Digging for Gold in Your Bible

Third in the series “The Bible is Our Guide.”

# Scripture: 2 Tim. 2:15; Psalm 19:9, 10

# Key thought: Studying your Bible well will yield truths more valuable than gold.

# Intro:

One of the most famous events in the history of California was the gold rush beginning in 1849. Within a few years it is estimated that 300,000 people from other places in the US, from Latin America, Europe, Australia and Asia moved to California to search for gold.

In 1896 gold was discovered in the Yukon River basin in Alaska and the Yukon Territory and another gold rush began. The grueling journey to Dawson in the Yukon territory took the lives of many would-be prospectors and animals.

For those who arrived, one main method used was panning. The idea of panning is to coax the heavier gold pieces to settle to the bottom while the prospector washes off the sediments and gravel. Some developed large sluices for separating out the gold which did the task on a much larger scale. But still, the vast majority of those who made it to the scenes of the action both in California and in the Yukon were gravely disappointed and unable to find gold.

Gold was highly valued in ancient times too. Yet, King David helps us get a good perspective for our lives when he writes;

The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold! Ps 19:9-10 NIV

Solomon when referring to the wisdom received from God wrote;

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
Prov 3:13-14 NIV

So, reading and studying the Bible is like digging for gold for our lives. We will find nuggets of truth and wisdom that will give us spiritual direction, guide our character formation, and instruct us about how to have eternal life.

But how do we dig for this wisdom gold in the Bible? Many people today don’t quite know how to approach the Bible. Others just think of the Bible as an old book and don’t try to read it our use it. What riches are missed when the Bible is neglected!

I recently read a book called Holy Habits that investigated the foundational practices of the early church as revealed in Acts chapter 2. The first one is this:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. (Acts 2:42)

The Apostles’ teaching is what is recorded in the NT portion of our Bibles today. I have been so happy for the Bible reading emphasis we are currently enjoying in our church. I don’t know about you but because of it, I have been devoting myself more to the apostles’ teaching. And I am already thinking about how I can keep up some of the reading habits that I have begun after the contest. It is enriching my life.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul encourages us all as Christians to learn how to handle the Bible well.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15 NRSV

The Greek word translated as “rightly explaining” literally means to cut straight. So translations have put this idea into English differently (KJV – “rightly dividing”; CJB – “deals straightforwardly with”; NIV – “correctly handles”).

Many today are still devoting themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.

The percentage of Americans who attend church more than once a week, pray daily, and accept the Bible as wholly reliable and deeply instructive to their lives has remained absolutely, steel-bar constant for the last 50 years or more, right up to today. These authors describe this continuity as “patently persistent.” http://thefederalist.com/2018/01/22/new-harvard-research-says-u-s-christianity-not-shrinking-growing-stronger/?fbclid=IwAR3ko4QwAj2e9uMblZy4Xq2EVzNZu3nzbQ6vuTGo7Kfn6f-nRFNujw6l7Fw#.XI-UIe\_V4Pv.facebook

This morning I would like us to think about what it means to explain properly or correctly handle God’s Word. We are influenced by most everything we read in one way or another. But we do not give the same credence to other books that we give to the Bible. We treat the Bible with special deference because it is a Word from God to guide us in our daily lives.

Yet no doubt, you have already in your reading, as I have, found large passages that were very difficult to understand or seemed completely irrelevant to your life right now. What do we do with them? If you were reading in some places in the Old Testament, you might have even found passages where actions taken seemed contrary to the values taught in the New Testament. How do we handle that?

The goal is not knowledge, the goal is change lives.

The Bible is not a book to be learnt by rote but a living story that we are invited to learn from, enter into and to be shaped by so that we, in turn, may be God’s agents of holiness and transformation in the world he loves. (Andrew Roberts in Holy Habits, p. 123)

# Basic Digging Tools



In the gold rush what did they use to dig for gold? Pick, shovel, and pan. Those were the basic tools. In the California gold rush, they also dug with water. Where gold was found in sediments rather than in rock. miners would use what we would describe as a firehose to wash down sediment from a gold-bearing bank. Then they would put the sediment in sluice boxes, shallow long rectangular boxes with slats in them to catch the gold as the water washed away the lighter sediments.

In would like us to think about what tools we use to dig for gold in our Bibles? So how do we approach the Bible? What are some basic procedures that will help us when we pick up our Bibles?

## Read for yourself

First of all, I hope we do pick up our Bibles. Many people just learn about the Bible from other people. Or they read about the Bible in a devotional book. Or maybe they watch a video segment. These are all good. But they do not take the place of reading the Bible for yourself. God uses all kinds of means to help us in our spiritual life. But reading the Bible for oneself is foundational to our spiritual growth. Develop reading habits. Read regularly. Read systematically. Read passages more than once. Read in a version that reads easily for you. Read in sections, not just individual verses. There is no substitute for personal exposure to the Word of God by reading. Listening to it is good, but even if we are taking in God’s word that way, unless we are prevented from reading by other circumstances, I believe we need to be reading it.

