

Lesson 3 - Basic tools and commitments needed for Bible study

I want us to get into this session on preparing for the trip. What we've done so far has been more theoretical. In the first lesson, we talked about the big word picture, that Bible study is like taking a trip. Last week, we talked about motivation for Bible study.

What we're going to talk about today is what are the tools and the commitments we need in order to get a pattern of life going where we're reading and studying the Scripture on a consistent basis. And so we want to talk about the things we need to pack, so to speak.

Next week we're going to start getting into practical step-by-step processes of reading and studying the Bible well. We're going to get into talking about issues like context and background. Each week, we are going to deal with a practical aspect of Bible study and we will pull all these together as we go along. And I'll be giving you some assignments where we'll be actually doing Bible study every week.

A. Packing for the trip

When you get ready to go on a trip, one of the big issues you have to face is packing. And you probably have different ways that you pack and prepare for a trip.

When Pat and I moved to Tennessee, we were poor. We were just out of graduate school. We had basically no money and so to move up to Tennessee, we moved in a horse trailer. Her brother had access to a big horse trailer. He drove up with his big pickup truck from south Texas and we loaded down. We had my dad's truck and then we had Brian pulling the horse trailer. Well, my dad's truck was just piled high. I think we had a chair up on top. We looked like the Clampetts, the Beverly Hillbillies, driving somewhere with all of this junk and we had all this stuff packed into the horse trailer.

Well, we got to Dallas and it was about 155 degrees outside - that's what it felt like. It was so hot the friction on the tires on the horse trailer burst one of the tires. So we broke down in this sweltering heat in Dallas, Texas, still about 550 miles from home. We got that fixed. But with the weight of all this stuff and the heat, we had to drive 30 to 35 miles an hour all the way from Texas to Tennessee in order to move our stuff home. It was not a good situation. And that was a situation where we were absolutely overloaded with too much stuff.

Now we've had other trips in which we didn't have enough. Last year, we went to Louisville, Kentucky. We normally do pack too much, way more than we actually need. If we're going away for two days, it looks like we're moving to Vermont. It was a fairly warm January day when we left, and we got all the stuff in the car. Everything was packed out. We hopped in. We go a back roads route to connect over to 40 from Medina. We took 152 and go over that direction. We were 20 or 25 minutes from home when Pat said, "We forgot to bring our coats." Here it was, the middle of winter, and because it was a little bit of a warmish day, we had forgotten to pack our heavy coats. So we had to turn around, backtrack and get the things that we didn't bring along. And it turned out - we didn't know it then - that it was going to snow when we were up in Louisville.

Well, as we talk about Bible study, we can at times feel both dynamics. There are times when you have so many tools that you're trying to juggle them. Maybe you have access to a lot of

Bible study types of tools. Maybe you bought a Bible computer program and you may just feel overwhelmed with all the different things that are there. But probably for most of us, we face the other kind of problem where we come to a point in our Bible reading or our Bible study and we think, "I wonder what that means." And we're not really sure where to go to find out. We don't feel like we have the tools right at hand that would help us do a word study or find out who a person or where a place is. We feel that we aren't well-packed. We don't have everything at hand that we need.

B. Basic tools needed for sound Bible reading and Bible study

So, what are some of the most basic tools that we need in order to do sound Bible reading and Bible study? I will start off with these before going to talk about some personal commitments to go along with these.

1. A good study Bible

The first thing we need is a good study Bible. There are several things a good study Bible will probably have.

"A limited concordance." You will probably find a limited concordance in the back of the Bible or in the text itself. What a concordance does is that it takes a term, a word, and gives you various occurrences of that word throughout the Scripture. If you're using an English translation, the concordance is going to give you every time that English word occurs in the text. So if you're looking up the word "heart," it's going to show you every time that the word "heart" occurs in the New American Standard translation, if that's what you're using, or the New Living Translation or the New International Version.

If I'm doing a study on Paul's use of a specific term like "justification," I can look up the concordance for other places where that word is used by Paul, in Romans or in Paul's other writings.

"Cross-referencing system." You will find cross-referencing system in the text itself. If you look at your study Bible, you may find it in a little column at the centre of the page or down at the bottom of the page. If you're looking at verse 13 and you look over in that little column, it may give you other passages of Scripture that are associated with that verse or a specific word in that verse. And what they're doing there is they're saying this idea or this term is used in other places in the Bible too, so you can look at those.

