

Bible Studies

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[0 : 00] As Phil said, what I am hoping to do this evening is talk to us about the need, how to improve Bible study, but we'll start off with why we need to improve them at all.

I think it's really important to think about how we study, how we can improve how we study the Bible, because unless we get better at it, I think we will, in the end, and I'm talking to you about decades, not weeks, stop genuinely believing the Bible is God's word.

Now that's a strong statement, it's my trademark to be provocative to make you think, but I will try to justify that assertion, and you can see at the end whether you think I've persuaded you that we will stop believing the Bible is God's word if we don't get better, and we'll need to start working on that. But let's begin with an exercise for you, which you can do either in groups, but some of the groups look quite big, so you might have to do it in some threes and fours around the corner of a table for the big groups.

But think about what you think a good study should do. It can be a group study or a personal study, but what would make you think at the end of a study that was a really good study? I'm not going to ask for feedback, so you can be absolutely honest, and if you think just surviving to the end of a study makes you a good study, say so.

[1 : 18] I'll just give you three or four minutes to talk about that. Right, that was just meant to be a taster to get our brains in here. So let me stop you there. Hold that door.

Hold that door. I heard what you say. Right. So what makes a good study? As we think about this, if you feel you've been doing everything wrong, don't panic.

This session is a result of over 50 years of getting things wrong, as those of you who have had the misfortune of being in my groups will testify. Amazingly, despite the fact that we are feeble, weak human beings who get all sorts of things wrong, our wonderful, great God still uses our pathetic efforts.

But I still think that getting better is vital, as we'll see. So what should a good Bible study achieve? I've got a reader to read Mark 4, 14 to 20, if they could do that.

Let me just, by way of introduction, say, this is Jesus' explanation of the parable of the soils in Mark chapter 4. You know the parable very well. The sower goes, and the sows what's received.

[2 : 30] The disciples go to who Jesus explains. Okay, so this is Mark chapter 4, verses 14 to 20. The sower sows the word, and these are the ones along the path where the word is sown.

When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground. The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.

And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. Then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Thank you.

[3 : 36] So, what we're talking about here is the Bible. What the sower is sowing is the word, says Jesus in his explanation. And the one I want to focus on is the very last one, the good soil.

In good soil, amongst God's children, the word bears fruit, a lot of fruit. It won't do it in every study, so don't think every study must bear fruit.

It won't do it quickly. But over time, as we study the Bible, the word should bear fruit. If we're doing it properly, if we're studying the Bible properly.

The next parable in Mark 4 actually says it will take time. So they don't expect the fruit to come quickly. But fruit, I think, means Christians growing, non-Christians becoming Christians. Everything to do with a changed person happens because of the word of God. It's very important to realize that Jesus is saying the word does this.

[4 : 36] It must be the word that changes people, not us. If we try hard, if I think I'm doing a Bible study, it's not changing me, so let me try hard, let me come up with some good resolutions. Let me come up with some applications as a result of my Bible study, and then do my best to live up to them and get my friends to challenge me if I'm not.

That's not the word working in us. That's us at work, not God. The important thing to realize is it's not changed people that characterizes a good Bible study.

It's the word itself changing people that makes a good study. Let me say that again because I think that's quite controversial in this day and age. It is not changed people that characterizes a good study.

There are all sorts of ways of changing people that are not helpful. What a good Bible study should do is the word itself changes us. We'll think later about how.

The second passage I want to look at before we think further is Psalm 19, verses 7-10. By way of introduction, this is the Psalm of David, and when David talks about the law, the law, meaning the first five books of the Old Testament, can be the only part of the Bible that David had.

[5 : 54] The rest of the Bible hasn't been written at this stage. So when he says the law, you need to take the whole Bible. Psalm 19, verse 7. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to the desires of aid than gold, even much fine gold.

Sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Thank you. So what should the Bible do? It should revive our souls. It should make our hearts rejoice.

It should be something we love doing. What does that mean? In churches like St. Helens, where I've been for the last 45 years or so, and I suspect, therefore, damage, we don't talk a lot about the Bible making us rejoice or reviving our souls.

