

How to Study the Bible

Is the Bible a mirror?

The Bible is not a mirror. It does not merely reflect back to us a clearer vision. If it was a mirror then it would reflect back things like “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better.” But it doesn’t.

Rather it is an opening to an entirely new world. A world that we could never imagine on our own. It shows us a world filled with rebellious, wholly sinful people who shake their fists at God. And that very same God walking among us not so as to convince Himself how bad we are and so deserve all of His wrath and punishment, but to become one of us so that He might die for us. This is a world where we have eternal mansions waiting for us and where angels and demons wage unseen battles for our souls.

We read in the Bible how the world began and how it is going to end, how the church began and how it is going to end. We also read who and what we truly are and what are choices in eternity are.

The Bible does not tell us what we are from a cultural or sociological perspective. It tells us what we are from God’s perspective. It does not tell us what God is as determined by a mystic or by a collective consensus. It is God Himself telling us what He is.

In this series we are going to learn how to study the Bible. God can speak to us personally, but He doesn’t do it (usually) with an audible voice. The main way that He communicates to us is through His word, the Bible. We, and millions of other people, have read some passage and every one of us gets the usual meaning out of it. But then one time you read that same passage and you are stopped in your tracks. It gives light to a personal situation, decision, or feeling. That issue that you’ve been struggling with is now clear. You now know what you need to do or how to feel. Or that cloud is lifted. That is God speaking to you.

Or a truth that you’ve known for many years but merely as a fact just now punches you in the chest and it becomes real in a way that you’ve never realized before. You’re almost shocked. You may get goosebumps. It’s like you’re in a dark room and feeling the furniture trying to figure out where you are when the light goes on and you realize that you’re in the Sistine Chapel.

Here’s a quiz. What man in the Bible is described as “blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil”? Job, in the very first verse of that book. That’s a pretty good description. I wish that’s how God would describe me. And yet after all of his trials what is part of the last thing that Job says in this book? “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You” (Job 42:5). At the beginning of the book, Job’s understanding of God was all knowledge; it was distant. It was “hearing of the ear.” But at the end of the book, it wasn’t just knowledge that he knew about; it was God right before him; God was intimate. It was “but now my eye sees You.” What happened in between? He contemplated the ways of God and heard from Him.

God wants to speak to you but you have to be listening. Proverbs 25:2 says, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.” God wants us to search out a matter but all too often we quickly read the words of a chapter or two, shut the Bible, and that’s that. We’ve fulfilled our obligation. God didn’t even have the time to say anything. We didn’t search; we didn’t study; we merely read.

But notice also what this verse in Proverbs says. When we search out (study) a matter it is a glory to us. We break out of this mundane world when we dig into God’s word and discover something new.

Let's stay in Job. In chapter 28 the first eleven verses talk about how hard it is to mine the Earth's treasures: gold, silver, copper, etc. Verse 3 and 4 says, "'Man puts an end to darkness, and to the farthest limit he searches out the rock in gloom and deep shadow. He sinks a shaft far from habitation.'" Mining is a tough job. It is considered the fourth most dangerous job in the world (1. Lumberjack, 2. Deep Sea Fishermen, 3. Bush Pilots). The average life expectancy of a miner is around 49 years.

But in verses 12 through 28 Job says that the search for wisdom is even harder. But, no, that doesn't mean that if you diligently study the Bible then your life expectancy will be less than 49 years. So don't worry about that. It's going to take work. But this class is going to give you the tools to dig better and pull those precious treasures not out of the ground but out of the Bible. And that will be a treasure worth more than gold.

Since we're liking the book of Job so much let's look at one more verse. Job 23:12 says, "I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food." We live in a time-sucking culture. Work sucks up our time. Activities suck up our time. Commuting sucks up our time. But when faced with a time dilemma what did Job choose? If he only had enough time to eat or to spend time with God there really was no dilemma. Time with God was the no-brainer choice. That is how much more crucial he felt his spiritual side was over his physical side. We should feel the same way. When we are without food we are hungry and weak. But when we are without God's word we are sinful. We don't forgive. We are easily angry. We lust. We are envious. We lose sight of what is really important. We don't set our minds on the things above (Colossians 3:2) but rather on the things below.

This class is going to try to make you Biblical carnivores. Hebrews 5:13-14, "For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

Here is something to chew on. Faith is not something that we need to sustain; faith is what sustains us. Our society is a pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality. In contrast, the Bible tells us that it is God who is raising us up. Now which do you trust to be more powerful, more loving, more wise? Reading the Bible increases our faith which, in turn, deepens our walk with God.

Here are a few terms related to Bible study that you'll probably only see once during this study and it is right here.

Hermeneutics [Greek *hermeneu(te)s* (interpreter).] Definition: The science of interpretation of a story or text, and the methods used in that science.

Exegesis [ek-si-jee-seez] [Greek *ex-* (out) + *hègeisthai* (to lead). Related to English 'seek'.] To analyze and interpret a text by thoroughly studying its content and all aspects of the text. You start with the text rather than any preconceived ideas and develop a thesis based on what the text is saying. So the text is leading you out to your conclusion.

Eisegesis [ahy-si-jee-seez] [< Greek *eis-* (into) + *hègeisthai* (to lead). (See 'exegesis'.)] An interpretation that expresses the reader's own ideas, bias, or the like, rather than the meaning of the text. You start with your own preconceived notions and then read those into the text.

In Exegesis we let the text determine the conclusions. In Eisegesis we read our already determined conclusions into the text. Of course, when studying the Bible we want to practice exegesis.

In this course we are going to learn how to study the Bible by using two very common events in the Gospels. These two events are juxtaposed and total fifteen verses. But we are going to get a lot out of them. Here is the Scripture.

Matthew 14:19-33

¹⁹ Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed *the food*, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples *gave them* to the crowds,

²⁰ and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.

²¹ There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children.

²² Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.

²³ After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

²⁴ But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea.

²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

²⁹ And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

³⁰ But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and *said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

³² When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.

³³ And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

Two great Biblical events. You've probably read these stories many times and may have even heard some sermons on them. Well over the course of the next few months we are going to use them to learn techniques to open up the entire Bible to us.

Ezekiel 37:3, "He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'" We want to make the Scriptures come alive.

This next statement is the key to why we read and study the Bible. We do not read the Bible to see how to fit God into our lives; rather, we read the Bible to see how we fit into God's plans.

If we read the Bible only in view of ourselves and what we need to do and what we need to think then we are just using the Bible to further our usual narcissist, self-centered way of thinking. Yes, we need to apply the Bible to our lives but ultimately the Bible is about God. God is the focus. God is the main theme. It is all about God.

In the book “The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship” the authors did a yearlong study on 2,500 Protestants. One of their conclusions was, “Statistically, the number one issue correlated to higher maturity scores was the discipline of daily Bible reading.”

Now realize that good Bible study takes time and effort. Remember in Job how it was compared to mining? To dig deep into the Bible is more than just reading and hoping that something magically pops out at you. You will need a quiet place where you can devote a good amount of focused time to study. It doesn’t matter if it is in early morning, late at night, over lunch, or some other time. But it should be free from distractions. It should be a time of just you and God.

Over the course of this study we are going to look at a number of ways by which we can dig deeper into God’s word and learn from it. We will look at in order:

- 1) Questions
- 2) Clauses
- 3) Cross-reference
- 4) Original Languages
- 5) Commentaries
- 6) External Resources
- 7) Context
- 8) Application

We will learn each one of these techniques using just one verse in this passage. Then we’ll put several of these techniques together for some other passages.

We will also look at some other projects or tasks that we can do to further understand the Bible. These will include:

- 1) Keeping a Bible diary
- 2) Studying a theme (single or many) while reading the Bible
- 3) Doing a topical study
- 4) Writing your own devotionals or meditations

We will also look at different kinds of resources that we can use including:

- 1) Commentaries
- 2) Topical Bibles
- 3) Bible Dictionaries
- 4) Hebrew or Greek Dictionaries
- 5) Study Bibles
- 6) Books

This is going to be exciting so let’s get started.

Questions

Here are perhaps the two keys to digging deeper into Scripture.

- 1) Asking questions

2) Knowing how to answer those questions

Asking questions. Did you know that after the Fall the first four sentences that God addresses to Adam and Eve are all questions?

- Where are you?
- Who told you that you were naked?
- Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?
- What is this you have done?

Each answer by Adam and Eve brought them closer and closer to the truth of what they had done.

The first answer merely stated that they were afraid although that in itself had huge implications. Sin, first of all, brought fear.

By the fourth question the answer was an admittance that they disobeyed by eating the fruit although they tried to pin the blame on the serpent.

Notice that God didn't just come out and tell them what they had done; He wanted them to figure it out themselves and He did this using questions.

It is questions that tell us where to start digging and how and then how deep to go.

One of Jesus' greatest professions came as an answer to a question. John 14:5-6, ⁵Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?' ⁶Jesus *said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.'" Suppose Thomas didn't ask that question?

So this study really boils down to three steps:

- 1) How to ask questions
- 2) How to answer those questions and we will look at different tools and techniques to do this
- 3) How to determine if our answers are correct

Here's an example. We'll take a single verse from the middle of our story—Matthew 14:22—a verse that is pretty straightforward and ask some questions.

²²Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.

This is a pretty straightforward verse that I bet many of you never gave a second thought to. Maybe you just read it as a transition between the great miracle of feeding the 5,000 and the other great miracles of Peter walking on water and Jesus calming a storm.

Here are some Questions:

- 1) The first word is "immediately." Why the urgency? What was going to happen that Jesus had to get the disciples into the boat right away?
- 2) Why put them in a boat? Why not send them home on land like He did the rest of the crowd?
- 3) What does "made" mean? Was this an order or a suggestion?
- 4) Why all of the disciples? Why not just one?

- 5) Why didn't Jesus go with them?
- 6) Why did Jesus send them away and not just have them wait for Him a little off shore?
- 7) What was on the other side?
- 8) Why did only Jesus send the crowds away? He had the disciples help feed them so why not let them help Him disperse the crowds?
- 9) Where did the crowds go?
- 10) Why did the crowds have to be sent away? Wouldn't they just have gone on their own anyway?

We're going to answer these questions and many more throughout the course of this study.

Here are around a dozen questions on a verse of just 24 words. If you answer just half of them—just a third of them—then you will have gained great insight not just for this verse but for both of these stories.

Let's look at our first verse.

Verse 19 - Clauses

¹⁹ Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed *the food*, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples *gave them to the crowds*,

There are many ways to study a passage of Scripture. One way is to split it into different clauses based on different themes or points or emphasis.

The passage can be a single verse or several verses. It can be a chapter. It can even be an entire book.

The idea is to see how God weaves marvelous patterns and sometimes even entire studies into even a single verse.

