

THE WHY AND HOW OF PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

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Lesson 7

REVIEW:

We have completed our study of the nineteenth Psalm and saw its background, author and interpretation. We added to the designations for the Word of God found in Psalm 19 other synonyms for the Scriptures.

OUTLINE:

I. BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS (simplified)

A. Meaning of term.

B. Range.

II. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF HERMENEUTICS

APPROACH:

We all love to receive letters from friends and loved ones. We "devour" them eagerly, savoring word after word. It would never dawn on us to call in an interpreter or a teacher to explain the contents or context of our mail. Did you ever ask yourself why that should be? No! You understand what you read instantly. We might say that YOUR UNDERSTANDING IS SPONTANEOUS! You neither require an explanation of the grammatical construction of the sentences nor of the idioms your friends might use. You use the same colloquialism (slang) and, at times, you can even read between the lines!

This was the case with the original recipients of the Scripture portions which now form our Bible. Written in their own native Hebrew or Greek, the communications they received presented no problems to the ancients. Certainly, there needed to be instructors, priests, prophets and judges, but for the most part, the messages for God's people, and the records and instructions were plain enough. For that reason the Epistles, for example, were to be READ IN THE CHURCHES (Col. 4:16).

Living languages undergo constant changes! Let me illustrate. Often we find that the vocabulary which our "mod generation" uses is somewhat foreign to us, even as the vocabulary we used as teenagers was strange to our parents! Technological advances demand that words be coined for new developments for which no former terminology is adequate. This was the case with our space-explorations. Over the years we have accepted these new terms, and they have become a very definite part

of our vocabulary, while the more outdated words were dropped and eventually became "extinct." What seemed to man to be impossible at one time is commonplace today, and what we consider up-to-date right now will be antiquated a few years from now! You can see, therefore, how a hundred years from now explanations may be required by the future generations regarding our own lifestyle! Just so, we often need an explanation before we can understand the ways and idioms of the ancient world.

Particularly is this true of the Scriptures. Here we face two problems--SPIRITUAL and INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING. In both instances God provided the solutions: (1) The teaching and enlightening ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:1-13); (2) The preservation and recovery of valuable ancient manuscripts; (3) Gifted scholars who determine the correct meaning of the original languages of Scripture; (4) The spiritual gift of Pastor-Teacher, and that of the Bible teacher in general.

NOW, WHILE GOD HIMSELF GUARANTEES THE PERMANENCE OF HIS WORD, THE DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION CERTIFIES THE INERRANCY OF THE SCRIPTURES **ONLY** AS THEY WERE ORIGINALLY RECORDED! The Scriptures first penned by "holy men of God" were indeed "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). However, despite their conscientious efforts, copyists have made errors in copying the original text, and other copyists have copied these errors. With the advent of the translations of the original languages, unintentional mistakes obscured the initial intent of some passages. Often concepts foreign to a people or tribe had to be rendered within their frame of understanding; thus a text might be paraphrased. Add to this the change of language and idiom, as well as anachronisms (chronological errors) that must be ironed out, and you will readily see that we run into difficulty understanding what was plain to believers of the past!

Anticipating such problems, our omniscient God cautioned the interpreters and teachers of Scripture NOT TO RIGHTLY DIVIDE THE WORD OF TRUTH (2 Tim. 2:15)! The twisting and distortion of God's Word constitutes an offense against God! **We are warned against adding to or diminishing from the Word of God** (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18)! HOW, THEN, DO WE MAKE SURE THAT WE ARE IN FACT RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH, OR THAT OTHERS ARE, AS THEY TEACH US?

Everyone who seeks to interpret Scripture must be guided by certain rules and principles in the evaluation of a passage. These rules are called HERMENEUTICS. As they apply to the Scriptures, we should refer to them more accurately as "BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS." Today we want to examine these rules in their most basic form.

I. BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

A. Meaning of term. What does the word "HERMENEUTICS" mean? Let us first look at the etymology of this word. (Etymology is that branch of philology which deals with the derivation of words to determine their meaning.) "HERMENEUTICS" is derived from the name of a Greek god, the god HERMES. Known as the "messenger of the gods," Hermes was thought to have delivered and thus "interpreted" the messages of the chief deity, Zeus. Hence, any interpreter was called an HERMENEUTES (ἑρμηνευτής). Transliterated, rather than translated, the word has come down to us as "HERMENEUTICS." It means "the science or art of interpretation." In its biblical sense, it refers specifically to the science or art of biblical interpretation.

