

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

HANDOUT B

Feasting on the Word

Chapter 4 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

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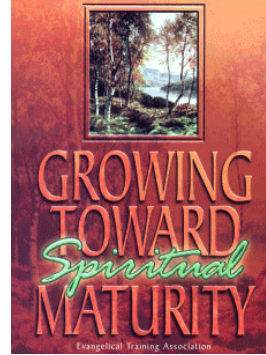
Just as newborn infants must drink milk to grow, so the new Christian must feed on the Word of God in order to grow and mature. Reading and studying God’s Word provides the nourishment necessary for this growth (1 Pet. 2:2). While eating food may be only a routine of life for some people, God elevates the process of feeding on His Word to a feast. Scripture compares God’s Word to delighting oneself, desiring gold, and eating honey. To grow and mature as disciples of Jesus, we must feast on God’s Word as if it is exactly what it claims to be, the very Word of God Himself. The Word of God is the most concrete, objective Truth the disciple has to follow.

The Bible as God’s Word

The Bible repeatedly claims to be God’s Word. More than 760 times in the Old Testament the authors identify their messages as “the word of God” or some equivalent phrase. Hundreds of statements, especially in the Prophets, begin with some form of the expression “the Lord says” (e.g. Jer. 31:1–40). During His earthly ministry Jesus endorsed all three sections of the Hebrew Bible—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:44)—and emphasized the divine origin of the Old Testament (Mark 7:7–8).

The New Testament also claims to be God’s Word. Jesus proclaimed His own gospel message with such divine authority (Matt. 7:28–29) that one astonished audience exclaimed, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (John 7:46). Insisting that God was the source of His message, Jesus said, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 8:28). The apostles also recognized the divine origin of their message and writings. Commending the Thessalonian believers, Paul wrote, “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). Peter even gave Paul’s epistles a scriptural status equal to the Old Testament (2 Pet. 3:16).

The Bible clearly claims to be God’s Word. That claim is verified by Jesus who demonstrated His own divine nature and trustworthiness by His sinless living, miracles, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and, most of all, by His resurrection from the dead.



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The Authority of God's Word

Because the Bible is God's Word, it demands serious attention and respect. Several terms explain the nature of this divine authority. Biblical revelation refers to the fact that God has taken the initiative to disclose information about His nature, eternal purposes, and provision for salvation in the words of Scripture. Much of this truth was not available apart from God's own communication of it (1 Cor. 2:6–12).

Biblical *inspiration* means that the Holy Spirit supernaturally controlled and guided the human authors of the biblical books so that they wrote precisely what God wanted said. As the human authors wrote from the background of their own experiences using their minds and individual writing styles, they “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). God's authorship of Scripture is not limited to passages where He is the direct speaker or dictated the contents. “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Even the choice of individual words was divinely controlled so that the terms used would convey the right meaning.

Biblical *infallibility* refers to the effectiveness of God's Word in achieving God's intended purposes (Isa. 55:11). God so works through the biblical message that His intentions are accomplished.

Biblical *inerrancy* is a technical phrase for the accuracy of the biblical message. It affirms that what the Bible teaches on any subject it addresses is true. Properly understood, the message of the Bible gives correct information (Heb. 2:1–4).

Ultimately the authority of God's Word focuses on personal accountability. God enforces His message (Heb. 2:1–4). Growing spiritually requires responding to the biblical message with undivided attention, humble submission, and unqualified obedience (James 1:19–22).

The Unity of God's Word

Although the Bible contains 66 different books written over a period of approximately 1500 years, it holds together as the ongoing story of God's redemptive program in the world. The Old Testament focuses primarily on God's dealing with His people Israel. The New Testament continues the story with the founding of the church, a group composed of believers in Jesus from every nation. God has not forgotten His promises to Israel. His blessing focused on the church after Pentecost to show the breadth of His mercy. A continuity of promise and fulfillment links the two Testaments (Matt. 5:17). The future age of spiritual blessing, predicted by the prophets, began with the ministry of Jesus (Luke 4:16–21). Even the Gentile outreach of the church is the achievement of God's initial promise to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3 with Gal. 3:8).

Consequently, believers are biblical Christians, not just New Testament Christians. Insights for spiritual growth and Christian living come from the whole Bible (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6–11). God's supernatural control insures a coherent, non-contradictory biblical message.

