

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 6: How to Use Commentaries

I. Introduction:

Like a good sermon, devotional book, or counselor a commentary serves as a gift to church. Gleaning from the mind of knowledgeable scholars, they can provide profound insight which will enhance our understanding of the text.

- Why might some people be hesitant to use commentaries?
- How can commentaries be helpful?
- What would you say to someone who says, “I don’t need a commentary so long as I have my Bible”?

II. The Usefulness of Commentaries:

- A. They often impart valuable historical/background information which you would not acquire through normal observation.
 - B. They often provide some very detailed word studies, often drawing from extra biblical resources.
 - C. They give you good leads on other books or passages which may answer your questions.
 - D. When there is a controversial passage, they will explain the different possibilities and give guidance for the best one.
 - E. They can be used to “check” your interpretation. In other words, they will help you to discern if you are way off in left field with your conclusions.
 - F. Like good sermons, they can be extremely devotional and helpful in internalizing the text.
- Can you think of any other benefits of using a commentary?

III. Marks of a Good Commentary:

- A. Is the commentary exegetical (a study of a text), homiletical (a sermon in print), or both? For those students serious about interpreting the Bible, you want someone who will help you to answer your questions. Therefore, what you really want in a commentary is exegesis.
- B. Is the commentary based on the original language? Does the author have a working knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, and are the original languages the real source of his comments? If the author does not, then there is little they can add to your study. Do not worry if you don't know the languages. Even if the author throws out Greek and Hebrew words, you can "read around" the words to get a source of the meaning.
- C. When the text has more than one possible meaning, does the author discuss all possible meanings and then give clear reasons for his interpretive choice?
- D. Does the author discuss a textual critical problem? In other words, when you notice in your margin "some manuscripts do not include . . ." does the author bring it up?
- E. Does the author offer important historical background of the text in important places?
- F. Does the author give you bibliographic information so that you can engage in further study?
- G. Does the introduction to the commentary give you enough historical information so that you can have a good sense of the occasion of the book?¹

IV. When to use a Commentary:

"You go to a commentary after you have done your own work: the reason you eventually consult a commentary is to find answers to the content questions that have arisen in your own study. At the same time, of course, the commentary will alert you to questions you failed to ask, but perhaps you should have."²

- What is the danger of using a commentary too early?
- Conversely, what might be the danger of not going to a commentary at all?

¹ Fee and Stuart p. 247-8.

² Ibid. p. 248.

V. Mistakes We can Make with Commentaries:

A. *We go to them too early.* If you go to a commentary too early you train yourself to let the scholar do the thinking for you. Over the long run this will lead you to spend more time in the commentary than in the Word, replacing thoughtful observation with barrowed insight.

B. *Using Too Few Commentaries:*

Proverbs 18:17 The first to plead his case seems just, Until another comes and examines him.

One commentary can make a compelling case for a certain interpretation, but it will remain unchallenged in your mind until you garner another point of view. While most commentaries are in general agreement they will debate on the meaning of certain key passages. Thus, using a variety of commentaries will give you a well rounded perspective of the debate.

C. *Using Too Many Commentaries.* Using too many commentaries can paralyze the reader. Unable to process all of the nuances of the arguments or feeling overwhelmed by some of the technical points, the reader will be tempted to throw their hands in the air and give up.

D. *We can rely on one of them too heavily.* When I was in seminary there was a joke about the new MacArthur Study Bible. Apparently, they printed the notes in red letters. While John MacArthur is an excellent interpreter of the text, he is not infallible. Don't allow the esteem of a certain teacher nor the quality of his comments lead you to blindly accept them as authoritative. You still have a responsibility to interpret the text for yourself (***Acts 17:11***).

E. *We are afraid to disagree with them.* There is nothing that says that commentaries are always right. In most cases, if you have diligently performed your exegesis, you will find that your conclusions match those of the better commentaries. However, there are times when you have to "stand on your own." If you find that your conclusions do not match a commentary, your first instinct should be to carefully reassess your interpretations. We should not be quick to discard the insights of patient and wise scholars, none the less, there are times when we have to stand by what we believe the text is teaching.