Are you an online type person? Then, read and study online as well as with your physical Bible in hand. I recommend a Bible reading and devotional app called YouVersion. Most of the devotional plans on the app are short-term. But some are year-long or even multi-year Bible reading plans guiding you through the entire Bible.

## Note the context

When you begin to read, try to have some sense of the contextual situation of the original writer or readers. At first, this can be daunting, but the more of the Bible you read, the easier this becomes. The short segments on Bible sections that JoAnne has been giving in children’s sermons are a great help in understanding what part of the Bible we are in. Knowing what kind of a book you are in, what its original context was, is immensely helpful. Study Bibles often give you a short book introduction to help in this regard. Bible Handbooks are another good source. Looking at a Chronological Bible could help too. When you are ready to go deeper, you might purchase or get online access to a Bible commentary. Copper Hill Church has a big set on the shelf just before the rest room.

Understanding the human context of the passage you are reading is important because God’s revelation to humankind is progressive. God did not reveal everything humankind needed to know to Abraham all at once. Rather, the revelation that we needed to receive happened through the experience of Israel as a nation and through a succession of prophetic figures over a period of about 1000 years of Israel’s history as a nation. Then the prophetic voice was silent for about 400 years during the time period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Then, in the relatively short time – about 100 years – between the birth of John of the Baptist to the death of the Apostle John, the New Testament books were written. God’s revelation to us took on a new and more complete dimension. Knowing where you are reading in this timeline is very important and helpful.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you read;

I call to you, Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you.
Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
Is your love declared in the grave? Ps 88:9-11 NIV

If you understand that God revealed his truths to us over time, you will not be worried that this does not sound like a resurrection hope. This is from Psalms and was written hundreds of years before Jesus rose from the dead. While there are in the OT predictions and hints concerning the resurrection hope to come, theses hints were exceptional insights, not the rule from OT writers. Much of the time, in the OT, we find, as in these verses, a reflection of humanities’ lack of hope after death – without Jesus.

Or take, for example, David’s wonderful Psalm about God’s knowledge of our lives, Psalm 139. Suddenly, you run into these verses:

Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.
Ps 139:21-22 NIV

That does not sound like good Christian religion! It does not agree at all with Jesus’ word about loving your enemies. But we are saved from stumbling by remembering the context. David is writing about 1000 years before Jesus spoke. In his time as king over Israel, it was a good thing for him to zealously pursue justice and righteousness and as ruler to come against those who opposed justice and righteousness in his kingdom. So, David reveals his love for God through zeal for righteousness, even though he expressed it in a way which we, having listened to Jesus, discern as unchristian. David was not wrong in his expression in his day and we are not wrong in seeing that such an expression would not be right today. Understanding the two contexts helps us to bridge the gap.

Knowing where you are reading in the Bible helps so much.

## Observe

As you read try to be an alert observer. What seems to be the purpose of the writer or speaker? Are there repeated key words, phrases or concepts? Is this a dialogue? Is there a shift in subject matter? Etc.

Both this tool and the next are tools that we use extensively in our Bible study groups. Don’t get me wrong. We need to study on our own, Self-feeding is crucial for Christians. Christians who grow read and study God’s word for themselves. But group study has great advantages too. When we are in a group, it usually prompts us to go a little deeper. We get perspectives that we don’t think of ourselves. The Holy Spirit can work through the group to give us additional insights. Particularly, we make observations and ask questions that we would not think of ourselves. We also benefit from the insights of others in answering those questions.

## Ask questions

Ask questions as you go. Use those helpful serving boys; What where, when, How, why and who. Sometimes it helps to write down your questions. Some will be answered as you read. Others you will need to dig out the answers. Asking questions is how we learn more. Some questions you may have to pass on to your class leader or even your pastor. Don’t worry that you can’t answer all your questions.

# Key Separating Methods



In mining for gold, the main method used by the ordinary miner to separate the gold pieces from the dirt was panning. The miner took a shallow pan in his hands and partially filled it with the gold-bearing sediments. Then he held it in flowing water or swished water in it to wash the lightest sediments out and allow the heavier gold to sink to the bottom. Miners also developed long sluice boxes with slats in the bottom to catch the gold. This tooled facilitated separating out the gold on a larger scale.



What are the methods that allow us to separate out the Bible truths that we need from all the things that we read in the history of Israel? Many of you have noticed and some have remarked to me that as they have been reading their Bibles, there has been much material that you have almost skimmed over because it just didn’t seem needed or relevant or understandable. I usually skim genealogies when I run into them myself. So, what approaches to Scripture do we use that will help us to separate out the nuggets of gold that will feed our souls for that day and for eternity? And how do we avoid mining fools’ gold – that is coming up with interpretations that seem good to us but are really a misusing and mis-interpretation of Scripture?

Let’s briefly discuss some key methods of Bible interpretation that will keep us on track for successful Bible mining.

## Rely on God’s Spirit

Learning from the Bible is not simply an intellectual exercise. If it becomes such, it will likely be counter-productive. We need the assistance of the Holy Spirit to both discern spiritual truth and to have that truth be transformational in our lives. As Paul said;

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. 1 Cor 2:14 NIV

In our Bible studies we pray at the beginning acknowledging our need of God’s Spirit to guide us. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would teach us.

