

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION



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Course Overview

This course introduces the basic principles of Biblical interpretation. Each lesson will include several practice activities. You should allot 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 will include several **activities** to provide 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 ease in studying and interpreting the Bible.

Discussion questions and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points ►. In 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.

Many footnotes refer to a scripture reference. Please have students look up the verses and take turns reading them to the group.

Each lesson will include **assignment(s)**. In the case of presentations to the group, give time at the beginning of the next class meeting for the presentations. Other assignments should be reviewed by the group, allowing time to discuss each student's results.

Each student will work on a **course project** throughout the entire course. At the end of Lesson 10, they will submit this project to the class leader.

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 spiritual power in Bible interpretation.

Course Instructions

This course follows a different format than other *Shepherds Global Classroom* courses. Rather than quizzes on each lesson, most work will be in the form of Bible study projects. By the end of the course, you will have carefully studied several passages of scripture. I recommend that you keep this information in a notebook for future use. The work you do for this course will be useful for sermon and Bible lesson preparation.

These lessons 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.

► Discuss your current Bible reading practices. This is not a time to judge those in your group; it is a time to reflect on the question, "How deep am I getting into God's Word?" Ask yourself:

- How often do I read the Bible?
- When I read the Bible, how much time do I spend?
- What are 2-3 reasons that I don't read the Bible more?

Part of the purpose of this course will be to challenge each member of your group to a deeper life in the Word. A good first step is to honestly evaluate your current Bible reading practices.

Introduction

Gene, a Taiwanese Christian, had been a Christian for fifteen 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?"

That Sunday, the Lord brought to my mind a question that I should have asked weeks before. “Gene, tell me **how** you read the Bible.” His response pointed to an important factor in his struggles. He answered, “Each morning before work, I open my Bible and read a verse.” I 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 Gene understand the problem of reading the Bible in this fashion, I asked him to open my Bible and read the first verse he saw. That morning, Gene 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.”¹

I asked Gene 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, we began a Bible study on “How to Read the Bible.” During the next several weeks, Gene began to learn some principles of interpreting the Bible. We learned how to rightly divide the Word of God and 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, a subject that is often called “biblical hermeneutics.” Don’t be afraid of the big word; it simply involves reading, interpreting, and applying God’s Word to our lives. 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?

“All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”² The fact that the Bible is God’s Word is sufficient reason that we should carefully study the Bible.³

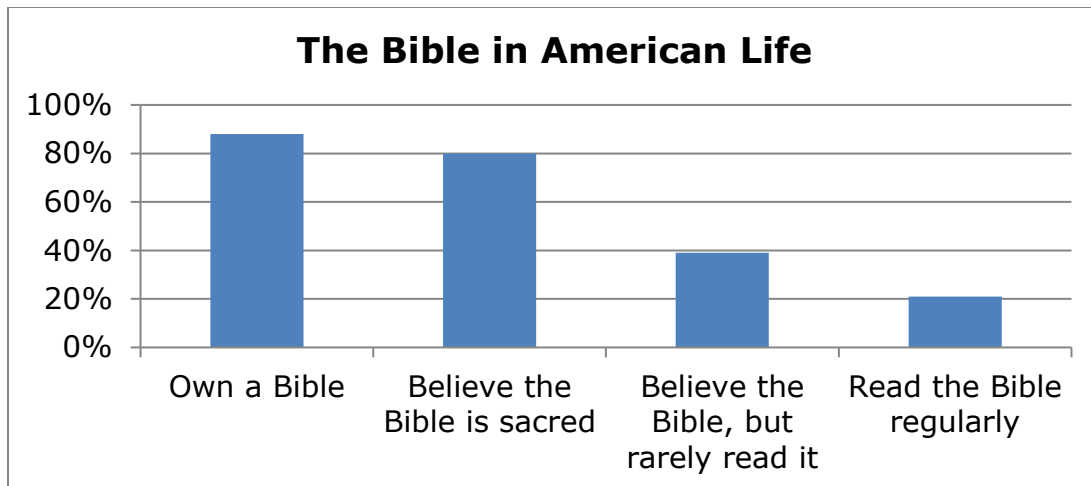
A recent survey shows the theoretical importance American Christians place on the Bible; unfortunately, it also shows the lack of practical importance these same Christians place on the Bible.⁴

¹ Obadiah 1:19

² 2 Timothy 3:16, *English Standard Version*

³ For more information on the inspiration of scripture, the formation of the canon, and the reliability of scripture, see the Shepherds Global Classroom course *Christian Beliefs*.

⁴ The Barna Group. “State of the Bible 2013” survey. Retrieved from <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-really-think-about-the-bible/> November 2, 2020.



Most Americans believe the Bible is God's Word, but only 1 in 5 read it four or more times per week. Nearly half of Americans who believe the Bible is God's Word rarely read it.

Many 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.

Reading the Bible requires hard work. Is it worth the work? Why should we study the Bible? scripture paints word pictures that show why the Bible is worthy of our careful study.

The Bible is a Lamp

David compared God's Word to a lamp; "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."⁵ The Bible guides the Christian's walk.

The Reformers taught the principle of *sola scriptura*. This principle means that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. It does not mean that we can understand scripture with no other study. It does not mean that tradition or study is unimportant. It means that God's Word is the final authority for the believer.

The lamps in ancient Israel were small oil lamps. They provided just enough light to show a person's next step. It was not until you took a step that you could see the following step.

This is an excellent metaphor for the role of the Bible in the Christian life. Some Christians are asking God for future guidance, but are not obeying what God's Word tells them to do today. His Word is a lamp; it is only as we obey his instructions today that we can find his guidance for tomorrow.

The Bible is Spiritual Milk

Peter compared the study of the Bible to a newborn baby's desire for milk.⁶ The Bible is essential to spiritual growth. Just as a baby must have milk to grow physically, a Christian

⁵ Psalm 119:105

⁶ 1 Peter 2:2

must have scripture to grow spiritually. Without a regular diet of God's Word, we will never grow to spiritual maturity.

The Bible is Sweet as Honey

As Christians, we should have the attitude of the psalmist who compared God's Word to honey.⁷ Honey is both healthy and sweet. The study of God's Word should be a delight, not a chore. 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 Jewish boy begins studying the Law, he touches the first letter and then dips his finger in honey to taste the sweetness. This object lesson teaches the young boy that the study of God's Word is sweet.

The Bible is the Sword of the Spirit

The writer of Hebrews said, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."⁸ We have already seen that 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that all scripture is inspired by God. The next verse speaks to the practical impact of our study of scripture, "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The ministry of the apostles was based on scripture. In the same way, effective ministry today is grounded on God's Word.

God's Word is the sword of the Spirit by which we fight Satan's attacks.⁹ It is our weapon in spiritual battles. When Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness, he responded to Satan's attacks by quoting from Deuteronomy.¹⁰

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.

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.

Gene agreed that study of the Bible is important. However, he did not know how to study scripture. He needed a method for digging into God's Word. This course is intended to provide a method for effective Bible study. These steps apply in many types of Bible study. Pastors can use these steps in sermon preparation. Bible teachers can use these steps in

⁷ Psalm 119:103

⁸ Hebrews 4:12, *English Standard Version*

⁹ Ephesians 6:17

¹⁰ Matthew 4:1-11

preparing Bible lessons. Lay Christians will benefit from using this approach in devotional Bible study.

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 glean as much information as possible from the text of scripture 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, we look for words that recur throughout the book. 1 John uses some form of the word *know* more than thirty times in five 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 gospel, it gives us a better understanding of John's purpose.

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 trace Paul's logic.

By contrast, Jonah is a short story written to illustrate God's love for all people. To read it well, you must ask, "What makes this a great 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.

"Where was John when the heavens were opened to reveal God's plan for the ages in Revelation?" He was in exile on the isle of Patmos.

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 universal across all ages and all cultures.

Application

In this step, we ask, "How do I apply the Bible to life and ministry today?" Just as many readers skip the observation step, many ignore the practical application of scripture.

In his textbook, Howard Hendricks suggests two questions regarding application:

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.

In England, I met a university professor who is a highly respected scholar of church history. Academically, he knows the Bible very well; personally, he is an agnostic who 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 this 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."¹¹ My friend 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

¹¹ James 1:23-24, *English Standard Version*

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.¹²

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, we should do two things when we study scripture:

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."¹³
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 it 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.¹⁴ 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.