While the so-called "layman" need not be burdened with a lot of technical know-how, the serious student of the Word should want to know some of the rules that govern the interpretation of the Bible.

B. Range. So extensive are the rules that, according to biblical scholars, they **range from style to exegesis** (the study of the meaning of the text). You will recall that we noted the style of Psalm 19, classifying it as poetry.

Hermeneutics falls into two categories: GENERAL HERMENEUTICS and BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS. **General hermeneutics is employed in all materials that need interpretation; be they secular or sacred! Biblical hermeneutics pertain to the interpretation of the Scriptures!** They are mandatory for the correct interpretation of the text, and they lead to its proper application. Both are essential for spiritual growth!

(Chalkboard diagram):

Word + HERMENEUTICS (rules for interpret.)	=	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• EXEGESIS (analysis, language study, etc.)• EXPOSITION (expository teaching)• APPLICATION
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Once more we see OBSERVATION, INTERPRETATION, APPLICATION! (Relevance to time and place)

II. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF HERMENEUTICS

A. General hermeneutics.

Once you are made aware of the basic rules of hermeneutics you will recognize that these were applied in our study of Psalm 19. We took every step suggested as we introduced the Psalm and gave as its background the entire Psalter. We noted the

author and the occasion or purpose of its writing. We saw the recipients and what might have prompted David to write these words. From its interpretation we covered the application, thus we made David's words relevant to our own personal lives!

1. **LITERARY STYLE!** The textbooks on hermeneutics list as the first rule the noting of the **literary genre or style** which **furnishes the correct frame of reference for a passage**. We might say that the style sets the mood and is the backdrop for the words.

Scripture contains a variety of styles: poetry, narrative, sermons, history, proverbs, parables, to name a few of them. DETERMINE WITH WHICH OF THESE YOU ARE DEALING IN ANY GIVEN PASSAGE!

2. **WORD STUDY!** Words convey thoughts and express meanings. Most likely, the student of Scripture will be content with the examination of an occasional word. Detailed word study is time-consuming and necessitates knowledge of the languages of the Bible. You can go about word study in a number of ways:
 - a. Use a good standard dictionary for words with which you are not familiar.
 - b. Discover the etymology of a word (often listed in good dictionaries. Or obtain a book on etymology).
 - c. Determine how the same word is used elsewhere in Scripture. Compare! (Concordance)
 - d. Compare synonyms.
 - e. Rely on research done by scholars; i.e., historical word studies (Bible Dictionaries)

3. **GRAMMATICAL (literal) EXEGESIS!** Of necessity this third rule applies mainly to the minister or the serious Bible student who has mastered the original languages of Scripture. The grammatical approach to exegesis is invaluable in determining the exact context of a passage. Apart from grammar, it takes into account the cultural and geographical settings, customs and historical events. Relating this principle to Scripture analysis, we must ALWAYS INTERPRET SCRIPTURE WITHIN ITS OWN HISTORICAL SETTING!

Recommendation: Bible students who either lack the time or the linguistic tools do well to rely on sound scholars who have done their research and have published their findings in commentaries!

B. Biblical hermeneutics. Whereas any good scholar of ancient literary works, who is well-versed in the languages of the Bible, can dig out these facts, it takes a Spirit-filled knowledgeable believer to discern the deep truths of Scripture! Here is where

biblical hermeneutic enter the picture. The textbooks list a number of factors to be considered.

1. **SPIRITUAL FACTOR.** The person who will gain the most from personal Bible study is **the Spirit-filled believer who applies himself diligently to the study of the Word!** A simple **reliance on the Holy Spirit is never a substitute for learning.** The Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the Word of God, not apart from it. Thus, the filling of the Spirit does not take the place of Bible study! To maintain that it does is a misapplication of Luke 12:12 or 1 John 2:27. We are assured that the HOLY SPIRIT WILL LEAD US INTO ALL TRUTH, YET THERE IS ALWAYS TO BE A BEAUTIFUL BALANCE BETWEEN THAT WHICH GOD DOES AND THAT WHICH WE ARE EXPECTED TO DO. He only does for us what we cannot do ourselves!
2. **UNITY OF SCRIPTURE.** This rule demands that the Bible student recognize that the UNITY AND HARMONY OF THE SCRIPTURES CENTER IN JESUS CHRIST! What is foretold in the Old Testament concerning His coming is fulfilled in the New Testament and documented therein. While the Old Testament is applicable to us today, it is the New Testament which provides the guidelines for the Church.
3. **PROGRESSIVE REVELATION.** In order to understand Scripture, the Bible student must know that ALL REVELATION IS PROGRESSIVE IN NATURE. Thus, God reveals Himself and His plan within man's present frame of understanding. **EXAMPLE:** In **Genesis 3:15** we find the SEED OF MAN'S REDEMPTION. God summarized for us in one sentence precisely what the first man and woman were told right after their Fall. The details of that plan unfolded gradually over the centuries, but it was not until the time of Micah that the actual birthplace of Messiah was pinpointed on the map (Micah 5:2). In progressive revelation God builds new truths upon the old to make His purposes ever clearer to us.

