

## **Knowing God in His Word**

### *“The word of God is living and active...”*

Reading the Bible is first and always a spiritual activity. We need the Holy Spirit to reveal the words of Scripture to us and transform us day by day. But the spiritual nature of reading the Bible doesn't mean we ignore study methods. This sheet will walk through a simple method of how to read the Bible and process what you're reading.

Whenever we read the Bible, we naturally progress through “what does it say, what does it mean, and how does this apply to my life?” Whether we consciously realize it or not, that is the way we process Scripture. This sheet will help you organize, write down, and remember these things. If it doesn't seem like you're “getting much,” that's okay. Pray that the Bible would come alive to you, read it, and drink deeply of the words of the living God.

### **WHAT DOES IT SAY? (Observation)**

To get your bearings when reading a particular passage, start by simply noting the surface-level action that takes place using who/what/when/where/why/how. You won't always be able to know the answer for all, but get what you can.

- **who** – who are the characters involved? who is speaking/writing, who is the audience, who is the passage talking about?
- **what** – what is being said or talked about?
- **when** – are there any clues in the text about when this is taking place? is it after, during, or before significant historical events? when in the timeline of the book is this passage taking place?
- **where** – is a setting given, or can it be figured out using context clues?
- **why** – based on the text and surrounding passages, what is the cause, occasion, or purpose of this passage?
- **how** – in what way is this being communicated?

Also look for:

- **terms** - key words; what words seem to drive the ideas in the passage?
- **repetition** – words, phrases, or ideas that appear multiple times often give major clues to the main point(s)
- **context** – what is the theme of the book? what happens/is said right before the passage? what happens/is said right after the passage?
- **language** – is the author commanding something? explaining something? do you see warnings, promises? is it literal language, or is it figurative? is the tone compassionate? joyful? angry? urgent?
- **illustration** – is the author using metaphors, analogies, stories, etc?
- **contrast** – is there a major shift in the language, tone, or action of the text?
- **questions** – does the author pose questions? If so, does he answer them?

You may want to underline, highlight, circle, box, draw arrows, and write notes in your Bible or in a journal to help you better understand what the text is talking about. It's a fact of the human condition: the more you write down, the more you will remember.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN? (Interpretation)**

One of the difficulties of interpreting Scripture is that we all naturally bring our own assumptions, perspectives, thoughts, background, and experiences to the text. This can be helpful, but it can also be dangerous and result in shallow understanding or even incorrect, unbiblical thinking. So it's vital that we look for interpretation based most of all on the actual words in the passage. Your aim should be to determine what the author meant by investigating the words that he used.

The good news is that you've already done a lot of work toward this end through your observation. Let your observations drive your interpretation. What you're really doing is asking, “what's the significance of these observations?” Think especially about:

- **synthesis** – is there a discernible argument or flow of thought?
- **themes** – do several observations speak to a similar theme?

- **definition** – are there words, theological terms, etc that you don't recognize? Look them up!
- **your thoughts** – you don't want to start with your personal thoughts and ideas, and you definitely don't want to rely entirely on them, but you don't want to ignore them either. The Holy Spirit will reveal things to you as you read. Ask Him to do that! Like a baby takes bad steps, it's okay and in fact beneficial to "take bad notes."
- **resources** – you also don't want to rely entirely on study Bibles, commentaries, sermons, etc, but they can be of great value when interpreting a passage.
- **context** – context is crucial! What comes right before and right after the passage? Make sure you have allowed the context to inform your understanding. Also, how does the passage fit into the BIG story of the Bible (Creation/Fall/Redemption/Restoration)? How does it highlight a truth about us, about God, and about how God has worked in Jesus to rescue us?
- **cross-reference** – in order to get the meaning of the passage, it is also helpful to see what other verses in different parts of the Bible have to say about the same idea/topic/word. Allow scripture to clarify and interpret scripture.
  - > if your Bible provides cross-references in the margins, look these up to discover helpful parallel passages. A Bible word concordance may be in the back of your Bible and help you find other verses related to your topic.

### **HOW DOES IT AFFECT MY LIFE? (Application)**

Ask two simple questions:

- **What am I to believe?** – Do I learn any new doctrines or ideas? Is there any important teaching on which I need to build my faith? *Ask yourself, "What is in this passage that I am to believe about God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, grace, mercy, sin, forgiveness, hope, eternal life, etc?"*
- **What am I to do?** – Another result of Bible study focuses more on actions and attitudes. *Ask yourself, "How am I to reveal my faith through my actions? Are there actions, behaviors, etc. that I need to change? What do I learn about emotions? What sins are pointed out in my life? Is there anything I need to confess to God or to my brothers and sisters in Christ?"*

After reflecting on these things, ask yourself two more questions:

- **Why am I unable to fully apply these things?** – Though we receive insights from Scripture that transform the way we act and think, we are still prone to sin and will never be able to obey him completely this side of heaven. We must acknowledge that we are unable to trust His promises and keep His commandments, and express why.
- **How does Christ fulfill this application on my behalf?** – However, one of the beautiful truths of the Bible is that Christ has succeeded in every place that we have failed. Consider the way that Christ kept the command you are unable to perfectly keep, or the way Christ reveals and proves the truth that you are unable to perfectly believe.