[7 : 02] I think it's the thrill that comes when we understand more about our God and what he's doing as we study his work. If we genuinely understand more about God, it will be thrilling, because our God is a wonderful God, and that will revive our souls and make us rejoice.

When I say learning more about God, it may be observing things in the Bible that we didn't know previously. I suspect for most of us who have been Christians for any length of time at all, it's much more likely to be understanding what we thought we knew better or more profoundly.

Again, it won't be every study, it won't be every person in every study, but over time, for God's real people, the Word should rejoice our hearts and revive our souls.

Let me give you an example. When I was doing, I gather you did a Bible overview last year, which I was thrilled by. When I was at St. Helens, I spent a lot of time heading up the Bible overview in our Bible study groups there, which we did in the third year.

And about eight, nine years ago, there was a girl in one of the groups which reached Isaiah 40, which is about God's immense rescue from exile that's going to happen. And I was sitting in the group that evening, and this girl, who's all those wonderful people you all wanted to have in the group, who sort of let her feelings and thoughts be known widely, was saying how she used to get, she would spend the whole year up to that point getting really frustrated, because God had made these amazing promises to Israel.

[8 : 34] They said, if you obey, you will get these promises. And Israel had sinned time and time and time again, as you see. She said, at the end of my prayer, every week I'd slam my bag shut, because I was so angry with Israel.

But this evening, having seen the passage about God at work, rescuing people, doing everything that was necessary, ensuring that the fulfillment of the promises rested on him alone, she was absolutely bouncing off the walls of St. Helens.

She was so exultantly excited by what she'd seen. She'd been at St. Helens for two and a half years by that point. If my memory serves me correctly, she'd come to us from a good church beforehand.

So, the fact that God does everything, wouldn't have been new truth to her. But seeing it in the context of what happens when he doesn't do it, failure after failure, after failure, after failure, she got it, she understood it.

And she was thrilled by that. And I think that's what David means when he says, the Lord of the Lord, the Word of God, revives our souls and rejoices our hearts when we see things like that.

[9 : 43] Again, the joy that comes from studying the Bible must come from the Word itself. Not because we as people or our leaders try to create a fizz or buzz or anything like that in the group.

In the study that I was sitting in, not going to be the state, nothing of that sort was of it. The girl had got excited by the study she had done. Our goal is not joy. Our goal is to study the Bible in such a way that it produces the joy.

Why do you study that and achieve this matter? I think it's vital because our studies aren't like this. That over time we'll stop being Christians who genuinely believe in the Bible.

Let me now try to justify this assertion. Many of us will have come across the idea or the concept that when it comes to a philosophy or an idea or something like that we have generations of believers.

The first generation really believed the philosophy really believed the idea. The second generation say they believe it and talk about it a lot but they don't really believe it. And the third generation stopped believing it at all.

[10 : 52] Generations here doesn't mean this for human generations are not just about you and your children and your grandchildren but generations in the sense of transmission of the idea. The first generation are those who really get it and then as they tell other people and persuade other people at some point the transmission is imperfect and you get the second generation who hear the theory but they don't really understand the facts and they talk about it.

And then they pass because they don't really understand what they're talking about they pass it on even more imperfectly and the third generation just completely uninterested who don't even talk about it.

