

8 Steps for Successful Bible Study

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | September 13, 2010



I try to study the Bible but find it difficult to understand and confusing. Can you give any suggestions on how to study the Bible?

Great question and here are 8 simple principles to understanding the Bible:

1. We must start with a humble heart/mind recognizing our dependence upon God to reveal Himself to us and enlighten our ability to understand. We by our own imaginations, ingenuity, or abilities cannot “discover” God. But thankfully we don’t have to. God has revealed Himself to us and therefore it is our privilege to “find” Him when we search for Him with our entire heart (Jer 29:13).
 - The error here is having an arrogant heart believing we can with our own innate abilities “figure” out God and His purposes or study Him in a lab like a science project. We cannot, but we can learn and understand what He has revealed.
2. We must exercise our reasoning ability (Isa 1:18, Romans 14:5, Heb 5:14) and evaluate the evidence God has provided.
 - The error here is in diminishing reason and suggesting we just take Scripture as it reads

and not ask questions or think it through. Those who suggest we take it just as it reads do so because they hold to positions that are not reasonable and will fall apart if the student of the Word were to engage His God given reasoning abilities and think about the meaning of the text.

3. We must determine what the scripture says, then after determining what it says we must ask, "what does it mean?" and "how does it apply to my life?"
 - The error here is closely linked to the "not reasoning" error and is such statements as "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." But the student can only be benefited by understanding the meaning of the Word of God, not by mere hearing it.
 - "Merely to hear or to read the word is not enough. He who desires to be profited by the Scriptures must meditate upon the truth that has been presented to him. By earnest attention and prayerful thought he must learn the meaning of the words of truth, and drink deep of the spirit of the holy oracles." — Christ's Object Lessons, pg. 59
4. We must allow Scripture to define its own terminology.
 - The error here is in using human dictionaries to define Biblical terminology. This error is at the root of much of the false theology taught, including much of the penal models of atonement.

Example – Revelation 14 in which the smoke of torment ascends "forever." If scripture is used to define the meaning of "forever" rather than accepting the common dictionary definition we conclude that forever means as long as the person is alive. If however, we interpret the meaning of "forever" with human dictionaries we conclude this means for eternity of never ending time and conclude the wicked are tormented eternally.

Whenever we fail to allow the Scripture to define its own terms we are vulnerable to error.

Unfortunately, penal models don't allow scripture to define words such as "wrath" "justice" "judgment" "vengeance" "anger" "death" and the like and instead insert human definitions to these terms. Our model seeks to define these terms based on God's Word:

Wrath – Romans 1:18-32 – "letting go" "abandoning" confirmed when Christ drank the cup of "wrath" and was "abandoned" by His Father at the Cross (Matt 27:46, Romans 4:25).

Vengeance – The Penal Substitution Model (PSM) claims Romans 12:19 "vengeance is mine says the Lord" as evidence God leaves His methods of love and uses power to inflict harm. This idea uses human dictionary definitions for vengeance – but if we use Scripture to define vengeance we find something different:

Therefore the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: "Ah, I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. 25 I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. Isaiah 1:24,25

What is the vengeance of God? Turning enemies into friends – His vengeance is not on sinners but on sinfulness. He attacks and destroys sin! This is His vengeance which purges and cleanses the sinner! The greatest vengeance God can have on Satan is healing and restoring all those who trust Him!

Justice – Bible definition is to do right in helping others, show compassion and mercy – no concept of punitive infliction of punishment, that is a human definition, which definition

does PSM use? Here is the Biblical evidence:

“Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice (tsadaq) to the afflicted and needy” (Psalm 82:3 NKJV).

Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice (mishpat) is done — help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows. (Isaiah 1:16,17 GNB)

This is what the LORD says to the dynasty of David: ‘Give justice (mishpat) each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors.’ (Jeremiah 21:12 NLT)

‘Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Enough, O princes of Israel! Remove violence and plundering, execute justice (mispat) and righteousness (tsadaq), and stop dispossessing my people,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘You shall have honest scales....’ (Ezekiel 45:9,10 NKJV)

The LORD is waiting to be kind to you. He rises to have compassion on you. The LORD is a God of justice (mishpat). (Isaiah 30:18 GW)

“This is what the LORD of Armies says: Administer real justice (mishpat), be compassionate and kind to each other.” (Zechariah 7:9 GW)

Death - We use the human definition and call cessation of biological life death - but Jesus, God in human form, called this “sleep” and Paul the apostle called this “sleep.” When God said, “in the day you eat you will surely die,” He was not speaking of “sleep.” He was speaking of eternal non-existence, when body and soul are destroyed (MT 10:28). If we allow the Bible to define its terms then we realize no one has yet “died” but all “sleep” waiting in the grave for their resurrection (either first or second).

What does this mean? It means God has never killed anyone - put to sleep, yes, but killed no! Penal models utilize OT texts and God’s acts there as evidence of God “killing” and projects this as evidence He will, in justice, kill the wicked in the end. But such an idea exists only if we don’t allow Scripture to define itself:

The wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23

Sin when full grown brings forth death. James 1:15

The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction. Gal 6:8

Sickness, suffering, and death are work of an antagonistic power. Satan is the destroyer;

God is the restorer. — Ministry of Healing, pg. 113

God destroys no one. The sinner destroys himself by his own impenitence. — Faith I Live By, pg. 58

Read the Scriptures carefully, and you will find that Christ spent the largest part of His ministry in restoring the suffering and afflicted to health. Thus He threw back upon Satan the reproach of the evil which the enemy of all good had originated. Satan is the destroyer; Christ is the Restorer. — Medical Ministry, pg. 240

5. We must identify God's testable laws and require all interpretations to harmonize with these. These include the law of love, liberty, and worship as described in other blogs and my lectures and books.
 - The error occurs when we misconstrue God's laws as imposed and when we hold to doctrines which violate God's testable laws. Such as teaching God threatens or coerces with inflictions of pain and suffering and eternal punishment, rather than the Biblical position that sin brings its own punishment of death and God is working to save.
6. We must harmonize the declarations of Scripture with the stories of Scripture
 - a. An error occurs when the declarations of scripture are not harmonized with the stories. Like using God's thundering and threatening of rebellious Israel as evidence that God inflicts pain and suffering rather than harmonizing those words with the history of what God did, which was let them go, at their persistence, and the Babylonians destroyed them, not God.
7. We must harmonize scripture and science
 - a. The error here occurs when Christians claim faith doesn't require evidence and when scientists claim the Bible is a book of myths or allegories. God is the author of nature and His principles are revealed in nature. However, nature is infected with an antagonistic principle and cannot be rightly understood without the aid of God's word. Science and scripture rightly understood always harmonize.
8. We must require Jesus, God in human form, to be the lens through which God, His nature, character and all His actions are understood.
 - a. An here error occurs when we see the Old and New Testaments as separate or try to fit Jesus into the Old Testament symbolic system rather than seeing the Old Testament through the lens of what Jesus revealed and taught.

Try applying these simple principles and see if what was once mysterious doesn't become clear and understandable.