¹² 1 Corinthians 2:11-14, *English Standard Version*

¹³ James 1:5, *English Standard Version*

¹⁴ Matthew 13:3-23

Lesson 1 Key Points

- (1) The term *biblical hermeneutics* refers to the study of biblical interpretation.
- (2) The Bible gives several word pictures that show the importance of Bible study.
 - The Bible is a lamp. It guides our daily path.
 - The Bible is spiritual milk. It is essential to spiritual growth.
 - The Bible is sweet like honey. The study of God's Word is a delight.
 - The Bible is the sword of the Spirit. It empowers us for spiritual victory and for effective ministry.
- (3) There are three steps in the process of Bible study.
 - Observation: What do I see in the Bible? In this step, I look for:
 - Terms
 - Structure
 - Literary Form
 - Atmosphere
 - Interpretation: What does the Bible mean?
 - Application: How do I apply the Bible to life and ministry today? I ask:
 - How does it work for me?
 - How does it work for others?
- (4) Spiritual power in interpretation requires more than mental knowledge. It requires the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - 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 each member 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 you are done with your description, discuss how much you observed and how much you allowed to pass unnoticed.

"Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."
- Psalm 119:18

When Glenn reads the Bible, he finishes with a mental picture. If you asked Glenn 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 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. Glenn 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 ye shall receive power,
after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:
and ye shall be witnesses unto me
both in Jerusalem,
and in all Judaea,
and in Samaria,
and unto the uttermost part 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 the times or the seasons." This is the Father's concern.
- "But ye shall receive power... and ye shall be witnesses to me." This is your concern.

Who is involved?

"You." To whom is Jesus speaking? The apostles (verses 2 and 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;¹⁵ they will receive power.
- They ran in fear at Jesus' arrest; they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

What is the verb of the sentence?

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

What will they receive?

"Power." 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?

¹⁵ Mark 9:14-29

What is the result of the power? (Power precedes witness. The natural result of this power will be a desire to share it with others.)

Whose witness will they be?

Where will they witness? (*Both* is a word that begins a series of four places where they will 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

I have poor eyesight. In elementary school, my teachers were a blur. I had to walk to the front of the room to read the chalkboard. In third grade, I began wearing eyeglasses. Suddenly, I saw things I had never seen before! Faces were clear; I could see the chalkboard; the world was brighter.

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 chapter can help you read with new insight.¹⁶

Read for Understanding

When I was ten years old, I decided that I should read the Bible through each year. It was a good resolution; unfortunately, I didn't know how to read the Bible effectively. I had a calendar showing how much to read each day, but I would frequently fall behind. On a Sunday afternoon, I would try to catch up. I would check my calendar and see that I was twenty chapters behind (in Leviticus!). So, I would read all of Leviticus in one afternoon. I would read as fast as I could, trying to get to the end. Ten minutes after finishing, I could not have told you the message of Leviticus. I read 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."¹⁷ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Proverbs 2:4-5, *English Standard Version*

Ask Questions As You Read

A key to reading with your mind is to ask questions. Please read Luke 24:13-35 before continuing this section. As you read the lesson, return to Luke 24 to answer each question. Some questions to ask while reading are:

(1) Who?

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

Who are the people in Luke 24:13-35? Cleopas and an unnamed companion¹⁸ were traveling to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. They were followers of Jesus who knew of his miracles and teachings.¹⁹ 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 is the revelation of Jesus. We are given a front row seat as the eyes of these two men are opened to the reality of Jesus' resurrection; "Their eyes were opened, and they knew him."

(3) When?

Like the previous question, the timing provides context for our reading. At the observation stage of Bible study, we are looking for clues 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 state of mind as they communed together and reasoned.²⁰ Think of the emotional highs and lows these two men have experienced over the past three days.

On Thursday, they felt despair as they saw Jesus arrested. On Friday, their hopes for a messianic kingdom were crushed as Jesus breathed his last. Now it is Sunday and the tomb is empty, but they don't understand. As they travel to Emmaus, they try to understand this mysterious series of events.

¹⁸ One tradition suggests that Luke was the unnamed companion, which would explain the amount of detail in the story.

¹⁹ Luke 24:22, "women 'of our company;'" 24:24, "which were with us"

²⁰ Luke 24:15

(4) Where?

It is often helpful to ask, "Where did this happen?" There are many good resources for answering the question, "Where?" Many Bibles have maps in the back. Internet resources such as <http://bibleatlas.org/> will give you a map for every location found in scripture.

In Luke 24, Cleopas and his companion are traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village about sixty furlongs (eleven 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!

(5) Why?

We see why these disciples were so discouraged when we answer the timing question. They are discouraged because they have watched all their hopes for a Messiah be dashed by the death of Jesus.

(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 Repeatedly

G. Campbell Morgan was one of the great preachers of the twentieth 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 forty 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 forty 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 unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part 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.** Modern 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.²¹
- 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.²²

Your Turn

For one week, read Genesis 3 each day. Each time, consider the account of the Fall from a different perspective.

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 <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

²¹ www.faithcomesbyhearing.com has audio Bibles in more than 700 languages.

²² <http://www.biblegateway.com> gives you free access to Bible translations in many languages.

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.²³

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 beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."²⁴ 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

- *Beseech* means "appeal," "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:

- *Brethren*. 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 being. We could paraphrase this, "Give your entire self."
- *Mercies*. Paul's call is based on God's mercy. God knows what is for our good. His plans for us are "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."²⁵
- *Sacrifice*. Under the Mosaic law, a worshipper brought an animal as a sacrifice. In Christ's kingdom, we are called to give ourselves fully as living sacrifices.

²³ Longer books will be balanced with short books like Philemon and Titus that can be read thirty times in only a few days.

²⁴ Romans 12:1

²⁵ Jeremiah 29:11, *English Standard Version*

Modifiers

Adjectives and adverbs are descriptive words that “enlarge the meaning of the words they modify.”²⁶ In Romans 12:1, *sacrifice* is modified by a series of words.

- 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 worshiper 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 unto 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 “unto 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.²⁷ 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 section. 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; “Stand fast **therefore** in the liberty wherewith Christ hath

²⁶ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 121

²⁷ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 35

made us free.”²⁸ 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**, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.”²⁹ Paul told the Colossians that they were dead and their life was hid with Christ in God. How should they live as a result? “Mortify **therefore** your members which are upon the earth.”³⁰

Look for Special Details in the Text³¹

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

Comfort/consolation is repeated four times in one sentence and ten times in these five verses. Ask:

- Is *comfort/consolation* 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

Abide is repeated ten times. Ask:

- 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.

²⁸ Galatians 5:1

²⁹ Ephesians 4:1

³⁰ Colossians 3:5

³¹ This list is adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

- There are two ways to respond to a critic: "A soft answer turns away wrath, **but** a harsh word stirs up anger."³²
- There are two ways to make an important decision: "Where no counsel is, the people fall: **but** in the multitude of counsellors there is safety."³³
- 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."³⁴

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."³⁵

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.³⁶

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."³⁷
- "Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country."³⁸

► 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 (26:7): "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:

³² Proverbs 15:1, *English Standard Version*, emphasis added.

³³ Proverbs 11:14, emphasis added.

³⁴ Proverbs 14:31, *English Standard Version*, emphasis added.

³⁵ Ephesians 5:8, emphasis added.

³⁶ 1 John 1:5-7

³⁷ Proverbs 10:26, *English Standard Version*

³⁸ Proverbs 25:25, *English Standard Version*

- 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.

- "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you," (why?) "that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."³⁹
- "Thy word have I hid in mine heart," (why?) "that I might not sin against thee."⁴⁰
- "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world" (why did he choose us?), "that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."⁴¹ Why did God save us? To make us holy.