For verse 19 we are going to use this technique of parsing the passage into its main clauses and examine it that way. By doing so we will answer the question, "Is there a story or sections within this passage?"

What I don't mean by parsing a verse is to break it down like this is an English grammar exercise. We are not splitting the sentence into noun, verb, subject, adjective, prepositional phrase, etc.

We are breaking it down by concept.

Some passages can be broken into clauses in several different ways. For this verse, we are going to parse it into three clauses.

Here is the first clause.

"Ordering the people to sit down on the grass"

It says that there were five thousand men. The word "men" does not mean "people." In the Greek we can see that it only refers to males. Therefore, there were very many more people than five thousand. There could easily have been twenty thousand. The biggest basketball arena in the United States is the United Center which is home to the Chicago Bulls which sits 23,400. So that's enough to fill this arena.

God starts this ministry event with order. He has a plan. God does not just come up with an idea and then wing it. He thinks it through, so to speak, and then puts His plan into action.

We can read in the parallel passage in Mark 6 in verse 40 that He organized them “in groups of hundreds and of fifties.” He had them sit down. By sitting down the situation was more calm and stable. If they remained standing they would have milled about and the groups would have broken up and the scene would have returned to its original chaotic state.

When it comes to ministry we should, likewise, be as well planned as possible.

Here is the second clause.

“He took the five loaves and the two fish”

God uses the resources that are available. When they found the boy with the five loaves and two fish there is no indication that Jesus bullied the boy into giving Him the food. God can do miracles with the resources that we give to Him, and He may multiply those resources beyond what they seem able to do. God can use us in a greater way than our natural abilities, social status, race, finances, or looks may seem to allow. God’s biggest limitation is not His abilities or desires. It is not having any resources with which to work. 2 Chronicles 16:9, “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.” Dwight L. Moody’s most famous utterance was, ““The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him. By God’s help, I aim to be that man.”

The third clause.

“and looking up toward heaven, He blessed *the food*,”

What do we see in this section? Here we see prayer and grace. Both are vital to successful ministry. Jesus gave the ministry to His Father. So should we.

The fourth clause.

“and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples *gave them* to the crowds”

Action. Jesus didn’t just pray and then wait for His Father to take over and do something. Jesus worked through His people and His people then followed through and gave to the crowd. Jesus, being God, could easily have distributed the food by Himself. But He does not want us sitting on sidelines or even leading the cheers. He wants us in the game. Today we might not be passing out food to 15,000 people but we may be passing out tracts. We may be serving in the church’s children’s ministry. We may be working to help the opposed and downtrodden. But God wants us to be involved.

So in this one verse we see four important aspects of ministry:

- Plan
- Resources
- Prayer
- Action

That is a sermon in one verse. If we apply that series to all that we do imagine how much more effective we can be?

Let’s look at another passage that we can split into clauses: Isaiah 42:6-7

⁶“I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, ⁷to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.

Clause 1 - “I am the LORD”

This clause sets the tone by declaring the one and only absolute foundation: God. Everything else in this passage is rooted in the fact that it is God who is speaking and God who is the source of all resources and grace.

This is similar to Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God...” and John 3:16, “For God...” and many other verses where it is clear from the start that the foundation is and always must be God Himself.

Clause 2 - “I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations,”

This clause is who will perform the Lord’s work and what He will be like.

Who is this person? If you read the opening verses of this chapter you will see that God the Father is addressing the Messiah, Jesus.

Speaking directly to Jesus the Father says that Jesus:

- Will lead a righteous and holy life.
- Will have the power and guidance to do His Father’s will.
- Will fulfill God’s covenant promises to His people.
- And will bring God’s eternal and unknown revelation to all people.

Clause 3 - “⁷to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.”

This clause is the results of that Person and work.

- Both physical (to prove the fulfillment of OT prophecies) and spiritual (the unsaved) blind eyes will be made to see.
- Those who are in physical prisons (Peter in Acts 12) and in spiritual prisons whose chains of sin will be freed.
- Those who are in the greatest grip of sin and despair will be freed from that bondage and, even more so, brought into the light. So not just rescue but also improvement, magnification.

So in this passage we have three clauses:

- 1) God-the initiator
- 2) Calls the holy and righteous Messiah, Jesus
- 3) And Jesus’s mission is to free the prisoners of sin

You can do this with passage after passage in the Bible. By breaking up passages into clauses we not only see God’s marvelous patterns in the Bible, but we also see mini stories and sometimes even mini-Bible studies.

You can section the Bible starting at its broadest and working down to individual verses.

How is the Bible sectioned?

- Old Testament

- New Testament

How does the Old Testament section?

- Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)
- History (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther)
- Poetry or Wisdom (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs or Song of Solomon)
- Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel)
- Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

How is the New Testament sectioned?

- Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
- History (Acts)
- Epistles (Romans – Jude)
- Prophecy (Revelation)

You can section books. For example, John.

- Chapters 1 – 12 Book of Signs (Jesus' Public Discourse)
 - Chapters 2 – 4 Cana Cycle
 - Chapters 5 – 12 Festival Cycle
- Chapters 13 – 17 Jesus' Private Discourse with His Disciples
- Chapters 18 – 20 Book of Passion or Book of Glory (Passion Narrative)

However, not every verse in the Bible lends itself to this.

For example Isaiah 3:21, “finger rings, nose rings” really doesn't really break down into clauses very well.

So breaking a verse or passage into sections is a good way to see what is being said and how it all fits together.

Keeping a Bible Diary

What is one way to force yourself to learn something new from the Bible every day? Keep a Bible diary. This is not a diary of your feelings or events: “I was sad today” or “I went to the beach and ate three ice cream cones. I feel sick.” This is also not a prayer diary that tracks what to pray for and answers. This is strictly a diary that you write in every day, because you read the Bible everyday—right?, of what you learn from the chapters that you read. If you finished reading what you had planned and you don't have anything to write then either re-read that section again or read more. It doesn't always have to be profound, but it should be an original thought and more than a recap of what you just read.

Let's pick the shortest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 117.

Praise the LORD, all nations;

Laud Him, all peoples!

²For His lovingkindness is great toward us,

And the truth of the LORD is everlasting.

Praise the LORD!

What are some thoughts that you could write about this passage?

1) Everyone should praise the Lord, not just believers. Why? Because God shows lovingkindness toward every person by way of His patience and mercy. And also because God gives everyone truth so that, whether they believe it or not, they can live their lives by it. This is truth such as if you do right then you will be blessed. If you do wrong then things will not go your way. Truth that the sun will come up tomorrow. We should be constantly alert to praise God at all times and in all ways. Once in a church group our assignment was to write down thirty ways that God proves that He loves us by the following week. I spent a lot of time thinking of thirty profound ways. Then when we read our list one guy wrote down all things like, my pencil, my paper, the desk, the lamp, the house, and so on. I thought at the time, "How lame." But over time I came to realize how actually profound his list was. Of course God proved that He loved us by dying on the cross and by the incarnation. But how often I overlook such mundane ways that God has also proved that He loves me. Things like supplying my everyday needs such as pencils and paper, having a desk, a house and so on. These are things that I can take for granted. By the truth is that they are all from God and I should praise Him for them.

2) Because God is everlasting and never changes then neither will His eternal truths. We can be assured that once we are saved then we will always be saved because God will never change the rules. We can be assured that once a believer dies then Heaven will indeed await us and that God won't just annihilate us and start everything again from scratch.

How does this work?

You buy a blank notebook. At the top of each day you put the date and you can put the Scripture reference that you read. Then from one sentence to an infinite number of sentences write something that you learned. When you finished writing then re-read what you wrote and see if there is anything more to add.

Do this for at least a year.

It will accomplish at least three things.

- 1) You will be more consistent to read every day because those blank days will look bad.
- 2) You will learn something new from the Bible every day.
- 3) You will remember it better by writing it down.

Start this soon. I guarantee you that it will make a difference.

Verses 20 and 21 – Cross-reference

²⁰ and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.

²¹ There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children.

What does it mean to cross-reference in the Bible? It means examining other passages that are similar. This similarity does not necessarily mean that it has to be the same story but just that it has the same theme, or same people, or is a similar situation.

When we cross-reference similar passages elsewhere in the Bible we are noticing three things: 1) things that common, 2) things that are in one but not in the other (this helps create a composite or total picture), and 3) doctrines or themes that are in one that shed light on the other.

The New Testament records 37 miracles that Jesus performed. Which is the only one that is mentioned in all four Gospels? The feeding of the five thousand.

Here are the passages in the Bible that discuss the feeding of the five thousand.

Matthew 14:13-21

Mark 6:33-44

Luke 9:12-17

John 6:1-14

And here are the verses that are similar to our passage here in Matthew 14:20.

Mark 6:43, “and they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish.”

Luke 9:17, “And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets *full*.”

John 6:12-14, “When they were filled, He said to His disciples, ‘Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’”

We will look at several points that are common to most or all of these passages. Therefore these are aspects of the story that all four authors felt were important to include.

One is that everyone or “all” was satisfied. All manner of person was present, but Jesus wasn’t selective. No matter their culture, race, gender, righteousness or sinfulness, all were satisfied. Jesus will bless anyone and everyone who follows Him.

Second, the disciples were the ones who did the cleanup. They and Jesus did all of the work. When we are out there bringing people to Jesus we should be willing to do everything from A to Z.

Third, there were twelve baskets. What else in this passage has a count of twelve? The disciples. Though it doesn’t say, it is possible that each of these baskets may have belonged to each disciple. So the disciples got to keep the leftovers.

Fourth, the baskets were full. All of the people were full and then the baskets were full. Jesus’ grace and completeness extends beyond the immediate situation. Jesus said to the paralytic, “Take up your pallet and walk.” He not only healed his paralysis but also gave him the ability to walk though, by all rights, the man should have been wobbly and needed physical therapy in order to walk.

Here are some observations that the passage in John adds.

The loaves were barley. Barley was a very common grain because it was more tolerant of adverse conditions.

When the event was over the peoples’ conclusion was that Jesus was a prophet.

Finally let’s look at how a cross-reference can shed light on a passage.

What are some broad aspects of this story?

- Jesus is the central figure.

- It is a miracle
- Members of the public were present (not just His followers)
- A crisis precipitated the miracle (People were hungry)
- Food was created

What are other accounts in the Bible that share these same characteristics?

Feeding of the 4,000 of course. But let's stretch ourselves a little more. How about Jesus' first miracle: Changing the water into wine at the wedding at Cana?

Once again:

- Jesus is the central figure
- It's a miracle
- Members of the public were there (the wedding guests)
- A crisis precipitated the miracle (The wine was almost gone)
- Food, in this case wine, was created (In Matthew it was multiplied and here it was transformed but in both cases it was created)

How do these two miracles complement each other?

First a little background regarding the Wedding Feast miracle.

