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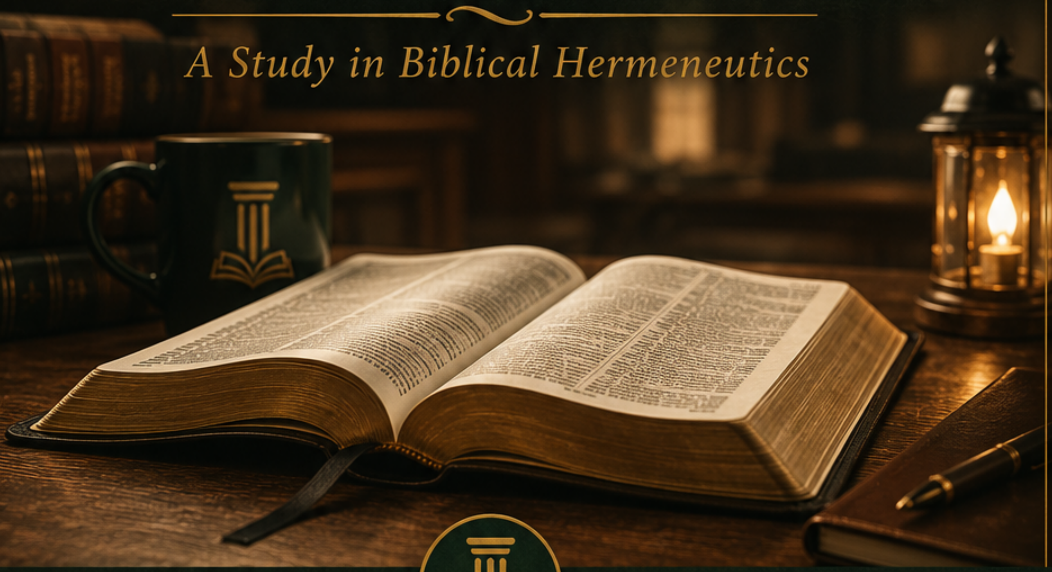
CHRIST CENTERED
REFORMED MINISTRIES

— ◆ —
THINKING BIBLICALLY™

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY SERIES

RIGHTLY
DIVIDING
THE
WORD OF TRUTH

— ◆ —
A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics



REV. JUSTIN D. HOKE, M.DIV.

THINKING BIBLICALLY™

Personal Bible Study Series

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH

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A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics

Thinking Biblically™ Personal Bible Study Series

By Rev. Justin D. Hoke, M.Div.

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Published by:

Christ Centered Reformed Ministries (CCRMin)

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Contents

Introduction: Why How You Read Matters	1
How to Use This Study	2
Chapter One: A Pattern in Scripture	3
Chapter Two: Reading What Is Actually There	5
Chapter Three: Understanding What It Meant	7
Chapter Four: Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture	9
Chapter Five: Seeing Christ in the Text	11
Chapter Six: From Meaning to Life	13
Chapter Seven: Common Errors to Avoid	14
Think Biblically Summary & Practical Reflection	15
Memory Verse & Suggested Reading	16
Closing Challenge & Closing Prayer	17

INTRODUCTION

WHY HOW YOU READ MATTERS

Every Christian reads the Bible. Not every Christian reads it the same way.

Two believers can open the same page, read the same verse, and walk away with two different conclusions. One of those conclusions may be right. One may be wrong. Sincerity does not decide which is which. The text itself does.

This is why Paul told Timothy to be diligent to present himself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15, NKJV). Handling Scripture well is not automatic. It is a skill, and like every skill, it can be done carelessly or carefully.

This study will not hand you a system to memorize and move past. It will walk you into a real event in Scripture—the public reading of God’s Law in Nehemiah 8—and let that event teach you, through careful questions, how God’s people have always been called to read God’s Word.

The goal is simple to state and lifelong to practice: to hear what God actually said, understand what He meant by it, and let that meaning shape your life. Not the other way around.

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study is inductive. That means you will be asked to observe the text before you are told what it means, and you will be asked to understand what it means before you are told how to apply it.

A few instructions before you begin:

- Read each passage slowly, in your own Bible, before answering the questions. This study will guide you, but it will not do your reading for you.
- Answer the observation questions first, even if the answer feels obvious. Skipping this step is the most common way readers slip into misinterpretation.
- Resist the urge to jump to application. Application always comes last, because application without accurate interpretation is guesswork wearing the clothes of conviction.
- Work through this study prayerfully. The skill this study teaches is a means; the end is a deeper trust in God and His Word.

