

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

by James Stalker

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*Stalker's practical guide advocating the study of entire biblical books as connected wholes rather than isolated verses, providing methods for fruitful engagement with Scripture.*

4 Chapters

## Table of Contents

1. 01 - Study of Texts
2. 02 - Study of Books
3. 03 - Study of Group of Books
4. 04 - Study of Doctrine

## 01 - Study of Texts

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The Study of Texts The way in which, as children, we are taught to read the Bible is to take a chapter, or perhaps a smaller portion, daily, or perhaps twice a day -- in the morning and at night; and, when those who may have dropped the habit of Bible-reading take it up again, during some season of religious impression, this is usually the way they begin. Perhaps they go through a book, reading a chapter every day; or they may take a chapter of the Old Testament in the morning and one of the New Testament in the evening. There are in circulation many programmes of Daily Bible Readings, issued by different churches and societies, to guide in this kind of study. When this mode of reading is followed, that which the reader generally gets is a verse here and there, which warms his heart at the moment and remains for a shorter or longer period in the memory. Now and then, indeed, the chapter may be such a connected whole -- like the fifty-third of Isaiah or the thirteenth of 1 Corinthians -- that it goes into the mind entire; and sometimes a few verses are so connected that they can scarcely help making a united impression; but in general the profit of this kind of reading lies in the impression made by isolated and striking verses. And this may be no small blessing. It is a marvelous proof of the wealth of Scripture that there is hardly a chapter in which there does not occur some golden verse, which arrests the mind by the felicity of its diction, the beauty of its sentiment, or its spiritual depth; and in many chapters such verses are so numerous that the difficulty is to choose among them. The division of the Bible into chapters and verses facilitates this kind of study, and, indeed, was invented for the purpose. But these divisions do not belong to the original book. On the contrary, they are a comparatively modern device; and it has become common of late to rail at them as impediments instead of helps. On the whole, they have probably been a blessing, and are worth preserving. The chapters encourage the simple and the busy to read by presenting to the eye portions not too difficult to face; and the verses, by isolating the pithy, proverb-like sayings with which the Bible abounds, have caused them to be noted and remembered. But this arrangement has also serious drawbacks. One of these is the tendency to render devotion mechanical. Of all modes of Bible reading the most unprofitable and deadening is to read a daily chapter and then lay the book aside without attempting to retain any definite impression. This, it is to be feared, is often done; and, if it is allowed to become habitual, the reader will scarcely remember, after closing the book, a single thing he has read.

Means, therefore, require to be taken to overcome this tendency. It is a good plan, as we read, to pick out the choicest verse in the chapter -- the one most attractive in itself or most adapted to our circumstances -- and, before closing the book, commit it to memory. Then let it be kept in the mind till the next reading, as something sweet is kept in the mouth till all its sweetness is extracted. In this way the attention is kept on the strain whilst the reading proceeds; the memory is gradually stored with a collection of choice texts, every one of which is tinged with the experience of the day on which it was learned; and, almost unawares, the reader becomes the possessor of spiritual wealth. The selected text may be imprinted still more deeply on the mind by writing out a few lines of reflection on it. Every one who knows what it is to give a lesson or an address occasionally on Scripture is aware how the verse or paragraph on which he has had to prepare himself to speak

stands out in his Bible afterwards from the rest of the text, as if its letters were embossed on the page. Something thus to awaken the mind and concentrate the attention should be devised by every one; because it is not mere reading, but meditation -- "meditation all the day," as the Psalmist says -- which extracts the sweetness and the power out of Scripture. When the mind sinks down and down into a text, like a bee into a flower, and abides in it, applying to its study every energy its possesses -- memory, imagination, reasoning, feeling -- then it comes forth at length as the bee comes out of the flower, when it flies away laden with honey to build up the treasure of the honey-comb.

## 02 - Study of Books

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### The Study of Books

There are many who never all their days advance beyond the method of reading the Scriptures which I have called the study of texts. But it is a more masculine and advanced method to study the books of the Bible as connected wholes.