It's slightly like Chinese whispers except it's not information that's being lost down for generations but convictions. It's true of believing that the Bible is God's word as well and historically the church has always moved from first generation believers that God works through his word it's the way he achieves things it's genuinely God revealing himself to second generation to third generation the risk of this drift is very real and you can see that so probably the clearest example is the Reformation you get great Christians like Martin Luther and John Calvin who really get that the word is the word the Bible is the word of God he works for it they live for it they teach it many of them get put to death for it they get it but go forward 20, 30, 40 years and they're losing it go forward seven to 80 years and they're pretty nearly lost to go together until he gets revived again and that happens all the way down through church history we live at actually quite a fortunate moment in history because in the relatively recent past about 50 years ago there were people like John Stott and Dick Lucas at All Souls and St. Helens who understood the importance of the Bible really the first generation Bible believers they really got it but not only did they get it there may have been others who did as well because of their church at All Souls and St. Helens they were immensely influential and the conviction they had in the importance of the word of God spread throughout the country in a large part of the world we many of us are the beneficiaries of that history says that will not last and I think there are many signs around us now of this drift to being second generation believers in the Bible we'll look at that a bit more later but it matters because the second generation think they believe the Bible is the word of God and they say they believe that the Bible is the word of God but they don't practice so I'm sure all of us here will say we believe that the Bible is the word of God we may think we believe that the Bible is the word of God the question is do we really and this idea of moving no before I say that people don't choose to be second generation believers in the Bible they drift into it as they stop seeing the Bible at work powerfully and making their hearts rejoice you see just think about it the theory is the Bible is the word of God he works through it he changes people through it he bears fruit through it if he jostles the heart as we see more of God it's a wonderful thing but if your experience isn't matching that if the way you study the Bible means you're not experiencing that joy you're not having the word change you then there's only so long that we can live with a disconnect between what we're experiencing and the theory and you see that all around us that people are still talking about it very widely but I'm not sure with the same conviction because I think we're beginning to lose the real belief in the fact that the Bible is

the word of God he works through it and we can move from first to second and third generations not just from one person to the next person to the third person but even within a single individual in their lifetime so we might when we were first young Christians maybe at university when we first came across good Bible teaching they may have thrilled our heart they may have really changed us they may have revolutionized us but if life got busy and we didn't study the Bible properly ten years later twenty years later do we still have that thrill do we still have the word changing us in that way or are we just now talking about it and if we're just

talking about it how certain are we that in another twenty years we'll even be talking about it so over time we move from first to second to third generation in an individual or got in an individual from one individual to the next generation of people they're teaching the drift happens very slowly so like the proverbial throb we get boiled without realizing it's happening and that shows our goal in studying the Bible our goal in studying the Bible is to genuinely hear God speak through his word so it makes our hearts rejoice and changes us so we remain first generation Bible believing Christians who genuinely believe the Bible is God's word because otherwise our relationship with God will stop being based on and around his word and over time our relationship with God itself will begin to wither so how do we achieve this how do we study the Bible in such a way that it does the work of changing us and it does the work of rejoicing our hearts and reviving our souls and if we're leaders how do we lead studies for others so that that happens so that we hear God and experience the joy and see him at work let me begin with a negative what we absolutely must not do it is very very very tempting to try to make Bible study the joy and life changing by trying to create the results directly through our own efforts we try to achieve results rather than studying God's word in such a way that it achieves results that won't grow people who are hearing

God speak and so genuinely believe the Bible is this work but when people start drifting into being second generation Bible believers we often try to achieve fruit and joy by our efforts rather than through the work let me give you a couple of examples to try to earth that many of us will know that in charismatic churches there's quite an emphasis on trying to have an atmosphere of emotion the music the atmosphere the ambience the presentation from up front is trying to whip up an emotion in the congregation I don't know why people are doing it now I think the early generation of charismatics who came out of a genuine Bible believing churches I think they did that because they were trying to create the joy they weren't getting from the world itself closer to home true for many of us I'm afraid I think many many Christians emphasize application in Bible study in the sense of us doing things in response to the word to achieve change because we're not actually seeing the [18:24] Bible itself change us we know the Bible should change us we don't see it changing us so we try to add in the change by emphasizing application going round at the end of the study taught by application and maybe having feedback from the team group as to how you got on with your application over the last week or so when I was growing up Christian speakers would sometimes talk about the difference between a tree bearing real fruit an apple tree in your garden which produced real apples and a tree that wasn't really fruitful where you went up to test those or same things and bought a pack of apples and tied them onto the tree you still had the fruit but it wasn't coming from the tree I haven't heard that discussion for a long time but it's a very good one and I think reflects what's happening around us all the time we are not seeing the word bear fruit so we're going off to Tesco's actually probably indulge waitrose and buying a bag of good apples and tying them onto the tree and hoping that that would be the work it won't and with that sort of a framework to think about it as we look around I think we can see many signs of

