

A
MESSAGE OF HOPE,
comfort and freedom in Jesus Christ

“Back to Basics” by Kyle Murphy

In recent months, I have begun a journey through some Bible studies published by Jen Wilkin. Jen is an author and Bible teacher who advocates for Bible literacy. She has a passion to see others become articulate and committed followers of Jesus, with a clear understanding of why they believe what they believe, grounded in the Word of God. Her Bible studies help answer the question, “What does the Bible say about God?”

In addition to incorporating Jen Wilkin’s Bible studies into my continuous quest for spiritual growth, I listen to a podcast that she co-hosts. One of the biggest takeaways I have had is the idea that application is not the primary purpose for reading a biblical text. That seems to be the way many of us approach the Bible. We read it and immediately look to how we can apply it to our lives. I have come to realize this is not the proper way to study the Bible and am seeing the value of what is presented in Jen’s publications as the proper steps of biblical study which are (in order): comprehension, interpretation, and then, application.

She notes, if the first two steps are skipped, it is likely the wrong conclusions will be reached in regard to the proper application of the text. For me, this insight has helped to bring about a whole new way of approaching the Bible. My last two read-throughs of the Bible have been through this lens of discovering God, rather than that of application. In this edition of the newsletter, I would like to share with you some of what Jen Wilkins explains in her book, “God of Creation.”

The Bible is not a book about self-discovery; it is a book about God-discovery. The Bible is God’s declared intent to make Himself known to us. In learning about the character of God in Scripture, we will experience self-discovery, but it must not be the object of our study. The object must be God Himself. This focus changes the way we study. We look first for what a passage can teach us about the character of God, allowing self-discovery to be the by-product of God-discovery. This is a much better approach because there can be no true knowledge of self apart from knowledge of God. So when I read the account of Jonah, I see first that God is just and faithful to His Word – He is faithful to proclaim His message to Nineveh no matter what. I see second that I, by contrast (and much like Jonah), am unjust to my fellow man and unfaithful to God’s word. Thus, knowledge of God leads to true knowledge of self, which leads to repentance and transformation. So are confirmed Paul’s words in Romans 12:2 that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The author goes on to provide some excellent tips and tricks to becoming a better Bible student. I believe there is always room for growth in our walk with God and in our Bible study methods (which is how we learn about Him). I entitled this article as “Back to Basics” because I believe we can all benefit from refining our study skills, regardless of where we are at in our walk with God – whether we have been Christians for a month, a year, or decades. Discussing how to read the Bible might seem like something very basic, but it can be helpful – at times – to go back to basics. I hope you glean something from what it shared here that leads you to becoming a better student of the Bible. Returning again to Jen Wilkin, she explains:

Being a good student entails following good study habits. When we sit down to read, most of us like to read through a particular passage and then find a way to apply it to our everyday lives. We may read through an entire book of the Bible over a period of time, or we may jump around from place to place. I want to suggest a different approach, one that may not always yield immediate application, comfort, or peace, but one that builds over time a cumulative understanding of the message of Scripture.

Imagine yourself reading receiving a letter in the mail. The envelope is handwritten, but you don't glance at the return address. Instead you tear open the envelope, flip to the second page, read two paragraphs near the bottom, and set the letter aside. Knowing that if someone bothered to send it to you, you should act on its contents in some way, you spend a few minutes trying to figure out how to respond to what the section you just read had to say. What are the odds you will be successful?

No one would read a letter this way. But this is precisely the way many of us read our Bibles. We skip past reading the "envelope" – Who wrote this? To whom is it written? When was it written? Where was it written? – and then try to determine the purpose of its contents from a portion of the whole. What if we took time to read the envelope? What if, after determining the context for its writing, we started at the beginning and read to the end? Wouldn't that make infinitely more sense?

In our study, we will take this approach to Scripture. We will begin by placing our text in its historical and cultural context. We will "read the envelope." Then we will read through the entire text multiple times, so that we can better determine what it wants to say to us. We will read repetitively so that we might move through three critical stages of understanding: comprehension, interpretation, and application.

A person who applies the creation story can tell us that because God creates in an orderly fashion, we too should live well-ordered lives. Knowledge of God gleaned through comprehension of the text and interpretation of its meaning can now be applied to my life in a way that challenges me to be different.

It is vital to the learning process that you allow yourself to move through the three stages of understanding on your own, without the aid of commentaries or study notes. The first several times you read a passage, you will probably be confused. This is actually a good thing. Allow yourself to feel lost, to dwell in the "I don't know." It will make the moment of discovery stick. Nobody likes to feel lost or confused, but it is an important step in the acquisition and retention of understanding.

Approaching God's Word with a God-centered perspective, with context, and with care takes effort and commitment. It is study for the long-term. Some days your study may not move you emotionally or speak to an immediate need. You may not be able to apply a passage at all. But what if ten years from now, in a dark night of the soul, that passage suddenly opens up to you because of the hard work you have done today? Wouldn't your long-term investment be worth it?

In Matthew 13, we see Jesus begin to teach in parables. He tells seven deceptively simple stories that leave His disciples struggling for understanding – dwelling in the "I don't know," if you will. After the last parable, He turns to them and asks, "Have you understood all these things?" (v. 51). Despite their apparent confusion, they answer out of their earnest desire with, "Yes" (v. 51). Jesus tells them that their newfound understanding makes them "like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasure as well as old" (13:52, NIV).

A storeroom, as Jesus indicates, is a place for keeping valuables over a long period of time for use when needed. Faithful study of God's Word is a means for filling our spiritual storerooms with truth, so that in our hour of need we can bring forth both the old and the new as a source of rich provision.

My hope and prayer for you is that you will be impacted by this teaching in the same way I have been. I pray you, too, will incorporate new methods and practices in the way you study the Bible – methods and practices that will lead to a better comprehension of the Bible and, more importantly, God. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Blessing

"The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

(Numbers 6:24-26; Romans 15:13 NIV)