Here is an interesting sketch of an experience which some may recognize as similar to their own:

"I well remember something happening when I was a boy, which made a complete change in my classical studies. I had long been learning Greek as boys are taught it; that is to say, having a score of lines of poetry, or two or three paragraphs of prose, prescribed for each day. The attention for the day is fixed on this little bit, every word of which has to be examined as to its meaning, etymology, syntax, and so on. Now and then the boy may be struck with a choice line or a fine thought; but he pays little attention to these things, and has no idea of the history or treatise as a whole which he is reading. But one day I went away by myself into the woods with a volume of Plato in my pocket, and, stretched on the grass, commenced to read. The piece at which I chanced to open is one of the most wonderful products of Greek genius -- the Apology of Socrates, that is, his address to his judges before his execution. I read on and on, not making out every word, but easily following the drift of the thought, till I forgot where I was, and my brain was aglow with the sublime scene and the immortal sentences. When I rose from the ground, Greek had become a new thing to me. Till then it had only meant lessons -- parsing, construing, and drudgery. Now I knew it as literature; I knew that a Greek book could tell a thrilling story and pour into the mind thoughts that breathe and words that burn. And I obtained this new power by reading a book, not in fragments, but as a whole." A precisely similar awakening in regard to the Bible may be experienced by beginning to read its books, not in separate chapters, but as wholes. The same pen goes on to describe this also:

"I remember perfectly well the first time I ever read an entire book of Scripture at one sitting. I chanced on the Sabbath to be in a continental country and in a town where there was no Protestant service of any kind. In the early morning I had gone to the Roman Catholic service, but it was over before breakfast; and I was thrown on my own resources for the rest of the day. Strolling out behind the hotel, I lay down on a green knoll, where I remained the whole forenoon. I opened the New Testament and dipped into the pages here and there, till, chancing on the Epistle to the Romans, I read on and on through it. As I proceeded, I caught the spirit of St. Paul's mighty theme, or rather was caught by it, and was drawn on to read. The argument opened out and rose like a great work of art above me, till at last I was enclosed within its perfect proportions. This was a new experience. I saw for the first time that a book of the Bible is a complete discussion of a single subject; I felt the full force of the whole argument; and I understood the different parts in the light of the whole as I had never done when reading them by themselves." The advantages of this method are here indicated. In the first place, it makes you feel the impression of the book as a whole; and this must, in the nature of the case, be far greater than that produced by a single

chapter or a single verse of the same book. Nearly every book of the Bible may be said to be a discussion of some particular theme. For example, Job is on the Problem of Evil, Ecclesiastes is on the Highest Good, Romans is on Righteousness, Timothy and Titus on the Pastoral Office, and so on. It has pleased God thus to give in His Word full statements on a number of the greatest subjects; and to master the contents of these books is to fill the mind with the great thoughts of God. The other advantage is that the different parts of a book are much more intelligible when read in the light of the whole. It is surprising how clear the meaning of obscure verses sometimes become when they are seen in their place in the entire structure to which they belong; and verses which have been impressive by themselves sometimes receive an entirely new importance when they are seen to be the keynotes of an argument whose strength depends upon their truth. It must, indeed, be confessed that occasionally, when examined in this way, favourite texts are discovered not to mean what has been supposed. A meaning suggested by their sound has been attached to them; and, if this has been in accordance with the general teaching of Scripture, the text, so interpreted, may have done the reader good; but, when we come upon it in the course of the argument to which it belongs, we perceive that the meaning is different. Any exact study of Scripture will bring some disappointments of this kind, because many favourite texts have not really the meaning which they carry to the popular ear. But surely every virile mind will wish to know precisely what the writer meant by every word he wrote; and every reverent reader must believe that the very mind of the Spirit is the best. The application of texts to circumstances widely different from those to which they were first applied is quite legitimate; but the modern application ought in every case to be derived in a fair way from the original sense.