Cana was a small little-known village. It is interesting how Jesus was born in a manger in a small town and His first miracle was also in a small village. What insights can we draw from that?

- Jesus can use the small and seemingly insignificant to do great things because the greatness is not in the vessel but in the God who controls the vessel. Remember that when you think that you are too poor or untalented or physically unattractive or not very smart. Think of 2 Chronicles 16:9, "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His." Or 1 Samuel 16:7, "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" God uses the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27).

In Cana there was a joyous occasion: a wedding feast. The festivities of a wedding could last a day or go on as long as a week depending on the resources—being defined as food and drink—of the husband. Therefore, if the wine ran out early then this was a reproach and shame to the husband. This was the crisis. Verse three tells us that the wine ran out.

Why wine? What was the big deal about wine? Here is where we can cross-reference by looking up "wine" in a concordance. There are 240 verses with the word "wine" in them. Should you look at every one of them? Well, it wouldn't hurt. But you can skip many of them because it just talks about someone drinking wine. But then there are a number of interesting passages that are similar in theme.

In many places in the Old Testament wine was a symbol of God's promised future abundance and blessings. Joel 3:18 says, "And in that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine..." Amos 9:13, "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'When the plowman will overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; when the mountains will drip sweet wine...'" So when Mary said, "They have no wine" this was significant. The blessings were gone. The festive wedding would have ended prematurely and the guests would have gone home disgusted and mad. It would have been an omen of a dire future. But Jesus showed that He was indeed the promised Messiah who would usher in the promised blessings of God. Though people and the world may fail (the wine ran out), Jesus would be able to keep His promises (the wine and therefore future blessings would be ours in abundance).

Putting these two miracles together we see at least two grand insights.

1) The focus of miracles was and still is to glorify God.

The ending sentence in John 6 at the feeding of the 5,000 is “Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’” The ending sentence in John 2 at the Cana wedding is, “This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.”

Picture yourself at this miracle and you just got home and you are all excited. They ask you why you are so hyped up. In a couple of sentences what would you say? It would probably go something like this, “Tens of thousands of us were following Jesus. It was getting late and we were all hungry. There was very little food but Jesus somehow multiplied it and fed every one of us. I’m stuffed.” Notice the focus. It is what Jesus did. It wouldn’t have been about the quality of the food or how fast the disciples distributed it. It would have been about Jesus. It wasn’t about the miracle; it was about the person who performed the miracle.

2) We see Jesus as God.

At one event Jesus created food; in the other He created wine. What does creating something out of nothing harken back to? Genesis 1 of course. How does Genesis 1:1 start? “In the beginning God...” So both of these miracles identify Jesus as the Messiah but even more so, as God Himself. (In case someone says that Jesus didn’t create the wine from nothing; He created it from water, there is no alcohol in water, there is no grape flavor in water, and there are none of the other hundred compounds in water that exist in wine. All of those were indeed created from nothing.) Colossians 1:15-16a emphasizes this, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created...” Creating something out of nothing is a sure sign of being God. Imagine how the disciples looked at each other after they looked into their full baskets. Their jaws must have hung open.

Yes, you could come to these same conclusions just from one of these stories, but putting the two together more than doubles the emphasis, it multiplies it.

The Bible is not a book that cobbled isolated stories together. It is not a patchwork quilt. Rather, it is an intricately woven tapestry where each part amplifies and supports every other part.

As you study a passage use the rest of the Bible to deepen it.

Resources that you can use to Cross-reference:

- Concordance
- Nave’s Topical Bible
- Cross-references in your own Bible’s margins

Study a Theme while Reading the Bible

Pick a theme that you would like to dig deeper into and learn more about.

This could be a theme that you find of particular interest. Such as you’ve always wanted to learn more about how God is faithful to us even when we don’t do what is right.

It could be a theme that we personally fall short in. For example, we may struggle with forgiving others. We hold grudges.

It could be a theme that we just want to learn more about such as end time prophecy.

Or it could be a theme that we need in our lives. For example, a long time ago I proposed to a woman and she turned me down. I was depressed, but I knew that the only way to get out of it would be to draw closer to God.

Get a blank notebook and as you read the Bible—every day, of course—write down anything that relates to your theme. It could be as simple as a verse and the comment, “This verse is talking about God’s faithfulness.” Or it could be a pages long discussion of what that passage means as related to your theme. Unlike a Bible diary where you must write down something each day, for this exercise you only write down thoughts and passages that are relevant as you come to them. Even for the simple ones where you don’t really have any thoughts, you may go back to them and fill in some more as you read other passages.

Do this for one entire reading of the Bible. That way you will have examined every passage.

Then when you have finished, review all of your notes and put them together into a study. This study doesn’t have to be for anyone else. It can be just for your most important audience: you.

For my example when I knew that I needed to draw closer to God, how is the best way to draw closer to God or to draw closer to any other person for that matter? To get to know them better. So I determined that I needed to get to know God because the more I know Him the more I will trust Him.

So I got a three ring notebook and filled it with blank paper. Then I got tabbed separators and put them between every five pages. On each separator I wrote a different attribute of God. So I had God’s eternity, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, holiness, sovereignty, love, faithfulness, mercy, grace, patience, forgiveness, and comfort. Fourteen attributes in all. Then as I read the Bible for that year I wrote down the Scriptures and my thoughts on any of these attributes as I came across them. When I was finished I put them together and studied them for many more months. Eventually I put them into a book called “Contemplating the Almighty.” It was the best time that I had ever spent in the Word.

Another time I focused just on God’s faithfulness and wrote down every passage about this theme for the year that it took me to read the Bible.

So how does this benefit?

- 1) It focuses your contemplation. As you read each passage you are consciously examining it for how it might relate to your theme. So you are more likely to be studying the passage rather than just reading it.
- 2) But of course as you are studying a passage you will probably see other insights unrelated to your theme that you would have missed otherwise. For example, you are reading the passage in Luke about Lazarus and the rich man and as you are thinking about it you realize how much God cares about the downtrodden and weak and poor.
- 3) You gain great insights into your theme. If your theme is forgiveness then I bet that at the end of that year you will be a much more forgiving person yourself.
- 4) You will have great and exciting material to share with other people. You don’t know what to talk to other people about? Well, how about your theme? How’s this for an opening sentence, “I’ve been studying a lot about God’s forgiveness and here is something interesting that I had not seen before.”

Go ahead and be daring. Try this and see what a difference it makes in your life.

Verse 22 Original Languages

²² Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.

Obviously , the Bible was not written in English. It was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Almost the entire Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Hebrew was the language of Israel.

A few chapters in Daniel and Ezra and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11) were written in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:46-7:28; and two words in Genesis 31:47). Aramaic was the language of Northern Syria and the Assyrians.

Hebrew and Aramaic were two distinct languages but were close enough that a speaker of one could kind-of understand someone speaking the other. Some say that it is comparable to Spanish and Portuguese today.

The entire New Testament was written in Greek. Rome had conquered Greece and Greek culture and language saturated the empire.

The New Testament has several Aramaic expressions which are transliterated into Greek:

- Mark 5:41 -> Talitha qumi ("Maiden, arise!")
- Mark 15:34 -> Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")
- Galatians 4:6 -> Abba ("Father")
- 1 Corinthians 16:22 -> Maranatha ("O Lord come")

The Greek translation of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint.

In translating the Bible into any language there are two goals:

- 1) Paralleling the original words – being faithful to the text as it was originally written
- 2) Retaining the original meaning – communicating the passage as it would have been understood to the original audience

<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/blog/curious-christian/6-5-2012/what-are-two-main-types-bible-translations>

There are three main ways of translating the Bible.

- 1) Formal equivalence. This is trying to stay more word-for-word. These are referred to as literal translations. Examples are New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the English Standard Version (ESV).

Advantages of this method:

- Retains better the original poetic style
- Is closer to the original sentence structure and word order
- It does not attempt to do its own interpretation but leaves that up to you
- Is probably better for your own Bible studies
- It does not have the translators opinions, personal doctrines, and bias

- 2) Functional (also called dynamic) equivalence. This is more thought-for-thought. Examples are the New Living Translation and the New International Version (NIV).

Advantages of this method:

- Oftentimes better communicates the original idea
 - Can be more easily understood especially by non-Christians and by those who struggle with literacy
 - May be easier to read if a young Christian
 - Can be better if you want a broad overview of the Bible
- 3) There is a third type called Paraphrase. This is where—generally—one person translates the entire Bible and puts it into his own words to make the original texts culturally relevant. An example is The Message by Eugene Peterson.

Advantages of this method:

- Very readable
- Seems more up-to-date

Here is John 1:14 comparing the three methods.

Formal Equivalence (New American Standard Bible), “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Functional Equivalence (New Living Translation), “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.”

Paraphrase (The Message), “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

Notice some obvious differences among the three.

Format Equivalence: “The Word became flesh”

Functional Equivalence: “The Word became human”

Paraphrase: “The Word became flesh and blood”

Same order:

“dwelt among us”

“made his home among us”

“moved into the neighborhood”

Another:

“truth”

“faithfulness”

“true from start to finish”

What type of translation you choose is entirely up to you. Pick the one type that you feel brings you into the word the best.

Let's get back to our verse. "Immediately He made the disciples..."

"Made" is an interesting word. As you read this passage did it jump out at you? Why was it worded this way? Why didn't it just read, "And the disciples got into a boat."?

"Made" in the Greek means "to compel or force." It is a strong word. It means "to constrain whether by threat, entreaty, force or persuasion. To compel someone in all the varying degrees from friendly pressure to forceful compulsion."

So it wasn't that the disciples were tired and decided to go home. There was more to it than that. Why did Jesus force the disciples to get into the boat and why the urgency?

Here's where we can go back to cross-reference. Remember John 6:14, "Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" Notice that they did not say "a prophet" but rather "the prophet, i.e. the Messiah." But back then the people did not see a Messiah that would die on a cross seemingly defeated. Their Messiah was going to free them from the bondage of Rome by being a great leader or king. What Scripture does this harken back to? Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses says, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him." Moses said "a prophet like me." What did Moses do? He led them out of the bondage of Egypt. What will this prophet do? Lead them out of the bondage of Rome.

There are two main reasons why Jesus couldn't let them make Him a leader or king at this time.

1) This wasn't His mission.

His mission was to deliver sinners from Hell and into the hands of God and not to deliver Israel from Rome and into the Promised Land.

1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..."

2) It wasn't the time.

Because the goal was death, resurrection, and salvation this had to come at a precise time in order to fulfill all prophecies.

John 7:6, "Then Jesus said unto them, 'My time is not yet come: but your time is always ready.'"

One day Jesus will be the Lion of Judah but first He must be the Lamb of God.

