

Studying a passage of Scripture

Analyse the text

This analysis is not the detailed study of a passage, but the total saturation of your mind with the Scripture you are studying (read and re-read the text, taking note of the following):

The Background of the Text

Research practices, customs and historical background which could affect the interpretation of the passage. Look at the passage in context with the structure and major theme of the whole book in which it is found.

What genre is the literature?

Narrative, history, law, poetry, wisdom, epistles (letters), prophetic / apocalyptic

EG. Interpreting The book of Proverbs without reference to the book being Wisdom literature can lead to many false assumptions such as reading a proverb as a promise rather than a reflection of life.

What is the Big idea of the Text

Saturate yourself in the passage until you can discern the one unifying idea that galvanises the text into a whole. Ask yourself "What makes this passage a section? Why does it start here and finish there? What main thought or idea is central to the passage?"

The big idea is discovered by answering the question "what is the passage talking about?" When you think you have found the big idea, check to see if it relates to all of the text, not just part of it. Ask yourself "Does every verse have something to say about this big idea?"

The Break-down of the Text

Analyse the structure of the text. What divisions are there, and how does each section relate to the others and to the big idea of the passage? Each section you are studying must have it's own separate idea or thought, and each of these must relate to and compliment (add something to) the one big idea in the passage.

The Burden of the Text

The thrust of text (What is the main message of the text?)

What was on the heart of the author?

What was the message he was trying to get through?

What is the primary application of the whole text to the reader (then and now)?

How does this apply today?"

Who does it apply to?

When does it apply?

Interpret the text (What is the meaning of the text?)

Basic principles of biblical interpretation: (Dr. John Stott)

1. God spoke to be understood - simplicity - look for the natural meaning.
2. God spoke in precise context - history - look for original meaning.
3. God spoke without contradicting Himself - harmony - look for the general meaning.
4. God speaks through what He spoke - modernity - look for the contemporary meaning.

Hermeneutical Principles

There is always only one interpretation of any given text, where there may be several applications.

1. Respect the straight forward meaning of the text. The Bible should be interpreted literally wherever possible, in it's natural and normal sense. Do not forget it was originally written to people who were often illiterate and uneducated.
2. The meaning of the text is governed by the immediate context as well as the broader context of the whole book in which it is found.
3. Use Scripture to aid in the understanding of Scripture.
4. Remember the diversity and progress within Scripture as a unit.
5. Use the clear to help explain the unclear or less clear.
6. The whole focus of Scripture - the centrality of Christ.

ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- a. Are there any indications of purpose, editorial comments, or interpretive statements about the events in the text?
- b. Are theological judgements made in the text? (eg. Judges 17:6 - Is this story given as an example or as a warning? If so, in exactly what way?)
- c. Is this instance a norm or an exception?
- d. What message was intended to those to whom the passage was first written?
- e. Why would the Holy Spirit have included this account in Scripture?

The Illumination of the Holy Spirit

We must approach the study of Scripture with a deep sense of inadequacy to be able to interpret the text by mere human intellect, education, experience or Bible knowledge (1 Cor. 2:6-14). We are to pray for illumination (Psa. 119:18, Eph 1:17-18). The indwelling Holy Spirit is our teacher (Luke 24:45 c/f John 14:26, 1 John 2:27).

Illumination is the opening of the 'spiritual eyes' of the preacher to understand the revealed Word of God. It is not revelation, but understanding of the revelation given in the Word. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers now illumines the readers (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Some things to remember :

- a. Not everything in Scripture can be fully understood (Deut. 29:29).

b. Human teachers can be instruments of illumination - both verbally or written down in commentaries and books (Eph. 4:11-12).

c. The Spirit's work does not take away from the necessity of hard work. It is not a short cut to Bible Study! Any new insights which we believe the Spirit has brought to us, we must judge by what the rest of Scripture says (Acts 17:11).

Procedures for Investigation

a. Literary analysis

What genre is the book? Why was it written? What bearing does the context of the whole book, and the surrounding chapters have on the text being investigated?

b. Syntactical analysis (Mechanical analysis)

Analysis can be likened to the 'exploded' parts of a gear box in an auto spare parts manual. The exploded view allows you to look at each individual part and see how it fits in with the whole.

The word syntax comes from a Greek word which means 'how statements relate with one another' (clauses, paragraphs, sentences, and phrases)

EXAMPLE: 1 Peter 1:3-5

Determine what is dominant and what is subordinate in this passage? Subordinate clauses and phrases are those which support, confirm, qualify, or in some way add to the main point.

The dominant phrase of this passage is 'Praise be to the God and Father'

What kind of God and Father? (first level of subordination)

* 'of our Lord Jesus Christ'

* 'He has given us new birth'

How did He give us new birth? (second level of subordination)

* It was 'in His great mercy'

* It was 'into a living hope'

* It was 'through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'

* It was 'into an inheritance'

What kind of inheritance? (third level of subordination)

* 'can never perish',

* 'spoil',

* 'fade',

* 'kept in heaven'

For whom is it kept? (fourth level of subordination)

* 'for you'.

Analyse by use of questions

Matthew 28:18-20 “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore go

and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to obey everything I commanded you.
and surely I am with you always.’ “

What is the big idea? - The main verb is “make disciples”

What has “All Authority...” got to do with making disciples?

Our responsibility (to make disciples),
Our right (to make disciples),
Our recognition (of the One who builds His church)

What has “go” got to do with making disciples?

Evangelism that is to be pro-active ... penetrating the world

What has “baptizing...” got to do with making disciples?

Commitment of faith and identification with Christ

What has “teaching...” got to do with making disciples?

Evangelism ends with the maturity of new Christians

What has “I am with you always...” got to do with making disciples?

Encouragement to do it, and perseverance

c. Verbal analysis

a. Unknown words - look for words that require definition.

b. Key words - the context will help identify words which are significant to the understanding of the meaning of the passage. For example, in John 15:1-16, the words "remain in" and "fruit" are crucial to a correct interpretation of the passage.

c. Emphasized words - words that relate to the dominant theme, that are repeated, or are prominent for other reasons. A good textual commentary will identify words that are emphatic in the Greek, or are emphasized because of the particular construction of the sentence in the Greek text.

d. Connecting words (but, therefore, and, so, etc.). Look for repetition - contrasts - progression, unusual usage (where the expected word is not used).

Looking into significant words -

1. What does the word mean?
2. Is there any other significant use of the word in the book? (or elsewhere)
3. How was the word used in non-biblical literature contemporary to the author?

d. Theological analysis

The investigation of the doctrinal and theological significance of the text:

* within the thought of the author

Paul's use of the expression "in Christ" consistently relates to the Christian's position in union with Christ. However, when John quotes Jesus using a similar term "in me" (John 15:1), the meaning is the Christian's fellowship with Christ.

The term 'eternal life' in John's Gospel has a different meaning than the way the term is used in the synoptic Gospels.

* within the context of biblical revelation

A passage may seem to teach that Christians can lose their salvation, but needs to be understood in light of other Scriptures which clearly show the eternal security of the believer.

* in harmony with the author's theological emphasis

In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of worldly wisdom as being an enemy of the cross and a barrier to people's faith in Christ. However, in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the author encourages us to seek after wisdom.

* in harmony with general biblical theology

Every preacher should have his own theology. Having studied Bible doctrines and the text of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible teacher should have strong convictions about every area of theology. This becomes a grid through which the interpretation of every individual passage is passed.

When a certain passage is not in harmony with that theology, either the preacher's convictions need to be evaluated and changed, or he must interpret the passage in question to line up with his theology.