

Using The Word

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Chapter Two

The City





THE DAY DAWNS IN THE CITY; THE people stir. Some have lived here all their lives and can find their way to any address. Others have never left their little neighborhood and can introduce you to every person in a six-block area. If you've just arrived from the country, the city may appear as a confusing jumble of streets filled with strangers. Will you ever get your bearings? Will you ever know your way around?

The Bible is a vast land, a city with surprises around every corner. It can be overwhelming to those who approach for the first time. You find yourself in conversations with people who seem to know everything. "I was down in the fourteenth chapter of John the other day..." And you're thinking John who? Where's John? Or you ask for simple directions and get a lengthy dissertation full of unfamiliar landmarks

and obscure roads: “You take the Roman road, beginning with the wages of sin, then you go left over to John 1 where you receive him and then go right toward Ephesians where you pick up the stamp and seal of your inheritance...” And you’re still wondering where the Roman road is, as the speaker’s voice dims into oblivion.

Looking at the Bible as a city to explore, instead of a text book to memorize, can remove a lot of tension. Approach it like a tourist looking for a fun week or, even better, as a wide-eyed traveler who has come to find a new place to settle. Start wherever you land and look around. “OK, this is the book of Ruth. Interesting.”

Many Bibles have chain references: notes at the end of a verse or in the center column between the text. If a particular verse catches your attention, you can follow the reference to a whole new area of the Bible. Using references or a

concordance is like taking the subway across town because you discover in the Art Museum's brochure that a particular artist is also showing at a gallery on the waterfront.

You may arrive on the waterfront and find it loaded with ramshackle buildings, a scary place to be after dark. So after a glance at the gallery, you zip back downtown. Or you may find yourself in a fascinating new area, worthy of future exploration.

I remember discovering Proverbs in the middle of my first Bible study group. "What is THIS?" I exclaimed. Chapter after chapter of great one-liners. It read like the spiral notebook full of quotes I'd collected over the years. Great fun.

As you explore, you meet people. They talk about other people and in time you meet them also. Pretty soon, you're not dealing with

strangers anymore. When you go to church or talk to a Christian, you find you have friends and experiences in common. Someone else may have discovered that great fountain on the corner of Isaiah and 55th.

There are important landmarks and dignitaries that many people from out of town have heard about. Psalm 23 and Moses are familiar. However, only the locals know the hidden parks and really special restaurants. Sermons, teaching tapes, books and biblical discussions can be like a friend taking you to see the sights. You don't have to take a tour with everyone or believe everything anyone says. Each of us finds food, shelter, work and fun in different settings. Sharing information and experiences is one of the joys of city living.

Ample resources are available, and making use of them can widen your experience of the city.

A Bible handbook is like a guidebook that provides more information than you ever want to know on every site. It is organized by books of the Bible. You don't need to look at it every time you walk around town; but if a certain building or park catches your attention, you can look up the historical setting and discover other details about the site.

A Bible dictionary is useful if you bump into a reference to a name or place and don't know what's being talked about. For example you might read, "a priest after the order of Melchizedek" in the letter to the Hebrews and think, "Mel who?" The Bible Dictionary can function like the city's Who's Who and give you a bead on names and places.

The city is a vast and exciting place. As you tromp around, certain areas become familiar. Someone mentions a restaurant, and you know

that it is near the park or on the cliffs overlooking the ocean. A map begins to form in your mind showing major thoroughfares and the relationship between some of the streets. You begin to know certain neighborhoods intimately. When you bump into a verse in a book or at church you can place it in context. Directions now make sense because you recognize the landmarks. Titles of mystery novels or parenthetical phrases leap out at you because you've seen those words before—signposts in the city. While new areas to explore always appear, a time will come when you know your way around town.

“I AM the way,” Jesus said in the 14th chapter of John. As you explore the city, you find him. He is not only hanging out in parks or showing up at someone's house. He becomes in a very real way the ground under your feet, the road you are traveling. He is the destination AND the

journey, the path and the resting place, the light
of the city of God.

Tools:

- a Bible with chain references and/or tabs for each book
- a Bible handbook and/or Bible dictionary
- travelogues in the form of books, teaching tapes or commentaries
- notebook, highlighter, pens.

Try it:

1. Open a Bible anywhere. Read along until a verse catches your attention. Look at the reference and zip over to the part of the Bible referred to. Read along there until something else catches your attention. Go wherever that leads. I call this kind of exploration “Wandering about in the Word.”
2. Choose a book of the Bible and read it through quickly. Think of it as a little drive around the block to get your bearings. You

don't need to explore every store, but you might make a mental note of a site to visit or inquire about later.

3. Guidebook and Who's Who in hand, step out your door. Read the Bible handbook's perspective on the area you are in. Look up names and places in the Bible dictionary as you come across them. Get thoroughly acquainted with a particular neighborhood, a particular book or chapter in the Bible.