You may work through this study alone or with others. If used in a group, resist the temptation to let discussion wander into opinion. Keep returning to the question: what does the text say?

CHAPTER ONE

A PATTERN IN SCRIPTURE

The Setting

The book of Nehemiah records the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls after the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon. Once the wall was finished, the people gathered—not for a celebration of construction, but for something else entirely. They asked for the Law of God to be read to them.

Read Nehemiah 8:1–8 in your Bible before continuing.

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. Who gathered in Nehemiah 8:1, and where did they gather?
2. Who did the people ask to bring the Book of the Law (v. 1)? What does their request tell you about what the people wanted?
3. According to verse 3, roughly how long did Ezra read? What does this tell you about the people’s posture toward God’s Word?
4. Verse 5 says the people stood up when the book was opened. Why might that detail matter?
5. Look closely at verse 7. Besides Ezra, who else is named as helping the people understand the Law?

The Verse at the Center

“So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”

NEHEMIAH 8:8, NKJV

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

6. This verse names three distinct actions. List them.
7. Which of the three actions involves simply presenting the words of the text?
8. Which of the three actions involves explaining what those words mean?
9. Why might it matter that “giving the sense” is listed as a separate action from “reading distinctly”?

Why This Passage Matters for This Study

Notice what is not happening in Nehemiah 8. The Levites are not offering their opinions about the Law. They are not telling the people what they feel the text might mean to them personally. They are reading it accurately, and then explaining what it actually says, so the people could understand it correctly.

This is the pattern this entire study will follow: read carefully, understand accurately, then respond rightly. Nehemiah 8 shows that this is not a modern method imposed on the Bible. It is how God’s people have handled God’s Word since before the New Testament was written.

INTERPRETATION QUESTION

10. Based on what you have observed in this passage, in your own words, what was the goal of the Levites’ work among the people—was it to entertain, to inform, to persuade emotionally, or something else? Support your answer from the text.

CHAPTER TWO

READING WHAT IS ACTUALLY THERE

The First Step: Observation

Before you can rightly interpret a passage, you must first accurately observe it. This sounds obvious. It is the step most often skipped.

Observation asks: who is speaking? Who is being addressed? What kind of writing is this—history, poetry, prophecy, letter? What actually happens in the text, in the order it happens?

Skipping observation is how well-meaning readers arrive at meanings the text was never making. A promise given to Israel gets applied to modern nations. A command given to a specific person in a specific situation gets applied as a universal rule. These errors do not usually come from bad intentions. They come from moving to interpretation before observation was finished.

A Second Witness: The Bereans

Read Acts 17:10–12 in your Bible.

“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.”

ACTS 17:11, NKJV

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

11. What two things does verse 11 say the Bereans did with Paul’s message? (There are two distinct actions in this verse—look for both.)

12. The Bereans were checking the words of an apostle against Scripture. What does that tell you about where final authority rests—in the teacher, or in the text?

13. How often did the Bereans search the Scriptures, according to the verse? What does that frequency suggest about their view of the importance of this practice?

Applying This to Your Own Reading

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

14. Based on Nehemiah 8 and Acts 17, would you say careful observation of Scripture is presented in the Bible as optional for spiritually mature believers, or expected of them? Support your answer from both passages.

15. Name one habit from this chapter you could build into your own Bible reading this week that would slow you down enough to actually observe a passage before deciding what it means.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANT

Once a passage has been carefully observed, the next step is interpretation: determining what it actually meant, according to the intention of the one who wrote it. Reformed Christians have historically approached this task using several consistent principles. None of these are complicated once you see them at work.

Plain Meaning

Scripture should ordinarily be understood in its plain, natural sense—the way any careful reader would understand ordinary language—unless the text itself signals that it is speaking figuratively (through poetry, parable, or symbol). This does not mean every verse is “literal” in a wooden sense. It means we take the text as it presents itself, rather than assigning it a hidden or secret meaning it does not claim for itself.

Grammar

The words of Scripture were chosen carefully, and their grammar matters. Who is the subject of the sentence? Who is the object? Is a verb a command or a description? In Nehemiah 8:8, notice that “gave the sense” and “helped them to understand” are separate verbs from “read distinctly.” Grammar itself tells you that reading and explaining were two different acts.

