BIG-small-BIG Learning

Let’s think together a bit about learning.

When you pull out a jigsaw puzzle, which pieces do you first work with? First, I grab the box and take some time to look at the panoramic view of the entire puzzle. Second, I focus on the corner pieces, the outside border and then fill in the inside pieces, one key color after another. I work from the easiest layer to the more difficult, so this is a framework for the more difficult colors. Lastly, I look at the puzzle again as a whole in light of the picture on the box to be sure all the parts fit together with the whole.

Begin to “master” a book of the Bible so you are mastered by it through “BIG-small-BIG” learning.

- First, read the Bible book repeatedly to grasp the big-picture and repeated themes (Survey).
- Second, begin to first explore the chapters one chapter after another, then perhaps later, key paragraphs (Investigate).
- Finally, put the parts back together again to verify that the parts harmonize with the whole and the whole gives light to the parts (Synthesize).

Martin Luther used to say that he studied the Bible as he gathered apples. He shook the tree first, then the limbs, then the branches, and after that he reached out under the leaves for the remaining fruit. The reverse order is monotonous, killing our enthusiastic interest in pursuing God’s Word as lifelong life-learners.

The best way I have found to study Scripture is the BIG-small-BIG rhythm. Learn to engage the Bible with a “BIG-small-BIG” perspective to grow through the Word of God over a lifetime. Alternate between these three because the whole and the parts mutually illuminate each other. These general methods of survey (BIG), investigate (small), and synthesize (BIG) will be an effective tool with most every book of the Bible for a lifetime of joy in personal Bible discovery through doing. They are best friends working together, not competing enemies.

If I inherited a farm sight unseen, what would I do first when I visited to maximize what I have? Would I take my neighbors suggestion to plant my favorite crop? Of course not! First, I would study a good topographical map and talk to someone who knew the lay of the land as a whole (BIG). Then I would walk my unexplored farmland and dig down to take soil samples to investigate the best use of the soil (small). Finally, I would look at the farm as a whole to be sure the parts fit with the overall plan.

First survey the farm, then investigate the parts, then synthesize the overall land by looking again at the whole. This is also the best plan to study the Bible, God’s love-letter.

BIG – Survey (grasping the panoramic view of the interconnected whole through rapid, repeated reading). When the church received the book that we now call Ephesians, for instance, what do you think they did with it? I suspect they read it out loud, rapidly and repeatedly, in one, continuous reading with anticipation and excitement!

Our first major shift in thinking must be to begin with a focus on the whole, rather than initially on the isolated parts. Some read the whole book through 5 to 10 times or more before working on the parts. Saturate our minds with this one Bible book for this season.

A failure to adopt an initial bi- picture approach to the Bible is partially responsible for a lack of enthusiastic interest in God’s Word from God’s people. Our minds hate bits and scraps! First
take out your telescope before unsheathing your microscope when mastering the Bible. Read rapidly with a wide sweep through a book or larger passage as you “survey.” Look for key themes that point to the big picture, the author’s main purpose for writing. Let’s not allow ourselves to get immersed in details for now.

**small – Investigate** (understanding the nuances of the individual parts, especially the “flow” of the passage). Beginning with survey widens our field of awareness and actually opens up more of the total picture we previously had since we naturally find support for whatever view we hold. The part is not the whole, but it can lead us to a better understanding of the whole.

When we investigate, we ignore verse or chapter breaks since they are not inspired (but be sensitive to them since they are often helpful). We seek to determine the author’s meaning by understanding the words and phrases and distilling them into a short overview summary. When we inquire into the details of the parts, we recognize that this part that we presently study is participating in the whole of this specific book of the Bible and also of the entire Scripture. Like with the Trinity (one God and three distinct persons), we keep the indivisible whole firmly in mind, even while we explore the startling uniqueness of each part. Maintain the tension: the part is not the whole, but it can lead us to a better understanding of the whole.

Don’t lock yourself in to verse or chapter breaks since they are not inspired (but be sensitive to them since they are often helpful). This “small” facet is an effective place to focus on the key to fruitful Bible study, prayerful meditation on and response to the Word of God. Meditation is simply turning truth over in our minds repeatedly and asking the Holy Spirit to help us to understand and impact our lives with His truth. A tool like D-O-I-N-G begins this process of “small.” Then after you have “mastered” a number of key books at this level, look in greater detail at key paragraphs with 3 I’s for Insight to flesh out the skeleton.

**BIG – Synthesize** (re-connecting individual parts into the dynamic whole through rapid, repeated reading). We don’t want to leave the book dissected, though, since life exists in the whole. Re-connect the parts. Put “Humpty Dumpty” back together again to be sure the parts fit, modifying your view of the whole or the individual parts where necessary. Life exists in the whole so re-connect them. Modify your view of the whole or the parts where necessary but keep dancing between the BIG and the small.

Seek to discover the meaning of the author by beginning with the book as a whole, then proceed to see how the parts that we’ve already studied fit in to the whole. The parts and the whole mutually illuminate each other. Both disciplines of study are essential. Understanding the parts helps us to understand the whole of the Book. Insight into the whole provides the context for properly understanding the parts.

“There is something in all of us that loves to put together a puzzle, that loves to see the image of the whole emerge. The beauty of a person, or a flower, or a poem lies in seeing all of it. It is interesting that the words ‘whole’ and ‘health’ come from the same root (the Old English hal, as in ‘hale and hearty’).”

First put a telescope in the hands of disciples, then afterwards a microscope. How do we normally study history? First, we study the history of the world in overview. This is reading rapidly, widely and regularly through Scripture. Then we peruse its great divisions...ancient, medieval, and modern. Then we dig deeper into the separate people and events in each one. Begin with the BIG. Like the expert mountain climber, let’s take people to the highest peak first. Then we see the panoramic vista as a whole before we study the small of the individual features of the
lower levels in their relation to the whole. A view of the whole materially assists in understanding the parts.

Get people to see for themselves what a book of the Bible is in the large, and then we will have a desire to see in detail. Like with the Trinity, we keep the indivisible whole firmly in mind (one God) even while we explore the startling uniqueness of each part (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). We learn more about the whole by focusing on each interconnected individual.

*This is the natural way God designed us to learn.*

Then alternate between *Survey, Investigate, and Synthesize* for variety and fuller understanding, one book after another. These three general methods will be an effective tool with most every book of the Bible for a lifetime of joy in personal Bible discovery because they are best of friends, working together for a lifetime of change.

All Christians not only have the right, but the ability and responsibility, to interpret Scripture for themselves. Don’t lock yourself in to verse or chapter breaks since they are not inspired (but be sensitive to them since they often are helpful). This “small” facet is an effective place to focus on the key to fruitful Bible study, prayerful meditation on the Word of God (meditation is turning truth over in our minds repeatedly and asking the Holy Spirit to help us to understand and impact our lives with His truth).

*All Christians not only have the right, but the ability and responsibility, to interpret Scripture for themselves...especially you!*