

*ARISE Flagship Program 2009 Sonora, CA 7 STEPS IN BIBLE
STUDY David Asscherick*

1. Get ready

try to be in a spiritual mindset confess your sins be humble, teachable, ready to obey

1. Ask questions

a. who was writing b. to whom were they writing c. when were they writing d. what was happening when this person wrote e. what else has the writer written?

3. Read passage (several times through)

a. several translations b. out loud and to self c. have others read to you or listen on audio Bible d. get the big picture; ask yourself: "broadly, at least, do I understand the passage"

4. Be aware. (Look for:)

a. key words (words that the passage hinges on) b. repeated words c. repeated phrases d. parallelisms (especially in the Psalms and OT) e. contrasts f. take notes (don't mark in your Bible yet; mark in a notebook or computer)

5. Draw preliminary conclusions

a. start piecing the picture together b. concentrate on what you do understand in the passage c. what are the principles derived from the specifics?

6. Confirm conclusions

a. do your conclusions fit with larger Biblical context b. Spirit of Prophecy c. Bible Commentaries (always remember these are the words of man) d. others' interpretation (friends, pastor, journals, etc.)

7. Apply

a. listen to the voice of the Spirit b. examine own life (not others!) c. is there a key verse you should memorize that will help you to apply lesson in life? d. make Spirit-led effort to apply principles e. pray f. share

How to Study the Bible

ARISE 2009

The Bible is a wonderful, unique book or, more precisely, a collection of books. Written over a period of about 1600 years (circa 1450 BC to AD 95) by about 40 authors on 3 continents. It was the first book ever printed on a printing press (circa AD 1450) and is the best-selling book of all time, with more than 6 billion copies printed. Yet, despite its near-ubiquity and popularity it remains unnecessarily mysterious to a great many people.

Can the Bible be understood? What are the interpretive principles one should employ in seeking to understand the Bible? Does one need to be scholar or a theologian to really understand the Bible? What translation should I use? And why are there so many different translations anyway?

These are all great questions. And there are many more like them. Even among people who believe and value the Bible, it remains largely inscrutable. But is this necessary? The answer is no. You can understand the Bible. You can learn to study the Bible responsibly and correctly for yourself.

Have you ever heard a sermon that really touched you and then thought How did the preacher come up with that? I've read that passage before and never saw that, but now it's so easy to see. How come I didn't see what they saw?

I know I have!

Well the good news is there is no “trick” to finding those precious gems of truth. There is no secret “code” or any such thing. With the application of some simple rules and tools in concert with basic reading comprehension, everyone--including and especially you--can come to study and understand the Bible for themselves!

So we'll be looking at three main areas (RIB):

- Reading school
- Interpretation rules
- Bible Study tools

The Bible is a Spiritual Book Before getting too far down the RIB trail we need to note a vital truth at the outset: the Bible is a spiritual book (2Peter 1:19-21; Hebrews 4:12; John 6:63) that speaks spiritually (1Corinthians 2:13, 14; John 3:10- 12) to spiritual people (John 3:5; 1Corinthians 3:1-3).

Bible study is, yes, an intellectual endeavor--it requires the use of reason, judgment, logic, language, and deduction, but it is also a decidedly spiritual endeavor. In this spiritual endeavor I Will is more important than IQ. That is, a willingness to hear and heed what is learned will go farther than a Ph D in theology in helping you to really understand the message God has for you in Scripture. Bible study is more about spiritual advancement (learning to love, forgive, minister etc.) than about unattached, idle knowledge.