Christians trying to produce joy or trying to change lives but what we do signs that we are becoming second generation believers in the Bible I think it's time I had a bit of a break and you had a chance to talk and think so in Do the Threes or your group if that's easier discuss how our studies both person and group can better help us hear God speak in such a way that it revives our souls rejoices our hearts and where he works and remember not the things that we add but how we study the Bible itself don't cheat and look ahead so I've got four suggestions for what we can do to improve our Bible studies to help us study it in such a way that it revives our souls and rejoices our hearts and bears truth in our lives the first thing we need to do is to study the Bible to hear God speak it sounds obvious but genuinely hearing God afresh for ourselves is what makes us rejoice and bears truth but unfortunately

I've heard too many sermons and seen too many Bible studies including unfortunately too many of my own studies where the study has been proper the sermon has been primarily about observing

things in the text or analysing and understanding the text or even worse reading in the preacher or the leader's framework that is biblical but isn't what the text itself is actually saying let me be clear understanding the text is essential we're not going to get anywhere in Bible study if we don't understand the text but it's so easy to make understanding the text an end in itself rather than the means to the end of hearing God and beyond a certain point it becomes counterproductive just think about it for a moment I suspect many of you enjoy reading think of your favourite book choose any page imagine any page from your favourite book and analyse it the way we tend to analyse a Bible passage would it increase your enjoyment and understanding of the book or would it basically kill it because I suspect for most of us they would kill it but that's the way we study the Bible and that we're surprised that we don't enjoy it it's not doing what it's meant to do so study the Bible to hear God speaking and reading things into the passage is not hearing

God speak however biblical those things are God may be saying that just not in this passage or something else is saying in this passage which we're missing because we're so focused on something said elsewhere and unfortunately both overanalyzing the text and reading things into the passage are real dangers as you study Romans Romans is a genuinely wonderful book you're in for a treat this year over history it has been one of the most influential books in the history of the church but if you know anything about Romans you know it has quite a few tricky arguments and details and you can spend all your time trying to analyse and understand those and focusing on understanding those will not help you hear God better spend time on those tricky details and arguments only when they unlock key points the passage is saying which is very rarely God generally does not bury his important points in tricky detail our God is writing his word to communicate with us not to confuse us but also because Romans is such a wonderful book most of us would have studied it before in our lives some of us several times most of us who have heard it taught previously maybe several times and there are literally hundreds if not thousands of different commentaries on it because it's been such an important book in the history of the church so we will be very tempted to read in what we previously thought or previously heard or have just read in the latest big commentary we have brought rather than trying to hear

God speak to us through his word you have to spend some time analysing the text you're not going to go anywhere without thinking about what the text is actually saying but try to spend more time drawing conclusions from your work of the text and hearing what God is saying aim to spend maybe two thirds of our time analysing the text and that's more than that but realistically we need to do that just because we struggle understanding the text it's not written in a way that naturally speaks to us but try to ration yourself to know more than two thirds of your time analysing the text and spending one third of the time trying to draw conclusions and hear what God is actually saying second suggestion realise that the Bible is primarily telling us about God and what he is doing not what we should do you did the Bible over for you last year which I'm thrilled by because you will then know that the Bible's story as a whole is how

[25 : 07] God is at work to rescue a people who rebelled against him in Genesis 3 and over the sweep of the whole Bible story how he achieves that rescue purpose to bring about his great end goal in Revelation 21 22 of a rescued people perfect with him in a new creation forever and if that's the story of the Bible as a whole you would expect the bulk of the passages to be about that story about that God doing that work and that is what they are there are indeed some passages telling us about what we should do but relatively few in our evangelism when we talk to non-Christians they're very good I think I've been clear that the gospel is about what God does for us not what we do for him we all say I hope you say when you speak to a non-Christian Christianity is not about what we do for God it's about what God did for us he sent his son to die across the cross very good absolutely right unfortunately for most