"Study notes." You will usually find study notes at the bottom of the page where they'll give you a sentence or two explaining what a word or a verse means, or who a person or where a place is. Now the danger here is that some study Bibles are going to be coming from a specific theological viewpoint, and so they will be trying to promote their viewpoint in their study notes. So you'll need to be aware what's the motivation behind a particular study Bible.

When the King James Version was first translated, it was not an original translation. A team of scholars, while dealing with the original languages, were also using other translations like Tyndale's translation and others to guide them in their translation of the text. The original preface to the original King James Version says very clearly: we're not trying to come up with a completely novel translation; we're trying to build on the good translation work that's been done

before us. One of the reasons why the King James Version became kind of a standard translation and very popular was because it was more neutral whereas the translations before that were loaded down with study notes that were theologically and sometimes politically loaded.

While we need to exercise care, study notes can be very helpful for a quick glance to discern who somebody is or maybe what a phrase means. There's a study Bible that's going to be released next year based on the New Living Translation. What I am excited about that study Bible is that a team of scholars will be providing the study notes on different books of the Bible. I did the study notes on the book of Hebrews. These study notes are going to be very detailed, providing you guidance as you read your Bible.

"Subject indices". The Open Bible is an example of a study Bible that gives you a subject index or a topic index at the beginning of the Bible. So if you want to look up things on King David, you can look under David and it will give you things like his early life, his reign as king and the mistakes he made. Or it may take a subject like sin or marriage and then it will give you a bunch of passages that may or may not have the specific term in those passages.

"Maps and others". All or almost all study Bibles have maps. Some of them will have articles on different subjects like archaeology of the Bible and how to study the Bible.

A fairly unique study Bible is the new Inductive Study Bible. This is something that Kay Arthur came up with. The Inductive Study Bible doesn't give you many study notes. It does have a concordance at the back and cross-references in the margins. The main thing the Inductive Study Bible is trying to do is to get you to study the Bible for yourself. So the study Bible leaves a lot of room in the margins for you to write notes. And at the end of every book of the Bible, there is a little chart where you can write a summary of each chapter in that book. So what Kay Arthur is trying to do is to get you into studying the Bible for yourself. And she gives instructions on things like how to mark the text, how to work through the chapter, and what to be aware of in terms of the kind of literature.

So the first thing that you need is a good study Bible, one that you're going to be able to keep for a long time and make notes in. If you haven't had one, I encourage you to go to one of the bookstores and pull down those study Bibles and look at them. You'll need to decide which translation you want to go with, and then browse through the study Bibles to see which one seems to fit you the best.

2. Several translations of the Bible

The second thing you need is several translations of the Bible. The reason for this is two-fold. First, when you are doing word study, using a number of translations side by side can help you tune in to what the critical word study issues are. If the same word in the passage you are studying is translated differently in the different translations, it could mean that word is a difficult word to grasp, and that will clue you in there.

The other reason why we need different translations is because the translations are done according to certain theories or approaches and they meet different kinds of needs. There's always going to be a need for new translations. We will never get to a point where one standard translation is going to be the best for everybody forever from that point on. Why? Because

language is constantly changing. In the early centuries of the church, as the gospel was taken into different cultures and places, people could not speak Greek, neither could they speak Hebrew. And so there was a need to translate the Scriptures from the original languages into the vernacular of the people who were being brought into the church. And even today, if you think about the English language, it changes dramatically over time.

I read some classic works this summer. One of them was Robin Hood. One of the words used consistently in these books is "gossip." Do you know what the word "gossip" meant a couple hundred years ago? It meant something like "friend." Your gossip was someone who was your close companion, someone you could talk to about things. You might even greet someone on the street using the word "gossip" instead of "friend." Well the word "gossip" means something completely different for us. In fact, gossip is unlikely to be somebody who's your intimate friend. You wouldn't want to tell him things. Well, language is always changing and so we're always going to need new translations.

Now in doing translation, as much as possible, we want to parallel the original wording, the original meaning. At the same time, we want the translation to communicate clearly. And so, what translations try to do is to balance being faithful to the text as it was originally written and at the same time communicate as clearly as possible to the target audience.

