

Biblical Literacy Session 5 — *How to Read the Bible*

There is no *one way* to read the Bible. Instead, there are many ways. We should choose a method based on God's directive, our goal, the context (including available time), and other important factors.

In this session, I simply want to expose us to various methods for reading the Bible:

A SIMPLE WAY TO READ

God's Word can be hard to understand and we, in our human weakness, can easily misconstrue what's written in the text. With those things in mind, here's a simple method that can help break down the complexity while also preventing us from misreading

What? → So What?

What?

- After asking the Holy Spirit to give us insight and to soften our heart to the message of the text, we read the passage asking ourselves, "**What?**" Namely, *what* does it say?
- As we do this, we remember what Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Know what you see, don't see what you know."
 - Many passages are familiar to us and we tend to see what we already know. Instead, we need to forget what we think we know and learn to see it for the first time.
 - We also tend to read through our cultural lenses. Often times, we need to slow down and see what's actually there instead of what we assume to be there.
- To truly understand **what** it says, we will likely need to read the passage many times, not just once. For some odd reason, many of us put pressure on ourselves to understand it on the first reading. This is God's Word! It is full of mystery and glory and majesty. We need to give ourselves permission to need more than one reading!
- In order to understand **what** it says, we may also benefit from reading the passages directly before and after the one in question. This helps us put the current passage in context.
- Furthermore, we often benefit from reading the cross-references. Do yourself a favor and get a Bible with cross references included!
- As we discover **what** it says, it also helps to *write it down*. As we write down the answer to "**What?**", the real content starts to jump out at us. Trust this process and God will speak to you.

So What?

- After you have a firm grasp of *what* the passage says, you must ask: "**So What?**" The Bible was not given to *inform* us. It was given to instruct, correct, train, & *transform* us.

- To answer the question, ‘**So What?**’, we may need to ask questions like these:
 - How is this text calling you to change *who you are* or *what you do* in order to be more in line with God’s intentions?
 - How is God using this text to call your family, your church, or your community to be better aligned with His intentions?
- During this part of the devotion, your conversation with God should be more intense. God calls us to take some radical steps in response to His Word and most of them can only be completed with the Spirit’s help.
- If you want it to have better impact, write down your answers to ‘**So What?**’ and as you do, ask God for help. Once you have heard clearly from God, you will then have a choice where you can either say “yes” or “no”. When we say “yes”, we are adding our “Amen” (which literally means “*so be it*”) to God’s Word. We are adding our word to God’s Word.

As implied in the description above, it is best to **take notes** during our reading. Otherwise, we can easily lose track of our answers to the two main questions: **What?** & **So What?** But, if we write it down, it helps us (1) keep track of what we’re noticing, (2) create order out of our chaotic thoughts, (3) keep us focused when we might otherwise get distracted, (4) keep a record for the future, (5) allow us to personally respond to God through prayerful writing—i.e., we can process our lives in response to the text and the God behind the text.

Through it all, remember: it will take **discipline** to be a **disciple**. No practice will be perfectly beneficial the first time you do it. Spending time with God is **more of an art than a science**. With the Spirit’s help, we can master that art.

ANOTHER SIMPLE WAY TO READ

John Calvin starts his Institutes this way: “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” In the spirit of that statement, we can read Scripture with those two items in mind. In other words, we ask two primary questions of any passage:

1. Is there anything in this passage that tells me about God the Father, about God the Son, or about God the Holy Spirit? How can I grow in knowledge of, gratitude for, and intimacy with the one true God?
2. Is there anything in this passage that tells me something about myself? (Is there a sin I should avoid? Is there a promise I should accept? Is there a command I need to obey? Is there an action I should go out and perform?)

ONE LAST SIMPLE WAY ... A WAY THAT’S ALSO GOOD FOR GROUPS

- **Lectio Divina** — *See separate document with description*

MASTICATION

- Following the directive of Psalm 1, we are to meditate on the Scriptures day and night.
happy are those *who delight in the law of the Lord.*
On his law they meditate day and night.
- In the Hebrew, the word is *hagah*. There's no 1-to-1 way to translate *hagah* into English. The translators use *meditate*, but *hagah* conveys something more. To *hagah* is to moan or growl. In fact, Isaiah uses the word *hagah* for the sounds a lion makes over its prey — “As a lion or a young lion **grows** over its prey,” ~ Isaiah 31:4
- This begins to convey the meaning. To *hagah* is not to meditate like we might think of *contemplation*. Instead, it is to repeat the words in our mouths, like a slow murmur, a growl, a groan. It's to chew on the words. So, meditation is mastication. Most of us *study* the Bible or *read* the Bible ... Psalm 1 is imploring us to chew on it until it seeps into our bones. So, this is *hagah*:
 - Ezekiel 2:8 & 3:3 *But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you. ... Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.*
- **That's hagah!** ... we eat the Word by chewing on the words. We're supposed to taste the words on our lips:
 - *they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb* (Ps. 19:10)
How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103)
- This eating/chewing is easier to do with certain genres rather than others. For instance, the Torah or Proverbs or Psalms. It would be strange to repeat over and over again parts of Revelation or even certain stories from the Gospels.

INTERNALIZATION (MEMORIZATION)

- And as Psalm 1 says, we delight in chewing on God's Word *day and night*. ... How can the “blessed” chew on the Scriptures day and night? Back then, they didn't have their own personal copy of the text, since there was no printing press. Everything was oral. People had vast swaths of scripture **memorized and internalized**.
- Just look at Jesus, the Scriptures roll off his tongue. For instance, it's his ability to quote Deuteronomy 6 & 8 that helps him repel the wiles of the devil in Matthew 4. The same should *and can* be true of us.
- Personally, I prefer the word “internalize” because we can memorize passages without letting them affect the deepest parts of our being. Sometimes memorization only increases our head-knowledge, and as we know, *knowledge puffs up while love builds up* (1 Cor. 8:1). We need to

internalize texts so that they shape our hearts and our desires. As Psalm 119 says, *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*

- But, how do we memorize/internalize if we have no confidence in our capacity to do so?
 - First, we trust that God would not ask us to memorize if we could not do it.
 - Second, we start with easy stuff: one verse at a time.
 - Third, with longer verses, we look for the thread.

IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION: IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was well-known for his *Spiritual Exercises*, published in book form in 1548. One of these exercises was called “contemplation,” but has since come to be known as imaginative prayer. Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts/reasoning. Consequently, instead of suggesting a pure “study” of the Word, he encouraged imaginative contemplation.

How it’s done: This sort of Ignatian contemplation is particularly suited to the Gospels. The goal is to accompany Jesus through his life by imagining scenes from the Gospel stories. Regardless of whether it is John 4 & the woman at the well, Luke 11 & the raising of Lazarus, or Luke 19 & Jesus interacting with Zacchaeus, visualize the event as if you were making a movie. Pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. At some point, place yourself in the scene and look around to see what you notice.

Who do you see?

Who do you identify with?

What is Jesus doing?

How does it all affect you?

We might worry that our imagination will let us “run too far” — i.e., we go beyond what’s in the text? There are three things to be said about that:

First, when we’re reading the Bible, we often don’t go far enough. We fail to empathize with the woman bleeding for 38 years or the man lowered through the roof.

Second, if we feel we are going too far, we can always come back to the text. In fact, our imaginative engagement will cause us to read very closely.

Third, there are stories in the Gospels that intentionally leave out fine details. We are invited into the text so that we end up becoming the completion of the story!!

Contemplating a Gospel scene is not simply remembering it or going back in time. We are using our imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with us in a personal, evocative way.