

# 20 Tips on How to Use Bible Commentaries

A summary lecture on how to use Bible Commentaries

## **1. Use them**

“It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others. My chat this afternoon is not for these great originals, but for you who are content to learn of holy men, taught of God, and mighty in the Scriptures. It has been the fashion of late years to speak against the use of commentaries...A respectable acquaintance with the opinions of the giants of the past, might have saved many an erratic thinker from wild interpretations and outrageous inferences” (C H Spurgeon).

## **2. Use them for appropriate tasks**

Commentaries vary in size, detail, level, and theological basis; they also have different roles in the exegetical process. The following classification is partly chronological – the first books are used earlier in the process than the latter books. (The books in brackets are OT focused and are merely exemplary not exhaustive).

- **Critical:** Emphasis on technical matters like the composition of the text rather than its meaning (e.g. *International Critical Commentary*, some *Word* commentaries).
- **Expository (Original Language):** Close and detailed exposition of the text, usually requiring some knowledge of the original languages (e.g. some *Word* commentaries, *New International Commentary on the OT*, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, *Mentor series* by Christian Focus).
- **Expository (English):** Stay close to the text but do not usually deal with critical issues and do not require original language knowledge (*Focus on the Bible series* by Christian Focus, *Evangelical Press Study Commentaries*).
- **Summary:** Do not explain everything but focus on main points and present conclusions rather than extensive arguments. Excellent summaries of a verse or passage's teaching. Big is not always better. (e.g. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, *Bible Speaks Today*).
- **Classical:** Reputable commentaries from the past that usually do not deal with technical issues, but rather the theological meaning of the text (*Banner of Truth Geneva series*, John Gill, John Calvin).
- **Applicatory:** Suitable for lay-people, usually with more of an applicatory focus (*NIV Application Commentary*).
- **Homiletical:** Tend to be the result of sermon series or at least more sermonic in style (e.g. *Welwyn*, *Dale Ralph Davis*).
- **Devotional:** Extensive comments on spiritually rich texts. Focus on edification rather than critical or controversial issues (e.g. *Matthew Henry*).

### **3. Use recommended commentaries**

Ask pastors and professors for their recommendations on various books. Weigh the recommendations. Just because a *Word* series' commentary on one book is good does not guarantee that they are all good.

Spurgeon: "The best commentators are those who have written upon only one book. Few men can comment eminently well upon the whole Bible."

There are many OT commentary guide books (e.g. Tremper Longman III, Douglas Stuart, Charles Spurgeon, etc). Here are some online recommendations:

- Enduring Word Commentary
- Joel Beeke's best Commentaries
- Best Commentaries
- Best Commentaries: Top 2 for each book
- Ligonier: Top 5 Commentaries on every book of the Bible
- Desiring God recommendations
- Tim Challies Top 5 Commentaries

### **4. Use them late in exegesis**

If you use commentaries too early, they will take over and suppress your own thought. Do your own exegesis rather than collate the work of others.

### **5. Use them to get started in exegesis**

This may seem like a contradiction to #4, but what I mean is that you should use commentaries earlier in the process if you get stuck, or perhaps can't even get started. They can provide helpful or even essential historical, geographical, or cultural background.

Use them to help you with specific issues but leave most commentary reading towards the end of your research. Remember to pray and seek the Holy Spirit's help rather than just open the nearest book.

### **6. Use them to confirm or correct your pericope and translation**

Checking your pericope selection and your translation with a higher-end commentary before you begin your exegesis may save you a lot of time and energy.

### **7. Use them to confirm or correct your exegesis**

If after exegeting a passage you find a number of commentators contradicting your conclusions, then review your work and decide who is correct.

### **8. Use them to help you understand grammar and syntax**

Some of the more technical commentaries can help you translate difficult parts of the passage, or perhaps highlight grammatical and syntax issues that help to uncover a text's meaning and message.

### **9. Use them to highlight unasked questions**

When I read a commentary I often find questions raised that I had not even considered, forcing me back to the text.

### **10. Use them to answer unanswered questions**

It may be that at the end of all your exegetical labor that you still don't have an answer to a question. That's when reading a number of commentaries can help you better understand the options and arguments and help you to come to a decision.

### **11. Use them to help you decide what to focus on**

Reading a commentary may reveal that what you thought important is relatively unimportant, and may also point you to study further in areas that you thought unimportant.

### **12. Use them to find other passages that are related to this one.**

Commentaries will often provide cross-references or even brief expositions of other passages that have a bearing on this one.

### **13. Use them to find sources for further reading**

Some commentaries, especially the more technical and expository ones, will often list books and journal articles that bear upon the passage.

### **14. Use them to find opposing arguments and conclusions**

As it's often helpful to listen to the other side of an interpretive debate, make sure you consult commentators who state the other positions fairly, or best of all, read the opposing commentators to help you sharpen your own conclusions or change them.

### **15. Use them to get quotes to back up conclusions**

If your view is out of sync with the majority of commentators, or if it is controversial, it is often helpful to back up your argument and decision with a quote from a reliable commentator.

### **16. Use them to help you express the meaning**

Especially if you've been struggling to express your thoughts, commentators can provide you with words that more briefly or clearly express the same thing.

### **17. Use them by translating their thoughts into your own words**

Don't just string quotes from various commentators together. If you are going to use them extensively, then at the very least, process their thoughts and translate them into your own words, while giving credit for the original thoughts.

### **18. Use them consistently**

If you adopt a conclusion from a commentator, make sure it is reflected in the rest of your work. Go back through and be consistent in your translation or interpretation of a word or phrase.

### **19. Use them discriminately**

Eventually you will get to know the particular theological biases and prejudices in certain commentaries and certain series. As long as you keep these in mind, you can filter out the bones and take the meat. Separate facts from opinion.

### **20. Use them independently**

Don't become wholly dependent upon commentaries; not even upon one commentator or series of commentaries. We don't want to belittle commentaries but we don't want to be bullied by them either. Have confidence in your own prayerful Spirit-led exegesis

#### **Reference**

Link: [How to use Bible Commentaries | HeadHeartHand Blog](#)