There are two main kinds of translations. One is known as "formal equivalence". The other is "functional equivalence".

"Formal equivalence." This is a more word for word translation. King James is formal equivalence, so is New American Standard, which is one that I grew up with. There are many places in the New American Standard translation where the translators opted to go with a word for word translation even though it may not be readily apparent to the readers what the words mean. For example, in the New American Standard translation, 1 Corinthians 7:1 reads, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman." The context here is that the Corinthians had written to Paul to ask him a series of questions. Now if we read this verse, what is communicated to us immediately is that it's good for a man not to touch a woman. But the meaning of "touch" then is not the same as the meaning of touch as we understand it today. But that is more of a formal translation of that passage.

There are other translations like the more recently released English Standard Version that are formal equivalence. The English Standard Version is like a redoing of the Revised Standard version, and it's a very good translation.

So, what is good about formal equivalence translations? First, you're left to study the text for yourself to discern what it means. Now that's actually a good thing because the other kind of translation theory (functional equivalence) involves more interpretation in the translation process. All translations involve interpretation. It's a question of degree. But functional equivalence translation makes more decisions about what the text means in order to bring it across and communicate in modern language.

The formal equivalence translation will leave more of the study and the discerning to you. It also leaves more things like the poetic structure and the word order intact. This approach has a very important place, and I want to suggest that as a base approach for Bible study, a formal

equivalence translation like the English Standard Version or the New American Standard would be more useful.

"Functional equivalence." Now the other kind of translation is functional equivalence or dynamic equivalence translation. It's not word for word, but thought for thought. It takes the words that are there and bring over the thought faithfully. It's trying to communicate what the author was intending to say. So when we look at the New Living Translation (NLT), which is an example of a functional equivalence translation, it says this in 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Now about the questions you asked in your letter. Yes, it is good to live the celibate life." Here, Paul was probably talking about marriage, or more specifically, the sexual relationship between a man and woman. So it's clear from the broader context that when he says it's good for a man not to touch a woman, he was using a softened way of saying it's best for a man not to be bound up in the marriage relationship and all the responsibilities that go along with that.

Now we don't have time to get deep into 1 Corinthians 7 today. Paul had a very specific reason for talking about that in 1 Corinthians 7. He says everybody has their gifts from God, and marriage is a gift from God. God calls people to that. But the point I am making is that the New Living Translation interprets those words for you in the translation.

Now I think the functional equivalence translation approach is vital because what it does is it allows us to read the text and hear what is being communicated in our own language and to readily grasp and understand it. So what I would suggest is that for broad reading or rapid reading of the text, especially if you're a fairly young Christian, you would want to have a very good functional equivalence translation because you can cover a lot of ground and understand what is going on very readily.

"Paraphrase." Now there's one other thing that is not actually a translation. It's called a paraphrase. An example is the original Living Bible done by Ken Taylor. What he did was he didn't even try to go thought for thought. He just tried to give some sort of a summary of what is said in the text. And I remember one of the Proverbs in the King James Version says, "The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil; so do stripes the inward parts of the belly." Well, you know if I get up in the morning and I read that, that's not going to really hit me with a great devotional thought. But the way that the Living translation said it was: "Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways." So what it does is it summarizes the sense or the meaning of the whole passage. Paraphrases I think are interesting to read as a kind of interpretation of the text, but I think that we need to stick with the formal equivalence and the functional equivalence for our Bible reading and our Bible study.

Let me mention a couple of other things quickly in terms of the tools.

3. Bible dictionary

The third thing that we need is a good Bible dictionary. The Holman Bible Dictionary is a good one, so too is the dictionary from Intervarsity Press. Again what I would suggest is that you go to a Christian bookstore (even many secular bookstores now have the basic reference tools) and just pull them off the shelf and read a bit and see if they communicate in a way that is helpful to you.

My wife has had the Zondervan Pictorial Bible dictionary for a long time, and this is something that we keep at hand when we're doing our Bible reading in the morning.

