

STEP 1

**Step 1: Study the Passage – *humble, careful listening***

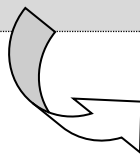
**1. Introduction**

**1.1. Expository preaching = preaching what the text says**

- Titus demands to be preached in an expository way – Titus 2;1, 15; 3:1, 8
- To preach what the text says we need to listen carefully to what it says
- Isaiah 66:2
- Perhaps things are changing in modern Africa but in older times, when you were in the village and the *mzee* was speaking and telling stories or giving instructions, we, the young people, would be quiet and listen. You wouldn't dream of interrupting and saying, "That's enough old man, now I can speak"! You would listen carefully until he has finished. You wouldn't take a word or phrase he said and go and quote it out of context. You wouldn't try to use his words for your own means or as an opportunity for you to speak all you know. How much more reverence should we have as we open the Bible and hear the words of the Creator?
- Our posture is to be as Mary listening at the feet of Jesus. In practice this means we will have to **read, read, read again** – maybe 30 times – until we finally hear what the text is really saying, not what I think it says or what I want it to mean.

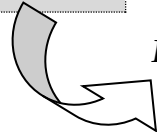
**1.2. Three questions** are fundamental for us to answer if we are to understand the passage of God's word properly:

Q. *What does the Bible passage say?*



*Content of the passage*

Q. *Why does the Bible passage say it here?*



*Purpose of the passage*

Q. *How does the Bible passage say it?*



*Character of the passage*

## 2. Studying the Bible passage

We don't want to skim over the passage and just get a rough idea. We should approach the passage as those who are mining for the costliest of stones or jewels. All the insights that God gives us into the biblical passage are gold dust.

One of the most crucial skills required for reading the Bible is **the ability to develop an eye for the details**. Most of us read the Bible in too much of a rush and miss some of details in the passage.

**The meaning of the Bible is bound up in the details of every sentence.** Therefore we want to *see* as much as possible, to *observe* as many of the details as we can!

**Action Step:** Read the Bible passage three times, slowly, prayerfully and meditatively.

**Helpful Hint:** At this stage try to stop yourself from *interpreting* or *applying* the passage – these things are important but at this stage we are just interested in *observing* the words closely.

"What does the passage say?"

### 2.1. CONTENT of the passage

This 'What?' question is the most important. So how do we develop our ability to be serious readers of the biblical passage? There are no short cuts that we can take if we are to see the details of a passage. **We must read the passage over and over again**, noting down the details that we observe as we read.

There are certain **things to look for in sentences**:<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. *Repeated Words / Phrases*

Read Titus 2 and keep an eye out for words or phrases or ideas that are used more than once in the sentence you are looking at. Words or phrases are often repeated for emphasis and start to guide you towards the Big Idea.

#### 2. *Big Bible words and Difficult Bible words*

Read Titus 2 and look for the words in this passage that you have not used recently in an SMS.

<sup>1</sup> These categories have been adapted from J. Scott Duvall & J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, pp. 30-39.

There are long words or unfamiliar words or technical Bible words. With the Bible words (e.g. redemption, salvation) we will probably not be helped by turning to a secular dictionary. The Bible uses certain words in certain ways. These are often the Bible's 'technical' terms and names, or what we might call 'big Bible words.' Often these words are misunderstood outside and even within the church – e.g. 'saved' understood as loud or committed or having had a conversion experience; or 'grace' is understood as a performance enhancing drug. We need to see how the Bible uses these words and especially how they are used in our passage (look at the sentences before and after) and in the letter as a whole. E.g. saved = act of God (Titus 3:5) and grace is a way of talking about the historic saving events of Christ's incarnation, atoning suffering and resurrection (Titus 2:11).

### 3. *Quotations / Allusions*

Be aware when the sentence refers to passages / sentences / ideas from elsewhere in the Bible. These will either be **quoted** or just **alluded to** (referred to without quoting) by the writer in order to explain or support what is being said.