The Clarity of God's Word

One does not have to be a seminary professor, or even a pastor, to know what the Bible means. Scripture was not written to confuse or conceal, but to clearly communicate God's message. God's truth was told in languages spoken in everyday life. “Setting forth the truth plainly” (2 Cor. 4:2) was a conscious objective of Paul's ministry. Except for a few obvious exceptions, biblical authors wrote to be understood.

The Bible as a Catalyst for Growth

The Bible uses several picture words from everyday life to show the great variety of ways in which God's Word helps the believer to grow. As seed, God's Word is the source of growth (Matt. 13:1–26). Young Christians grow spiritually because they are well nourished by the food God's Word provides (1 Pet. 2:2). Using the Bible as a mirror enables believers to evaluate the consistency of their Christian living (James 1:22–25). When Satan attacks God's people, God's Word serves as "the sword of the Spirit," that offensive weapon which defeats the enemy (Eph. 6:17). Like light illuminating a dark path, biblical principles provide guidance in daily decision making (Ps. 119:105). God's Word is a tremendous resource for Christian growth and living.

One of the most important purposes of the Word of God is explained in Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." When this verse is examined within the context of the previous two chapters, it clearly indicates that God's Word keeps believers from getting a hard heart. Reflective study of God's Word keeps the Christian's heart moldable and responsive to God's voice. A soft heart provides the richest soil for the seed of God's Word to grow.

The Bible as a Ministry Training Manual

After declaring the divine inspiration of Scripture, Paul makes a surprisingly bold statement in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. He says that all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible must be our foundational Truth for learning how to grow and minister. Other resources that aid the process of growing and reaching out to others must always be tested against the foundational principles of Scripture.

Principles for Studying the Bible

Knowing how valuable God's Word is for spiritual growth, believers should read the Bible with intense personal interest. After all, the ultimate purpose of studying Scripture is to relate biblical truth to daily living. Followers of Christ are obligated to not just study the Word but to obey it (James 1:22).

It is grossly inaccurate to try to apply a passage of Scripture directly to our lives today without accurately studying what it meant within its original historical and cultural context.

By following these three steps of Bible study, we can be confident we are accurately handling God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Application

Step 1—Observation

Observation focuses on what the passage says. At this step the reader watches for all the important facts in the paragraph. Someone has well said, "If you look for nothing, you will find it every time." Most important information will be discovered by looking for the five "W"s and an "H" used by journalists: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Observe all these details using a concordance or word study book to look up the meanings of words and note how they are used in other parts of the Bible.

Finally in the observation step, organize the main points of the text or story into a logical outline. This will help to identify the pattern of the thought processes of the author and the big idea of the text.

Step 2—Interpretation

Interpretation asks what the passage means. All the details previously observed in the passage are now analyzed to discover the point which the author was trying to make. One must study important words, significant grammatical relationships, and relevant background information using Bible dictionaries and commentaries to find their precise meanings. The correct understanding of the paragraph adequately accounts for all of these facts. If some information does not fit naturally with the explanation of the passage, the interpretation needs revision.

Hermeneutics is the science of determining the correct rules to follow when interpreting the Bible. Examine how the people used language to communicate ideas. The main idea of most passages is clear from a simple reading of the text. Others require careful thought to get to the author's point (2 Pet. 3:16). It is easy to twist Scripture to make it support our own biases. Most cults are based on misinterpreted biblical passages. Carefully study, using correct rules, to avoid distorting God's Word (2 Cor. 4:2).

The Bible was originally written in foreign languages to people living a long time ago, in another part of the world with a different culture. A study process for God's Word is more necessary now than it was for the original recipients in biblical times. The following rules of hermeneutics help us overcome barriers to understanding.

Reading for the main idea of the paragraph

Bible reading should seek to discover the main point of each paragraph. Paragraphs, not verses, are the focus of good reading. Each paragraph consists of several sentences on the same subject. The main idea of the paragraph is the central theme that holds the verses together. Having identified this main idea, the reader is able to determine how each sentence helps the author make his point. Stating the main idea of the paragraph in one concise sentence may be hard at first; but it gets easier with practice.

Modern verse divisions added in A.D. 1560 are both a blessing and a curse. Without them, it would be next to impossible to find a specific passage. But with them, people treat each verse as an independent unit of thought. Trying to understand a verse apart from its paragraph makes it easy to insert one's own ideas in error. What the author meant by a verse is clear only when it is explained consistently with the main idea of its paragraph. A wise principle of Bible study warns: the shorter the passage interpreted, the greater the danger of error.

