

LESSON 5: COMMENTARIES

I. Introduction

Like a good sermon, devotional book, or counselor, a good commentary is God's gift to the church. Commentaries give us access to the findings of knowledgeable scholars who have spent years studying and researching a particular text. Their insights can profoundly enhance our understanding of the text, as well as challenge us to apply these Scriptures in ways we had not yet thought of.

- Why might some people hesitate to use commentaries?
- How can commentaries be helpful?
- A church member tells you, "I don't need a commentary so long as I have my Bible." How would you respond? Would you respond differently if this church member wanted to teach the Bible?

II. The Usefulness of Commentaries

Commentaries offer a number of distinct benefits to the Bible student:

- A. They can impart valuable historical context and background information that you simply cannot learn from the text alone.
- B. They often provide very detailed word studies, often drawing from extrabiblical resources to arrive at a deeper understanding of meaning and usage.
- C. They can point us to other books or passages for answers to our questions.
- D. When addressing a controversial passage, commentaries often explain the different possible interpretations and give guidance toward the best one.
- E. They can be used to "check" our interpretations. If no commentator has ever suggested your conclusion, you may be off in left field and need to reconsider.

F. Like good sermons, commentaries can be deeply devotional, helping us to internalize the text before we presume to teach it.

- Can you think of any other benefits of using a commentary?

III. Marks of a Good Commentary

- A. **Exegesis:** Commentaries can be either exegetical (a study of a text), homiletical (a sermon in print), or both. Students who are serious about interpreting the Bible want a commentary that will help answer their questions. Therefore, what they really want in a commentary is exegesis.
- B. **Original languages:** Does the author have a working knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, and are the original languages the real source of his comments? If not, then this commentary is likely to add little to your study. Don't worry if you don't know the languages yourself; you can "read around" the Greek and Hebrew words to get a source of the meaning.
- C. **Clear interpretations:** When the text has more than one possible meaning, does the author discuss all possible meanings and then give clear reasons for his interpretive choice?
- D. **Textual criticism:** Does the author discuss a textual critical problem? In other words, when you notice in your margin "some manuscripts do not include . . .," does the author bring it up?
- E. **Historical background:** Does the author offer relevant historical background to issues within the text?
- F. **Bibliography:** Does the author give enough bibliographic information to guide your further study?
- G. **Setting the Stage:** Does the Introduction give enough historical information so that you can have a good sense of the occasion of the book?¹

IV. When to use a Commentary

¹ Fee and Stuart p. 247-8.

As two great commentators have said, “You go to a commentary after you have done your own work: the reason you eventually consult a commentary is to find answers to the content questions that have arisen in your own study. At the same time, of course, the commentary will alert you to questions you failed to ask, but perhaps you should have.”²

- What is the danger of using a commentary too early?
- Conversely, what might be the danger of not going to a commentary at all?

V. Mistakes we can Make with Commentaries

- A. We go to them too early.** If you go to a commentary too early you train yourself to let the scholar do the thinking for you. Over the long run this will lead you to spend more time in the commentary than in the word, replacing thoughtful observation with borrowed insight.
- B. We use too many.** Too many commentaries can paralyze the reader. Unable to process all the nuances of the arguments or feeling overwhelmed by the technical points, the reader will be tempted to throw his hands in the air and give up.
- C. We use too few.** As Proverbs 18:17 says, *The first to plead his case seems just, Until another comes and examines him.* One commentary can make a compelling case for a certain interpretation, but it will remain unchallenged in your mind until you read another point of view. While most good commentaries will be in general agreement, they will differ on the meaning of certain key passages. Using a variety of commentaries will give you a well-rounded perspective on the debate.
- D. We rely too heavily on one author.** When I was in seminary there was a joke that in the new MacArthur Study Bible, they printed the notes in red letters! While John MacArthur is an excellent Bible teacher, he is not infallible. Don’t allow esteem for a certain teacher to become blind acceptance of his conclusions. You still have a responsibility to interpret the text for yourself (Acts 17:11).
- E. We are afraid to disagree.** Nothing says that commentaries are always right! In most cases, if you have diligently performed your exegesis, you will find that your conclusions match those of the better commentaries – but this is not always the

² Ibid. p. 248.

- case. If you find that your conclusions do not match a commentary, your first instinct should be to carefully reassess your interpretations and not quickly discard the insights of patient and wise scholars. But if, after further study, you still disagree, you have to stand by what you believe the text is teaching.
- F. **We take their word for it.** It's not enough to read a stated conclusion; we need to also do our best to see how the commentator arrives at that conclusion. Only then can we weigh the strength of his argument.
 - G. **We choose poorly.** A bad commentary can lead you in all kinds of errant directions. Some academics have a low view of inspiration and seem bent on pleasing their colleagues in the academy rather than standing for the truth; others write with an agenda to undermine Scripture and prove a certain point. Also, remember that not everything you find online is solid! Just because it's free doesn't mean it's worth it.