What a Bible dictionary is going to do is it's going to give you articles on each book of the Bible. It's going to tell you about people. For instance, let's say that you're reading along and you come across a man named Ehud. And you think who in the world was Ehud. And so you look it up. If you look up Ehud in the Pictorial Bible Dictionary or another one of the dictionaries, it's going to tell you that he was one of the judges. He was a Benjamite and he was a real crafty fellow, who killed his enemy by stealth. You can very quickly find that out in a Bible dictionary. At times, I will use my Bible dictionary to find out where exactly a certain place was. There's so much geography to the Bible that some of the obscure places are hard for us to tune into. You can find articles on groups like the Sadducees or the Pharisees. And then you also can look up specific theological terms. So if you want to look up a word like "repentance," your Bible dictionary will help you with that. So these are basic, standard tools that you ought to keep at hand when you're doing your Bible reading or Bible study. All these will range in price from about \$20 to \$40 or \$45.

4. Exhaustive concordance

A fourth tool is called an exhaustive concordance. An exhaustive concordance is like a word study book. Now you're going to think that's an exhausted concordance. I would be exhausted carrying it around because it's so big. Well, the reason why it's so big is that it takes a specific translation, like the New American Standard, and when you look up a word like "heart", it will give you every occurrence of the word "heart" in the New American Standard translation. The other thing that it does is it keys every one of those occurrences with a number to a dictionary in the back that tells you the meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew word. Because you may have two completely different Greek words that are translated into the same word in English, the exhaustive concordance will tell you which one of those original words you're dealing with. From this, you may be able to discern the nuances in the meaning of those words.

Now don't worry about it if that's confusing to you. We're going to get to that when we talk about word studies. For now, just know that an exhaustive concordance is a basic beginning place for doing good word studies. But you may want to be careful when using older word study books like Vine's and others because there's been a lot of study done in recent years in areas of linguistics and how to do word studies. And some of those older tools were done before a lot of these more recent approaches to word studies were developed and so some of the information there is outdated. When we get to word studies, one of the things that we're going to talk about is word study fallacies, how to keep away from doing really strange things with word studies, like coming up with stuff that Jesus and Paul never thought of.

5. Bible study software

Let me mention one other tool - Bible study software. Bible study software pulls together all the tools I have talked about (and normally many more) in one place and allows you to search them with ease. On some of them, you can search on a word by just double clicking that word. Let's say that you have a Bible translation up on the screen. You can double click on a particular word and it will pull up a concordance of every occurrence of that word in the Scripture. You might be able to right click on that word and it will take you to a Bible dictionary that will describe that

term. So it puts all of those tools right there at hand. When we move a little bit further into our study, I'll bring a couple of Bible study software programs and show you how they work.

Whether for teaching or for my own Bible study, one of the things that I appreciate about Bible study software is I can cut and paste. So if I have a Bible dictionary open and I'm in the middle of my Bible study and I've come across a word, I can cut the section out of that dictionary and paste it into my document.

Many of the Bible study programs will also allow you to keep notes that will be tied to the specific verse that you're studying. So, if you're studying Romans 3:23, and you write your notes on that verse and you paste stuff in there, a year from now when you look up Romans 3:23 again, the program will pull up all of those notes that you put in.

There are some basic Bible study software that you can check out and there are even some free ones on the Internet that you can download. They normally have older tools that are in the public domain, for example, dictionaries like Easton's Dictionary.

6. Others

In terms of further help, there are some books there that you might want to check out in addition to the Holman guide that you're using for this class. And then the Center for Biblical Studies website at Union University has some links to different places on the web that can give you help. You'll also need to reach out to somebody who can help you at points. And what I want to suggest is that you find a mentor, someone who can give you a little bit of guidance. That can be a tremendous help. There was a man named Bill Lane, who died of cancer a few years ago, a great scholar on the New Testament. Bill mentored me for the last ten years of his life. It was a tremendous gift to be able to call him up and say, "You know, I'm dealing with this Bible study issue. What do you think? How do you interpret this passage?" So if you have someone, a friend who's further along in the faith and who knows more about the Bible, then I would encourage you to reach out to that person and say, "Can you just give me some help and guidance here?"

II. Personal commitments

We want to talk now about personal commitments. We're probably not going to get finished with these all the way. So let me just start and we'll get through as far as we can and pick up with the rest of them next week.