So why did Jesus immediately make the disciples get into the boat? Perhaps because He didn't want them to get caught up in the frenzy. Jesus wanted them to be disciples and not king makers.

Here's an example of how knowing the meaning in the original language adds depth to the passage.

Matthew 20:

²⁹ As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him. ³⁰ And two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹ The crowd sternly told them to be quiet, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" ³² And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" ³³ They *said to Him, "Lord, *we want* our eyes to be opened." ³⁴ Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

He was “moved with compassion.”

In English we think, “Jesus really felt sorry for these guys.” Or that the reason Jesus helped these beggars was because He pitied them; that that was His motivation.

But if we look at the original Greek we see a lot more. In the Greek the phrase “moved with compassion” is all one word. It is a very interesting word. It originally was used to denote the “inward parts” of a sacrifice, and specifically the nobler parts such as the heart, liver, lungs, and kidneys. These are the parts that are used in the sacrifice and the word eventually went on to mean the sacrifice itself.

In later writings it came to mean the “seat of feelings” and the “center of human feeling and sensibility.” I.e., it denoted the whole person in respect of the depth and force of feeling.

So in using this particular word here, it is saying that Jesus was moved to the very deepest part of His being and with all of His feelings and emotions. That is why He helped them. And that is the same attitude that we should have toward the oppressed.

We don’t have to become Hebrew or Greek scholars in order to use the original languages to pull more out of the Bible. But if we see a word that seems particularly interesting then we should take a few minutes to look it up and see if it adds depth to the passage. Most of the time it probably will not. But those times that it does will be well worth it.

Some resources that you can use for original languages are:

- Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words
- Wuest’s Word Studies in the Greek New Testament
- Word Pictures in the New Testament
- Word Meanings in the New Testament
- Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies
- The Interlinear Bible Greek/English
- Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

How to do a Topical Bible Study

What is a topical Bible study? It is a study on a single theme or subject versus the study of a passage like we have been doing.

These topics can be anything:

An attribute of God: love, holiness, forgiveness, grace, sovereignty.

It can be a subject in the Bible: angels, end times, water, prophecy.

It can be an action on our part: evangelism, repentance, reading the Bible, fellowship.

It can be a Biblical theme: Heaven, Hell, sin, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the post-Resurrection Christ.

People in the Bible: Noah, Moses, David, Peter, John, Paul.

There are literally thousands of topics to study and you can spend a lifetime studying any one of them.

So how do you start and what do you do? Well, how you do a study is going to be different depending on the person and the topic. So I can't say, "Here is step 1, here is step 2, and so on." But I can give you some methods that you can choose and do in whatever order and depth that you want.

First off, though, try to find a quiet place and time where you can concentrate on your study without many distractions. If this isn't totally possible then do the best that you can.

One method is to look up every verse in the Bible that uses that word. For this you would use a concordance.

Let's say that you are doing a study on patience.

Using an online concordance (such as BibleGateway.com) you would look up:

Patience: 20 results

Patient: 12 results

Patiently: 5 results

That's not too many. You can easily look up each of these verses.

If, however, you are doing your study on faith, there are 378 verses with that word. Yes, you can look up every one, but you might find it less daunting to be more selective in which ones you study. How would you be selective?

You can probably skip Job 39:12, "'Will you have faith in him that he will return your grain and gather *it from* your threshing floor?" But you would look at Matthew 8:26, "He said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?' Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm."

As you look up each verse first think about them. Contemplate them. Ask questions. See what the Holy Spirit might be teaching you personally.

Then go to commentaries. See what other people's insights are. Then use that as seeds to perhaps develop your own thoughts on the passage.

Write down your thoughts on paper. You might want to categorize the verses. For example, if you are doing a study on faith you might want the following categories:

- 1) What is faith
- 2) Different kinds of faith
- 3) How to increase faith
- 4) Weak or little faith
- 5) The power of faith
- 6) Examples of faith

So each time you come across a verse on faith then put it into one of these categories and even multiple categories.

Then, once you've studied all of the verses, go into each section and see how the passages fit together. Are there points or themes that are repeated? Can you create a list or lists? If you are studying faith an example of a list is in Hebrews 11. Write down the verb associated with faith.

Verse 3: "By faith we understand"

Verse 4: "By faith Abel offered"

Verse 5: "By faith Enoch was taken" and then later on in the same verse "he obtained"

Verse 7: "By faith Noah... in reverence prepared"

Verse 8: "By faith Abraham... obeyed"

And so on.

Do these verses set up contrasts (not contradictions) and, if so, what are they? For example, slave versus free, or rich versus poor.

Another method is to look up related verses but which might not have the word in them. For this something like Nave's topical Bible is good. Another one is Torrey's New Topical Textbook.

You can find a free online Nave's Topical Bible and Torrey's at [www.BibleStudyTools .com](http://www.BibleStudyTools.com).

How does a topical Bible work?

A concordance will list all verses with the word that you searching for. If the word isn't there, even if the verse is clearly discussing that topic, then the verse won't show up.

A topical Bible will include verses related to a topic even if the word isn't in the verse. For example a topical Bible under faith will give you Jeremiah 17:7, "'Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD.'" You won't find this verse in a concordance.

Look up the verses in the topical Bible and study them the same way that you did with the verses that you found in a concordance: categorize them, find common themes, make lists, and so on.

Some Bibles have chain-references. The way that this works is that you look up a topic in the back of the Bible. It will list a verse to start with. You turn to that verse. Sometimes there will be a note about your topic. Then there will be another verse which is the second in this chain. You go to that verse. Again there might be a note on your topic but there will be the third verse in this chain. You keep going from verse to verse until you reach the last verse in the chain.

One example is the Thompson Chain Reference Bible. This is by far the most famous one. It has over 4,000 chains. It was first published in 1908. You can use it free online.

You can even create your own chains as you study a topic in your Bible.

Finally, you can read a book that is devoted to the subject. For example, good books related to faith are:

- "The Pursuit of God" by A.W. Tozer
- "Twelve Ordinary Men" by John MacArthur
- "50 People Every Christian Should Know: Learning from Spiritual Giants of the Faith" by Warren Wiersbe
- A biography such as one on George Mueller

Ultimately, once you gathered and studied all of the materials then write them out in an orderly fashion. This may be one page or it may be many, many pages. Doing this will help solidify what you have learned.

What has been emphasized?

What are cause and efforts? Luke 17:6, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.” The cause is even a small faith. The result is something great.

What are contrasts? Slave versus free. Darkness versus light. Doubt versus faith.

What are comparisons? Faith like a mustard seed. Why a mustard seed? Look up something that describes a mustard seed.

What was God’s response both to the good and to the bad?

Ask yourself the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How questions.

Can you develop any personnel application?

- Are there any actions or habits that I should do as a result of this study?
- Should I change any of my thoughts or attitudes?
- Do I need to repent of anything?
- How can I use this to deepen my relationship with God and my worship of Him?
- Are there any verses from this study that I should memorize?
- How should I change my approach to relationships?

Though any length Bible study is good, try, as much as possible, to be thorough. The verse that God wants to speak to you through may be the next one.

Verse 23 - Commentaries

²³ After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

In this section we will look at commentaries.

What is a commentary? A commentary systematically analyzes, explains, interprets, and applies passages of Scripture. It can be written by one author or by a collaboration of authors. It will usually include a discussion on the likely author of the Bible book, its date, location, possible circumstances, and major themes.

There are essentially three types of commentaries.

- 1) The kind that is usually included with the Bible with notes on the bottom. It is not verse-by-verse but covers only more pronounced—according to the author--verses. It is usually in one book.

Advantages:

- You have the Bible right there with you.
- It generally only addresses the more prominent Scriptures which may be the ones that you are interested in anyway.
- Its explanations are brief and to the point.

- It gives a good first level of insight for people who are just starting to dig into the Bible.

Disadvantages:

- Most passages aren't addressed at all.
- The explanations are brief. So a verse may only have a couple of sentences of discussion at the most.

Examples:

- MacArthur Study Bible
- Scofield's Reference Bible

2) A one or so volume commentary on either the Old Testament or the New Testament.

This will not have the Bible included. For a New Testament commentary it might come close to verse-by-verse although this commentary tends to be more on chunks of related Scripture with each chunk averaging maybe five verses.

Advantages:

- It's all in one volume.
- It will usually say at least something about the passage that you are interested in.
- It gives a good second level of depth as you get more into studying the Bible.
- Because of space limitations it won't get into theology that is over your head. It tends to be very readable.

Disadvantages:

- You generally need to have a Bible handy to read the passage that is being commented on.
- If you have a very specific question it may not address it since it is still a little general.

Examples:

- The Bible Knowledge Commentary

3) The third type is where each book of the Bible has its own commentary.

These will nearly always be verse-by-verse although maybe not so much in the Old Testament. It does not usually include the Bible passages themselves.

Advantages:

- Will more than likely answer any question that you might have.
- Takes you to a third level of depth that builds a greater appreciation of the Scriptures.

Disadvantages:

- It takes up a lot of space.
- It can be costly.

Examples:

- Lifechange Bible Study Series by NavPress
- John MacArthur Bible Commentary

Here's our verse again, "After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone."

Here are what some commentaries say about this verse.

From the setting we already see Jesus as a man of prayer (v. 23). Rather than sticking around to reap the political benefits of his miracle, Jesus retires to prayer, which, unlike political advancement, is central to his mission (compare Jn 6:15). – IVP NT Commentary

This one was short. It makes two points: 1) That Jesus was a man of prayer, and 2) That prayer took precedence over miracles and political advancement.

It is probable that he directed them to go in a ship or boat to Bethsaida, and remain there till he should dismiss the people, and that he would meet them there, and with them cross the lake. The effect of the miracle on the multitude was so great, John 6:14, that they believed him to be that prophet which should come into the world; that is, the Messiah, the king that they had expected, and they were about to take him by force and make him a king, John 6:15. To avoid this, Jesus got away from them as privately as possible. He went into a solitary mountain alone. In view of the temptation - when human honors were offered to him and almost forced upon him - he retired for private prayer; an example for all who are tempted with human honors and applause. Nothing is better to keep the mind humble and unambitious than to seek some lonely place; to shut out the world with all its honors; to realize that the great God, before whom all creatures and all honors sink to nothing, is round about us; and to ask him to keep us from pride and vainglory. – Barnes Notes

This commentary makes several points. 1) Because of the miracle the people wanted to make Jesus king. 2) Jesus sent the disciples away so that He could handle the delicate situation Himself. 3) The first thing that Jesus did after this near crisis situation and temptation was to be alone and pray. 4) The best way to avoid pride is prayer because the focus is not on self but on the greatness of God.

Observe here, 1. Christ dismisses the multitude, and then retires to pray; teaching us, by his example, when we have to do with God, to dismiss the multitude of our affairs and employments, of our cares and thoughts. O how unseemly it is to have our tongues talking to God, and our thoughts taken up with the world!