The application of this important principle guards the Bible student from reading into the Scriptures what is not there! To read into Genesis 3:15 that Adam and his wife understood the whole realm of Christology is erroneous! They knew only what God had told them, no more and no less. Just so it would be completely wrong to read Church Age teaching into the Old Testament. The prophets of old merely saw the mountain peaks of prophecy, not the valleys in between! Paul tells us so in **Ephesians 3:1-5**. And because revelation is progressive, **NEWLY REVEALED TRUTHS MUST TAKE PRECEDENT OVER THOSE ALREADY KNOWN.** Together, they form a complete picture! We can look back today and see the whole scope of truth; the ancients looked forward to that day when revelation would be complete!

4. **SELF-INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.** SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE! Many a sect is built upon some incidental reference in the Word

of God. This is taking a text out of its context and using it to support one's own notions. This fourth principle holds that **THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS THE PART OF SCRIPTURE!** Think of the Scriptures as a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece has its place, and it can fit only in its place. A piece cannot be stretched or squeezed to make it fit. As we learn to understand the various truths of Scripture, the whole will dovetail and fall into place. **EXAMPLE:** A classical example of the self-interpretation of Scripture can be found in the Book of Daniel, in Chapter 4, where a baffling dream is both told and interpreted. The parables which our Lord told are another. In the more difficult passages this principle is of even greater importance. We mentioned in an earlier lesson the **CORRELATION OF SCRIPTURE PASSAGES**. These must often be determined in an effort to resolve the deeper truths.

5. **SUPERNATURAL ACCOUNTS IN SCRIPTURE.** How does the Bible student deal with the supernatural he encounters in God's Word? He accepts it unquestioningly and does not try to explain it away! What God purposes He can perform, and how He chooses to go about it is His prerogative.
6. **THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS.** Do not let this term scare you. This step is a logical progression from the grammatical step which has already been discussed. It is the search for spiritual interpretation. What is **the full implication** of this text or that? Here is where **SPIRITUAL INSIGHT IS NEEDED**. The deeper your understanding of the things of God, the richer will be your harvest of deductions. **THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS MAKES THE TEXT MEANINGFUL.** It often brings about the coupling of texts from the Old and the New Testaments by way of illustration. **One word of warning: NEVER BE GUILTY OF SPIRITUALIZING OR ALLEGORIZING A TEXT!** Unless stated or implied, the Word means exactly what it says! It is to be taken literally; don't ever try to make it say something which it does not!

SUMMARY: The principles given you comprise the essential rules of both general and biblical hermeneutics. Some may be more technical to you than you can presently categorize in your mind. Nevertheless, it is helpful to know them. What were they?

General:

1. **LITERARY STYLE**--for frame of reference of a passage.
2. **WORD STUDY** --for expression of thought and meaning.
3. **GRAMMATICAL EXEGESIS** --for context, historical, cultural setting, events.

Biblical:

1. SPIRITUAL FACTOR --be filled with the Spirit; then study for maximum benefit.
2. UNITY OF SCRIPTURE--recognize that Christ is the focal Point of the Bible.
3. PROGRESSIVE REVELATION--be aware of the gradual unfolding of God's plan.
4. SELF-INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE --allow the Bible to interpret itself.
5. SUPERNATURAL IN SCRIPTURE --accept it.
6. THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS --seek the deeper meaning of a passage.

APPLICATION: You may well ask, what good does all this technical information do me? Besides giving you valuable information for your own use, it should give you an appreciation for the pastor-teacher or Bible teacher whose call and devotion to the Lord gives him the privilege of concentrated study that others might be built up in the truth, "TILL WE ALL COME IN THE UNITY OF THE FAITH...UNTO THE MEASURE OF THE STATURE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST! (Eph. 4:13)!"