mark up. It will help you study it if you can underline words, circle things, and write comments in the margins. My suggestion is that you begin by noticing repeated terms and concepts, and marking them. It stands to reason that the often repeated a terms or thoughts give you a clue into the mind of the author. You're looking for a theme; and noticing repetition will help you in your search.

6) Identify main themes of a book or a section of the Bible.

It's nice when the author makes it obvious by saying things like, "*I've written this because...*" or, "*I say this in response to your question about...*". In some cases though, you'll have to dig a little more in order to decipher the main themes. As you take the steps mentioned above, you'll begin to be able to more and more readily decipher these important themes that God had on His heart in guiding the authors of the Bible to write certain things. If you have a study Bible, they usually have summaries and background information which can help you in your pursuit to understand each book of the Bible. But I recommend that you begin by simply reading a book of the Bible without too much ancillary reading at first. After you've read a book several times on your own and marked it up (per the recommendations above), then I suggest that you take a look at your Study Bible resources to give you an even great framework for your search for its message.

Interpretation: What's it mean?

Once we've done some *investigating*, and finding out what the Bible says, we're going to want to transition to do some *interpreting*, and looking for what it *means*. Here are some simple steps toward interpretation.

1) Start with asking God for help.

Why? Because the Bible's a supernatural book, and is therefore supernaturally understood. All the good literary interpretive skills in the world, though helpful, won't yield the kind of help we need to accurately interpret the Word of God. We need God to help us know His Word. So, start with prayer.

2) Context rules.

Remember what we said above about the importance of context during our investigation phase? Well, it's just as crucial, if not more so, while we try to accurately interpret Scripture. We have to be sure that our interpretation is consistent with the context of the passage. Don't just read one verse and expect to understand it. Read it in context. At least read the paragraph that surrounds it, if not the whole chapter or entire book of the Bible in which you find it. What might seem difficult to understand at first could become clear as you "read around it."

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3) Keep in mind the whole counsel of God.

In Acts 20:27 Paul told some spiritual leaders, "*For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*" When interpreting pieces of Scripture we want to be careful not to base a doctrine on one obscure passage. We want to look at what the rest of the Bible says when interpreting one section or passage. Find other places in which this truth is taught. How do other passages make this one clearer?

4) Remember that God doesn't contradict Himself.

You can count on Scripture correlating with other Scripture. Though some of the Word of God is difficult to understand, it doesn't contradict itself. If you've come to an interpretation that doesn't correspond in some way with other clear conclusions from Scripture, you've most likely come to a faulty conclusion.

Integration: What will I do with it?

So, you've accomplished your *investigative* work and done your best to notice the details. Then you've moved on to the work of *interpretation*, and prayerfully discovered what you believe it means. Now you're ready to go to the last phase of *integrating* its

meaning into the way you think, speak, and act. What will you do with what you understand to be true? How will it change you? How will it affect your relationship with God and people? How does this help you to live for the glory of God and the good of others?

This helpful acrostic covers the bases of what we're looking for during the integration phase, "**S.P.E.C.S.**": **S**uff to believe; **P**romises to claim; **E**xamples to follow; **C**ommands to obey; **S**ins to forsake.

- **Stuff to believe** - Is there something here that's supposed to affect my belief system? Is God telling me something about Himself, about myself?
- **Promises to claim** - Are there promises God is giving to me in this passage?
- **Examples to follow** - Is somebody in this section of Scripture showing me an example of a godly life? What can I learn from this person's life story?
- **Commands to obey** - Is God telling me to do something here? Is there a mandate that I must obey?
- **Sins to forsake** - Is God warning me about something or urging me to repent of something here? Does this show me something to change in my life?

How does this help you to
live for the glory of God and
the good of others?

Now, pray again!

After you've done S.P.E.C.S., I recommend that you pray again. This time, pray that God will help you do it. Now that you've read and understood what you read in the Bible, you're going to need the Holy Spirit's strength to act on what you've read. I like to say that the *"Christian life is not hard to live – it's impossible! Only He can do it in and through you."* I have another favorite saying, which I probably stole from someone years ago. *"The Christian life is the life He (Jesus) lived then, lived now by Him in you."* Paul said it this way: *"I've been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."* (Galatians 2:20) So, pray!

