

GROWING DEEP IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Returning to Our Roots

STUDY FOUR

Handling the Scriptures Accurately

Nehemiah 8:1–18; Matthew 15:1–14; 16:5–12

Our problem is not a lack of Bibles but a lack of people who carefully handle the Scriptures in their teaching.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day devoted their lives to knowing and keeping every detail of the Mosaic law. People admired their spiritual zeal and considered their teaching as sacred as Scripture itself.

And yet, despite their strict regimen, extensive study, and expansive knowledge, the scribes and Pharisees mishandled the Word. They piled their own laws on top of God's law, and then they laid that cumbersome load on God's people, crushing them under a burden of impossible religious regulations. It was a classic example of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abusers live on. They may be gifted communicators, seemingly brilliant theologians, or popular personalities. But just because a person can draw a large audience, doesn't mean he or she can teach Scripture accurately. Abusers can twist the meaning of the biblical text, sometimes without realizing it, and when they do, people are hurt.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll learn to handle the Scriptures accurately from a priest-turned-teacher named Ezra. Even if we never teach the Bible, Ezra's fine example of exposition shows us how it's done correctly so we can spot and avoid Scripture mishandling.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

For us to handle the Scriptures accurately, the Holy Spirit must “guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13). We’d be lost in a maze of speculation without His illumination. So, as you open God’s Word, invite the Spirit to help you see the true meaning of the text, just as the psalmist prayed.

Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in your instructions. (Psalm 119:18)



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The historical setting of Ezra’s ministry is the period after the Jewish exile, when waves of Jews returned from Babylon to their homeland.

The Babylonians had destroyed Solomon’s original temple in 586 BC, so, under Zerubbabel’s leadership, the first group to return built a new temple, which was finished in 516 BC. Soon after, the Persian king Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to lead a second group of Jews to Jerusalem, including Levites and priests, to reestablish worship. The king generously supplied Ezra with silver and gold from the royal treasury, along with grain, wine, oil, and “whatever the God of heaven demands for his Temple” (Ezra 7:23).

Imagine Ezra’s delight when he surveyed the bounty! “The gracious hand of our God was upon us,” Ezra joyfully declared as he led the caravan through the desert to Jerusalem (8:18). When Nehemiah returned with a third group of Jews and rebuilt the walls, the restoration of Jerusalem was complete. God had turned the wheels of world affairs to bring tens of thousands of Jews back to the land of promise.



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Observation: How to Handle the Scriptures Accurately

The people had a heart to obey God, but who would teach them God’s commands? They had built the walls “with the help of [their] God” (Nehemiah 6:16); now the Jews turned to Ezra for help in building their lives with the Word of God.

All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey. (8:1)

Ezra’s message is one of the clearest examples in the Bible of genuine exposition of the Scriptures. Read the account in *Nehemiah 8:2–12* and observe the key components.

What is the first essential component in accurately handling the Scriptures in *8:3*?

I don’t begin preparing a lesson or sermon by reading the newspaper or a book. I read the Bible. What does it say? I read it aloud. I read repeatedly. I read with emphasis and feeling. I pause. I think. I pray. The focus of my concentration is the Book.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What does accurately handling the Scriptures include next, according to *8:4–6*?



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They stood in reverence and in silence. This wasn't just a casual listening.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What element of accurately handling the Scriptures do you observe Ezra and the Levites modeling in *Nehemiah 8:7–8*?

The desire of the careful student of Scripture is to understand what the passage meant at the time it was written and then make it meaningful today. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Handling the Scriptures accurately isn't complete until it includes what final component, modelled by the listeners in *8:9–12*. Read *8:13–18*, which goes into more detail.



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Interpretation: Read, Explain, Respond

In the interpretation stage, we drill down into the meaning of the passage.

Reading and Respecting Scripture

Ezra's focus on Scripture started in his preparation, long before he stepped in front of his congregation. The book that bears his name, *Ezra*, reveals the man's personal life in the Word.

Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel. (Ezra 7:10)

Ezra wouldn't have thought of teaching others until he had first studied and obeyed the Law himself.¹ With this insight into Ezra's personal life, look back at how the people assembled as Ezra read Scripture in *Nehemiah 8:1–3*. What principle can you draw from Ezra's preparation, his focus on Scripture, and the people's respect for the Word?

Thankfully, we have Bible study resources Ezra never dreamed of to help us stay true to Scripture. You can read Pastor Chuck Swindoll's list of favorite resources in the online article, "[Basic Bible Study Tools](#)," or watch the video, "[How to Use Bible Study Tools](#)," as Pastor Chuck discusses this subject.

Interpreting and Explaining Scripture

According to the New American Standard Bible, the Levites "read from the book . . . *translating* to give the sense so that [the people] understood the meaning" (*Nehemiah 8:8* NASB emphasis added). The word, *translating*, in Hebrew can either refer to translating from one language to another or to explaining. Either way, the goals were clear communication and clear understanding of the meaning of the Scripture.



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What principle do you glean from this central feature of exposition?

When you study the Bible, look at the words. Pull out your dictionary. Examine the meaning of the words in context. Compare the words found in another place in Scripture to help enrich the meaning. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Responding to and Obeying Scripture

After Ezra's teaching, the people bowed down and worshiped the Lord; they shouted "Amen!" lifted their hands, wept, celebrated, and obeyed. What a response!

What was most striking to you about the people's response in *Nehemiah 8:6–18*? What principle can you conclude from this culminating aspect of accurately handling Scripture?

*Bible study is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. The Jews heard what God said, and they did it. They wept. They changed, and they celebrated God.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



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Correlation: Confronting Spiritual Abusers

Fast-forward from Ezra's day to Jesus' day and contrast Ezra's faithfulness to the Word with the scribes and Pharisees' abuses. How far these first-century Bible teachers had drifted! Jesus had to confront them on their poor handling of Scripture.

Which key element in Ezra's expositional ministry did Jesus point out in his confrontation of the Pharisees in *Matthew 9:13*?

In *12:3*?

In *15:7–9*?



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In your own words, what was Jesus conveying in His rebuke?

Just because people call themselves teachers of the Bible, don't believe everything they say. Just because they have great followings and people hang on their every word doesn't mean they're right. Be careful about people who adapt lines from the Scriptures to say what they want the passage to say. They miss the meaning of Scripture. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Rules to Remember

Five rules of thumb make our study memorable. They focus on the *what*, *who*, *why*, *where*, and *when* of handling the Scriptures accurately.

1. Never forget *what* you're handling . . . God's Word. This will keep you *sensitive*.
2. Always remember *who* has the authority . . . the Lord. This will keep you *humble*.
3. Keep in mind *why* you are teaching . . . not to impress others or grind your own axe but to explain the meaning of the text. This will keep you *accurate*.
4. Think about *where* people are . . . their world. This will keep you *interesting*.
5. Focus on *when* the teaching ends . . . at the point of application. This will keep you *practical*.



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Slip these tips in your Bible and refer to them as you're studying or preparing to teach. You can also use them to evaluate the Bible-teaching you're receiving. You'll know if they are there because your heart will resonate with "amens" as you listen. When you truly understand God's Word, you'll long to respond with joyful celebration and obedience as the Jews did. Do you notice any of these guidelines present in your Bible teacher? Which ones?

Are any of these elements absent? Do you think you may be attached to a teacher who is mishandling the Word?

We don't often hear about spiritual abuse, but it is devastating and disillusioning for its victims. If you're suffering under a spiritual abuser, consult a trusted Christian counselor who can help you heal. Also, feel free to contact the [biblical counseling ministry](#) at Insight for Living Ministries to schedule a phone appointment with one of our pastors on staff. Help is near.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for the Scriptures that cause my heart to celebrate when I hear and understand. Guide me into the wonders of Your Word and fill my heart with a willingness to do what You say. Draw me nearer as I learn more and more of Your ways. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Learn more about the Bible-study method Pastor Chuck Swindoll uses and the basis of our *Searching the Scriptures* Bible studies on the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

