

BIBLE STUDY

THE EIGHT STEPS OF BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

DIGGING DEEPER

1 FIND A QUIET PLACE

Find a comfortable place where you are least likely to be distracted or disturbed. Gather a Pen, Notebook, Bible, Bible Dictionary, Concordance, Lectionary Resource, and a Tablet or Computer (if desired). A table or a desk will allow you to spread out while keeping all of your books and other resources ready at your fingertips. Spend a few moments to quiet yourself down. Close your eyes and open yourself to God's presence. A candle is a helpful reminder of God's presence as well as God's call for you to be a light to the world. As you light a candle, offer your time and your attention to God in prayer.

2 SELECT A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE

Consult the Revised Common Lectionary to see which texts might be assigned for the coming Sunday and determine which text you intend to study more thoroughly. Once selected, make sure you know where the text begins and ends. Examine what comes before and what comes after in order to see whether you agree with the breaks proposed by the Lectionary. ↗

3 READ FOR BASIC UNDERSTANDING

Read through the scripture passage carefully and attentively to make sure that you have a straightforward understanding of the text. If you come across any unfamiliar terms, look them up in the glossary at the back of your Bible or in a good Bible Dictionary.

Pay attention to any footnotes in the text. These will usually tell you where the interpreters had to make difficult decisions. Typically a word or phrase can have a variety of meanings and interpreters need to use their best judgment to determine which meaning is intended by the author. Some footnotes will point to the fact that there is a disagreement among ancient manuscripts as to what a verse actually says. Sometimes different manuscripts will include extra words or phrases and sometimes words or phrases will be missing in other ancient manuscripts. Make note of any important differences in your notes.

Consider asking some basic questions of the text—the who, what, where, when, why, and how questions. Who is involved—what people or groups? What ↘

“The Bible is not primarily a book of information, it is story. It is God’s story. It is our story. It’s the story that teaches us to love the right things, to dream the right things, to practice the right things.”

happens—what is the sequence of events? Where does this story take place and why might that be significant? When does this story take place and why might that be significant? Why does this story take place—what is the reason or purpose for this event? Consider writing some answers to these questions in your journal or notebook. Remember, you are not seeking to uncover any hidden meanings or delve into the theological implications of the text. You simply want to understand the text in its basic most straightforward meaning.

4 CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Investigate the literary context of the text. Skim through or read the surrounding passages. How do the passages that precede and follow inform what is happening in this text? Remember that the Bible is not primarily a book of information, it is story. How does this particular story or argument fit into the larger story or argument of the book you are studying?

EIGHT SIMPLE STEPS TO IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

- 1 FIND A QUIET PLACE
- 2 SELECT A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE
- 3 READ FOR BASIC UNDERSTANDING
- 4 CONSIDER THE CONTEXT
- 5 QUESTION THE TEXT
- 6 SEEK ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS
- 7 SUMMARIZE YOUR DISCOVERIES
- 8 CLOSE IN PRAYER

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Sometimes looking at your Study Bible's outline can be helpful (normally found in the Introduction to each book). Ask yourself: How does the context of this passage shape my understanding of the text?

Another part of investigating the context of the text is to understand this text within its larger Biblical context. Look for any cross-references listed in the notes of your Study Bible. Use the concordance to find where other passages of scripture might relate to this text or shed light on what is said.

Read not only the cross-referenced passages themselves, but always pay attention to their context. Sometimes biblical authors will quote a small portion of scripture, knowing that this will trigger people's memories of that quote's larger context or story. Sometimes it's not the quote, but a quote's context that enhances our understanding.

Also, when studying the gospels, look to see if this passage has a parallel in any of the other gospels. How did the other gospel writers tell this story differently? Sometimes the parallel story in another gospel can reveal differences (small or large) that can serve as interpretive clues.

5 QUESTION THE TEXT

Now wrestle with the text. Question the text. Challenge the text. Argue with it. Give yourself the freedom to ask the text anything. Don't worry about whether your questions are too basic or too difficult; theologically incorrect or irreverent. Bombard the text with every honest question you can think up. This is not the time for trying to find the answers. This is the time for questions.

Hold the text up in front of you, look at it from all angles, and ask it absolutely anything that you think is worth discovering, investigating or noticing. Write your questions down in your journal or notebook.

The purpose of asking so many questions of the text is to free ourselves from all of our previous assumptions so that the text is free to speak to us anew. Sometimes we see a word or a phrase in the text and we assume we know what it means based on what we've been taught in a sermon or some other location. And we impose our assumptions on the text rather than

listening to what the text actually says. Listen carefully to the text. Try to avoid letting your preconceived ideas define your interpretation of the text.

6 SEEK ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS

Now is the time to test what you have heard—to investigate the answers to your questions and try to determine what God is trying to say to you and the church through this text.

Take a look at your list of questions and determine

which questions are most significant or important. Then seek out answers to those questions. Use commentaries, Bible introductions, and scholarly websites (like what you find at www.enterthebible.com) to help you. The scholarly notes in your Study Bible can be helpful as well. The point of your seeking these answers is so that you can better know God and God's desires for

you, God's people, and all of God's creation.

7 SUMMARIZE YOUR DISCOVERIES

Having read commentaries and others study aids, try reading the passage one last time. Consider how your understanding has changed. What new and interesting discoveries did you make? Does this passage help you understand God in a new and interesting way? How does this passage challenge you or strengthen you as a disciple of Christ? How does the biblical story shape your desires and fears, hopes and actions? How is God calling you to respond to what you have learned or discovered? Write your answers in your notebook.

One fun and helpful way to think about summarizing a text is to imagine that a friend of yours missed the sermon on Sunday. Imagine that you see them at lunch and they say "Hey! I missed worship today. I heard that the gospel lesson was fascinating. What was it about? What did I miss?" How would you quickly and succinctly respond to your friend? Using only a sentence or two, write your answer in your journal or notebook.

8 CLOSE IN PRAYER

Close your time in prayer by thanking God for any new insights you have gained and asking God to help you embrace, proclaim and live out what you have learned.

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