VI. Getting Started

The following resources are recommended for all serious Bible students. I have included a brief description of each one, along with its commentary on John 3:16, so you can see a little of its style and nuance. John 3:16: ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.***

- A. *The MacArthur Study Bible*: This is a clear, straightforward study Bible. The simplicity and clarity of his explanations are the strength of this resource. In addition, he does a wonderful job of cross referencing the reader to other passages which may illuminate the text.

3:16 For God so loved the world. The Son's mission is bound up in the supreme love of God for the evil, sinful "world" of humanity (cf. 6:32, 51; 12:47; see note on 1:9; see note on Matt. 5:44, 45) that is in rebellion against Him. The word "so" emphasizes the intensity or greatness of His love. The Father gave His unique and beloved Son to die on behalf on sinful men (see note on 2 Cor. 5:21). **everlasting life.** See note on v. 15; cf. 17:3; 1 John 5:20.

- B. *The ESV Study Bible*: This is an extremely thorough study Bible with detailed notes and introductions. One of the strengths of this study Bible is that it raises awareness of the key textual debates. There are dozens of helpful articles in the back of this tome as well.

16 Here is the most famous summary of the gospel in the entire Bible. **For** connects to v. 15 and explains what happened to make it possible that someone can "have eternal life" (v. 15), that is, through believing in Christ. **God so loved the world** was an astounding statement in that context because the OT and other Jewish writings had spoken only of God's love for his people Israel. God's love for "the world" made it possible for "whoever" (v. 15) believes in Christ, not Jews

alone, to have eternal life. God's love for the world was not mere sentiment but led to a specific action: he **gave his only Son**, which John elsewhere explains as sending him to earth as a man (v. 17) to suffer and die and thereby to bear the penalty for sins (see note on 1 John 2:2; cf. Rom. 3:25). On "only Son," see note on John 1:14, which contains the same Greek phrase. The purpose of giving his Son was to make God's great gift of eternal life available to anyone—to **whoever believes in him**, that is, whoever personally trusts in him (see note on 11:25). **Not perish** means not perish in eternal judgment, in contrast to having **eternal life**, the life of abundant joy and immeasurable blessing in the presence of God forever. Those who "believe in" Christ **have** that "eternal life" and already experience its blessings in this present time, not yet fully, but in some significant measure.

- C. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*: If you buy just one commentary series, this is the one. The information is insightful and accessible for any earnest Bible Student. This is available in a 12 Volume printed set or on CD-ROM.

16 Commentators are divided as to whether vv. 16-21 are a direct continuation of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus or whether they represent only the author's comment on Jesus' words. In either case, they express the most important message of the Gospel (emphasized elsewhere in many ways)-that salvation is a gift received only by believing God for it. The nature of belief is implied in the illustration of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (v. 14). Belief consists of accepting something, not doing something. The result of belief is that one receives eternal life. He is freed from condemnation and lives in a relation of total honesty with God, for he does not fear having his real self exposed.

"Eternal," the new life God gives, refers not solely to the duration of existence but also to the quality of life as contrasted with futility. It is a deepening and growing experience. It can never be exhausted in any measurable span of time, but it introduces a totally new quality of life. The believer becomes imperishable; he is free from all condemnation, he is approved by God. The verb "perish" depicts the opposite of salvation. It is used of death as opposed to life (Mark 3:6, transitive), "destroy" as opposed to preserve (1Cor 1:19), "loss" as opposed to win or gain (2John 8). It may be used of sheep that have gone astray (Matt 10:6) or a son who has wandered from his father's house (Luke 15:24). Its use here clearly implies that those without God are hopelessly confused in purpose, alienated from him in their affections, and futile in their efforts. Positive belief in Christ is necessary; all that one has to do to perish is nothing. To perish is to fail completely of fulfilling God's purpose and consequently to be excluded forever from his fellowship.

The presentation of the good news of God's love offers only two options: to believe or to perish. Eternal life, which is accepted by believing, is a gift of God and brings with it the fullest blessings God can bestow. To perish does not mean to cease to exist; it means to experience utter failure, futility, and loss of all that makes existence worthwhile. Its use with reference to Judas in John 17:12 is a vivid illustration.

- D. If you are studying an individual book, you should check out bestcommentaries.com. This website provides helpful reviews and ratings for just about every Bible commentary in print.

VII. Application

The best time to use commentaries is after you have made your observations and performed your word studies. My advice is to approach a commentary with an agenda. Take the exegetical questions raised from your own observations of the text, then read the commentaries looking for answers to those questions. In addition, keep an eye out for observations you may have overlooked in your own study. Finally, after surveying the commentaries, reanalyze your understanding of your passage in light of the new information and insights you have now gleaned.

VIII. Assignment

Consult at least two commentaries (email me if you want to borrow some) on Titus 3:4-7 and answer your own exegetical questions from your observations on the text.

Preaching Assignment: Use the tools we have practiced to study your passage until you know what it means. Come up with an exegetical outline, a homiletical outline, and a propositional statement.

IX. Conclusion

In His providence God has blessed the church with scholars who provide enriching commentary on His word. For many a student, these commentaries serve as knowledgeable friends with whom they can test their ideas and move ever closer to the pure meaning of the text. While excellent tools, these books should be used judiciously, for God wants us to be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, who 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.”***