

Feeding Yourself From the Word of God **Workshop#1: Before You Begin** (D. Parlett)

Welcome to Workshop #1:

The Goal of this workshop is to equip you to 'Feed Yourself from the Word of God'. I hope to do that in two basic ways:

1. By helping you learn simple but effective Bible study methods.
2. By practicing our methods on actual verses and passages.

However, a third very important ingredient is needed: Your hard work and faithfulness to consistently be in the Word. Perhaps accountability with another individual or a small group will create the right environment for you to be consistent in your study of the Word. Although this study could be self-guided, I find it's a lot more fun and more productive if you do it with others.

In this workshop, we will cover:

1. The Prerequisites of Bible Study.
2. The Foundation of Bible Study.
3. Choosing a Course of Bible Study.

Introduction

Many years ago at my university, when I first moved out of the dorms and began living in an apartment I began to realize that my roommates and I needed to feed ourselves and not just order pizza all the time. We were all novices in the kitchen. We took turns nervously attempting simple culinary feats for dinner each night. One of my roommates, on his turn, served us a big white hunk of cold raw tofu. Needless to say, we did not find it the most appetizing entrée we had ever tried.

Well, when it comes to feeding ourselves from the Word of God many of us are just as inexperienced. We are hungry but we are not sure how to go about getting nourished. My hope is that this simple program will get you started in the right direction. It is not fancy. It is not complicated. Yet, it will contain just about all you need to uncover the life-giving words of truth in the Bible. Preparing any meal requires you to first have a few basic utensils. So, let's first look at what you need before you begin. Not surprisingly, it has to do with your heart.

A. The Prerequisites of Bible Study

A Hungry Heart. Have you heard this saying? "You can give a person a fish and they'll eat for a meal. If you teach a person to fish they will eat for a lifetime". In both these scenarios there is an assumption. People need to eat regularly. If we don't, we get hungry.

But are you hungry to hear from God? Is there a craving to have Him teach you and mold you and give you the truths that will set you free? Is your soul not satisfied unless it has been satisfied by the spiritual food of the Word? Do you need to hear from God about specific situations you find yourself in?

It is important that we have a strong desire to understand and apply the Bible to our lives. Food tastes and smells better when we are hungry, doesn't it? In the same way, our time in the Word will be better if we are hungry to hear from God. So then, "you can give a Christian a sermon and they'll feed from the Word of God for a day. If you teach them to feed themselves from the Word of God, they'll feed for a lifetime". Are you ready to pig out?

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A Disciplined Heart. We need to be willing to work hard. I know as an American I am used to convenience and ease: instant this and instant that. The Bible, however, does not surrender many of its blessings easily. The old saying, "The more you put into it, the more you get out of it!" applies here. A few basic techniques plus a lot of sweat will yield a lot of results for your personal Bible study. I want you to read the article I've included with this week's lesson. It's simply about a man and a fish but it has a lot to tell us about the need for a persistent, disciplined heart and the life change that can come from it. (Read the Solid Food article before answering the questions / exercises at end).

An Obedient Heart. It is very important that our ultimate desire is to apply and obey what we learn in Scripture. In our minds we can know what the Bible says but it is a whole other thing to do what it says. Mark Twain is supposed to have said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me. It's the parts I do understand!" Whether he said it or not, he is expressing a common reaction to the Bible: "I know what it says and I don't like it!" Christians, on the other hand, should have a hunger to have the Bible guide and change them (James 1:22-25). The goal of Bible Study is Application!!

B. The Foundation of Bible Study

Although there are many Bible Study methods, there seems to be a basic template or pattern that all of them use to one degree or another. This pattern is also good because it leads us, step by step, to that important goal of Application!

1. **Observation:** What does it say? (Many of our methods will be different methods of Observation)
2. **Interpretation:** What does it mean (generally)? (The Basics of Interpretation will help us here).
3. **Application:** What does it mean to me? (This will be the personal application part).

We will go into more depth on each of these steps but let's get this basic structure set in our mind. Why don't you try these steps with a very brief example? Say, Matthew 7:6b "do not throw your pearls to pigs" or something else short like that. Take notes. Share your insights with someone else.

