



## **How to Master the Bible**

*He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. — Ezra 7:8-10*

In the whole of human history, there is no better example of a biblical scholar than Ezra. He is directly responsible for providing the combined Old Testament as we know it, for establishing the foundation of the scribal system which faithfully preserved it in its original form to this very day, and on top of that oversaw the forty-nine year project to build the temple. He actually laid the proper foundations for the literal temple as well as the spiritual temple consisting of God's people returning to both God and the land. And he set the standard, which even to this very hour, determines who is and who is not a true scholar in God's estimation. He did not merely "study" and "teach", but most importantly, he "set his heart...to **practice** it". The "good hand of his God was upon him" not because of what was in his brain, but that upon which "Ezra had set his heart".

This is really the difference when it comes to those scholars past and present whose books, articles and sermons are esteemed above the rest; they practice what they preach. This is confirmed in the biographies and testimonies of all the great historical figures such as Wesley, Tyndale, Ironside, and a list far too long to properly document here, but we've seen it even in our times. And sooner or later the absence of this key trait comes to light to confirm that someone's bad or outright false theology parallels an absence of personally practicing the Word. Most ironically of all, a trademark of those more concerned with pointing to Christ than themselves is consistently present among the scholarly practitioners of the faith who will exalt their weaknesses and shortcomings, whereas those so lacking will justify each omission and even deny their existence.

Especially here in the West, because the world's standard to qualify someone as a "scholar" is equated to a resumé stemming from a formal education, we have adopted

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the world's definition, contrary to God's. Christian seminaries and universities structure their programs exactly like the world does, write their curriculum according to the same model, offers equivalent degrees, and invariably become indistinguishable from a secular institution. It is something very far afield from Christ's commandment to make disciples, instead choosing to produce "graduates". Such a system values the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake, even though God's Word repeatedly demonstrates His preference for those who put it into practice.

In the course of my life, the number of seminary graduates is staggering who have testified personally that when they finally arrived at their first ministry assignment, they had to deal with the incredible reality that they had not been prepared at all for ministry by the institution issuing an academic credential proclaiming they were. It is even more staggering to consider the number of conference speakers, authors and website operators who are universally considered experts who have little or no actual experience in even the most basic of ministries, often never having actually ever left the academic environment perpetuating this cycle. Having never actually disciplined anyone themselves, they can only engage in biblical discipleship in the most marginal ways, if at all. At most, they illustrate the difference between a lecturer or researcher and a preacher, pastor, or evangelist.

Now, this isn't a diatribe committed to expressing all the things, great and small, that I can pick at where Christians have mistakenly allowed their institutions to mirror worldly counterparts. Jesus himself said that **He** would send scribes, which can be interpreted as nothing less than a qualified scholar according to biblical standards, Ezra being the most notable example in the Old Testament to compliment the Apostle Paul in the New. But it needs to be pointed out that while the academically trained love to point out that detail, they often betray their actual weakness when it comes to God's Word by omitting the **rest** of what Jesus promised in that very statement to send His own scribes:

*"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets **and** wise men **and** scribes... — Matthew 23:34a*

These offices cover the spectrum of the three aspects and approaches to handling God's Word which are ultimately needed by everyone who wants to not just properly master God's Word, but follow through and put it into practice to biblically prove they really do know the Master. Sadly, throughout most of the Church's history, and especially in these times, far too many attaining to these positions over-emphasize their preferred approach

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to God's Word over the others, or outright dismiss them completely. And that is where so much confusion and division comes from within the Church. Leaders and followers alike will throw all their weight behind a single approach and say that prophecy is all that matters, or wisdom supersedes the rest, or scholarship is king, and not just ignore everything else, but even heap disdain on the other members of this three-legged stool of God's Word. Jesus sends them all because we need them all, and in particular their biblical handling of Scripture.

## **The Prophet**

Do you realize that English translations such as the NASB or NKJV contain nearly a million—yes, *million*—words already provided by God Himself? (It sort of makes you want to read a little more before you go to prayer, asking Him things He's already spoken about, doesn't it?) It also raises the question, that with such a compendium of His written Word already given, why would the Church still need to hear something more through yet another prophet? It's exactly this question that betrays the fact that we think a prophet does nothing but predict something to come true in the future, when even in Scripture that is not what occupies most of the space recording God's Word through them.

