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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 12: Using Extra-Biblical Resources**

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Over the last twelve weeks we’ve done quite a bit: we’ve discussed the bible’s divine and human origins, examined how we can categorize what we learn from the bible using Systematic and Biblical Theology, reviewed and employed the inductive study method, considered the basic divisions and genres of the bible, and worked with some specific interpretive tools like parallelism and linking words. Now we come to the last class where we will think about some of the extra-biblical (or, non-biblical) resources we can use to supplement our study of God’s word.

Even if you employ all of the methods and tools we’ve discussed in this class, the day will come when you want or need to **go “deeper”** in your bible study. **This should be an encouragement to you.** It means you’re interacting with the text in a more meaningful way, you’re maturing in your understanding of God’s word, and he is blessing you with **an appetite** for even more in your studies. Fortunately, God has provided wonderful bible commentaries, dictionaries, and other resources for us to use so that we might plumb even deeper depths of his Truth.

**Commentaries**

We’ll begin with Commentaries. Frankly, when many people think of Bible study tools, they only think of Bible commentaries. They imagine that all that is required in Bible study is to simply look up what is written in some type of commentary, and voila!- you are finished! You now know what the passage means.

Nothing could be farther from the truth! In fact, if you are going to use a Bible commentary it is best to **use it towards the end of your study**, rather than at the beginning.

Why? Because if all you do is use a Bible commentary all you know is the interpretation and conclusions of the commentary’s author - you will only be learning their opinions - and because you did not take the time to actually study the Bible for yourself, you will have no frame of reference, no way to judge the correctness of the interpretations offered to you in that commentary.

In other words, all you will be capable of doing is repeating what someone else has said, and won't even be able to tell if those opinions are correct! Far too much of what passes for "Bible teaching" today is nothing more than a passing around of someone else's views. So remember, study your bibles like we’ve taught for the last 12 weeks, and then look at the Bible commentary! We actually encourage all you do this, at some level, when we tell you to read the passage that is going to be preached on ahead of time. We want you to study that passage like we’ve talked about for the last 12 weeks and then on Sunday morning, check your interpretation as you listen to the preacher’s sermon.

That being said, **why even bother with a Bible commentary?** They are useful for a number of reasons. First of all, the better ones are written by acknowledged authorities on that particular book of the Bible, oftentimes men and women who have spent years and years studying that book in detail. So they definitely have something to share!

In addition Bible commentaries often **give details** about the historical period, the culture, the language, manners and customs, information that would take you much time to compile. Often commentaries will discuss difficult doctrinal or theological problems associated with a particular Bible passage. In short, the better commentaries place vast amounts of Biblical research at your fingertips.

Commentaries are also particularly useful for **checking your own work**. You can check several Bible commentaries to see if others understand and interpret a Bible passage the same way you do. If recognized authorities are saying one thing, but you are seeing something different, beware! People who claim to have "a new perspective" or "insights that no one else has" are usually wrong. Make sure that isn't you -- check your opinions and conclusions against the insights gathered by the people of God through the ages.

Commentaries can be broadly **divided into three types**: exegetical, homiletical, and devotional." Exegesis" can be defined as "the *practice* of and the set of *procedures* for discovering the author's intended meaning," I have been describing exegetical commentaries in my remarks so far.

Homiletical (or "preaching") commentaries are much more self-consciously focused upon making relevant applications of the text to the modern, contemporary world, and they commonly refer to events, ideas, and movements in contemporary culture. As such, they often have an immediate relevance, but they also can become outdated quickly as the culture changes. Most such commentaries are weak concerning an explanation of the text's meaning, compared to exegetical commentaries.

Devotional commentaries are often similar to homiletical, but their focus usually is more individualistic. Often, they are very impressionistic, that is involving general feelings and thoughts, rather than on facts. Devotional often comment at random on individual verses or portions of verses, but paying little or no attention to their context. But some are great, like morning and evening by CH Spurgeon and for the love of God by DA Carson.