Some may think this method of studying whole books to be above them, because demanding too much time. But few know how limited the Bible literature is; and it may serve a good purpose to compare its external compass with that of ordinary books. It would not be thought a great intellectual achievement to read through five of the Waverly Novels or three of the works of Thackeray; many would consider this a moderate allowance of reading for a few weeks. Yet either of these courses would contain as many words as the entire Bible. Even a long book, like Job, can be read without haste in a couple of hours; and many books scarcely take longer than ordinary letters. In fact, they are just letters. Of course, the Bible is not to be always read as quickly as this. But to read rapidly is a great advantage when what you wish is to catch the drift of a book as a whole. When this has been done, it is a good thing to note down somewhere, say at the top of the book in your Bible, what the theme is and where the chief hinges of the story or argument come in; because, in the subsequent reading of single chapters of the same book, you can refer to this scheme and see in what portion of the whole you are. A more serious impediment will sometimes be encountered in the difficulty of making out what the drift of a book is; and it may be asked if any aids are to be used in doing so. The articles on the different books in any Bible dictionary, or in Dr. Wright's Introduction to the Old Testament, or Dr. Dod's Introduction to the New Testament, will help (see also Farrar's Messages of the Books or Fraser's Synoptical Lectures on the Books of the Bible); and the use of the Revised Version along with the Authorised will clear away many obstacles. There are some books, especially among the Old Testament prophets, that cannot be read through with full intelligence without some assistance from commentaries; and to the reader who wishes to pursue the subject further, Collins' Critical and Experimental Commentary, by the Rev. Robert Jamieson, D.D., the Rev. Canon Fausset, D.D., and the Rev. Principal Brown, D.D., can hardly be too highly recommended. The best help to the understanding of any book of the

Bible is knowledge of the time and circumstances in which it was composed. If you know in what circumstances the author was when he was writing, and what was the condition of those he was writing to, there is generally little difficulty in understanding what he says. In this way some of the Bible books throw light on one another. The histories of the kings, for example, in the Old Testament, explain the prophets who wrote in the reigns of those kings; and the life of St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles throws light on his epistles. Some modern books make excellent use of the same method. There is, for example, a book worthy to be called one of the glories of the English Church in this century -- Conybeare and Howson's Life of St. Paul -- which thus casts a flood of light on the Apostle's writings. It follows his footsteps from stage to stage with the most patient accuracy and luminous fulness of information. It shows the precise condition in which he was when each of his epistles was penned, and what were the circumstances of those to whom he was writing. It inserts each epistle in its own place in the history; and at the same time gives a fresh translation. Any one who will take the trouble to master this great work will easily be able to discover what is the subject of every one of St. Paul's epistles, and what the course of its argument, and thus put himself in possession of the substance of what, taken all in all, is, next to the four Gospels, the most instructive portion of Holy Writ.

Yet let it always be remembered that, whatever assistance may be derived from these and similar sources, the most serviceable division for every one will be that which he has made for himself.

## 03 - Study of Group of Books

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The Study of Groups of Books This is a method of study more advanced than that of which we have just spoken, but following naturally upon it; and it is one which at the present time is proving to many so fascinating as almost to make the Bible a new book. When the books of the Bible are carefully examined, it is found that not only is each book a connected whole, but sometimes several books, either on account of their chronological proximity or from being penned by the same hand, or for other reasons, all bear the impress of the same type of thought. It is advantageous to study them together; because they cast light on one another and produce on the mind a united impression or effect. In the Old Testament there are three outstanding groups -- The Historical, the Poetical, and the Prophetic books; and in the New Testament we may distinguish four great groups -- first, the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts; secondly, the Writings of St. Peter and, along with them, Hebrews, St. James and St. Jude; thirdly, the Epistles of St. Paul; and fourthly, the Writings of St. John. Within these large groups smaller ones may be formed. In the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament, for instance, there are important divisions not only according to the size of the books (Major and Minor Prophets), but according to the different epochs to which the prophets belong (see the article Bible in Chambers' Encyclopedia) and in St. Paul's voluminous writings there are four minor groups distinguishable partly by the chronology and partly by the distinctive sets of ideas with which his mind was occupied at different stages of his career (see Stalker's St. Paul). The principal charm of this mode of study is the perception of the growth of revelation. When the books of the Bible are thus arranged, and the groups placed in chronological succession, it becomes manifest at once that there is in them a gradual unfolding of the truth. Even in the career of a single writer, like St. Paul, this is perfectly manifest. The ideas of his earlier epistles are much simpler than those of the later ones. Evidently the Spirit of inspiration made use of his growing experience as a means of leading him to more recondite and comprehensive views of the truth. So it was also with the men of revelation from age to age. Each of them, standing upon the attainments of his predecessors, was enabled to reach forward to the apprehension of the still undiscovered; and so all the facets of revelation by degrees flashed their light upon the world.