A biblical prophet is best thought of as an evangelist to backslidden believers. They spend most of their time attempting to get them to repent and return to practicing the Word. Their message is specially customized for the times, prompted by God to make a compelling case as to why the only proper response to present circumstances is to authentically and sincerely return to the Lord and His Word. When and if a prophet presents a prediction, it is always in this context. But consider how the New Testament targets this mission even further:

*But one who prophesies speaks to men for **edification** and **exhortation** and **consolation**. — 1 Corinthians 14:3*

What happened to predicting the future? Or spiritual forecasting? Or setting a date for something? Even when God did that through an Old Testament prophet, it was actually presented in a message and ministry dedicated to achieving "*edification*", "*exhortation*", and/or "*consolation*". And even these qualifications are best understood if you read them with the word "biblically" in front of each. What the world deems as edifying, exhorting and consoling rarely rises to the level of God's definition and needs a messenger of the times who holds to the higher standard of Scripture when performing these qualities.

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This tidbit is not only vital for going back and re-reading God's prophetic written Word in the proper light, but understanding how it is still functioning at present. The true prophets in our midst show God's written Word as it is operating in our time and society, with an emphasis to call backslidden Christians back to faithfulness to His Word through approaches that biblically qualify as edification, exhortation, or consolation.

In the course of our personal walk, and in encouraging that of our brothers and sisters, we need to be like those identified in Scripture who understand the times and know what to do about it. (1 Chr. 12:32) They're not busy setting the next false date for the next failed Blood Moon hoax, but contemporizing God's Word for the present in an attempt to call back all believers before it is too late because of what is *really* on the cusp of fulfillment in our times. They understand the appropriate examples in Scripture of events past that are being replayed to an even fuller extent at present. But by "too late", I don't just mean the one-time Rapture, but the more often experienced method of "meeting Jesus" by death, the unexpected event that most often and instantly brings about an immediate meeting with Christ long before the supernatural removal of the Church.

The prophet's approach is an aspect of handling God's Word which is crucial for all of us to master, and especially crucial for making our handling of Scripture the most relevant to the times we live in and among the fellow believers in our sphere of influence. Most prophecy at present is not communicating something new, but properly applying what has already been given in the context of and application to the present.

### ***The Wise Man***

The wise man or woman sent by Jesus is equally valuable to the Church and their approach to Scripture a necessary addition to our toolbox.

Notice that the wise men of the Nativity Narrative also knew how to interpret God's signs for their times, but was accompanied by the compelling need to follow through and put it into personal practice.

*"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and **have come to worship Him.**" —  
Matthew 2:2*

Throughout the ages the false wise guys are most quickly identified as those who, instead of applying God's Word, spin their yarns to come up with things they claim are not addressed directly in God's Word. They do this to make the case that they alone possess

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the ability to interpret and apply a unique talent to exclusively provide the answers. This is most prominently on display in Jesus' encounter with the scribes and Pharisees during His last week in the Temple. (Mt 15:15-22) They didn't think Scripture provided a direct answer about paying taxes without their expertise to figure it out with their "between the lines" license. They make people believe that only they can really explain Scripture completely and thus invoke some kind of system where their followers become dependent on them, instead of independently growing into self-sufficiency in the Lord.

From the beginning, God established in His Word that wisdom is evidenced by those who put His Word in practice in combination with a godly fear of Him:

**"So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' — Deuteronomy 4:6**

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. — Proverbs 1:7**

But the New Testament takes it much deeper by declaring...

**but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. — 1 Corinthians 1:24**

This is why no biblically wise man or woman according to current biblical standards can qualify as such without being a faithful practitioner of the Word, because Christ Himself is our wisdom. James develops this to its fullest and plainest meaning:

**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. — James 3:13-17**

That closing condition to be "unwavering, without hypocrisy" really seals the deal on who is or is not biblically wise. Like Ezra, the hand of God is upon them because of what they have set their heart on to practice, not just study, examine, and extrapolate.

(By the way, all my fellow prophecy watchers, Revelation 17:9 says the mark of the beast can only be understood by those who have biblical wisdom, so how will you finally unravel that mystery apart from a Bible-practicing faith in Christ, your Wisdom?)

### **Three Approaches, But Where To Start?**

As touched on previously, as part of the greater Body of Christ, the Church needs all three positions filled by those who follow through and become qualified according to God's standards for each, but individually we need these three approaches for our own life and ministry to obtain a complete skillset where God's Word is concerned.