Observe, 2. The place Christ retires to for prayer, a solitary mountain; not so much for his own need, for he could be alone, when he was in company, but to teach us, that when we address ourselves to God in duty, O how good is it to get upon a mountain, to get our hearts above the world, above worldly employments and worldly cogitations!

Observe, 3. The occasion of Christ's prayer: he had sent the disciples to sea, he foresaw the storm arising, and now he gets into a mountain to pray for them, that their faith might not fail them when their troubles were upon them.

Learn hence, that it is the singular comfort of the church of God, that in all her difficulties and distresses Christ is interceding for her; when she is on the sea conflicting with the waves, Christ is upon the mountain praying for her preservation. – Burkitt's Commentary

Here are three comments. 1) Dismiss the world, our distracting thoughts, and worries and go to God in prayer. 2) Try to pray alone away from the distractions of our world. 3) Jesus knowing that the disciples were going to be in trouble prayed fervently for them. We should do the same for others. I.e., our prayers should not always be self-centered. 4) Jesus is still praying for us. This should be a source of strength and hope.

Here is just one paragraph from John MacArthur's commentary.

Notice it says in verse 23 that it was evening. This would be, by Jewish definition, the second evening. The first evening was from 3-6, and the second evening was from 6-9. From 3-6, the first evening, He had fed them. From 6-9, we're in the second evening, and it's coming toward darkness. As it grows dark, He is alone in the mountain, and He is praying. Always remember that if He needed to pray, how much more do I need to pray!

Here the commentator is giving us information about the significance of the times that are mentioned. Then he makes the point that if Jesus, who was God, prayed then how much more should we.

Some additional commentaries that won't be discussed here.

1. That he was alone; *he went apart into a solitary place, and was there all alone*. Though he had so much work to do with others, yet he chose sometimes to be alone, to set us an example. Those are not Christ's followers that do not care for being alone; that cannot enjoy themselves in solitude, when they have none else to converse with, none else to enjoy, but God and their own hearts.
2. That he was alone at prayer; that was his business in this solitude, to pray. Though Christ, as God, was Lord of all, and was prayed to, yet Christ, as Man, had *the form of a servant*, of a beggar, and prayed. Christ has herein set before us an example of secret prayer, and the performance of it secretly, according to the rule he gave, Matt. 6:6. Perhaps in this mountain there was some private oratory or convenience, provided for such an occasion; it was usual among the Jews to have such. Observe, When the disciples went to sea, their Master went to prayer; when Peter was to be *sifted as wheat*, *Christ prayed for him*.
3. That he was long alone; *there he was when the evening was come*, and, for aught that appears, there he was till towards morning, *the fourth watch of the night*. *The night* came on, and it was a stormy, tempestuous night, yet he continued *instant in prayer*. Note, It is good, at least sometimes, upon special occasions, and when we find our hearts enlarged, to continue long in secret prayer, and to take full scope in *pouring out our hearts before the Lord*. We must not *restrain prayer*, [Job 15:4](#). – Matthew Henry

He went up into a mountain apart to pray;

perhaps the same he went up to before, and from whence he came down, ([John 6:3](#)) . This he chose as a proper place for prayer, where he could be retired, and alone, have his thoughts free, and, as man, pour out his soul to his Father, on his own account, and on the behalf of others; and particularly, he might be concerned about this notion of a temporal kingdom, that his disciples and others were so fond of; and pray that his disciples might be convinced of their mistake, and that the people might be hindered from prosecuting their designs. His going up into a mountain and praying there, were quite contrary to the canons of the Jews; which forbid praying in places ever so little raised. – Gill's Exposition of the Bible

It was a familiar place to be - in the presence of the Father. He went there very often at night to find rest for His soul, and to find that great fellowship for which He longed as He expressed the longing in John 17, saying, "How

much to I want to be restored to that which We knew before the incarnation," that sweet communion with the Father.

Notice it says in verse 23 that it was evening. This would be, by Jewish definition, the second evening. The first evening was from 3-6, and the second evening was from 6-9. From 3-6, the first evening, He had fed them. From 6-9, we're in the second evening, and it's coming toward darkness. As it grows dark, He is alone in the mountain, and He is praying. Always remember that if He needed to pray, how much more do I need to pray!

You ask yourself, "For whom does He pray?" All you need for an answer is John 17, which says that after He prayed on His own behalf and exalted the Father in His prayer, He then spent most of the time praying for His own, and I see Him there interceding for His own, praying for His disciples, that they will overcome with victory the same temptation He had just overcome, not to follow the mood of the mob, or the shallow popularity. I believe He prayed for them.

In [Luke 22:31](#), He said to Peter, "Satan has desired to have you, Peter, but I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail." Isn't that a comforting thing? That is the High Priestly work of Christ. Right now, this moment, at the throne of the Father, He prays for you and for me and He prays with the authority of God. What a great confidence!

So we see the authority of Christ here; we see His authority as He commands the multitude, as He commands the disciples, as He calls upon the Father's protecting care for His own. No wonder they worshiped when they understood His authority; so should we. – John MacArthur

We see in this section that it is good to utilize other people's meditations. There is nothing wrong with doing all of the study on our own, but we have to be careful that we are not excluding other people's efforts just because of pride. Indeed, every Sunday morning when you come to church you are hearing your pastor's commentary on a passage.

Commentaries are written by men and women who have the time and resources to do in depth studies that we oftentimes cannot find the time to do to such a degree. We should utilize these resources but not to the exclusion of our own time with the Holy Spirit.

However, we must always remember that these are still fallible people who can and will get things wrong. Therefore, everything must be weighed against Scripture. Acts 17:11, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Verse 24 – External Resources

²⁴ But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

Sometimes gaining insight into a passage is best helped using extra-Biblical reference sources. Some of these insights can be cultural, archeological, historical, sociological, political, scientific, and the religious environment.

What are some examples?

A cultural reference

Psalms 30:11b reads, "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,"

Why is sackcloth mentioned here and why?

Sackcloth was a rough, coarse material usually made of goat's hair and was black. It was uncomfortable to wear. In the Bible it is referenced many times as being worn to demonstrate mourning for the dead, repentance, times of disaster, and a begging of God's mercy. It was an outward demonstration of the inner condition of the heart. It was often accompanied by ashes as in "sackcloth and ashes." Ashes were a symbol of devastation and grief. The person would often sit in ashes and put ashes on his head. This was not just a Jewish ritual but one that was common throughout that area. For example, when Jonah confronted Nineveh with God's judgement they all put on sackcloth, even on their animals.

So in this verse David is saying that God removed his deep sorrow and replaced it with gladness and not just gladness, but a joy so great that it caused David to dance.

An archeological reference

Revelation 3:15-16, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth."

What is this reference to hot, cold, and lukewarm? Is it merely a made-up-analogy or does it have more to it?

Archeology has discovered the remains of an aqueduct that started at least four miles away in the city of Hierapolis and carried water to Laodicea. Hierapolis had hot, spa-like waters that people often used for medicinal purposes. By the time this water reached Laodicea it would have become warm. Most of us like to drink cold water and hot water is good for tea or coffee. But lukewarm water is unappealing to drink. Another nearby town was Colossae and its waters were known as being cold and pure. So in contrast to these two nearby towns which had medicinal hot water and fresh cold water, Laodicea's water was nearly undrinkable. People at that time and in that area would have known all of this and so this allusion would really brought God's point home. It would be like today saying "I was on an emotional rollercoaster." That has a greater emphasis than saying, "I was emotionally up and down."

A scientific reference

Job 26:7, "He stretches out the north over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing."

Here we see God stating that the earth hangs in space in contrast to resting on something like on the back of a turtle.

A historical reference

A political reference

A sociological reference

A religious environment reference

Let's look at our verse again.

²⁴ But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

A storm came up on the sea. The word for “battered” means “tormented, distressed.” We got that from looking up the word in the original Greek. But some of these were veteran fisherman who made their living on this very sea. So why were they having such a hard time? To answer this question you have to go to external resources.

The Sea of Galilee also goes by these names:

- Sea of Tiberias
- Waters of Gennesaret
- Lake of Gennesaret

The Sea of Galilee is actually a lake that is fed by the Jordan River. At 700 feet below sea-level it is the lowest freshwater lake on the Earth. It is approximately 13 miles by 7.5 miles which makes it 64 square miles. It is a rather shallow lake with its deepest point at 200 feet.

It is surrounded by hills which on the east side rise to 2,000 feet high.

So what does this have to do with storms? Three things.

- 1) There is a big difference between the temperate on the water and the temperature in the surrounding hills. The lake has warm, moist air and is semi-tropical. The hills, in contrast, are cool dry air. This difference can create strong winds.
- 2) Being surrounded by hills, the winds are funneled onto the lake sweeping across its center. These winds can sometimes be violent with the middle of the lake being the worst.
- 3) A deep lake can buffer and absorb storms and winds more easily. However, a shallow lake will be whipped about. The Sea of Galilee is a shallow lake.

The result of all of this is that on the Sea of Galilee, storms can come quickly and be fierce. Boats caught in the middle of the lake can be tossed about and be in great danger. Even experienced fisherman can be caught off guard.

We see in this verse that the boat “was already a long distance from the land.” If it read that the boat was a long distance from where they started then that could mean that they could be close to the other side. But instead, they were a long distance from land, meaning far from land on all sides. Therefore, they were in the middle of the lake when the storm hit and so were at the most intense and perilous place.

They were being hit from all sides. The waves were pounding them from the below and the winds were against them from above.

We saw in verse 23 that when Jesus went up to pray it was around 6:00 PM. But the disciples set off in the boat before this time. In verse 25 it was the fourth watch which is between 3 and 6 AM. So the disciples were out on this boat battling the storm for 6 to 12 hours. This was a long time.

So from external resources we are able to deepen this verse by learning about how powerful and sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee can be and how that not only adds to our understanding of what is happening here but even allows us to better visualize it. This takes this story out from being merely words on a page to pulling us in and putting us there.

We can’t possibly know about every place and person in the Bible. External resources help us get a better understanding of these things so that they become more real to us.

What are some external resources?

Books that inform about people, places, animals, food, customs, books, titles, roles, etc.:

- Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (edited by Walter A. Elwell)
- New Bible Dictionary (Tyndale)

Books that inform about doctrinal concepts:

- Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (edited by Walter A. Elwell)
- The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Zondervan)

Verse 25- Using several resources together

²⁵ **And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea.**

Let's start with a question: "What is the fourth watch and is it significant?"

The McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia states, "The Jews, like the Greeks and Romans, divided the night; into military watches instead of hours, each watch representing the period for which sentinels or pickets remained on duty."

