

# **PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**



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Lead writer: Dr. Randall D. McElwain

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# COURSE OVERVIEW

This course introduces the basic principles of Biblical interpretation. Most of the lessons in this course are based on a popular textbook, *Living by the Book*, by Howard and William Hendricks. If you have access to this book, you will find exercises to practice the principles taught in the course, as well as further discussion of each principle. However, the textbook is not required for the course. All the required material is included in these lessons.

Students should read each lesson prior to coming to class. You should plan to have 90-120 minutes for each class session, in addition to time for doing assignments outside of class. Because this course is primarily based on practical activities, you may wish to divide a lesson into more than one meeting. This will give students additional time to do the activities.

Most lessons include several **activities** for practice of the principles taught in the lesson. It is important that students take adequate time to do these activities carefully. These activities move through many different scriptures. Do not rush to finish the lesson. Because many of these activities will be new to the students, take time in class to make sure each student understands how to complete the activities. The primary goal is not to find a particular answer; the primary goal is to develop skill in studying and interpreting the Bible.

By the end of the course, the student will have carefully studied several passages of scripture. Each student should keep their study notes in a notebook for future use. The work done for this course will be useful for sermon and Bible lesson preparation.

**Discussion questions** and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points. In the case of discussion questions, let students discuss the answer. Try to make sure that all students in the class are involved in the discussion. If necessary, you can call on students by name.

Each student will work on a **course project** throughout the entire course. After Lesson 10, they will make a presentation to the class or submit a paper to the class leader. Instructions for the presentation or paper are given in the assignments section of Lesson 10.

A couple of **other assignments** are also included at the end of Lesson 2 and Lesson 7. Students should show the class leader their completed work but should keep a copy of their work in their own notebook.



## LESSON 1

# INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Know why in-depth study of the Bible is important for the Christian.
2. Be able to list three steps necessary for studying the Bible.
3. Begin the process of carefully studying a selected passage of scripture.
4. Appreciate the importance of the illumination of the Holy Spirit for Bible interpretation.

### INTRODUCTION

One purpose of this course is to help you grow in your personal study and application of scripture. A good first step is to honestly evaluate your current Bible reading practices.

- » Take a couple of minutes to discuss your current Bible reading practices. This is not a time to criticize each other; it is a time to reflect on the question, “How am I reading God’s Word?” Here are some questions to think about:
  - How often do I read the Bible?
  - When I read the Bible, how much time do I spend?
  - How do I select passages to read?
  - Do I understand what I am reading?
  - Do I remember what I read?
  - Am I able to make applications to my life?
  - What are 2-3 reasons that I don’t read the Bible more?

Samuel, a Taiwanese Christian, had been a Christian for 15 years, but showed few signs of spiritual maturity. He was frustrated with his lack of spiritual growth. After a Sunday morning service, his frustration came to the surface. “Pastor, you tell me to read the Bible. You say that God will speak to me through His Word. I’ve tried! I read the Bible every morning, and it doesn’t say anything to me. What’s wrong?”

The pastor replied, “Samuel, tell me **how** you read the Bible.” Samuel’s response pointed to an important factor in his struggles. He answered, “Each morning before work, I open my Bible and read a verse.” The pastor followed up, “Do you read through an entire book of the Bible or even a complete chapter before moving on?” “No, I just read a verse every morning – wherever my Bible falls open. And it rarely helps!”

To help Samuel understand the problem of reading the Bible in this fashion, the pastor asked him to open his Bible and read the first verse he saw. Samuel read, “Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau, and those of the Shephelah shall possess the land of the Philistines; they shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria, and Benjamin shall possess Gilead” (Obadiah 1:19).

Then the pastor asked Samuel some questions. “Where is the Negeb? Where is the Shephelah? Where is the land of Ephraim? Samaria? Benjamin? Gilead?” The answer to every question was “I don’t know.” The next week, they began a Bible study on “How to Read the Bible.” During the next several weeks, Samuel began to learn some principles of interpreting the Bible. He learned to understand how scripture speaks to us today.

The goal of this course is to help you learn and apply basic principles of Bible interpretation. Through these lessons and exercises, you will gain tools to help you understand God’s Word, to apply it to your life, and to teach it to others.

## WHY SHOULD I STUDY THE BIBLE?

Some people avoid reading the Bible because they believe it is too difficult to understand. Many who believe the Bible is God’s Word do not know how to interpret and apply it. Studying the Bible is hard work. Is it worth the work? Why should we study the Bible?

## God Reveals Himself through Scripture

Scripture shows us who God is. God’s Word is an expression of the nature of God (Psalm 119:15, 27). Scripture shows us how God thinks, what is important to him, how he relates to people, and how he works in human history. God’s law (what he requires) reflects his character, his justice, and his wisdom (Psalm 119:137). Whenever we read the Bible, we should pay attention to what it shows us about God.



Scripture reveals God to the worshipper. It also guides the worshipper's response to God, showing the way we must live.

## **The Bible Is a Lamp**

The Psalmist compared God's Word to a lamp that guides us in the way to live (Psalm 119:105). The Bible is God's truth that teaches us how to think and live.

» Read Psalm 19:7-11, Psalm 119:160, and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

God's Word is the source of right doctrine. The Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. This principle does not mean that we can understand everything in scripture without other help. It does not mean that tradition is unimportant. It means that God's Word is the final authority for the believer.

Because God's Word is the source of truth, knowledge of scripture prepares and equips us for ministry. When we teach God's Word accurately, we teach with God's authority. The truth is his, not ours.

## **The Bible Is Spiritual Milk**

Peter said that believers should desire the Bible as much as a newborn baby desires milk (1 Peter 2:2). Just as a baby must have milk to grow physically, a Christian must have scripture to grow spiritually. Without a regular diet of God's Word, we will never grow to spiritual maturity.

As we learn the skills of biblical interpretation and practice discerning truth from God's Word, we mature (Hebrews 5:14). Our ability to use the Word of God to teach others is developed.

## **The Bible Is Sweet as Honey**

The psalmist compared God's Word to honey (Psalm 19:10, Psalm 119:103). Honey is both healthy and sweet. We should consider study of God's Word a delight, not unpleasant work. Just as a soldier at war rejoices to read a letter from his family at home, we should rejoice to read the Bible, God's letter to his children.

When a young Jewish child begins school so that he can learn to read the Law, the teacher will put honey on the first letters of the alphabet and the child will lick the page to taste

its sweetness. The teacher uses this object lesson so that “the child learns to associate [the Law] with delight and good taste.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Bible Is the Sword of the Spirit

God’s Word is our weapon in spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:17). When Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness, he responded to Satan’s attacks by quoting from Deuteronomy (Matthew 4:1-11).

Scripture empowers us for spiritual victory and for effective ministry. Through Bible study, we are prepared to respond to false doctrine, to establish our congregations in true doctrine, and to minister effectively in today’s world.

## Improper Reasons for Studying Scripture

» Read Hebrews 4:12-13.

There are many good reasons for studying scripture, but sometimes people read or study scripture with wrong motivations.

Some people may study scripture just to collect evidence to defend their opinion. Perhaps they even want to use knowledge to control others under their influence.

Some people may study scripture for prideful reasons. Perhaps they feel that they will gain spiritual status and be superior to other people. Maybe they want people to think well of them for their accomplishments. Or perhaps they assume that studying scripture will help them to earn God’s favor.

All of these are misguided reasons for reading or studying scripture. Hebrews 4:12-13 shows the proper attitude towards scripture. Instead of using scripture to accomplish selfish goals, we should remember that it is God’s Word, not ours. We should study it with an attitude of reverence for God. The Bible is our authority, and we should submit ourselves to it. When we teach it to others, we should do so with humility.

When we study and teach God’s Word in this way, it reveals sin or error in our lives and shows us how to turn from it. It changes our lives and the lives of those we serve and lead.

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1 Efraim Rubin, “Honey in Jewish Law, Lore, Tradition, and More,” accessed November 15, 2023, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/2697265/jewish/Honey-in-Jewish-Law-Lore-Tradition-and-More.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2697265/jewish/Honey-in-Jewish-Law-Lore-Tradition-and-More.htm)

## HOW SHOULD I STUDY THE BIBLE?

- » What process do you currently use when studying a passage of scripture? Discuss specific steps that you take to find the meaning of a Bible text.

Samuel agreed that study of the Bible is important. However, he did not know how to study scripture. He needed a method.

This course is intended to provide a method for effective Bible study. Pastors can use these steps in sermon preparation. Bible teachers can use these steps in preparing Bible lessons. Every believer can benefit from using this method for personal spiritual growth.

The method followed in this course will involve three steps.

### Observation

In this step, we ask, “What do I see in the Bible?” In this step, we observe as many details as possible about the scripture. Too many readers skip observation and move directly to interpretation. We cannot truly understand scripture until we have carefully observed what it says. In the step of observation, we look at the details of the scripture text itself. We will learn to identify details that are important to the message of scripture. Particularly, we will study terms, structure, literary form, and atmosphere.

### Terms

When studying a book of the Bible, we look for words that are used several times throughout the book. 1 John uses some form of the word *know* more than 30 times in 5 chapters. When studying John’s letter, we can begin by tracing this word throughout the book. A list of places where John uses the word *know* will help us begin interpreting his message. To understand John’s message, we can ask, “What does John say we can know?” and “What are the characteristics of those who know?”

### Structure

The books of the Bible were carefully constructed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As you study a book like the Gospel of John, you will find that John organized his gospel around seven signs that show who Jesus is. As we observe the structure of the book, it gives us a better understanding of John’s purpose.

When we study a passage, we may see that the structure follows a story (as in Luke 9:28-36). It might give reasons for a conclusion (as in Romans 6:1-13). It could use details to give a list of points (as in Ephesians 6:13-18). There are also other kinds of structure.

## Literary Form

Paul wrote highly organized letters that argue his point much like a lawyer building an argument to a climax. To read Romans or other epistles well, you should carefully follow Paul's logic.

By contrast, Jonah is a short historical account written to illustrate God's love for all people. To read it well, you must ask, "What makes this a surprising, unusual story?" You are then ready to interpret the book of Jonah by asking, "What do the details of this story mean?"

## Atmosphere

Here we ask questions like, "Where was Paul when he wrote the Epistle of Philippians with its message of joy?" He was in Rome, awaiting trial and possible execution. The situation makes us look at the reasons Paul said he had joy, because he felt this joy even though he was personally in a bad situation.

"Where was John when the heavens were opened to reveal God's eternal plan in the book of Revelation?" He was in exile on the isle of Patmos. The time of persecution made the message of God's victory a great encouragement of faith.

## Interpretation

In this step, we ask, "What does the Bible mean?" After we have collected as many observations as possible, we look for the message of the scripture. We will learn to find the large themes that tie a book together along with the message of individual chapters and verses. We will ask, "What was the message of this book to the first readers?" We will look for principles that are true in all times, places, and cultures.

## Application

In this step, we ask, "How do I apply the Bible to life and ministry today?" It is not enough to understand the meaning without applying it to our lives.

In his textbook, Howard Hendricks suggests two questions regarding application:<sup>2</sup>

1. How does it work for me? This looks at the application of the scripture in my life.
2. How does it work for others? This looks at the application of the scripture in the lives of those to whom I minister.

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2 Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007)

In England there is a university professor who is a highly respected scholar of church history. Academically, he knows the Bible very well; personally, he rejects any belief in God or God's Word. This man knows much about observation and interpretation. Unfortunately, he has never applied the truth of scripture to his life.

James described such a person like this: "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like" (James 1:23-24). The professor in England is an extreme case; however, there are many people who know what scripture says, but who fail to live it in daily life. True Bible study must result in practical application.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN INTERPRETATION

» Can an unbeliever understand the meaning of scripture?

The answer to this question is "Yes, but only partially." In this course, we will study a process to guide our interpretation. These steps will help us understand the message of God's Word. The Bible, read like any other book, will reveal much truth to any reader.

However, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, a person's understanding will always be limited. Intellectual study alone can never reveal spiritual truth. Paul wrote:

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but **taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual**. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:11-14).

An unbeliever can understand some of the message of scripture, but the deep truths of the Bible are revealed through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Studying scripture is more than gaining information; it requires faith and obedience. Until we submit to the authority of God's Word, God's Spirit cannot do his transforming work in our lives. Because of this:

1. Our study of scripture should be preceded by prayer. We should ask the Holy Spirit to guide our study. James wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).
2. Our study of scripture should be followed by a personal response. The goal of Bible study is more than intellectual information; the goal is personal transformation. If

we are not transformed through our study, we have missed the purpose of study. This transformation comes only through the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' parable about the sower and seed, some seed fell along the pathway and was eaten by birds. Some seed had no root and died when the sun grew hot. Some seed was choked by thorns. But some seed fell on good ground and brought forth fruit. Jesus explained that the good soil is the person who both hears and understands the Word (Matthew 13:3-23). This parable shows that it is possible to hear the Word without understanding. We understand God's Word fully only when we open our hearts to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

## LESSON 1 KEY POINTS

### 1. Reasons to study the Bible:

- God reveals himself through scripture.
- The Bible is a lamp.
- The Bible is spiritual milk.
- The Bible is sweet as honey.
- The Bible is the sword of the Spirit.

### 2. There are three steps in the process of Bible study.

- Observation: What do I see in the Bible? Study:
  - Terms
  - Structure
  - Literary Form
  - Atmosphere
- Interpretation: What does the Bible mean?
- Application: How do I apply the Bible to life and ministry today? Ask:
  - How does it work for me?
  - How does it work for others?

### 3. We must have the illumination of the Holy Spirit when studying the Bible. Because of this

- Our study of scripture should be preceded by prayer.
- Our study of scripture should be followed by a personal response.

## LESSON 1 ASSIGNMENT

To begin the process of interpretation, choose one of the following passages of scripture.

- Deuteronomy 6:1-9
- Joshua 1:1-9
- Matthew 6:25-34
- Ephesians 3:14-21
- Colossians 3:1-16

You will study this scripture throughout the course. For this first lesson, read the scripture carefully. Make notes in three areas:

1. Observation: List as many details as you can about the scripture you choose. Depending on the scripture, your details will differ. Some questions that may help you are these:
  - Where did events recorded in this scripture take place?
  - Who are the characters in this scripture?
  - What does this scripture command?
  - What words are repeated in this scripture?
2. Interpretation: In 2-3 sentences, summarize the primary message of the passage.
3. Application: List 2-3 ways in which you can apply the scripture in your life and ministry.





## LESSON 2

# OBSERVATION: LOOKING AT A VERSE

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of careful reading of scripture.
2. Ask important questions of each verse studied.
3. Have a plan for a systematic study of scripture.
4. Practice making detailed observations on selected verses.

### INTRODUCTION

- » Have one or two members of your group describe their trip to the place you are meeting for this course. Include as many details as possible. Did you pass any restaurants, churches, or businesses? How many stop signs or stop lights did you pass? How many turns did you make? Did you pass anything unusual, something that is usually not there on your trip? When each one is finished with the description, discuss how much was observed and how much was not noticed.

When Gideon reads the Bible, he finishes with a mental picture. If you asked Gideon to read and summarize Mark 1:29-31, he would say, “Jesus left the synagogue in Galilee with four disciples (Simon, Andrew, James and John). They went to Simon’s house where Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus

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**“Open my eyes, that I  
may behold wondrous  
things out of your law.”**

**Psalms 119:18**

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lifted her by her hand and her fever left immediately. She felt so much better that she was able to fix them a meal. She didn't even need time to rest and recover!"

When Jonathan reads the Bible, he reads the words but sees few details. If you asked Jonathan to read and summarize Mark 1:29-31, he would say, "Jesus visited Simon's house and healed someone."

Which of these readers has observed? Which reader will remember the story longer? Which reader has more information on which to base an interpretation of this story? The answer is obvious. Gideon saw what happens in Mark 1:29-31. Jonathan read the chapter, but he didn't observe.

The first step in studying the Bible is observation. In this step, we ask, "What do I see in this section of scripture?" A key to effective Bible interpretation is to observe as much as possible. In this lesson, we will learn to observe important details in a verse. Be patient as you do this; the more you observe, the more material you have for interpretation.

## OBSERVATIONS FROM A VERSE

Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power  
when the Holy Ghost has come upon you,  
and you will be my witnesses  
in Jerusalem  
and in all Judea  
and Samaria,  
and to the end of the earth.

What can we observe in a single verse?

### What is the first word?

"But." *But* is a connecting word pointing to previous verses. In Acts 1:6, the disciples asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now that you are resurrected from the dead, will you establish your kingdom? Jesus responds with two statements:

- "It is not for you to know times or seasons..." (Acts 1:7). This is the Father's responsibility.
- "But you will receive power... and you will be my witnesses." This is your responsibility.

**Who is involved?**

“You.” To whom is Jesus speaking? The apostles (Acts 1:2, 4). Take a moment to ask, “Who are these apostles?” Make a list of everything you know about the apostles. Who this verse is about shows the wonderful transforming power of Pentecost.

- They are Jewish; Jesus is sending them to Samaria!
- They were powerless to heal the boy possessed of a spirit (Mark 9:14-29); they will receive power.
- They ran in fear at Jesus’ arrest (Matthew 26:56); they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

**What is the verb of the sentence?**

“Will receive.” The verb tells us what is happening. In this case, the verb tense is looking to something they will receive in the future.

**What will they receive?**

“Power.” The book of Acts will show this power in the ministry of the apostles.

- » This gets you started. Work with the rest of the verse, answering these questions:
  - **When will they receive power?**
  - **Who will give them power?**
  - **What is the result of the power?** (Power precedes witness. The natural result of this power will be a desire to share the gospel with others.)
  - **Whose witness will they be?**
  - **Where will they witness?** (What do you know about these four locations? What is special about Samaria? Did these Jewish apostles want to go there?)

**IMPROVING YOUR POWERS OF OBSERVATION**

James had poor eyesight. When he was in school, he couldn’t see his teacher clearly. He couldn’t read the words on the chalkboard at the front of the room. Then one day, he began to wear eyeglasses. Suddenly, he saw things he had never seen before! He could see his teacher’s face clearly. He could easily read what was written on the chalkboard. He was so excited!

Careful observation is similar to wearing eyeglasses to correct poor vision. Learning how to observe scripture improves your understanding of what scripture is saying.

The practice on Acts 1:8 shows how well you currently observe what you read. Let's study some tips for improving your powers of observation. You will learn questions to ask that bring the scripture into clearer focus. You will then practice reading other verses.

As you read a verse from the Bible, please do not say, "I already know this verse!" Instead, ask God to open your eyes to his Word in a fresh way. The tools in this lesson can help you read with new insight.<sup>3</sup>

## Read for Understanding

A 10-year-old boy decided that he would read the Bible through each year. It was a good resolution; unfortunately, he didn't know how to read the Bible effectively. He had a calendar showing how much to read each day, but he would frequently fall behind. On a Sunday afternoon, he would try to catch up. He would check his calendar and see that he was 20 chapters behind (in Leviticus!). So, he would read all of Leviticus in one afternoon. He would read as fast as he could, trying to get to the end. 10 minutes after finishing, he could not have told you the message of Leviticus. He was reading without understanding.

Reading for understanding is hard work. The Bible describes the search for truth like this: "If you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:4-5). Read scripture carefully. Ask questions. Take notes. Read with your mind.

You can sometimes gain new understanding by paraphrasing the scripture in your own words. While your paraphrase may not be a scholarly translation, it can help you to think deeply about the meaning of the text.

## Ask Questions as You Read

A key to reading with your mind is to ask questions.

- » Read Luke 24:13-35 before continuing this section. As you read the lesson, return to Luke 24 to answer each question.

### 1. Who?

Who are the people in the text? What do you know about each person?

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3 The steps in this lesson come from Chapters 8-17 of *Living by the Book*, by Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007). You can get additional practice and explanation by reading those chapters.

Who were the people in Luke 24:13-35? Cleopas and an unnamed companion<sup>4</sup> were traveling to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. They were followers of Jesus who knew of his miracles and teachings. On this Sunday, they became the first people to have Christ's sufferings and resurrection explained by Jesus himself; they became early witnesses to the resurrection.

## **2. What?**

What is happening in the text? If it is a historical text, what events occur? If it is an epistle, what is the writer trying to teach?

In Luke 24, the event was the revelation of Jesus. The eyes of these two men were opened to the reality of Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:31).

## **3. When?**

Like the previous question, timing provides context for our reading. At the observation stage of Bible study, we look for details about time in the text itself. From Luke 24:13, we learn that the journey to Emmaus took place the same day that the empty tomb was discovered.

These two disciples meet Jesus only a few hours after the tomb is found empty. This tells us something of their feelings as they talked and reasoned (Luke 24:15). Think of the emotional highs and lows these two men had experienced over the past three days.

On Thursday, they had felt despair as they saw Jesus arrested. On Friday, their hopes for a messianic kingdom were crushed as Jesus breathed his last. Now it was Sunday, and the tomb was empty. As they traveled to Emmaus, they tried to understand this mysterious series of events.

## **4. Where?**

It is often helpful to ask, "Where did this happen?" A Bible atlas can help you to find answers to this question. Some Bibles have maps in the back of them.

In Luke 24, Cleopas and his companion are traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village about 11 kilometers west of the city. By the time they walked this distance, it was evening. But after their eyes were opened, these men joyfully returned to Jerusalem. This news could not wait for the next day!

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4 One tradition suggests that Luke was the unnamed companion, which would explain the amount of detail in the story.

## 5. Why?

We see why these disciples were so discouraged when we answer the timing question. They were discouraged because all their hopes for a Messiah ended when Jesus died.

## 6. How?

How were the lives of these disciples changed by this encounter? They returned to Jerusalem confident that Jesus was risen from the dead. Like millions of people since, their lives were changed forever by the Resurrection.

## Read the Same Passage or Book Many Times

G. Campbell Morgan was one of the great preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Morgan never attended Bible college, but he became an effective Bible teacher. Before preaching on a text, Morgan read the entire book of the Bible that contained his chosen text at least 40 times. Through this process, Morgan learned how each verse fit into the entire book. He knew the important themes of the book; he understood the message of the author. Morgan once said, “The Bible never yields itself to laziness.” Bible study is hard work.

You may ask, “How can I read a Bible book 40 times? I will never finish the Bible.” It may not be as difficult as you think. Most adults read 200 words per minute; they can read 12,000 words in one hour. 44 books of the Bible contain less than 12,000 words. This includes Paul’s letters, the General Epistles, the Minor Prophets, and the Old Testament books of Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel. In one hour per day, you could read the books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians 40 times in 40 days.

Reading an entire book shows how the book is organized. Earlier, we read Acts 1:8 where the disciples were sent as witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth. As you read Acts repeatedly, you will see that this provides a pattern for the entire book. In the early part of Acts, persecution takes the disciples from Jerusalem to the rest of Judea; in Acts 8, Philip takes the gospel to Samaria; by the end of Acts, Paul preaches in Rome, from where the gospel will go to the ends of the known world.

## Some Hints for Reading Repeatedly

1. **Read the Bible aloud or listen to it being read.** People in cultures that depend on the written page often forget that most early Christians *heard* the Bible read. When the church at Ephesus received Paul’s letter, they did not make photocopies for each member! A leader read the letter to the other members. Through much of history, far more people received God’s Word by hearing than by reading. Paul’s epistles were read in the churches; the prophets spoke their messages. By reading an epistle aloud

or by listening to it read as an audio book, you will hear the Word of God spoken much like the early church heard scripture.<sup>5</sup>

2. **Read the Bible in various translations (if more than one translation is available in your language).** Some translations are more technical in their approach; some are intended for easier comprehension. By reading from more than one translation, you may gain new insight into the message. If you know more than one language, it can be helpful to read scripture in a second language.<sup>6</sup>
3. **Focus on different things each time you read.** For example, a person could read Genesis 3 once each day for a week, considering the account from a different perspective each time:

Monday: Read Genesis 3 from the perspective of the heavenly Father. How does the Father feel to see the sin of his children?

Tuesday: What is the most important verse in the chapter?

Wednesday: Read Genesis 3 from the perspective of Satan. How does he try to destroy God's relationship with his children?

Thursday: Read Genesis 3 while considering Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Friday: Read Genesis 3 from the perspective of Adam and Eve. What did they feel as they heard God's judgment?

Saturday: Read Genesis 3 from the perspective of someone reading the Bible for the first time. How is this story important for understanding the rest of the Bible?

A selection of plans are available at [www.bible.com](http://www.bible.com) to allow you to read through the Bible in a year. Another plan, based on G. Campbell Morgan's model, is to read a book multiple times in a month. Since 44 Bible books can be read in one hour or less, you can read through one book 30 times in a month in an hour each day. While this might seem like a slow process, the repeated reading of a book will give you a deeper understanding of God's Word. Reading in this manner, you could read the entire Bible 30 times in six years.<sup>7</sup>

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5 [www.faithcomesbyhearing.com](http://www.faithcomesbyhearing.com) has audio Bibles in more than 700 languages.

6 [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) gives you free access to Bible translations in many languages.

7 Longer books will be balanced with short books like Philemon and Titus that can be read thirty times in only a few days.

## Study the Grammar

God communicates with us in many ways, mainly through written words. While you don't need to be a linguist to understand scripture, the better you understand written language, the better you can grasp the deep truths of God's Word.

As an example, we will study the grammar of one of Paul's best-known verses. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). In examining the grammar of a text, we look at:

### Verbs

Verbs communicate action or being. There are two action verbs in Romans 12:1:

- **Appeal** means "plead" or even "beg." Do you feel the urgency of Paul's request? This is not a casual suggestion; there is deep emotion as Paul pleads with his readers to give themselves fully to God.
- **Present** is an active verb. It requires a commitment. Paul calls his readers to present their bodies, to give themselves to God.