C. Choosing a Course of Bible Study

1. I would like to encourage you to commit to a course of study as you through this workshop series. It may be something you are already doing. It may be something you want to do. We will try our new Bible study techniques out on it and hopefully discover something to share with others. Most of all, we hope to hear from God.

2. Your section should be short and doable (able to be read in 15 minutes or less). Don't bite off more than you can chew. Commit to studying it a minimum of 3 hours a week. Find a regular place that is conducive to study and prayer and free from distractions. Keep notes.

3. Suggestions:

Study the sermon of your own church in depth (focus on the related passages of Scripture).

Short New Testament sections: Philippians; James; Colossians; the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6 &7); the Parables in Luke; a character study (Philip, Peter, Stephen, Barnabas, Paul in the book of Acts,).

Short Old Testament sections: selected Psalms (e.g. The Psalms of David); selected Proverbs; short portions of Daniel or Nehemiah; Jonah; a character study (Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Noah, Moses, David, Daniel, Elijah, etc.).

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I am sure there are many other good short passages to start your study on. It might just be a few chapters somewhere. Have something specific.

4. Don't expect to mine all the gold of a passage in your first time through. Relax and explore the parts that interest you. One of the great rewards of Bible study is coming back to a section and finding new inspiration you didn't see before.

5. Ready, get set, GOOOOOO!!

Begin by reading section many, many times; get familiar with the section.

Find background information on your book: author, date, historical and cultural context and so on (often available in Study Bibles).

Begin to make very basic, general observations about the passage (don't go verse by verse yet). Take lots of notes.

D. Next Workshop (#2):

1. Bring things you learned or that encouraged you.
2. Next time we will look at: **Bible Study tools**.

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E. Questions / Exercises:

1. Why do you think the prerequisites of Bible study are a Hungry, Disciplined and Obedient Heart?

2. **Please read the Solid Food Article.** Obviously this can be an analogy of how we should be studying the Word of God. Keep that in mind as you answer these questions:

- A. At first the author thought he had seen everything about the fish in 10 minutes. Why didn't he? How would this apply to our own Bible study?
- B. Why did drawing the fish help the author see more? What kinds of things could accomplish the same goal for our Bible study?
- C. In what ways did Professor Agassiz help this student?
- D. In what ways did his study of fish permanently effect the author?
- E. Why was the odor of the specimen bottles fragrant to the author by the end of his experience?
- F. What else did you learn from this article especially as it might apply to Bible study?

Remember the phrase, "**Look at your fish!**"

3. What are the three basic steps of Bible study? Have you tried them out on a single verse such as the suggested one above?

4. Which course of study have you chosen and why?

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Observation: Solid Food Article

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the later I replied that while I wished to be well-grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specifically to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic, “Very well,” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

“Take this fish,” he said, “and look at it; we call it a Haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks, half-eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish was infectious; and though this alcohol had “a very ancient and fish-like smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still, I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not comment itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of *eau de cologne* would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and I looked with anxiety for a return of a normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, and hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face -ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, as a three-quarters view -just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my fingers down its throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me -I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words he added, “Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me; the fringed gill-arches and moveable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then with an air of disappointment:

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“You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued, more earnestly, “you haven’t seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again; look again.” And he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish? But now I set myself to the task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor’s criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and towards its close, the professor inquired, “Do you see it yet?”

“No,” I replied. “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.”

“That is next best,” said he earnestly, “but I won’t hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.”

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but also, without reviewing my new discoveries I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by the Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring: here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

“Do you perhaps mean,” I asked, “that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?”

His thoroughly pleased, “Of course, of course!” repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically –as he always did –upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

“Oh, look at your fish!” he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

“That is good, that is good!” he repeated, “But that is not all; go on.” And so for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. “Look, look, look,” was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had –a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterwards, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the blackboard. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately craw-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was as much amused as any at our experiments. He looked at the fishes. “Haemulons, every one of them,” he said; “Mr. _____ drew them.

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old six-inch worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought into review; and whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz’s training in the method of observing facts in their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

“Facts are stupid things,” he would say, “until brought into connection with some general law.”

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

Reprinted from Paul Cox’s *Solid Food Study Guide*. Author Unknown