- The first watch also called "evening" went from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM.
- The second watch also called "midnight" went from 9:00 PM to midnight.
- The third watch also called "cock-crowing" went from midnight to 3:00 AM.
- The fourth watch also called "morning" went from 3:00 AM to 6:00 AM.

That specific information was cobbled together from "Benson Commentary" and "The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible."

In Mark 6:34 we read, "When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things

We see in Matthew that the crowds began being fed started in the evening. This would have been between 6 and 9 PM.

Mark and John say that the boat was in the middle of the sea in the evening. This would have been between 6 and 9 PM.

Matthew and Mark both say that Jesus came walking on the water in the fourth watch.

So putting this together we can approximate the chronology to be this:

The crowd gathered and Jesus began teaching them many things. This might have been in the afternoon.

Then around 6:00 PM Jesus finished His teaching and the disciples said that it was getting late but the crowds had not eaten. So they coordinated the people into groups of fifty and then distributed the food. Considering that there were at least 15,000 people that means that there was at least 300 groups. That meant that each disciple was responsible for 25 groups. This probably took at least an hour. Then there was the time to eat and cleanup. My guess is that the entire feeding of the 5,000 took around two hours.

So then the disciples launched the boat at around 8:00 PM.

By 9:00 PM or so they were in the middle of the sea and the storm hit.

Jesus then came to them at 3:00 AM at the earliest. That means that the disciples fought the storm for at least six hours and possibly up to twelve hours. Even for seasoned, sea-hearty men this was a long, exhausting amount of time. Knowing this brings an even greater drama and struggle to this narrative. No wonder why when they saw Jesus coming on the water they thought that He was a ghost and that they were going to die.

How did we put together this chronology? We used cross-references and external resources.

Let's ask another question. This all occurred in a boat. What was this boat like?

The disciples struggled for at least six hours in a boat. How big was this boat? In 1986 during a drought on the Sea of Galilee when the waters had receded the remains of a boat were found. It dated from around the New Testament time and is the type of boat that Jesus and the disciples would have used. It is actually called the "Jesus Boat" although there is nothing to connect it to Jesus or to the disciples.

This boat is 27 feet long and 7 ½ feet wide. That is not very large. It would have been able to hold Jesus and His disciples and not much more. It would have a sail or two and could be rowed. It had a fairly flat bottom so that it could be brought close to shore to unload its catch of fish. The height of the boat not counting the mast was just over 4 feet.

This information came from several external sources such as "New Bible Dictionary."

This is the boat that was battered by the storm and which the disciples struggled with for hours. The waves could easily have washed on the side and splashed around the deck. Picture the scene, twelve men are in this smallish boat in thick darkness (after all there was a storm and no clouds or moon would have been visible) with waves pouring onto the boat and the wind violently rocking it back and forth. This struggle went on for six to eight hours all through the night. And for nearly all of it Jesus was not there.

But then Jesus came to them. They didn't shoot up flares or scream incessantly for Jesus. He knew their trouble and He came to them. Yes, He did come to them but notice that He allowed them to struggle for quite a while and a terrible struggle it was. Notice also that He did not prevent this from happening. As God He knew that a storm was coming but He still forced them into the boat. Our trials do not end just when we want them to. In this instance the trial ended when they saw Jesus.

It says that Jesus was "walking on the sea." Here's another question. What role does the sea play in this vignette, in this story at this time? The sea was what was roughing the disciples up. It was the source of their trial. What did Jesus come walking on? He came walking on the sea, on the source of their trial. Many times in our own lives Jesus will come to us in our trials. Not above them, but right through the midst of them.

When we are sitting on our couch crumbling up the potato chip bag whose entire contents we just consumed and while we're patting our bloated belly and watching our favorite TV show do you think that Jesus will come to us? But when we are struggling with our job or our family and our heart is grieved then Jesus will come.

Depending on what God is doing in your life at the moment and what He may want to say to you, here are some other ways that you might have looked at this verse.

- 1) When I am beaten down and at the end of my rope in a trial and just don't feel that I can do one more thing, Jesus will still come to me.
- 2) Jesus' walking on water shows that He is the ruler of all and can perform whatever miracle it takes in my life, in the church, or in our event.

- 3) Jesus wasn't affected by the storm. He didn't stumble through the waves trying to catch His balance. He didn't make a comment about having a hard time finding them in the dark. This shows that He is not affected by our circumstances, culture, or world's sins. He can pass right through them to come to me.

And there are many other ways that God can speak to you through this verse. But if you don't study it then you won't hear any of it.

Notice how understanding the details of this story brings us closer to it. Maybe we even can feel like we are there. That is good. When we read the Bible they should not be mere words on a page. These things actually happened. If we were alive during this time and in that place we might have been one of the people sitting on the grass with 49 other people in our group. We are still warm and amazed by His teaching. We might see Jesus a couple of hundred feet away pulling loaves upon loaves of bread and fish out of a small basket. The disciples are excitedly filling their own baskets and then rushing over to their groups and handing out the food to a fired up people. There are so many things going on that we can hardly take it all in.

Then we are on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee being whipped about and in fear of our lives. There is much shouting and danger. It feels real because it was real.

This verse has only 16 words but look at how much we got out of it. We used external sources, commentaries, and cross-references.

Verse 26 – Original languages revisited

²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

When the disciples saw Jesus why were terrified? Shouldn't they have been comforted?

Realize that even though Jesus had just performed a great miracle the disciples still didn't quite get it. So when they see someone walking on a stormy sea they're not thinking that this is something Jesus would and could do and so they concluded that it must not be Him. Rather, no one walks on water, no one who is alive that is. Therefore this must be a supernatural being. This must be a ghost.

The word "ghost" is not the Greek word "pneuma" which would mean a disembodied individual who had died, but rather was "phantasma" which means an "apparition, a specter." This was more like a demon or something evil. In those times if someone thought that they were seeing a ghost then it meant that they were going to die. Seeing the circumstances that they were in and how it wasn't getting any better this wasn't an inappropriate conclusion.

To "cry out" in the Greek means "to raise a cry from the depth of the throat." It was a shriek of terror, a scream.

These Greek references are from "Word Studies in the Greek New Testament" by Kenneth Wuest.

Here are the disciples struggling to survive in a stormy sea for six to twelve hours and now a ghost shows up and is coming towards them. Surely this was a sign of their impending death. Hence their screaming out in terror. The situation had become so bad that even burly men of the sea were shrieking out in fear.

So for this verse we looked up some key words in the Greek to give us a deeper understanding of what is happening here. Once again this type of studying brings us closer to the scene. We are taken from merely reading words on paper to almost being there like watching a movie.

Another point that we can get out of this verse is that Jesus came to them, but they didn't recognize Him. How many people in history do not recognize Jesus for who He really is? Many other religions such as Islam and Hinduism see Jesus only as a prophet. Others, such as atheists, see Jesus as a fraud. Some see Jesus as vindictive or lacking in moral character because He preached eternal damnation.

However, at one point everyone will see Jesus for who He really is and those who rejected Him will indeed cry in terror but this time it will not be because they think that they are seeing a ghost but because they will see Him as He really is—the Son of God, the Almighty Creator and Judge. But this time Jesus won't be there to rescue them from the storm. Then they will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

Writing your own devotions

Another way to study the Bible is to write a devotional on a particular passage, event, or theme in the Bible.

What is a devotional?

You've probably seen them in daily devotionals such as "The Upper Room" and "Our Daily Bread" or in books such as "Morning and Evening" by Spurgeon.

A devotional is around 250 words. It generally consists of six sections:

- 1) A title
- 2) A single verse that is the main theme of the devotional
- 3) The body of the devotional
- 4) A related section of Scripture that is usually five to ten verses
- 5) A prayer
- 6) A call to action or summary thought

The body of the devotional has three parts to it:

- 1) The situation or event in your life or in history, science, etc.
- 2) The relationship of your situation to the thematic verse
- 3) An application

What is the point of writing a devotional?

It is a way of bringing moments of your life into Scripture and then pulling insights and applications out of the Scripture back into your life. So it forms a circle.

Or if you are using science, art, history, etc. then you are bringing the world into Scripture and then pulling insights and applications out of the Scripture into your life.

But in both cases Scripture is the lens or filter that is used to interpret what happens in life.

If you set your mind to write devotionals then a great benefit is that it focuses your mind on applying God's word in two ways.

One is that when you are reading the Bible and you come across a verse that sticks out to you then you will more likely to meditate on it and see if you can come up with a situation in your life where it applies to you.

Two, when you are going through life whenever you see something unusual or even something common you are more likely to think of how you can apply a verse to that situation. You may not be able to think of a specific verse at the moment but then you should be motivated to search for a relevant verse when you get home. That in itself only solidifies your time in God's word. It also brings God into your thoughts throughout the day. For example, you see a tree lying across the road and instead of thinking, "That is one rotted out tree" you instead think, "How can I connect that tree lying in the road to a Bible theme?" Then your mind starts going through the Bible: sin is roadblock, without a solid foundation anyone can fall, that tree should have been taken care before it caused damage and so I should examine my own life, and so on. Then when you settle on a connection that you like you can start trying to think of a verse. Isn't that a much better way to spend your commute then the way that you usually do?—no judgement there.

Let's take a look at two devotionals that I wrote that were published.

Stage Grace

Verse: I sought the LORD, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Psalm 34:4 (NASB)

When I was in college I had to present the results of my research before an annual meeting of hundreds of the nation's top professors and students. While the presenter before me was speaking I was sitting in the audience terrified thinking, "I'll just leave and when they call my name I simply won't be there. Who will know? No one here knows me." My solution to my fear was escape.

But then I thought about how if I leave I won't be giving God a chance to prove His faithfulness. So I prayed and was assured of God's grace and presence. I went up to the podium and the second I turned and faced the audience all of my nervousness vanished. I did a great job and almost skipped off of the stage glorifying God. I realized that if I did not give God a chance to pour out His grace and to glorify Himself in my life then I will never know what He can accomplish through me.

Ever since then, if I am nervous about doing something I will think back to this incident and remember how faithful God was then and so can assured that He is just as faithful now. Then I have a confidence and strength that my own willpower could never conjure up on its own.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 34:1-9

Prayer: Whenever I am frightened and weak, God, let me remember that you are with me wherever I go.

Thought: Give God a chance to glorify Himself in your life and you may be amazed at what He will do.

This devotional took an incident in my life and applied it to a promise of God. Then I created an application that I can apply to every fearful situation in my life. I have shared this with daughters and they have memorized this verse so that whenever they are nervous about something they can quote it and trust in God's grace.

Here's another devotion.

Necessary Food

Verse: I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. Job 23:12 (NASB)

In survival, the rule of three states that you can survive no more than three minutes without oxygen, three hours without warmth, three days without water, and three weeks without food. The results of these deprivations are obvious. As you get close to these limits you will feel extreme discomfort. You will think about nothing else other than breathing, a thick blanket, a long glass of water, or spaghetti and meatballs as the case may be.