But without the guidance of the Holy Spirit we shall be continually liable to wrest the Scriptures or to misinterpret them. There is much reading of the Bible that is without profit and in many cases a positive injury. When the word of God is opened without reverence and without prayer; when the thoughts and

affections are not fixed upon God, or in harmony with His will, the mind is clouded with doubts; and in the very study of the Bible, skepticism strengthens. The enemy takes control of the thoughts, and he suggests interpretations that are not correct. Whenever men are not in word and deed seeking to be in harmony with God, then, however learned they may be, they are liable to err in their understanding of Scripture, and it is not safe to trust to their explanations. Steps to Christ 110

The Bible with its precious gems of truth was not written for the scholar alone. On the contrary, it was designed for the common people; and the interpretation given by the common people, when aided by the Holy Spirit, accords best with the truth as it is in Jesus. The great truths necessary for salvation are made clear as the noonday, and none will mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God. Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 5 331

Because Bible study is a fundamentally a spiritual transaction involving God's Holy Spirit (the Inspirer of and Instructor in Scripture), spiritual words, spiritual people, and spiritual understanding it is essential that Bible study always begin with prayer. This prayer should be an earnest and reflective asking for (1)God's presence in the person of His Spirit to attend your study. It should also include (2)the confession of sin, (3)the opening of the heart and will to God, and (4)a plea for a willingness to hear and heed whatever is revealed.

Never should the Bible be studied without prayer. Before opening its pages we should ask for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, and it will be given. When Nathanael came to Jesus, the Saviour exclaimed, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathanael said, "Whence knowest Thou me?" Jesus answered, "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee." John 1:47, 48. And Jesus will see us also in the secret places of prayer if we will seek Him for light that we may know what is truth. Angels from the world of light will be with those who in humility of heart seek for divine guidance. Steps to Christ 91

So we repeat Bible study is both intellectual and spiritual. We are intellectual creatures (with a mind) and spiritual creatures (with a spirit). Jesus exhorted us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment (Matthew 22:37, 38)." We should strive to have ready, sharp minds and a humble, pliable spirit. Think about the phrase "Spiritual things are spiritually discerned". Here we have an appeal to both spirit and mind. The word discern means to perceive, to understand. This takes place in the mind. So both spiritual and intellectual faculties are engaged in Bible study.

With this basic yet profound truth firmly in our minds, we are now ready to advance down the RIB trail. Bible study is not difficult (though there are difficult sections in Scripture!). With the thoughtful application of some simple principles we'll soon be having the unequalled and glorious experience of interacting with the Living God Himself! Could there be anything more exciting? No way!

Reading School Let's go to reading school! O wait, do you already know how to read? Of course you do! But do you know how to understand what you have read? This is called reading comprehension. It is one thing to read the words on a piece of paper or a computer screen, it is something else altogether to grasp, comprehend, and understand those words. Reading involves knowing the words--the vocabulary. Comprehending involves knowing what the words as assembled mean.

The Bible is made up of words. Those words form phrases. Those phrases form sentences. Those sentences form paragraphs. Those paragraphs form chapters. Those chapters form books. And those books form The Bible. So in order to understand the Bible we're going to need to understand words--not just to be able to read the words, but to understand them as arranged. This is called reading

comprehension.

Who is writing? To whom? When? Why? What words did he use? What phrases did he use? What is his line of reasoning? These are the kinds of questions we'll be considering in our quest to "graduate" from Reading School.

Here are some of the first steps:

2. Do I know all of the words in the passage (verse, chapter, etc.)? If the answer is no then get a dictionary (one of the most important tools in Bible study!). Look up all the words you don't know. In fact, even look up some of the words that you do know!

3. Do I know who is writing/ speaking? To whom? In what genre? This is quite often essential in understanding a given passage. If you don't know, then get your hands on a good Bible dictionary (another important Bible study tool). Look up the book in the Bible dictionary and find out who wrote the book and to whom. Is the passage an epistle (a letter)? a history? a poem? An awareness of what kind of passage you're reading is essential. This is true even in non-biblical writing. Think of the different ways you read, understand, and apply poems, stories, biographies, histories, periodicals (magazines, newspapers, etc.), blogs, and allegories. Each requires a different interpretive perspective. So too with the Bible! There are poems, stories, histories, personal letters, church letters, laws, proverbs, and more. Identifying the author, audience, and genre of a given passage is a crucial step in correctly understanding the Bible.