### Nouns

In Romans 12:1, nouns that are important for our study include:

- **Brothers.** Paul is writing to believers. He is not calling sinners to conversion; he is calling believers to a deeper consecration.
- **Bodies.** The rest of Romans 12 shows that *bodies* represents our entire beings. We could paraphrase this, "Give your entire self."
- **Mercies.** Paul's call is based on God's mercy. In the passage that comes just before this verse, Paul had been describing the mercy God shows all people, both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 11:32).
- **Sacrifice.** Under the law of Moses, a worshipper brought an animal as a sacrifice. In Christ's kingdom, we are called to give ourselves fully as living sacrifices.

### Modifiers

Adjectives and adverbs are descriptive words that "enlarge the meaning of the words they modify."<sup>8</sup> In Romans 12:1, *sacrifice* is modified by a series of words.

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8 Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 121



- Our sacrifice is **living**. We no longer sacrifice a dead animal; we give our lives in daily surrender.
- Our sacrifice must be **holy**. An Old Testament worshipper could not bring a lame or mutilated animal for sacrifice; a New Testament believer cannot offer an impure, disobedient life for sacrifice.
- Only a complete and willing sacrifice is **acceptable to God**.

## Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions are words such as *in*, *on*, *upon*, *through*, *to*, *unto*, and *by*. These small words carry large meaning. In Romans 12:1, two prepositional phrases are important:

- “**By** the mercies of God” gives us the ground for Paul’s appeal. This is not the begrudging surrender of a soldier to an enemy; instead, it is the joyful surrender of a child to the will of a loving father.
- Our sacrifice must be acceptable “**to** God.” To the Christian, God’s approval is the ultimate reward.

## Connecting Words

The connecting words *and* or *but* are powerful. One writer compares connecting words to the mortar that holds the bricks together.<sup>9</sup> In Acts 1:8, we saw that *but* points back to the misunderstanding of the disciples.

In Romans 12:1, *therefore* points back to the previous passage. If you read all of Romans, you quickly see two large divisions:

- Romans 1-11 teaches doctrine: condemnation for sin, justification by faith, sanctification of the believer, glorification as God’s ultimate purpose for his children, and election as God’s means of accomplishing this purpose.
- Romans 12-16 shows the practical application of this doctrine. Because we have been made right with God, this is how we live. Because of what we believe (Romans 1-11), this is what we do (Romans 12-16). The connecting verse is Romans 12:1.

*Therefore* is an important marker in many of Paul’s letters. After reminding the Galatian believers of the great truth of justification by faith alone, Paul called them to live out their justification in daily practice; “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm **therefore**” (Galatians 5:1). After teaching the Ephesians the great doctrine of their election in Christ Jesus, Paul called them to live lives worthy of that calling; “**I therefore**, a prisoner for the

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9 J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 59

Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). Paul told the Colossians that they were dead and their life was hid with Christ in God. How should they live as a result? “Put to death **therefore** what is earthly in you” (Colossians 3:5).

## Look for Special Details in the Text<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing techniques that biblical authors use to mark important ideas in the text can bring new insight to your study. Details to watch include:

### Repeated Words

When an author repeats a word frequently, it points to an important idea. In the observation stage, you may not dig into all the deep meanings of the repeated word, but you will want to mark the word and ask, “Why is this word repeated?”

- » Read the following passages and mark the repeated words:

**2 Corinthians 1:3-7.** How many times is the word *comfort* repeated in this passage? Examples of questions you could ask when you notice the repetition in this passage:

- Is *comfort* used the same way each time? (Sometimes it is a noun; sometimes a verb.)
- What modifiers are used? (*All* comfort; *our* comfort; *your* comfort.)

**John 15:1-10.** How many times is the word *abide* repeated in this passage? Examples of questions you could ask when you notice the repetition in this passage:

- What are the conditions for abiding in him?
- Does the warning of this passage imply that it is possible to not abide in him?
- What are the results of failing to abide in him?
- What are the blessings of abiding in him?

### Contrasts

Many biblical authors contrast people or ideas. When you see the word *but* in the middle of a verse, it may link two contrasting ideas. Many proverbs use this type of contrast.

- There are two ways to respond to a critic: “A soft answer turns away wrath, **but** a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

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10 This list is adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

- There are two ways to make an important decision: “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, **but** in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).
- Our treatment of the poor shows our attitude towards God: “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, **but** he who is generous to the needy honors him” (Proverbs 14:31).

New Testament writers also make contrasts. Paul contrasted our old lives (darkness) and our new lives (light); “For at one time you were darkness, **but** now you are light in the Lord...” (Ephesians 5:8).

In 1 John 1:5-7, John contrasted darkness and light in two ways:

- God is light and no darkness is in him.
- If we have fellowship with God, we will walk in light, not in darkness.

## Comparisons

Contrast looks at differences; comparison looks at similarities.

- “**Like** vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him” (Proverbs 10:26).
- “**Like** cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country” (Proverbs 25:25).
- » Read James 3:3-6. The tongue is compared to what three things? What can you learn from the comparisons?
- » Each verse of Proverbs 26:7-11 includes the word *like*. For each verse, study the comparison. For example, if you are looking at Proverbs 26:7, you would say to yourself: “A proverb in the mouth of fools is like a lame man’s legs **because....**” What similarities do you see between a proverb spoken by a fool and the legs of a lame man?

## Lists

As you read the Bible, you should highlight lists and study them for important characteristics.

- » Before continuing the lesson, take time to read the following lists:
  - In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul shows the components of his ministry in Corinth.
  - 1 John 2:16 lists things that come from the world rather than from the Father.
  - Galatians 5:19-21 lists the works of the sinful nature.
  - Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit.

## Purpose Statements

Words such as *that*, *so that*, or *to* often describe the motivation for an action or the result of the action. Take time to consider the relationship between the purpose and the result; ask why scripture is giving the instruction.

- “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you,” (why?) “**that** you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16).
- “I have stored up your word in my heart,” (why?) “**that** I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11).
- “Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (why did he choose us?), “**that** we should be holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4).

Other times, the statement will show how the purpose is accomplished:

- “How can a young man keep his way pure? **By** guarding it according to your word” (Psalm 119:9).
- How can we be assured of life? “If **by** the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13).

## Conditional Clauses

Clauses that begin with *if* often provide a condition. Sometimes readers expect Bible promises to be fulfilled without meeting the condition; however, a conditional promise is based on fulfillment of a specific condition. This is often seen through a conditional clause.

**Condition:** “Therefore, **if** anyone is in Christ,”

**Result:** “he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

**Condition:** “If you ask me anything in my name,”

**Result:** “I will do it” (John 14:14).

## Pray As You Read

This final instruction may seem obvious, but it is important. For the Christian, the study of the Bible and a life of prayer must never be separated. To separate Bible reading and prayer is to divide two aspects of our daily conversation with God.

James assures us that we can ask God’s help when we lack wisdom; “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given

him” (James 1:5). This is a wonderful promise when we need God’s help to understand God’s Word.

Psalms 119 shows the link between prayer and scripture. The psalmist repeatedly asks God to guide his study of God’s Word. In the same way, we can seek God’s help as we study.

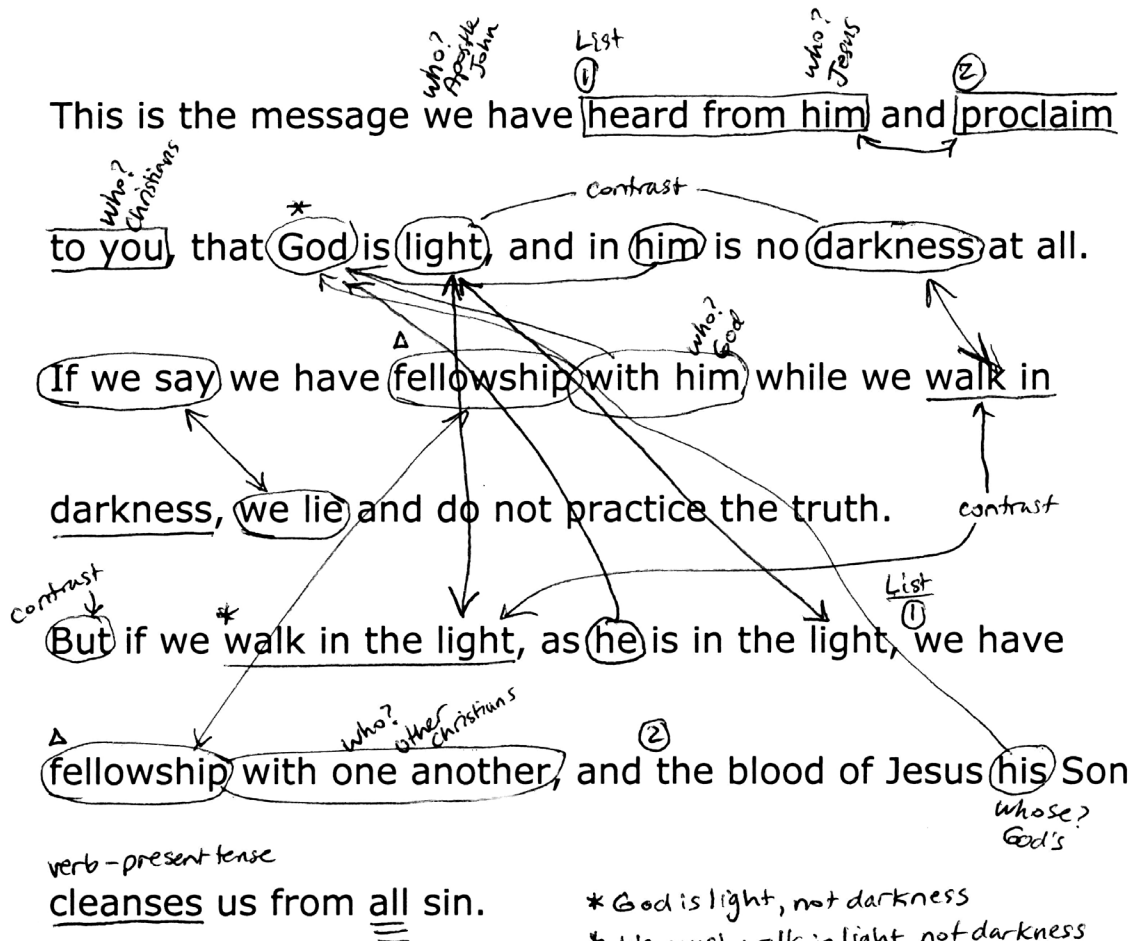
- “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18).
- “Make me to understand the way of your precepts” (Psalm 119:27).
- “Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes” (Psalm 119:33).

Many people have learned the power of turning the words of scripture into prayer. Try turning these passages into personal prayers:

- Psalm 23 - a prayer for God’s guidance and protection
- Isaiah 40:28-31 - a prayer for God’s strength
- Philippians 4:8-9 - a prayer for a godly mind

## EXAMPLE: OBSERVATIONS ON 1 JOHN 1:5-7

## 1 John 1:5-7



- \* God is light, not darkness
- \* We must walk in light, not darkness
- Δ fellowship with him
- Δ fellowship with one another

Repetition: light, darkness, fellowship, walk

Contrast: walk in darkness OR walk in light

List: We (John) have heard and proclaim  
 We have fellowship... and the blood of Jesus  
 cleanses us

## LESSON 2 KEY POINTS

1. Begin the process of observation by studying a single verse. Ask as many questions as possible of the verse.
2. Steps to improve your power of observation include:
  - Read for understanding.
  - Ask questions as you read.
    - Who?
    - What?
    - When?
    - Where?
    - Why?
    - How?
  - Read the same passage or book many times.
  - Study the grammar. Look for:
    - Verbs
    - Nouns
    - Modifiers
    - Prepositional phrases
    - Connecting words
  - Look for special details in the text. Look for:
    - Repeated words
    - Contrasts
    - Comparisons
    - Lists
    - Purpose statements
    - Conditional clauses
  - Pray as you read.

## LESSON 2 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Make a list of observations on Joshua 1:8. Write the verse on a sheet of paper and then begin asking questions: “Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?” Using the example given in the last section and the guidelines in this lesson, make as many observations as you can. At this stage, you are not interpreting the verse or preparing a sermon outline. You are simply looking for details in the verse.
2. For more practice, follow the same process with Matthew 28:18-20.



## LESSON 3

# OBSERVATION: LOOKING AT LARGER SECTIONS

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize the importance of context when reading scripture.
2. Become increasingly sensitive to the purpose and intent of the biblical authors by observing details that are emphasized in a book.
3. Practice making observations on larger sections of scripture.
4. Collect information in a chart for further study.

### INTRODUCTION

Some reading is of no importance; we read a novel to pass the time while traveling. Some reading is of minor importance; we read the newspaper to keep current with our world. Some reading is of eternal importance; we read the Bible to hear God's voice. Paul wrote that scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Because of this, we read the Bible carefully, listening to God speak.

In Lesson 2, we made observations about individual verses. In this lesson, we will study larger passages. These may be paragraphs, chapters, or an entire book. In a historical narrative, a larger passage may be an entire story. In the gospels, we may study a parable, miracle, or sermon. In an epistle, a larger passage may be a unit that focuses on a single theme.

The Bible was not originally divided into chapters and verses. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Stephen Langton divided the Bible into chapters to make study easier. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Estienne printed a Bible divided into verses. Chapter and verse divisions help us study the Bible; however, they do not always match the natural divisions of the text. Do not allow

chapter divisions to control your study; follow the natural division of the text in logical paragraphs.

In this lesson, we will study a paragraph, Nehemiah 1:4-11. This will provide a model for your future study. We will learn several ways to study a paragraph. Realize that not every type of study fits every book. This lesson will give you a box of tools to use. As you study a book of the Bible, you will need to decide, “Which tool is best for this book?”

## FINDING THE CONTEXT OF A PARAGRAPH

Nehemiah 1:4-11:

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’

They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

When studying a paragraph, we need to determine the context in which the paragraph occurs. Nehemiah 1:4 points to the beginning of the chapter.

As soon as I heard **these words**....

“These words” requires us to look at the previous verses to find out **what words** Nehemiah heard that caused his reaction.

Nehemiah 1:1 provides the context for the book of Nehemiah:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel.

Lesson 2 gave questions to ask when studying this verse.

**Who?** “Nehemiah, the son of Hachabiah.” There is another Nehemiah mentioned later in this book (Nehemiah 3:16). The family name (“son of Hachabiah”) shows which Nehemiah is referred to here.

**When?** “...in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year.” From a Bible dictionary, we learn that the Hebrew month of Chislev is the equivalent of November to December.<sup>11</sup> “In the twentieth year” doesn’t tell us much because we don’t know if the author means the twentieth year of Nehemiah’s life, the twentieth year of some historical event, or some other reference. At this point, we might put a question mark beside this phrase. In Nehemiah 2, we will learn the answer; “in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.” Nehemiah begins in November/December of the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes.

**Where?** Nehemiah was “in Susa the citadel.” From a Bible dictionary or atlas, we learn that there were two palaces in Persia. The summer palace was located in Ek-batana. The winter palace was a luxurious palace in Susa. The book begins while Nehemiah was with King Artaxerxes at his winter palace in Susa.

If you are studying a text on your computer, it can be helpful to reformat the paragraph to show the relationship between each phrase. The paragraph (Nehemiah 1:1) will then look like this:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened  
in the month of Chislev,  
in the twentieth year,  
as I was in Susa the citadel...

Verse 1 gives the setting for the book of Nehemiah. Verses 2 and 3 show the setting for Nehemiah’s prayer. While Nehemiah was at Susa, “Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.” Nehemiah asked about two things.

And I asked them  
concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and  
concerning Jerusalem.

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11 *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ‘Kislev’, accessed October 6, 2023,  
<https://www.studydrive.org/encyclopedias/eng/isb/k/kislev.html>.

In response, the men from Judah reported two problems:

- “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.”
- “The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

This shows the problems that motivated Nehemiah’s prayer. After studying the context of the prayer, we are ready to begin making observations about the prayer itself.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN READING A PARAGRAPH

Your observations in a paragraph will depend on the style of the passage. A historical narrative will include *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions. A doctrinal passage will include questions related to the teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Nehemiah 1:5-11 is a prayer. His prayer includes:

- **Praise** to the “great and awesome God who keeps covenant.”
- **Confession** for the “sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.”
- **Petition** based on God’s promise “if you return to me... I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.”

At this stage it is important to note unusual details in the passage. Nehemiah’s prayer is followed by a biographical detail: “Now I was cupbearer to the king.” This seems unimportant at first, but this information will become important as the narrative unfolds.

If we study the term *cupbearer* in a Bible dictionary,<sup>13</sup> we learn that a cupbearer was more than a mere servant; he was an officer of high rank and a trusted confidant to the king.<sup>14</sup>

What details should we observe in a paragraph? Watch for:

## General to Specific Relationships

Many paragraphs begin with a general overview that is then developed with specific details. These details support the general statement with further explanation.

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12 Much of the material in this section is adapted from Chapter 4 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

13 *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ‘Cupbearer’, accessed October 6, 2023, <https://www.studydrive.org/dictionaries/eng/hbd/c/cupbearer.html>.

14 J. D. Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary*, (2nd edition), (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982)

General to specific relationships are common in Paul's epistles. Galatians 5:16 contrasts life in the Spirit with life in the flesh; "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." This general statement is then supported by a series of specifics. Galatians 5:19-21 identifies the works of the flesh; Galatians 5:22-23 identifies the fruit of the Spirit.

Some narratives follow the general to specific pattern. Genesis 1 and 2 follows this pattern, moving from a general statement to specific details. This comes in three steps:

1. Genesis 1:1 gives the general statement: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."
2. Genesis 1:3-31 gives more details of creation. On day one, God created light; on day two, God separated the water from the skies; and so on.
3. Genesis 2 is even more specific. The narrator moves from the general creation of the world to the specific creation of man. The story narrows from the whole world to a specific place, the Garden of Eden. Even the name for God changes. Genesis 1 uses the name *God*, a universal name of power. Genesis 2 uses the name *LORD God*, a personal name showing his intimate relationship with Adam and Eve.<sup>15</sup>

This pattern usually moves from general to specific. The order is sometimes reversed, moving from specific to general. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul gives the specifics of love in verses 1-12. The chapter ends with a general statement that summarizes Paul's teaching: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

## Question and Answer Sections

When a paragraph begins with a question, the question shows the significance of the rest of the paragraph. This format is common in Romans. To those who argue that grace permits a sinful lifestyle, Paul asks, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1). He then shows that God's grace empowers the Christian for victory over sin, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:2).

The Gospel of Mark frequently uses this structure. In Mark 2:1–3:6, five episodes begin with questions. Four times, opponents ask a question. Each time, Jesus responds with a defense. In the final episode, Jesus asks a question which the Pharisees are unable to answer. Notice how this provides a structure to this large section. Without this, we read five individual stories. When we see the structure formed by the questions and answers, the five stories provide one testimony to the messianic authority of the Son of Man.

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15 The Hebrew name *Elohim* is translated *God* in English Bibles; it is a universal, majestic name. The Hebrew name *Yahweh* is translated "LORD" in English Bibles; it is the personal name revealed in Exodus 3:14.

1. Healing of a paralyzed man (Mark 2:1-12)

Question: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Answer: Jesus shows his authority by healing the paralyzed man.

2. Eating with sinners (Mark 2:13-17)

Question: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Answer: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

3. Fasting (Mark 2:18-22)

Question: “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

Answer: “As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.”

4. Sabbath laws (Mark 2:23-28)

Question: “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

Answer: “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

5. Healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6)

Question: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?”

Answer: Jesus’ opponents were silent.

## Dialogue

The gospels frequently portray dialogue between Jesus and those around him. We gain a better understanding of Jesus’ teaching by asking questions such as:

- Who are the participants in the dialogue?
- What onlookers are listening to the conversation? How do they respond?
- What conflict or situation caused the dialogue?

Matthew 21:23–22:46 shows a series of dialogues between Jesus and his opponents. Each group asked questions designed to trap Jesus.

- First, the religious leaders questioned his authority (Matthew 21:23-46).
- The Pharisees and Herodians (usually bitter enemies of one another) joined together to trap him with a question about taxes (Matthew 22:15-22).
- The Sadducees (who didn’t believe in the resurrection) asked a question about marriage after the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-32).

- The Pharisees tried once more with a question about the commandments (Matthew 22:34-40).
- Finally, Jesus ended the confrontation by asking them a question which they could not answer (Matthew 22:41-46).

The crowd watched as each group tried to trick Jesus, and they watched as Jesus silenced each questioner. “And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching” (Matthew 22:33).

Dialogue is important in the book of Job. This book includes conversations between God and Satan, between Job and his friends, and between Job and God.

The entire book of Habakkuk consists of a dialogue between the prophet and God. The book is structured like this:

**Habakkuk questions:** Why does God tolerate Judah’s sin (1:1-4)?

**God responds:** Babylon will defeat Judah (1:5-11).

**Habakkuk questions:** How will God use wicked Babylon to judge Judah (1:12-2:1)?

**God responds:** Habakkuk must live by faith in God’s purposes (2:2-20).

## Emotional Tone

Emotional tone refers to the emotions that the author is expressing. Scripture is more than abstract information; it is the story of the relationship between a loving God and the people he has created. Such an intimate relationship involves emotion. Careful readers pay attention to the emotions of the author.

To find the emotional tone of a paragraph, watch for words that convey emotion (rejoice, scorn, weep) or relationship (father, son, daughter). Listen to the spirit of the author and of the characters in the narrative.

- » Read Philippians 1:1-8 followed by Galatians 1:1-9. What is the emotional tone of each passage? From these introductions, what can you deduce about Paul’s relationship with the church at Philippi and with the churches in Galatia?

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN READING AN ENTIRE BOOK

As we read an entire book, we look for the structure and main themes of the book. Items to observe at this stage include:

## Things That Are Emphasized

We can find what is emphasized in a book by observing:

### The Amount of Space

The amount of space a book gives to a topic often shows what is important to the author. In Genesis, four people (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) are studied in chapters 12-50. This compares with only 11 chapters to cover the entire story of Creation, the Fall, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. Noticing this detail in the observation stage will prepare us to ask “Why?” in the interpretation stage.

As we read the book of Nehemiah, we notice that prayer takes a central place in the book. At each important juncture in Nehemiah’s life, he prayed. By noticing this, we are prepared to better understand the character of Nehemiah.

### The Stated Purpose

In some books, the author tells us the purpose for writing. Proverbs begins with a lengthy statement of Solomon’s purpose in writing this wisdom collection (Proverbs 1:2-6). The Gospel of John states his purpose: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

### The Order of the Material

In historical narratives, the order of the material may show the author’s purpose. 2 Samuel 1-10 tells the story of David’s triumphant rule. 2 Samuel 11 records David’s sin with Bathsheba. From that point, 2 Samuel traces the troubles that come to David’s kingdom. The author of 2 Samuel shows that these troubles are God’s judgment for David’s sin.

Nehemiah is broken into three large sections. In Nehemiah 1-6, Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of the city. Nehemiah 7-12 lists the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem and narrates the renewal of the covenant. Nehemiah 13 addresses problems that happen after Nehemiah’s second return to Jerusalem. This order shows that the physical rebuilding of the walls was not sufficient; Judah needed a spiritual revival to address the original problems that led to the exile.

## Things That Are Repeated

Repetition is another way a biblical author can emphasize material.



## Repeated Terms or Phrases

The word *remember* is repeated throughout the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah asks God to “remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses” (Nehemiah 1:8). When the people of Jerusalem are threatened, Nehemiah asks them to “remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” (Nehemiah 4:14). Three times, Nehemiah prays that God will remember him and his faithfulness. Memory is important to Nehemiah; what God has done in the past gives confidence in God’s faithfulness in the future.

- » Read Psalm 119:1-32. Each verse uses some term that refers to God’s Word. From this, make a list showing what the psalmist believed about the importance of the Word of God.

## Reappearing Characters

Barnabas reappears at key points throughout Acts. Each time Barnabas appears, he lives up to his nickname, “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Barnabas brings Saul to the apostles and testifies to the truth of Saul’s conversion (Acts 9:27). With Saul, Barnabas builds up the church at Antioch (Acts 11:22-26). In spite of Paul’s doubts, Barnabas encourages an immature John Mark (Acts 12:25 and Acts 15:36-39). The repeated appearances of Barnabas in Acts demonstrate how the early church fulfilled Jesus’ commission to disciple believers.

## Repeated Incidents or Circumstances

The book of Judges includes a series of stories that show the decline of Israel from great victories under Joshua’s leadership to social chaos. Seven times a cycle is repeated in which the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and were defeated by their enemies. Each time God raised up a judge who delivered them. This repeated story shows the steady decline of the nation.

## Shifts of Direction

A shift of direction is a change in the writer’s emphasis. For example, the direction of Paul’s epistles often changes near the middle of the book. Ephesians begins with an emphasis on what God has done for his people; the second half of Ephesians emphasizes what God’s people are to do in obedience to God.

In Ephesians 1-3, descriptive verbs show what God has done for his people. God has:

- Blessed us (Ephesians 1:3, 6)
- Chosen us (Ephesians 1:4)
- Planned for us to be saved (Ephesians 1:5)

Beginning at Ephesians 4:1, Paul addresses the believer's responsibility to live in a manner worthy of God's redemptive work for us. In Ephesians 4–6, many of the verbs are imperative. Paul commands us to:

- Speak truth (Ephesians 4:25)
- Not grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30)
- Walk in love (Ephesians 5:2)
- Walk carefully (Ephesians 5:15)
- Honor our father and mother (Ephesians 6:2)
- Put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:11)

The change of direction from rejoicing at what God has done for us to how we are to live in response to his grace is seen in the verbs. Carefully observing such changes will prepare us to properly interpret Paul's message in Ephesians.