But there is another type of deprivation that can be equally devastating. The problem is that the results are not as easily connected and so we continue to go without. This is when we neglect to spend time with God by not going to church, or not reading our Bible, or not praying. Then the consequences will be worry, anxiety, frustration, discouragement, anger or a host of other wrong attitudes or temperaments. Usually we attribute these behaviors to trying circumstances or bad relationships, but fail to make the connection that our time with God has been neglected. When we are spiritually healthy then we will be more joyful, confident, motivated, and peaceful.

Scripture Reading: Job 23:10-14

Prayer: God, show me the urgency of my daily need for spiritual nourishment.

Thought: We must be just as diligent and concerned about our spiritual health as we are about our physical needs.

This devotional is different in that I took a scientific fact and applied it to the word of God. The application here is to read the Bible at least every day. I've actually seen this devotional on other people's websites and blogs including some in other languages such as Japanese.

If I hear or read something that catches my attention I'll think, "How can I get a devotional out of this?" As a result, I've had over 200 of my devotionals published.

But don't write devotionals only if you think that you can get them published. Write them for yourself and for your friends and family.

If you do decide to write some devotionals then keep them in a notebook.

Verse 27 – Questions, once again

²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Here are some questions.

- Why "immediately"?
- Who spoke the calming words?
- Who was spoken to?
- Is there significance to who the speaker was and who the audience was rather than it being the other way around?
- Why did Jesus mention courage and not something else?

- What was the basis of their courage?
- Why did Jesus repeat His assurance but from a different angle?

Let's pick out one of these questions.

Who spoke the calming words?

Obviously the one word answer is Jesus. But don't stop there; that is not the end of the question. Why is this significant?

Because the assurance was from Jesus and not from something or someone else. One example of this "something else" is positive thinking. Practitioners of positive thinking include Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Oprah Winfrey, and advocates of the prosperity gospel.

Quotes from Dale Carnegie:

"It isn't what you have, or who you are, or where you are, or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about it."

"Fear doesn't exist anywhere except in the mind."

Quotes from Norman Vincent Peale:

"Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy."

"What the mind can conceive and believe, and the heart desire, you can achieve."

"Plant seeds of expectation in your mind; cultivate thoughts that anticipate achievement. Believe in yourself as being capable of overcoming all obstacles and weaknesses."

Quotes from Oprah Winfrey:

"The thing you fear most has no power. Your fear of it is what has the power. Facing the truth really will set you free."

"With every experience, you alone are painting your own canvas, thought by thought, choice by choice."

These quotes all sound good and do have some truth to them. But what is the problem with all of them? That we are solely the determiners of our happiness and the ones who overcome all situations simply by changing how we think.

The real world is replaced by a world that we construct and develop in our own minds. Kate Tuttle in "The Downside of Cheering Up" wrote, "We are not talking here about garden-variety hopefulness or genuine happiness, but rather the philosophy that individuals create—rather than encounter—their own circumstances."

"Martin Luther criticized Erasmus for treating the Bible as a 'waxed nose' that he could twist in any direction he wished. The secularist—the man without God—wants to create his own universe untrammelled by anything. Someone has rightly said, 'First God created us in His image, and ever since we have been returning the compliment.' The secularist wants to become his or her own god, creating a world that will be maximally satisfying and personally undemanding." — John Warwick Montgomery, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 168 (January – March 2011), p 51

Our thinking does not become better because we make it so. Our thinking becomes better because we set our minds on the things above.

Our situations do not become better because we make it so. Our situations become better because God's grace intervenes both into the situation and into our lives.

This was not the conversation in the boat, "Everyone, stop being afraid. The fear is only in your minds. The main problem here is ourselves. Think clearly. Think positively and everything will be better."

No, it was only when their focus was on Jesus that we see the situation change. It matters tremendously from where your help comes from. Psalm 121:2, "My help *comes* from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth."

So we got some interesting stuff by answering just one question.

Here are some others studies that we can do.

We could get into the "immediately" here versus other times when Jesus delayed such as at the very beginning of this storm. Jesus delayed at hearing about Lazarus being sick. Here He acted immediately. What was the difference?

We could study all of the times when God/Jesus said words to the effect, "Take courage" or "Do not fear." Who was He speaking to? What was the circumstance? What did Jesus do? What was the result? You can create a table with these four questions across the top and the Scriptures going down in rows. The results could be fascinating.

We could easily create several good Bible studies just on this one verse. These 16 words could change your life.

Verse 28 - Context

²⁸ **Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."**

Using this verse we are going to look at context. What is context?

Surrounding verses

Context starts with the verses immediately before and after the verse that you are examining.

You can then expand the context to the entire paragraph or section.

Then to the entire chapter.

Then to entire book.

Then to the entire Bible.

But context is more than just the surrounding Scriptures.

It includes the setting of the passage.

Something in the Old Testament is going to be viewed differently than something in the New Testament.

Who wrote the passage?

Take Paul and James and the controversy about faith versus works.

Paul wrote in Romans 3:28, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law."

Whereas James wrote in James 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Is this a contradiction?

For one, you have to consider the authors. Paul viewed some issues from a different angle than James. Ultimately they completely agreed on whatever the issue was but Paul was more of a theologian and teacher whereas James, the Lord’s brother, was a working man. Paul is concerned that people think rightly. James is concerned that people are treated rightly. Paul’s themes in Romans are unbelief, impartiality of God, the law, sin, justification, grace, the conflict of our two natures, freedom from sin, our victory in Jesus, Israel, salvation, spiritual gifts, conscience, and self-denial. Whereas James themes in his book are trials, doers of the word, orphans and widows, partiality, proper speech, quarrels, and treating laborers wrongly. Do you see the difference? So is it any surprise that when approaching the subject of faith and works Paul would write from the faith angle but James would write from the works angle. Both are right but they are two sides of the same coin.

Who was the audience?

Read the two passages in the Book of Revelation regarding the church at Philadelphia and the church at Laodicea. Philadelphia was a good church with many commendations and not one word of condemnation. Whereas Laodicea was a disobedient church and there it is the opposite: no commendation but several words of condemnation. The spiritual state of each of these churches determined the tone of the message that was delivered to them.

What situation, if any, is being addressed?

Was a particular sin being addressed? Something written to be scolding will be different than something written to be a teaching.

Context is one of the most vital components of proper Bible exegesis.

I’m sure that you’ve heard of verses taken “out of context.” That means that a verse is lifted apart from its surrounding verses, author, setting, and audience and used to “validate” a pre-existing point. Used in this way the verse does seem to agree with the person’s premise. But when put back into context it becomes clear that the verse does not mean that at all.

What are some doctrines where verses taken out of context are used to substantiate them?

“You must be baptized to be saved.” 1 Peter 3:21, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you...”

Sounds good. It can’t get any clearer than that now can it? Let’s read the entire verse. 1 Peter 3:21, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” “Not the removal of dirt from the flesh,” i.e. not physical baptism, not being dunked under water, but being placed into Christ. That is what saves you.

Here’s another.

“It is Biblical to enslave black people.” So he [Noah] said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers.’” This was after Noah got drunk and Ham disrespected him by uncovering his nakedness. So how does this validate black slavery? The claim is that the name “Ham” means black and that Ham’s curse was to be a slave to his brothers. Furthermore, along these lines, it is taught that white people descended from Japheth, Asians descended from Shem, and blacks descended from Ham. Therefore it is Biblical that blacks be slaves to their brothers the white and Asian people.

So what is the problem with this interpretation? Well, plenty. First the name “Ham” is the same word that when used as an adjective means “warm” or “hot.” So how did this come to mean “black”? Apparently if something gets too hot then it chars and becomes black. But that is clearly forcing one thing to become another simply to validate your own bias. Warm is a temperature; black is a color. When some things get too hot they become “white hot.” Somehow that conveniently doesn’t seem to play into this interpretation.

Also, the context is that Ham wasn’t the one cursed but his son Canaan and only his son Canaan—not his descendants. In the Bible when a curse or a blessing is applied to a person and to his descendants this is made explicitly clear. Here, in this context, that is not stated. It was a single curse applied only to one person and once that person died the curse was ended.

Here’s one more.

“Jesus is not God.” Luke 18:19, “And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” It seems as though Jesus is saying, “Don’t call me good because only God is good and I’m not God.”

Jesus never denies that He is God nor that He is good. He is simply challenging the rich, young ruler. “You say that I am good. Only God is good. Are you therefore calling me God? Do you understand who you are addressing?” The context is the ruler asking Jesus about inheriting eternal life. Luke 18:18, “A ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Notice the wording of the question, “What shall I do...?”

The story ends with Jesus saying, “The things that are impossible with people are possible with God.” Jesus is tying the entire conversation together. The theme is eternal life. It starts with the ruler asking what he can do and ending with the truth that only God can do it. It is as though He said, “You are asking Me about how to get eternal life. This is impossible for you to get. Only God can give eternal life. Recognize that I am God. I am good and I am God. Don’t ask Me a philosophical question. Ask Me to give you eternal life.”

Then if we look in John 10:11 we see where Jesus does say that He is good, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” There is no contradiction between Luke 18 and John 10. In both Scriptures Jesus is good.

So how can the verse, “Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water’” be taken out of context? Not that people will try to walk on water because that is easily and quickly dismissed. But that people will think that by simply trusting God they can do silly or outrageous things.

Here are some examples.

I knew someone who threw their watch into a river from a bridge because he was going to trust God to guide his time management from this moment forward. Well, God never promises that He will ensure that we make every appointment on time. You might as well push your car into that same river and trust that God will teleport you everywhere like He did Philip in Acts 8.

Someone else lost their job but he wasn’t going to actively do anything to find a new one because he was going to trust God to provide a job. Well, guess what? God doesn’t reward laziness. Proverbs 6:6-8, “Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer *and* gathers her provision in the harvest.”

Several times in the news the parents of a deeply sick child didn't seek treatment because they trusted that God would supernaturally heal the child. The child died. God gives us doctors so that we might be healed. Prayer is good but even prayer won't necessarily mitigate irresponsibility.

What is the context here? Jesus was physically standing there. Peter asked Jesus a question and Jesus gave a clear, audible answer. It was two specific people, one being God, in a very specific situation. That is quite different from us telling God what we want Him to do and then expecting Him to do it simply because we say that we are "trusting Him."

"Context is king." That is so true. As has been said, "You can make the Bible say anything you want." But that is not true and is never true if you put the verses in the Bible in context.

Verse 29 – Clauses redux

²⁹ And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

We can do a lot with this verse but let's return to clauses. Let's split this verse up.

1) And He said, "Come!"

Here we see Jesus' command.