4. When was the passage written? Is it from the Old Testament or the New? This background information is important to gather as you seek to establish the meaning of the passage in context, that is in the setting in which it was originally composed.

5. Do I know anything about the circumstances that precipitated and surrounded the writing of the passage? This is more background information that helps establish context (setting). The best place to get this information is from the text itself. Often it is possible to accurately reconstruct the basic situation that surrounded the writing of the passage. A Bible dictionary can also be helpful here, but be careful because sometimes the Bible dictionary's explanation will contain an interpretive element itself. As long as you're aware of this, and you don't allow it to uncritically color your interpretation of the passage, you'll be fine. Just remember there are two kinds of words: God's words and words about God's word. We'll talk more about this later in the Bible Study Tools section.

6. Read and re-read the passage through several times until you have a preliminary feel for the flow of thought. This is absolutely critical to understanding the Bible. Let me say it again, This is absolutely critical to understanding the Bible. Remember, the author (both the human and Divine) had a message and a purpose he (He!) was trying to communicate. What is that basic message? Have you followed the author's basic flow of thought and line of reasoning? If not, then read the passage again and again. Try different translations. You don't need to know everything (you never will!) at this point, but in general are you following the author broadly at least as he seeks to communicate his message? Think of yourself as a kind of detective. Look for clues. Pay attention to words!--pivotal words, repeated words, forceful words, picture words etc.

OK great, we're making real progress! See, Bible study is not so hard is it? Now let's consider some more advanced steps in our Reading School section.

Prepare for Prepositional Phrases A prepositional phrase is a modifying phrase within a sentence. It begins, naturally, with a preposition

such as on, in, after, and from. A preposition expresses a relation to another element within the sentence. Here are some examples:

- That is David's Bible on the lectern.
- She rode a great distance in that old carriage.
- Please get me some soup after you've fixed your hair.
- This is my uncle Ned from Alberta, Canada.

Let's consider a couple passages in Scripture where understanding (and in some cases even temporarily removing) prepositional phrases is particularly critical in getting toward the heart of the passage's meaning.

- Paul's definition of the Gospel in Romans 1:1-3
- Paul's two ways of viewing the law in Romans 8:2
- The nature of salvation in Matthew 1:21 ("from" not "in")
- Jesus' claim to divinity in John 8:58 is made very pointed by a certain prepositional phrase

Sometimes a passage can be so filled with prepositional phrases its difficult to follow the authors flow of thought. Remember that a prepositional phrase can be lifted from the sentence without dismantling the essential sentence structure. Sometimes it is helpful to try and find the sentence structure without the prepositional phrases in order to get to the main point the author/ speaker is making. This is particularly true of the Paul's letters. Try this exercise on Ephesians 1:3-6, for example. How many prepositional phrases did you count? How does the core sentence read without all the prepositional phrases?

Write your answers here _____

So be prepared for prepositional phrases. An awareness of their modifying, defining role in a passage can be the key that unlocks the passage's core meaning.

Be Proactive with Pronouns Pronouns are words that refer to other nouns (or noun phrases) in a sentence. They can be either masculine (he, him), feminine (she, her), or neuter/ understood (it, they, them). They can also be possessive (his, hers, theirs, ours). A pronoun can also refer to the writer(s) or speaker(s) (I, my, we, ours). It is vital that you identify the antecedent nouns to all the pronouns in a given passage. (This is true, of course, for all reading, not just for Bible study.) This is not always easy. Sometimes there can be multiple different pronouns in a single verse.

A great exercise that often clarifies a passage's meaning is to take a piece of paper and write in the antecedent nouns for the passage's pronouns. Do this for the following passages:

- 2Corinthians 5:21
- Hebrews 1:1-9
- Colossians 1:13-23

It should be clear that keeping track of pronouns is essential to accurately understanding Scripture (and other writings). Another great tool is to personalize pronouns. This can make Scripture really come alive and feel personal. This is done by substituting your name into given passage of Scripture in the

appropriate place. So, for example, John 3:16 becomes

For God so loved David Asscherick, that He gave his only Son, so that David

Asscherick would believe in Jesus Christ and not perish but have eternal life.