## Literary Structure

While there are many different means by which a book may be organized, three types of literary structure are easy to recognize.<sup>16</sup>

## Biographical Structure

Historical books are often organized around particular people. The story is based on the events in a person's life. For example:

| GENESIS 12-50: FOUR GREAT PEOPLE |         |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| Chapters                         | Person  |
| Genesis 12-25                    | Abraham |
| Genesis 25-26                    | Isaac   |
| Genesis 27-36                    | Jacob   |
| Genesis 37-50                    | Joseph  |

16 This material is adapted from Chapter 15 of Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

1 and 2 Samuel trace the rise and decline of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David.

| <b>1 &amp; 2 SAMUEL: ISRAEL'S FIRST KINGS</b> |                               |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Chapters</b>                               | <b>Rise/Decline of Kings</b>  |
| 1 Samuel 1-8                                  | Prophet Samuel                |
| 1 Samuel 9-12                                 | Saul's rise                   |
| 1 Samuel 13-31                                | Saul's decline & David's rise |
| 2 Samuel 1-10                                 | David's successes             |
| 2 Samuel 11-24                                | David's struggles             |

### Geographical Structure

Geography provides a structure for some books. The story progresses as events happen at different geographical locations. A Bible atlas will help outline the structure of these books.

| <b>EXODUS: ISRAEL'S TRAVELS</b> |                       |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Passage</b>                  | <b>Location</b>       |
| Exodus 1:1-3:16                 | Israel in Egypt       |
| Exodus 13:17-18:27              | Israel in the desert  |
| Exodus 19-40                    | Israel at Mount Sinai |

Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts traces the early church's fulfillment of this commission.

| <b>ACTS: THE GOSPEL REACHES THE WORLD</b> |                       |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Chapters</b>                           | <b>Location</b>       |
| Acts 1-7                                  | Jerusalem             |
| Acts 8-12                                 | Judea & Samaria       |
| Acts 13-28                                | The ends of the earth |

## Historical or Chronological Structure

Some books are structured around key historical events, usually in chronological order. Marking these events provides an overview of the book.

The book of Joshua traces the conquest and settlement of Canaan. The structure of Joshua follows the primary events of the conquest.

- Crossing into Canaan (Joshua 1–5)
- Capture of Jericho (Joshua 6)
- Defeat at Ai (Joshua 7–8)
- Renewal of the Covenant at Shechem (Joshua 9)
- The Southern Campaign (Joshua 10)
- The Northern Campaign (Joshua 11–12)
- The Division and Settlement of the Land (Joshua 13–23)
- Renewal of the Covenant at Shechem (Joshua 24)

John's purpose for writing his gospel is stated at the end of the book. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). John's gospel is organized around seven miracles that accomplish his purpose. These seven signs provide a structure for the entire book:

- Turning water into wine (John 2:1-12)
- Healing an official's son (John 4:46-54)
- Healing the man at Bethesda (John 5:1-47)
- Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:1-4)
- Walking on water (John 6:15-21)
- Healing the man born blind (John 9:1-41)
- Raising Lazarus back to life (John 11:1-57)

## SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

To this point, we have observed details about individual verses, larger paragraphs, and entire books.<sup>17</sup> The final step in the observation stage is to organize the observations in a format that is easy to use. One of the best ways to do this is by putting the material into a summary chart. This shows connections within large sections of scripture. It also provides a clear summary in preparation for the interpretation stage of Bible study.

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17 The material in this section is based on Chapters 24-25 of Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

There are many different ways to organize this chart. The categories included on a chart will depend on the style of the passage you are studying. In this section, we will use several types of charts to show how a chart can help in Bible study.

## Charting a Series of Related Events

It was mentioned earlier that chapter divisions do not always parallel the structure of a book. A chart showing the relationship of events can show the unity of a series of events across multiple chapters. This will often show comparisons or contrasts between the events.

Mark 4:35—Mark 5:42 presents a series of four miracles. If you compare the four stories, you will see that the stories show the contrast between a lack of faith by Jesus' disciples in the storm and the faith of some unexpected people: a demon-possessed man, a woman with an issue of blood, and the ruler of the synagogue. Mark shows that the disciples are eyewitnesses to each of these stories of great faith. Look at these four stories side by side:

| FOUR MIRACLES                   |                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Miracle                     | People in the Story                                                                                                                                         | Role of Faith                                                                                                                                                       |
| Stilling a storm                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus</li> <li>• The disciples</li> </ul>                                                                          | The disciples have no faith (4:40).                                                                                                                                 |
| Healing the demon-possessed man | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus</li> <li>• The demon-possessed man</li> <li>• The townspeople</li> <li>• The disciples (watching)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The man worships Jesus (5:6) and witnesses for Jesus (5:18-20).</li> <li>• The townspeople reject Jesus (5:10).</li> </ul> |
| Healing a bleeding woman        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus</li> <li>• The woman</li> <li>• The disciples (watching)</li> </ul>                                          | The woman has faith and takes the initiative to touch Jesus (5:28, 34).                                                                                             |
| Raising Jairus' daughter        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus</li> <li>• Jairus and his daughter</li> <li>• The mourners</li> <li>• Peter, James, and John</li> </ul>      | Jairus has faith (5:23).                                                                                                                                            |

## Your Turn

Prepare a chart based on Matthew 13:1-23.

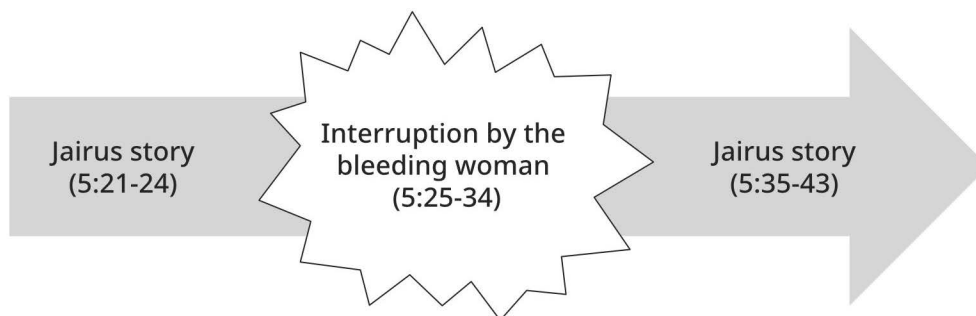
1. Read the story three times.
2. Mark as many observations as you can find.
3. Fill in the chart with the primary ideas in the parable.

Remember, the chart is not the goal; the chart is a tool to help you study and apply God's Word in your life. The goal of Bible study is transformation. In studying this parable, ask, "What type of soil am I? Am I allowing God's Word to produce fruit in my life?"

| MATTHEW 13:1-23 - THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS |                                   |                                                             |          |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Type of Soil                               | Growth                            | Hindrances to Growth                                        | Results  |
| The path                                   | No growth—the seed is taken away. | A lack of understanding of the truth. The soil is too hard. | No fruit |
|                                            |                                   |                                                             |          |
|                                            |                                   |                                                             |          |
|                                            |                                   |                                                             |          |

## Your Turn

Read Mark 5:21-43. It is one story containing two miracles. The story of the bleeding woman interrupts the story of Jairus and his daughter. What are the comparisons and contrasts between these two stories? The structure looks like this:



| MARK 5:21-43: COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS |                           |                            |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
|                                         | Jairus                    | Bleeding Woman             |
| Comparison                              | Shows great faith         | Shows great faith          |
|                                         |                           |                            |
|                                         |                           |                            |
| Contrast                                | A man of authority        | A woman of no status       |
|                                         | Approaches Jesus publicly | Approaches Jesus privately |
|                                         |                           |                            |
|                                         |                           |                            |

## Charting an Entire Book

A chart can be helpful in summarizing an entire book. This shows the big picture of the book. In preparing a chart, read the entire book several times. Look for the large sections.

As you read, mark repeated words, questions and answers, and other relationships that show the structure of the book.

| A STUDY OF 1 PETER - ENCOURAGEMENT FOR SUFFERING SAINTS                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Salvation (1:1–2:10)                                                                                                                                                     | Submission (2:11–3:12)                                                                                       | Suffering (3:13–5:11)                                                                                                                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privileges of salvation (1:2-12)</li> <li>• Products of salvation (1:13-25)</li> <li>• Process of salvation (2:1-10)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the state (2:13-25)</li> <li>• In the family (3:1-12)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a citizen (3:13–4:6)</li> <li>• As a believer (4:7-19)</li> <li>• As a shepherd (5:1-11)</li> </ul> |
| <b>The Destiny of the Christian</b>                                                                                                                                      | <b>The Duty of the Christian</b>                                                                             | <b>The Discipline of the Christian</b>                                                                                                          |

The three large sections of 1 Peter are related. We will never understand suffering (3:13–5:11) until we have submitted to the Father's will (2:11–3:12); we will never submit to the Father until we know His saving power (1:1–2:10).

### Your Turn

Prepare a chart on Ephesians. This chart will help you trace four themes in Paul's letter. One example is given. When you are done, ask:

- What is the relationship between each theme?
- Is one of these themes more dominant than the others?
- How does each theme relate to the overall structure of the book?

| THEME    | VERSES ON THIS THEME | SUMMARY OF PAUL'S TEACHING |
|----------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Grace    |                      |                            |
| Satan    | 2:1-2                |                            |
| Our Walk |                      |                            |
| Prayer   |                      |                            |



## LESSON 3 KEY POINTS

1. You continue the process of observation by studying a paragraph and then an entire book. The Bible was not originally divided into chapters and verses. You must make sure that you follow the natural division of the text in your study.
2. When reading a paragraph, look for:
  - General to specific relationships
  - Question and answer sections
  - Dialogue
  - Emotional tone
3. When reading an entire book, look for:
  - Things that are emphasized. The writer can emphasize things with:
    - The amount of space
    - The stated purpose
    - The order of the material
  - Things that are repeated.
    - Repeated terms or phrases
    - Reappearing characters
    - Repeated incidents or circumstances
  - Shifts of direction.
  - Literary structure.
    - Biographical structure
    - Geographical structure
    - Historical or chronological structure
4. Making a chart of a section of scripture or an entire book can clarify the structure.

## LESSON 3 ASSIGNMENT

In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study during this course. Following the steps given in this lesson, make as many observations as possible on the scripture you have chosen. Remember, you are not yet interpreting the verse or preparing a sermon outline. You are simply looking for details in the passage. If it is useful, prepare a chart that summarizes your observations. If you are studying as a group, share your observations at your next meeting.

## LESSON 4

# INTERPRETATION: INTRODUCTION

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of properly interpreting scripture.
2. Recognize some challenges that make biblical interpretation difficult.
3. Be aware of common mistakes that can lead to improper interpretation.
4. Maintain humility and tolerance of different opinions in biblical interpretation.

### INTRODUCTION

Do you remember Samuel from Lesson 1? Samuel read the Bible each day, but he did not hear God's voice speak through what he read. What was wrong? Samuel did not have a process for interpreting what he read. He read, but he did not understand.

Acts 8 tells the story of another man who read but did not understand. Philip, a deacon in the early church, was led by the Holy Spirit to the desert road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he met an Ethiopian official returning from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. The official was reading from Isaiah as he traveled.

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**“Give me understanding,  
that I may keep your  
law and observe it with  
my whole heart.”**

**Psalms 119:34**

---

Philip asked this official, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). The official responded, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). As Philip explained God’s Word, the man believed on Jesus as the Son of God and was baptized as a new believer.

Knowing how to interpret what we read is crucial. In the next few lessons we will study the process of interpreting scripture. We will learn practical steps for interpretation.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

Three judges are discussing their work in court. The first judge says, “There are guilty people and there are innocent people. I identify them for who they are.” This judge believes that there is absolute truth. There are guilty people and innocent people, and the job of the judge is to declare what is true.

The second judge says, “There are guilty people and there are innocent people. I try to discern whether a person is guilty or innocent.” This judge knows that there is absolute truth, but he also realizes that he may be mistaken in his opinion about someone.

The third judge says, “A person is not guilty or innocent until I give my verdict.” This judge does not believe in absolute truth. He thinks his announcement makes something true.

Sadly, many Christians believe that scripture has no absolute meaning. They say, “What is true for you may not be true for me.” In this view, every reader creates their own “truth.” They think a biblical statement means whatever they want it to mean.

Like the second judge in the story, Christians need to understand two important truths:

1. The meaning in scripture is absolute, and our job is to try to understand God’s truth in the text.
2. Our understanding is limited. Because of this, our interpretation may be wrong. We should be humble.

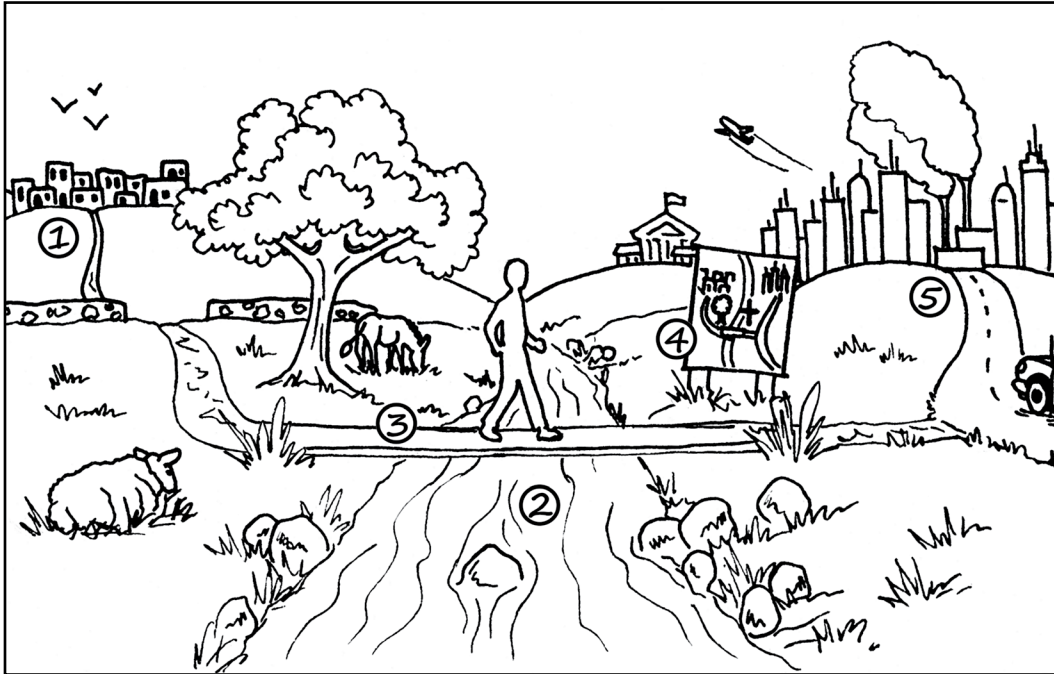
In the **observation** stage, we asked, “What do I see in the text?” In the **interpretation** stage, we ask, “What does the text mean?” Later, we will look at the **application** of scripture in our lives.

We start the process of interpretation by asking, “What did the author intend to say?” This prepares us to ask, “What does this scripture mean to me?”

## CHALLENGES TO PROPER INTERPRETATION

There are many challenges to a modern reader who interprets an ancient text such as the Bible. The time and distance that separate us from the original author makes interpretation difficult. We speak a different language. Our culture is different than the culture of the biblical authors.

### INTERPRETING THE BIBLE<sup>18</sup>



This picture shows the challenges involved in interpreting the Bible for our day. The Bible was written for an ancient world (1). The first readers lived in a different culture than today's reader. The river (2) that separates their world from today makes it more difficult for us to understand the Bible. This river is made up of the differences between our culture and the world of the Bible. What are the differences between a modern reader and the original author?

### Language Differences

The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Today, most of us read the Bible in our own language. This creates a distance between us and the author. Anyone who speaks a second language understands the difficulties of language.

18 Image: "Interpreting the Bible" drawing by Anna Boggs, available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgc-library/52377290578>, licensed under CC BY 2.0. Concept from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

## Cultural Differences

Similar to the difficulty of language is the difficulty of cultural difference. The human authors of scripture were part of a culture that may be much different from our world. As we study scripture, we should ask, “What can I learn about the culture of the ancient world that will help me better understand and interpret the message of the Bible?”

## Unfamiliar Geography

Biblical events happened to real people living in real places. The better we understand geography, the better we are able to cross the river that divides our world and their world.

Knowing that the road between Jericho and Jerusalem passes through a dangerous mountainous area explains the caution of the priest and Levite (Luke 10:31-32). It also gives an appreciation for the compassion of a Samaritan who risked his own safety to help an injured stranger (Luke 10:33-34).

Readers have asked, “Why did the disciples doubt Jesus’ ability to feed 4,000 in Mark 8 after he fed 5,000 in Mark 6?” A map provides an answer. In Mark 7, Jesus travels to the Decapolis, an area populated by Gentiles. The question for the disciples was not, “**Can** Jesus feed these people?” but “**Will** he feed them?” They did not believe Gentiles deserved the same miracle. They did not yet understand that Jesus had come for all people.

|        | MARK 6  | MARK 7        | MARK 8    |
|--------|---------|---------------|-----------|
| PLACE  | Galilee | <i>TRAVEL</i> | Decapolis |
| PEOPLE | Jews    |               | Gentiles  |

Mark 4 tells how Jesus quieted a storm on the Sea of Galilee. In a Bible atlas, we learn that the Sea of Galilee is a large lake, 210 meters below sea level. Because the higher elevation around the lake acts as a funnel, winds often create violent storms within a few minutes. As fishermen who had spent their lives on this sea, the disciples were accustomed to violent storms. The fact that they feared for their lives tells us that it was not an ordinary storm. This was an unusually powerful storm, but it took no more than a few words for Jesus to bring the sea to a great calm. No wonder they said, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:36-41).

## Unfamiliar Literary Forms

Each type of literature must be read in a different way. When we read Romans, we must carefully trace Paul's argument as he shows how we are made right with God. When we read a parable, we listen to a storyteller teach through a wonderful story.

## Conclusion

Look again at the picture. Even though a river of language, culture, geography, and literature separates us, the Bible has a message that speaks to all cultures. This is the bridge (3) across the river. The bridge is made up of the principles that the Bible teaches. These principles are true for all cultures in every age.

The map (4) asks us to consider where we are in the biblical story. The coming of Christ fulfilled many of the prophecies and laws of the Old Testament. Remembering this will change how we interpret and apply these passages of scripture.

Finally, we arrive in our world today (5). In this step, we ask how the principle we found (3) will be applied in our world.

We will come back to this picture in future lessons. For now, you should be aware of the steps.

## COMMON MISTAKES OF BIBLE INTERPRETERS

There are several common mistakes Bible interpreters can make.

### Misreading the Text

Some preachers have preached that Paul said, "Money is the root of all evils." But Paul didn't say that! He said, "For **the love of money** is a root of all kinds of evils" (1 Timothy 6:10). It is possible to have money without loving it, and it is possible to love money, even if you don't have much money. Paul's warning is not primarily about money; it is about a heart controlled by the love of money.

Some Christians misread Psalm 37:4 to say, "God promises to give me the desires of my heart. I want to be rich, so God will make me rich." The Psalmist said, "Delight yourself **in the LORD**; and he will give you the desires of your heart." The psalm promises that if we delight in the Lord, God will give us our delight – the Lord. Later, Jesus promised that if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled – with righteousness (Matthew 5:6). This is not a promise of financial prosperity; it is a promise of something better – spiritual prosperity.

The first step we learned in this course was observation. Our observations must be accurate, or our interpretation will be wrong. Be careful not to misread the text. Someone said that the first three steps of Bible study are:

1. Read the text.
2. Read the text again.
3. After Step 2, read the text again!

## Twisting the Text

Throughout history, false teachers have twisted scripture to defend their errors. Paul warned that some people would twist his teaching on justification by faith alone to defend their desire to continue in willful sin (Romans 6:1-2). There have been times when people used scripture to defend slavery or a government's murder of an ethnic group. Today, some evangelists twist the promises of God into a prosperity gospel that is contrary to the truth of scripture.

Peter warned of those who twist the scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). Similarly, James spoke of the serious responsibility of those who teach (James 3:1). We who teach the Bible must be careful that we do not twist scripture to support false ideas.

## Giving Imaginary Meaning

The story of the three judges illustrates another common mistake of Bible interpreters: the idea that the meaning of the scripture comes from the imagination of the reader. Some people only ask, "What do I **feel** scripture means?" While emotion and feeling are important, the ultimate truth of scripture is in what the author wrote, not in what I feel about what he wrote.

## Being Overconfident

An interpreter trusts his own reasoning too much if he thinks he could never be wrong. We study the Word to arrive at conclusions about the meaning of the text; however, we must have the humility to admit when our conclusions are wrong. No one has every answer.

Humility in interpretation is important. As you study the Bible, you will find areas in which godly Christians disagree. That does not always mean that one side has purposely twisted scripture; it may be a sincere disagreement between two sides that are both committed to the truth of scripture. We must maintain humility regarding our own interpretation and be able to tolerate others having different opinions.



## Your Turn

Below are some inaccurate statements people make, thinking they are quoting scripture. To gain a better appreciation for careful reading, find the text which is twisted in each example and note what the Bible actually says. The first example has been completed for you.

| WHAT SOME PEOPLE SAY                                | WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Money is the root of all evil.”                    | “The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). |
| “Work is a curse.”                                  |                                                                      |
| “God will never give you more than you can handle.” |                                                                      |

## LESSON 4 KEY POINTS

1. The step of interpretation asks, “What does the text mean?”
2. Some of the challenges that make interpretation difficult are:
  - Language differences
  - Cultural differences
  - Unfamiliar geography
  - Unfamiliar literary forms
3. Some common mistakes that lead to improper interpretation are:
  - Misreading the text
  - Twisting the text
  - Giving imaginary meaning
  - Being overconfident



## LESSON 5

# INTERPRETATION: CONTEXT

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the value of historical-cultural background for interpreting scripture.
2. Use questions to discover the historical-cultural background of a scripture passage.
3. Recognize how an individual verse fits into its surrounding context.
4. Avoid common mistakes when studying context.

### INTRODUCTION

- » Name a word in your language that has multiple meanings. When someone uses that word, how do you know what they mean?

One of the most important aspects of Bible interpretation is the context of the passage we are studying. In this lesson we will learn to study the historical-cultural context and the surrounding biblical context of a passage.<sup>19</sup>

### THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

- » Read 2 Timothy 4:6-22.

Paul writes to Timothy, “Do your best to come before winter” (2 Timothy 4:21). Listen to Paul’s request in light of the following background:

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19 Much of the material in this lesson comes from Chapters 6-7 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

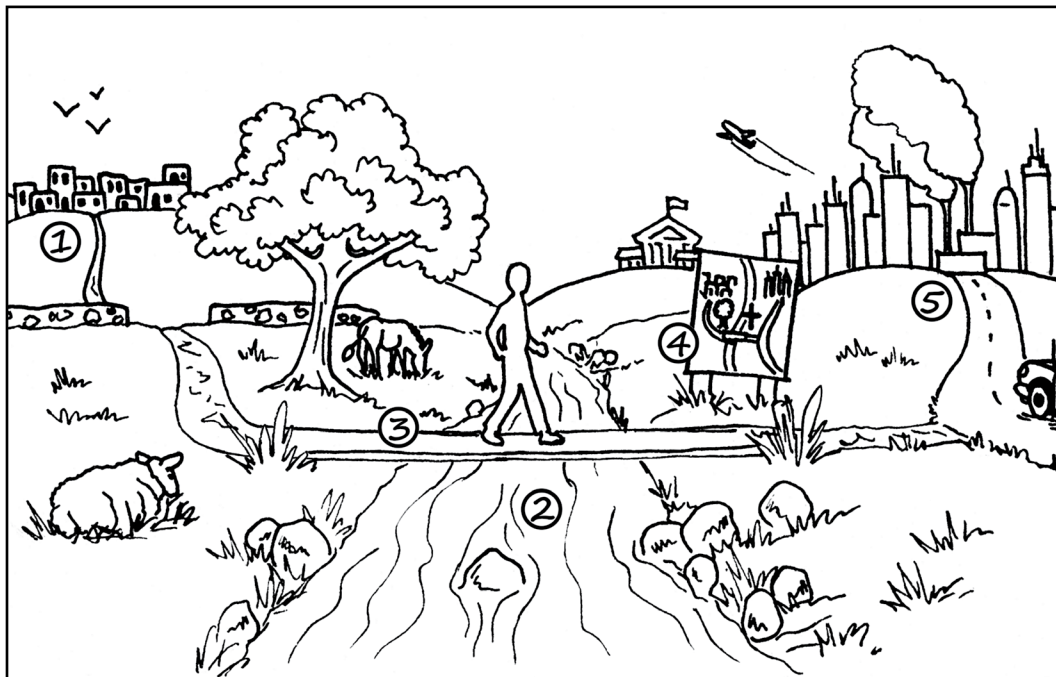
- Paul is in a Roman prison. He will soon be martyred for his faith.
- Timothy is ministering in Ephesus, hundreds of kilometers away.
- Travel by sea was dangerous in the fall and impossible in the winter. For Timothy to arrive before winter, he must leave soon after he receives this letter.

The historical context adds to our appreciation of the emotion behind Paul's request. Paul is saying more than, "Please visit when it is convenient." He is pleading with his spiritual son, "I want to see you again before I die. If you wait till winter, travel will be impossible. Please come before it is too late." The letter has the same message even if you know nothing of the historical context, but the context shows the intensity of Paul's request.