- F. *We take their word for it.* It's not enough to read a stated conclusion we need to do our best to see how the commentator arrives at that conclusion. Only then can we weigh the strength of their arguments and conclusions.
- G. *We are careless in our selection of commentaries.* A bad commentary can lead you an errant direction in your study. Some of the academics who publish their commentaries have a low view of inspiration and seem bent on pleasing their colleagues in the academy rather than standing for the truth. Other commentaries can be written with a decisive agenda to prove a certain point.

In addition, we should take great care and caution in our use of online commentaries. Just because they are free does not make them worth it.

VI. How to Get Started:

For those of you who are serious about bible study let me recommend the following resources. In order to help you appreciate the nuances of each, I have included their commentary on *John 3:16*:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

- A. *The MacArthur Study Bible*: This is a clear, straightforward study bible. The simplicity and clarity of his explanations are the strength of this resource. In addition, he does a wonderful job of cross referencing the reader to other passages which may illumine the reader. You can purchase this resource for \$31.99 at Christianbook.com.

3:16 For God so loved the world. The Son's mission is bound up in the supreme love of God for the evil, sinful "world" of humanity (cf. 6:32, 51; 12:47; *see note on 1:9*; *see note on Matt. 5:44, 45*) that is in rebellion against Him. The word "so" emphasizes the intensity or greatness of His love. The Father gave His unique and beloved Son to die on behalf on sinful men (*see note on 2 Cor. 5:21*). **everlasting life.** *See note on v. 15*; cf. 17:3; 1 John 5:20.

- B. *The ESV Study Bible*: This is an extremely thorough study bible with detailed notes and introductions. One of the strengths of this Study Bible is that it raises awareness and addresses a number of the key textual debates. The articles in the back of the

Some have been extremely informative as well. You can purchase this resource for \$31.99 at Christianbook.com.

16 Here is the most famous summary of the gospel in the entire Bible. **For** connects to v. 15 and explains what happened to make it possible that someone can “have eternal life” (v. 15), that is, through believing in Christ. **God so loved the world** was an astounding statement in that context because the OT and other Jewish writings had spoken only of God's love for his people Israel. God's love for “the world” made it possible for “whoever” (v. 15) believes in Christ, not Jews alone, to have eternal life. God's love for the world was not mere sentiment but led to a specific action: he **gave his only Son**, which John elsewhere explains as sending him to earth as a man (v. 17) to suffer and die and thereby to bear the penalty for sins (see note on 1 John 2:2; cf. Rom. 3:25). On “only Son,” see note on John 1:14, which contains the same Greek phrase. The purpose of giving his Son was to make God's great gift of eternal life available to anyone—to **whoever believes in him**, that is, whoever personally trusts in him (see note on 11:25). **Not perish** means not perish in eternal judgment, in contrast to having **eternal life**, the life of abundant joy and immeasurable blessing in the presence of God forever. Those who “believe in” Christ **have** that “eternal life” and already experience its blessings in this present time, not yet fully, but in some significant measure. « Less

C. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*: If you buy one commentary series this is the one. The information is insightful and accessible for any earnest Bible Student. You can get the 12 Volume Set on Christianbook.com for \$129.99 or you can get the CD-ROM for \$75.

16 Commentators are divided as to whether vv. 16-21 are a direct continuation of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus or whether they represent only the author's comment on Jesus' words. In either case, they express the most important message of the Gospel (emphasized elsewhere in many ways)—that salvation is a gift received only by believing God for it. The nature of belief is implied in the illustration of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (v. 14). Belief consists of accepting something, not doing something. The result of belief is that one receives eternal life. He is freed from condemnation and lives in a relation of total honesty with God, for he does not fear having his real self exposed.

"Eternal," the new life God gives, refers not solely to the duration of existence but also to the quality of life as contrasted with futility. It is a deepening and growing experience. It can never be exhausted in any measurable span of time, but it introduces a totally new quality of life. The believer becomes imperishable; he is free from all condemnation, he is approved by God. The verb "perish" depicts the opposite of salvation. It is used of death as opposed to life (Mark 3:6, transitive), "destroy" as opposed to preserve (1Cor 1:19), "loss" as opposed to win or gain (2John 8). It may be used of sheep that have gone astray (Matt 10:6) or a son who has wandered from his father's house (Luke 15:24). Its use here clearly implies that those without God are

hopelessly confused in purpose, alienated from him in their affections, and futile in their efforts. Positive belief in Christ is necessary; all that one has to do to perish is nothing. To perish is to fail completely of fulfilling God's purpose and consequently to be excluded forever from his fellowship.