Wow! What a great verse indeed! It's tailor made just for me!

Do the same for Psalm 23. Read it out loud but personalize the pronouns "my", "me" and "I". This can give Scripture a more personal feel and application. God is not just the God of Abraham, Moses, Israel, and Paul. He is your God. Scripture was written for you. So put yourself in there, where you belong!

Key in on Key Words and Phrases It is often the case that key words, phrases, and ideas are repeated in a given book, chapter, or by a particular author. Look for these repeated elements. They give you an insight into both the author's particular point and his general personality and perspective as a writer. Repetition deepens impression. So when you see a repeated element you should take special notice. The Bible writers were not stuttering. If there is repetition it is a guarantee that there is something of special importance being communicated. Here are few examples:

Words:

- "Good" in Genesis 1
- "Vanity" in Ecclesiastes
- "Woe" in Isaiah 1-6
- "Lawless" in 2Thessalonians 2
- Logizomai in Romans 4
- "Worship" in Revelation 13, 14
- "Know" in 1John

Phrases:

- Moses' use of "it was good" and "and it was so" in Genesis 1
- The use of "there was no king" in Judges (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)
- Isaiah's use of "I will" in Isaiah 12:13, 14
- Paul's use of "gave them up" in Romans 1
- Paul's use of "much more" in Romans 5
- Paul's use of "gave himself" throughout his letters.
- Jesus' use of "you have heard that it was said" in Matthew 5-7
- Jesus' use of "I am" as recorded in John's gospel (consider, for example, John 8)
- Jesus' use of "ruler of this world" in John's gospel
- Jesus use of "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew 5:1-10 (note verb tenses later in lesson)
- John's use of "cast down" and "cast" in Revelation 12:9-13 (cmp. with John 12:31, 32)

Ideas/ concepts:

- The "hardening" of pharaoh's heart in Exodus 7-11 (just who was it that hardened His heart?)

- All of the upward words in Isaiah 14:12-14 (contrasted with v 15)
- The many words in Hebrews 9 and 10 which communicate the ongoing nature of the animal sacrifices.
- “Walking” in Ephesians 5 (“walk in love” v 2; “walk as children of light” v 8; “walk wisely” v 15)
- “Fulfilled” in Matthew’s gospel
- Rapidity and immediacy in Mark’s gospel (“immediately”, “straightway”, “forthwith”)

Being aware of repeated words, phrases, and ideas is a powerful key in the hand of the thoughtful Bible student in seeking to understand a given passage or writer. Can you think of some of your own? You should be able to. If not, don't be discouraged, but make a point to be a better observer--a better detective--as you read and study Scripture. Keep a note pad (or computer) near you so you can write down any thoughts, ideas, and/ or insights that come to you as you study. Before you know it you'll be finding your own key words, phrases, and ideas right from the text of Scripture! It is very exciting indeed to begin to unlock the great truths of God's Word for yourself. In fact, there is no greater joy.

Intense tenses In addition to repeated, key elements found in the Bible, it is absolutely vital that you pay attention to verb tenses. The English language has three basic verb tenses: past, present, and future. Often some of the most sublime Scriptural truths are contained in verb tenses and in their changes within a passage. Several years ago in my devotions I had a personal watershed moment in my study of Scripture when I noticed the amazing and purposeful verb tense changes in the Beattitudes (Matthew 5:3-10). I was so happy I could barely contain myself. I've preached it dozens of times and it never gets old. I've seen people's lives completely changed as a result of hearing a sermon based on those verb tense changes.

Take a look at it. What do you notice about the verb tenses? Can you spot the pattern? Go over it again and again until you do. There is another pattern here as well. Can you spot that too?

