

# Look Again!

Samuel Scudder (1837-1911) wrote an interesting and well-known essay about his days as a student in the lab of Harvard Professor Louis Agassiz, the famous naturalist.

In his very first lesson, Agassiz sat Scudder at a table and brought to him a huge jar containing a fish specimen. He pulled it from the foul-smelling preservative liquid, placed it on the table and said, "Look at it; we call it a haemulon. By and by, I will ask what you have seen."

Scudder writes, "In ten minutes, I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the Professor."

Agassiz could not be found anywhere, and so Scudder returned to his seat to look at the fish, for one hour, another hour, and another. He turned the fish every which way, looking at it from all angles, until finally lunchtime came.

Agassiz could not be found after lunch, and so Scudder had nothing to do but return to the fish. He used his finger to explore the teeth and throat of the fish. He counted the scales in rows. He pulled at the fins.

He had just begun to draw the fish, when Agassiz suddenly appeared at his shoulder. "That's right," he exclaimed, "a pencil is one of the best eyes!" Scudder pointed out the obvious structures of the fish—the gills, the lips, the eyes, the lateral lines of the body, the forked tail.

Agassiz became disappointed and said, "You have not looked very carefully... Look again, look again!"

Scudder returned to the fish, angry and disgusted. But with a will to look deeper, he discovered new details that he had missed. When the end of the day drew close, the Professor returned and asked, "Do you see it yet?"

Scudder replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before." Agassiz was complimentary, but unsatisfied, and demanded that Scudder put away the fish and return the next morning. Scudder thought about the fish all night long. The next day, he provided insights about the fish's symmetrically paired parts. Agassiz was very excited, and enthusiastically lectured about the importance of this discovery. But when Scudder asked what he should do next, Agassiz said, "Oh, look at your fish!"

For three days Scudder was forced to remain at the table and look at the fish. Finally, on the 4th day, Agassiz produced a second almost-identical fish, and demanded that Scudder point out

the similarities and differences.

By the end of eight months, countless jars surrounded Scudder's work table, and the whole family of haemulons was laid out before him.

You might think this is utterly silly Mr. Miyagi paint-the-fence stuff, but listen to Scudder's conclusion at the end of his essay:

"This was the best lesson I ever had, a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study, a legacy the Professor has left to me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part. Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them. Facts [must be] brought into connection with some general law."

Perhaps we could all use some of Professor Agassiz's patience, determination, and rigor, when it comes to studying the Bible. Too often, we skim a passage of scripture, perhaps while drifting off to sleep. I'm doubtful that we gain very much this way.

Sometimes, we will actually read the passage carefully, when fully awake, and we will absorb the overall message. This is certainly good! But let's not be like Scudder and say, "in ten minutes, I had seen all that could be seen in that chapter..."

Often there are layers of meaning that will not reveal themselves until we look, and look, and meditate, and look, and look again. I don't mean to suggest there is some kind of secret Bible code that can only be discerned while sitting in the lotus position. It just takes time to appreciate what's going on, to truly see what is plainly there.

For example, I lost count of how many times I looked at the passage in Luke 4, where Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness, before I asked the right questions and began to discern what was waiting to be discovered. It was the third or fourth reading before I noticed the structure in Psalm 136 which reveals the real message of the psalm. (No, not the obvious structure. "Look again! Do you see it yet?")

Also, when studying a passage, it helps to have someone point out other passages that can be used for comparison. What are the similarities? What are the differences? What "general law" helps apply them to our lives? What is God trying to communicate to us?

When studying, take notes. As Agassiz said, "A pencil is one of the best eyes!" Underline key words and thoughts. Outline the passage on a separate sheet. Notice the structure. Jot down thoughts or questions. Soon, through the tool of notetaking, obvious truths will begin to rise to the surface. Look at Philippians 3:4-14 through the eye of the pencil. Do you see the three-part

structure? Do you see how it brings to light the message of Paul's life? "Look again, look again!"

Sometimes it is helpful to use additional tools to dissect the text—such as Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, topical Bibles, and Greek helps—to dig a little deeper and see the meaning.

And always, our circumstances change over time, and a passage will speak to us in a way that it couldn't a few years previously, because we were not tuned to listen for it. That's why it's a good idea to reread the Bible from time to time—as a youth, as a spouse, as a parent, as a teacher, as a widow—and gain new encouragement each time. That's also why it's good for preacher to repeat topics from time to time.

So look, look again! Don't be satisfied with skimming. Meditate at length on the truths of God's word.

—John Guzzetta