

Introduction to Biblical Interpretation
Course Developed by Ron Habinski in 2006/2007
For
An Adult Bible Class, at Alta Vista Baptist Church, Ottawa

Unit #6 – The Devotional Use of the Bible

- We have just finished examining some of the problems involved in properly understanding the various types of literature included in the Bible.
- We have now examined:
 - Narrative passages that tell a story,
 - Poetical literature that includes preaching , devotional writing, wisdom literature and love poetry
 - The four gospels,
 - Twenty one epistles or letters, and
 - Prophetic literature (inspired preaching) that includes glimpses of the future that God has decided to bring to fulfillment.
- Each of these literary types conveys truth in its own unique way.
- So our approach and understanding needs to be adjusted to the requirements of each type of literature and the specific passage that we are reading.
- But our general objective in reading any part of the Bible remains the same: to understand each word with the meaning intended by its original author, taking advantage of all the clues provided to us by context.
- This is a demanding discipline, and over time each of us, gradually and in small ways, can improve the way we go about trying to understand the Bible.
- We can do this by building on insights we have had and information we have learned one way or another.
- Most people will never study Biblical Hebrew or Greek, and most people will use few if any Bible commentaries or Bible dictionaries in their lifetimes.
- But it is hoped that the majority of Christians will read the Bible for themselves, try to understand what the author was trying to say, and think about how to apply the author's message to themselves.
- In other words, individuals will read parts of the Bible and try to get something out of it that they can apply to themselves or in their lives.
- It has become increasingly common for Christians to use a daily devotional guide such as ***Our Daily Bread***.
- One important purpose of such guides is to make daily devotions quick and easy.
- For most people that would seem to be a good thing, and I do not say it is bad.
- Using a devotional guide is better than not reading the Bible at all, but there are real disadvantages to devotional guides that we should be aware of.
- In each day's notes, the individual is invited to read a fairly short passage of the Bible; it

may be between five and ten verses long.

- A verse, a sentence or a phrase found in this passage is then highlighted, and the author of the notes says a few words about the topic mentioned in this highlighted portion, throwing in one or more related illustrations or examples.

- The problem is that the highlighted portion is generally disconnected from its context in the passage, and in the notes we generally hear far more about what the author of the notes thinks about the subject for the day than about what the passage teaches about it.

- A more basic difficulty is that *most guides do not encourage or require their users to think for themselves about what the passage actually says and teaches, or about how they might apply its message personally.*

- It is as though the author of the notes was asking us to look at a plate full of tasty nutritious food without chewing it and swallowing it for ourselves.

- We are just to take his word for it that it is good nourishing food, and he will tell us what we most need to get out of it without our bothering to shovel it into our mouths bit by bit, chew it up fine until we can really taste it for ourselves, and then swallow it.

- There are many, many helpful approaches that have been developed for individual use in devotional Bible study.

- But the best approaches tend to include *three basic elements or steps.*

- These three basic steps are essential to successful, fruitful Bible study, so I would encourage you to try to include each of them whenever you read the Bible devotionally.

- Doing this needn't be particularly time consuming, and when you have gotten used to this three-step approach, it will feel as natural as sitting in a comfortable chair.

- The three basic elements or steps are *meaning, message and personal application* [WRITE].

- Our purpose in reading the Bible is not just to perform a religious duty or ritual, but to have the words of Scripture shape us.

- So our first step is to **consider what the words used in the passage mean.**

- Ask yourself, *What is the author is saying?* and answer that question by paraphrasing or restating what he has said in your own words.

- In other words, just tell yourself exactly what the passage says.

- You can do this silently or aloud, or even by taking time to write it out for yourself.

- There is an important discipline involved in this first step.

- Expressing the author's thoughts in your own words forces you to let your thinking be guided by the author's words, and helps you to get close to understanding his meaning.

- So the first step is putting in your own words what the author has said in the passage.

- This needn't be a long paraphrase, but it doesn't have to be short either.

- Your paraphrase may be a single sentence or several sentences.

- The point is for you to understand the author's words well enough that you can restate them without repeating the author's words or constantly looking at the passage.

- Paraphrasing should also help you to avoid introducing ideas that are not actually mentioned in the passage.

