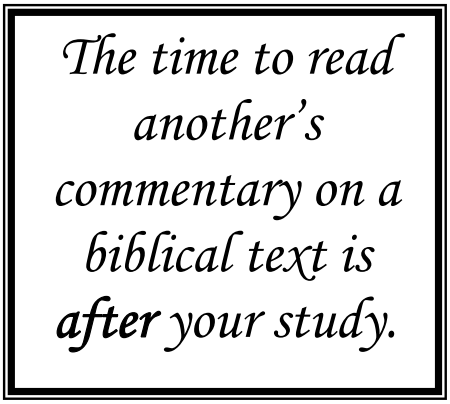
How to Teach or Learn the Bible Simply by *Reading* the Bible:

*A simple way to learn to **hear** the text as it was first intended*

I actually fell upon this simple, but effective way to teach Bible *and* Bible study quite by accident—this method of teaching Bible by simply *reading* a fairly lengthy Bible passage aloud in a group, then discussing what the participants *hear*.

Contextual philosophy

Our goal in this study (and all biblical study, if you adopt this philosophy) will be to hear the text as it was initially intended to be heard. What did the writer have in mind *at the time the text was written*? What did he expect *his specific audience* to hear, know, understand, or learn? Like writing today, every biblical text had a context—a situation, a place, a relationship, a need that inspired its writing. It was a communication, and as such, at least two parties were involved: the writer and the reader(s). One disadvantage of approaching a text hundreds of years after it was written is learning *to hear* what was intended when we often possess only one side of the conversation. We must enter the text, looking for *context clues*, some means by which to more fully understand. We must saturate ourselves with the words, grow to more fully understand the writer, his time, and his audience. While a good commentary *introduction* can supply the who, when and where behind the writing (or at least a good many ideas about the same), we must look to the writing itself to find the *what* and the *how*. *What* is the writer saying? *How* is he communicating this message? We learn these best *without* the use of a commentary. While someone else's opinions about what the text actually communicates can be helpful, it can also lead us down a path we might not have found without a guide. The time to read another's commentary on a biblical text is *after* your study. At such time, you will be able to converse with the writer, agreeing and disagreeing with his/her logic and ideas. Your study will earn you a place at the table, and what you come away with may be influenced by what you read, but it will not be dictated by another.



Because of this, careful study involves reading, reading, and re-reading. The idea is to saturate yourself with the text, to minimize the influence of even *your own* previous thoughts. This baptism in the text allows patterns to emerge from flat words on a page and patterns are often the key to meaning. As we communicate on any given topic, we repeat words, we use synonyms, images, allusions, and examples. We say what we mean, and we will also often say what we don't mean: "*I am not talking about.…*" In order to make our topic clear, we speak with antonyms, supply contrasts, and tell stories that directly contradict what we intend to communicate—all for emphasis and clarification. When we do this effectively, people begin to understand our point. The biblical writers did the same. Thus, when the Bible is read, listeners *hear* these patterns. We hear the connection between the illustrative story and the repeated word. We

understand why contradictory ideas or statements actually contribute to *clarity*. However, the process takes time and discipline. We must stay in the text we are reading and look to that text to tutor us in what is meant.

Too often readers—even Bible translators—can make quick judgments about the meaning of a specific text based on a thorough understanding of a similar statement somewhere else in the Bible. When this occurs, we begin to *read meaning into the text* rather than *gain meaning from the text*. I cannot overemphasize this point! Every piece of information we carry into a study stands to influence what comes out of that study. Therefore, the best examinations of biblical texts occur when the bible and the reader hunker down together—alone—to learn. Stay in the text you are reading; do not carry verses from other books or writers into your understanding of the book you examine. As with the commentary, there is a time to expand your vision, but the time to do so is *after* you have thoroughly digested the text at hand.

When studying with a group, the facilitator should maintain strict boundaries in regard to discussion. To a great degree students should limit their comments to the book being studied. As a rule, the group will not introduce teachings from elsewhere in the Bible or define a difficult passage by another text that might or might not use similar language. The text's best interpreter will be the text itself. Though we might benefit from such discussions, the facilitator should take care that these discussions neither interrupt the flow of the conversation nor carry the discussion off track into another part of the Bible.

Stay in the text you are reading.

It takes about 90 minutes

The Reading—*about 15 minutes*

The trick to hearing messages in reading is to read *large portions* of text at one time—a full section[1[1]], at least. In short books with five or six chapters, read it all—every time. Most of the time, I have my group begin at a story or thought before the section we are studying and stop reading at the end of the section. I want to remind them of the context of the *last section*, as we begin *hearing* the section we are working on together. Readings should last **about fifteen minutes** and be done by ***one voice.*** These two guidelines are important. If the book is long enough, fifteen minutes provides students a good opportunity to begin *hearing* the text without becoming overwhelmed with too much information. Only when the complete text can be read in less time, or when listeners are not hearing the text in their native language, [2[2]] should one consider a briefer reading. When my group reads Mark, we read it in sections like this: Mark 1.1-3.6, 3.7-6.6; 6.7-8.21, etc. I try as much as possible to find breaks in the content of the book, dividing at major sections whenever possible.