Great! You found it! Now, what does it mean? What do you think Jesus was trying communicate here? Write it here _____

There are many other places where the entire thrust of the passage hinges utterly on the verb tenses. Consider these examples:

- Paul's use of past, present, and future in Colossians 3:3, 4
- Paul's use of death and the past tense in Romans 6:1-9
- Paul's use of reconciliation in the past tense in 2Corinthians 5:17-21
- John's use of past and present verb tenses in 1John 5:11-13

Furthermore, there is a phenomenon in the Bible that has been identified as the already, not yet motif. That is, that God has already done something but He hasn't yet done it. Confused? Don't be. It actually makes good sense. Because God's promises are totally reliable, when He speaks it's as good as done. Yet sometimes this thing called "time" gets in the way. So, from God's perspective as well as from the perspective of those who believe God, the thing is as good as done. Here are few examples of this unique verb tense motif:

- John 3:1-3
- Colossians 1:11-14
- Ezekiel 28:16-19 (concerning Satan's final destruction)
- The Kingdom of God (John 18:36; Luke 17:21; 23:42, 43)

Plainly we must allow verb tenses to have their proper and deserved weight if we are going to hope to understand Scripture as God intended. Slow down. Pay attention. One verse well understood is better than a whole book raced through with little understanding. When it comes to the Bible, reading deeply is better

then reading broadly.

I Did it My Way!

There is no problem with doing something your way, as long as your way is also God's way. As we bring our Reading School section to a close there are two more simple lessons that will help you immeasurably in understanding the words, sentences, chapters, and books of the Bible. First, try to put the passage you're studying in your own words. Write it down or just say it out loud. Try to use as few words from the original passage as possible. See if you can do this. It is not always easy. But it can act as a kind of litmus test for you to see if you're actually "getting" the passage. If you find that you simply cannot put the passage in your own words (either written or spoken), then chances are you don't really understand it.

Second, make a habit of reading the passage you are studying out loud. This is a good idea for many reasons. First, your ears hear what your mouth says. So you get the passage doubly. Second, it will help you to feel more and more comfortable reading Scripture. Third, you will likely find it easier to stay on track and not get distracted if you read out loud. Fourth, and finally, you will actually find that you will pick up insights that you had missed while just reading it silently. This has happened to me more times than I can count. I read a Scripture out loud and suddenly find myself saying, "Whoa! How come I hadn't noticed that before?" Try it. It works!

So reading school wasn't so bad was it? Basic reading comprehension is essential to understand the Bible correctly. Philip Melancthon famously remarked that, "The Bible must be understood grammatically before it can be understood theologically." How true indeed! That is, we must first know what the words are and what they mean before we can start placing them in a larger theological construct. After all, it all starts with words! Pay attention to words! And above all, to The Word (John 1:1).

Interpretation Rules Now that we've started with the rock-bottom basics of reading and reading comprehension, we're ready to move to our second part of the RIB trail: Interpretation Rules. A better word, probably, would be principles. But principles doesn't rhyme with either school or tools. So we're stuck with "rules". Sorry.

So then how are we to interpret Scripture correctly? Actually, if we've done our reading work properly we're more than half way there to sound interpretation. Its like math. If our arithmetic is solid then everything else will likely follow nicely. If, however, our arithmetic is off our advanced algebra will be really off. So will our geometry and calculus.

Or think of the alphabet. If we know our ABCs, then reading is just around the corner. But trying to read without knowing your ABCs is an exercise doomed to failure. First things must come first. And good reading comprehension paves the way for good application of the rules of interpretation. So what are some of these rules?

The Microscope and the Telescope What is a microscope for? How about a telescope? Well, one is for looking at small things and the other at big things. In Bible interpretation we'll need to look at both the small picture (the words, tenses, and structure) and the big picture (the whole system of Scripture). The small picture can be called exegesis (meaning to lead or draw out). Think of an EXIT sign. What does it tell you? How to get out. The meaning derives from the Latin prefix ex which means out. So to do exegesis is to draw out the intended meaning (interpretation) of a text based on the words, tenses, syntax, and larger context). Exegesis is your microscope.

