

Don Hargrove
Faith Bible Church
Tuesday October 15, 2013
<http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>

Personal Study of the Bible-34 (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4)

I have been noting some fundamental principles on personal Bible study with each lesson before actually guiding you into a personal study of the Bible. We have been looking at 5 modern myths regarding Bible study. The fifth one is that “*anyone can understand the Bible—any way he wants.*” This reminds me of the story of a woman who walked into her pastor’s office and announced, “I’m leaving my husband to live with my lover.” The pastor asked what led her to that decision. The woman confidently proclaimed, “Ephesians 4:24 says we are supposed to ‘put on the new man.’” The reason we laugh at this is because we know her interpretation is wrong. But how do we know that? What if you knew absolutely nothing about the Bible or God? How could you know that her interpretation was wrong? You couldn’t! Your interpretation is based on your understanding of the Word of God—which is largely determined by very deep philosophical commitments that you have already made about the nature of reality, God, and the Word of God, which you may or may not even be consciously aware of, but more on these faith commitments to naturalism and fideism later.

While we laugh at the above anecdote, many Christians actually believe that a passage can be read in many *different* ways. I am not talking about the inexhaustible nature of the Word in *application*. I am speaking of modern subjectivity about what the text actually says and means in distinction to the countless applications. What drives these believers is their subjective and existential horizons. In other words, what is important about a passage is the experience they get from a passage. Since everyone’s experience is different, the thinking goes, it is OK for believers to get different meanings out of the passage—after all, “*the only thing that matters is what it means to you.*” This type of thinking is not only destructive to a believer’s spiritual life, it actually destroys mental ability to learn God’s Word, and thus God. These believers have become *psychological* or *existential* believers. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not just among the liberals and charismatics, to some extent it also exists among Bible-believers and even some “doctrinal” believers, whose entire focus is on personal application of the Word to personal problems. While it is perfectly normal to really enjoy certain passages that touch on existential issues, it is pathological for any believer to be taught the Bible and not get a thing out of it except personal existential issues. This is a relatively new phenomenon in Church history and it has resulted in many maladies among believers.

A psychologically/existentially oriented believer is so into their own psychological orbit that they have lost the ability to resonate or learn the objective Word of God. These types of believers could listen to hundreds or thousands of hours of good verse-by-verse Bible teaching, but the only things that they hear and remember, that would resonate with them, would be in relation to personal problems (“psychology”). If you asked them what that book was about, the objective content apart from any application that the pastor taught them, they often would not have a clue. They love how God is going to get them through yet another test, how to handle the problems of life, but truths about the nature of God or reality does not suit their fancy. They are all looking for some higher life magic principle that is going to get them to the next breakthrough—all the while remaining ignorant of what God’s Word actually says. Even after decades and decades of being under excellent teaching, they are very frank about their inability

to read the Bible for themselves. They remain biblically illiterate. Obviously, something here is terribly wrong.

Pastors are given to believers to help them understand the Bible and the reality of all that it touches upon. Pastors were never designed to replace the Bible. I am not being hyperbolic when I say that if you are not reading your Bible regularly, then you do not have a balanced view of the Christian life. How could you? Let me put it another way: if *all* you do is listen to tapes, I can guarantee you that you do not have a balanced view of God and His plan—no matter how long you have been a Christian. Nothing can replace the daily reading of the Word. Without it you will be unbalanced in regard to the Christian life because your view of the overall Christian life will be *solely* based on what the pastor is teaching and emphasizing. The pastor is right to emphasize certain things, but your whole view of the Christian life is not to be restricted to what he is stressing. You need to have the overall framework of the Word of God in your soul. By understanding the Bible, then when you listen to a pastor you will be able to see the reason for the emphasis, but not at the *expense* of other truths that are vital to the spiritual life. Every pastor is going to have a different emphasis according to what he sees as the spiritual needs for his congregation. Even if he is accurate in assessment and teaching, unless you read the Word yourself in addition to learning from the pastor your view of Christianity will be jaded. You must spend personal time in the Word. If you do this, then your understanding of his teaching will be enhanced. Say, for example, you listen to your pastor teach on the importance of love as a virtue. Consider the difference it is going to make against a background that is formed by a personal reading and understanding of love gained only by regular reading of the Word. Don't misunderstand my point: you need to be under a pastor for in-depth study. *However, this depth and emphasis was never designed to replace a personal understanding of the Bible.* One reason you do need a pastor is because as you advance from the basic conceptual level of understanding the Bible, you will need help filling in details and answering questions. Apart from some expertise, you will end up filling in details with secular information and end up with a messed up view of Christianity. For example, if you spend time reading your Bible, you will, on a basic conceptual level, see the importance of loving fellow believers. You will come to see how important this is to God. You will intuitively know something about love on a basic level. However, when you start filling in the details of that love, you will likely fill in the details with worldly views of love. However, the expertise from a pastor who understands philosophical psychology, the Word of God, and the spiritual life can help fill in the details correctly (one must understand all 3 to accurately understand love).

I think it is safe to say that Bible study is not the strong suite of Christians today. In fact, biblical illiteracy seems to be at an all-time high, even among Bible-believers. Our lifestyles do not accommodate any serious time for Bible study. And most Christians would say they do not really know how to read and study the Bible by themselves. The brunt of the blame for this clearly lies at the feet of pastors who are supposed to teach them—*mea culpa!* Personal study of the Bible is not to be confused with doing word studies, listening to different teachers, or even using Bible commentaries. Personal Bible study is simply sitting down and spending time *reading* the Word of God over and over again. Again, nothing can replace this for a vibrant and balanced spiritual life.