*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, **accurately handling the word of truth**. — 2 Timothy 2:15*

The end goal is to embrace this three-legged stool wherein we are not just educated in God's Word, but are faithful to practice it in every situation, and adept at properly applying it in the context of our times, not just personally faithful, but equipped to call both the unsaved and backslidden saved alike to the Lord. Of course, this is a lifetime commitment, and for those of us who have already allowed such a large span of life to pass by, where to even begin? How to make up for lost ground?

If we wanted to go from merely jogging occasionally to being a competitive marathon runner, we already know the answer is to begin regularly working out consistently on a small scale, slowly ramping things up. We'd most likely master getting around the neighborhood block before tackling the local charity 5K and 10K runs on our way to the whole enchilada. Or as I've often intoned to my weekly Bible study who think I'm the Jeopardy equivalent of all Bible trivia, "I'm not smarter than any of you, I've just been working at it harder and longer than you". Admittedly, achieving the full toolset of the scribe, wise man, and prophet is not going to be achieved quickly, so where to start? Which approach should we seek to master first?

I would suggest that there are two things you can immediately and consistently do to set yourself on this path, and as it turns out, if we don't stick with these approaches from the start to very end, we will inevitably fail, or worse, end up at the wrong place. You should make as your first and primary overriding rule for handling God's Word, "The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture".

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There's nothing wrong with commentaries, sermons or books in and of themselves until you allow them to take the place of God's authoritative Word. Accept from the outset that God's Word is whole, complete and self-explanatory, and always first attempt to find the answer with the aid of just your Bible dictionary and concordance. Go to the commentaries only as a last resort. Don't be misled by assertions that there might be something wrong with certain parts of the Bible, or that some of it is obsolete and no longer applicable, or that there is some sort of shortfall or "gap". (The worst is when it is asserted that the Old Testament has been replaced by the New and is therefore unnecessary.)

***All Scripture** is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; — 2 Timothy 3:16*

Yes, even the genealogies. No matter if you achieve the trifecta to become a formally academically educated prophet of God who becomes the human personification of biblical wisdom itself, never deviate from dogmatically believing and practicing that the best explainer of Scripture is Scripture itself. The absence of such is precisely why each of these positions become dismissive of the other in their negative extremes. They start slicing and dicing God's Word to elevate what they think is most important, eventually asserting that they alone can explain the myopia they themselves have created around their slice of the pizza.

But the second principle is equally important: No matter what you are reading in the Bible, always ask, "How is this teaching something about Jesus?"

Every person, place and thing provided in those nearly million words has been selected and guided by the Holy Spirit for the sole purpose of telling us something about Jesus. The lives of the good figures such as Joseph, David, Moses and the Prophets all teach about the character of Christ; the historical events all speak to either the way Christ works or His greater plan at work; there is nothing provided that is not somehow pointing to the Person, work or fulfillment of God's plan in Jesus Christ. When you do this, you can never end up dismissing even a syllable of Scripture.

This is where the bad scribes, less than fully wise men, and ultimate false prophets take the wrong fork in the exegetical road. They begin to handle small portions of the Word as if they are not actually connected to the Messiah, and it leads to the inevitable, gaping shortfalls which characterize the final state they find themselves in. They may have set

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their mind to achieve something, but unlike Ezra they have not set their hearts “to practice it”.

This is really evident in the Psalms, and is the place where the average believer most quickly see this phenomenon. David and the other writers are constantly and directly addressing the Messiah, but in reality this is taking place in every word of every chapter of every book of the Bible. We know this to be true, but so often fail to follow through personally.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. — John 1:1-5*

If you begin by always giving the priority over God’s Word to God’s Word and never fail to seek how it speaking of something important concerning Jesus, then as we add those tools from the scribe, wise man, and prophet we grow into that metaphorical marathon runner who actually becomes competitive. We will achieve the true and ultimate purpose of God’s Word in our life personally and our ministry corporately:

*For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, **and abides by it**, not having become a forgetful hearer but **an effectual doer**, this man will be blessed in what he does. — James 1:23-25*

*...the good hand of his God was upon him. For **Ezra set his heart** to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statues and ordinances in Israel”. – Ezra 7:9-10*

In Him,

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