- *Example: Titus 14 -- Exodus*

**Helpful Hint:** It is always good to look up the original context of an OT quotation or allusion. This is just in case the later writer wants us to think about not only the few words that he has copied out but the whole of the section that the quote was taken from.

### 4. *Contrasts and Comparisons*

Look out for when words or phrases are set in opposition to each other and compared so as to show their *differences*. E.g. Proverbs 15:1. Read Titus 2 and look for the comparisons and contrasts.

### 5. *Lists*

- How many groups are addressed in Titus 2?
- Looking at a list within a verse, what are the differences and what are the similarities between the items?

## 6. *Connecting words, logic words and Cause & Effect*

E.g. for, that, therefore, because...

Read Titus 2 and look for the main connectors which introduce a major shift or change of direction

Sometimes these connecting words introduce a comparison (But, However), sometimes a similarity (Likewise). Most importantly sometimes you will notice that biblical writers will give a *reason* (or cause) and then tell you the *result* (or effect) of that reason.

- *Example: Titus 2:11-14 is the reason and means of 2:2-10*

In Paul's letters his sentences can be very long and involved with lots of sub-clauses. In John's letters he often seems to go round and round in circles covering the same themes in slightly different ways from different directions. In Peter's letters he can seem to jump quickly from one thing to another. In all their letters there is a huge amount of theology packed into relatively few words. It can be very helpful to write out the sentences again with different thoughts on different lines, putting similar things right underneath each other and underlining the key logic words. It doesn't really matter how you do it. Whether you use arrows or different colours or whatever but the key thing is to see the bits of a sentence and how they connect together – what is the logic of the argument? This can be quite hard work but the fire is in the logic. Just one "but" can make the difference between heaven and hell (e.g. Rom. 3:21). Noticing one "therefore" can make the difference between moralism and gospel preaching (e.g. Rom. 12:1).

E.g. Philippians 3:8-11:

Indeed I count everything a loss  
because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord  
    because of whom I have lost all things  
        and consider them rubbish  
            in order that I may gain Christ  
                that is, be found in him  
                    not having a righteousness of my own  
                                    of the Law  
                    but that which is through faith in Christ Jesus  
                            the righteousness of God  
                                    based on faith  
                that I may know him  
                    the power of his resurrection  
                    and participation in his sufferings  
                    being conformed to his death  
                    if somehow I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

## 7. Pronouns (Who?)

Make a note of the words used to refer to people or places. Then ask, 'to whom or to what is the word referring?'

### Helpful hints

- Some pronouns refer to a subject: *I, you, he, she, it, we, and they*.
- Some pronouns demonstrate someone or something being singled out for attention. E.g. 'This man', 'that girl', 'these beans', 'which car'
- Some pronouns indicate possession – who or what belongs to whom: *my, your, his, her, our, their; who, whom, whose*.

- Example: Read through Titus 2 and notice the shifts from you → them → you → them → us → you

## 8. Describing Words

Whenever a writer uses an *extra* word that adds meaning to a verb (action word) or a noun (naming word) by describing it further, you should take *extra* note. In particular there are few in Paul's letters so when he uses one then it is important.

- Example: Titus 2:13
- Example: 1 Peter 2:4-6

## 9. Verbs – Action Words

Verbs are **really important** when observing sentences because they indicate where the *action* is going on. Often the key verb in a passage<sup>2</sup> will lead you to the force/thrust of the passage and so of your sermon. As you observe these kinds of words try to identify:

- When is the action happening? (*Past, Present or future*)
- Who/What is *doing* the action?
- Who/What is the *object* of the action?

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<sup>2</sup> You may well be able to see the key verb by doing the sentence outlining process discussed in point 6 above.

- *Example: Titus 3:5*

**ACTION STEP** Open your Bible at *Titus 2:11-14*

As you read through the passage once more, this time take a pen and note down your observations on...