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."⁴²
- How can we be assured of life? "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."⁴³

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."⁴⁴

Condition: "If ye shall ask any thing in my name,"

Result: "I will do it."⁴⁵

Pray As You Read

³⁹ John 15:16

⁴⁰ Psalm 119:11

⁴¹ Ephesians 1:4

⁴² Psalm 119:9, *English Standard Version*

⁴³ Romans 8:13

⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁴⁵ John 14:14

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."⁴⁶ 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 thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."⁴⁷
- "Make me to understand the way of thy precepts."⁴⁸
- "Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes."⁴⁹

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

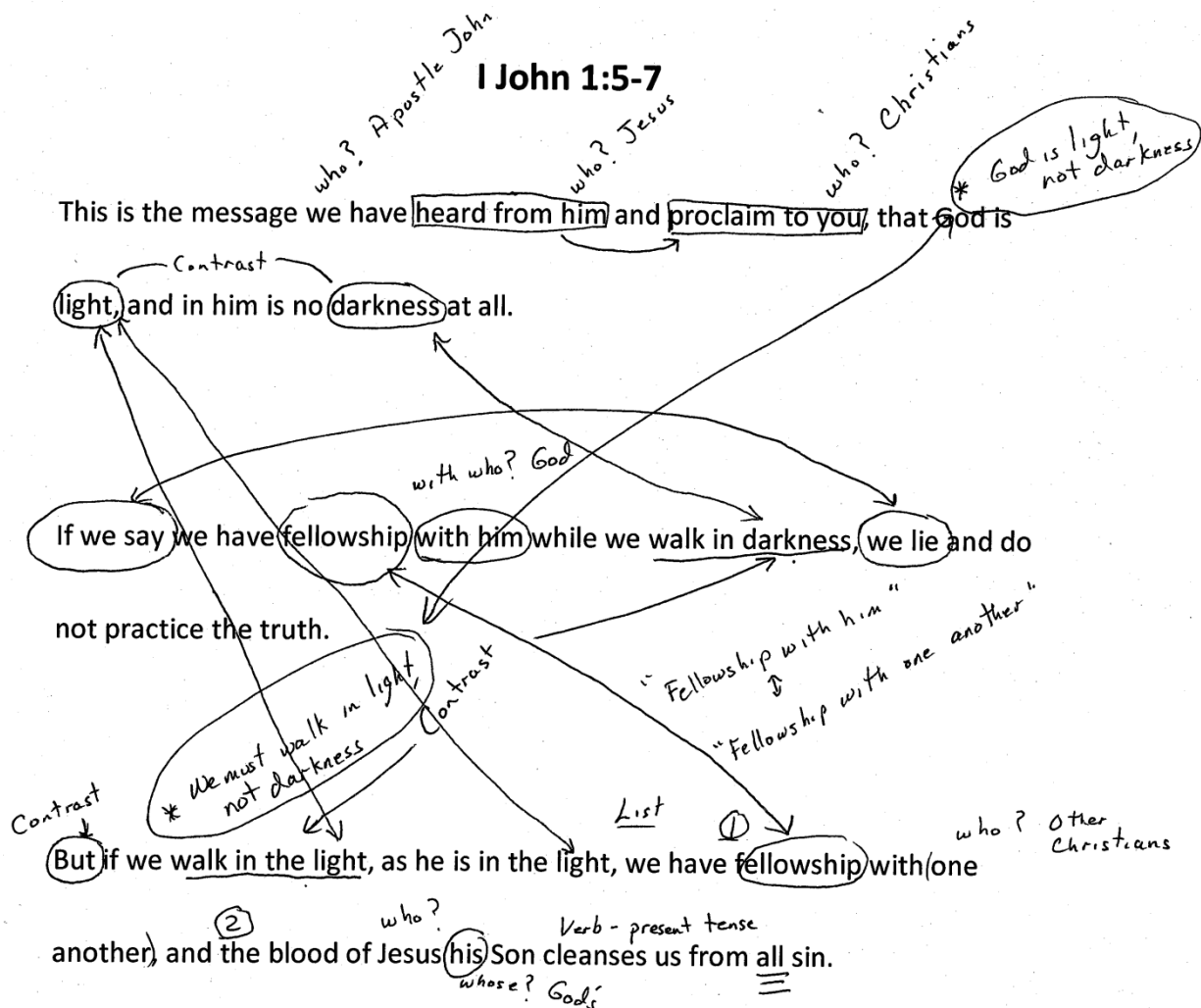
⁴⁶ James 1:5, *English Standard Version*

⁴⁷ Psalm 119:18

⁴⁸ Psalm 119:27

⁴⁹ Psalm 119:33

Example: Observations on 1 John 1:5-7



Repetition: Light, Darkness, Fellowship, Walk

Contrast: Walk in darkness OR walk in light

List: We have fellowship ... and the blood of Jesus cleanses us if we walk in the light

We (John) have heard and proclaim

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?
 - Where?
 - When?
- Read repeatedly.
- 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, (etc.)." 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 on a long flight. 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.⁵⁰ 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 13th century, Stephen Langton divided the Bible into chapters to make study easier. In the 16th 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 chapter 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?"

⁵⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

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.⁵¹

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...." This requires us to look at the previous verses.

Nehemiah 1:1 provides the context for the book of Nehemiah. "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. 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 Hachaliah." There is another Nehemiah mentioned later in this book (Nehemiah 3:16). The family name ("son of Hachaliah") shows which Nehemiah is referred to here.

⁵¹ *English Standard Version*

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. "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 will then look like this:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. 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.

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.⁵²

⁵² Much of the material in this section is adapted from Chapter 3 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

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, 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.⁵³

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.

General to specific relationships are common in Paul’s epistles. Galatians 5:16 contrasts life in the Spirit with life in the flesh; “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” This general statement is then supported by a series of specifics. 5:19-21 identifies the works of the flesh; 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 heaven 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; etc.
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.⁵⁴

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

⁵³ J. D. Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary*, (2nd edition), (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982)

⁵⁴ The Hebrew name *Elohim* is translated *God* in English Bibles; it is a universal, majestic name. The Hebrew name *Jehovah* is translated “LORD” in English Bibles; it is the personal name revealed in Exodus 3:14.

verses 1-12. The chapter ends with a general statement that summarizes Paul's teaching: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

Question and Answer Sections

When a paragraph begins with a question, the rest of the paragraph must be read in light of the opening question. This format is common in Romans. To those who argue that grace permits a sinful lifestyle, Paul asks, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" He then shows that God's grace empowers the Christian for victory over sin, "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"⁵⁵

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.

Healing of a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12)

Question: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Answer: Jesus shows his authority by healing the paralytic.

Eating with sinners (Mark 2:13-17)

Question: "Why does he eat with publicans and sinners?"

Answer: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

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."

Sabbath laws (Mark 2:23-28)

Question: "Why are the disciples doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

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

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.

⁵⁵ Romans 6:1-2

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 inspired 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 (bitter enemies) 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."⁵⁶

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.

⁵⁶ Matthew 22:33, *English Standard Version*

To find the emotional tone of a paragraph, watch for words that convey emotion (rejoice, scorn, weep, etc.) or relationship (father, son, daughter, etc.). 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 eleven 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.⁵⁷ 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."⁵⁸

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

⁵⁷ Proverbs 1:2-6

⁵⁸ John 20:31

renewal of the covenant. Nehemiah 13 addresses problems that recur after Nehemiah's second return to Jerusalem. This order shows that the physical rebuilding of the walls was not sufficient; Judah required a spiritual revival to address the problems that led to the exile.

Things That Are Repeated

Repetition is another way in which 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."⁵⁹ When the people of Jerusalem are threatened, Nehemiah asks them to "remember the Lord, who is great and awesome."⁶⁰ 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."⁶¹ Barnabas brings Saul to the apostles and testifies to the truth of Saul's conversion.⁶² With Saul, Barnabas builds up the church at Antioch.⁶³ In spite of Paul's doubts, Barnabas encourages an immature John Mark.⁶⁴ 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

⁵⁹ Nehemiah 1:8, *English Standard Version*

⁶⁰ Nehemiah 4:14, *English Standard Version*

⁶¹ Acts 4:36

⁶² Acts 9:27

⁶³ Acts 11:22-26

⁶⁴ Acts 12:25 and 15:36-39

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)
- Chosen us (Ephesians 1:4)
- Predestinated us (Ephesians 1:5)
- Made us accepted in the beloved (Ephesians 1:6)

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

- Speak truth (Ephesians 4:25)
- Grieve not the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30)
- Walk in love (Ephesians 5:2)
- Walk circumspectly (Ephesians 5:15)
- Honor thy 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.⁶⁵ In a later lesson, we will study more detailed literary structures.

⁶⁵ This material is adapted from Chapter 15 of Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

Biographical Structure

Historical books are often organized around key figures. Marking the structure shows the overall pattern of the book. 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

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

1 & 2 Samuel: Israel's First Kings	
Chapters	Rise/Decline of Kings
1 Samuel 1-8	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. A Bible atlas will help outline the structure of these books.

Exodus: Israel's Travels	
Passage	Location
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 Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”⁶⁶ The book of Acts traces the early church’s fulfillment of this commission.

Acts: The Gospel Reaches the World	
Chapters	Location
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. “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”⁶⁷ 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)

⁶⁶ Acts 1:8

⁶⁷ John 20:30-31

- Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-57)
- Jesus' Resurrection (John 20:1-31)

Seeing the Big Picture

To this point, we have observed details about individual verses, larger paragraphs, and entire books.⁶⁸ 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.

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.

⁶⁸ 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).

Charting a Series of Related Events

I 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. On the surface the events do not seem related. However, 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">• Jesus• The disciples	The disciples have no faith (4:40).
Healing a demoniac	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jesus• The demoniac• The townspeople• The disciples (watching)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The demoniac worships him (5:6) and witnesses for him (5:18-20).• The townspeople reject him (5:10).
Healing a bleeding woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jesus• The woman• The disciples (watching)	The woman has faith and takes the initiative to touch him (5:28, 34).
Raising Jairus' daughter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jesus• Jairus and his daughter• The mourners• Peter, James and John	Jairus has faith (5:23).

Your Turn

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

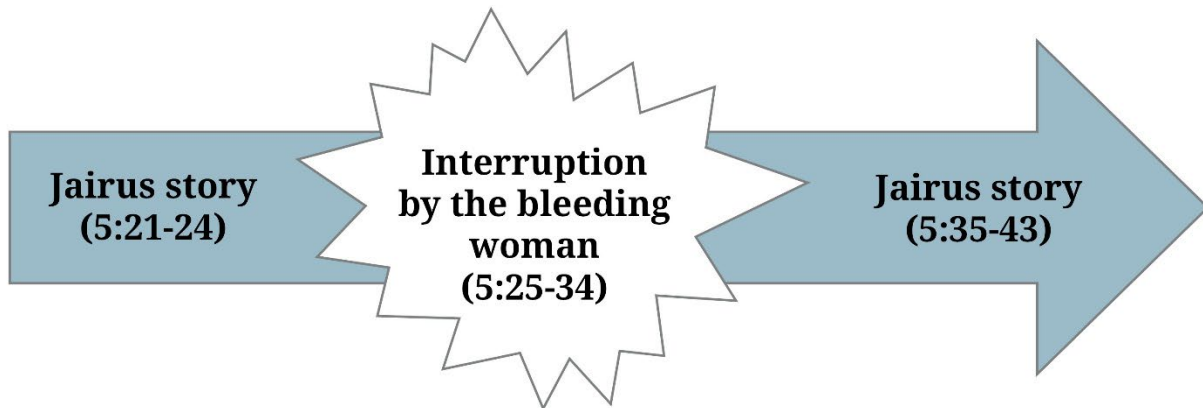
1. Read the story three times.
2. Mark as many observations as you can find.
3. Fill in the chart with the primary ideas in the parable.

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 snatched 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">• Privileges of salvation (1:2-12)• Products of salvation (1:13-25)• Process of salvation (2:1-10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the state (2:13-25)• In the family (3:1-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As a citizen (3:13–4:6)• As a believer (4:7-19)• As a shepherd (5:1-11)
The Destiny of the Christian	The Duty of the Christian	The Discipline of the Christian

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. I've given one example. 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 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 traps that can lead to incorrect interpretation.
- (4) Maintain humility and charity in biblical interpretation.

Introduction

Do you remember Gene from Lesson 1? Gene read the Bible each day, but he did not hear God's voice speak through what he read. What was wrong? Gene 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.

"Give me understanding,
and I shall keep thy law;
yea, I shall observe it
with my whole heart."
- Psalm 119:34

Philip asked this traveler, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch responded, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" 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." To this judge, there is objective reality. There are guilty 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 objective reality, but he also recognizes the limits of his knowledge. He realizes that he may be mistaken in his understanding of truth.

The third judge says, "There are guilty people and there are innocent people, but they are neither guilty nor innocent until I give my verdict." This judge does not recognize any objective truth. He insists that the only reality is the reality he creates. It is only his

announcement that makes something true. This is the postmodern view of truth: there are no absolute truth statements.

Sadly, many Christians believe that scripture has no objective meaning. They say, "What is true for you may not be true for me." In this view, every reader creates their own "truth."

The second judge in this story balances two important truths:

1. There is an objective meaning to scripture. Howard Hendricks says it like this, "'Meaning' is not our subjective thoughts read into the text but God's objective truth read out of the text."⁶⁹ Our job as readers is to find God's truth in the text.
2. My interpretation may be wrong. Because of this, I should humbly recognize the limits of my understanding.

In the observation stage, we asked, "What do I see in the text?" In the interpretation stage, we ask, "What does the text mean?" Following this, we will look at the application of scripture in our lives.

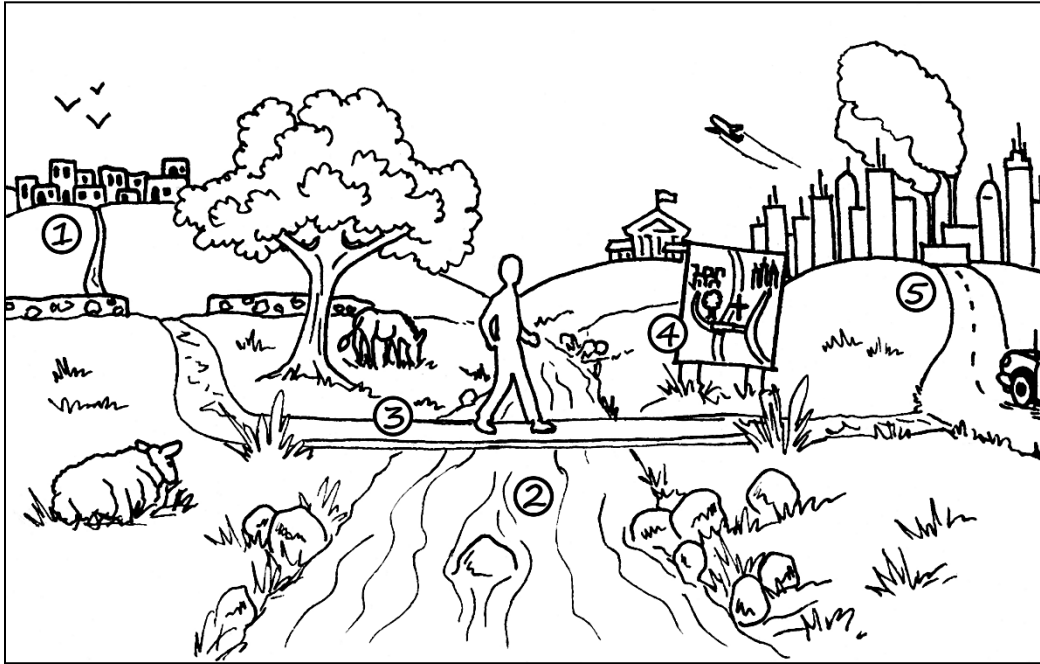
We start the process of interpretation by asking, "What did this scripture mean to the human author?" This prepares us to ask, "What does this scripture mean to me?"

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. One textbook portrays the challenge like this:

⁶⁹ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 201

Interpreting the Bible⁷⁰



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

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 speaks a second language understands the difficulties of language.

Culture

Similar to the difficulty of language is the difficulty of cultural difference. The human authors of scripture were part of a culture that was much different than 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?"

⁷⁰ 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: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

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. It also gives an appreciation for the compassion of a Samaritan who risked his own safety to help an injured stranger.⁷¹

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 mankind.

	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 no 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, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"⁷²

Literature

I like to read many different types of books. Each type of literature must be read in a different way. If I am reading a book on theology, I will underline important sentences, look up words I don't understand, and mark ideas for further study. If I'm reading a simple story, I will quickly scan the book. The way I read is determined by the type of literature.

The same thing is true in scripture. 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.

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

⁷¹ Luke 10:25-37

⁷² Mark 4:36-41

bridge (3) across the river. The bridge is made up of the principles that the Bible teaches. These principles apply to all cultures in every age.

The map (4) asks us to consider where we are in the biblical story. If we are reading in the Old Testament, we will realize that the coming of Christ fulfilled many of the prophecies and laws. This will change how we interpret these passages of scripture.

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

We will revisit this picture in future lessons. For now, you should be aware of the steps. We will study each step in later lessons.

Watch Out! Traps for the Bible Interpreter

There are several traps for the Bible interpreter. These traps include:

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."⁷³ 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 thyself also **in the LORD**; and he shall give thee the desires of thine 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.⁷⁴ 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

⁷³ 1 Timothy 6:10, *English Standard Version*

⁷⁴ Matthew 5:6

desire to continue in willful sin.⁷⁵ There was a time when some people used scripture to defend slavery and even the Holocaust. 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.⁷⁶ Similarly, James spoke of the grave responsibility of those who teach.⁷⁷ We who teach the Bible must be careful that we do not twist scripture to support false ideas.

Exaggerated Subjectivism⁷⁸

The story of the three judges illustrates another trap for Bible interpreters: the idea that all truth is subjective. For those who believe that all truth is subjective, Bible study and the use of the mind is not important. Instead, they ask only, "What do I **feel** scripture means?" While emotion and feeling is important, the ultimate truth of scripture is in what the author wrote, not in what I feel about what he wrote.

A Sunday school teacher once asked her class, "What does the word 'faith' mean?" A boy answered, "Faith is believing something you know isn't true." This boy did not understand faith. Faith in God's Word does not mean "believing something that you know isn't true." Faith is looking honestly at scripture, believing the truth of God's Word, and doing the hard work of rightly handling the word of truth.⁷⁹

Handling the Word of God requires loving God with all your mind. It requires digging into the Word to find the deep truths of scripture.

Relativism

Relativism, the idea that the meaning of scripture changes over time, is related to subjectivism.

Howard Hendricks gives this example. The Gospels teach that Jesus rose from the dead and was seen by his disciples. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul points to Jesus' resurrection as evidence for our own future resurrection. Today, some scholars deny the truth of Jesus' literal resurrection. Accepting the presuppositions of a skeptical world, they say, "The Gospel writers and Paul were talking about a spiritual resurrection. In their day, people thought that resurrection was possible; today we know better. The Gospels show that Jesus should 'live in our hearts.'" This is relativism; it teaches that the meaning of scripture changes from one age to another.

⁷⁵ Romans 6:1-2

⁷⁶ 2 Peter 3:16

⁷⁷ James 3:1

⁷⁸ Since we have limited knowledge, our interpretations will always contain a degree of subjectivism. It is impossible for human beings to be completely objective. However, it is possible to identify how our subjective presuppositions influence our interpretations.

⁷⁹ 2 Timothy 2:15

It is true that scripture will be applied differently in different periods of time. However, the meaning of scripture is absolute. Our job as interpreters is to find the original message of the text. Our application today must be faithful to the original meaning.

Overconfidence

Subjectivism is a problem because of its assumption that there are no absolute truths in scripture. The opposite problem is also a danger: the assumption that my interpretation is right, with no possibility of error. 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 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 charity regarding the interpretation of those who disagree with us.

Your Turn

Below is a list of misstatements of what scripture actually says. To gain a better appreciation for careful reading, find the text which is twisted in each example and note what the Bible actually says. I have completed the first example 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).
"Jesus never claimed to be God."	
"The Bible says that work is a curse."	
"All religions lead to the same goal."	

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
- Culture
- Geography
- Literature

(3) Some traps that lead to incorrect interpretation are:

- Misreading the text
- Twisting the text
- Subjectivism
- Relativism
- Overconfidence

Lesson 5

Interpretation: Context

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Understand the value of historical-cultural background for interpreting scripture.
- (2) Follow concrete steps for moving from the original setting of the text to today's world.
- (3) Identify questions to ask of different genres of scripture.
- (4) Recognize how an individual verse fits into its surrounding context.
- (5) Apply these steps to a selected passage of scripture.

Introduction

► What is a trunk?

Your immediate answer depends on your background. If you love trees, you probably thought first of a tree. If you just returned from an African safari, you might think of an elephant. If you are British and are preparing for a long trip, you probably thought of the case that you will take on the trip. If you are a typical American, you probably thought of the luggage compartment of your car. Meaning requires context.

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, the literary context, and the surrounding biblical context of a text. At the end of the lesson, you will practice interpreting scripture in light of each type of context.⁸⁰

The Historical-Cultural Context

► Please read 2 Timothy 4:6-22.

Paul writes to Timothy, "Do your best to come before winter."⁸¹ Listen to Paul's request in light of the following background:

- 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.

⁸⁰ Much of the material in this chapter comes from Chapters 6-7 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

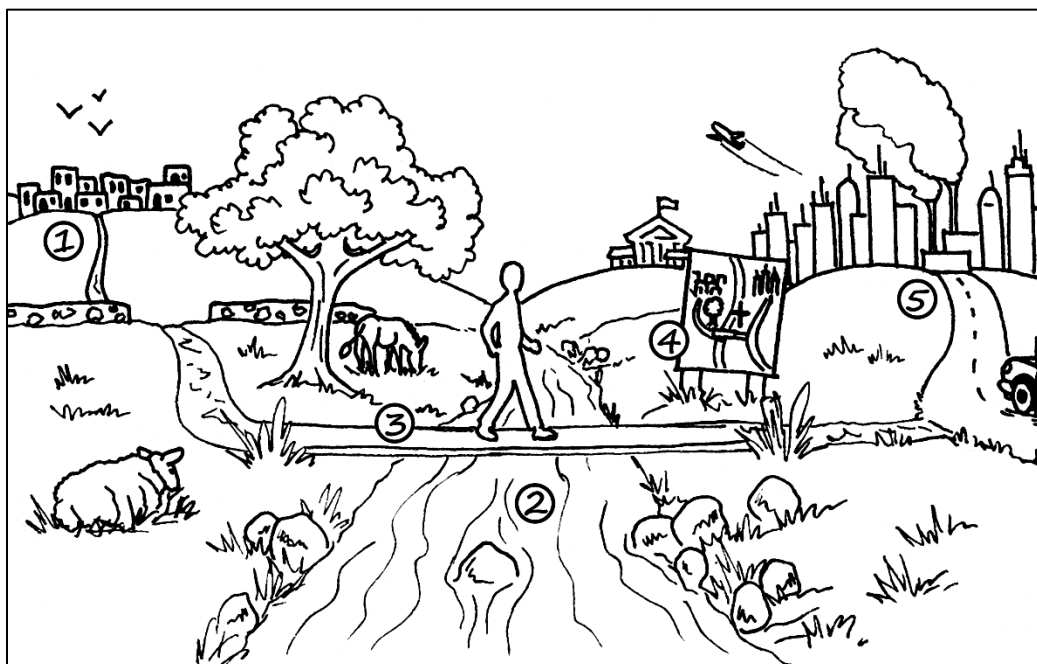
⁸¹ 2 Timothy 4:9, *English Standard Version*

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 dictate the Bible in a universal language. 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 Bible⁸²



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

⁸² 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: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

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 deeper we dig into 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 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 Judaizers 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,”⁸³ 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 passion for God’s law.

On the other hand, when Paul describes himself as the “chief” of sinners,⁸⁴ 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, Hebrews 11:25 becomes even more powerful; “Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a

⁸³ Philippians 3:4-6

⁸⁴ 1 Timothy 1:15

season.” 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 imminent. However, in Jeremiah we also read God’s promise, “I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”⁸⁵ This promise comes not on the eve of deliverance, but on the eve of exile. 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 an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught that only the spirit is good; physical matter is evil. They taught 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 have **looked upon**, and our hands have **handled**.”⁸⁶

Gnostics also taught that salvation came through secret knowledge. John showed that we must obey in order to have true knowledge of God; “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.”⁸⁷ The knowledge that brings eternal life involves love; “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.”⁸⁸

(3) What do we know about the historical setting of the book?

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.⁸⁹ This was a time of social chaos in Judah. This highlights the faithfulness of Ruth, a Moabite widow.

The role of the kinsman-redeemer in Israel highlights Boaz’s unselfishness in marrying Ruth to provide a legal heir for Naomi’s dead sons. Boaz sacrificed his own estate rights to provide a son for Naomi. In doing so, Boaz found a place in the genealogy of David.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Jeremiah 29:11

⁸⁶ 1 John 1:1

⁸⁷ 1 John 2:3

⁸⁸ 1 John 3:14

⁸⁹ Ruth 1:1

⁹⁰ 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 mankind 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 light of the customs of first century Palestine:

- The parable of the Good Samaritan was shocking 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 an ordinary Jewish person, someone "just like us." Instead, Jesus points to their bitter enemy, a despised Samaritan, as the model of love.
- In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we should remember that Jewish fathers were dignified. At best, the father might meet his son with reserve and hear his apology; at worst, he would drive the son away. 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 in light 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 called on fathers to not provoke their children to wrath.

When Paul called the Philippians to live as if "our citizenship is in heaven,"⁹¹ 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.

⁹¹ Philippians 3:20

The Literary Context

Read Judges 21:20-21. Imagine a preacher who announces, “Today I will preach on Christian courtship. Judges 21 tells us how a Christian should obtain a wife. 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 courtship.” I hope you would question his interpretation!

What is wrong with the preacher’s interpretation? Judges says that the Benjaminites obtained wives in this manner. It even says that they did it for a good reason – to preserve one of Israel’s tribes. However, the preacher is ignoring the literary 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.

The literary context of a verse looks at the literary genre (form) of the passage. The context helps us better understand the message of the passage. The term *genre* means the form of a piece of literature. Understanding genre guides our expectations for interpretation.

If you are reading a newspaper article about a recent presidential election, you expect to read detailed facts: how many people voted, how many voted for each candidate, the margin of victory, etc. If you are reading a poem about a great president from history, you expect something entirely different: expressive words extolling his great achievements and beautiful descriptions of his world. The genre determines your expectations. You don’t complain if the poem doesn’t tell you the margin of victory in Abraham Lincoln’s re-election campaign; this is not what a poem is expected to do.

Scholars use the analogy of a game to explain genre. Imagine a European soccer fan attending his first American football game. In football, players can push their opponents; in soccer, they cannot. In football, anyone can hold the ball, but only one person can kick it; in soccer, anyone can kick the ball, but only one person can hold it. Unless we understand the rules, the game will be confusing.⁹²

In the same way, writers follow different rules for each type of literature. Understanding the type of literature is important in Bible interpretation. This is not a question of the truth of scripture; it is a question of the interpretation of scripture. A wisdom book (Ecclesiastes) will communicate differently than an epistle (Romans). Understanding the differences help us interpret each book as the author intended. Here is a brief introduction to the major types of literature in scripture.

⁹² This example is from Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Ada: Baker, 1994), 75-76.

Exposition

Exposition is orderly teaching. It moves in a logical manner from point A to point B. This genre 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. The greeting includes a reason for the letter (Colossians 1:14).
"That ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."
2. 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.
3. 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)
4. Paul warns against teachings that deny the superiority of Christ (Colossians 2:6-23).
 - Legalism
 - Mysticism
 - Asceticism
5. *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 indulge in immorality (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).
6. 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.

Letter

The genre of letter, or epistle, is related to exposition. Most of Paul's writing is in the form of letters. 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 preface 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.⁹³ 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,⁹⁴ 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 without blame before him in love."⁹⁵

(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 put great emphasis on love. John was known as the "son of thunder" (Mark 3:17) who wanted to call fire from heaven on those who rejected Jesus (Luke 9:54). This gives a new understanding of the transformation brought by the Resurrection and Pentecost.

Peter wrote his letters to encourage suffering Christians. He assured them that they could be bold in the face of Satan's attacks.⁹⁶ Remembering Peter's fear at the trial of Jesus highlights the transformation in this disciple's 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.

⁹³ Acts 16:12-40

⁹⁴ Ephesians 3:19

⁹⁵ Ephesians 1:4

⁹⁶ 1 Peter 5:8-9

(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."⁹⁷ It soon becomes clear that these new converts are abandoning the gospel of justification by grace through faith for a message of justification by works. Paul's passionate words are motivated by his love for these converts. The message of justification by faith alone is a message to which Paul has committed his life. He is shocked that the Galatians are abandoning the truth for a false gospel.

Narrative

Narrative is story. Much of the Bible is written in the genre of narrative: Genesis, Exodus, parts of Numbers, the Old Testament historical books, the Gospels, and Acts. Questions we ask when we read narrative include:

(1) What is the plot?

When reading Paul's epistles, we look for his logical argument. When reading narrative, we look for the shape of the plot. 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 plot. 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 characters?

From the characters in Bible stories, we see strengths to develop and weaknesses to 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 narrative, we gain a picture of people.

(3) Is the narrative normative or descriptive?

In reading narratives, we must ask if the actions are normative or descriptive. A narrative that is normative provides a model of what God expects of his people. By contrast, a descriptive narrative merely describes a situation; it does not provide a model to follow.

⁹⁷ Galatians 1:6, *English Standard Version*

The imaginary preacher at the beginning of this section 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 narrative, we must ask, “Is this a pattern to follow?” or “Is this merely 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. Acts is particularly difficult. Should every church see the miracles that marked the early church? Will all Spirit-filled believers speak in other tongues? Does the Holy Spirit kill everyone who lies to God?

How do we decide if a passage is normative or descriptive? If we do not correctly answer this question, we will misread narratives such as Judges and Acts. If we do not correctly answer this question, our reading of narrative becomes very subjective; we will pick and choose based on our personal preferences. Remember this principle: **If a passage is normative, we can expect clear instruction or repeated examples in other passages.**

For example, Acts shows that early Christians were passionate about evangelism. This is normative; 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.⁹⁸ 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 examples are normative for the church.

Acts also tells us that Christians had all things in common and worshiped in private homes. Are these practices commanded in scripture? No. This practice was voluntary, not required:

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?⁹⁹

According to Peter, the money belonged to Ananias; he was not required to give it to the church. Similarly, scripture doesn’t command us to worship in private homes. Persecution of the Christians probably led to their communal life and house worship. In the same way, Christians in some parts of the world today find house worship to be safer than gathering in a public building. This is based on individual circumstances, not a universal command.

Because of this, we can conclude that worship in private homes and having all things in common was descriptive, not normative. Acts is describing a particular time in history; it is not commanding these practices for all times.

► Is the gift of languages (or tongues) normative or descriptive in Acts?

⁹⁸ Acts 1:8

⁹⁹ Acts 5:3-4, *English Standard Version*

Acts describes the gift of languages on the day of Pentecost. Nowhere in scripture are we commanded to speak in tongues. Acts 2 describes a miracle by which the Holy Spirit publicly confirmed the message of the newly born Christian church.

(4) What principles are taught in the narrative?

According to Paul, Bible narratives were given for our instruction.¹⁰⁰ They show how God works in human history and what pleases or displeases God. As readers, we must find principles from the narrative.

Rarely does the story say, "The Israelites complained against God and were punished. You should not complain against God."¹⁰¹ Instead, we are told that Israel complained against God; we see the consequences of their sin, and we are expected to see the principle that is taught. Instead of direct commands, narratives give 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.

Parable

A parable is a story that teaches a spiritual or moral lesson. This was one of Jesus' favorite ways to teach.¹⁰² Through parables, Jesus taught about prayer (the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple), love for our neighbor (the Good Samaritan), the nature of the Kingdom of God (the Matthew 13 parables), and God's mercy to sinners (the Prodigal Son).

Parables allowed Jesus to rebuke his listeners without direct confrontation. The nature of the story opened the ears of Jesus' audience to his words until suddenly they were shocked with the recognition, "He is talking about me!" Nathan the prophet did the same when he told David a parable about a poor man's sheep.¹⁰³ It was not until Nathan said, "You are the man," that David realized the story was about himself.

To find the point of a parable, we ask:

(1) What question or situation inspired the parable?

If our interpretation does not answer the question Jesus was asked, we have probably missed the point of the parable.

For example, Augustine gave a famous interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. According to Augustine, 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). However, Augustine's interpretation ignores the question that inspired Jesus' story, "Who

¹⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:11, *English Standard Version*

¹⁰¹ Numbers 21:5-6

¹⁰² Matthew 13:34

¹⁰³ 2 Samuel 12:1-10

is my neighbor?" Jesus' parable answers, "A needy person in my path is my neighbor – and my responsibility."¹⁰⁴

The parable of the Prodigal Son answered a specific situation. "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:"¹⁰⁵

- 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!

So, Jesus implies, "you should not be shocked that I eat with sinners. Look at the rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents!"

(2) What is the primary point (or points) of the parable?

This is related to the first question. Most teachers today suggest that a parable will have one main point for each main character in the story. The primary lesson of the parable will relate directly to the question or situation that inspired the parable. Other lessons may come from the characters included in the story.

The story of the prodigal son features three people. We have already seen that the primary lesson of the story is the joy in heaven over a sinner who repents. This answers the situation that inspired Jesus' story. What might the three characters teach us?

Character	Lesson
The prodigal son	Sinners who turn to God in repentance will find ready forgiveness.
The loving father	More than a grudging willingness to forgive, our heavenly Father rejoices in forgiveness.
The elder brother	It is possible to obey the rules without having the heart of a true son.

(3) What cultural details are important to the parable?

Jesus' parables often went against the expected norms of his culture. This is what made them shocking: a father runs to greet a rebellious son; a Samaritan is the hero; a powerless widow defeats an unjust, but powerful, judge. The better we understand the cultural setting of the parable, the more clearly we see the message.

¹⁰⁴ Luke 10:36-37

¹⁰⁵ Luke 15:1-3, *English Standard Version*

As noted earlier in this lesson, Jewish fathers did not run; this highlights the love of the father in Jesus' parable. The good Samaritan would never have been considered good by a Jewish audience; this highlights what it means to truly love your neighbor. An unjust judge listened to the widow only because of her persistence; this contrasts with our heavenly Father who delights to act on behalf of his children.¹⁰⁶

Poetry

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and some prophetic books include poetry. Poetry does not rely on plot or logical argument. In poetry, we listen for the heart of the poet; we are particularly sensitive to the emotions expressed in the poem.

Unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry is not based on rhyme. Understanding the characteristics of Hebrew poetry may help you better appreciate its beauty.

Parallelism

Hebrew poetry is often based on parallelism. In parallelism, two lines use different words to express the same idea. A Hebrew poet says something and then repeats it with slightly different words. Three types of parallelism are:

Synonymous parallelism: the second line reinforces the first line.

1. Shew me thy ways, O LORD;
2. Teach me thy paths.¹⁰⁷
1. In the way of righteousness is life;
2. And in the pathway thereof there is no death.¹⁰⁸

Antithetic parallelism: the first line is contrasted in the second line. This form is often used in Proverbs to contrast the paths of the wise and the fool.

1. A wise son maketh a glad father:
2. But a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.¹⁰⁹
1. The memory of the just is blessed:
2. But the name of the wicked shall rot.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Luke 18:1-8

¹⁰⁷ Psalm 25:4

¹⁰⁸ Proverbs 12:28

¹⁰⁹ Proverbs 10:1

¹¹⁰ Proverbs 10:7

Synthetic parallelism: the second line adds to the thought of the first line.

1. The LORD is my shepherd;
2. I shall not want.¹¹¹
1. Keep thy heart with all diligence;
2. For out of it are the issues of life.¹¹²

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

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:

- *Metaphors* compare two things that are similar in some way. "The Lord is my shepherd."¹¹³
- *Hyperbole* uses deliberate exaggeration to emphasize a point. In a psalm of lament, David describes his grief, "Every night I flood my bed with tears."¹¹⁴
- *Personification* gives human characteristics to something that is not human. "Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets."¹¹⁵
- *Anthropomorphism* describes God using human characteristics. God's "eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man."¹¹⁶

When interpreting poetic figures of speech, ask what the figure adds to the prose meaning. 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.

Wisdom Literature

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and parts of Psalms and James represent the genre known as wisdom literature. In this form, a wise teacher teaches a younger reader how life works. The instruction can take the form of short sayings as in the book of Proverbs, or the form of long dialogues as in the book of Job.

¹¹¹ Psalm 23:1

¹¹² Proverbs 4:23

¹¹³ Psalm 23:1

¹¹⁴ Psalm 6:6, *English Standard Version*

¹¹⁵ Proverbs 1:20

¹¹⁶ Psalm 11:4, *English Standard Version*

On the surface, a proverb is easy to interpret; it states its message briefly and clearly. “He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich.”¹¹⁷

However, this form offers a particular challenge. A proverb states a general observation about life, *but* it does not apply in every situation. 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.

The same contrast is seen in the book of Job. The friends are right; as a general principle, obedience to God brings blessing and disobedience brings judgment. However, Job shows an exception to this general rule. Job is suffering *because* he is righteous.

We should ask these questions when interpreting a book of wisdom:

(1) What general principle is taught in this scripture?

In Proverbs 21:17 quoted above, the principle 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 negate the principle; it simply shows that a wise person must be sensitive both to the principle and to the exceptions.

(3) What biblical characters 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.”¹¹⁸ Saul’s pride and David’s humble confession of sin show how this proverb looks in real life.

Prophetic Literature

One of the most difficult types of literature to interpret is prophetic literature. 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 an apostate nation of Israel. To a people who were enjoying prosperity and who assumed that they could ignore God’s law without consequence, Amos

¹¹⁷ Proverbs 21:17

¹¹⁸ Proverbs 11:2, *English Standard Version*

proclaimed a message of judgment. Israel would be judged because she had forsaken justice and righteousness.¹¹⁹

(2) What was the response of the people to his message?

The response of Israel to the message of Amos is represented by Amaziah, the high priest at Bethel. He ordered Amos to return to Judah and to preach no more in the Northern Kingdom.¹²⁰

(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.¹²¹

These questions make the transition 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.

The Biblical Context

Another consideration for biblical interpretation is the surrounding context. In this step, we 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.

¹¹⁹ Amos 5:7

¹²⁰ Amos 7:10-13

¹²¹ Amos 5:22-24

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."¹²² 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." The contrast is between a path that is known (watched and approved) by God and a path that leads to destruction.

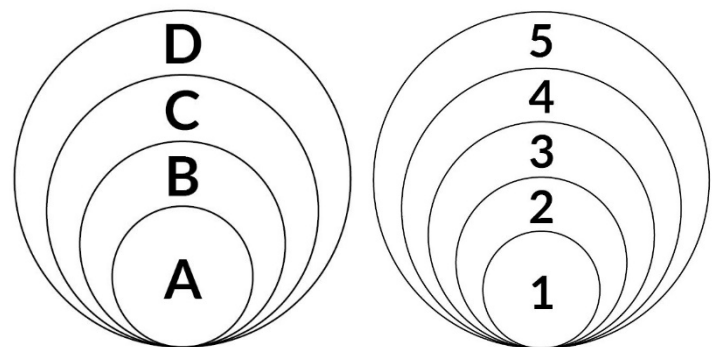
Following through the rest of Psalms and the Bible as a whole, this message is confirmed. The prosperity of a believer is found not in material possessions, but in God's approval. This is true prosperity.

To read a passage in context, follow three steps:

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

D = All of the Bible
C = Entire book
B = Paragraph or chapter
A = Verse

5 = The Bible
4 = Paul's letters
3 = Romans
2 = Romans 12-15
1 = Romans 12:1-2



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

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.

¹²² *English Standard Version*

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 eleven 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 outworking 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?

Conclusion: Dangers in Studying Context

To conclude this lesson, we should consider some dangers when studying the context of scripture. **One danger is 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.

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 puffs up, but love builds up.¹²³ It is possible to become so fascinated by details of context that we forget the message of the text we are studying.

We can learn everything about Samaritan culture and forget the purpose of the Good Samaritan parable: “Go, and do likewise.” 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!

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) Literary context considers the genre (literary form) of a passage. Some of the important biblical genres include:

- Exposition: orderly teaching
- Letter: Paul’s most common genre. When reading a letter, ask:
 - Who is the recipient?
 - Who is the author? How is he related to the recipient?
 - What circumstances inspired the letter?
- Narrative: story. When reading narrative, ask:
 - What is the plot?
 - Who are the characters?
 - Is the narrative normative or descriptive?
 - What principles are taught in the narrative?

¹²³ 1 Corinthians 8:1, *English Standard Version*. 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.

- Parable: a story that teaches a spiritual or moral lesson. When reading a parable, ask:
 - What question or situation inspired the parable?
 - What is the primary point (or points) of the parable?
- Poetry: Hebrew poetry uses:
 - Parallelism. Two lines use different words to express the same idea.
 - Figures of speech.
- Wisdom Literature: teaches how life works. When reading wisdom books, ask:
 - What general principle is taught?
 - What exceptions to the principle exist?
 - What biblical characters model this principle?
- Prophetic Literature. When reading the prophets, 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?

(4) 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, literary, and biblical context 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?
- What is the genre of the book?

After determining the genre, ask the questions suggested in this lesson.

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

Lesson 6

Interpretation: Word Studies

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) Use tools such as a concordance and Bible dictionary in word study.
- (5) Recognize figurative language in the Bible.

Introduction

The Bible is full of meaning, but sadly, some people read scripture without understanding its message.¹²⁴

The Bible is made up of verses, paragraphs, chapters, and books, but an even smaller unit is the word. This lesson is about studying words. We will look at tools that allow you to study the Greek and Hebrew words behind our translations of the Bible.

This does not mean that you cannot understand the Bible without studying Greek and Hebrew. Through the careful work of translators who have studied the Greek and Hebrew texts, we have access to translations that allow all of us to read scripture in our language.

However, there is great benefit in studying the original words of scripture. In any translation, we miss some of the rich color of the original text. The more we know of the original language, the richer our study of scripture becomes. Word studies open our eyes to the bright colors of scripture.

Let's look at an example. Jesus said, "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever."¹²⁵ The *English Standard Version* translates this as: "He will give you another Helper." The Greek word for "Comforter" or "Helper" has the idea of "someone who is called to one's side." The Holy Spirit has been sent alongside us to comfort, to encourage, to guide, to help, and to exhort. All of these ideas are wrapped up in the phrase, "He will give you a Comforter."