Christians as soon as somebody becomes a Christian and starts studying the Bible you forget that and turn Christianity into what we do the New Testament is adamant in place after place after place it says continue as you began we began by looking to God to do it all for us in Jesus continue that way we normally study the Bible as though every passage is about us and what we should do and I think one of the main reasons for this is because we know the Bible should change us so we're trying to apply it directly to make that happen to produce the fruit that it's not doing which is a sideways turning into second generation believers in the Bible trusting our own efforts to achieve change as we emphasize application rather than God's word but it's not just a sign that we're turning into second generation people worse much worse I think it actually creates second

generation believers in the Bible just think about it always reading the Bible to see what we should do doesn't make studying the Bible a joy by and life there are only a handful of applications we tend to come up with every week evangelize more serve more give more money pray more read your Bible more look after other people more that probably sums up the applications we're going to get a version of every week if every single time you study the Bible whether it's a daily devotional or the study or the sermon you hear God say sacrifice more serve more give more that's God nagging us we're turning this wonderful word of God into God nagging us I don't think anybody in the world likes to be nagged and we don't so if we study the Bible in such a way that we turn it into God nagging us we will actually turn us against loving it and since the Bible isn't about what we should do currently looking for food that way won't bear genuine food so again remember that girl in Isaiah 40 I told you about at the beginning of our evening she was excited not by discovering a new application she needed to do but discovering more about her God the Bible does indeed change us radically so don't mishear me

I'm not saying the Bible isn't meant to change us it's meant to change us very very radically it's meant to bear fruit it just does that in a different way to what we expect it doesn't change us and bear fruit in us by telling us to do this and do that and do the other rather it changes us and bears fruit in us by telling us about our wonderful God and his amazing plan so that we love him and trust in him and hope in the fulfillment of his plan more and those of you who know your New Testament will know that faith, hope and love are all great applications that turn out in letter after letter after letter because that is fundamental Bible application that's real application if we really love and trust and hope in God we will live for him with all our lives and we will die for him if necessary far more radical than the normal applications we try to come up with at the end of a study and we don't love and trust and hope in God more by trying harder screwing up ourselves and thinking I must love him more I must love him more I really must trust him no we love and trust and hope in God more by seeing how wonderful he is how trustworthy he has been throughout history and all his will be how incredible his plan and promises are and how worth hoping it are more than any hope in this world and that we learn these things the Bible reveals these things so that we fall in love with God and what he is doing and that changes our life completely and doing all that will make Bible studies genuinely thrilling and will trust our souls because our God and his plan are so wonderful so reading the Bible to see what they tell us about those will make studying the Bible much more thrilling second reason we make Bible study about past instead of God is we very often need the context of the passage to see the Bible is about God and we're very bad at using context [30 : 39] I'll come back to that in a moment but if a past in isolation is not obviously about God we focus on ourselves because we don't know what else to do but just think about it how many weeks are you doing Romans 8 just roughly about 20 times 20 times when Paul wrote that letter to the Romans did he intend it to be read over 20 weeks obviously not it was meant to be read in a city there is a focus of God in it as I'll show you in a moment but you will not see necessarily in every passage you need to stand back and see the whole sweep and think oh yes that shows me that God is the centre of this book but we are very bad at using not just observing but even worse once we have noticed it and using it to change the way we study the Bible so how do we study passages looking for what they teach us about God at one level it's hard because looking for what we should do is very deeply ingrained in most of us so we will need to provide that entrenched habit but making the shift is vital but apart from that we need to change a very entrenched habit changing how we study the Bible to focus on God is actually quite easy there are two keys first we need to change perspective to look for what the passage is saying about God and when I say God