Identify the author's literary style

Whenever you hear someone complain about a speaker by saying, "Did he ever dig himself into a hole!" your first impulse is not to look for a ladder to help him get out. The word "hole" in this sense does not mean a pit in the ground. It is a way of saying his excessive argument was inconsistent. Similarly, biblical authors often used figures of speech. The historical books and New Testament epistles were written in a fairly direct style. Old Testament prophets often used poetry, like those who composed psalms and proverbial sayings. Jesus frequently taught in parables which are figurative stories, illustrating deep truths or abstract concepts. Each literary style uses language in a special way. Readers must understand every passage according to its distinct literary style.

Consider the flow of the biblical content

In normal conversation, we understand words and sentences according to their context. Thoughts are expressed by a series of related ideas. Accurate Bible reading requires understanding what is written according to the author's train of thought. Specific phrases and sentences must be understood in a way consistent with the author's main idea. For example, the promise of wisdom in James 1:5 does not guarantee risk-free decision making through prayer. Earlier in the paragraph, James tells believers to respond with joy to hardships in life because endurance of difficult experiences develops spiritual maturity. Here the promised wisdom provides insight on how to cope during the hard experience.

Understand the meaning of key words

Words express ideas; but every word can have several different meanings. The statement, "That was the largest trunk I had ever seen" can mean more than one thing. Does "the trunk" refer to a tree, car, elephant, suitcase, or clothing? Normally, the other ideas mentioned in the context automatically make clear which meaning the author had in mind. Similarly, when people read the Bible from a good modern language translation, the meaning of most words will be clear. Important words or unclear terms need to be researched. Often shades of a word's meaning are difficult for a translation to suggest but add much insight to the author's intent. Carefully select the best meaning for each word in light of the words actually used by the author. For example, students often inappropriately claim the promise of "wisdom" in James 1:5 when they take tests. What they need is "knowledge," not "wisdom." Quoting this verse is no substitute for study.

Follow the force of the grammar

Normally people communicate with a series of words. One-word sentences are rare. The way words are arranged in a sentence affects their meaning as much as the choice of the words. To say "The man hit the ball" is quite different from "The ball hit the man." The reader must pay close attention to grammatical forms used to communicate the author's point.

When James commands his readers to "consider it pure joy" (James 1:2) when they experience different kinds of adversity, he is not suggesting they convince themselves the situation is not so bad. Rather, by beginning verse 3 with the word "because," James shows the reason why believers are to respond to adversity with joy; to know the trying of their faith produces perseverance, a much needed spiritual quality.

View from historical perspective

Reading the Bible is like reading someone else's mail. To understand God's message to another continent, an earlier century, and a different culture, the reader needs to know as much as possible about circumstances. The more readers mentally place themselves in the situation of the original audience, the better they are able to know the intended meaning and its significance for today.

Integrate with other biblical teaching on the subject

The Bible does not say all it has to say about a subject in any one passage. Information learned in one passage should be understood in conjunction with other key verses on the same subject. Basing an action on only one verse is like running with only one shoe on.

Step 3—Application

Application determines the relevance of the message for God's people living today. The whole Bible is God's Word; however, there are some cultural things God does not necessarily expect believers to practice today. Four specific guidelines help the believer determine what is valid for today:

- First, biblical statements that are universal in scope have timeless relevance. These will be expressed in general terms as true for all believers. Conversely, commands given to an individual in some specific situation usually apply only to that person. Universals will be based on Christian truth rather than cultural factors. Sometimes doctrine requires a certain quality of response and the local culture will determine the specific physical expression.
- Second, promises that are conditional only apply when the condition is met.
- Third, guidelines changed by later revelation no longer apply. The dietary and sacrificial regulations of the Old Testament have been removed by the finished work of Christ.
- Fourth, biblical examples are relevant to the extent they are approved or censured by the biblical authors. Just because an act is recorded in the Bible does not make the act right.

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Summary

The main ingredient for spiritual growth is a steady diet of God's Word. The steps in studying the Bible accurately include observation, interpretation, and application. By following proper hermeneutical principles under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we can be confident that we are getting our direction from God rather than from our own imagination. Our goal should go beyond just *doing* Bible study to actually feasting on God's Word daily and applying it to our lives.

For Further Discussion

1. What evidence is there that the Bible claims to be God's Word?
2. Discuss how biblical revelation, inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy differ from each other. Why are they important?
3. Explain why the unity of the Bible is so surprising. Describe what holds the message of the Bible together.
4. Why are rules necessary for Bible study?

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