Though it may seem trivial, hearing the reading from ***one voice*** will lend continuity to the reading—an extremely important feature when attempting to hear the overall construction of a piece. Whether we realize it or not, changing readers signals a context change—similar to the way chapter breaks (some of which are very poor indicators of theme) can create distractions. If you are going to change readers, *only* do so after you have determined *where* distinct breaks occur in the context of the writing. *Don't interrupt an author's train of* thought—it will disrupt your own, as well. Since groups discover context and meaning *en route,* inadvertently breaking a reading by changing voices will cause a "disconnect" in the understanding we are seeking. On a practical note, the reader *can* be the facilitator—especially if the facilitator herself hears better *while reading*—but under normal circumstances, handing off the task to a good reader other than the facilitator will permit her the luxury of jotting down notes—things she has heard and ideas that should not be left unsaid during the session.

After fifteen minutes of reading by one voice, the reading should cease. A moment of silence permits reflection, thought, or jotting down notes—but only a moment. At that point the facilitator, will ask, *"What did you hear?"*

[1[1]] By section, I am speaking of "the context of an entire unit of thought" in a particular writing. Actually, reading and rereading will help you *discover* these sections on your own, but you can also start, using a reliable outline of a book. These can be found in the **introductions to commentaries or study Bibles.**

[2[2]] During the fall of 2006 , I used this technique in teaching the book of Mark to an international group, most of whom were Asian. During the first couple of months, reading for seven to ten minutes was about the right amount of time, but eight months later, we were able to read 12-15.

The Question and Response Time: What did you hear? *usually 15-45 minutes, total*

How it works: My exegesis professor told the class on the first day: *Exegesis is really only asking questions of the text then looking for answers to those questions until you are satisfied.* For that reason, there is *no one system* for producing good exegesis. Mix together a biblical text (or any text for that matter) with an inquisitive, resourceful, and thorough mind, and what results will be exegesis. While my experience has taught me the validity of this statement, getting *my* students to buy into such a definition—much less such an experience—has proven more difficult. They want a system, and interestingly the ones who latch on to the concept tend to refer to the process *as* a "new system"—something I try to discourage. Nonetheless, I am a teacher, and I understand that people learn in different ways. To that end, I designed worksheets, wrote concrete directives, and built boxes and blanks to hold their various responses. Though these aids don't particularly appeal to *me* as a student, others say they find them helpful (*access the Come before Winter equipping materials*). For example, in Step 3, Worksheet 1, of our exegetical notebook, students who dissect a specific biblical text seek repeated words, linked phrases, ideas and events, summation words, and changes in place or time. They examine the verbs and verb forms, the comparisons and contrasts, identify questions in the text, and attempt to locate any answers the text provides to those questions.

To me, the truly amazing aspect of a reading group study and discussion is that students *hear* these same exegetically sound observations. Note these observations and exchanges that have occurred in my group:

> **Student**: "I kept hearing the word 'comfort.'"
> **Facilitator to all students:** How many times does your version use the word 'comfort' between verses one and eight? (This question could provide an excellent opportunity to learn about translations if the number is different. If it *is* different, ask, "Look at the context of the word 'comfort' in [the variant verse]. Can you see anything distinct about the way the word is used that could indicate the reason [one version] would translate it one way and [another translation] might translate it differently?"
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> **Student**: "I couldn't help but think of the unity theme. I heard the words 'one spirit,' 'side by side,' 'one mind,' and 'same struggle.'"
> **Facilitator:** "What do you think has been happening in Philippi that Paul uses so many words and phrases about unity? Can we/you see evidence of [those speculations] in the epistle?"
>
> **Student**: "The 'therefore' at chapter 12 really stuck out to me."
> **Facilitator:** "Why do you think Paul uses the word 'therefore' at *this* point in the writing?"
>
> **Student**: "You know it is interesting that when Jesus performs his second miracle, He is in Cana, the same as when He performed his first miracle."

Facilitator: "I noticed that too. Why do you think John points that out?"

Student: "In that one verse, I heard that standing with Christian brothers and sisters represents *salvation* to the Christian and *destruction* to those who oppose them."
Facilitator: (If the facilitator has done background reading on the situation of the letter, the geography of Philippi, and the history of the Macedonians, she might have discovered a wealth of information to bring to the front here. For example, Paul uses an historical allusion of the Greek Philanx here, a formation of soldiers designed *in Macedonia* by Alexander the Great's father, Philip (the man after which Philippi was named). This formation of soldiers was so impenetrable that when opposing armies saw it coming, they recognized it as sure defeat—*because the soldiers walked in lock-step together, using their swords and shields as one man*.)