I mean the Holy Trinity Father Son and Holy Spirit we're not necessarily having every member and everything but one of the members would be the focus in most of the books of the Bible if not all let's just take a worked example to see how that works I think my next read is kind of going to read Mark 4 verses 35 to 41 very familiar instance which I'm using because I expect most of you to know on that day when evening had come he said to them let us go across to the other side and leaving the crowd they took him with them in the boat just as he was and other boats were with him and a great windstorm arose and the waves were breaking into the boat so that the boat was already filling but he was in the stern asleep on the cushion and they woke him and said to him teacher do you not care that we are perishing and he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea peace be still and the wind ceased and there was a great car he said to them why are you so afraid have you still no faith and they were filled with great fear and said to one another who then is this that

even wind and sea obey him thank you so very familiar miracle of Jesus coming the storm it's a spectacular miracle Jesus stands up he says to the storm which is whipped up the sea so the huge waves that are breaking into the boat and threatening the city be quiet and the storm goes to their car and it's not as though we could miss it I have no idea how big the boat was but as a step it was probably from between those folding doors to the end of that kitchen counter small wood they put about 12 people in it which can't be more much more than that they would have seen the miracle close up and personal they would have no doubt about how big a miracle it was they were fishing they knew that when the waves got up they don't die down just like that they saw it happen we all look at that passage and study it as what it teaches us about the disciples and how silly the disciples were how lacking in faith as Jesus says how fearful they were and think we mustn't be like the disciples we must have faith we mustn't be fearful open a minute Mark 1 1 Mark says he's writing the gospel to tell us about Jesus the Christ the Son of God this is a book about Jesus first and foremost which means we need to think first and foremost what the miracle is teaching us about Jesus it teaches us some obvious things like he has authority over the elements which is something we saw about 40 years ago I think that Lucas pointed out very helpful but once you see it you see something well that's that I've seen it Jesus has authority over the elements there's a lot more to it than just that think about how the disciples in this little boat can see such a spectacular miracle and not understand it's all very well to say silly disciples but how can you see a miracle like that and be in any doubt just think about it how can Jesus just stand up he's not praying he's not doing anything he just stands up and says be quiet the authority of the elements and they quiet who has that authority apart from

God so the answer is obviously Jesus is God shows us Jesus is God what does the Old Testament tell us about God you've looked at it the God of the Old Testament made the whole universe with the word he's so large according to Isaiah 40 that all the waters of the world can fit in the palm of his hand in one king's the dedication of the temple Solomon says he's so great that the heavens itself cannot contain him the Old Testament in Exodus 33 God says to Moses no one can see my face and live and in Psalm 121 the psalmist says the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps so how can this ordinary man whose face they've seen every day for the last few months fast asleep because he's so exhausted after the day's teaching how on earth can that man be God so the disciples are faced with this incredible conundrum of he's doing things that only God can do and yet he cannot possibly be

[36 : 50] God because he's just a man I think when we just say oh this miracle shows Jesus as well we're living shallow the disciples were much much shrewder much more completely literate to be confused but it's not just the book as a whole that tells us that we should be looking for Jesus it's not the Bible as a whole just the Bible as a whole with this emphasis on God at work that tells us we should be thinking about God himself not what we do for those of you who know Mark you know that this passage comes in the middle of a section that climaxes in chapter 8 when Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Christ but is it the story of how the disciples gradually get their act together and start having faith and stop being so stupid and recognize who it is no it's not at all like that they remain completely blind completely clueless unchanged until suddenly in Mark chapter 8 they get why do they get it we've just had the only two miracles that

Jesus ever has difficulty with in any of the gospel the opening of the deaf man's ears and the opening of the blind man's eyes it's symbolic and that Peter has his eyes open and understands and it's symbolic of the fact that helping somebody understand takes a really really hard miracle which Jesus has done in chapter 8 so it's not about how sorry the coming of the psalm is not about how the disciples were stupid and faithless and the people it's about Jesus being so great so incomprehensible!