The presentation of the good news of God's love offers only two options: to believe or to perish. Eternal life, which is accepted by believing, is a gift of God and brings with it the fullest blessings God can bestow. To perish does not mean to cease to exist; it means to experience utter failure, futility, and loss of all that makes existence worthwhile. Its use with reference to Judas in John 17:12 is a vivid illustration.

D. For those of you studying an individual book, allow me to direct you to <http://www.bestcommentaries.com>. This website provides helpful reviews and ratings for just about every biblical commentary in print. In addition, the appendix found at the end of the study provides some recommendations for individual books of the Bible.

VII. Application:

The best time to use commentaries is after you have made your observations and performed your word studies. My advice is to go to a commentary with an agenda. Take the exegetical questions raised from your observations, and seek to get answers from the commentaries. In addition, watch for observations made in the commentaries which you may have overlooked in your studies. Finally, after surveying the commentaries, reanalyze your passage with the additional information you may have gleaned from the commentaries.

VIII. Assignment:

Consult at least two commentaries (e-mail me if you want some) on *Titus 3:4-7* and answer the exegetical questions you asked when you made observations on the text.

IX. Conclusion:

By God's providence He has given us scholars to bless the church by providing enriching commentary on various books of the Bible. For many a student, these commentaries serve as knowledgeable friends whom they can bounce their ideas off of and move ever closer to the pure meaning of the text. While excellent tools, these books should be used judiciously with the understanding that God wants us to understand the text for ourselves.

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.

Appendix 1

Recommended Commentary List

The following comes from bestcommentaries.com which I found to be a helpful website.

Wenham, Gordon J.	Genesis (2 Vols)	WBC
Stuart, Douglas	Exodus	NAC
Wenham, Gordon J.	The Book of Leviticus	NICOT
Cole, R. Dennis	Numbers	NAC
Craigie, Peter C.	The Book of Deuteronomy	NICOT
Howard, David M.	Joshua	NAC
Block, Daniel I.	Judges-Ruth	NAC
Hubbard, Robert L.	The Book of Ruth	NICOT
Tsumura, David Toshio	The First Book of Samuel	NICOT
Hubbard, Robert L.	First and Second Kings	EvBC
Selman, Martin J.	1 & 2 Chronicles (2 Vols)	TOTC
Fensham, F. Charles	The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah	NICOT
Finley, Thomas J.	Joel, Amos, Obadiah	WEC
Alexander, T. Desmond; Baker, David W.; Waltke, Bruce K.	Obadiah, Jonah, Micah	TOTC
Waltke, Bruce K.	A Commentary on Micah	
Patterson, Richard D.	Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah	WEC
Taylor, Richard A.; Clendenen, E. Ray	Haggai and Malachi	NAC
Merrill, Eugene H.	Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi - An Exegetical Commentary	
Carson, D. A.	Matthew (2 Vols)	EBC

Chisholm, Jr., Robert B.	Interpreting the Minor Prophets	
Hiebert, D. Edmond	The Gospel of Mark: An Expositional Commentary	
Bock, Darrell L.	Luke (2 Vols)	BECNT
Carson, D. A.	The Gospel According to John	PNTC
Kent, Jr., Homer A.	Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in the Book of Acts	
Moo, Douglas J.	The Epistle to the Romans	NICNT
Fee, Gordon D.	The First Epistle to the Corinthians	NICNT
Belleville, Linda	2 Corinthians	IVPNTC
Kent, Jr., Homer A.	The Freedom of God's Sons: Studies in Galatians	
Hoehner, Harold W.	Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary	
Fee, Gordon D.	Paul's Letter to the Philippians	NICNT
Kent, Jr., Homer A.	Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon	
Hiebert, D. Edmond	The Thessalonian epistles: A call to readiness	
Mounce, William D.	Pastoral Epistles (Vol 46)	WBC
Kent, Jr., Homer A.	The Epistle to the Hebrews	
Hiebert, D. Edmond	James	
Hiebert, D. Edmond	First Peter	
Hiebert, D. Edmond	Second Peter and Jude: An Expositional Commentary	
Thomas, Robert L.	Revelation (2 Vols)	WEC