OK, let's conclude by remembering what we said at the beginning. Don't let this approach to Bible study take even one iota of the joy of learning God's Word out of your reading and study times. The more you

practice this process, it will become more and more second-nature to you. You probably won't be reading the Word, thinking, "Now I'm in the investigative phase..." or, "What was that second 'S' in SPECS?" You'll do these things without having to think about them. And as you do, you'll get more and more out of God's great Love Letter written to you. Happy studying!

Now, let's practice...

Let's practice on the one-chapter epistle called "**Philemon**." It's a great little letter from Paul to his friend Philemon regarding his runaway slave, Onesimus, whom apparently Paul led to Christ while they were both in jail. We'll start with *investigating*, then move to *interpreting* and then on to *integrating* the message of this Epistle into our lives.

INVESTIGATE

So, where do we start?

- With **prayer**. Ask Him for insight. Sample Prayer: *Lord, I'm about to read your Word, and I was hoping you'd help me see what you want me to see, know what you want me to know, so that I can do what you want me to do. Open my eyes and heart to your truth. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*
- Then, let's ask the questions... who, what, where, when, why? Read the chapter through and underline all the references to **Who (the people)** in the letter to Philemon?
- Read it again and circle all the references to **Where (the places)**? [Hint: Is there a city mentioned, and even a place in that city?]
- Read it once more and put a box around any references to **When (the time)**? [Hint: there is at least one in verse 9.]
- Now, retell the story that's contained in Philemon as you see it (either in your mind, on paper, or to a friend), recreating the **What (what happened here)**.
- Now, give a reason **Why** you think the story was written (**i.e. Why did Paul write this letter? What was his purpose?**)? [Hint: How would the letter benefit Onesimus?]
- Then, while some of these things tend to overlap a bit, think through the issues of context... obvious observations... key words (mark them)... and main themes.

INTERPRET

Now you're ready to do some interpreting of the letter to Philemon. Notice that you are best off not trying to interpret until you've done your investigating.

So, what do we do next?

- Pray again. Ask God for insight while you interpret.
- In this phase we're asking the question: **"What's it mean?"** This isn't the "take away," the application yet. We have to sort of run it through a time machine, and attempt to interpret what Philemon meant to the original writers and readers.

For this letter of Philemon, let's ask these questions:

- **What do we learn about 1st century culture** from Philemon? You might do some thinking about the institution of slavery...
- **What do we learn about Paul?** What kind of person was he? How does this letter get to know him better? [Hint: Can you see any clues to Paul's heart for people or his tenacity under pressure? See verse 12.]
- **What do we learn about Onesimus?** Do you see something happen to him that brought about change? What kind of person was he before, and then after, meeting Paul, who introduced him to Jesus? [Hint: His name means, "Useful."]
- **What do we learn about God?** Where do you see His fingerprints in the letter? How is he involved in this story?

INTEGRATE

Now for the most important part! This is where we attempt to put the Word into our lives, to apply it, to take it away with us. If the question while investigating was, "What does it say?" and the question while interpreting is, "What does it mean?" the question here is, "What am I going to do with it – How will I integrate this into my life today?"

Let's use **S.P.E.C.S.** to help us do that.

Do you see in the letter some **Stuff to believe** – stuff to believe about God, about Jesus, about our relationship with Him? How does the letter to Philemon give us something to believe? [Hint: Is there a redemption picture here - something that illustrates how Jesus saves us by paying our debt? Pay particular attention to verses 17-19.

- How about some **Promises to claim?** Do you see any promises from God to us here (even in a sort of obscure way)?

- Do you see in the any **Examples to follow?** Do any of the characters do or say or exude anything that you find exemplary as you attempt to follow Christ? [Hint: In the letter to Philemon is Paul showing us anything about how Christians act or about their passion to evangelize in all circumstances?]
- Do you find any **Commands to obey?** Is there anything that the letter just outright tells us to do as Christians? [Hint: Is there a hint of a command in verse 6?]
- How about any **Sins to forsake?** Is there anything we're either directly or indirectly told to avoid doing? When you read Philemon, do you see anything that God is warning us to repent of?

Now, pray again!

Remember, this is God's Book with God's plan which can only be revealed and carried out in God's power. So, pray. There really is no such thing as innocently studying the Bible. This Book will not let you peruse it innocently. You have to know it in your head, stow it in your heart, show it in your life, so you can sow it in the world! So, pray for God's help!