Student: "I noticed that Jesus doesn't answer the man's question."
"**Facilitator:** Let's look at the question. How does this gospel show Jesus responding to this question?"

As you can see, observations like these (in response to the simple question, "What did you hear?") lead to other questions and answers that promote excellent opportunities to help readers grow in Bible reading skills as well as understanding of the text.

Leading the "What did you hear" discussion: There are no right or wrong answers to the question, "What did you hear", as long as the thoughts originate during the reading itself. Allow each participant to communicate an array of observations made during the reading. Some listeners will contribute several comments and some will be more reticent, but the facilitator should work to make sure each person has an opportunity at some point in the evening to share what they noticed. Good discussions *can* begin with any comment, so we do not rush from one to another. The goal is not to catalogue a long list of observations, but to explore the reading with as much understanding as the group can bring to the table at a given time.

Several listeners may have heard similar messages or want to ask related questions. When this is the case, take time to share and consider possibilities. Make a concerted effort to ***keep readers in the context of the book being read.*** Pulling in parallel texts from throughout the Bible only confuses the issue at hand—understanding the book being read. If students ask a question no one can answer, great! That can be an assignment each explores during the days between sessions.

The time allotted for the "What did you hear?" discussion, which is based on what participants heard as they listened to the oral reading of the text, will vary with each reading. Sometimes the conversation might take a large portion of the time (I have spent as much as an hour here); other times this part of the study can conclude after 10-20 minutes. Remember, as long as the discussion remains fruitful, nothing is lost. One of the great things about studying with a group in this way is the open-ended nature of the

experience. A hot (or cold) drink, a group of friends, a good book, and fascinating conversation—what more could one ask?

Directing the study after the "What did you hear?" discussion *(15-45 minutes)*

At some point, what the participants heard, and all necessary discussion surrounding those observations, will end. At that time, the facilitator will use what *she* has noticed about this particular piece of text (or discovered since the last group reading) and direct the remaining minutes of the study. I usually do this by asking questions. Students may not share *everything* they noticed; sometimes they fear that their observations will be wrong. However, when the facilitator opens a topic that connects to something they noticed, they usually join in. Thus, the relaxed tone of the study continues throughout the evening.

Determining the questions that need to be asked of a particular text becomes the facilitator's most difficult and important task. Obviously, the better a facilitator understands the text, the more significant the resulting discussion. However, as my group of friends proved a few years ago, even in the process of deciphering a book, this type reading experience can be rich and rewarding. Most of the time the questions that occur to a practiced Bible reader *during the reading itself* offer plenty of fodder for those reading/studying with her. (For this reason, having someone else actually *read* the text at the beginning of the session will allow facilitators the opportunity to jot down their own thoughts/questions and thus serve the group.)

I try particularly hard to recognize each contribution during the "what did you hear?" segment of the class. However, I don't open the floor for discussion of *every point.* However when a student notices *anything* that ties into the main theme of the reading, I follow that observation with question upon question in order to help the class "discover" the truth that lies only slightly below the surface of the spoken observation.

What kind of questions *should* be asked of the text? First, if at all possible, the facilitator should pay attention to **context**, the broad perspective, *of the passage*. This standpoint provides the most fertile ground for discovering meaning, *and* it is the territory the novice seems *least likely* to consider or investigate. Even students who study regularly seem more willing to interpret a difficult passage in light of better understood texts than to work to decipher the difficult passage in the context of the book they are studying. Facilitators need to be purposeful in requiring their students to think deeply about passages in the context in which they lie. In doing so, vivid understandings emerge.

Second, students usually need coaching in considering the **situation** (some call it the "occasion") *of the writing* and *in the writing.* Why was the book written? To whom was it written? What was the relationship or situation between the writer and the intended reader *at the time it was written*? In narrative or historical books, details like the time

and place *of the writing* will vary from the time within the story itself. In other words, Luke wrote his gospel and its sequel Acts decades after the events actually occurred. Knowing what was occurring in the church *at the time Luke wrote* can be as significant to the process of understanding *his* story of Jesus as understanding the times and events occurring in the story.