Your telescope is called systematics. The 66 books of the Bible form a cohesive, inspired whole. This being the case, we should rightfully expect consistency in Scripture's teaching across the broad sweep of

all 66 books. This is based on the fact that God's Holy Spirit is the Mover and Inspirer of the human authors. Since we expect (and find!) consistency, we will want to labor to be sure that what we learn in

the small picture with the microscope of exegesis squares with the rest of what Scripture says. In this way Scripture is self-checking.

We just noted something very important that you may have missed. The Spirit moved the authors not the authors' hands. This is why we find that the stylistic elements of a given author are recognized and preserved. Ellen White understood this and communicated it admirably:

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God. Selected Messages Vol.1 21

As we endeavor to understand the Bible we're going to need to utilize both the microscope and the telescope. One gets us access to words, tenses, and syntax and the other ensures that our interpretations are sound and consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Knowing This First As believers there are several intellectual commitments that we embrace as we approach Scripture. It is important to understand and be aware of these commitments. They include:

- The Bible is inspired by God.
- The Bible is inerrant.
- The Old Testament and the New Testament together form an indivisible whole. This can be summarized by the familiar axiom, The Old Testament is the New Testament Concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.
- The Bible is Christocentric (Christ at the center).
- The Bible is Theocentric (God at the center).
- The Bible is historical.
- The Bible is understandable.
- The Bible is communicated in normal, accessible language.

These commitments require faith. But don't worry too much about that, everyone has intellectual, a priori commitments. In fact it is impossible not to have these kinds of pre-commitments. There really is no such thing as a tabula rasa (literally a scraped tablet, that is, a blank slate). Everyone has faith in something. The question is Is that faith reasonable? Are my intellectual commitments reasonable and defensible?

Consider Hebrews 11:6 in this regard, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must [first] believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (ESV)." This makes sense doesn't it? In order to really seek to approach God one must first be at least preliminarily persuaded that God may actually exist. So is there any evidence which supports belief in God's existence? Yes, indeed there is!

Now go back through the commitments listed above. Are they reasonable? Do you have any evidence which seems to corroborate them? You should!

Truth be told, the Bible is self-authenticating. That is, it proves itself in the unique and inimitable way it speaks to its individual readers (Hebrews 4:12, 13; 1Thessalonians 2:13).

The apostle Paul says that God "hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son." Colossians 1:13. And everyone who has passed from death unto life is able to "set to his seal that God is true." John 3:33. He can testify, "I needed help, and I found it in Jesus. Every want was supplied, the hunger of my soul was satisfied; and now the Bible is to me the revelation of Jesus Christ. Do you ask why I believe in Jesus? Because He is to me a divine Saviour. Why do I believe the Bible? Because I have found it to be the voice of God to my soul." We may have the witness in ourselves that the Bible is true, that Christ is the Son of God. We know that we are not following cunningly devised fables. Steps to Christ 112

I am an enthusiastic fan of the many excellent apologetic arguments which support God's existence, the Christian worldview, and the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. At the same time, if the chips were down and I had to give one fundamental reason for my faith, it would be this: I have found the Bible to be the voice of God to my soul. The Bible possesses a self-attesting, self-authenticating quality. Scripture has what I call the "ring of truth". It just sounds right. It rings with my internal world and it rings with the external world. Remember, its about I will more than IQ.

Is this blind faith? Not at all. It is an informed faith, and informed confidence. There is superb evidence which supports the Bible's authenticity and inspiration (unlike, say, The Book of Mormon), nevertheless the bottom line is that it works, it really works. Gd speaks to me personally and inimitably in its pages. It speaks to my mind and my ears, yes, and yet beyond this it speaks to my heart and my spirit. God has met me and I have met Him in the pages of the Bible. And the same can be true for anyone who takes the Bible prayerfully and humbly in hand and reads it.