

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

*G. Michael Cocoris*

Probably because I teach the Bible, people asked me how to understand the Bible. I'm not talking about a particular passage but about understanding the Bible generally. What does the Bible say about how to understand it?

## Pray about it

*The Command* "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Ps. 119:18). Before you read the Bible, talk to its Author. Ask Him to explain it to you.

*The Consequences* "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven'" (Mt. 16:15-17).

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer founded a theological seminary to teach people how to teach the Bible. He spoke in chapel at the beginning of every year. He reminded the faculty and students of the seminary that it only had a faculty of one, the Holy Spirit. It is one thing to be seminary-taught; it is an entirely different matter to be Spirit-taught. When you are in seminary, you understand the hypostatic union, a theological explanation concerning the union of the human and divine nature of Jesus. When you are Spirit-taught, you know Jesus.

## Meditate on it

*Meditate* "But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:2). If there is any method of Bible study in the Bible, it is meditation, which is simply thinking about the Bible all during the day.

*Get a Good Translation* "So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading" (Neh. 8:8). "They read distinctly" means they translated the Scripture (NASB; NIV fn.; Fensham). They were from Babylon and spoke Aramaic. Nehemiah says, "Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people" (Neh. 13:24). In other words, some from Babylon spoke Aramaic, so when Ezra read, they translated Hebrew into Aramaic. Get a good translation.

*Get the Sense* Next, after they translated, "they gave the sense," which means "to have insight, comprehend." In other words, they explained the text so that the people got the sense and insight of what was being read and the people understood (Ryle).

Ezra was reading something written by Moses about 1400 BC. He and the people to whom he was reading lived about 445 BC. Moses had written five *books* at a *different time* and in a *different language*. In other words, they heard a Hebrew Bible with

Babylonian ears. That meant that they had to understand three things: literature (books), history (different times), and language (different language). We hear a Hebrew Bible with English/American ears. To understand the Scriptures, we, like the people in Nehemiah 8, must understand literature, history, and language. The Bible contains different types of literature, like law and proverbs. The law is absolute, with no exceptions. A proverb is a general maxim, which may or may not have an exception. The Bible contains history. Abraham, for example, was a nomad. And, of course, the Bible was written in three different languages. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (some small parts were written in Aramaic), and the New Testament was written in Greek. To understand the Scripture, we must understand the English equivalent of the Hebrew and Greek of the original.

Get a good study Bible (*The NKJV Study Bible; The Ryrie Study Bible*).

## Do It

“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra made the trip. He led others to do so, and God was gracious to him because he concentrated his whole life on studying, practicing, and communicating the Word of God. The Hebrew word translated “prepare” means “be firm, be stable, be established,” and the one rendered “seek” means “seek with care, inquire.” The Hebrew word “heart” denotes the whole of one’s being. Ezra gave himself totally to the study of the Word. He diligently searched the Scriptures so that he could live by them and teach them to Israel. Consequently, the gracious hand of God was on him (Fensham).

How often do you have to read the manual to understand how to parallel park the car? How many lectures would you have to hear to understand how to parallel park the car? How many times would you have to watch somebody else parallel park before you would understand how to do it? Knowing how to do something is one thing, but you do not understand it until you do it.

## Teach it

*Teach* “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). In Ezra’s case, the teaching was formal. In your case, it can be informal. For example, parents are to teach their children the Word of God. Moses said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:5-7).

*Talk* “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then, you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

**Summary:** The way to understand the Bible is to pray, meditate, practice what it says, and teach what it says.

Dr. Bruce Waltke is a Hebrew scholar with two earned doctorates, one from Harvard. He was on the translation committee for the New American Standard Bible and The New International Version. He has written at least 16 books, including a massive commentary on the book of Genesis and another on the book of Proverbs. In his 1040-page book on the theology of the Old Testament, he describes the possible “Christian attitudes” toward the Bible.

1. Above the Bible. This is the stance of a liberal theologian who makes reason, which includes experience, the ground floor of theological understanding. They put reason above revelation. They give no more credence to the historicity of the Lord’s intervention in human affairs than to the historicity of the intervention of other gods in ancient Near East myths. They assume that nothing happened in the past that does not occur in the present, such as rising from the dead or ascending into heaven.
2. Before the Bible. This is the position of neo-orthodox theologians, which is a post-liberal movement. They stand before the Bible with an expectation that through preaching, the words of the Bible become the Word of God. So, according to them, biblical statements that do not contribute to the witness of Jesus Christ are not necessarily true. To restrict revelation of the Word of God to human encounter with God in preaching is to make the experience of revelation the authority rather than the divine inspiration of the Bible.
3. Alongside the Bible. This is the view of traditionalists, who placed tradition alongside the Bible. They find their authority in both the text of Scripture and tradition. Jewish theology does this by placing the Talmud and the Midrash alongside the Bible. Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity contend that revelation is only comprehensible through an authoritative tradition of interpretation. Jesus warned about this (Mark 7:13). Waltke says, “The suppression of the truth of some text by an undue emphasis on the truth of others distorts the truth. Truth is often paradoxical, as is well known from the biblical doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ.
4. On the Bible. This is the practice of fundamentalists, who assume that their interpretation represents truth. They do not “stand under” the Bible long enough to “understand” it.
5. Under the Bible. Calling himself an evangelical, Waltke says this is the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture as to its source and its infallibility as to its authority. “The finite mind is incapable of coming to infinite truth and moreover is depraved. To live wisely, I need the inspired revelation of the divine reality by which I can judge the wisdom or the folly, the right or the wrong, of my thoughts and actions” (Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, pp. 73-77).

Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian. He is famous for his commentary on the book of Romans and his thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics* (1932-1967). He wrote 36 books. He was once featured on the cover of Time magazine. Pope Pius XII said Barth was “the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas.” During an interview with a

reporter, he was asked what he would say was the most profound thought he ever had and he said, “Jesus loves me; this I know because the Bible tells me so.”

That, my friend, is what you need to understand about the Bible. You need to know Jesus loves you. Then, you need to stand under His Word to do and teach what He said.