So let’s work an example, turn to Genesis chapter 3:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

*He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” 2And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

*8And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” 10And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” 11He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” 13Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”*

*14The Lord God said to the serpent,*

*“Because you have done this,  
    cursed are you above all livestock  
    and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
    and dust you shall eat  
    all the days of your life.  
15I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
    and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
    and you shall bruise his heel.”*

*16To the woman he said,*

*“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;  
    in pain you shall bring forth children.  
Your desire shall be for your husband,  
    and he shall rule over you.”*

*17And to Adam he said,*

*“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
    and have eaten of the tree  
of which I commanded you,  
    ‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
    in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
    and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
19By the sweat of your face  
    you shall eat bread,  
till you return to the ground,  
    for out of it you were taken;  
for you are dust,  
    and to dust you shall return.”*

Now listen as I read a section from Inter Varsity Press’ New Bible Commentary on this passage:

*Man, woman, and serpent were then interrogated and sentenced by the divine inquisitor. God’s questions were designed to elicit confessions, not information; he knew perfectly well what they had done.*

*The long-term effects of sin then started to appear. The serpent was condemned to crawl and to constant warfare with mankind, the woman’s offspring (15). In that her offspring will crush the snake’s head, the latter will come off worse in the long battle. Thus, though this was a judgment on the snake, it was at the same time a promise to man. It has, therefore, traditionally been seen by Jews and Christians, as the first hint of a savior for mankind, and 3:15 is often called the ‘protoevangelion’ the ‘first gospel.’*

*Allusions to it in the NT include Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12. Within Genesis the promise to Abraham that ‘through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed’ (22:18) starts to make the vague promise of 3:15 more specific. It is also notable that this first judgment on sin is tinged with hope, something that recurs throughout Scripture (cf. 6:5-8), as God’s mercy outweighs his wrath (cf. Ex. 20:5-6).*

What insights did you gain from this commentary? (Let class answer)

If you’re looking for a good set of commentaries, I’d recommend the following:

* IVP’s New Bible Commentary, Edited by G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson and R.T. France
* The Tyndale OT and NT commentary series, published by William B. Erdmand Publishing
* The Bible Speaks Today Commentaries, published by IVP

Are there any other questions on commentaries?

**Bible Dictionaries**

Let’s move on to Bible Dictionaries. What are Bible Dictionaries? Well, have you ever used a "regular" dictionary? You simply look up a word (which is listed alphabetically) and the dictionary will give you information on the various shades of meaning of the word, where that word comes from, examples of its usage in a sentence, etc.

A Bible Dictionary is a lot like dictionaries you already know about - except that the entries (words) are words that might be meaningful for the study of the Bible.

A Bible Dictionary has entries for Biblical people (like David, Abraham, Moses, Jesus) - Biblical places (Jerusalem, Rome, Babylon, etc) - Biblical concepts (like faith, repentance, sacrifice) - Biblical events (like the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Exile, the Resurrection of Jesus) - and other types of information may be presented as well: outlines of Bible books, pictures, charts, diagrams, and the like.

The entries are usually brief - especially if the dictionary is only one volume - so if you need more in-depth information, you may need to check a Bible Encyclopedia, which is a lot like a Bible Dictionary, except that the entries are more lengthy and may also include lists of other references to consult on the subject (Bibliographies).

Why use a Bible Dictionary (or Bible Encyclopedia)? Its primary use is in researching specific Biblical subjects. A good Bible Dictionary will give you the essential facts, presented briefly; a Bible Encyclopedia will usually provide much more detail. Many commentaries and study Bibles may only deal with certain topics or subjects in passing. When you need to explore a topic in more detail, consult a dictionary or encyclopedia entry on the subject.

For example: perhaps you are studying the opening chapters of Genesis as we just did, and you’re wondering: where was the Garden of Eden located?