You can have all the tools in the world, but if you don't have the right heart commitments, then those tools are going to stay on the shelf and they're not going to be used. So I want us to think a little bit about our attitudes and perspectives, about how we are to approach the Bible for study and reading.

A. Consider your pre-understanding

The first thing to consider is your pre-understanding. Pre-understanding refers to the preconceived notion that I have about a passage based on my culture, teachings I've heard, or even my past experience. Now pre-understanding is not wrong. It just means that I need to remind myself to look at many passages in the Bible with fresh eyes as I study them. We may

not realize it, but many things have been ingrained into us through the years such that it can be hard for us to look at those passages in a fresh way. And so we want to think through our own pre-understanding of the text when we read it.

Now the commitment here is a commitment to truth seeking. What I mean by that is I want to come to the passage with the commitment to discern what God wants to say to me through this text. What is the truth that God wants to communicate to my life? I want to be more committed to that than simply advancing my own understanding of the text. So as best as I can, I want to say, "God, what I'm interested in here is understanding what this text really means."

One of my favorite parts of Scripture to think about this on is Christmas. I have a friend named Danny Hayes. Danny was a missionary in Ethiopia for a while and when he was over there he said, "You know, in the first Christmas play I ever attended in Ethiopia, I was sitting down front and these folks came in for the play. You have Mary coming in on a donkey and all these women were around her, excited and talking among themselves. Joseph was following along behind. And when they came to the time of the birth, Mary had all these women around her. And Joseph was pacing outside and it was the women, the extended family, who actually helped Mary with the birth. And then when the baby was born, all the women went, 'La la la la la.' They were all excited." And he said as he got to thinking about it, he thought probably that view of the birth is more in line with the original culture, where women and midwives and family members perhaps helped with the birth. That's probably more how it really took place. If you start probing the details of the Christmas story, some of the things that we hold so dear - like the three wise men, or even about Jesus being born in a stable - are not really there in the text.

There are various things that we can talk about there. I was teaching this in New Testament class one time and this lady came up. She was so mad at me. She said, "You ruined all my nativity scenes." I don't mean to do that. I mean that we just need to think through these things - why do I see the text the way that I do, coming out of my culture and my past experience. If we're really studying the text well, at times the text will change our mind about something.

Now we're not talking about big picture issues like who Jesus was and what does salvation mean and did Jesus really rise from the dead. Those are presuppositions. Those are things that over the history of the church and over a long study in the church, we come to hold those as convictions. But there are a lot of details in the text that we need to approach with fresh eyes and we need to come, if you will, with a teachable spirit, to say, "God, what would you teach me? What am I not seeing here that I need to see?"

Kevin Vanhoozer says, "Pride does not listen; it knows." Anytime we come to the text and think we already have all the answers, then we're not really studying to learn. We're studying just to reaffirm what we already believe. Then we do not have the right kind of commitment. We need to come from a standpoint of being teachable and being open for God to change our hearts and our minds.

We will stop here today and look at the other commitments in our next lesson. Let me give you an assignment for next week. Take a look at chapters 2 and 3 in the little book. I also want to ask you to take a look at some of these tools that I've talked about. If you have a study Bible, go back and reacquaint yourself with the different things that are there in your study Bible. You might want to go by a bookstore and take a look at study Bibles and Bible dictionaries on the shelf and begin there by just learning how these different tools function. Then we'll come back

and we'll get into the step-by-step process of how do you actually study different aspects of the texts like the background, the context, and eventually, learning how we do word studies.

One of my favorite stories is about a man who was visiting an African-American church and he came down and was sitting on the front row. And the pastor came out and started playing the piano and said, "Yes, Lord. Yes. Yes, Lord." This guy didn't know what was going on and other people in the congregation started joining in with the pastor, saying, "Yes, Lord. Yes. Yes, Lord." And after a while the whole congregation was in this great chorus, echoing, "Yes, Lord. Yes." And then things quietened down, and the pastor prayed this simple prayer, saying, "Lord, you've heard our answer. Now you tell us what it is you want us to do." We need to come at our Bible reading and Bible study with the heart attitude that says, "Lord, bottom line, I want to hear you in your Word and I want to be obedient to it." That's the kind of heart commitment that we need to make.