Most Christians throughout our country simply do not seem to want to do any serious Bible study. Others who really desire to understand their bibles have been told that they cannot understand it because they do not know the original languages. This is not only false, it has horrendous consequences. The truth is that any rational believer can understand the Word on a

basic conceptual level. If you can read this, then you can read and understand the Word of God (in fact, the Bible is easier because, for one thing, it does not contain typos). One of the most common examples often used to show the *necessity* of biblical languages to understand the Bible is in the Mosaic Law where we have an erroneous translation “thou shalt not kill.” This is supposed to prove that one needs to know the original languages otherwise one could be against war or capital punishment. However, all one has to do is keep reading the Pentateuch *in the English* and see that the Mosaic Law, in fact, codified not only capital punishment for many offense, but also rules for warfare. God’s people were commanded to execute criminals and exterminate the enemy in warfare. So it is not true that one might think that the Bible prohibits all killing if one does not the original. It is evidently not true based on what the rest of the Word teaches. While it is critical that a pastor understands the original languages and metaphysics (killing vs. murder are metaphysical concepts, not just physical acts of ending a life), I have yet to find one case where the difference in interpretation based on a faulty translation could not be mollified by knowing other passages in the Word of God in the English. The difficult passages are almost always resolved by metaphysical principles, not exegetical ones.

Back to our personal Bible study. My last lesson was for you to spend a couple of days reading 2 Thessalonians so you can become familiar with its tone and the general content. 2 Thessalonians is Paul’s shortest epistle (3 chapters, 47 verses, 1042 words). You should have noted differences and similarities in tone and content from your readings of 1 Thessalonians. I would like for you note these comparisons by reading and reflecting on the following passages:

- 1 Thess. 4:13-18 with 2 Thess. 1:6-10: 1 Thessalonians deals with Christ’s coming for Christians *in the air* (Rapture) whereas 2 Thessalonians deals with Christ coming to the earth with his saints (2nd Advent).
- 1 Thess. 1:10, 2:19; 3:13; 4:15 and 2 Thess. 2:3-4. 1 Thessalonians presents the coming of Christ whereas 2 Thessalonians sets the stage for the coming of the Anti-Christ.
- 1 Thess. 4:18 and 2 Thess. 1:7-9: Consider the different tone in the two letters as 1 Thessalonians emphasizes the Day of Christ [Rapture] and comfort whereas 2 Thessalonians emphasizes the Day of the Lord [Tribulation] and wrath.
- 1 Thess. 1:3, 1:8; 2:19; 3:2; 3:5-7, 10, 12; 4:9; 5:8, 13; with 2 Thess. 1:3-4, 11; 2:10, 13, 16; 3:5: consider the importance of the 3 critical Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4: “*your faith is greatly enlarged*” and “*love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater*” and “*we speak proudly of you . . . for your perseverance and faith in the midst of your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.*” Note the critical virtues in which the Thessalonians were excelling. Can you say this about yourself? Is your faith in God and the things of God becoming larger and larger? Is your love for fellow believers growing greater and greater over time? What about your faith and patience in the midst of your trials and tribulations? Every believer should be growing in these virtues as they advance in the life. Your faith in the things of God and love for fellow believers should be much greater than it was last year. If not, then you need to check your priorities and see what it is that is hindering your growth.

For this generation, there are three huge problem areas: 1) Mammon, that is a love for the world and the things of the world more than God and the things of God (read Matt. 6:24; 1 John 2:15); 2) False philosophical foundations, where a believer has already made many faith commitments to naturalism and thus possesses a mindset of practical deism, which makes it extremely difficult for him to grow and thrive in the Christian faith. Apart from “faith growing exceedingly” the believer degenerates into fideism or skepticism, generally depending upon his psychological makeup. Apart from a growing and thriving faith, the believer will not love Bible doctrine, let alone the Bible—at least apart from “pragmatic” use of it; and 3) Spiritual laziness, where instead of an enthusiastic and *active* love for learning about Total Truth, the believer has a lukewarm attitude, an indolence with regard to the spiritual life and the Word of God. It is not like the Lord did not warn us about our latter Laodecian times. This evil has grown to such an extent that most believers do not even realize how great an evil it is to be lazy and complacent about growth in the spiritual life. Unfortunately, these believers will often not listen to warnings from the Word or the pastor. Instead of thanking God for the correction, instead of being thankful for the reminder to get back on track, the believer will often attack the messenger. It is not like this believer has forsaken God. After all, he still needs God to take care of problems that get in the way of attaining more of the kosmos. The problem is lack of desire as a first priority in attaining more of God. It is little wonder that this believer is not a believer whose “faith is greatly enlarged” year after year or that his “love toward one is growing even greater” (read 2 Thess. 1:3 again). Instead, this believer is, year by year, becoming more distant from God and fellow believers as his love and value for the kosmos and the things of the kosmos continually vacate love and enthusiasm for God, the things of God, and the people of God. At this point, no one can correct him. It will take nothing less than God Himself as Ultimate Being, Esse, to detach him from Mr. Mammon and his *daily* dismissive attitude toward the Bible, fellowship, God, the plan of God, and fellow believers. Only God Himself can wake up such a “sleepy” believer.

In ‘Ehyeh,

Pastor Don Hargrove