Historical and cultural context is important because God did not provide the Bible in a single language that everyone in the world understands. Two statements about scripture are important:

1. The principles of scripture are true for every person in every place in every time.
2. The principles of scripture were given to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time.

## INTERPRETING THE BIBLE<sup>20</sup>



20 Image: "Interpreting the Bible" drawing by Anna Boggs, available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgc-library/52377290578>, licensed under CC BY 2.0. Concept from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

|   |                   |                                                                                |
|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | <b>Their town</b> | The original message of scripture                                              |
| 2 | <b>The river</b>  | Historical-cultural differences that separate our world from the ancient world |
| 3 | <b>The bridge</b> | The principle that is taught in the text                                       |
| 4 | <b>The map</b>    | Relationship to the New Testament (for Old Testament passages)                 |
| 5 | <b>Our town</b>   | The application of the principle in our world                                  |

The better we understand the historical and cultural background of scripture, the better we will understand the universal principles of the Bible.

As we study historical-cultural context, we read the Bible in “their town” to understand the message for the original audience. We then look at the “river” – cultural differences that separate our world and the ancient world. The better we understand the world of the Bible, the more clearly we can hear God’s Word speak to our world today.

Reading scripture in its original context is important because it is the foundation for an important principle for Bible interpretation: **Any valid interpretation of a biblical text today must be consistent with the original message of the text.** I must not find a meaning that contradicts the original message of the text.

What is historical-cultural context? Historical-cultural context is anything outside the text that helps us understand the text itself. This includes the answers to questions such as:

- What was life like for the Israelites in the desert (the context for Exodus—Deuteronomy)?
- What was the culture of Palestine in the first century (the context for the Gospels)?
- Who were the false teachers who caused Paul such frustration in Galatians and Philippians?

Some questions to ask when studying historical-cultural context include:

### 1. What do we know about the biblical writer?

Since God spoke through human authors, knowledge of the authors helps us better understand God’s Word.

When reading Paul’s letters, remember his life before conversion. When he describes his early “confidence in the flesh,” (Philippians 3:4-6) know that Pharisees were highly respected

for their careful obedience to the Law. While we recall their hypocrisy and refusal to accept Jesus, we should also remember their love for the details of God's law.

On the other hand, when Paul describes himself as the "foremost" of sinners, (1 Timothy 1:15) remember that Paul persecuted the church and delivered Christians to death. This is a man who lived with the memory of his life before meeting Christ on the road to Damascus.

When reading Exodus, we should learn about Moses' privileges in Pharaoh's palace. As we consider the luxury of palace life, what Hebrews 11:25 says of Moses is even more meaningful; "...choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin." As we see the educational and cultural opportunities enjoyed by young Moses, we see God preparing his servant to lead a great nation.

## 2. What do we know about the biblical audience?

Along with learning about the biblical author, we should learn as much as possible about the original audience.

Much of the material in 1 and 2 Chronicles is repeated from Samuel and Kings. Why? Chronicles was written after Israel's return from exile. Kings shows why God allowed Israel to suffer judgment; Chronicles shows that God still cared for his people.

Jeremiah preached during the days surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem. As we read his message of judgment, we should remember that the promised judgment is about to happen. However, in Jeremiah we also read God's promise, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). This promise comes as the people are about to be taken as prisoners into a foreign country. God's plan for his people includes the judgments that will bring them to repentance.

The epistle of 1 John was addressed to Christians facing a false teaching: that only the spirit is good; physical matter is evil. False teachers said that Jesus was not truly human; he only appeared to be human. John reminded his readers that Jesus had a physical body. "That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we **looked upon** and have **touched with our hands**" (1 John 1:1).

The false teachers also said that salvation came through secret knowledge that was revealed to only a few people. John showed that we must obey in order to have true knowledge of God; "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3). The knowledge that brings eternal life involves love; "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14).

### 3. What do we know about the historical setting of the book?

Imagine a preacher who announces, “Today I will preach on how a Christian should obtain a wife. Judges 21:20-21 tells us we should go to a neighboring village and wait in the bushes. When one of the young ladies from the village comes by, grab her and carry her home. This is the biblical model for choosing a wife.” You should doubt this preacher’s application of scripture!

What is wrong with the preacher’s application? Judges says that the men of the tribe of Benjamin obtained wives this way on one occasion. It even says that they did it for a good reason – to preserve one of Israel’s tribes. However, the preacher is ignoring the historical context. This story comes at the end of Judges, a book that shows the decline of Israel from God’s plan to chaos. Instead of showing God’s plan for marriage, this story shows what happens when God’s people rebel.

Sometimes we know little about the author or audience, but we know about the general historical setting. We do not know who wrote the book of Ruth, but we know that the events happened in the days when the judges ruled (Ruth 1:1). This was a time of social chaos in Israel (Judges 21:25). In contrast to Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, the book of Ruth draws attention to the faithfulness of Ruth, a Moabite widow.

The story also tells about how Boaz selflessly married Ruth to provide a legal heir for Naomi’s dead sons. As a kinsman-redeemer, Boaz sacrificed his own inheritance rights to provide a son for Naomi. In doing so, Boaz found a place in the genealogy of David (Matthew 1:6, 16).

Historical background is important when interpreting the book of Jonah:

- Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, Israel’s most dangerous enemy.
- Near the same time that Jonah was preaching at Nineveh, Amos and Hosea were warning that God’s judgment on Israel would come at the hands of the Assyrians.

From a human perspective, Jonah’s reluctance to preach to the Assyrians is understandable. The book of Jonah shows God’s perspective, the perspective of a God who loves all people without reserve.

### 4. What do we know about the cultural setting of the book?

The historical-cultural context of scripture also looks at the cultural customs of the biblical world. We gain new insights into Jesus’ parables when we read them in the setting of the customs of first century Palestine:

- The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) was surprising to a Jewish audience. Jesus’ listeners would not have been surprised at the failure of religious leaders

to help an injured traveler. However, they would have expected the rescuer to be a rabbi or Pharisee. Instead, Jesus points to a despised Samaritan as the model of love.

- In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), we should remember that Jewish fathers were dignified. The listeners expected to hear that the father refused to let the son come back, or possibly allowed him to be a slave. Instead, the father throws aside his dignity in his joy at the return of his lost son. This action is so surprising that some eastern cultures call this story the “Parable of the Running Father.” In the same way, our heavenly Father does not wait for us to earn forgiveness; instead, he seeks out rebellious sinners. This is a picture of our Father’s extravagant love.

Paul’s letters should be read with consideration of first century cultural conditions. Ephesians 5:21–6:9 was shocking to Paul’s readers. Paul’s command that a wife submit to her husband was normal; his command that husbands follow the self-sacrificing example of Christ was foreign to Roman audiences. Children were expected to obey their parents, but no one in the Roman world told fathers not to provoke their children to wrath.

When Paul called the Philippians to live as if their citizenship was in heaven, (Philippians 3:20) he was writing to a city that had special citizenship privileges in the Roman Empire. Because the city had been established as a colony for retired soldiers, citizens of Philippi greatly valued their citizenship. Paul reminded them that their true citizenship is in heaven, not in an earthly city. Knowing this historical-cultural background gives a better understanding of Philippians.

## Discovering Historical-Cultural Context

As we have seen, our study of the historical-cultural context of a passage begins by asking questions. How will we discover the answers to our questions? The course appendix explains a few Bible study resources that can provide us with answers. We also recommend using the introductory Old Testament and New Testament courses produced by Shepherds Global Classroom. These courses provide background for each of the books of the Bible.

## THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Another consideration for biblical interpretation is the surrounding context. It is important to ask, “How does this verse, paragraph, chapter, and book fit into the rest of the Bible?”

Imagine that you find a scrap of paper with one sentence torn from a letter. The paper reads, “Yes, 7 is OK.” What does the sentence mean?

- Maybe the writer had an appointment with someone. He is confirming that 7:00 p.m. is fine for the meeting.



- Maybe the writer's wife sent a note asking, "How many people should I invite for supper Friday night?" He responds, "Seven (people) is OK."
- Maybe the writer had offered a book for sale for \$8.00. Someone asked, "Will you lower the price to \$7.00?" The writer responds, "Yes, \$7 is OK."

We understand the individual sentence only after we know the context. We read a sentence in the context of an entire paragraph. We read a paragraph in the context of an entire letter. On a larger scale, we might read the letter in the context of a series of letters between two people.

Scripture works in the same way. Individual verses must be read in the context of the surrounding verses, chapter, and the book. The context moves from the immediate passage outward to the entire Bible.

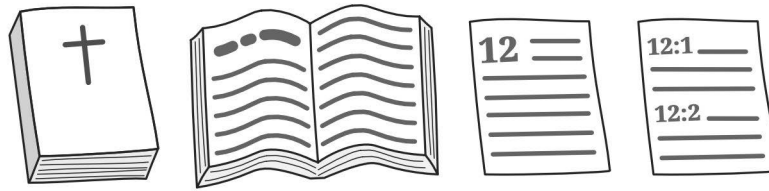
To properly understand an individual verse, we must look at the surrounding context. Psalm 1:3 gives a wonderful promise to the person who delights in God's law. He is like a well-watered tree that bears fruit. "In all that he does, he prospers." Some people have claimed this as a promise of material prosperity to every faithful believer.

However, when you read the rest of Psalm 1, the focus is not material blessing but the spiritual fruitfulness of those who walk in the law of the Lord. The psalm concludes with a promise; God "knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Psalm 1:6). The contrast is between a path that is known (watched and approved) by God and a path that leads to destruction.

Following through the rest of Psalms and the Bible as a whole, this message is confirmed. The prosperity of a believer is found not in material possessions, but in God's approval. This is true prosperity.

To read a passage in context, follow three steps:

1. Determine how the book is divided into paragraphs. What is the immediate context of the verse you are reading?
2. Summarize the main idea of the paragraph in one or two sentences. This will help you to understand the message of the entire section.
3. Read the entire book and ask, "How does the paragraph I am studying fit into the message of the book?"



*All of the Bible > entire book > paragraph or chapter > verse*

*The Bible > Paul's letters > Romans > Romans 12-15 > Romans 12:1-2*

Romans 12:1-2 calls us to a full surrender to God.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This begins a section (Romans 12-15) that shows how this surrender will look in the daily life of a Christian. Moving from the immediate context, Romans 12-15 follows 11 chapters of doctrinal instruction that shows how we are made right with God.

Beyond the context of Romans, each of Paul's letters show his concern for the practical out-working of our Christian faith. Finally, Romans 12:1-2 fits within the entire biblical message of obedience and surrender to God. For example, the language of Romans 12:1-2 mirrors the language of sacrifice in Leviticus. The better we understand the larger biblical context, the more powerful Paul's words become.

## Your Turn

- » Read each of the following verses and then read their immediate context. Discuss how the context affects your understanding of the verse.
  1. Read Matthew 18:20. What does it mean?
  2. Now read Matthew 18:15-20. Does this affect the meaning of 18:20?
  
- 1. Read Romans 8:28. What does it promise?
  2. Now read Romans 8:28-30. What is the good promised in 8:28?
  
- 1. Read Revelation 3:20. Who is invited?
  2. Now read Revelation 3:14-21. Who is this invitation addressed to?

## COMMON MISTAKES IN STUDYING CONTEXT

To conclude this lesson, we should consider some common mistakes interpreters make when studying the context of scripture.

### Using Inaccurate Information

A student gave a presentation on Matthew 19:23-24. He said that one of the gates into Jerusalem in Jesus' day was called the "Eye of the Needle." This gate was so low that a camel's load had to be removed in order for the animal to squeeze through the opening.

There were two problems with the student's presentation:

1. There is no historical evidence for this gate in Jesus' day. The "eye of a needle" meant the same thing in Jesus' day as it means now, the eye of a sewing needle.
2. Because his background information was wrong, the student came to a false conclusion about the text. His presentation implied that we must get rid of everything extra in our life so that we can squeeze into the kingdom of heaven.

However, Jesus was not teaching that it is very difficult for the rich and powerful to enter God's kingdom; he was teaching that it is impossible! The disciples were so astounded by this that they responded, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus did not respond, "It is difficult, but if you try hard enough, you can squeeze through." He responded with the good news of the gospel: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." In studying context, don't allow inaccurate information to mislead you.

### Prioritizing Study of Context over the Message

A second danger is allowing study of the context to become more important than the message of the text. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that the wrong kind of knowledge causes pride, but love benefits others (1 Corinthians 8:1).<sup>21</sup> It is possible to become so fascinated by details of context that we forget the message of the text we are studying.

A person may learn everything about Samaritan culture and forget the purpose of the parable of the good Samaritan: "Go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). In this case, our knowledge will be useless. Study to understand the message of scripture; don't become buried in study for its own sake. Study to preach and teach more effectively, not to pride yourself on your great knowledge!

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21 Paul is not opposed to knowledge; he wrote his epistles to provide good instruction for young churches. However, the prideful "knowledge" of the Corinthians led to destruction, not to edification.

## LESSON 5 KEY POINTS

1. Proper interpretation requires us to study the context of any individual scripture passage.
2. Historical-cultural context considers the cultural setting of the Bible. It asks:
  - What do we know about the biblical writer?
  - What do we know about the biblical audience?
  - What do we know about the historical setting of the book?
  - What do we know about the cultural setting of the book?
3. Biblical context considers how a verse fits into the rest of scripture.

## LESSON 5 ASSIGNMENT

In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study throughout this course. Study the historical-cultural and biblical contexts of the scripture you chose. Prepare a page of notes in which you answer as many questions as possible from this lesson's discussion of context.

Ask:

- Who was the author?
- When did he write?
- What was his background?
- Who was his audience?
- What problems did they have?
- What were the circumstances surrounding the passage?
- What historical events occurred at the time of this book?
- What cultural factors help explain the book?

Read the surrounding chapter to determine the biblical context of the passage.

## LESSON 6

# INTERPRETATION: LITERARY FORMS

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the characteristics of several literary forms found in scripture.
2. Understand how literary form affects interpretation of text.
3. Discern whether or not a particular historical account in scripture should be interpreted as an example to follow.
4. Recognize principles that apply to all people in all time in any passage of scripture.
5. Describe the use of Old Testament passages for today's believer.

### INTRODUCTION

*Note to class leader: We recommend you teach this lesson in two class sessions because of how much material must be covered. Students will only have an assignment after the second class session.*

Knowing literary forms helps us interpret scripture.

When the Bible tells us that David cared for sheep (1 Samuel 16:11), we know that it is speaking of literal sheep, because he was a shepherd. When the book of Revelation says that John saw a dragon (Revelation 12:3) or something that looked like a lion or bear, we know that those animals represent other things because the book of Revelation has many symbols.

When 1 Kings 5:6 tells us that Solomon bought cedar trees to use for temple construction, we know that he bought literal trees. When Psalm 1:3 says that a righteous man will be like a tree by the river, we know that it is making a point by comparison. When Isaiah 55:12 says that the trees would clap their hands, it means there would be such joy that even nature would seem to celebrate.

Understanding literary form is important in Bible interpretation. A book of poetry (Psalms) will communicate differently than an epistle (Romans). Understanding the differences helps us interpret each book as the author intended. Here is an introduction to the major types of literature in scripture.

## LITERARY FORM: HISTORY

Much of the Bible is history: Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Gospels, and Acts, and other shorter sections are accurate, historical accounts of real people and events.

(The Bible also includes fictional illustrations told by the prophets and parables told by Jesus. We will discuss interpretation of these in a later section since it is different than the interpretation of historical accounts.)

### Questions to Ask When Reading History

You should ask these questions as you read biblical history:

#### 1. What is the story?

When reading history, we look for the design of the story. For instance, the gospel of Luke traces Jesus' ministry in Galilee; it then looks at Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and focuses on his teaching about discipleship; Luke concludes with a focus on Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem. In Acts, Luke shows the growing ministry of the church. Again, he follows a geographic structure. The gospel is preached in Jerusalem; then the gospel is taken throughout Judea and Samaria; finally, the gospel goes to the ends of the earth through Paul's ministry in Rome.

#### 2. Who are the people in the story?

When we read about historical people in the Bible, we learn about strengths we should develop and weaknesses we should avoid. We ask questions such as, "What made Nehemiah an effective leader?" and "What made the difference between the failure of Saul and the success of David?" We compare the evangelistic approaches of Peter and Paul. In biblical history, we gain a picture of people.

### 3. Does the historical account give an example to follow?

When reading history, we must ask if the actions are an example for us to follow. A historical account may give a model of what God expects of his people. By contrast, it may give important history that does not provide a model to follow.

Do you remember the example given about a preacher using Judges 21 to preach on how to obtain a wife? In that example, the preacher failed to ask, “Is Judges commanding this action or simply describing this action?” Judges 21 describes Israel’s actions; it does not command the behavior.

When reading history, we must ask, “Is this an example to follow?” or “Is this just a description?” In many cases, the answer is simple; no one thinks Judges 21 commands us to kidnap a wife! However, many cases are less clear. The book of Acts is particularly difficult. Should churches today expect God to do the kinds of miracles He did during the days of the early church? Will all Spirit-filled believers speak in other tongues?

How do we decide whether or not a passage gives us an example to follow? If we do not correctly answer this question, we will misread historical books such as Judges and Acts. If we do not correctly answer this question, we will emphasize or neglect biblical details depending on our personal preferences. Remember this principle: **If a historical passage gives us an example to follow, we can expect to find clear instruction or repeated examples in other passages.**

For example, Acts shows that early Christians were passionate about evangelism. We know this is an example for us to follow because Matthew 28:19-20 commands us to make disciples. Acts shows the Holy Spirit’s activities in the church. We know this is to be a normal part of church life because Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would empower the ministry of his followers (Acts 1:8). If we fail to evangelize or to demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit in our ministry, we do not live up to the model of Acts. These stories are examples for the church.

Acts also tells us that Christians had all things in common and worshipped in private homes. Are these practices commanded in scripture? No. The practice of sharing one’s wealth was voluntary, not required, as Peter told Ananias (Acts 5:3-4). Similarly, scripture doesn’t command us to worship in private homes.<sup>22</sup>

Because these practices are not commanded in scripture, we can conclude that they are part of church history but are not necessarily an example to follow. Acts is describing a particular time in history; it is not commanding these practices for all times.

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22 Christians in some parts of the world today find house worship to be safer than gathering in a public building. This is based on local circumstances, not a universal command.

#### 4. What principles are taught in this historical account?

According to Paul, Bible history is given for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:11). It shows how God works in human history and what pleases or displeases God. As readers, we must find principles from the historical accounts.

Rarely does the story say, “The Israelites complained against God and were punished. You should not complain against God.” Instead, we are told that Israel complained against God; we see the consequences of their sin, and we should understand the principle that is taught. Instead of direct commands, history gives positive examples to follow and negative examples to avoid. In the book of Joshua, we see that obedience to God brings victory; in the book of Judges, we see that disobedience brings chaos.

### The Book of Acts

The book of Acts provides a historical record of what happened after Jesus’ life on earth. For readers of the New Testament, Acts gives the context of the letters written to churches.

The book of Acts shows that the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, could not be stopped in its mission to spread the gospel. The church faced doctrinal issues, internal divisions, teachers of false doctrines, struggles in administration, hypocrites, the resistance of demons, persecution from society and government, and disasters during travel. Yet, the church went forward joyfully and victoriously. Because the Holy Spirit empowered the church, individuals and communities were changed by the gospel.

Luke’s purpose for writing Acts was to give the church confidence to continue fulfilling its mission of reaching the world with the gospel. His purpose is seen throughout the book with the following points. Other similar points could be added.

- Jesus said his disciples would take the gospel to the farthest point of the earth (Acts 1:8).
- The Spirit empowered the disciples to preach the gospel on the day of Pentecost, and 3,000 people believed (Acts 2:41).
- People were added to the church daily (Acts 2:47).
- The Jewish leader Gamaliel said that a work of God cannot be stopped (Acts 5:39).
- Persecuted believers left Jerusalem and spread the gospel (Acts 8:1, 4).
- The leader of the persecution was converted and became the greatest evangelist (Acts 9:13-22).
- Paul and others made missionary trips throughout the known world (Acts 13-21).



- Paul preached to rulers (Acts 24-26).
- Paul preached in Rome, the capital of the empire (Acts 28).

## Application of the Book of Acts

Sometimes a reader assumes that the book of Acts tells us how to do missions work, baptize, organize the church, and experience the Holy Spirit. Acts records the history of how the early church did those things; however, the author did not intend for Acts to be a manual for church ministry.

We should not assume that we should do everything the same way the church did in the book of Acts, but we can learn much from seeing how the church faced challenges.

Acts shows us that the church should continually reach farther with the gospel, always advancing and facing all problems with the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, developing structures as needed to solve practical issues.

## LITERARY FORM: OLD TESTAMENT LAW

### The Value of Old Testament Law

Some Christians think that the Old Testament has little use for a believer today except that the historical sections illustrate Christian principles. They think that the laws of the Old Testament have no application to believers today.

The Apostle Paul wrote several times about the changed use of the Old Testament law for the believer. He said that the death of Christ took away the condemnation of the law and that we should not judge believers who do not follow the rituals of the law (Colossians 2:14-17). He said that the apostles no longer lived under the Jewish requirements (Galatians 2:14-16). He refused to require a Gentile pastor to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3). He said that each person should follow his conscience about the Jewish diet and special days and that believers should not judge each other about those requirements (Romans 14). He said that the believer is dead to the law and that we serve God in a way that fulfills the intention of the law but not the specific requirements (Romans 7:4, 6). Most importantly, he said that no one will be justified by the deeds of the law (Romans 3:20).

The Bible also makes statements about the Old Testament law that show us that it is still significant for the believer. Because the Old Testament law was an expression of the nature of God, a person who loved God loved his law (See Psalm 1:2, Psalm 119:7, 16, 70). Paul said that the law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). He also said, “All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). At the time he made that statement, the term *scripture*

referred primarily to the Old Testament. Paul told Timothy that the scriptures would make him wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). These statements tell us that as believers we should not discard any part of the Old Testament. Even though we are not saved by keeping God's laws, we want to understand his will for us so that we can please him (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

## Classification of Old Testament Laws

To help us understand how believers should use Old Testament law today, we observe some categories of laws.

**Ceremonial laws** were about sacrifices, rituals, diet, and special days. Paul said that these laws have been fulfilled by Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). The book of Hebrews gives much application of the meaning of the Old Testament ceremonies. For example, things in the temple were purified with blood, symbolizing the blood of Christ that would purify believers (Hebrews 9:14, 21-24).

**Civil laws** were given to Israel as a nation. Civil laws were not enforced by individual citizens, but by appointed authorities. For example, people who practiced witchcraft were to be executed (Exodus 22:18), but a trial and execution were done by established authorities, not by individual citizens. Deuteronomy 17:2-12 describes the process of local government hearing witnesses and giving justice; a higher court was available for more difficult cases.

Laws of a nation may be different today, and individual believers are not supposed to take personal responsibility to enforce the civil laws of ancient Israel. However, those laws teach us about the righteousness of God and the righteousness he expects from his people. For instance, the law given in Exodus 22:18 tells us that it is wrong for a person to practice witchcraft. Other civil laws tell us that God wants a nation to protect the poor and prevent injustice to all categories of people (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 17-22).

The Bible interpreter first tries to understand the principle of an Old Testament civil law, then considers how a believer should apply that principle today. We should ask, "What was God's concern? What was God's purpose? What does this law reveal about what God values?" Then we consider what modern application would please God.

**Moral laws** state God's permanent requirements for right living. The moral laws speak of honesty, sexuality, idolatry, and other issues (Exodus 20:4-5, 13-16). Many of the moral laws are repeated in the New Testament. The moral laws are foundational to civil laws of nations today, though the laws of nations do not follow God's laws completely or consistently. God's laws for his people go far beyond what society requires.

Our classification of laws into categories is not perfect. Passages in the Old Testament sometimes include all three categories of laws and laws that are not easy to categorize.

Even though it isn't perfect, this classification system helps us to understand how the Old Testament laws apply to New Testament believers.

## Interpreting Old Testament Law<sup>23</sup>

When you are studying Old Testament law, consider the larger context of the law you are studying. Notice the surrounding narrative. How does the law fit its immediate context?

Then ask:

### 1. What did this text mean to the original audience?

To understand how Israel interpreted a law, ask questions such as:

- Is there a connection between the law and the surrounding verses?
- Is the law in response to a specific situation related to Israel's history?
- Is the law related to the Old Testament sacrificial system?

### 2. What are the differences between the biblical audience and our world?

There are more differences between our world and the Old Testament than between our world and the New Testament. For example:

- We no longer visit the one, central Temple; the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer.
- We do not approach God through sacrifices; Christ died once, for all (Hebrews 10:10).
- God's Word is not the law of our nation. We live under secular governments.

### 3. What principles are taught in this text?

The specific action required by an Old Testament law may not be required today. We should look for the permanent principle taught by the law. This is the bridge that moves the scripture from its ancient setting to the modern world. This principle will be relevant both to the Old Testament audience and to a contemporary audience.

State the principle in 1-2 sentences. To confirm that the principle is truly biblical, ask these questions:

- Is this principle clearly demonstrated by the law?
- Is this principle applicable to people in all times and places?
- Is this principle consistent with the rest of scripture?

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23 This section is adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

#### 4. Does the New Testament adapt this principle in any way?

Each of the previous three main questions are useful for interpretation of any scripture passage. This last question should be added to the interpretation process when we study Old Testament texts. If you have found a universal principle in the Old Testament passage, the principle remains in effect today. However, the New Testament may show that the application differs from the time of the Old Testament.