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. John 16:13, 14 NIV

## What did it mean to its authors and first readers?

Our tendency when we read the Bible is to jump immediately to the question, “How does this apply to me?” That is a very important question. But it is the concluding part of the Bible study process, not the beginning. One of the most important questions with which to begin when we are studying a passage is this; what did this mean to the its original authors and/or readers? We cannot safely apply it to our lives until we have first understood what it meant to those who first spoke it or read it. Often we cannot nail the answer down for sure but can limit the answer to a couple options.

For example;

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.
 1 Cor 9:24-26 NIV

As soon as we know that Paul was writing to a city in Greece, we understand that the games being referred to are the Greek games which were popular in that part of the world during Paul’s time. Each town had its own venue for Greek Olympic-type games much as in our country today each town has at least one stadium for basketball and for baseball.

The prizes for those Greek games were wreaths made of various types of plants. They wilted and faded like cut flowers will do. They were called “crowns” but the crowns were very temporary. Knowing this background is crucial in understanding this passage.

## Look for the big picture teachings

When one is reading a passage of Scripture, it is tempting to look for a hidden meaning in every word or line. While a single word or phrase may have a special meaning, that is not the first thing to look for. Begin by looking for the big picture teaching of the passage as a whole. What principle is being taught? What does the story teach us about God? Why do you think this passage, or this event, was chosen for inclusion in Scripture? Questions like these will keep our study and our later application focus on the best path.

The story of Gideon in Judges chapter 6 is a great example. There are all kinds of juicy details which can sidetrack the discussion and even result in speculation as to their meaning and function in the story. There is the wine press in which Gideon is thrashing wheat. There’s the fact that Gideon offered his sacrifice before the angel and pondering who the angel was. There is the fire coming out of the rock. There is the story of the fleece repeated twice. As interesting as these are, and they are not without something to tell us, none of them are the main message of the story. The main point of the story has to do with how God took of man who was the least of his tribe, a cowering and retiring type by personality, and helped him to defeat a huge army with only 300 soldiers for his initial attack, as a lesson to Israel that God is the source of our victories. That’s the main line of the story. We can apply the main lesson by saying that God can use you, no matter how reticent you are, and how little influence you think you have, God can use you to make a huge difference if you follow him.

## Understand the Relationship of the Old Testament and the New Testament

One of the more difficult areas for beginning Bible students is to understand the relationship of the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you have questions in this area, I encourage you to ask your teacher or your pastor.

### The Old and New Testaments refer to two covenants

In Exodus chapter 19 through 24, we learn about the Mosaic covenant, the agreement that God made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. He gave them the 10 Commandments and the instructions concerning the tabernacle, the rules for sacrifices and many other laws for society.

When Jesus came, he announced a New Covenant in his blood. The old sacrifices were no longer needed, the tabernacle for the sacrifices was not needed. Access to God no longer depended upon ritual laws of cleanness and uncleanness. As Peter began to follow Jesus in Acts, he was led by a vision to reject the OT dietary restrictions which would have restricted Christians from eating with Gentiles if they had not been eliminated.

So back to the question of the Old and New Testaments in our Bible -

### Teachings about God remain largely unchanged

The Old Testament still teaches us about God. It teaches us much about who God is and what pleases and displeases God. Since God does not change, most of these insights remain binding for New Testament people as well. The moral laws are largely in this category though there are exceptions.

### Things superseded by the New Covenant now are simply illustrations

But the sacrificial laws, the dietary laws and the laws about clean and unclean, these are superseded by the New Covenant in Jesus. So, when we read about them in the Old Testament they serve to help us understand concepts like redemption, sanctification and holiness, but they do not apply in the same way that they did before Jesus came.

## Rely on the Bible as a whole

When studying a topic, compare Scripture with Scripture. Usually there is more than one passage that deals with an issue or principle. One passage may clarify another.

Avoid basing an opinion or interpretation on one verse.

The Bible warns against adding to or taking away. We can’t pick which passages we like and which we don’t. It’s all God’s Word. We need to deal with that and learn to understand the difficult passages, and there are a few.

## Take it home

The last thing the gold miner needs to do is take his new-found gold to town and sell it. The gold is weighed and then the miner is paid according to the weight of the gold he or she has found. The goal was to get some money for living.

The equivalent step in our Bible study is to put what we read and learn from our Bible study into practice. This is the pay-off. Allowing the Bible to affect our lives is the goal of reading and studying it. We are not just in the Bible for curiosity, we are there to allow God to transform us into the image of Christ. So, the goal of reading the Bible or studying it in a class is not just to understand it, it is to put it into practice.

So, we need to constantly be asking questions like these.

* What is the Holy Spirit pointing out to me?
* What thought, attitude or action do I feel impressed upon me?
* How I can put this lesson into practice this week?

The wise person of Matthew 7 in Jesus’ famous parable is the one who hears Jesus’ teachings and puts them into practice. One of the grave dangers in the American church is that we do Bible studies “ad infinitum” but we are not doing service to others in the same degree, we are amending our ways to the same degree. We take in Christian teaching in services but are we helping others learn about Jesus? We are in need of “take home” practices.