Much of this can be learned from pre-study and reading outside the text. A good study Bible, commentary introduction,[3[3]] Bible dictionary or encyclopedia can be useful. However, the text itself also provides details and clues, and introducing texts and questions to help students recognize these cues will prompt good discussions. For instance, in the book of Philippians, Paul writes in 1.17 of a group of preachers who teach from "selfish ambition…supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." In 4.2 he directly exhorts two women to "agree with each other." In these two references alone, readers understand that when Paul wrote this letter, he was surrounded by conflict—in prison, with adversaries who seek to "stir up trouble," and having received news that his followers are bickering. Understanding this and other significant passages about conflict and unity in the letter, changes the way we read, "…my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends." Paul *values* these precious relationships; he wants the Philippians to value one another and to stand firm in the conviction to remain united in Christ.

*While the class is meeting regularly, the **leader** needs to be reading the text **daily.***

The most difficult part of leading any discussion class resides in the possibility that the discussion will become unfruitful, that it will *miss the point.* Certainly, the facilitator must take care to keep the conversation from rambling about the insignificant and moving toward a clearer understanding of the **main point** In order to aid a group of students in finding and examining the main point of a writing, the leader must be able to identify that point herself. A facilitator's success will obviously depend on the amount of study she has done. Therefore, while the class is meeting weekly or bi-weekly, the leader needs to be reading the text *daily.*

Progression from class to class

I am still learning to teach in this way. However, I have come to believe that establishing the pattern of the study in the beginning weeks requires additional time. Therefore, I am likely to spend three or even four weeks reading the same material in the beginning of each class. During the first class, establishing this pattern is *most important.*

[3[3]] Students should be highly discouraged from using—even reading—the expository section of a commentary while working through a readings class. I tell my students only when we have worked in the text ourselves and wrestled with its passages, are we equipped to sit at the table with other serious students (ie. the commentary writers). For students who check their every thought against a commentary, study becomes an exercise in locating the correct answer and less an adventure to be enjoyed. Additionally, it is a rare student with the confidence to continue exploring a hunch or idea when a commentary provides a different explanation.

However, by the fourth class, I have a list of specific points that *must be made* in order to move on, and I coach students *toward* those points. Occasionally, I *teach* the points—that is, I bring them up, ask questions about them, and supply any needed information that remains. Gradually, though, we are moving from one section to the next. About five or six weeks into the study (or when we are mid-way in the second section), after I have had time to get to know the class (and the book), I make a reading log for my benefit that helps me determine how quickly we will move through the remainder of the time. I do not usually give this to the class. However, in this log, I factor in the weeks remaining in our pre-determined study time, and I schedule out which sections we will read at each class to help us finish the chosen text on schedule.

Normally, I spend eight or nine months in a reading class on a book the size of Mark—16 chapters. My first six weeks of my schedule usually develops something like this:

Week 1: Read Mark 1.1-20 and discuss. After what *they hear*, I focus only on verses 1-3
Week 2: Read Mark 1.1-20 and discuss passage, emphasizing 9-20
Week 3: Read 1.14-3.6 and discuss 1.21-3.6
Week 4: Read 2.23-6.6 and focus discussion on 3.6-4.34
Week 5: Read 2.23-6.6 and focus discussion on 4.1-4.34
Week 6: Read 4.1-6.6 and focus discussion on 4.35-6.6

By this time, we have established a routine. Using my outline of the book, I move gradually through the book. I never begin with a reading of a new section that doesn't include at least one passage or story from the last section. I do this to put the *hearers* back into the context they know well before we enter new material.

The gift of understanding

Monday meanings

I believe Bible study changes lives. However, that change does not occur by osmosis, and neither does it come easily. Therefore, when a group completes various sections of study, the facilitator should ask each person to share what she has learned *in that section* and how that knowledge *will change her life* from this point forward. In our exegesis classes, we have developed a worksheet to help students do this (click here to go to Worksheet 3). Groups that share these insights and goals will become closer and find Bible study more significant.

Theologically speaking

I love the miracle of this study because I think that in practicing this exercise, we commit to a biblical principal that seems to have been Jesus' focus during his ministry in Galilee. That is, the miracle of the gospel is that God supplies understanding to those who *want to hear*. In fact, he provides this understanding in *exact proportion* to the amount of our desire. Thus, understanding becomes *a gift* of God, offered without prejudice to all people equally, regardless of their intelligence quotient or their level of education. My job is *to hear.*

> *"Consider carefully what you hear,"* Jesus said. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." Mark 4.24-25

Hearing was not easy for the men Jesus came upon in the first century; it is not easy for me. But, if I *want to hear,* somehow, some way he will *open my ears*, teach me to understand, and allow me *to see* Him—as He is. I teach this truth to my students each time I begin a readings class. The miracle of Jesus, his message, and his Spirit is that He supplies the knowledge. We desire Him, and He supplies. The fact that this study occurs in my living room, next to a burning fire (in winter), with cups of hot tea and in the presence of a group of friends just facilitates this experience. We relax, we ponder Him, and He enters—into the room, into our hearts and into our lives.