For example, Exodus 20:14 commands, “You shall not commit adultery.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands this to apply to thoughts, not just actions (Matthew 5:28). Jesus’ teaching does not cancel the principle of Exodus 20:14; it deepens its application.

### LITERARY FORM: POETRY

The Bible has much poetry. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon are almost entirely in poetic form, and Ecclesiastes includes some poetry. There is also much poetry in the prophets. Poetry is a style of writing used to express strong emotions. It is not designed to communicate the details of historical accounts or to create logical arguments. In poetry, we listen for the heart of the poet; we are particularly sensitive to the emotions expressed in the poem.

Poetry often uses figurative speech, and its descriptions are not necessarily intended to be taken literally.

Here is an example of a poetic statement from the Psalms: “You [God] will aim at their faces with your bows” (Psalm 21:12). We realize that God does not have a literal bow that will shoot literal arrows. The writer is saying that God is able to defeat anyone who chooses to be his enemy. The writer is telling believers to have confidence in God’s victory.

Poetry often serves the purpose of imaginatively communicating truth that is more plainly stated elsewhere in the Bible. Do not develop a doctrine or practice from a passage of poetry if it is not also taught in a plainer passage.

Hebrew poetry sometimes uses patterns of sound but does not rhyme the way that traditional English poetry does. Understanding the characteristics of Hebrew poetry may help you better appreciate its beauty.

## Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

### Parallelism

Hebrew poetry is often based on parallelism. Two parallel statements are used together; the second statement adds some meaning to the first statement but does not always make an additional point.

There are three types of parallelism:

- A verse says the same thing two ways (Psalm 25:4, Psalm 103:10, Proverbs 12:28).
- A verse shows how two things are different from one another (Psalm 37:21, Proverbs 10:1, 7).
- A verse makes a statement then adds more detail with the next statement (Psalm 14:2, Psalm 23:1, Proverbs 4:23).

When interpreting parallelism, ask what the second line adds to the first. Does it reinforce the first line, does it provide a contrast to the first line, or does it add new information?

### Figures of Speech

While all biblical books contain figures of speech, these are particularly important in poetry. Figures of speech found in Hebrew poetry include:

1. Comparison of two things that are similar in some way: “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1).
2. Using exaggeration to emphasize a point. David describes his grief this way: “Every night I flood my bed with tears” (Psalm 6:6).
3. Talking about something as if it were human: “Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice” (Proverbs 1:20).
4. Describing God using human characteristics: God’s “eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man” (Psalm 11:4).

When interpreting poetic figures of speech, ask what the image shows that we would not understand from a plain statement. For example, “The Lord is my shepherd” is much more than “God takes care of me.” It speaks of his care, but it also speaks of his love, his leadership, his protection from our enemies, and his discipline when we wander from his care.

## The Book of Psalms

### Types of Psalms

There are several types of Psalms. Psalms of praise honor God for his characteristics, blessings, and interventions (Psalm 23, 29). Psalms about the law of God praise God's wisdom and righteousness (Psalm 119). Psalms of sorrow express feelings to God, ask for his help, and submit to his will (Psalm 3, 13, 22). Psalms about the king describe the blessings that come to a nation through a king that honors God, and these psalms also point to the future messianic kingdom (Psalm 21, 72). Psalms of anger call for God to judge wicked people and defend his servants (Psalm 69:21-28, Psalm 59). Other types of Psalms could be listed.

### Application of the Psalms

The New Testament tells us some ways to use the Psalms. Psalms express our worship of God (Ephesians 5:19). They are also useful for doctrine and encouragement (Colossians 3:16).

Not every attitude expressed in the Psalms is an example of an attitude we should have. However, we learn from the Psalms that every attitude should be submitted to God. In prayer, you can express to God whatever you are feeling. The Psalms show us that God can renew the faith of a believer who is struggling with discouragement, fear, or anger.

## LITERARY FORM: WISDOM LITERATURE

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and parts of Psalms and James represent the genre known as wisdom literature. In the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the instruction is addressed to young readers who are learning the principles of life.

### The Book of Job

Long passages in Job give the words of various human speakers, including Job himself. The speakers express various opinions. A Bible interpreter should not take statements from one of the human speeches and teach them as biblical principles. The book of Job critically analyzes those statements with God's words and perspective. In Job 38-42 God responds to the speeches, and Job 1-2 also shows God's perspective.

### Literary Form: Proverb

Proverbs are observations of life stated briefly and clearly. They state what usually happens, but they do not mean that there are no exceptions.

On the surface, a proverb is easy to interpret. However, this literary form offers a particular challenge. A proverb states a general principle about life, but it does not apply in every situation. For example, Proverbs 21:17 says,

Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

As a general rule, those who love pleasure rather than work will tend towards poverty. This general rule is true, but there are many exceptions. Some wealthy people have inherited their wealth with no work. They spend their days drinking and playing, but they are rich. Other people work hard and remain poor. The proverb teaches a general principle, not a universal rule.

There are many proverbs in the Bible, not just in the book of Proverbs. Here is an example of a proverb spoken by Jesus: “...All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). There have been violent men who did not die violently. Again, the proverb is true as a general observation, but there have been exceptions.

We should ask these questions when interpreting a proverb:

**1. What general principle is taught in this scripture?**

The principle found in Proverbs 21:17 is the value of hard work and discipline. Most proverbs summarize a principle that can be developed in one paragraph.

**2. What exceptions to this principle exist?**

In the case of Proverbs 21:17, we see exceptions in everyday life. This does not contradict the principle; it simply shows that a wise person must realize that there are exceptions to the general principles.

**3. Which people in the Bible model this principle?**

When interpreting a proverb, it can be helpful to find a biblical character who models the principle of the proverb. For instance, Proverbs says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2). Saul’s pride and David’s humble confession of sin show how this proverb looks in real life.

## The Book of Proverbs

Much of the book of Proverbs was written by Solomon. The stated purpose of the book is to help the immature person get wisdom and to help a wise person become even wiser (Proverbs 1:4-5).

The book of Proverbs talks about three kinds of people. The **simple person** has grown to be an adult but does not yet have experience and understanding of life. The simple person needs to gain wisdom and avoid making mistakes that will destroy him.

The **wise person** is one who understands how to live according to God's principles. People must fear God if they want to become wise (Proverbs 9:10). Wise people continue to learn.

The **fool** has rejected wisdom (God's principles) and refuses to listen. He shows bad character and suffers from wrong decisions. A fool does not lack intelligence but does not understand life because he has rejected God's direction.

Some frequent themes in the book of Proverbs are (1) the danger of laziness and the value of work (2) the disasters that result from sexual sin, and (3) ethics in various kinds of relationships.

## The Book of Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

The message of Ecclesiastes: **If** only this life exists, there is no justice or purpose in life or in any great accomplishment.

Ecclesiastes explains why earthly life cannot give people ultimate satisfaction or purpose. In this life:

- Justice is ignored.
- Everyone will die and be forgotten.
- The wicked prosper.
- Wisdom is strongest yet is despised.
- Wisdom and knowledge increase grief.

Ecclesiastes shows us that a person who lives life with an eternal perspective will:

- Have joy but be serious about the issues of life.
- Remember that death is coming.
- Enjoy good things and take pleasure in them but be conscious of accountability to God.
- Not let any earthly goal become most important.

Solomon came to this conclusion: Since there is judgment, serve God and keep His commandments from youth.



## LITERARY FORM: OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

The books of the Old Testament prophets are written collections of preached messages. 16 prophets have messages recorded in scripture. Only Jeremiah has two books. Some prophets wrote books that are not in scripture (1 Chronicles 29:29). There were hundreds of prophets who wrote nothing as far as we are told.

The 16 writing prophets ministered between the years of 760-460 B.C. (Israel fell in 722. Judah fell in 587.) During this period of history, the rise and fall of several world empires affected Israel politically, economically, and religiously. At times, the majority of the people of the nations of Israel and Judah broke their covenant with God and served idols.

The prophets were advocates for God's covenant. They reminded the people of God's requirements. Years before, God had promised that Israel would receive blessings or curses depending on whether they obeyed or disobeyed him (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28-32). The prophets predicted the fulfillment of those promises. Blessings promised for obedience included life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, freedom, and safety. Curses for disobedience included death, disease, drought, famine, destruction of homes and cities, defeat in battle, exile from the homeland, loss of freedom, poverty, and humiliation.

**Prophecy was communication of a message from God.** Prophecy was preaching, addressing a present concern and calling for an immediate response. The messages of the prophets often contained predictions. However, the prophet was a preacher. His message was prophetic whether or not it contained predictions.

In many cases, we do not know how or when a prediction within a prophecy was fulfilled. That knowledge is not necessary in order for us to learn from those passages. Often the fulfillment did not occur in the lifetime of a prophet and his immediate hearers, yet his message was preached for immediate application and response. The prophets pointed to the future kingdom of God as a reason people should repent and obey God in the present (Habakkuk 2:14).

Prophets' methods of communication and illustration were often unusual and dramatic. Their messages used figurative imagery and sometimes physical demonstration. **However, they did not preach that people should do something new and unusual, but that they should obey the revealed law of God.**

The preaching of the prophets, which was to draw people back to the terms of the covenant (their relationship to God), can be preached today to draw people back to the terms of our relationship to God.

Prediction (even of events that would happen far into the future) was intended to have an immediate effect. People were called to repent and obey God. This purpose is similar to the purpose of preaching today.

Some predictions were conditional. The hearers could avoid the predicted judgment by repenting (Jeremiah 18:7-11, Jeremiah 26:13-19). Jonah's hearers in Nineveh escaped destruction even though Jonah's message did not offer mercy (Jonah 3:4-5, 9-10).

The fulfillment of God's ultimate purposes is not conditional; for example, in Isaiah 43:5-6 God promises that he will bring exiles back to Israel by his own power, but the passage does not give a requirement Israel must fulfill. Still, one's own place in these events is conditioned by one's own choices.

The books of prophecy contain passages of historical narrative, but the speeches are usually in poetic form. It is not difficult to distinguish historical narrative that should be interpreted literally from poetic passages that contain symbols.

## Significant Terms and Concepts in the Prophets

**Idolatry:** The primary violation of the covenant.

**Adultery:** A sin that often accompanies idolatry and is used figuratively to refer to idolatry.

**Nations:** Refers to the world that was not in covenant relationship with God. Two sub-themes:

1. The nations are often hostile to Israel.
2. God intends for Israel to glorify him among the nations.

**Temple:** The center of God's presence. Two sub-themes:

1. Hypocritical worship dishonors God.
2. Invasion of the Temple by enemies showed the total defeat of Israel and loss of God's presence.

**Land/Inheritance:** The special place God put the Israelites to be blessed.

**Captivity:** Removal from the place God had given, and enslavement to other nations. Captivity meant Israel had lost God's blessing.

**Rain (and related terms):** A sign of God's continuous blessing in the land he gave the Israelites. Lack of rain spoke of God's disapproval.

**Harvest (and related terms):** Blessings of God related to the concept of rain and land.

**Day of the Lord:** A future, sudden judgment of God that will destroy the wicked. Israel thought judgment was for other nations and was horrified to hear that they would be judged also.

**Horses:** Represented military force.

**Deliverance from Egypt:** The historical event that made Israel a nation and made God their king. Idolatry dishonored the covenant formed after the deliverance.

## Interpreting Prophetic Literature

Prophetic literature is one of the most difficult types of literature to interpret. To effectively interpret prophetic literature, ask these questions:

### 1. What did the prophet say to his world?

Contrary to popular opinion, prophetic literature is not solely about predictions of the future. The prophet spoke first to his own world.

For example, Amos wrote to the nation of Israel, which was disobeying God. The people were prosperous and assumed that they could ignore God's law without consequence. Amos proclaimed a message of judgment: Israel would be judged because she had forsaken justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7).

### 2. What was the response of the people to his message?

The response of Israel to the message of Amos is seen in the response of Amaziah, the high priest at Bethel. He ordered Amos to return to Judah and to no longer preach in the Northern Kingdom (Amos 7:10-13).

### 3. What principle from the prophet's message speaks to our world today?

Just as justice and righteousness were God's standards for his people in ancient Israel, God requires justice and righteousness from his people today. We cannot worship at God's house while ignoring his call for righteous living (Amos 5:22-24).

These questions bring the truth of prophecy from the world of the prophet to our world. By looking at the world of the prophet, we ensure that our interpretation for today is rooted in the original message.

## LITERARY FORM: APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic scriptures include Daniel, Zechariah, Joel, Revelation, and passages from other books of the Bible.

The writer of an apocalyptic book receives the message in a vision or dream. It is highly symbolic. It often uses animals or strange, monstrous creatures as symbols.

Rather than describing events in a chronological order, the writing may repeatedly talk about the same events/settings, with different details revealed with each telling.

The usual method of interpreting scripture is to understand details literally unless it is obvious that the writer intended the description to be figurative. In the case of apocalyptic literature, the interpreter should realize that the author intended many of the details to be figurative. Examples of obviously figurative descriptions would be those of the animals and monsters in the visions of Daniel.

- Examples of animal symbols: Daniel 7:3-7, Revelation 12:3, Revelation 16:13, and Zechariah 6:1-3.

Apocalyptic writing usually deals with the challenge of keeping faith in spite of the evil and injustice in the present world. It describes a universal battle with intense warfare.

Apocalyptic writings in the Bible show the ultimate triumph of God, who punishes evil and rewards good. The focus is the sovereign God who comes to the aid of his people.

The primary message of apocalyptic writing can be understood even if all of the symbols are not understood and even if the interpreter is not able to make a timeline of predicted events.

- Examples of passages that describe a great, final battle: Joel 2:9-11, Revelation 19:11-21, and Revelation 20:7-9.
- Examples of passages that teach the final victory and eternal kingdom of God: Daniel 7:14, 27 and Zechariah 14:9.

Besides the apocalyptic books, other sections of scripture may be considered apocalyptic writing because they speak of God's sudden intervention when he judges the evil powers and delivers the righteous. These scriptures do not all have the other characteristics of apocalyptic writing, such as visions or animal symbols. (Examples are Ezekiel 37-39, Isaiah 24-27, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, 2 Thessalonians 2, and 2 Peter 3.)

## General Application of Apocalyptic Scripture

The ultimate solution to the world's problem is not cultural or societal development. It is not political reform or revolution. The solution is the intervention of God. He presently gives faith, strength, and mercy to his people. In the future he will come to suddenly and completely change the world.

Believers should patiently endure by faith. Complete, present understanding of God's plan or of events in the world is not necessary. Having faith does not mean that people can predict certain immediate results. Instead, people who have real faith obey God in all circumstances, because they know that in the end obedience will be worthwhile.

## LITERARY FORM: PARABLE

A parable is a teaching tool that compares spiritual truth to things in nature or situations in life. The similarity between spiritual and natural truth is shown so that we can better understand the spiritual truth.

Telling parables was one of Jesus' favorite ways to teach (Matthew 13:34). He told 30 parables and used many other figurative comparisons.

Through parables, Jesus taught about prayer (the Pharisee and the publican in the Temple, Luke 18:9-14), love for our neighbor (the good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37), the nature of the kingdom of God (the Matthew 13 parables), and God's mercy to sinners (the prodigal son, Luke 15:11-32).

Parables allowed Jesus to rebuke his listeners without direct confrontation. Because the parables Jesus told were interesting, they opened the ears of Jesus' audience to his words until suddenly they were surprised to realize "He is talking about me!" Nathan the prophet did the same when he told David a parable about a poor man's sheep (2 Samuel 12:1-10). It was not until Nathan said, "You are the man," that David realized the parable was about himself.

### Interpreting Parables

The interpreter should notice:

- How was the parable introduced?
- What was the conclusion of the parable?
- What response or change of attitude does the parable call for?
- What reaction would the original audience have had?

#### 1. How was the parable introduced?

Jesus often told a parable in response to a question or an attitude. Knowing the situation in which the parable was told helps the interpreter understand its message.

If our interpretation of the parable does not directly relate to the conversation or situation that led to Jesus telling it, we have probably missed the point.

**Parables in response to a question.** During a conversation, a lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus could have answered, "A needy person in your path is your neighbor—and your responsibility." Instead, Jesus gave that same answer indirectly, by telling the parable of the good Samaritan.

Augustine misinterpreted the parable because he ignored the question that it answered. This is the interpretation Augustine gave: Jesus (the Samaritan) rescued Adam (the man) from Satan (the robbers) and took him to the church (the inn) for safety. Jesus paid Paul (the innkeeper) two denarii (the promise of this life and the life to come) to bind up sin (the wounds). Augustine's interpretation was not correct because it was not related to the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer.

**Parables in response to an attitude.** Luke 15:1-3 says, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable”:

- A shepherd had a lost sheep. Look at his rejoicing when the sheep was found!
- A woman had a lost coin. Look at her rejoicing when the coin was found!
- A father had a lost son. Look at his rejoicing when the son was found!

Through these three parables, Jesus implies, “You should not be shocked that I eat with sinners. Look at the rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents!”

It is very important to remember that **the primary lesson of a parable will relate directly to the question or situation that inspired it.**

## **2. What was the conclusion of the parable? What response or change of attitude does the parable call for?**

A parable usually makes one main point, though different applications are possible. Each main character in the parable may also illustrate one lesson.

We have already seen the primary lesson of the parable of the prodigal son: There is great joy in heaven over a sinner who repents. This main point answers the situation that inspired Jesus' parable: the Pharisees' unwillingness to forgive sinners. Each of the three characters also teach one lesson directly related to the main point of the parable.

| CHARACTER         | LESSON                                                                              |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The prodigal son  | Sinners who turn to God in repentance will find ready forgiveness.                  |
| The loving father | Instead of being unwilling to forgive, our heavenly Father rejoices in forgiveness. |
| The elder brother | A person who will not forgive does not have love like the Father.                   |

Jesus contrasted the unforgiveness of the elder brother with the forgiveness of the father. Jesus' purpose was to rebuke the unforgiveness of the Pharisees. He wanted them to repent of their wrong attitude.

Someone preaching from this parable could emphasize the love and forgiveness of the father for the purpose of encouraging a sinner to repent. Or he could preach that believers should have God's attitude of forgiveness for unbelievers.

### **3. What reaction would the original audience have had?**

To understand how a parable would have affected the first audience, we must understand their culture. Jesus' parables often went against the expected norms of his culture. This made them surprising.

For example, consider again the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus' audience would have seen it as terribly disrespectful for a son to ask for his inheritance early. The son then wasted the inheritance. The listeners thought that when the son returned, the father would reject him, refuse to see him, and maybe even have him beaten and driven away. Imagine the surprise of the listeners when the father ran to welcome his son!

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the listeners were not surprised that a priest and Levite would pass the injured man without helping him, because they considered the temple leaders to be corrupt and hypocritical. They respected the Pharisees, and they thought the third person who helped the man would be a Pharisee. Imagine their surprise when the third person was a Samaritan, a person they despised for his ethnicity and lack of religious status!

The better we understand the cultural setting of the parable, the more clearly we see the message.

## **Details and Symbolism in Parables**

Some preachers mistakenly assume that every detail in every parable is symbolic. For example, in the parable of the good Samaritan some have said that when the traveler went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, he was making a wrong choice because he was going to a city God had cursed. This is not a good interpretation of the parable, because the purpose of the parable was to explain how a person shows love to a neighbor. The details are not symbols of anything.

In the parable in Mark 4:30-32, preachers have imagined what the birds in the tree symbolize, but the birds are only mentioned to show that a small seed grew into something so large that birds could come and sit in the branches.

In the parable of the prodigal son there is no reason to try to find symbolic meaning for the details. For example, the pigs are not symbols. The pigs are mentioned to show the bad condition of the son: A Jewish boy would not ordinarily be near pigs.

It is rare for the details of parables to be symbolic. One example of symbolic details in a parable is in the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:38-39). We know that the details in this parable were symbolic because Jesus specifically said they were.

## Preaching with Parables

A preacher may adapt a parable to a familiar situation in his own culture. However, he should take the time to understand what the parable meant to the first listeners. Otherwise, he will not communicate the same message to his listeners.

An interpreter should not use a parable as the basis of a doctrine or application that is not supported by other clear scripture.

## LITERARY FORM: LETTER

### Characteristics of Letters<sup>24</sup>

Many of the New Testament books are letters from Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude. While there are differences between the letters, certain characteristics are common to the letters. New Testament letters are:

1. **Authoritative.** New Testament letters were a substitute for the author's presence. The letter represented the authority of the writer; this authority was often stated in the opening verses.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Situational.** New Testament letters often addressed specific situations or problems. For instance, Galatians was written to a church that thought salvation depended on following Jewish requirements. Paul emphasized our freedom in Christ. In contrast, the church at Corinth was taking freedom to the extreme—tolerating sexual immorality. In 1 Corinthians, Paul emphasizes our responsibility to obedience.
3. **Addressed to Believers.** The letters are written to regional churches (Romans) or individual believers (Philemon) or to believers in general (Jude). Not all the recipients were living in a saving relationship with God. Paul called the Corinthian believers to repent of some of their actions; he called the Galatians to return to the gospel; and

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24 The concepts in this section are adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

25 For example, Ephesians 1:1 states Paul's apostolic authority: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God."



James tells unjust rich men to expect judgment. However, the letters are written in the context of the Christian family of faith.

### STRUCTURE OF NT LETTERS

#### Introduction

- Author's name and position
- Recipients
- Greeting
- Introductory prayer

#### Body (Primary message of the letter)

#### Conclusion (Includes material such as)

- Travel plans (Titus 3:12)
- Commendations and greetings (Romans 16)
- Final instructions (Colossians 4:16-17)
- Benediction (Ephesians 6:23-24)
- Doxology (Jude 24-25)

## Interpreting Letters

When you receive a letter from a friend, you sit down and read the entire letter. Read New Testament letters in the same way. Read the entire letter to gain an overview of the author's message. As you read, make a list of observations. The more details you observe, the better equipped you are to interpret the letter.

There are several questions to ask when we read a biblical letter:

### 1. Who is the recipient of the letter?

The more we know of the church or person that received a letter, the better we will understand the letter. When we study a Pauline letter, it is helpful to start our study by reading references in Acts to the recipient church. This will often give a better understanding of the letter. For example:

- The church at Philippi was born in persecution (Acts 16:12-40). This highlights Paul's instruction that they are to rejoice even in difficult circumstances.

- Ephesians (like other Pauline letters) is written to believers. When Paul prays that the Ephesian believers will be filled with all the fullness of God, (Ephesians 3:19) he is praying that children of God will receive even more of God's fullness. He is praying that Christians will be made "holy and blameless before him" (Ephesians 1:4).

## **2. Who is the author? How is he related to the recipient?**

When you receive a letter in the mail, you want to know: "Who wrote this?" The better you know the author, the more interesting the letter will be. Similarly, the more we know about the author of a biblical letter, the better we will understand his message.

In his letters, the apostle John emphasized love. John had previously been known as one of the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Back then, he and his brother had asked for Jesus' permission to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). John's letters, written later, show us that he had been transformed by the infilling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Peter wrote his letters to encourage suffering Christians. He assured them that they could be bold in the face of Satan's attacks (1 Peter 5:8-9). Earlier in Peter's life, he had denied knowing Jesus because of his fear (Mark 14:66-72). Peter's letters show us the transformation that had happened in his life.

Knowing the relationship between the author and the recipient is often helpful in reading a letter. Paul's warm relationship with the church at Philippi is seen throughout his joyful letter. On the other hand, conflict between Paul and rebellious members at Corinth led to the strong rebukes of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

## **3. What circumstances inspired the letter?**

We know the circumstances that inspired several of Paul's letters. 1 and 2 Corinthians were written in response to problems and questions at Corinth. Philemon was written as an appeal on behalf of a runaway slave, Onesimus.

The letter to the Galatians shows the value of understanding the circumstances of a letter. A few verses into Galatians, you are likely to ask, "What is wrong in Galatia?" Paul begins, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6). It soon becomes clear that these new converts are abandoning the gospel of justification by grace through faith. They are instead believing a message of justification by works. Paul's passionate words are motivated by his love for these converts. He has committed his life to proclaiming the message of justification by faith alone. He is astonished that the Galatians are abandoning the truth and accepting a false gospel.

## Literary Form: Exposition

Exposition is orderly teaching. It moves in a logical manner from point 1 to point 2. This literary form is common in the New Testament epistles, particularly Paul's letters. In these letters, Paul presents truth in the clear manner of a good teacher.

Exposition uses linking words such as *therefore*, *and*, or *but*. It often includes questions and answers. An exposition gives a logical presentation of truth.

In Colossians, Paul presents an exposition on the nature of Christ. Paul teaches that Christ is superior to all human philosophies and traditions. Paul follows this logical pattern:

1. Paul gives evidence for the superiority of Christ (Colossians 1:15-23)
  - He is the firstborn of all creation.
  - By him all things were created.
  - He is the head of the church.
  - Reconciliation comes through him.
2. Paul reminds his readers of his purpose in writing. The message of the exalted Christ has been entrusted to Paul to bring to the Gentiles (Colossians 1:24–2:5)
3. Paul warns against teachings that deny the superiority of Christ (Colossians 2:6-23).
  - The teaching that people are saved by keeping God's law
  - The practice of dangerous interaction with spirits
  - A wrong emphasis on physical discipline for spiritual results
4. Therefore, because of the superiority of Christ, this is how you should live (Colossians 3-4):
  - Submission to Christ will affect our moral behavior.
    - We will no longer behave immorally (Colossians 3:1-11).
    - We will live in peace and thanksgiving (Colossians 3:12-17).
  - Submission to Christ will affect our relationships with others (Colossians 3:18-4:6).
5. Closing greetings remind the readers of Paul's personal concern for the Colossian believers (Colossians 4:7-18).

