

## **HOW TO PRODUCTIVELY STUDY THE WORD**

In John 5:39, Jesus commends searching of the Scriptures. But those he was addressing had not done so adequately for they failed to recognize the One to whom the Scriptures bore witness! They had certainly spent time in the Word of God, but it had been fruitless!

It is undeniably good to realize the importance of

Scripture. It is even more helpful to understand the basic principles for interpreting the Bible accurately. But how can a disciple turn this knowledge into profitable study of the Word? Is there a practical method for unlocking the truth of Scripture? The following seeks to describe a simple, clear approach to studying the Scriptures profitably.

### **Step One: Dependence**

Earlier, it was stated that the interpreter of Scripture must come to the Bible reverently, in conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. If His illumining ministry is not present, we simply will not be able to perceive the truth that is in the passage under study. Hence, whenever a disciple begins to study a portion of Scripture, he needs to remind himself of his own inability to "see" and to ask the Lord to enable him to grasp the truth he is about to study. This attitude of dependence must permeate each of the following steps.

### **Step Two: Familiarity**

The individual who wants to study Scripture must obtain a good degree of familiarity with that portion he desires to understand. This can be accomplished by repeated reading and/or memorizing. Many students, in beginning to study a book of the bible, read it daily for several weeks. Some never teach or preach unless they have first memorized their text.

Illustration - Alexander Maclaren, famous Scottish preacher of the 19th century, rose early and studied steadily for many hours daily, often spending 60 hours preparing a sermon. One contemporary said it seemed Maclaren had a "silver hammer"; one "tap" and the text would fall into its natural and memorable divisions. His devoted probing of the Scriptures ministered greatly to his generation, and his sermons are in print, prized and read a century later!

There is no adequate substitute for this familiarity with the Word to the point of saturation. One is sufficiently acquainted with a book when -

- there are no words or phrases whose meaning is not basically known
- one can "think through" the book, stating its major divisions and giving a title to each
- the author's purpose, theme and subject(s) can be clearly stated

**Purpose** has to do with the intent of the author--why did he write?

**Theme** means the overall message of the book--what is his main point?

**Subject** encompasses the things discussed, the content of the book--what is the book's subject matter?

### **Step Three: Setting**

A third step in profitably studying the Scripture is to learn all one can about the background of a book. It is only natural that the author would assume, on the part of his readers, an awareness of the historical situation and the cultural backdrop surrounding his writing. To intelligently read his book, therefore, one has to attempt to re-enter that same setting, as depicted in the following diagram:

Bible Author -----20th century Disciple

Culture Place Language Time

The careful student of God's Word must build a "bridge" to cross over the differences in culture, language, time and place. Usually, more of this information is found in the book than anywhere else. Once again, careful reading is the key. There are at least four aspects of the setting that ought to be investigated. These include -

- what can be known of the author?
- concerning the writing itself, when, where, why, and in what form was it written?
- what can be known about the readers?
- in what historical and cultural situation was the book written?

Every book must be first understood in its original setting before valid application of its message can be made to the contemporary world.

#### **Step Four: Observation**

Scrupulous attention must be paid to the structure of a book, that is, how the author develops his argument. Once the book is seen as a whole, once the logical development of the author is seen, then attention can be focused on the details of the book. In observation, the student becomes a sponge/detective. As a sponge, one attempts to "soak up" every noteworthy detail in the text. As a detective, question after question tumbles out of the student, as he seeks to find what the author is saying, questions like -

- what is the precise meaning of that word?
- to what custom does that phrase refer? What can be known about the custom?
- who is that individual? Why is he mentioned here?
- why is this statement here instead of elsewhere in the argument? Why is it here at all?
- what does that conjunction (for example, "for" or "that") signify? What's it there for?

Observation means mental perception and discernment. It involves noting every significant detail and then framing questions to discover the contribution that detail makes to a statement's meaning. As such, it takes time and concentration!

Use the "six serving men."

I have six faithful serving men

Who taught me all I know.

Their names are WHAT and WHERE and WHEN

And HOW and WHY and WHO.

WHO? Who is being addressed? Who are the readers? Who is speaking? What characters are present?

WHEN? What is this passage's place in history? AT what time, or on what day, is the action occurring? Is the season significant? What year was this written?