Historical and Cultural Setting

Every passage of Scripture was written to real people, in a real time and place, facing real circumstances. Nehemiah 8 happened after seventy years of exile, to a people who had largely lost familiarity with God’s Law. Knowing that background helps explain why the people wept when they heard it read (v. 9)—many were hearing it, in effect, for the first time in their lives.

Context

No verse stands alone. Every verse belongs to a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, a book, and the whole of Scripture. Removing a verse from its context is one of the surest ways to make it say something it was never saying.

OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

16. Look again at Nehemiah 8:9. Why did the people weep when they heard the Law read? What does the surrounding context (the fact that they had returned from exile, and had not had regular access to the Law) tell you about why this moment affected them so deeply?

17. In Acts 17:11, the Bereans are contrasted with the believers in Thessalonica (v. 11, “than those in Thessalonica”). Why might Luke have included that comparison? What does it teach about the value of Berean-style examination?

18. Choose one of the four principles above (plain meaning, grammar, historical setting, or context). Explain in your own words how applying it changes the way you would read a passage, compared with reading it without that principle in mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

LETTING SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE

One of the most important principles in biblical interpretation is this: Scripture is its own best interpreter. A clearer passage sheds light on a less clear one. A doctrine taught explicitly in one place should guide how we understand a related idea stated more briefly elsewhere.

This principle protects against two errors at once. It protects against forcing a private meaning onto a difficult verse, and it protects against isolating a single verse from the full teaching of Scripture on a subject (a practice often called proof-texting).

A Brief Caution: Proof-Texting

Proof-texting happens when a single verse is lifted out of its context and used to support an idea the passage was never making. The danger is not using Scripture to support truth—Scripture should always be the support for truth. The danger is skipping the observation and interpretation steps and jumping straight to a verse that sounds like it fits.

A Worked Example

Someone might quote 2 Timothy 2:15 to argue that every Christian must become a skilled biblical scholar before they can be trusted with any spiritual responsibility. But look at the full verse again: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The context of chapter 2 is Paul instructing Timothy, a minister of the gospel, on faithful ministry. The verse is a call to diligence and integrity in

handling God's Word—not a requirement of advanced scholarship before any believer may serve.

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

19. Why is it important to check a single verse against its immediate context, and against what the rest of Scripture teaches on the same subject, before drawing a conclusion from it?

20. Think of a verse you have heard quoted often, perhaps out of its context. Look up that verse now. Does its surrounding context confirm the way it is commonly used, or does it reveal a different meaning?

CHAPTER FIVE

SEEING CHRIST IN THE TEXT

Scripture, in its full sweep, points to Jesus Christ. This is not a technique imposed on the text from the outside—it is how Jesus Himself read the Old Testament.

Read Luke 24:13–27 in your Bible.

“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

LUKE 24:27, NKJV

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

21. Where does Jesus begin His explanation, according to verse 27?
22. The verse says He explained things concerning Himself “in all the Scriptures.” What does the word “all” suggest about the scope of what Jesus was teaching these two disciples?

A Necessary Caution

This truth must be handled carefully. Because Christ is present throughout Scripture does not mean every verse is directly, explicitly about Him in the same way. Some passages point to Christ through direct prophecy. Others point to Him through pattern, type, or promise fulfilled. Still others teach truths about God, sin, or wisdom that are not themselves Christological but that fit within a Bible whose overall storyline moves toward Him.

The rule to remember: follow the interpretive example of Jesus and the apostles. Do not force a connection to Christ where the text and its context do not lead there. Forcing meaning onto a text, even meaning

that is true elsewhere in Scripture, is still a failure to rightly divide the word of truth.

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

23. Based on Luke 24:27, would you say seeing Christ in Scripture is something readers invent, or something that was already present in the text and simply needed to be shown? Support your answer from the verse.

24. Why might it be just as important to avoid forcing Christ into every passage as it is to recognize Him where He is genuinely present?

CHAPTER SIX

FROM MEANING TO LIFE

Only after a passage has been carefully observed and rightly interpreted is it ready to be applied. This order matters. Meaning always determines application; application never determines meaning.

Return to Nehemiah 8. The people did not simply hear the Law read and go on with their day unchanged. Once they understood what had been read to them, they responded—first with grief over their sin (v. 9), and then, once Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites had instructed them further, with obedience and celebration (vv. 9–12).

OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

25. What was the order of events in Nehemiah 8:8–12: reading, then explaining, then responding—or some other order? Why does that sequence matter?
26. If application had come before understanding—if the people had simply responded emotionally to unfamiliar words being read aloud, without the Levites' explanation—what problems might have resulted?
27. Think of a passage of Scripture you have studied carefully in this study so far. What is one specific, concrete way its true meaning should shape how you live, think, or worship this week?

CHAPTER SEVEN

COMMON ERRORS TO AVOID

As you continue studying Scripture beyond this study, watch for these common errors. Each one has already appeared, in some form, in the passages you have studied:

- **Proof-texting**—using an isolated verse to support a conclusion its context does not support.
- **Reading modern ideas into ancient texts**—assuming the original audience shared our exact circumstances, categories, or concerns.
- **Application before interpretation**—deciding what a passage means to you before determining what it actually means.
- **Letting feelings determine meaning**—treating an emotional response to a text as evidence of its correct interpretation.
- **Forcing connections**—including forcing Christ, or any other theme, onto a passage where the text and its context do not lead there.
- **Skipping context**—treating a verse as though it exists independently of its chapter, book, and the whole of Scripture.

THINK BIBLICALLY SUMMARY

Scripture is not a collection of scattered sayings waiting for a reader's opinion to complete their meaning. It has an intended sense—one placed there by God, through its human authors, meant to be discovered rather than invented.

Nehemiah 8 shows that clear reading and careful explanation are not modern conveniences; they are how God's Word has always been rightly handled. The Bereans show that even apostolic teaching was to be tested against the Scriptures themselves. Jesus Himself, walking to Emmaus, showed His disciples that the whole of Scripture holds together, and holds together around Him.

Observation before interpretation. Interpretation before application. Christ present throughout, without being forced anywhere. This is what it means to rightly divide the word of truth.

Practical Reflection

Set aside time this week to answer honestly, in writing if possible:

- When have you drawn a conclusion from Scripture before slowing down to observe what the text actually said?
- What is one passage you have long assumed you understood, that you now want to study more carefully using the steps in this study?
- Who in your life could you study alongside, in the manner of the Bereans, so that you are both testing what you hear against Scripture?

Memory Verse

“So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.”

NEHEMIAH 8:8, NKJV

Suggested Reading

For further study on biblical interpretation from a Reformed perspective, consider consulting:

- *Knowing Scripture* by R.C. Sproul
- *Christ-Centered Preaching* by Bryan Chapell (for further study on Christ in all of Scripture)
- The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I, “Of the Holy Scripture”

Closing Challenge

You have studied how to rightly divide the word of truth. The skill you have practiced in this study is not meant to end here. Return to your Bible this week with the same care you have practiced in these pages: observe before you interpret, interpret before you apply, and let Scripture—not your feelings, not your assumptions—remain the final authority over what a passage means.

Closing Prayer

Lord, Your Word is truth. Give us humble hearts that receive it as it is, not as we wish it to be. Teach us to read carefully, understand rightly, and obey gladly. Let Christ, who fills all the Scriptures, be honored in how we handle Your Word, all our days. Amen.







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THINKING BIBLICALLY™ PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY SERIES

HOW YOU READ THE BIBLE DETERMINES WHAT YOU BELIEVE. WHAT YOU BELIEVE DETERMINES HOW YOU LIVE.

God's Word is not hard to understand, but it is not always easy to understand correctly. *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* will equip you with a biblical, practical, and life-changing approach to reading Scripture the way God intended.

Using the example of Nehemiah 8, this study will teach you the steps of sound biblical interpretation so that you can hear what God actually said, understand what He meant, and obey what He has commanded.

IN THIS STUDY YOU WILL LEARN:

-  A pattern of interpretation modeled in Scripture.
-  How to read what is actually there—not what you wish were there.
-  How to understand what the text meant to the original audience.
-  How Scripture interprets Scripture.
-  How to apply God's Word to your life with wisdom and grace.
-  Common errors that lead to misinterpretation.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Justin Hoke is the founder of Christ Centered Reformed Ministries (CCRMin). He is a minister of the Gospel, teacher of God's Word, and a graduate of The North American Reformed Seminary.

His passion is to help Christians think biblically, love Christ deeply, and live for the glory of God alone.



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"Study to show yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

2 TIMOTHY 2:15, NKJV