Paul's letter is an exposition of the doctrine of the lordship of Christ. It teaches about the nature of Christ and the impact of this truth on our lives as believers.

## LESSON 6 KEY POINTS

1. Proper interpretation requires us to understand the literary form of the scripture passage we are studying.
2. Some of the important literary forms found in the Bible include:
  - History: accurate, historical accounts of real people and events.

When interpreting history, ask:

- What is the story?
  - Who are the people in the story?
  - Does the historical account give an example to follow?
  - What principles are taught in this historical account?
- Old Testament Law

Old Testament law is important for New Testament believers because:

- It is an expression of the nature of God.
- It makes us wise for salvation.
- It helps us know God's will.

It can be helpful to think about three categories of Old Testament Law:

- Ceremonial laws
- Civil laws
- Moral laws

When interpreting Old Testament law, ask:

- What did this text mean to the original audience?
  - What are the differences between the biblical audience and our world?
  - What principles are taught in this text?
  - Does the New Testament adapt this principle in any way?
- Poetry

Characteristics of Hebrew poetry:

- Parallelism
  - Figures of speech
- Wisdom Literature: teaches how life works.

- Proverb: general observations of life stated briefly and clearly

When interpreting proverbs, ask:

- What general principle is taught in this scripture?
- What exceptions to this principle exist?
- Which people in the Bible model this principle?

- Old Testament Prophecy: communication of messages from God.

When interpreting Old Testament prophecy, ask:

- What did the prophet say to his world?
- What was the response of the people to his message?
- What principle from the prophet's message speaks to our world today?

- Apocalyptic Literature

When interpreting apocalyptic literature, remember:

- It is highly symbolic.
- It does not necessarily describe events in chronological order.
- It may repeatedly describe the same events, giving different details.

The most important themes of apocalyptic literature are:

- The challenge of keeping faith in the present evil world.
- The sovereign God who helps his people.

- Parable: teaching that compares spiritual truth with things in nature or situations in life. Most often parables were told in response to a question or an attitude.

When interpreting parables, ask:

- How was the parable introduced?
- What was the conclusion of the parable?
- What response or change of attitude does the parable call for?
- What reaction would the original audience have had?

- Letter

New Testament letters are:

- Authoritative
- Situational

- Addressed to believers

When interpreting letters, ask:

- Who is the recipient of the letter?
  - Who is the author? How is he related to the recipient?
  - What circumstances inspired the letter?
- Exposition: orderly teaching

## LESSON 6 ASSIGNMENT

In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study throughout this course. What is the literary form of your passage? Use the information in this lesson to help you understand more about the passage. Answer the interpretative questions related to the specific literary form.

## LESSON 7

# INTERPRETATION: WORD STUDY

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Appreciate the value of in-depth word study.
2. Avoid common mistakes in doing word study.
3. Understand and apply a process for doing word study.
4. Recognize figurative language in the Bible.

### INTRODUCTION

The Bible is full of meaning, but sadly, some people read scripture without understanding its message.<sup>26</sup> The Bible is made up of books, chapters, paragraphs, verses, and words. Understanding the meaning of the words helps us to correctly interpret the passage we are studying. This lesson is about how to study words. We study a word to understand what it means in a particular biblical context.

Sometimes people study the Bible's original Greek and Hebrew words using Bible study resources. Resources used for that kind of word study are not widely available, so we will not discuss them in this lesson. Instead, we will learn about how to study the words in our local translations of the Bible.

We will use a three-step process for word study:

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26 Much of the material in this lesson comes from Chapter 9 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

1. Choose the words to study.
2. List the possible meanings of each selected word.
3. Discern what each selected word means in the context of the passage.

## COMMON MISTAKES IN WORD STUDY

As we begin doing word studies, there are some mistakes we must avoid. These mistakes often lead to wrong interpretations.

### Ignoring a Word's Former Meaning

Sometimes the way a word is used changes over time. If the translation of our Bible happened many years ago, we need to be aware that the meanings of some words in our Bible may be different from what the same words mean today. If we do not understand how a word was used in the past, we may come to the wrong conclusion about what is being said in the passage we are studying. (This is not as much of an issue when we are reading a Bible translation from recent years.)

- » Talk about a word in your language that means something different today from what it used to mean.

### Assuming a Word Has the Same Meaning in Every Context

Biblical authors used words that have more than one possible meaning. The same word may be used with one meaning in one context, and a different meaning in another. We must look at the context in which the word is used to know which meaning is the correct meaning in the verse we are studying.

## WORD STUDY PROCESS

### Step One: Choose Words from the Passage to Study

We do not need to do an in-depth study of every word in the Bible. Sometimes the meaning of a word is obvious. For example, when the Bible says that David picked up five stones (1 Samuel 17:40), we do not need to study the word *stone* to find its meaning.

To choose words to study, look for:

- Words that are significant for the meaning of the passage
- Repeated words
- Figures of speech
- Words that are unclear or difficult



- » Read Romans 12:1-2 and circle important words for study. Beside the word, mark the reason you are choosing the word:

- 1 = Significant word
- 2 = Repeated word
- 3 = Figure of speech
- 4 = Unclear or difficult word

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Some words that you may have marked are:

- 1 = Significant word: *appeal, present, be conformed, be transformed, renewal*
- 2 = Repeated word: None in this passage
- 3 = Figure of speech: *living sacrifice*
- 4 = Unclear or difficult word: *spiritual worship*

## Step Two: List Possible Meanings of the Word

Most languages have words that are used in multiple ways, with very different meanings. A listener usually knows which meaning a speaker intends because of the context. Occasionally, humorous or serious misunderstandings happen when a listener does not consider the context and is wrong about what the speaker means.

- » Can you think of a time when someone made a mistake because they misunderstood what someone meant by a word?

During this second step, we should try to think of every possible way the word can be used. If our Bible translation is old, we should also think about whether the word had additional meanings in the past.<sup>27</sup> If we have a dictionary, it could help us make a list of all possible

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<sup>27</sup> If we are using an older translation of the Bible, looking at a newer Bible translation may also provide us with insight about the likely meaning of a word in that specific context.

meanings. If we are studying with other people, they may also help us think of meanings we hadn't thought of.

If possible, look at other translations of the Bible to see if they use the same word.<sup>28</sup> If a translation uses a different word, compare the words to see what the differences are. Do they mean the same thing? If not, how are they different? Is the meaning of the passage changed by using a different word?

- » *Present* was one of the words we marked for study from Romans 12:1-2. Work together to make a list of all possible meanings of the word *present*.

### Step Three: Discern What the Word Means in Context

After looking at various uses of a word and making a list of possible meanings, you are ready to discover what the word means in the passage you are studying. The context will guide you. Remember, the author did not intend to use a special meaning that only a few people would know. The author wanted the reader to understand.

We looked at the importance of context in Lesson 5, so we will not review this material in detail. To summarize the role of context: We look at the surrounding verse, chapter, and book to determine the best definition for a word.

There are questions to consider as you look at the context and try to discover the meaning of a word.

#### 1. Is there a contrast or comparison in the passage that helps define the word?

- » Read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Together, make a list of all possible meanings for the word *perish*. (You may use a dictionary if you have one.) Now, consider the contrast given in the verse. **To perish** is contrasted with **having eternal life**. On your list, which meaning of the word *perish* was most likely intended by Jesus in this sentence?

#### 2. How does the author use this word in other places?

The word *world* is also used in John 3:16. The word *world* can mean several things:

- The physical universe
- All people
- The known civilized nations
- General society that rejects God

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28 See the appendix for a list of websites where you can read the Bible in various languages and versions.

Writers used *world* to refer to each of these things in various places in scripture. To discern which meaning *world* has in John 3:16, we should look at other examples of John's use of the term.

- John 1:10, "He was in the **world**, and the **world** was made through him, yet the **world** did not know him." This verse is talking about Jesus. The world did not know him.
- John 7:7, "The **world** cannot hate you; but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil." Jesus was speaking in this verse. The world hates him.
- John 14:17, "Even the Spirit of truth, whom the **world** cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." The world does not receive the Spirit of truth.
- 1 John 2:15-17, "Do not love the **world** or the things in the **world**. If anyone loves the **world**, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the **world**—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the **world**. And the **world** is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." The world's values and pursuits are completely opposite of God's.

The Apostle John usually used the term *world* to refer to the general society that rejects God. This shows the extent of Jesus' promise: God so loved those who are alienated from himself that he gave his Son so that all could be saved.

### 3. What does the context show about the meaning of the word?

- » Look at Luke 1:68-79.

In Luke 1:71, Zechariah prays about Israel being *saved*. What is he referring to? What does *saved* mean in this verse?

The concept of *salvation* has more than one meaning in scripture. It can specifically refer to:

- Deliverance from an enemy or danger
- Deliverance from sickness
- Deliverance from sin

The immediate context (Luke 1:68-74) shows that *saved* refers to deliverance from an enemy. Deliverance (salvation) will fulfill the promise that God made to Abraham (Luke 1:73).

A few verses later, Luke uses *salvation* in a deeper sense (Luke 1:77). Through the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sees that his son will be called the prophet of the Most High. Zechariah's son will give knowledge of salvation to the Lord's people in the forgiveness of their sins. Here, *salvation* is linked to forgiveness of sins.

Different meanings of *salvation* are used in this prayer. We determine meaning from context.

## PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

*Note to class leader: Reserve adequate time in class for these practice activities. If your class session is typically one hour, spend one whole class session on these exercises. Suggested time allotment is given for each exercise. Practicing together during class will help students apply the ideas they are learning. Going through the process of word study with other people will also help them to see that there are often perspectives and details they would not consider if working alone.*

*For small group activities, put three students in each group. The whole group should come back together for the last five minutes and discuss what was learned.*

- » **Small group activity (20 minutes).** In your group, find several verses where a single word is used with various meanings. Here are a few ideas to get you started: *house, vision, day, fruit*. When you have identified some verses that use the same word in different ways, make a list of all the ways that word could be used. How does word study help with proper interpretation of each verse?
- » **Whole group activity (10 minutes).** Now return to Romans 12:1 and your list of possible meanings for the word *present*. Use the questions above to help you discern which of the meanings was intended in that verse.
- » **Small group activity (30 minutes).** In your group, practice going through the word study process. You have already marked the words in Romans 12:1-2 that should be studied carefully. For each of those words, list every possible meaning and determine which meaning the word has in that context.

## A SPECIAL CASE: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In Lesson 6, we looked briefly at the use of figurative language. No matter how carefully we do a word study, our conclusions will be wrong if we misunderstand the author's figurative language. In figures of speech, the important thing is not the literal meaning of the words, but the idea they symbolize.<sup>29</sup>

All of us use figurative language. Imagine that an American friend is showing you pictures of her garden. You are amazed at the garden and ask your friend, "How do you grow such beautiful plants?" She answers, "I have a green thumb." She does not mean that the thumb

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29 The material in this section is adapted from Chapter 36 of Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

on her hand is literally green. She is using an American English figure of speech that means, “I have an unusual ability to grow plants.”

- » What are some phrases in your language that mean something different from their literal meaning?

Sometimes a word is used to represent something else. This is not the same as a word having several meanings. For example, in the Bible some people are called dogs (Revelation 22:15). The statement is a criticism of people who have some traits of dogs that people should not have. The word *dog* still means the animal that we call a dog, but it is used figuratively to refer to people. Jesus called Simon by the name of Peter, meaning *rock*, because Peter had a characteristic of a rock that is good for people to have (Matthew 16:18). Jesus was using the ordinary meaning of the word *rock*, making the point that Simon was like a rock in a certain way.

Jesus called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32). We do not need to study the different literal meanings of the word *fox* then look at the context to understand what kind of animal Jesus meant. It is a figurative statement, so we should try to understand what Jesus meant to say about Herod by calling him a fox. Jesus meant that Herod was intelligent but could not be trusted because of his bad character.

- » What animal is used figuratively in your culture to criticize a person?

How do we know if a statement is literal or figurative? Here are two guidelines to consider:

1. **Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to do so.** Genesis 37 relates two dreams. In the Bible, a dream often communicated a figurative message. Because of this, we should not expect Joseph’s dream to mean that sheaves of grain will literally bow to another sheaf, or that the sun, moon, and stars will literally bow to Joseph. Instead, the statement that this is a dream tells us to expect figurative language. In this case, the interpretation is given in Genesis 37:8, 10.
2. **Use the figurative sense when a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.** In Revelation 1:16, the Lord appeared with a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. In a book full of imagery, it seems very unlikely that this is a literal picture of Jesus! As we continue in Revelation, we see that the image of Jesus with a large two-edged sword fits the message of God’s ultimate victory over the powers of evil.

Remember that God gave his Word to communicate truth, not to hide truth. Most figurative language in the Bible will be obvious. We saw a list of figures of speech in Lesson 6. These give you a good sense of how to interpret figurative language. After you recognize the figure of speech, ask, “Why did God inspire this particular imagery? What truth is communicated with this image?”

Sometimes a word is used figuratively and becomes a permanent symbol. When Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice...” (John 10:27), the listeners knew he meant the people who follow him, and the Bible uses that symbol other times (Psalm 23, for instance). In Revelation 5, the Lion of the tribe of Judah appears before the throne of God. A Bible dictionary explains that “Lion of the tribe of Judah” is a title that refers to the Messiah. When you know that, you ask, “Why does John use this title? What does the title tell us about Jesus?” Recognizing the figure of speech helps us understand John’s image of Jesus’ redemptive power.

The fact that biblical authors sometimes used figurative language does not mean that we should never interpret scripture literally. Rather, with the knowledge that figurative language was sometimes used, we must try to understand the text in the way the author intended. We should not use our imaginations to make a biblical statement mean something the writer was not trying to say.

## CONCLUSION

The writer of Proverbs made this promise to the person who seeks wisdom; “if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2:4-5). There is no greater source of wisdom than God’s Word. Your study of scripture will pay eternal rewards.

## LESSON 7 KEY POINTS

1. Word study is the examination of significant words in a passage for the purpose of discovering their meaning within context. Word study helps us to correctly interpret the passage we are studying.
2. Two common mistakes to avoid when doing word studies:
  - Ignoring a word’s former meaning
  - Assuming a word has the same meaning in every context
3. The process of word study:
  - Choose the words to study.
    - Words that are significant for the meaning of the passage
    - Repeated words
    - Figures of speech
    - Words that are unclear or difficult
  - List the possible meanings of each selected word.
  - Discern what each selected word means in the context of the passage.

4. Questions that help you discern what the word means in context:
  - Is there a contrast or comparison in the passage that helps define the word?
  - How does the author use this word in other places?
  - What does the context show about the meaning of the word?
5. Things to remember when studying figurative language:
  - The idea that is symbolized is what is important.
  - A figurative picture, phrase, or word represents something else.
  - Figurative language calls attention to the traits of what it represents.
  - We must try to understand the text in the way the author intended it to be understood—whether the meaning is literal or figurative.
6. When to interpret a scriptural statement figuratively:
  - When the passage tells you to do so
  - When a literal meaning is impossible or absurd

## LESSON 7 ASSIGNMENTS

1. In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study throughout the course. From the passage, make a list of words that you think are important to study. Look for significant words, repeated words, figures of speech, or words that are unclear or difficult. Study each of these words following the process explained in this lesson. For each word, make a list of all possible meanings. Consider the context. Discern the meaning of each of the words in the context of the passage you are studying.
2. Consider each of the words you have just been studying. Look at the lists of possible meanings you made for each study word. How could misunderstanding the meaning of your study word have led to an incorrect interpretation of the passage? Write 2-4 sentences of reflection.





## LESSON 8

# INTERPRETATION: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand basic principles of Bible interpretation.
2. Apply these principles when studying scripture.
3. Be aware of how failure to follow these principles may lead to doctrinal error.

### INTRODUCTION

The principles in this lesson are foundational to the study of scripture. These are principles that wise Bible teachers have developed to guide their study. These principles should be the basis of your Bible study methods. Please take the time to understand these principles and then apply them in your study.

### CONSIDER THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION

The author intended to say something to his readers. That intended meaning is the real meaning of the writing. Interpretation is the work of trying to understand the author's intended message. We should never use scripture as material for a message that is different from the meaning the writer intended.

A scriptural statement can mean more than the writer intended. When Abraham said to Isaac that "God will provide for himself the lamb..." (Genesis 22:8), he may not have understood that God would fulfill his words in a greater way in the coming of Jesus. When Moses wrote down those words of Abraham, Moses also may not have understood the full meaning of

the statement. However, to apply the statement to the coming of Jesus is not a completely different meaning from Moses' intention; it is a larger, fuller meaning of the principle that God provides what is needed for our salvation.

Each biblical writer also intended that the first readers apply his message in a practical way. Our application of the message may be different from the application of the first readers, but it follows the same principle. Because we are applying the biblical principle to a different situation, our action may be different. For example, the people of Israel were told to put railings around the roofs of their houses (Deuteronomy 22:8). The roof of a house at that time was flat, and the roof was used as part of the living area. If you do not live in a house with a flat roof where people go, then you do not need a railing around the edge to make it a safe place. However, we should still apply the principle of making our properties safe for people.

The interpreter should not develop imaginary interpretations of the details of the passage. Here is an example of an imaginary interpretation of Jesus' story of the Samaritan who helped the injured man (Luke 10:30-35):

The Samaritan is an evangelist, the injured man is a sinner who is converted, the hotel is the church, and the two coins are baptism and communion.

This interpretation ignores the point that Jesus intended to make about loving our neighbors (Luke 10:27-29, 36-37): We are to show love to those we meet who have needs.

There are three problems with imaginary interpretations:

1. They come from the opinions of the interpreter.
2. They are not guided by good interpretive principles.
3. They cannot be evaluated by any usual, reasonable methods.

## START WITH THE TEXT, NOT WITH YOUR CONCLUSION

Caleb looked at a map to find his way to his destination, but then Caleb said, "This map is wrong." Caleb's passenger asked, "How do you know the map is wrong?" Caleb responded confidently, "I know the route to take. The map is wrong." A few hours later, completely lost, Caleb admitted defeat and began to try to understand and follow the map. What was his mistake? He had started with the conclusion. He was sure he had the right answer, so he refused to listen to a map that gave a different answer.

Some people read the Bible in this way. Once a preacher read a verse of scripture he did not like. He said, "I don't know what this means, but it doesn't mean what it says." He had started with his conclusion ("I don't agree with this teaching") and then read the scripture.

He couldn't fit the scripture into his conclusion, so he simply decided to ignore the scripture ("It doesn't mean what it says").

To interpret scripture, we must start with the scripture and then find our conclusion. All of us have certain assumptions. We start from a particular point of view. That is fine. The problem is when our assumptions cause us to ignore the clear teaching of scripture. We must make sure that we start with the text, not with our conclusions. We must not allow our assumptions to cause us to ignore the text.

## An Example

"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Some people say, "No one is perfect!" So, they ignore Jesus' command. They have started with their conclusion ("No one is perfect!") and don't even try to understand what Jesus meant.

When studying Matthew 5:48, we must ask, "What does Jesus mean by 'perfect'? In what way are we to be like our heavenly Father?" The verses just before Matthew 5:48 give the answer: We are to love our enemies and do good to them in the same way that our Father in heaven "...makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good..." (Matthew 5:45).

## SCRIPTURE TEACHINGS DO NOT CONTRADICT SCRIPTURE TEACHINGS

When we read a book by a human author, it may contradict itself at some point. Two human authors are likely to contradict each other on some issues. However, the Bible is the Word of God; it does not contradict itself.

God does not change (James 1:17). Because of this, his Word is consistent even though it was written over hundreds of years through multiple human authors. God's Word does not contradict itself.

This principle is a necessary result of the doctrine of inspiration: "All scripture is breathed out by God..." (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If the ultimate source of scripture is God, the Bible cannot contradict itself. This is important for good Bible interpretation. When two passages *seem* to contradict each other, we should ask if we have misunderstood one of the scriptures. When we fully understand each passage, we will see that both passages are true.

## An Example

"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28).

“...a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

Some readers believe that Paul and James disagreed about the role of faith and works. Paul insists that man is justified without the works of the law. James writes that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Without looking at the contexts for these verses a person could think that James contradicted Paul. However, the context of each of the passages shows what Paul and James were saying. Paul is talking about how a person is saved and made righteous. A person becomes righteous by faith. James is talking about how a person shows that he is saved. A person shows his righteousness by works. Both Paul and James would agree that a person is made righteous by faith, then shows righteousness by works.

## SCRIPTURE IS THE BEST INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

This principle is closely related to the previous principle. Since scripture does not contradict itself, we can use passages with a plain meaning to help us understand passages where the meaning is less clear. We use verses that are clear to explain more difficult verses; we don’t twist simple verses to fit our interpretation of more difficult verses.

An interpretation textbook says it like this: “Often what is obscure in one part of the Bible is made clear in another part.”<sup>30</sup> By studying all of scripture, we allow plain passages to shed light on more difficult passages.

### An Example

“Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” (1 Corinthians 15:29).

Because of this verse, some people think that living people should be baptized for the sake of people who died without having been baptized. However, the Bible nowhere tells us to do that. Paul mentioned a custom that his readers practiced, but we don’t know what the custom was.

Scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. This principle guides us in interpreting 1 Corinthians 15:29. When we read Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:41, Acts 8:12, and Acts 19:5, we see that baptism was for living believers. Since 1 Corinthians 15:29 does not clearly command baptism for the dead and since other verses clearly show the common practice of the early church, there is no reason to believe that 1 Corinthians 15 commands baptism for the dead.

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30 Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 132.

## SCRIPTURE WAS WRITTEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD

The meaning of God's Word can be found in scripture itself, using normal means of interpretation. God's Word is not written in secret codes.

From the beginning of the church, all gospel truth has been openly revealed to everyone, not just to special members of the church. Jesus said that he did not have any secret doctrines for his followers (John 18:20). The Apostle Paul told Timothy to teach to others the truth that Paul had taught publicly (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul explained that if people cannot see the truth, it is not because it is purposely hidden, but because Satan blinds them (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). The mission of the church has always been to openly share God's truth.

It is true that much of scripture must be studied carefully for its meaning, but its truth is not hidden from us. The essential truths of scripture are not buried in obscure verses. The Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). The purpose of God's Word is to guide us, not to hide the truth.

No special keys are necessary to unlock the message of God's Word. Do not believe books that claim to unlock the hidden codes of the Bible. God spoke so that we could understand His Word.

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**"Unique interpretations  
are usually wrong."**

**Gordon Fee**

*How to Read the Bible*

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### An Example

Every few years, someone will claim, "God has revealed to me that Jesus is returning next year." A popular book in 1987 predicted the return of Jesus in 1988. The author claimed that he discovered this fact from a study of the ancient Jewish feasts. The same author wrote a book the next year predicting the rapture in 1989. We should not believe someone who bases important teachings on hidden or secret ways of interpreting the Bible. Jesus said, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36).

## A BIBLICAL COMMAND IMPLIES A BIBLICAL PROMISE

This principle teaches that if God gives a command, he makes obedience possible.

Imagine a father who says, "Son, to please me you must run a mile in two minutes." For a while, the son might try his best, but he would always fail to meet his father's expectations. Eventually, the son would become discouraged and quit trying. Is this a good father?

Some people imagine that God is an unreasonable Father. When God says, “Be holy,”<sup>31</sup> they say, “God knows that we cannot obey his commands.”

John Calvin said that we cannot “...measure the strength of men by the [commands] of God.”<sup>32</sup> Calvin believed that God gives commands that we cannot obey with human strength, but that God provides the power for obedience for those who are saved. John Wesley taught that every command in God’s Word is a promise that God’s power will fulfill in a believer.

A person cannot fulfill God’s commands with natural, human strength. But we can fulfill God’s commands by his strength. A loving heavenly Father empowers his children to obey his commands. A loving Father will not frustrate his children with impossible commands. Every command of scripture is accompanied by the grace to obey the command.

Jesus commanded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). This is both a command and a promise. God’s command to love God with an undivided heart implies his promise to give us an undivided heart if we trust him.

## An Example

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

From the context, we understand that Jesus is referring to love, not perfection in every way. We also understand that this is not something that we accomplish by our own efforts. The God who commands us to be perfect is the God who fulfills the command. The Psalmist testified, “[It is] God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless” (Psalm 18:32).

Jesus’ command must be properly understood. It must be read in light of the immediate context of Jesus’ teaching, and in light of biblical teaching on a perfect (undivided) heart and a holy (set apart) people. Once we understand this, Jesus’ command becomes a gracious promise, not an impossible standard for human effort.

## THREE LENSES ON THE BIBLE

As evangelical Christians, we accept the Bible as the final authority for doctrine and practice. The Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation.

However, it is important to recognize that we interpret what we read through a variety of means. For most evangelicals, there are three lenses through which we read the Bible.

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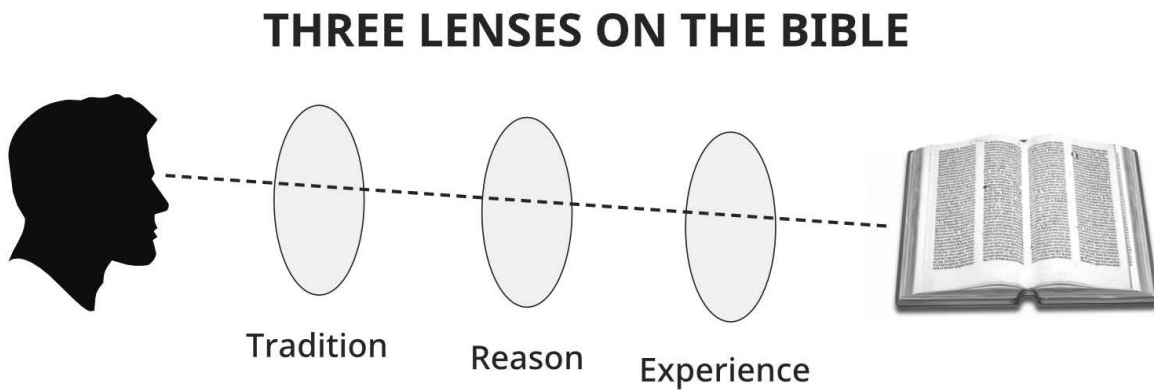
31 God commands this multiple times, not just once. (See Leviticus 11:44, 45, Leviticus 20:7, and 1 Peter 1:16.)

