

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 type of Bible study quite by accident—this method of understanding scripture by simply *reading* a fairly lengthy Bible passage repeatedly, then reflecting on what I *heard*.

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.

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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

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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.

It takes commitment

The Reading—about 15 minutes

The trick to hearing messages in reading is to read *large portions* of text at one time—a full section¹, at least. In short books with five or six chapters, read it all—every time. Most of the time, I begin reading at a story or thought before the section I have been studying and stop reading at the end of the section. I want to remind myself of the context of the *last section*, as I begin *hearing* the section I am currently considering. Readings should last **at least fifteen minutes** and be completed in one sitting. These two guidelines are important. If the book is long enough, fifteen minutes provides 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 readers are not reading the text in their native language,² should one consider a briefer reading. When I read Mark, I 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, reading a lengthy passage in one sitting 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, breaking up the reading can create confusion about the context—similar to the way chapter breaks (some of which are very poor indicators of theme) can create distractions. If possible, *only* read shorter excerpts 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 we often discover context and meaning *en route*, inadvertently breaking a reading by reading in smaller bits will cause a “disconnect” in the understanding we are seeking.

After at least fifteen minutes of reading, pause. A moment of silence permits reflection, thought, or jotting down notes—but only a moment. At that point, ask yourself, “**What did I hear?**”

The Question and Response Time: What did I hear? usually 15-45 minutes

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

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.

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.

However, the truly amazing aspect of a reading the text in this way is that readers begin to *hear* and make these same exegetically sound observations. Note how these observations prompt questions that lead to further understanding:

Reader: “I kept hearing the word ‘comfort.’”

Question: How many times does this version use the word ‘comfort?’ (When reading from more than one version, this question provides an excellent opportunity to learn about translations. If the word occurs a different number of times from one version to the other, examine the context of the word ‘comfort’ in [the variant verse]. Is there anything distinct about the way the word is used that could indicate the reason [one version] might translate it one way and [another translation] translate it differently?”

Reader: “I couldn’t help but think of the unity theme. I heard the words ‘one spirit,’ ‘side by side,’ ‘one mind,’ and ‘same struggle.’”

Question: What do you think has been happening in Philippi that Paul uses so many words and phrases about unity? Can you see evidence of [those speculations] in the epistle?”

Reader: “The ‘therefore’ at chapter 12 really stuck out to me.”

Question: “Why do you think Paul uses the word ‘therefore’ at *this* point in the writing?”

Reader: “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.”

Question: Why do you think John points that out?

Reader: “I noticed that Jesus doesn’t answer the man’s question.”

Question: Look at the question and its broader context. 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.

Reflecting on “What did I hear”: 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 yourself an array of observations about the reading. Good reflection *can* begin with any observation, 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 you can bring to the table at a given time.

Make a concerted effort to *stay 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 you come up with a question you cannot answer in regard to custom, time, situation, or something similar, spend some time pondering that question and where you might find such answers. Take time to explore some of your secondary resources in the next few days. However, remember, the time to use secondary resources to explore the meaning of the text itself occurs much later. Resist the temptation to consult a commentary.

When studying in a group setting, 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. Setting aside similar blocks of time for individual study will give you the freedom to ask questions and seek answers within the text. Remember, as long as you are listening prayerfully, this time is well-spent.

What kind of questions *should* be asked of the text? First, 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. Instead, choose to work to decipher the difficult passage in the context of the book you are studying. Be purposeful about thinking deeply about passages in the context in which they lay. If there is a reference from the Hebrew scriptures, read it and examine its context, as well. In doing so, vivid understandings emerge.

Second, consider 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 Bible dictionary or encyclopedia can be useful. However, use these aides only after carefully reading the text itself. The text also provides details and clues. 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.

The most difficult part of studying any passage is the possibility that the examination will become unfruitful, that it will *miss the point*. Certainly, the reader must take care to remember that all his/her discoveries should be moving toward a clearer understanding and a **main point**. To a great degree, your success in coming up with the main point will depend on the amount of study you invest and your willingness to keep an open mind and examine all options. Too often readers jump to conclusions about the point before they have collected all the evidence. From that point on, they are *reading meaning into the text* rather than pulling *meaning out of text*, which is the definition of “exegesis.” In this way, they (possibly unconsciously) begin to read the text, looking for ways to prove their theory. If anything, the Bible student should be *more critical* of his/her theories, looking for ways to disprove them, to ensure that he/she is keeping an open mind.

Progression from reading to reading: I am still learning the variety of ways that women can incorporate such study into their own practices. However, I have come to believe that establishing yourself in a pattern of study as you begin each book requires additional time. Therefore, I am likely to spend three or even four weeks reading the same material in the beginning of each study. Gradually, though, you will move from one section to the next. Normally, I spend eight or nine months in reading a book the size of Mark—16 chapters. The first six weeks of my schedule usually develops something like this:

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.

Reading schedule:

Week 1: Read Mark 1.1-20 and reflect; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate. I focus only on verses 1-3.

Week 2: Read Mark 1.1-20 and reflect; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate; emphasize 9-20.

Week 3: Read 1.14-3.6 and reflect on 1.21-3.6; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate.

Week 4: Read 2.23-6.6 and focus your reflection on 3.6-4.34; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate.

Week 5: Read 2.23-6.6 and focus reflection on 4.1-4.34; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate.

Week 6: Read 4.1-6.6 and focus reflection on 4.35-6.6; ; write on your reflections when it seems appropriate.

By this time, you will have established a routine. Using my outline of the book, I move gradually through the chapters. I never begin reading a new section unless I include at least one passage or story from the last section. I do this to put remind myself of the context I am coming to know so well before I 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 student completes various sections of study, she should take time to reflect on what she has learned *in that section* and how that knowledge *will change her life* from this point forward. In Come before Winter's exegesis classes, we have developed a worksheet to help students do this ([link to Worksheet 3](#)). Individuals that put some thought into these insights and goals will 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 principle 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

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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 my study occurs in my own home, sometimes near a burning fire (in winter), and often accompanied by cups of hot tea simply facilitates this experience. I relax, I ponder Him, and He enters—into the room, into my heart and into my life.