Pull down your Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia and look up the words "Eden", "garden", "paradise". If you looked up “Eden” in the New Bible Dictionary published by IVP you find this definition: Eden - “The place God made for Adam to live in, and from which Adam and Eve were driven after the Fall.” But you would also see an explanation of the derivation of the word, “Eden,” a discussion of the garden’s boundary rivers, the content of the garden, its neighboring territories, its possible locations, and even a parallel place called Dilmun that is discussed in Sumerian literature.

So I hope you can see that Bible dictionaries and Encyclopedias can be very helpful.

To choose a good Bible Dictionary/Bible Encyclopedia you should consider the following criteria:

REPUTATION: What is the reputation (reliability) both of the contributors as well as the publisher? What do you know of them? What is their theological point-of-view? Has the publisher released other reputable reference tools?

RECENCY: When was this reference first published? If it was first released many years ago, has it been revised? You need a reference tool that presents the most up-to-date information.

REFERENCES: Does this tool have Bibliographies that point you to more information on a subject? Do they quote (or cite) an adequate amount of Bible passages for you to investigate? Does it have indexes that cross-reference subjects to more than one location in the book?

RELEVANCY: Is this tool the right one for your needs? Enough detail - without being overwhelming? Does it require pre-requisite knowledge (such as Greek or Hebrew)? Is it a tool for scholars or specialists? Is it written from a particular perspective, or with a particular audience in mind?

There are several types of Bible Dictionaries/Encyclopedias:

**Single-volume references**: These are convenient to use (and less expensive) but far less detailed than multi-volume works.

**Multi-volume references**: Much more detailed and authoritative, the best of these put vast resources of Bible scholarship at your fingertips.

**Hebrew/Greek Lexicons**: These explain the meanings of specific words in the original languages of Scripture. While some can be used profitably by beginners, most require some knowledge of the original languages, as the words will be listed according to the alphabets of those languages, in their special scripts. If you don't know the original languages, then it will be challenging to look up words.

Lexicons online…

**Theological Dictionaries**: These focus on words that have important theological or doctrinal meanings. Some of them require knowledge of the original languages, some do not. As you might expect, these dictionaries often reflect particular interpretations of the Bible, so investigate the focus and theological orientation before you buy/use.

**Specialized Dictionaries**: These deal with specialized subjects - ancient or Church history, Archaeological finds, worship and liturgy. They provide great detail but are much more restricted in their focus.

Some popular choices in Bible Dictionaries/Encyclopedias would include (but not be limited to) the following:

* **The New Bible Dictionary** (Inter-Varsity Press, 1982). This is a very good one-volume Bible Dictionary, written from an Evangelical perspective. Many British scholars provided material for this dictionary; often those of us in the USA are not familiar with them, but can gain significant insights nevertheless.
* **The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary** (Harper, 1996). Also a one-volume Bible Dictionary, written from a less conservative point-of-view.
* **The Anchor Bible Dictionary** (Doubleday, 1992) - Don't be confused by the title that says “dictionary”, this reference is the best general, multi-volume Bible Encyclopedia in print. In my opinion, it is also **the most scholarly**. If you want only one of these types of resources, and want the best, this is what you should purchase. Conservatives note: if you use this resource, be aware that it will not necessarily endorse your viewpoints.
* **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** (Eerdmans, 1979-1988). It is much like the Anchor Bible Dictionary, but written from an Evangelical point-of-view. It is in 4 volumes. Although it reflects my personal views more than the Anchor BD, I am still a great fan of the latter.

**Questions? Study Bibles?**

**Conclusion:**

At the very beginning of this Core Seminar, twelve weeks ago, I stated that it was our deliberate goal to foster and equip a desire within you for God’s word. There is no category of healthy Christian living that does not regularly study the bible and commit it to memory. Bible Study is a normal part of the Christian life.

I hope that this class has helped to make this discipline more desirable, effective, and useful for you so that you may have many, many years of seeing in Scripture and the glories of God’s plan to save his people and judge his enemies through Jesus Christ. God bless you all.

Amen