32 John Calvin’s commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:23 from *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*.

These lenses do not replace the authority of scripture in any way. They are simply the ways we read and understand scripture.

To have a full understanding of scripture, we should use all three lenses. If we ignore one lens, we may misinterpret scripture. Reading the Bible using these lenses helps us to better understand the message of God's Word.

This picture may help you see the relationship of these lenses to the Bible. We look through the lenses at the Bible.<sup>33</sup>



## Lens 1: Tradition

The first lens through which we look at scripture is tradition. The tradition lens asks, “How have Christians throughout history understood this scripture?” Tradition tests our understanding of the text in comparison to the insights of other Christians throughout history.

Tradition includes the creeds of the early church, the great doctrines which have united Christians in the past, and the teachings of earlier generations. Tradition shows how the Bible has been interpreted throughout church history.

Church tradition does not agree on all issues; the most reliable tradition is what has been taught by the church everywhere and in all times. The

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**“Tradition is the fruit of the Spirit’s teaching activity from the ages... It is not infallible, but neither is it [unimportant], and we make ourselves poor if we disregard it.”**

**J.I. Packer**

“Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today”

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<sup>33</sup> This illustration is adapted from the weblog of Danny Coleman: <https://dannycoleman.blogspot.com/2013/02/quadrilateral-lenses.html>. Image of Bible by Wolfgang Eckert from Pixabay, retrieved from <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/a-book-bible-literature-pages-6402285/>.



tradition of individual denominations should be considered, but it does not have as much authority as the tradition of the universal church.

God speaks through tradition to help us understand his Word. If your interpretation gives a meaning to scripture that no one else has ever seen, you should assume that you are mistaken!

## Lens 2: Reason

Reason is the second lens we use. This lens asks, “What is a rational understanding of this scripture?” The lens of reason asks us to use our mind to understand what we read in scripture. It realizes that scripture is rationally understood by the mind. We use reason to understand scripture; however, we must not reject truth from scripture just because we cannot use reason to prove that it is true. Many people reject the biblical records of miracles because they think that miracles are contrary to reason. However, miracles are not contrary to reason because we rationally understand that God has the power to do miracles.

Some Christians oppose the use of reason; they argue that our fallen minds cannot be trusted to understand God’s Word. It is true that humans have limited mental ability. However, Paul consistently appeals to reason when making his arguments. In Romans, for example, Paul asks a series of questions that lead his readers to a logical understanding of the great truths of salvation. While our reason is never the final authority, we should not ignore the rational meaning of scripture.

## Lens 3: Experience

Experience is the last lens. This lens asks, “Does my understanding match the experience of other Christians?” Personal experience should not be trusted above absolute truth. However, experience is valuable when balanced with tradition and reason.

Each of these lenses is important. If we use only tradition, we will fall to the Roman Catholic error of viewing church teaching as being equal to scripture in its authority. If we use only reason, we will view the mind as the final authority. If we use only experience, our interpretation will be limited and will be based on the personal feelings, perspectives, and opinions of people. These lenses are ways that we understand scripture, but they should not be used in a way that contradicts the authority of scripture.

## An Example

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:14, 19).



Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would grow deeper in their relationship with God. He prayed that they would be filled with all the fullness of God. What do we find if we read this prayer through these three lenses?

**Tradition.** Christians from all generations have taught that God promises a deeper walk for believers. Christians have not agreed on the details of how God accomplishes this purpose in believers, but throughout church history, Christians from many different backgrounds have agreed that God calls his children to a deeper relationship with himself.

In the second century, Irenaeus wrote that God's purpose for us is "that we may be made after the image and likeness of God."<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus believed that every believer could be filled with all the fullness of God. In the fourth century, Eastern writers such as Gregory of Nyssa taught that the Christian is to become more and more filled with all the fullness of God. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French Catholic Francois Fenelon wrote that, through God's gracious strength, we are able to "live as Jesus lived, to think as he thought..."<sup>35</sup> Through God's grace, we can be conformed to his image.

**Reason.** When reading Paul's prayer, our reason asks, "Is my interpretation of this prayer consistent with the rest of scripture?" Is it reasonable to interpret this prayer as a promise of a deeper life for the Christian? Looking at other scriptures, we see that Romans 12:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, and other texts suggest a deeper life that is available to the believer. The reality of being filled with all the fullness of God is reasonable.

**Experience.** The experience of great Christians throughout history shows their hunger for a deeper life. Every committed Christian hungers for more of God. The testimonies of great Christians show that this hunger was satisfied by God's grace.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING DEBATED PASSAGES

There are passages of scripture that are interpreted differently among churches and are sometimes debated among friends. When you look at one of those passages, instead of just defending your opinion, consider the following questions:

- Am I beginning with the conclusion? Have I already decided what I think the scripture should say before I read it?
- Does my interpretation of this scripture contradict other scripture passages?
- Do other verses give a clearer understanding of this passage?
- Is my interpretation based on a hidden message, or am I interpreting the passage in the clearest manner possible?

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34 As quoted in William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostles to Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 38

35 *From the Apostles to Wesley*, 85

- Does this passage give a command? If so, what is the promise that is implied by the command?
- What does the tradition of the Christian church through the ages say about this passage?
- What is a clear and rational understanding of this passage?
- What does the experience of other Christians say about this passage?

These questions do not guarantee that you will find complete agreement on the interpretation of a passage. However, they may help you find areas of agreement. If not, the questions may help to pinpoint the reasons that sincere Christians who are committed to the authority of God's Word disagree on the interpretation of certain passages of scripture.

## LESSON 8 KEY POINTS

1. An understanding of basic principles of Bible interpretation will help to keep you from coming to wrong conclusions in study.
2. Start with the text, not with your conclusion. Do not allow your presuppositions to cause you to ignore the text.
3. Scripture teachings do not contradict scripture teachings. If two passages seem contradictory, consider whether you have misunderstood one of the passages.
4. Scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. Allow plain passages to explain more difficult passages.
5. Scripture was written to be understood. Look for the plain sense of the text.
6. A biblical command implies a biblical promise. The God who gives a command empowers our obedience.
7. The Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation.
8. We look at scripture through three lenses that help us understand God's Word:
  - Tradition: the insights of other Christians throughout history
  - Reason: a rational understanding of the meaning of the text
  - Experience: the spiritual experience of Christians

# LESSON 9

## APPLICATION

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Be aware of false substitutes for biblical application.
2. Follow a process for moving from interpretation to application of the text.
3. Know specific questions to ask in order to find applications of the text.
4. Practice these steps on selected passages of scripture.

### INTRODUCTION

- » Discuss the relationship of **interpretation** and **application** in your current Bible study. When you preach or teach, which is easier: to interpret the text or to apply it in today's world? When you study scripture or listen to a sermon, are you able to find application to your life?

Jacob said, "Pastor, can we meet? I have a big question about the Bible." Later that week, the pastor met with Jacob and looked at several scriptures that addressed the issue Jacob was facing. After a few minutes, Jacob closed his Bible and said, "Let me be honest. I already know what the Bible says, but I don't want to do this. It is too difficult for me."

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**"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."**

**James 1:23-24**

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The problem for Jacob was not interpretation; the problem was application. It is not enough to observe what scripture says and interpret its meaning; we must apply it to our lives. Too often, Bible study ends at the interpretation stage.

We begin by observing what the text says; we continue by interpreting what it means; we must end by applying the text to our lives. We can summarize this process with three questions:

- What does the text say? (Observation)
- What does the text mean? (Interpretation)
- How does the text work in my life? (Application)

## SUBSTITUTES FOR APPLICATION

The Psalmist wrote that the person who delights in the law of the Lord and who meditates on the law will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season” (Psalm 1:2-3). Satan tries to keep us out of the Bible. He knows that we will weaken and die spiritually if we don’t take in the nourishment of God’s Word.<sup>36</sup>

If he cannot keep us out of God’s Word, Satan tries to keep us from applying the truth to our lives. As long as we don’t live out God’s Word, we will not be fruitful. If Satan cannot keep us from reading the Bible, he will tempt us to accept a substitute for application.

### We Substitute Interpretation for Application

It is possible to carefully study a scripture passage and determine its meaning without putting it into action. When David heard Nathan’s parable about a rich man who stole a poor man’s sheep, he responded with the correct interpretation. “...As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity” (2 Samuel 12:5-6).

David’s interpretation was correct. He responded in the name of the Lord; he insisted on justice; he required restitution. No one can fault David’s interpretation, but David failed to apply the parable to his own life. The prophet made the application, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7).

This is a special danger for preachers and teachers. We can teach scripture to others while ignoring our own disobedience. James warned against interpretation without obedience. “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17).

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36 Material in this lesson is adapted from Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

After we properly interpret scripture, we must not fail to put it into action. We must not substitute interpretation for application.

## **We Substitute Partial Obedience for Complete Obedience**

It is possible to study a scripture passage, determine its meaning, and find some areas of application without allowing it to change us completely. We may find areas where we obey the scripture, but we may ignore the deepest areas of disobedience in our lives.

Perhaps we have been studying Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” In the application step, we examine our important relationships. We ask:

- “Do my sermons build up my congregation?” “Yes; I am a faithful pastor.”
- “Do I use supportive words with my children?” “Yes; I am a loving parent.”
- “Do I build up my spouse?” “No; I am often negative in my responses.”

Your communication with your spouse is the place where God’s Spirit wants to change you. Satan tempts you to substitute obedience in other areas for a life-changing application of this text to your relationship with your spouse. He tempts you to accept partial obedience instead of committing yourself to full obedience.

## **We Substitute Excuses for Repentance**

A lawyer asked Jesus, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). The lawyer already knew the answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

The lawyer understood scripture. “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 10:29). His problem was not interpretation; his problem was application. The lawyer rationalized his lack of love.

Perhaps God’s Spirit says to you, “Your words are not edifying to your spouse; this is destructive communication.” You have read the Word; you have interpreted the Word; it is now time to apply the Word. Instead, you may think, “My spouse is always negative. If I am negative, it is because my spouse is so negative. It isn’t my fault!” What have you done? You have excused your behavior rather than repenting of your failure to obey God’s Word.

## **We Substitute Emotion for Transformation**

James wrote of a person who hears the Word but does not act on it (James 1:23-24). Sometimes a person hears the Word and is genuinely stirred, but he allows an emotional response

to substitute for true change. Every pastor knows the frustration of preaching on a topic, having people say, “That sermon convicted me,” and then seeing no lasting transformation.

Perhaps you hear Ephesians 4:29 taught at a marriage seminar. In a time of commitment at the end of the seminar, you say to your spouse, “I’m sorry. I want to speak positive words. I’ll do better!” However, you soon fall back into your old habits of harsh words, negative statements, and hurtful communication.

What happened? There was an emotional response, but no true transformation. This is dangerous; after repeated failure, we become convinced that transformation is impossible. An emotional response to truth must be accompanied by true transformation and obedience, which are only possible when we submit to the work of the Holy Spirit.

## STEPS TO APPLYING SCRIPTURE

After describing the person who looks at himself in a mirror and then forgets what he looks like, James describes the person who properly applies scripture in his life. “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but **a doer who acts**, he will be blessed in his doing” (James 1:25). It is not enough to hear the Word, we must apply the Word. What is necessary for proper application of scripture?

In order to properly apply scripture, you must do three things.

### Step 1: Know the Meaning of the Scripture

This is why the lessons on observation and interpretation are important. If we do not know the text, our application will not be correct. We begin the step of application by asking, “How did first century Christians apply this scripture in their world?”

For example, Paul wrote, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Some teachers have taken this as a promise that we can achieve anything we desire because, “Christ gives me strength.” Athletes proclaim, “I will win today’s game because ‘I can do all things through Christ.’” Faith healers assure their listeners, “If you have enough faith, you will be healed because ‘you can do all things through Christ.’” Preachers of a false prosperity gospel announce, “God wants to make you rich. All you must do is to cooperate with God. You ‘can do all things through Christ.’”

When we ask, “How did Christians in Philippi apply this verse?” we find that this was not a promise of worldly success, but a promise of spiritual endurance. Paul was under arrest in Rome; his audience was facing persecution. He did not mean that he had worldly success, but that he was able to persist in all situations by faith and obedience. Paul learned to be content in all circumstances because through Christ, he could do what God wanted him to

do. This did not mean a life of comfort; it meant that he did not lose his spirit of contentment in the face of difficulties.

## Step 2: Understand How the Scripture Applies to Life

Paul warned Timothy that he must know himself in order to minister effectively to others. “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). As Timothy paid close attention both to himself and to the doctrine he preached, he would minister effectively to his hearers.

After I know the text and how it applied to its first readers, I must know myself and how the text applies to my world. Perhaps I look at myself and see that I usually do not expect God to bless and help me. Philippians 4:13 tells me to face life’s challenges with confidence because “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Now the application becomes clear and specific. Next to this verse, I might write, “When working in an environment that is opposed to Christian values, I will trust God’s grace to strengthen me to faithfulness. I can do all things **through Christ**.” This takes the verse from the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Proper application of scripture will work in the real world. God’s Word relates to all areas of life. As I apply scripture, I do not ask, “What is the ‘religious’ application of this text?” Instead, I ask, “How will this text be lived out in every area of life?”

John Wesley wrote, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>37</sup> We live the gospel not as monks hidden from society, but as believers in relationship with others. We grow in holiness not by separating from others, but within the context of a church community.

Earlier, we looked at Ephesians 4:29. As I consider the application of this verse, I should apply it to my relationships with fellow Christians: “Do my words build up my fellow believers or tear them down?” I should relate the verse to my family: “Does my conversation build my family, or does it weaken the confidence of my spouse and children?” I should relate the verse to my job: “Am I an employee who speaks positive words, or do I spread negative ideas?” Ephesians 4:29 relates to every area of life.

This is why Paul wrote that servants who live properly in relation to their masters will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things (Titus 2:10). Careful application of scripture makes the gospel attractive to the people around us.

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37 Preface to John and Charles Wesley’s 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.



### Step 3: Obey the Scripture

The ultimate goal of Bible study is daily application. In 2 Timothy 2:3-6, Paul describes Christians as soldiers, runners, and farmers. These images describe someone who is persistent in pursuing a goal. The soldier doesn't rest during the battle; the runner doesn't stop halfway through the race; the farmer doesn't stop plowing until he finishes the job. The Christian life demands endurance. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

As you study scripture, ask, "Is there an area of my life where I should practice this truth?" Ask God to help you to systematically apply the truth in your life. As you do this, God will reveal more truth to you. You will develop an even greater appetite for spiritual food.

If God speaks through Ephesians 4:29 to convict you of your speech, you should commit to practicing speech that builds up. This might be as simple as asking God to give you one opportunity a day to speak grace into someone's life. It might mean asking a trusted friend to warn you when they hear you using harmful communication. This becomes a way to practice God's Word on a daily basis.

In college, there was a young man who struggled with a certain area of temptation. Jason loved music, including some styles with texts that tempted him in his area of weakness. Jason wanted victory over temptation, but he did not apply scripture consistently in his life.

In September, the school would have revival services. Jason would go to the altar. He would return to his dorm room and throw away his inappropriate music. For a few weeks, he would have a bright testimony. Then he would begin to buy some new recordings in this style. Soon he was discouraged; by November, he would say, "I've backslidden."

In February, the school would have a Bible conference. Jason would go to the altar. He would throw away his recordings and have a bright testimony for a few weeks. Then in April, he would buy some more recordings and the process would start again!

What did Jason need? Better interpretation? No! He knew his area of weakness; he knew what the Bible said about keeping a pure mind; he knew the impact that certain music had on his spiritual walk. Jason's problem was not interpretation; he simply needed to practice what he knew.

What area of application do you need to practice?

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

It can be helpful to ask these five questions as you look for ways to apply scripture to life.



### 1. Is there a sin to avoid?

Too many Christians despair when they find an area in which their lives fail to match the demands of scripture. When God speaks to us through His Word about an area of sin in our life we should not despair. Instead, we must willingly obey His Word.

### 2. Is there a promise to claim?

Sometimes application is simply claiming God's promises. We must be careful to interpret the promise correctly. Some promises were made to certain individuals or to the nation of Israel. We must be careful to not take the promise out of its context. However, when we have carefully interpreted the promise in its biblical context and know that it is a promise to all believers, we can claim the promise for our lives.

### 3. Is there an action to take?

Ask, "What should I do because of this passage of scripture. What truth is this passage teaching? Does it warn me of an error in my doctrine? Do I need to change my thinking to line up with scripture? What action do I need to take because of this scripture?"

One example is prayer. As we read the prayers of David, Paul, Nehemiah, and Jesus, we find models for our own prayer life. How better to learn to pray than to copy the prayers of Paul or Jesus! As I read, I can take action by adapting the prayers for my own life.

### 4. Is there a command to obey?

The second half of Paul's letters is usually made up of commands. These commands are usually very simple and direct. Sometimes Christians look for profound truths, while ignoring the simple application of what they already know!

Someone wrote about the danger of looking for deep truths while ignoring the obvious truth. He told about his first studies in New Testament Greek. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." The original Greek does not have a different, surprising meaning. In Greek, this verse means exactly what it sounds like it means. It is not difficult to understand the meaning. Rather, it is difficult to obey.<sup>38</sup>

Sometimes all that is needed is a simple, "Yes, Lord. I will obey."

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38 Adapted from Andy Crouch, "Information and Formation" in *Christianity Today*, March 2014. Available online at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march/information-and-formation.html>.

## 5. Is there an example to follow?

Much of scripture contains biography. As we read biography, we ask, “Is there an example to follow?”

When we read about Abraham in Genesis 18, we can follow the model of Abraham by interceding for our world. A teacher was teaching in Nigeria. Nigeria has been torn by conflict between Muslims and Christians. One of the students asked his classmates, “Why do we fight with Muslims more than we pray for them? Do we believe that God is able to bring them to salvation? If so, we should follow Abraham’s example and intercede for their salvation!” That is application.

## PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

We have made observations from Romans 12:1-2. We have done word study on important terms in these verses. We have studied the historical, cultural, and biblical context in order to properly interpret Paul’s message.

We are now ready for the most important step. How will you apply Romans 12:1-2 in your life?

- » Review the notes on Romans 12:1-2 that you made during earlier lessons. Then list three specific things you can do to apply this text in your life.
- » If you are studying this lesson with a group, share your applications with the group. If you will be meeting again in the future, create accountability. Make some commitments and ask the group to follow up by asking you how you are doing in your application.

## CONCLUSION

This course is about interpreting the Bible in order to teach it to others. This is what we are called to do as ministers of God’s Word. However, there is a danger in this. If we are not careful, we can study the Bible only for preaching and teaching. We can fail to apply biblical truth in our own lives.

Bible study is not just for the purpose of learning and teaching. God’s Word can be compared to the food that nourishes us physically. Eating has both daily and long-term effects. You don’t lower your cholesterol with one healthy meal, and you don’t build spiritual strength with one day in God’s Word. It takes a regular healthy diet to build physical health, and it takes a long-term diet of the Word to build spiritual strength. Yet the day’s meal of the Word is significant for whatever you face that day, just as a good breakfast helps you with a hard day’s work.

As pastors, teachers, and church leaders, we must never forget that our own spiritual lives must be nourished daily. In our efforts to teach others, we must not forget to feed our own hearts with the bread of God's Word. It is only as we nourish ourselves that we have the spiritual strength that we need to minister to God's people.

Paul was well aware of this danger. He wrote of the awful possibility of being disqualified himself after he had preached to others (1 Corinthians 9:27). What a terrible thing to teach others while rejecting God's grace in our own hearts. Study to teach others, but also study to hear God speak to your own heart.

## PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

» Luke 14:25–17:10 is a series of parables and instruction. As Jesus traveled to Jerusalem the last time, he gave his final instruction to his disciples. As you read Jesus' teaching, find specific applications from these verses. Ask:

- Is there a sin to avoid?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there an action to take?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there an example to follow?

## LESSON 9 KEY POINTS

1. It is not enough to properly interpret God's Word; we must apply it in our daily lives.
2. Satan tempts us to replace application with substitutes:
  - We can substitute interpretation for application.
  - We can substitute partial obedience for complete obedience.
  - We can substitute excuses for repentance.
  - We can substitute emotion for transformation.
3. In order to apply scripture in our lives, we should follow three steps:
  - Know the meaning of the scripture.
  - Understand how the scripture applies to life.
  - Obey the scripture.
4. To find ways to apply scripture in your life, ask these questions:
  - Is there a sin to avoid?
  - Is there a promise to claim?

- Is there an action to take?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there an example to follow?

## LESSON 9 ASSIGNMENT

In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study throughout this course. Using the notes you have prepared on observation and interpretation, make a list of practical application steps for the scripture you are studying.

## LESSON 10

# PRACTICING PASSAGE STUDY

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Practice applying the steps of interpretation to selected passages of scripture.
2. Prepare a paper or oral presentation of a detailed study of a scripture passage.

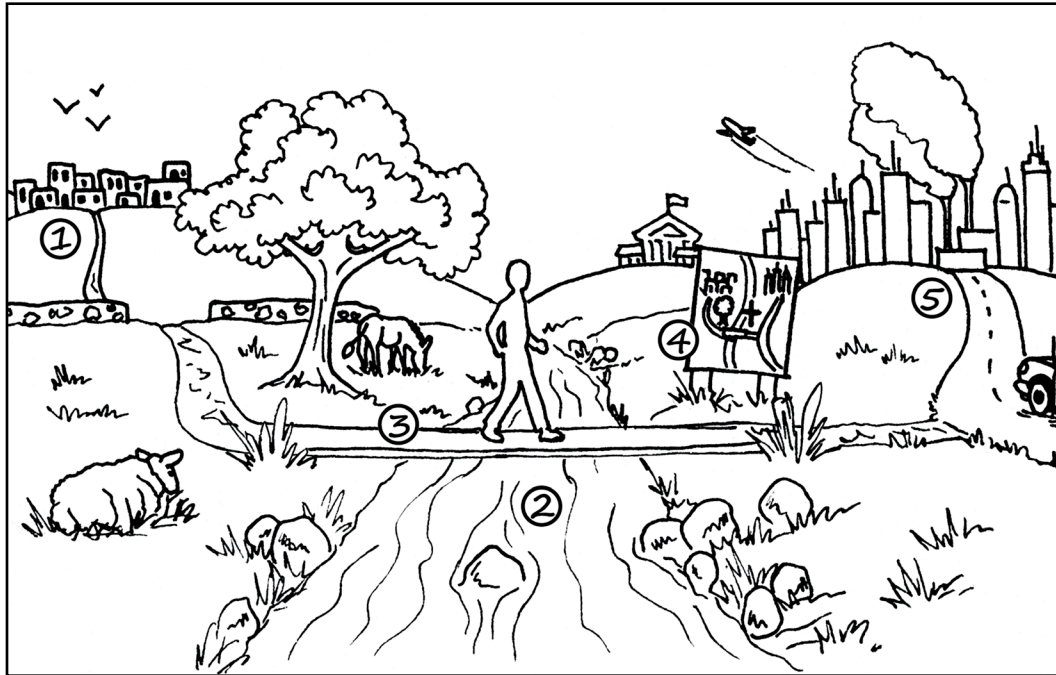
### INTRODUCTION

*Note to class leader: Reserve adequate time in class for the practice activities in this lesson, even if more than one class session is required.*

In this course, we have looked at the steps of biblical interpretation: observation, interpretation, and application. We have learned about avoiding mistakes commonly made in biblical interpretation. We have discussed important principles for studying scripture. We have practiced each step. In this lesson, we will first review the entire process. Then the whole class will study passages from both the Old and New Testaments together using this process. You will also practice the skills on your own. Then you will complete the course project you began in Lesson 1.

To begin, review the picture below:

## INTERPRETING THE BIBLE<sup>39</sup>



|          |                   |                                                                                |
|----------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Their town</b> | The original message of scripture                                              |
| <b>2</b> | <b>The river</b>  | Historical-cultural differences that separate our world from the ancient world |
| <b>3</b> | <b>The bridge</b> | The principle that is taught in the text                                       |
| <b>4</b> | <b>The map</b>    | Relationship to the New Testament (for Old Testament passages)                 |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Our town</b>   | The application of the principle in our world                                  |

The next sections of this lesson review the entire process of biblical interpretation. During each step of the interpretation process, interpreters should ask questions that will guide them to proper conclusions. These questions are based on principles of interpretation.

The questions that should be asked at each point in the process are listed. Examples show how to use the questions and why they are useful for proper interpretation.

<sup>39</sup> Image: "Interpreting the Bible" drawing by Anna Boggs, available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgc-library/52377290578>, licensed under CC BY 2.0. Concept from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

The collection of questions should be considered a toolbox for interpretation. Just as a builder may not need to use every one of his tools on a particular building project, not every question here will be applicable to every passage. A question may be considered irrelevant to a passage if its answer does not seem to exist or if it seems to contribute nothing.

## **OBSERVATION: UNDERSTAND THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

### **Author**

- Who was the author?
- What was his role?
- What was his relationship to the recipients?