that in order to understand him a major miracle is needed that's where we need to think about it and I hope that when we think about it that way we will realize that Jesus is much greater than we think we are very quick to say Jesus is God he's the second person of the Trinity for most of us I think Jesus is God is simply a label attached onto Jesus let's say this person is Mr or Sir or Mrs it means very little the more you understand the God of the Old Testament and what we see here the more you say I'm beginning to get what we mean when we say Jesus is God in Romans which you'll be studying no actually before I say that what we needed to see that Jesus the focus here is Jesus is the context the whole Bible which says focus on God the book which says is a book about Jesus the son of God and the section which is the miracles need to recognize him it's not just the last

passage context it's not just me to think that's what we studied last week and it's put the passage in the context of the whole book the whole

Bible the whole big section in Romans the whole Bible is still telling us it always tells us that we need to think first and foremost what we're learning about God but in Romans Paul explicitly says that he's writing about God so Paul begins the big theological heart of the book in Romans chapter 1 16 and 17 and I think I've read it and I'm going to do that to me as well Romans 1 16 for I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written the righteous shall live by faith thank you so Paul is writing this letter to help the Romans understand he is not ashamed of the gospel of God because it is the power of God and it's the righteousness of God and he wants them to be not ashamed of the gospel because they understand it's the power of God and it's the righteousness of God and he wants them not to be ashamed of him as he goes around preaching that message because the gospel is the power of God and the righteousness of God so that's how Paul begins and that sets his agenda for most of the book at the end of the big theological section in chapter 11 Paul finishes with great doxology can somebody read Romans 11 33-35 please Romans 11 33-35 oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God how unsearchable are his judgments and how unscuteable his ways for who has known the mind of the Lord for who has been his counsellor for who has given a gift to him as he might be repaid thank you so Paul is saying that what he's been revealing in the book so far is teaching us about the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God so as you study [42 : 17] Romans this year the big things you need to think about is what is Paul teaching about God's power God's righteousness God's wisdom there are indeed bits about us mainly in chapters 12 15 but they're far fewer than you think and they're not the great heart of the book which is the theological section 1-11 let me put a very important caveat in seeing the passage is about God or seeing what the passage says about God is not simply restating old truth it's not simply saying oh yes I know God is powerful let me just say God is powerful yes I know God is righteous let me just say this passage shows God is righteous that's really boring we're trying to understand him better there's an infinite more to understand about God not because God is confusing but because God is infinite how long does it take to understand fully and grasp fully an infinite

God eternity we will definitely not get to the bottom of everything God is revealing about himself and what he's doing in this lifetime however far you've got there is more to see but we will see it only if we think hard about what the things we are saying mean so I gave you that example of Jesus in the book you didn't see it obviously it wasn't sitting on the surface where he jumped off the page at you let us think about it put it in the context of the book put it in the context of the Bible in Romans again it's very easy to say we can obviously see something about God's power and God's righteousness and God's wisdom but if you just say the simple thing it will get boring very quickly after about week three you need to think about what these things mean what's the righteousness of God mean don't read in what you think don't read in what great people at Martin Luther said those of you know your church history will know that one of the keys to the reformation was Martin

Luther rightly understanding the righteousness of God not just something we do but something God gives us but that is absolutely true and super important but it is not everything that can be said about God's righteousness don Carson in a couple of his books has this wonderful line where he says we can know truly without knowing fully what we see can be absolutely right completely what God is intending to say without everything God is intending to say because an infinite God has an awful lot to say so there's power to God there's more to see we need to wrestle with what we're seeing of God thinking about it not simply saying the right words and that leads us to the next point my third suggestion the third suggestion is understand that Bible study is about a process of discovery not about reaching a destination and then stopping because God is infinite however hard you have worked however good your teachers and leaders might be however good the commentaries you read might be there is vastly more infinitely more still to understand and as we discover more about God and what he is doing in the Bible our hearts rejoice because each new discovery is thrilling because our

God is wonderful so each time we discover something more about him we think wow my God is like that I had no idea he's much greater he's much better he's much more wonderful than I thought so studying the Bible is not just seeing what we already know it's not just seeing what we have read in the commentary and if you're reading a study it's not just trying to get the group to reach your

conclusions just trying to get the group to reach your conclusions results in really painful studies where they're trying to guess your mind rather than hear God and I know some of you are really super and clever and bright but I'm afraid your mind is not nearly as thrilling as God's so guessing your mind is not going to fill them in the same way as hearing God the opposite of so if that's what Bible study is not it's not about just seeing what we've already seen or reading what we've read or guess in the mind what is it about and it's about discovering more about

