



Dear Phil

STUDYING THE BIBLE

Dear Phil,
How can I study my Bible so I get something out of it?
 —Randy

Great question! How you study the Bible depends in part on why you are studying the Bible. You can study the Bible to learn its facts, its theology, or its history; or you can study it to understand its literary structure, and so on. I assume your question means that you want to see something that personally applies to your life.

But how you study the Bible also depends in part on why the Bible was written. God had many purposes for giving us His Word in written form, but one of the most important purposes was to reveal Himself to us (Heb. 1:1-3). In every book in the Bible God is teaching us something about Himself. Therefore, I recommend that you ask yourself a key question every time you read some portion of Scripture: *“What is God trying to teach me about Himself in this passage?”* This question will focus your thinking on perhaps the most important purpose of Scripture. (There are other pur-

poses for Scripture, but this is probably the best place to start.)

If you were to open a book and find, “Once upon a time, far, far away, lived...,” what kind of book would you think it was? A history book or a fairy tale book? If you open another book and read, “In chemistry we have a study of things round about us, not merely in regard to their outward appearance, but in learning about their composition,” would you assume that you had picked up science fiction or a science textbook? We all know that we wouldn’t read a chemistry textbook with the same expectations that we would read science fiction. Unfortunately, many Christians have not transferred this knowledge to their reading of the Bible.

The Bible contains 66 books, not just one. Since these books were not all written in the same genre, we should not read them all the same way. A basic list of the genres or types of literature in the Bible includes narrative history (Genesis), poetry (Psalms), wisdom (Ecclesiastes), prophecy (Isaiah), gospels (Matthew), personal letters (Philemon), treatise letters (1 John), and apocalyptic (Revelation). Each of these kinds of literature has its own characteristics as well as methods of communicating God’s truth to us. You do not study Proverbs the same way you do Romans; or if you try to, you’ll be rather frustrated! For this reason, the first step in studying your Bible is to identify the basic kind of literature you are reading.

Once you’ve identified the genre of a book of the Bible, then you need to understand how that genre communicates truth. Let’s look at OT poetry for a minute. English poetry is very different from Hebrew poetry. We like rhyme and meter. The Hebrews liked thought repetition with little or no rhyme and meter. This is why many of the verses in the Psalms are somewhat repetitious: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). If you expect Hebrew poetry to read and work like English poetry, you will be confused at times. The Psalms are inspired patterns for worship, and one of the best places in Scripture to spend time learning about God and how to relate to Him. If you haven’t read through the Psalms looking for what God is revealing about Himself in each one, you should. It is a richly rewarding study.

I have only started to scratch the surface of your question. If you would like to go deeper in this area there are several books I would recommend. If this is new to you, then start with Kay Arthur’s *How to Study Your Bible* (Harvest House Press) or Howard & William Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Moody Press).

Blessings,
 Philip ■

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