1 Timothy 5:20: “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all...”

Apostle Paul, the author of 1 Timothy, was Timothy’s mentor. This was an instruction Paul was giving Timothy, who was a young pastor.

Understanding these things helps us to realize that Paul’s instruction might not be directly applicable to every individual Christian.

### **Original Audience**

- Who were they?
- What are their characteristics?

Philemon was written to an individual believer.

Hebrews was written to persecuted Jewish believers.

### **Circumstances**

- At what period of salvation history was this scripture written?

2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

“My people” refers to a particular nation that was God’s people. The promise to “heal their land” is not necessarily directly applicable to a church.

- What was the cultural setting? If possible, use a Bible dictionary to study the original culture. This allows you to compare/contrast their culture and ours.

2 Corinthians 13:12: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

To greet with a holy kiss was a cultural norm among Christians at that time.

- What were the current events?
- What was the situation in the church? (New Testament passages only)

## OBSERVATION: UNDERSTAND THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Consider the characteristics of the literary form of the book and the passage.

- What is the literary form of this book/passage?
- What are the characteristics of this literary form?

Psalms 124:4-5:

- Literary form: Poetry
- Characteristic: Parallelism

Revelation 12:3:

- Literary form: Apocalyptic Literature
- Characteristic: Animals are symbolic

## OBSERVATION: UNDERSTAND THE BOOK'S THEME

- What was the purpose of the writing? Look for what the author emphasizes or where the author has expressed concern, offered explanation, or challenged the readers.

1 Corinthians 7:1: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...”

1 Corinthians was written in reply to a letter the Corinthian church wrote to Paul, asking him questions.

- What seem(s) to be the recipients' problem/need?

1 Corinthians 1:10: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

*Divisions* are frequently discussed throughout the letter.



- What was the author saying to the recipients? Any commands given after the author's observations are obvious indications of what the author expected. They indicate how we should apply the passage.

## **OBSERVATION: DETERMINE THE BEGINNING AND ENDING OF THE PASSAGE**

Often, but not always, a chapter division will mark either the end or beginning of a passage. Occasionally, an entire chapter may make up a single passage. At other times, the chapter divisions are improperly placed and should not be used as passage divisions. Watch for changes of subject, which are usually marked with transitional statements. If you try to include too much in the passage, the passage will not have one main theme. If you do not include enough in the passage, the passage will not contain a complete thought.

- What verses are included in this passage?

2 Corinthians 7:1: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us..."

This is part of the passage found at the end of the last chapter, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

Isaiah 52:13-15 is in the same passage as Isaiah 53.

## **OBSERVATION: UNDERSTAND HOW THE PASSAGE RELATES TO THE BOOK**

- Is it narrative that fits in with a larger theme?

Judges 17:5: "And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest."

A man had his own priest and idols. This verse and the surrounding narrative of Judges 17-18 illustrates the overall theme of Judges, "...Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, Judges 21:25).

- Is it providing theology for later application?
- Is it application of previous passages in the book?

Ephesians 4-6 is primarily practical application of the theology taught in Ephesians 1-3. In Ephesians 4:1 the word "therefore" indicates a transition from teaching of theology to teaching of practical application.

Ephesians 4:1: "I therefore... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..."

## OBSERVATION: NOTICE THE STRUCTURE OF THE PASSAGE

- Does some material only prepare for the main message?

Mark 2:2: “...And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door....”

These details prepare the reader to hear about the man being lowered through the roof.

- What words are used to connect ideas chronologically?

Repeated use of *then* in Matthew 24.

- Is a question or problem presented?

Romans 6:1: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”

- What words are used to connect ideas logically?

Repeated use of *for* in Romans 6 to show the sequence of logic.

- Is comparison or contrast used?

Romans 6:19-20: “...For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification...”

Contrast between past slavery (to impurity and lawlessness) and present slavery (to righteousness).

- Is there repetition or use of similar terms?

Romans 6 repeated/similar terms: *die, died, dead, death, crucified, buried, brought to nothing*.

All of these are terms of finality.

- Are there any lists?

1 Timothy 4:12: “...but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

- What illustrations or figurative expressions are used?

Romans 6 uses crucifixion as a figure of speech.

- Is the means of achieving a goal described?

Romans 8:13: "...if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

"by the Spirit" – means

"put to death the deeds of the body" – goal

"you will live" – ultimate goal

- Are reasons given for a statement or claim?

Repeated use of *for* leading into explanations of assertions in Romans 6.

- Is there a climax or pivot point? This is particularly a question for narratives.

In the parable told in Matthew 21:33-41, verses 38-39 are the climax.

- Is cause and effect described?

Galatians 5:16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

Cause: "walk by the Spirit"

Effect: "you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

- Does a section serve as summary of that which precedes or follows?

Judges 2:11-23 summarizes the book of Judges.

Ephesians 5:1 summarizes Ephesians 4:25-32.

- Does the section quote or refer to another scripture? The New Testament authors frequently used quotations or illustrations from the Old Testament.

Romans 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

In this verse, *sacrifice* is a word picture that refers to something in the Old Testament.

## OBSERVATION: NOTICE AND STUDY IMPORTANT TERMS

- What are the important terms in the passage?

Important terms from 1 Corinthians 2:14-15:

- *Natural person*
- *Spiritual person*

Important terms from Romans 8:

- *Flesh*
- *Spirit*

- What do they mean in this context? Do a word study on each.

## OBSERVATION: EXAMINE EACH STATEMENT

- What does it mean? Paraphrase what the statement is actually saying.
- Why is it included, and why is it positioned here? Consider what difference it would make if the statement were not there.

## INTERPRETATION: SUMMARIZE THE MESSAGE

Now that you have carefully observed the details of the verse or passage, summarize the author's message to the original audience. The summary of **a verse** may be **one sentence**. The summary of **a passage** will be **several sentences** or even **several paragraphs**.

The goal of this step is to simply state what the author was saying to the first readers. This is not a time to be imaginative and creative. You can be creative when you develop ways to communicate the message in preaching or teaching, but right now you are trying to find the meaning of the scripture. The meaning should come from the scripture and not from your imagination.

- What was the author saying to the first intended readers?

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 could be summarized this way: "Please agree together in your doctrines and fellowship and do not separate into opposing groups. I have heard from the family of Chloe that you are arguing. You are choosing to follow various leaders, but only Christ died for you."

Check your summary. Consider the following questions with material drawn from the observations you made:

- Have I sufficiently considered the original situation of writing?
- What seem to be the author's concerns and purposes for writing this passage?
- Does my interpretation of the passage fit in with the theme of the book?
- Does my interpretation give the passage its proper role in the book?
- Is the emphasis of the passage structure consistent with my summary?
- Does the meaning of each statement within the passage support my summary?
- Am I properly interpreting the author's use of important terms?

## INTERPRETATION: STATE THE PRINCIPLE

In the passage, find one principle that applies to all times and all people. (A passage may teach several principles, but for practice, choose one.) State it in one sentence.

One of the principles found in Ephesians 4:25: "Speak the truth in all communication."

Then check to make sure your principle accurately reflects the original message of the text:

- Is this principle clearly taught in the text?
- Is this principle consistent with the rest of scripture?
- Is this principle true for all times and all people?

Relate the principle to other truth:

- What related truth is revealed elsewhere in scripture?
- How does this truth add to our knowledge?
- Could my interpretation be corrected by considering scripture as a whole?
- Does this truth seem to contradict another passage? If so, can they be reconciled?

## APPLICATION: MAKE CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

The principle you have found may be applied in various ways. Make one specific contemporary application.

- To what specific modern situation could this truth be applied?
- When, where, and for whom are the statements relevant?
- How could the truth be applied in action as well as in concept?
- If I really took the passage seriously, what difference would result in my life?

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in living God's Word in daily life.

## PRACTICE INTERPRETATION OF LETTERS

When interpreting New Testament letters, we begin by observing as much as possible about the letter, we continue by studying the letter to determine its message, and we end by applying the principles to our world. This journey of interpretation moves us from the world of the original recipients to the world of the modern reader.

### Practice Together

- » Together as a class, work through the interpretation process for 1 John 2:15-17. In addition to the questions and interpretation process described above, remember to consider features of New Testament letters as a literary form (see Lesson 6).

### Practice on Your Own

- » Each student should take one of these passages through the interpretation process. Then students should share their conclusions with other members of the group.
  - Romans 13:8-10
  - Ephesians 6:18-20
  - 2 Timothy 4:6-8
  - James 3:13-18
  - 1 Peter 2:9-10

## PRACTICE INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT LAW

When we interpret an Old Testament law, we must first understand what it meant to the original audience. We must consider the differences between their situation and ours, especially any differences related to the fact that we are living under a New Covenant. In the Old Testament law, we must discern the principle that applies to all people in all times. Then we can apply that principle to our lives.

### Practice Together

- » Together as a class, work through the interpretation process for Numbers 15:37-41. In addition to the questions and interpretation process described above, remember to consider features of Old Testament law as a literary form and use the questions given in Lesson 6.

## Practice on Your Own

- » Each student should take one of these passages through the interpretation process. Then students should share their conclusions with other members of the group.
- Leviticus 19:9-10
- Exodus 20:4-6
- Exodus 22:10-13
- Deuteronomy 14:1-2

## LESSON 10 ASSIGNMENT

In Lesson 1, you chose one of the following passages of scripture.

- Deuteronomy 6:1-9
- Joshua 1:1-9
- Matthew 6:25-34
- Ephesians 3:14-21
- Colossians 3:1-16

Now that you have practiced each step of the journey of interpretation, do a thorough study of your selected scripture. When you are done, prepare your study in one of these forms:

1. If you have been taking this course with a group, you should make a presentation in which you share your study. (1) Show your observations, (2) teach the principles from the text, and (3) show how the text applies to believers today.
2. If you are studying alone, write a 5-6 page paper in which you explain (1) your observations, (2) the principles taught in the text, and (3) applications for believers today.





# APPENDIX: BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you call a carpenter to fix a window that does not close properly. As he unpacks, you notice that his toolbox is nearly empty; in fact, it contains only one tool, a hammer. The carpenter says, “I don’t use many tools. Having too many tools causes confusion.”

You would begin to worry. When he begins to pound on the window with his hammer, you might shout, “Stop! You’ll break my window! You need a screwdriver, not a hammer. Go get the right tools.”

A library is an important part of a pastor’s toolbox. A man once visited a pastor who had very few Bible study resources. It wasn’t because books were not available in his language. It wasn’t because he was too poor to buy books; he had many books and DVDs for entertainment. As they visited, the pastor said, “I avoid reading too much about the Bible and theology. I am afraid too much study will confuse me.” This pastor had a nearly empty toolbox.

This appendix explains how to build a Bible study library. Because books can be expensive, you should add to your collection in stages, obtaining the most important books first. You can use free online resources when they are available.

Many of the books mentioned here have already been mentioned within the lesson text, but this appendix has all of the information in one place for easy reference. This appendix will help you to fill your toolbox.

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**“Do your best to  
present yourself to  
God as one approved,  
a worker who has no  
need to be ashamed,  
rightly handling the  
word of truth.”**

**2 Timothy 2:15**

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## STEP ONE: THE BASICS

### Concordances

In the process of interpreting a passage, you identify important words. One part of studying these words is comparing their use in your study passage to their use in other passages. To do this, you need to know about other passages that use the same word. If you have access to the internet or a Bible software program, you can search for a word and the website or program will show you all of the verses where that word is used.

A second option is a printed concordance. A concordance lists the words found in the Bible. Under each word entry are listed the references for the verses in which that word appears.

Large concordance books have every occurrence of each main word found in the Bible. Small concordances are included in the back of some Bibles. They have fewer words and do not include every verse for those words.

Concordances can be helpful for study if you understand their strengths and limitations. Things to remember when using a concordance for study include:

1. The Bible was translated into your language from Hebrew and Greek. In some cases, multiple Hebrew and Greek words have been translated into a single word in your language. If the same word is used in your Bible in two different verses, you should not assume that it was translated from the same original word in both instances.
2. Even if the word used in various places in your Bible is not from the same original word in Hebrew or Greek, each use of it in your Bible is an example of a normal use of the word at the time that your Bible was translated. Therefore, you have examples of various uses of the word. This is helpful when you are listing all of the possible meanings for the word.
3. Some concordances show the original Hebrew or Greek word beside each entry word. This helps you to know whether the word in your language is translated from the same Hebrew or Greek word in the various listed verses.
4. A concordance that shows original words also gives definitions, like a dictionary. However, a concordance or dictionary usually gives several possible meanings of a word, so you must still look at context to determine which meaning the writer intended.

James Strong. *New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

*Strong's Concordance* is the most popular concordance of the King James Bible. An online version of this concordance is available at [studylight.org](http://studylight.org).

Old Testament: <https://studylight.org/lexicons/eng/hebrew.html>

New Testament: <https://studylight.org/lexicons/eng/greek.html>

There are concordances linked to other versions of the Bible.

## Bible Dictionaries

Bible dictionaries:

1. Provide background information on terms, places, and people.
2. Give examples of verses where the entry words are used.
3. May explain the different meanings the word has in various places.

Popular Bible dictionaries include:

Howard Marshall, J.I. Packer, and D.J. Wiseman. *New Bible Dictionary*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

W.E. Vine. *An Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

This is one of the oldest and most widely used Bible dictionaries.

Old Testament: <https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/eng/vot.html>

New Testament: <https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/eng/ved.html>

Additional online Bible dictionaries are available at [www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/](http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/).

## Bible Handbooks

A Bible handbook provides an introduction to each book of the Bible with basic information about the author and history.

Henry Halley. *Halley's Bible Handbook*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

*Halley's Bible Handbook* is available in many editions and is usually inexpensive.

J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall. *Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*. Ada: Baker, 2011.

This is a newly updated alternative to *Halley's Bible Handbook*.

If you cannot purchase a Bible handbook yet, we recommend using the free introductory Old Testament and New Testament courses produced by Shepherds Global Classroom. These courses provide background for each of the books of the Bible.

## Bible Atlases

A Bible atlas includes maps of each place mentioned in the Bible, pictures of cities that have been excavated, and articles on the ancient world.

Carl Rasmussen. *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

This is a good Bible atlas. However, any thorough Bible atlas will work well.

An online Bible atlas is available at [www.bibleatlas.org](http://www.bibleatlas.org).

## Bible Translations<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of your preferred translation, reading your study passage in several versions can give new insights on a verse. It is easy to compare translations of a verse or passage if you use a Bible website or software program to show multiple translations side-by-side.

Translations vary based on two major factors: target audience and translation philosophy.

### The target audience

Some translations are addressed to an audience with a smaller vocabulary. Here is 1 John 2:2 in two translations:

| KING JAMES VERSION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | NEW LIVING TRANSLATION                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “He is the propitiation for our sins.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | “He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sin.”                                                                      |
| <p>“Propitiation” expresses the necessity of a sacrifice to atone for sin. Two ideas are important in this concept:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The wrath of God against sin</li> <li>• The mercy of God in providing a way of atonement</li> </ul> <p>In the Old Testament, sin was propitiated by an animal sacrifice. In the New Testament, Christ came as the atoning sacrifice for the world.</p> | <p>In the <i>New Living Translation</i>, the phrase “sacrifice that atones” replaces the more difficult “propitiation.”</p> |

40 For more information on translations, read Dr. Allan Brown’s article, “From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man,” in the April 2011 edition of *God’s Revivalist*. This is available online at [https://www.gbs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/1104\\_gods\\_revivalist.pdf](https://www.gbs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/1104_gods_revivalist.pdf). Accessed on November 2, 2020.

Some translations explain concepts that a non-believer or new Christian may not understand. Here is Romans 11:16 in two translations:

| KING JAMES VERSION                                                                                                 | NEW CENTURY VERSION                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy.”                                                            | “If the first piece of bread is offered to God, then the whole loaf is made holy.”                                                         |
| This refers to the Old Testament law that the first part of a crop be given as an offering to God (Numbers 15:21). | Since some readers will not know the Old Testament background of “firstfruit,” <i>New Century Version</i> adds words to explain this term. |

### Translation philosophy

Some translations (*King James Version*, *New American Standard Bible*, and *English Standard Version*) attempt to retain the grammar and sentence structure of the original Hebrew or Greek text. As much as possible, these translations keep the original word order and divide sentences in the same way as the original.

Other translations (*New International Version*, *New Living Translation*, and *New Century Version*) attempt to communicate the message in updated language, sometimes changing the sentence structure to better express the concept. Here is 2 Corinthians 10:13 in different translations:

| MORE LITERAL TRANSLATIONS                    |                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>King James Version (KJV)</i></b>       | “But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you.” |
| <b><i>English Standard Version (ESV)</i></b> | “But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.”                           |

| ADAPTED TRANSLATIONS                          |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>New International Version (NIV)</i></b> | “We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you.”                    |
| <b><i>New Century Version (NCV)</i></b>       | “But we will not brag about things outside the work that was given us to do. We will limit our bragging to the work that God gave us, and this includes our work with you.” |

It is best to begin your passage study with a translation that closely follows the structure in the original language. Then you can look in the more adapted translations for comparison. You can compare several translations online at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com).

This group of 5-6 books will provide a small, basic library for Bible study. By using online sources, you can develop this part of your library at a very low cost. This will give you a basic toolbox for Bible interpretation.

## STEP TWO: GROWING YOUR LIBRARY

As you study, you may find that you need a bigger collection of tools. Two screwdrivers may seem like enough for a beginning carpenter. As he attempts more difficult jobs, he learns that some projects require special screwdrivers. Over time, he adds more screwdrivers to his toolbox.

The sources listed in this section will expand your toolbox for Bible study. When you can add these to your library you will be better equipped for Bible study.

### Study Bible

A good study Bible is a Bible, commentary, Bible handbook, concordance, and atlas all in one book. A study Bible is a good start for your study.

*Thompson Chain Reference Bible.* Kirkbride Bible Company.

The *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* was first published more than 100 years ago and has been used by thousands of Bible students. The *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* does not give commentary; instead, it uses a numbering system to guide you in your own study of a topic. (You can see the topic chains used in the Thompson Bible at <https://www.studylight.org/con/tcr/>.)

*Life Application Study Bible.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

The *Life Application Study Bible* contains an overview of each book, notes on individual verses, sketches of Bible characters, an atlas, and a concordance. It is available in several versions including *King James Version*, *New American Standard Bible*, *New International Version*, and *New Living Translation*.

## Bible Commentaries

Bible commentaries provide notes for every verse or passage in the Bible. Commentaries can be printed books or can be included on Bible study websites or in Bible study software. Some printed commentary books cover only one book of the Bible, while others cover multiple books, or the whole Bible. You may want to begin with a one-volume commentary. Because commentaries reflect the theological biases of the authors, you must be discerning.

*New Bible Commentary.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

This respected commentary gives an introduction to each book and has comments on each passage of scripture.

*Adam Clarke Commentary on the Bible.*

This is not a one-volume commentary. However, a free version is available online at <https://www.studylight.org/com/acc>. Adam Clarke was a contemporary of John Wesley. He was a brilliant scholar and a godly man. His commentary has influenced many generations of preachers and Bible teachers.



## Bible Background

Commentaries and books on Bible background give cultural and historical context for the Bible. An understanding of the customs of the biblical world will give you a better understanding of the message of scripture.

For instance, Jesus' parables are based on the cultural practices of his day; the books of Moses often respond to the idolatrous practices of Israel's neighbors; the writings of Paul are addressed to Christians living in a polytheistic world. As we understand this background, we are more equipped to interpret scriptural teaching.

| OLD TESTAMENT                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas. <i>The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament</i> . Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000. |
| Eugene H. Merrill. <i>Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel</i> . Ada: Baker, 1987.                                                            |
| NEW TESTAMENT                                                                                                                                                  |
| Craig S. Keener. <i>The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament</i> . Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993.                                          |
| Everett Ferguson. <i>Backgrounds of Early Christianity</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.                                                                     |

## CONCLUSION

Stephen's parents were not believers, and he did not have the opportunity to attend Bible college. Stephen did not have a college education, but after he was called to preach, he wanted to carefully and accurately teach God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15).

Stephen understood that he would need to develop a good toolbox in order to serve his congregations. Throughout a ministry of nearly 50 years, he worked to expand his toolbox. He ministered in small churches and did not have a budget for a large library. However, over the years he built a library that included the books discussed in this appendix.

More importantly, Stephen *used* the books in his library. A toolbox will do you no good if the lid is rusted shut! Don't buy books for show; buy them to use. Stephen used his *Strong's Concordance* on a weekly basis. His *Halley's Bible Handbook* was worn from use. He often consulted *Vine's Bible Dictionary* to learn about Hebrew and Greek words. He loved the *Thompson Chain Reference Bible* and studied *Adam Clarke's Commentary* on each text he preached.

Though Stephen never received a college diploma, he was truly a student of the Bible. He used these resources to better serve his congregations. You too can use the resources in this appendix to build your toolbox for effective ministry.

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

## Lesson 1

Sources that were used throughout this course are listed here.

Bible. *English Standard Version*.

Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Ada: Baker Books, 1996.

Duvall, J. Scott and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Hendricks, Howard G. and William D. Hendricks. *Living by the Book*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2007.

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993.

Virkler, Henry A. and Karelynne Ayayo. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Ada: Baker Books, 2007.

Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991.

## Lesson 2

These sources are available online at no charge.

Audio Bibles. [www.faithcomesbyhearing.com](http://www.faithcomesbyhearing.com)

Bible Dictionaries. [www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/](http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/)

Bible Reading Calendars. [www.bible.com](http://www.bible.com)

Bible Translations. [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

Online Bible Atlas. [www.bibleatlas.org](http://www.bibleatlas.org)

## Lesson 4

These online lectures on Bible interpretation can give you a deeper understanding of Bible interpretation.

Dr. Walter Martin. “Biblical Hermeneutics One by Dr. Walter Martin.” Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJQGVzILN-Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJQGVzILN-Y)

Seven Minute Seminary. “Why Bible Background Matters.” Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wiIK8A2EFk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wiIK8A2EFk)

Seven Minute Seminary. “The Role of Archaeology in Biblical Studies.” Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm3HlLoNOak](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm3HlLoNOak)

# RECORD OF ASSIGNMENTS

**STUDENT NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

Initial when each assignment has been completed. All assignments must be successfully completed to receive a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom.

| LESSON | ASSIGNMENTS |  |
|--------|-------------|--|
| 1      |             |  |
| 2      |             |  |
| 3      |             |  |
| 5      |             |  |
| 6      |             |  |
| 7      |             |  |
| 9      |             |  |
| 10     |             |  |

Application for a Certificate of Completion from Shepherds Global Classroom may be completed on our webpage at [www.shepherdsglobal.org](http://www.shepherdsglobal.org). Certificates will be digitally transmitted from the president of SGC to instructors and facilitators who complete the application on behalf of their student(s).

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# SHEPHERDS GLOBAL CLASSROOM COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

## DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS COURSES

### **Christian Beliefs**

This is a systematic theology course, describing the Christian doctrines about the Bible, God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and last things.

### **Romans**

This course teaches the theology of salvation and missions as explained in the book of Romans, discussing several issues that have been controversial in the church.

### **Eschatology**

This course teaches the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation along with other sections of prophetic scripture and emphasizes essential doctrines such as the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the eternal kingdom of God.

### **Doctrine and Practice of the Holy Life**

This course gives a biblical description of the holy life that God expects and empowers for a Christian.

### **Doctrine and Practice of the Church**

This course explains God's design and plan for the church and biblical subjects such as church membership, baptism, communion, tithe, and spiritual leadership.

## BIBLE SURVEY COURSES

### **Exploring the Old Testament**

This course teaches the essential content and teachings of the 39 books of the Old Testament.

## **Exploring the New Testament**

This course teaches the essential content and teachings of the 27 books of the New Testament.

## **Principles of Biblical Interpretation**

This course teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Bible properly in order to guide our life and relationship with God.

# **EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP COURSES**

## **Introduction to Apologetics**

This course teaches the scientific, historical, and philosophical basis for a Christian worldview, and shows how the Christian faith is consistent with reason and reality.

## **Faith Traditions of the World**

This course gives the evangelical believer an understanding of the teachings and proper responses to 17 religious groups.

## **Biblical Evangelism and Discipleship**

This course presents the biblical principles that guide evangelism methods. It describes forms of evangelism and provides lessons to use in discipling new converts.

## **Spiritual Formation**

In this course students learn to have the attitudes of Jesus, to relate to God the way Jesus related to his Father, to humble ourselves as Jesus did, to practice the spiritual and personal disciplines of Jesus, to endure suffering as Jesus did, and to engage in the Christian community (the Church) formed by Jesus.

## **Practical Christian Living**

This course applies scriptural principles to the use of money, relationships, the environment, relations with the government, human rights, and other areas of practical living.

## **Christian Family**

This course gives a Christian perspective on human development through the stages of life and applies scriptural principles to family roles and relationships.

## **CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP COURSES**

### **Ministry Leadership**

This course emphasizes Christian character while teaching leaders to guide organizations through the process of discovering values, realizing purpose, sharing vision, setting goals, planning strategy, taking action, and experiencing achievement.

### **The Life and Ministry of Jesus**

This course studies the life of Jesus as a model for ministry and leadership in the 21st century.

### **Principles of Communication**

This course teaches the theology of communication, methods for effective speaking, and methods for preparing and presenting biblical sermons.

### **Introduction to Christian Worship**

This course explains how worship impacts all aspects of the believer's life and gives principles that should guide individual and congregational practices of worship.

## **CHURCH HISTORY COURSES**

### **Survey of Church History I**

This course describes how the church fulfilled its mission and protected essential doctrine through the period from the early church to the Reformation.

### **Survey of Church History II**

This course describes how the church expanded and faced challenges through the period from the Reformation to modern times.