God through his word and discovering more about what God is saying in his word comes as we think and wrestle with what we're reading but that takes time which is why prep is essential I know that prep gets harder when we have young people in heaven it's not easy but it's easier to cover the nasty of their prep as you get older your family responsibilities and more responsibilities at work and life and things like that I know it gets harder but it is still absolutely essential I've been studying the Bible for over 50 years now full time for probably the best part of 40 years and I cannot say anything sensible about a passage without prep somebody jumps to me at church and says what do you think about this passage the honest answer is I don't know I need to go away and think about it so we need to do some prep where prep isn't just reading the passage and it's definitely not just reading a commentary it's read the passage and think about what it's saying what's God revealing to this but it's not just our prep that helps us we can learn from each other as well if they've also thought about what God is saying in the passage because different people have their brains wired in different ways and therefore different people who actually have put the time and thought into a passage will see different things and analyse it in different ways and that's why

[48 : 31] I think group studies are the absolute best way to study the Bible they beat reading a book they beat a sermon they beat even doing it on your own because there's a whole bunch of you working on it together and my personal experience over 50 years of Bible study is learning as much from others in the groups I've been reading as from my own personal study but that is because they also have worked hard before coming to the study so we can now see the ingredients if not all the ingredients some of the ingredients of a good study the ingredients that go into a good study is people who have thought about the passage beforehand coming together to share their understanding with each other to be challenged about whether their understanding is really what God is saying in the passage and to build on each other's understanding and integrate it with their own understanding so that together they get a better understanding of what God is saying in the passage let me run through those four ingredients again the key ingredients of a good study people who have thought about the passage coming together to share their understanding with each other to be challenged about whether their understanding really is what

God is saying in the passage and to build on each other's understanding so that together they come to a better understanding of what God is saying and finally and briefly the fourth suggestion which is another key ingredient pray for the right thing as we come to our Bible studies I'm sure we all know that we should pray before we study I'm afraid that most of us certainly in our personal study may not hold it I know for myself I speak for myself mere culpa I too often when I need to do some Bible study just dive into the passage without praying if we do pray in groups many of the groups I've been in think right we need to pray so let's go around the group and hear about the things that have troubled us and concerned us and happened in our life over the week and then let's pray about them before we turn to our study praying about our concerns praying for each other they're good things but the thing that really really matters most if you're going to have a good Bible study is pray that God would speak to us through his word we let the disciples by nature blind and dare we will not hear what God is saying we will not see what he is saying unless he helps us understand and opens our blind eyes and opens our deaf ears and helps us hear him so pray for that it is super important that's the briefest of my points not because it's the least important on the contrary it's one of the most important but simply because it's the easiest to explain

I think so let me conclude I don't know what you said in the opening exercise about what makes a good study but I think most Christians seem to think that a good study is understanding the text better or getting some good practical applications and often they're happy just to see again what they already knew however those things will not lead to experiencing the joy and power of God's word but instead will make us people who stop enjoying Bible study it will turn us into second generation believers in the Bible instead a good study is genuinely hearing God speak through his word and as we have seen in most passages not all but in most passages this means progressively understanding more about what God is revealing about himself and what he is doing as we think

about what he is saying

I'm going to stop there I suggest you spend five minutes or so in our groups discussing what we have heard and thinking is that right is that not right and then I'm going to throw it open to questions so I'd love to have you ask questions challenge me point out where I'm wrong engage chuck your insights in as well so five minutes or so in our groups just thinking about what we said what I said Father God thank you that you are a genuinely wonderful faithful loving powerful God thank you Father that you've revealed yourself and you've revealed what you're doing in your word help us Father as we study your word in our personal studies in our group studies as on Sunday help us to hear you speak that we might love you more and trust you more and hope in you more in Jesus name Amen