Obedience to God and trusting in God always starts with God's voice and God's voice is almost always the Bible. Obedience and trust do not come from a pumped up confidence that we might call "faith." They start with clear direction and promises from God.

2) And Peter got out of the boat

Obedience and trust require action. That action doesn't have to be physical movement. It can be repentance or worship or prayer. But something happens. We do something. The boat didn't just disappear out from under Peter and there he was standing on the water. No, Peter got out of the boat. The grace and power came when he took action.

3) And walked on the water

But when we obey God's clear commands and promises we know that He will supply the resources. Peter didn't just step out of the boat and stand on the water. He walked on the water. He continued; he followed through.

4) And came toward Jesus

Ultimately the focus is always on Jesus. He is the center. Notice that it doesn't say that Peter yelled out, "Look at me. Look at what I'm doing." As long as he focused on Jesus, God gave grace, and Peter did a great work.

So in this one verse we see a progression of obedience and trust.

- 1) It starts with the clear command and/or promise of God. In this situation it was Jesus Himself. For us it is the Bible.
- 2) We act on that command or promise.
- 3) God gives the grace and resources to obey.
- 4) The focus is always Jesus.

There are other ways to focus on this verse. It is so rich.

Peter looked to Jesus and he is the only one who walked on water. The other disciples just sat in the boat. You don't hear their names mentioned. Don't be a spectator; be the one who takes action on God's word.

Peter was took action while the storm was still raging. He didn't wait until the seas were calm. In your life, don't wait until the circumstances are favorable to obey God. Trust and obey in the calm and in the storm.

Peter left the others to go to Jesus. Don't wait for the crowd and don't wait for someone to go first. If you feel that God is calling you to do something for Him then don't look around at others first. Just do what you are supposed to even if you are alone.

You can easily create a full study on any one of these. And there are many more points or themes that you can mine from this one verse.

Verse 30 - Application

³⁰ But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Knowledge about God and the Bible is always good in itself. Sometimes we learn things and the Holy Spirit stores them away in a file cabinet in our hearts. Then in some circumstance in the future He pulls that out and uses it when we need it. So we don't have to struggle trying to come up with an application for everything that we read. We'd develop paralysis if we did.

For example, if we learn that God is faithful then we don't have to try to come up with an application in the sense of behavior or action. An increase in faith is sufficient. Then twenty years from now when we've blown it in some way and we fear that God has had enough of us the Holy Spirit pulls this study on faithfulness and reminds us that God will always be with us.

Here's a verse from the beginning of this series.

Proverbs 2:1-6

My son, if you will receive my words
And treasure my commandments within you,
² Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
Incline your heart to understanding;
³ For if you cry for discernment,
Lift your voice for understanding;
⁴ If you seek her as silver
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
⁵ Then you will discern the fear of the LORD
And discover the knowledge of God.
⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom;
From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding.

Many times when we uncover a new truth in the Bible the end result is simply that we draw closer to God in knowledge, fear, and wisdom.

But sometimes when we discover a truth or find that the Holy Spirit has spoken to us it should change our life in some way even if small.

Philippians 4:9 says, “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” When we apply what we read we will experience for ourselves that God will be with us. That’s a pretty good promise.

Application can be in two major ways: 1) Change in attitude and 2) Taking action.

You can ask yourself questions like these:

- In what way should I change my thinking?
- What should I repent of?
- How can I exhibit this same behavior?
- What should I start doing?
- What motives, attitudes, or desires should I change, remove, or add?
- Is there something that I have been doing wrong this entire time?

In this verse there are many, many applications. Here is one.

Our prayers do not have to be long and eloquent. They do not have to be in King James English. Peter was in trouble. He didn’t pray, “O greateth and magnificent Lord who dwelleth in Thy Heavens and on Earth.” He prayed three words, “Lord, save me” and God responded. It isn’t so much the words as it is the heart. Romans 8:26 says, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words...” Though it is good to set aside times to pray alone or with others there is also a place for those quick prayers while we are walking down a hall at work, while doing the dishes, while stopped at a red light, and all of those hundreds of other times during our day when we have a few seconds of thought.

Here are some good short prayers:

- “God, bless Grace Bible Church.”
- “Lord, provide an opportunity for me to save the Gospel with my neighbor/coworker/relative.”
- “Lord, deliver me from temptation.”

The application here is to prayer more. To develop a constant sense of God’s presence and in any free thought time to always aim my thoughts towards God.

Another application is that Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and put them onto the circumstances around him. When that happened Peter became frightened and his circumstances became even worse. “There are big waves—check. There are strong winds—check. I’m going down—check.” So in all ways keep your eyes on Jesus. But what does that really mean? It sounds good and it is Biblical, but how do you really apply it? You can’t actually see Jesus. It isn’t like I can say, “Keep your eyes on the chalkboard and don’t look at the floor.” You can do that even though the second I said that you would all struggle to keep from looking at the floor. The idea is to trust more in the power of what you know through faith rather than let the circumstances around you. The Bible speaks of this quite a number of times.

Colossians 3:2 “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”

2 Corinthians 4:18, “while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

So what does this mean? Here is a devotion that I wrote and which was published.

If someone is standing several hundred feet away you can easily fit them between your thumb and index finger if you close one eye and spread those two fingers an inch apart. They seem small. But if a tiny spider crawls across your glasses it appears as though a monster is in your face. An aspect of perspective is how objects appear to us based on our relationship to them. The closer something is to us the larger it will appear. In the above situation we know that a person is larger than a spider but at that moment the spider is more frightening.

This same principle holds true for our problems and God. The one that we keep closer to us will appear to be bigger than the other. If we keep God at a distance by not reading the Bible, praying, or attending church then He will appear to be small and ineffective. We may occasionally yell to Him for help but it is like we are talking to someone on the other side of a parking lot. Whereas if we constantly focus on a problem, thinking about it, mulling its worst consequences then it will be like that spider on our glasses. Of course the reality is that God is greater than any problem but our perspective of these may be distorted because of which one we are keeping closest to us.

It is only by being in the constant presence of God that we can begin to see just how great and powerful He is.

What is the application here? When a problem or trial hits, don't focus on the problem, focus on the solution with God being a major part of that solution. For example, you just lost your job. You can spend a lot of time saying things like:

- "We're going to lose the house."
- "The only job that I'll ever be able to get anymore is minimum wage."
- "What am I going to do?"
- "Why me?"

Will those statements solve the problem? No, they only add to the problem by increasing anxiety and distracting you from looking to God. Here are better things to say:

- "Let's get the family together and pray."
- "I need to update my resume tonight."
- "Is there anyone at church that I can network with as I look for a job?"
- "Thank you, God, for my losing my job. Please guide me and teach me in this situation."
- "Lord, save me!"

The application is don't use circumstances to be a victim, instead, use circumstances to be a God-focused person.

Verse 31

³¹ Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and *said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Here are some questions that you can ask about this verse.

- Why is "immediately" important?
- Does God always immediately help us? Why would He in some circumstances but not in others?
- Why did Jesus stretch out His hand versus just verbally commanding like He did with Lazarus?
- Why did Jesus take hold of Peter instead of holding out His hand and requiring Peter to grab onto Him?

- Why did Jesus rebuke Peter?
- What did faith have to do with Peter walking on the water and then with sinking?
- How are faith and doubt opposite?
- Are there other passages where Jesus accuses someone of being of little faith? How are these passages similar? How are they different?

You should take one of these questions or maybe one of your own and develop a study to answer it.

Verse 32

³² **When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.**

Questions:

- Why did the wind stop only after they got back into the boat?
- Why did the wind stop at all; what is the significance of that?
- When we are going through a trial, does the boat and wind in this story represent anything in our trial?
- Why did Jesus get into the boat also rather than help Peter and stop the storm and then just keep on walking to the other side?

Verse 33

³³ **And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”**

This is an appropriate passage with which to end this study—the glorification and worship of Jesus.

At the very beginning of this story we found Jesus distressed over John the Baptist’s death and withdrew to a mountain to pray by Himself.

Then when Jesus went ashore a large crowd came bringing their sick and wanting to hear Him teach. When it was getting late and the people were getting hungry the disciples didn’t ask Jesus to do a miracle. Instead, they asked Him to send everyone home so that they could get their own food. But Jesus took this potentially disastrous situation and turned it into an opportunity to glorify God which, in this case, is Himself. In this situation, Jesus took a great event--hearing Him teach--and turned it into an even better event--being feed by a supernatural miracle.

The following event, the storm, was the opposite. Jesus took a bad situation, people almost drowning, and rescued them from it.

The first went from great to greater. The second went from terrible to safety.

What was the end result?--Worship.

As far as I can tell, this is the first time in the book of Matthew that the disciples linked Jesus to being God.

Notice that after Peter walking on water and the storm being calmed the disciples in the boat didn’t crowd around Jesus make requests. “Jesus, can you get me a bigger boat? Then I could catch more fish and donate more money to your ministry.” “Jesus, can you give me the power to still storms? Then I could impress people more and bring them to the Gospel.” “Jesus, I’ve got this bum knee from when an oar hit me ten years ago. Can you heal it?”

No, they worshipped. Worship is adoring and praising God for who He is rather than for what He has done for us. The latter is called thanks. Both are commanded, both are good, and both should be done as often as we can. But oftentimes worship is the neglected child. In our prayers we must not forget to worship because we are too caught up in thanksgiving and requests.

Oftentimes our “worship” songs are really “thanksgiving” songs because we are thanking God for what He has done for us. And that is a great thing. But we need to include songs that are pure worship also.

That is why “O, Come All Ye Faithful” is such a great song. It has the chorus, “O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” We need adoration simply because He is Christ the Lord.

Conclusion

Over the course of this study we saw a number of ways by which we can dig deeper into God’s word and learn from it. We looked at:

- 9) Questions
- 10) Clauses
- 11) Cross-reference
- 12) Original Languages
- 13) Commentaries
- 14) External Resources
- 15) Context
- 16) Application

We also looked at some other projects or tasks that we can do to further understand the Bible. These included:

- 5) Keeping a Bible diary
- 6) Studying a theme (single or many) while reading the Bible
- 7) Doing a topical study
- 8) Writing your own devotionals or meditations

We also looked at different kinds of resources that we can use including:

- 7) Commentaries
- 8) Topical Bibles
- 9) Bible Dictionaries
- 10) Hebrew or Greek Dictionaries
- 11) Study Bibles
- 12) Books

Ultimately our goal is not to be pumped up with knowledge but to hear what God wants to say to us through His word. To be able to take a passage and of the hundred different themes and applications that can be pulled out of it to let the Holy Spirit pull out that one that we need to hear at that moment. But that won’t happen if we don’t mine the word of God like we would for gold and silver.

Hopefully through this time together we'll all be motivated and equipped to dive deep into the Bible and to hear God, to change our lives, and to worship.