- repeated words
- big words
- contrasts
- connecting logic
- pronouns/who
- verbs

*Helpful Hint:* You may wish to do this verse by verse on a separate piece of paper to leave room for you to write down your comments & observations.

## 2.2. CONTEXT of the Bible passage

*"Why does the passage say it here"*

If we tore all the pages out of our Bibles and threw them up in the air and then gathered them up anyhow, would it matter?

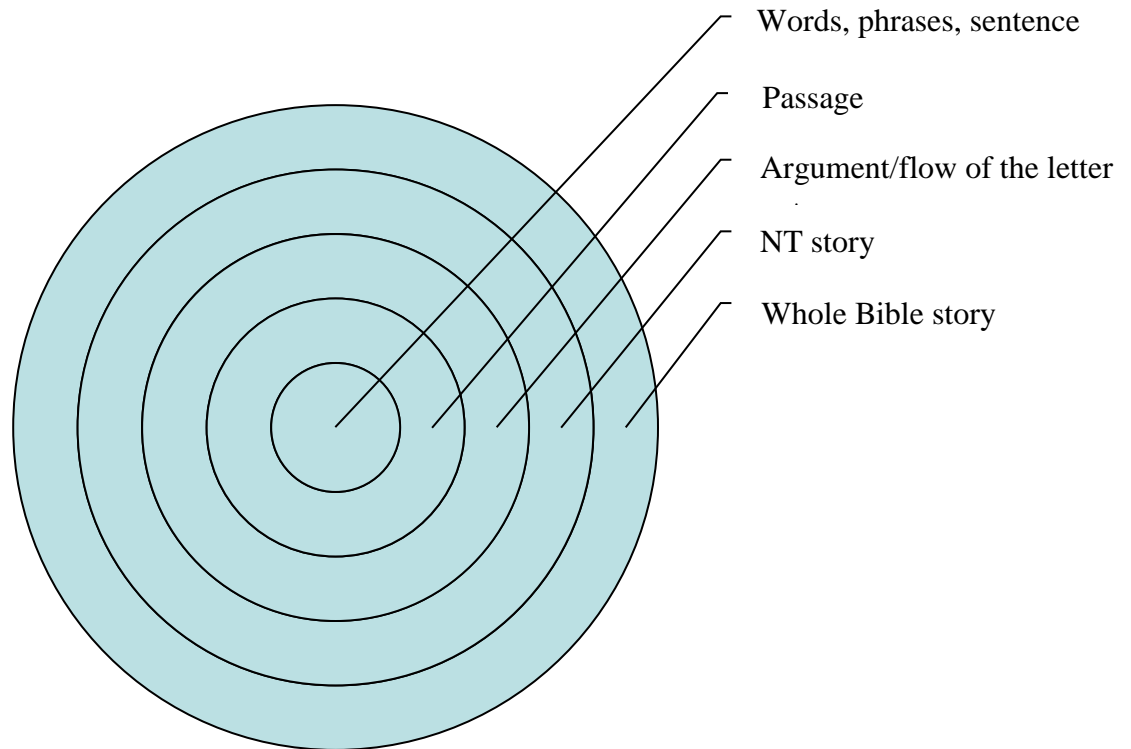
Titus 2:1 – "But..." – begs to be put in context – What is before it?

It really just comes back to listening – humble, careful listening. In life we almost always understand things in context – reading letters or emails, watching TV – but when it comes to the Bible we strangely suspend that normal instinct and spiritualise the Bible into a disjointed collection of magic saying.

We need to listen carefully to the whole story...

*"What comes before and after this passage?"*

Pay attention to the *surrounding context* of your passage in the rest of the paragraph, section, chapter, book, and whole Bible. Thinking about a passage in this way will help you interpret the meaning of words with greater understanding of, a) the author's overall message and, b) the significance that the passage has as it sits on the rest of the Bible.



*Q. What happens when we ignore the surrounding context?*

*Q. Do we believe that the Bible means one thing or different things to different people?*

If you pick a verse and strip away the context you can make it mean almost anything, but the more context you have around it the clearer and more fixed its meaning becomes.

