

## ~ How To Study The Bible and Have It Make Sense ~

**"I will send a famine in the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the word of the Lord."** - Amos 8:11 *Extracted from a tract originally published by the New Albany (IN) Bible Students.*

Today this prophecy is fulfilled in our minds! Despite the fact that during the past century Bibles have been printed by the millions, and despite the fact that mass education has brought ability to read God's word into all hands, nevertheless we are in the very famine foretold by the prophet.

Our heads are starving and our hearts are starving. Our heads are starving for correct, reasonable ideas about God. Our hearts are starving for assurance that God is loving and just; starving for assurance that he is somehow going to take control and save the world from its troubles.

Why are we starving? Why do we not all feel as fed as we should from the Bible?

### **The Cause of the Famine**

In the past century knowledge on all subjects has grown by leaps and bounds. This has been the century of reason and analysis. When the torchlight of reason is focused upon the traditional ideas about God and the Bible which we have been taught, we are startled to find that much in the creeds (not the Bible) defies reason.

For example: consider the creed of eternal torment. We are told that all of us are sinners by nature-inclined to do wrong. (This is true. Then we are told that if we continue doing what we are inclined to do-what comes naturally through no fault of our own-we will be tortured. Indeed, the creeds further tell us that this torture will serve no purpose; that habilitation and repentance will not be possible; and that an eternity of brutal, agonizing torture will be applied as punishment for the comparatively little sin that can be accomplished in one lifetime. Our newly enlightened minds recoil at this and other teachings of the creeds.

Churches and teachers try in vain to restore our confidence in the various creeds and traditions, but it is too late. Once enlightened, it is with great difficulty that the human mind will ever be satisfied with the old darkness. And so twentieth century man, seeing the errors but not knowing the truth, drifts on with only the hollow pursuits of materialism and technology to relieve his despair. Those who struggle to find

reasonable, spiritual values are starving, just as the prophet foretold.

### **What We Need**

We need food for our minds and hearts. We need a reliable authority. We need an explanation for man's disappointing past and present and an indication of what we might expect for the future. We need assurance that good men in all ages have not died in vain. We need the conviction that evil will ultimately be punished-not vengefully but with justice. We need help in overcoming our own faults. We need hope for ourselves as well as for all the poor, downtrodden, heartsick, and deluded members of the human family-both those living and those already dead.

All of these things we need; and above all we need confidence in God's love; confidence that God will supply these needs in his due time.

### **The Bible's Claim**

The Bible claims to supply these needs. It claims to be an infallible authority, the testimony of God himself, able to make us "wise unto salvation." But as we have seen, human theories and creeds have hindered us from understanding what the Bible says. Setting aside the creeds and our preconceived ideas, let us examine the Bible in a reasonable and thoughtful way. The following five time-proven steps may help everyone in their Bible study.

### **Step 1 - Study One Topic at a Time**

No one can remember and mentally cross-reference all of the verses of Scripture. Therefore, a chapter-by-chapter approach to Bible study cannot be as complete as a topical study. For example, suppose that as we read the Bible we have a question about the resurrection of the dead. We should not think that we understand the resurrection until we have read all the Bible verses on the subject. The best way to find out about the resurrection (or any other Bible topic) is to use a Bible concordance. This is a book that contains an alphabetical list of every word that occurs in the Bible, with the verse in which it can be found. Many Bibles have an incomplete concordance

in the back. Strong's concordance and Young's concordance are complete—every word is listed. (Both of these concordances are available in most libraries and Christian book stores.)

If we look up the word resurrection in a complete concordance, we find 41 verses in the Bible use the word. Reading all these verses would be the first step in understanding our subject.

The study of one topic at a time, the use of a concordance, and looking up all the Bible says on that topic—these things form the first step to rewarding Bible study.

**STEP 2 - Consider the Context**

As we read Bible verses, we should not think of them as isolated statements. Each of them is part of a context; each relates to the verses and chapters which go before and after. In study, therefore, notice:

- Who is speaking?
- Who is being spoken to?
- Who or what is being spoken about?

If it is a verse about the resurrection, ask yourself, "Is it speaking of the resurrection of Christians, or of the resurrection of the world in general? Is it speaking of believers or non-believers?"

Noticing the context is important if we hope to make sense of all that the Bible says.

**STEP 3 - Ask, "Is This Verse Literal or Symbolic?"**

In other words, does the scripture mean just what it says, or is it describing something else in picture form? For example, when we read in Revelation 12 about a woman clothed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet, our reason tells us that this cannot be literal, it must be symbolic or pictorial of some other people or events.

This is how to decide whether a scripture is literal or symbolic:

- If it does not seem reasonable if taken literally, or
- If it would contradict other, more plain, Bible statements, then it should be considered symbolic and we should look for an interpretation of the symbols in harmony with the rest of the Bible.

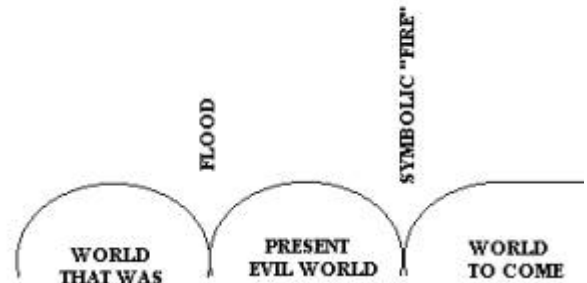
**STEP 4 - Notice the Time Periods Involved**

Some scriptures apply at one time, but not at another time. How do we find out when a verse applies?

The Bible divides history into three great periods or ages.

1. "The world [social order] that was" before the flood (2 Peter 3:6).
2. "The present evil world [age]" which is under Satan's control by God's permission (2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4; 2 Peter 3:7).
3. "The world [age] to come, wherein dwelleth righteousness." This will be the time when God will triumph over sin, evil, and death (2 Peter 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:22-26; Rev. 21:1-4; Isa. 25:8).

We might diagram these three time periods as follows:



Acts 15:14-17 is a good example of how scriptures are easier to understand when they are applied to the proper time period. In verse 14 we learn that God will first "visit the Gentiles" to take out of them a people for his name. After that he will restore Israel (the "tabernacle of David") so that the residue of men (those not already selected as the special people of God) might also seek after God. The words "first" and "after" in those verses indicate time periods. God first selects a little flock of believers as a "people for his name" (Luke 12:32). This occurs during the "present evil world." Afterward, during the "world to come," he will give the residue of men the opportunity to seek and know God.

Understanding God's time periods is perhaps the most important step in studying the Bible sensibly.

**STEP 5 - Watch for "Types" and "Antitypes"**

Much of the Old Testament is like a scale model in which God used those historic events to illustrate larger events of the future. The model or pattern in

the Bible was the "type" and the event it foreshadowed is the "antitype."

An example of a type is the Passover recorded in Exodus, chapters 12 to 14. The New Testament tells us that the Passover lambs which died on behalf of Israel pictured or typed the Lamb of God, Jesus, who died on behalf of the world (1 Cor. 5:7, 8; John 1:29).

The first-born children of Israel typed the true followers of Christ, the "church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:23).

When we understand types and antitypes, we begin to see that nothing in the Bible just "takes up space" - everything in God's word has meaning and is valuable to us. . . .

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The NW Indiana Bible Students invite you to visit [WWW.Blessedbible.com](http://WWW.Blessedbible.com) for a topical Bible study approach to find answers to your questions about God's plan.