## 04 - Study of Doctrine

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The Study of Doctrine The three methods of study already spoken of inevitably lead on to a fourth, which is more advanced than any of them. This is the study of the Doctrine of Scripture. The study of verses and chapters yields us the truth contained in separate morsels of Holy Writ; and the study of whole books or groups of books gives the mastery of larger portions of the divine revelation. But it is inevitable to those who go so far to ask, What is the message conveyed by God to man in the Bible as a whole? Though the Bible is a large collection separate books, each of which contains its own leading thought, it is, in another aspect, one Book, conveying to the sinful children of men the mind of the loving and redeeming God. What then, is this message? As we ascertain the meaning of the verses and the messages of the books, we are collecting fragments of it; but what is it as a whole? The catechisms, the creeds, and the doctrinal systems of the churches are attempts to answer this question.

It is well known that at the present time these do not stand in very high repute; and the use of them as tests is a question much disputed even among earnest Christians, and therefore not to be touched upon here. But, apart from this, it is difficult to see how the human mind could have refrained from making these efforts. Every reader of the Bible is encouraged to try to understand the meaning of single texts and chapters and to state it in his own words. It is considered meritorious on the part of the student to grasp the drift and leading idea of a whole book, and to be able to show how every part of the book falls into its natural place when viewed in the light of this idea. It is even more in accordance with the intellectual fashion of the time to admire the mastery which any one may be able to display of a whole group of books, like the Minor Prophets or the writings of St. John. But, if we go a step further and, grasping the message conveyed by all the books taken together, express it in our own words, this is only doing what the earlier procedure, which every one applauds, has made inevitable; and to forbid it is to put an arbitrary arrest on Christian thought and condemn the Christian mind to remain in a state of intellectual nonage. In like manner, to avail ourselves, in this study, of the help and guidance of the great and good who in the past have devoted themselves to the same task is only to do what is done in every other department of knowledge. A good catechism or manual of Christian doctrine serves to the student of Scripture the same purpose as is served to the tourist in Switzerland or Norway by his Murray or Baedeker. He will be ill-advised, indeed, if he does not use and trust his own eyes and allow the Scriptures to make on him their own natural impression, just as the traveller, if he has any wisdom, will not wait to see what the guide-book says before enjoying a lake or a mountain or a sunset, if it happens to be beautiful. But the catechism will direct him to the most important statements of Scripture and acquaint him with the relation of the different parts of truth to one another in the very same way as the guide-book conducts the tourist to the best points of view and shows him, in the map, the relation to each other of the different parts of the country. Nor is it wiser to scorn such assistance from the thinkers of the past, and act as if the study of the Bible had begun with us, than it would be to go to a foreign country without a guide-book on the ground that every one should see the world with his own eyes.

Here, however, as before, the principle holds good that the truth most valuable to us will be that which, whether with assistance from others or not, we have appropriated by our own thinking and confirmed by our own experience. In point of fact, the earnest and intelligent reader of Scripture cannot help gradually forming a conception in his own mind of the entire message which the Scripture conveys. Nor is it so difficult to do as might be imagined. The leading features of it are written on the face of Scripture so plainly that he who runs may read. That God loves us; that we are fallen creatures, exposed for our sins to a terrible doom; that the Son of God died for sinners; and that there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved -- these and similar truths are written in capital letters, so to speak, in the divine record, and so large that they cannot be mistaken. Let them be clearly outlined in the mind as the essentials; and the smaller print will also by degrees fill itself up and take its proper place. A simple plan is to take a single doctrine at a time, such as the love of God, the person of Christ, or the destiny of man, and collect from the different books or groups of books in chronological order the most important passages bearing on the subject. This will frequently be found to yield surprising results, disclosing unexpected points of view, and producing on the mind an overwhelming total impression; and, applied to truth after truth round the circle of doctrine, it will supply to any diligent student a comprehensive and Scriptural theology.

It has pleased God to give us the whole Bible; and it ought to be the ambition of the Christian mind to take complete possession of it. It is one of the principal means of preparing for the other world; and our stature in that world, the station and degree which we shall occupy, and the volume of our joy throughout eternity may depend on the faithfulness and diligence with which we now make use of this precious heritage.

It will be observed that these different modes of study do not exclude but supplement one another. The simpler lead on to the more elaborate; but it is not less true that the attempt to cultivate the more difficult kinds of study will lend new interest to the daily reading of brief portions of the Word, which must always for the great majority of Christians be the common way of using this means of grace.

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

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