Perhaps we prefer to think of the Bible meaning different things to different people – perhaps because we want to be tolerant and avoid dogmatism and pride, perhaps because of our experience of discussions between Christian friends of different denominations where we have had to ‘agree to disagree’. And certainly there are places in Scripture that are hard to understand and where there has been controversy between Bible-believing Christians and we need to be humble. But if we accept the position that there is no right answer and the Bible can mean various contradictory things then we have given away too much ground. How then can we say that Jehovah’s Witnesses are wrong in their reading of the Bible? How can we say that homosexual activity is wrong? How can we say that God is communicating to us at all?

There may be different *levels* of meaning and different *applications* but **the meaning of the text itself is fixed**, it is not subjective or changeable over time. God is saying something. He is not confused and he is not an unclear communicator. Often we think a text is fluid and open to subjective interpretation because of lack of context. Context fixes the meaning.

- *Example: Romans 8:37*
- *Example: Hebrews 11:1*

### 2.3. CHARACTER of the Bible passage

"**How** does the passage say it?"

#### a) *Type of Writing*

Each type of Bible writing should be read & understood on its own terms – story, poetry, law etc. With NT letters we are looking at real letters written by real people to real people in real times and places. We must remember that these letters are part of a conversation and part of the story of the early church mission.

We also need to be aware that there is a **flow** to each letter. The letters are usually making an argument which moves through different stages (e.g. I give thanks that X but there is a problem with Y and the solution is Z). We need to particularly pay attention to the logical connections between the sections.

Within the letter there may be:

- Explanation
- Exhortation
- Prayer
- Promise

*Which of these 4 do we have in 3 John 2?*

#### b) *Tone & Feel of the Passage*

Note down any *emotional* terms that you come across, and any phrases that indicate the *feeling* with which the author is saying what he is saying. The overall 'tone' or 'feel' of the passage might be one of: urging, encouraging, rebuking, anger, instructing, rejoicing, despairing, longing, hopeful, etc.

- *Example: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13*



- *Example: 2 Cor. 11:2*
- *Example: Galatians 1:6; 4:12-20*
- *Example: Phil. 1:3-5*

In the case of Titus there is not much clear, explicit emotion but maybe that itself shows the closeness of the relationship between Paul and Titus. Paul doesn't have to spend lots of time persuading and expressing his emotion to Titus – he just gets on with instructing his trusted fellow worker. Paul is his 'father' (Titus 1:4) so he can just tell him what to do.

➔ **This tone and emotion should flow into the way we deliver the sermon.**

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## 2.4. UNDERSTANDING the Bible passage

*"What does the passage mean?"*

Once you have observed as many of the details as possible, the next stage is to begin seeking meaning from the detail of what you have seen in the passage. Again the key thing is to **read and read and read again** until I understand what it says.

- *Asking Questions*

Can I write out each verse in my own words?

Are there words or ideas I still don't understand?

How do the details of the passage help us understand what the writer means?

### **Let Scripture interpret Scripture!**

That is to say, we must seek to understand the Bible the way it understands itself. This means answering questions as best we can from within the surrounding biblical context to the passage we are studying.

◦ *Testing our understanding*

Here are three helpful tests to help us guard against *misinterpreting*, *under-*interpreting, or *over-*interpreting what God has revealed<sup>3</sup> as we observe a passage.

- *Can your understanding be stated simply from the passage? As Paul in Acts 17 we want to be reasoning from the Scriptures so that what we say can be checked against the Scriptures.*
  
- *Does your understanding fit with everything else the writer is saying in passage? Is your understanding consistent with what else the writer is saying in Bible book? If Paul and Jesus were standing beside you in the pulpit would they agree with the way you are understanding and explaining what they had written?*
  
- *Can you explain this passage to a 5 year-old?*

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Now pray about what God has shown you in the Bible and for the people you will teach!  
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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes this is described as 'staying on the line'. Not going above or below.