- Reading the context will often help you zero in on what the author is saying in the passage.
- It may also help to read the passage in more than one translation.
- When you can restate the author's meaning in your own words and you are satisfied with your paraphrase of his words you have completed step one.
- The second step is to *summarize in your own words the message or principle taught in the passage.*
- It helps to ask yourself, *Where is the author going in this passage, what is the point or principle he is getting at? What is he really trying to teach his readers?*
- *In this step we are seeking the mind of God, because we believe that God's message is expressed in the words of Scripture.*
- When you can state the essential message or principle taught in the passage in a few words, you have completed step two.
- If you cannot state the point or message or principle taught in the passage you need to chew on the passage a bit longer, until you can taste and recognize its flavour.
- Think about the passage a bit more, talk to yourself about it, meditate on it.
- Let's think for a moment about what meditation is.
- **READ Ps 49:3.**
- It is not equally clear in all translations, but this verse is speaking about meditation or what goes on inside your mind when you are thinking about something.
- This verse implies that for Jews and Christians meditation is connected to understanding.
- You can profitably think about a portion of scripture for hours or days or even weeks.
- This past week as I was loading firewood onto a trailer, I started thinking about Isaiah 53, and as I thought about it I had what seemed to me a very valuable insight into its meaning.
- I realized that this amazing messianic poem about the suffering servant is actually *a confession of wrongdoing*, a confession in which Isaiah groups himself with his people and says, we all misjudged him.
- We thought he was being judged by God because of sin, *his* sin, so we looked down on him.
- But we were only half right; he was being judged by God for sin, but it was our sin, not his that he being judged for.
- Thinking about a passage of scripture, even while you are doing something else, can help you to see its message more clearly.
- Some individuals may manage to get the meaning of a passage through intellectual effort, but have no interest in doing anything with their insights.
- Their minds successfully grasp the meaning of the words of Luke or Paul or John, but intellectual understanding is all they want.
- They may not personally accept the truth or importance of the message of the passage, even though they understand it.
- They do not see themselves as believing the message that their minds have successfully

grasped.

- This is exactly the situation described in **1 Cor 2:14 [READ]**.
- Without the help of the Spirit of God individuals may not accept what a portion teaches as true and important for them even if they understand it.
- The third step, for those who want to take it, is personal application.
- Ask yourself, *So what? What does this message that I have managed to understand mean to me, how can I apply it in my life?*
- In this step, you are asking, *How can I respond to God's voice in this passage?*
- Remember that there are only three basic types of personal application of God's word.

Q: What are the three fundamental types of personal application?

A: They involve knowledge, attitude/value or action.

- These three types of application involve *acquiring knowledge, changing or confirming an attitude or value or doing something to act on the message of the passage.*
- The personal application of a passage may involve only one basic type of application, or it may involve two or even three types of application.
- If your thinking leads you to consider an action response, then more than one possible action may come to your mind.
- Whatever kind of response you conclude would be most appropriate for you, it is important to resolve to carry through on it or at least on a part of it.
- The whole point of this process is to let God's word shape you, so deciding how you will respond is more important than realizing how you can and should respond.
- **After all, if you want to respond to God's word, why read the Bible at all?**
- Now let's try out this three-step approach to the personal devotional reading of the Bible.
- First I will suggest a passage, for us to tackle together, and then you can suggest a passage for us to work on.

- Let's examine **Mark 12:41-44**.

- **[DISCUSS meaning, message and application.]**

Q: Now, someone suggest a brief portion of Scripture for us to examine, and we will tackle it as a group.

A: [DISCUSS meaning, message and application.] (Message: Sacrificial giving is not commanded, but it is appreciated by God and deserves serious consideration.)

Q: Can you think of a knowledge, attitude or action application for this message?

A: [DISCUSS]

- **[Apply this three-step method to passages suggested by individual class members.]**

- This three-step approach becomes easier and more enjoyable with practice.
- But remember that there is no one approach that will make a difficult passage of

scripture easy to grasp.

- You may come across a passage where you can't quite state what the passage says, or you can't state the principle or message of the passage, or you cannot think of an appropriate knowledge, attitude or action response.

- If this happens to you, do not be shy about admitting your difficulty to yourself and do not be discouraged.

- There are many such passages in the Bible.

- It can be very difficult to get a satisfying meal out of some of the genealogical lists in the Bible.

- Consulting a Bible commentary may help, and it may help to discuss the passage with another Christian or just meditate on it to see if you can find the meat in it.

- Whatever you do, don't get hung up on your lack of success with a passage.

- Look for another passage that you can more easily chew, swallow and digest.

Q: Have you any questions or thoughts about how to make personal Bible reading profitable?