WHERE? Do you know where each location mentioned is found? If there is movement from one place to another, trace it using a map of the appropriate biblical era.

WHAT? What is the "mood" (that is, the general tone or atmosphere) of the passage? What are the key words used? Look for theological terms, for repeated words, and for difficult words. Note the figures of speech (for example, comparisons using either similes or metaphors). What actions are taking place? What topics are treated? What commands are there? Look for advice, admonitions, warnings, exhortations. Are any promises found? Are there conditions that need to be met (look for "if...then" constructions)? Do illustrations occur? Are questions asked? Are they answered? Is some local custom involved in the action or dialogue?

HOW? How does the author convey his message? What type of literature is it? (Is it prose or poetry? Is it discourse, narrative, parable, apocalyptic?) How has the author structured his composition? How are his ideas arranged? How are the thoughts expressed? What progressions of thought are evident? Are there lists? Give a descriptive title to each paragraph. Prepare a chart that depicts the flow of the passage. Outline it. Write a summary statement of the passage.

WHY? What reasons underlie the commands? Are causes linked to effects? Are there statements of purpose ("in order that," etc.)? of anticipated result ("so that," etc.)? Does the author indicate his purpose in writing?

These "six serving men" prepare the student to formulate interpretive questions of the observed data. Ask yourself, "What don't I understand?"

And persevere!

"Peering into the mists of gray  
that shroud the surface of the bay,  
Nothing I see except a veil  
of fog surrounding every sail.  
Then suddenly against a cape  
a vast and silent form takes shape.  
A great ship lies against the shore  
where nothing has appeared before.  
Who sees a truth must often gaze  
into a fog for many days;  
It may seem very sure to him  
nothing is there but mist-clouds dim,  
Then--suddenly--his eyes will see

a shape where nothing used to be!  
Discoveries are missed each day  
by men who turn too soon away."

-Clarence Edward Flynn

(The following bit of experience with a great teacher is an excellent example of right method--going directly into the subject itself instead of into books about the subject of study. Its application to Bible study is obvious.)

### THE STUDENT, THE FISH, AND AGASSIZ

by the Student

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that, while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself especially to insects.

"When do you wish to begin?" he asked.

"Now," I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic "Very well," he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. "Take this fish," he said, "and look at it. We call it a Haemulon. By and by I will ask what you have seen." With that he left me, but in a moment he returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me. "No man is fit to be a naturalist," said he, "who does not know how to take care of specimens."

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars. All the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax besmeared corks, half-eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish was infectious. And though this alcohol had a "very ancient and fish-like smell," I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts and so treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappoint, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor. He had, however, left the museum and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of a normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion.

Half an hour passed an hour, another hour. The fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face--ghastly; from behind, beneath, above<sup>3</sup>, sideways, at a three-quarters view--just as ghastly. I was in despair. At an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary. So with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish and, with a feeling of desperation, again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my fingers down its throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convoked that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me--I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

"That is right," said he, "A pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked." With these encouraging words he added, "Well, what is it like?"

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me; the fringed gill-archers and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment, said, "You have not looked very carefully." Why," he continued more earnestly, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again! Look again!" And he left me to my misery.

But now I set myself to the task with a will and discovered one thing after another, until I saw how hush the professor's criticism had been.

The afternoon passed quickly, and toward its close, the professor inquired, "do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he earnestly, "but I won't hear you now. Put away your fish and go home. Perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting. Not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory, so I walked home by the Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring. Here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

He was thoroughly pleased. His "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night.

After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically as he always did upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next. "Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices.

In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue. "Oh, that is good, that is good!" he repeated. "But that is not all, go on."

And so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else or to use any artificial aid. This was the best entomological lesson ever had, a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study. It is a legacy the professor has left me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, and with which we cannot part.

A year afterwards, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the blackboard. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydro-headed worms; stately crawl-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after and was as much amused as any at our experiments. He looked at the fishes. "Haemulons! Every one of them," he said. "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ drew them."

True! And to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two. Another and another followed until the

entire family lay before me and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves. The odor had become a pleasant perfume. Even now, the sight of an old six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought into review and whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was every accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them. "Facts are stupid things," he would say, "until brought into connection with some general law."

At the end of eight months it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects. But what I gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

I was piqued. I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish?