

THE BIBLE AND REALITY

- A. Introduction: Rom 12:1,2--We've been discussing the importance of renewing our minds. We want to continue our study in this next series of lessons.
1. All of us gather information about the world around us through our five physical senses. That information is needful but limited because there is a whole dimension beyond the reach of our senses. It is the unseen realm -- the realm of God and His kingdom. I Tim 1:17; Col 1:16; II Cor 4:18; etc.
 - a. Before we took Jesus as Savior and Lord we had no way to access this realm (John 3:3). Consequently, we came to Christ with a skewed or incomplete view of reality.
 - b. Therefore we now need to learn to see things the way they really are or renew our minds.
 1. To renew your mind means to change your perception of reality so that you see yourself, the world, and your circumstances as God sees them.
 2. To fully demonstrate the will of God in our lives we must learn to see reality as it truly is and then walk in the light of it.
 2. The only reliable source of information we have about God and His unseen kingdom, about the way things really are, is the Bible. Therefore we need to read, study, and feed on the Bible.
 - a. But for many people that is a problem. They literally do not know how to approach the Bible: What do I read? How much do I read? What about all the stuff I don't understand?
 - b. In this next portion of our series we're going to talk about how to read and study the Bible. In this lesson we want to cover some introductory points critical to understanding the Bible.
- B. We want to begin by first making several things very clear about why we need to read the Bible.
1. Many sincere Christians have misunderstood the purpose for which we read the Bible. Bible reading has become a source of bondage and or guilt for them because they don't read much (if at all) or, when they do read, they find it boring and hard to understand.
 - a. Bible reading is not one of the "rules" of Christianity that if broken gets you into a lot of trouble with God. We don't read to gain "brownie points" with God. You can't earn God's favor.
 - b. Reading or not reading the Bible does not affect God's love or care for you. Your standing with God is not changed at all by reading or not reading. So why read?
 1. Through the new birth we become citizens of the Kingdom of God (Col 1:13; Phil 3:20). This kingdom has new language, new customs, new ways of doing. If you never learn those things you'll be limited in how much peace, power, and provision you can access in the kingdom.
 2. It is vital for your well being, spirit, soul, and body. God's written word is food (Matt 4:4; Jer 15:16), light to our path (Ps 119:105), armor (Ps 91:4; Eph 6:13-17), medicine (Prov 4:22).
 - c. God's Word works in us to produce change in us when we believe it. I Thess 2:13--And we also [especially] thank God continually for this, that when you received the message of God [which you heard] from us, you welcomed it not as the word of [mere] men but as what it truly is, the Word of God, which is effectually at work in those who adhere to and trust in and rely on it. (Amp)
 2. The Bible is our only 100% reliable source of information about God and His kingdom. His Word is truth or reality. John 17:17--Thy word is the revelation of eternal spiritual verities. (Riggs)
 - a. The Bible is God's revelation to man of Himself and His plans and purposes. God used human authors to pen the words, but God inspired the men. II Tim 3:16
 1. The word inspiration in the Greek is THEOPNEUSTOS, made up of two words: THEOS, or God, and PNEO, meaning to breathe or blow. Inspiration literally means God-breathed.
 2. The Bible does not contain the word of God. It is the word of God. If Jesus Christ were to appear to you He would say nothing different than or contrary to what the Bible says.
 - b. We cannot know God through our feelings, our intellect, or our physical senses. We can only know Him through His written word.
 1. The Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, is revealed to us in and through the written word.

2. John 6:63--All the words through which I have offered myself to you are meant to be channels of the spirit and of life to you, since in believing those words you would be brought into contact with the life in me. (Riggs)
- c. The non-denominational charismatic move brought a wave of fresh air to the Body of Christ. But it had some down sides. One of them was the emphasis on feelings and experiences -- everybody seeking to hear from God and feel His presence.
1. "Hearing God's voice" is very subjective. All of us are vulnerable to thinking we've heard from God when we have not. It is made doubly difficult because most people are unfamiliar with God's voice because they are not familiar with His voice in the pages of scripture.
 2. The number one way God speaks and reveals His will to us is through the Bible. Prov 6:20-23
- d. The Bible is more reliable than any supernatural experience, and all supernatural experiences must be judged in the light of the Bible. Luke 24:25-27; II Pet 1:16-21

C. There are some basic keys to Bible interpretation which you must understand and use if your Bible reading is going to be helpful and effective.

1. The Bible is a collection of books and letters penned by various authors but it has one main theme: God's desire for a family and the lengths to which He went to obtain that family through Jesus Christ.
 - a. The Bible is not a collection of independent verses unrelated to each other. Each verse in the Bible somehow "fits" with every other verse and with the overall theme.
 1. Imagine trying to understand a car -- its purpose, function, appearance, etc. -- if you had never seen a whole car, just a room which contains twenty pieces from a car.
 2. That's the way many Christians try to interpret and understand the Bible. But you cannot fully understand individual verses until you first have an understanding of the whole.
 - b. The Bible was not written in chapters and verses. The chapter divisions were developed in the early 1200s A.D. The verse divisions were not fully developed until 1551 A.D.
 - c. These divisions were added to aid the readers. They serve as reference points to help readers find particular passages in scripture.
2. We must learn to read everything in the Bible in context. It means understanding each part (individual verses, individual books) in relation to all the other verses and books of the Bible.
 - a. Each verse is related to the verses before and after. Each book in the Bible is related to all the other books and all of them add to the story of God's desire for a family.
 - b. And, everything in the Bible was written by someone to someone about something. Somebody is speaking or writing to someone about something. To accurately interpret any verse, you must determine those three things in order to set the boundaries of interpretation.
 1. The scripture cannot mean something to us that it would not have meant to those to whom it was first spoken or written.
 2. There are eternal, timeless truths in the Bible which can be personally applied to you and me.

But, before you can do that, you must have the in-time, historical meaning of the words -- who is talking to who about what. Otherwise, we can make the Bible say anything we want. If you put Matt 27:5 with Luke 10:37 it looks like the Bible says its okay to kill yourself.
 - c. Consider two examples of taking verses out of context and altering the meaning.
 1. I Cor 10:13 is often used to say that God won't give you more trials than you can bear. In context the verse says that no temptation to sin is greater than you can bear because God always provides a way of escape.
 2. Luke 6:38 is often used at offering time to encourage people to give generously. But the verse has nothing to do with money. Jesus is stating that what you give out in terms of mercy and forgiveness to others, in that measure it will come back to you.
 - d. You might ask, how can I determine who is speaking to whom about what? First, you must know that you are supposed to be looking for that information. Often times it is obvious from the text

itself if you are on the lookout for it. Second, there are study aids which can help you. We'll discuss them later in this series.

3. Many approach the Bible this way: What does it mean to me? That is wrong. It doesn't matter what it means to you or to me. What matters is: What does it say? What would it mean if I did not exist?

a. There are not "many different interpretations".

1. There is one meaning which the Holy Spirit intended when it was written and which He wants to show us. We should endeavor to determine that meaning.

2. II Pet 1:20,21--[Yet] first [you must] understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is [a matter] of any personal or private or special interpretation (loosening, solving). For no prophecy ever originated because some man willed it [to do so] — it never came by human impulse — but as men spoke from God who were borne along (moved and impelled) by the Holy Spirit. (Amp)

b. Too much of the time sermons and Bible teachings are nothing more than a speaker giving his ideas about something and then reading one verse (out of context) that supports his idea.

c. Bible study for many people means getting together with fellow believers in someone's living room, reading a verse, and letting everyone giving their interpretation (opinion) of the verse.

1. What if several people decided to study medicine to become doctors and they agreed to meet once a week in one of their homes. At the meeting they'd take a standard medical book, read a paragraph at random, and then discuss it. Everyone would tell what it means to them and how they feel about it, and give an opinion about what they think it means.

2. Even after a long period of time had passed and much discussion had taken place, would you let any one of these people operate on you? Of course not. Yet, that's how many people approach the study of the most important book in the universe.

d. It isn't wrong to discuss what verses mean with friends, but, recognize, that is not Bible study.

That is fellowship. Bible reading and study must be approached systematically. And we need help from people who have already studied it and know more than we do. That's why good teaching is so important for spiritual growth.

D. The number one key to understanding the Bible is reading it, not just parts of it, but reading the entire Bible.

1. Too often the only Bible reading people do is their daily devotional. While that is better than nothing we must recognize its limitations.

a. Most devotionals are set up like this: The daily verse is printed at the top of the page. And then the rest of the page is an author's commentary or opinion about what that verse means. You're still not reading the Bible as it needs to be read.

b. When Paul wrote Philippians (a letter written to Christians living in the city of Philippi) he did not intend for them to pick out verses at random and then discuss them. He intended that they read the letter from start to finish.

2. You must read the Bible through to become familiar with it. Understanding comes with familiarity. Therefore, you need to develop a systematic reading program for yourself.

a. Start with the New Testament. Use a translation you are comfortable with. Set aside 20 to 30 minutes everyday to read (or as close to that as possible).

b. Start with the Gospel of Matthew. Read as much as you can in one sitting. Leave a marker where you stop and pick up there the next day.

1. If you come to something you don't understand, just keep reading. Don't stop to look up all the words in a Greek dictionary. Don't get out the concordance. Don't read the study notes at the bottom of the page. Just read the Bible.

2. Often, you'll see something in the next few chapters which will help you with the verse you didn't understand. Or, next time you read through that chapter you'll get more understanding.

c. People often ask me how I became so familiar with the Bible. This is the system I used: When I

finished Matthew I then read through each epistle (except for Revelation). Then I read Mark and all the epistles again. Then Luke and the epistles again. Then John and the epistles. Lastly I read Acts and then started over with Matthew. (I waited to read Revelation until I had more understanding about Jesus' return.)

d. Save the Old Testament (except for Psalms and Proverbs) until you've become familiar with the New Testament. The Old Testament is important, but it must be read in the light of the New.

1. The Bible is progressive revelation. God has gradually revealed Himself to man in the pages of scripture. The Old Testament is not a complete revelation of God and His plan for man.

2. We find the complete revelation in Jesus in the New Testament. Heb 1:1-3; John 14:9,10

e. It will take a while, but if you will follow a systematic reading plan, you will gradually become familiar with the New Testament. Then, you will be ready to move on to the Old Testament.

3. Through systematic reading of the New Testament you will develop a frame of reference by which to judge things. You will get an accurate picture of what Christianity is supposed to look like.

a. Bible reading may be more important now than it has ever been. We are living at the end of the age. The return of Jesus is very near. And the deception level in the world -- but particularly in the church -- has skyrocketed.

b. Because of the developments in technology anyone can get their message out to multitudes of people. There are so many voices out there you have to be able to discern truth from error.

c. Our protection against end-time deception is God's word. II Tim 3:13-17

E. Conclusion: People struggle with reading the Bible because they literally don't know how to approach it. We have a lot more to say about how to read and study the Bible in the next several lessons, but consider these points as we close.

1. Although it may not seem like it at first, understanding does come with familiarity. If you will commit to reading the New Testament systematically (as we describe above) on a regular basis you will notice a difference.

a. Bible reading is not "bells and whistles going off". People think that if they don't "feel something" when they read they aren't getting anything out of it. But when you eat food you don't worry about whether or not you "feel" vitamins and nutrients going into your system. You just eat.

b. People think that when they read the Bible, if they don't have some great revelation or spiritual experience, they must not be doing it correctly. But most of the time nothing obvious happens when you read the Bible. You just read.

2. If you are not a regular Bible reader your mind will never be renewed to the point where your perception of reality is changed and you are able to fully demonstrated God's will in your life. But as you become a regular reader, gradually (almost imperceptibly at first) your view of reality will start to change and you will see the effects in your life.

3. When you read the Bible it is helpful to understand its structure. We'll talk about that next week.