Understand what a wonderful gift we received when Jesus prayed that the Father would send the Spirit to our side. The Holy Spirit does not come from far away to rescue us in

¹²⁴ Much of the material in this chapter comes from Chapter 8 of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹²⁵ John 14:16

times of trouble. Instead, the Comforter is always at our side to minister grace into our lives, a very present help in trouble.¹²⁶

Word study can be a very rewarding aspect of Bible study. God revealed himself through the words of scripture; in this lesson, we will study some of those words.

Common Mistakes in Word Studies

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

Misunderstanding Root Words

Imagine a person who is learning English. They read about a butterfly. They have never seen a butterfly, but they do a word study. They tell their friends, "A butterfly comes from two root words – butter and fly. A butterfly is a fly that has landed in a tub of butter." This person has studied the root words, but they are completely wrong; a butterfly has nothing to do with butter!

Sometimes a person will look at a Greek word and say, "This is made up of two root words," and then they will come to a completely wrong conclusion! In this lesson, we will look at root words which may be at times be meaningful. But the final guide for meaning is the context in which the word is used.

Misunderstanding a Word in Its Original Time Period

One of my favorite books is the "Oxford English Dictionary." I love this book because it shows how words have changed in meaning over many years. Sometimes a word is used differently today than in the past. We must be careful not to misunderstand a word if its meaning has changed.

D. A. Carson points to a common example of this misunderstanding. Paul writes that the gospel of Christ "is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."¹²⁷ Because the Greek word for power sounds like the English word *dynamite*, some preachers have said that Paul was thinking of the power of dynamite when he said that the gospel is the "*dynamis* of God unto salvation." Of course, dynamite did not exist in Paul's time. Paul is thinking of something much greater than dynamite when he talks of the gospel. For Paul, the measure of the power of the gospel is not a bomb; the measure of the power of the gospel is an empty tomb. The resurrection is the true *dynamis* of the gospel.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Psalm 46:1

¹²⁷ Romans 1:16

¹²⁸ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, (2nd edition) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 34

Defining a Word the Same Way Each Time It is Used

In the lesson on context, we learned that we cannot assume that the word *trunk* means the same thing in every context. In the same way, biblical authors used words that have more than one possible meaning. We must look at the context in which the word is used.

For example, the word *salvation* has more than one meaning in scripture. It can refer to deliverance from enemies or danger; it can refer to deliverance from sickness; it can refer to deliverance from sin. In John 3:17, salvation refers to deliverance from the penalty and the power of sin. On the other hand, Zacharias prays that Israel will be “saved from our enemies.”¹²⁹ Zacharias is praying for political deliverance from an enemy. We misunderstand the verses if we define the word the same way in both verses.

All this may sound as if word study is too difficult for anyone other than an expert. Don’t worry; the process is not difficult. We will use a three-step process for word study. The process is:

1. Choose the word to study.
2. Determine what the word **could** mean.
3. Determine what the word **does** mean.

Step One: Choose Words to Study

We do not need to do an in-depth study of every word in the Bible. To choose important words for word study, look for:

- Key words that are crucial to the meaning of the passage
- Repeated words
- Figures of speech
- Words that are unclear or difficult

¹²⁹ Luke 1:71

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

- A = Key word
- B = Repeated word
- C = Figure of speech
- D = Unclear or difficult word

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Some words that you may have marked are:

- A = Key word: *beseech, present, be conformed, be transformed, renewing*
- B = Repeated word: *None in this passage*
- C = Figure of speech: *living sacrifice*
- D = Unclear or difficult word: *reasonable service, prove*

Step Two: Determine What the Word Could Mean

When we ask what the word *could* mean, we are considering all the possible meanings for the word. This is called the *range of meaning*, a list of possible meanings for a word.

For example, the range of meaning for the word *spring* includes:

- The season of the year immediately following winter
- A metal coil
- The act of jumping
- A source of water

Knowing each possible meaning ensures that we do not assume only one meaning and ignore other possibilities. Since our Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek, we will use a concordance to help us trace the possible meanings for the Hebrew and Greek words behind our text. You can find a printed concordance for any major English translation of the Bible. This is one of our most valuable resources for word study.

Using a Concordance for Word Study

For this lesson, I will use *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* based on the King James Version.¹³⁰ If you have a concordance, you can use it as you work through this lesson. Let's see how a concordance helps in word study. On the list of words to study in Romans 12:1-2, I included the word *prove*. If you think of the English word as it is used today, you might think of its meaning as, "to show that something is true." Let's see what a study of this word teaches us.

(1) Where is the word used in the Bible?

When you look up *prove* in *Strong's*, you will find a list of places this word is used in the Bible. Because we are in Romans, we will focus on New Testament examples.

- In Luke 14:19, a man responds to Jesus' call by saying, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to **prove** them: I pray thee have me excused."
- In John 6:5-6, Jesus asked Philip where they could buy bread to feed the multitude. He did this "to **prove** him: for he himself knew what he would do."
- Acts 24:13 and 25:7 use the word "prove" in a modern sense of demonstrating that something is true: "Neither can they **prove** the things whereof they now accuse me." "The Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not **prove**."

Most important for understanding Romans 12:2 is Paul's use of *prove*. Paul often uses *prove* in the sense of testing:

- 2 Corinthians 8:8 "I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to **prove** the sincerity of your love."
- 2 Corinthians 13:5 "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; **prove** your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"
- Galatians 6:4 "But let every man **prove** his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another."
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21 "**Prove** all things; hold fast that which is good."

(2) What is the Greek or Hebrew word that is used?

When we move between two languages, we soon find that translation is not as simple as "*This word* in Greek equals *this word* in English." Instead, several English words may be

¹³⁰ I am using *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984). You can use any concordance linked to your version of the Bible. An online version is located at: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/strongs-exhaustive-concordance/> If you use this online source for your word study, check the box marked "Strong's Numbers."

suitable translations for a single Greek word. A single English word may be used to translate several different Greek words. Because of this, after finding the English words in the concordance, we will look for the particular Greek or Hebrew word that is used.

Under *prove* in Romans 12:2 in *Strong's*, you find the number 1381. This refers to the Greek word that is translated "prove" in Romans 12:2.

Looking at other references, you will see a different number beside the entries in John and Acts. This begins to narrow the meaning for us. When Luke wrote (in Acts 24 and 25) about proving charges against Paul, he used a different Greek word. We want to focus on the meaning of #1381 in *Strong's*. This brings us to the next step.

Using a Bible Dictionary for Word Study

If you own a *Strong's Concordance*, you already have a simple Bible dictionary. Go to the Greek dictionary in the back of *Strong's*. The definition for word #1381 reads:

1381. *dokimazo*: to test, approve, allow, discern, examine, like, approve, try

This gives us the range of meaning for the word translated "prove" in the KJV. If you use the online concordance, you have an added benefit; you can immediately see how this word has been translated in other places. The Greek word *dokimazo* is used 23 times in the New Testament. The KJV translates *dokimazo* like this.

<i>Dokimazo</i> is translated into...	Number of times
prove	10 times
try	4 times
approve	3 times
discern	2 times
allow	2 times
like	1 time
examine	1 time

This first step doesn't tell us what Paul means in Romans 12:2, but it shows the range of meaning. *Prove* in Romans 12 could mean to approve God's will; it could mean to allow God's will; it could mean to try God's will.

A more comprehensive definition is found in other Bible dictionaries. If you use the online version of *Strong's*, it is linked to *Thayer's Bible Dictionary*. This gives a fuller definition:

- To test, examine, prove, scrutinize (to see whether a thing is genuine or not)
- To recognize as genuine after examination, to approve, deem worthy

To “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” may mean:

- To test and examine God’s will or
- To recognize God’s will as genuine.

Let’s dig deeper in step three.

Step Three: Determine What the Word Means in Context

Now that we have the range of meaning for a word, we look at the context to find the meaning that best fits this verse. Remember, context determines meaning. The best way to determine the definition of *spring* is to read the surrounding sentence:

- The winter has been harsh, but we are expecting a beautiful spring.
- The water in our city is impure, so we carry water from a mountain spring.
- The spring on our door is loose; it no longer pulls the door shut.
- When Illana walks through the door, we will spring from behind the curtain and sing “Happy Birthday.”

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

When doing word studies, some questions narrow the meaning based on the context:

(1) Is there a contrast or comparison that defines the word?

Ephesians 4:29 warns, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” If we study *corrupt* following the steps above, we will find this range of meaning: “rotten, worn out, of poor quality, bad, unwholesome, unfit for use, worthless.” Any of these could be the meaning of corrupt in Ephesians 4.

When we look at the immediate context of the verse, the contrast is between corrupt communication and edifying communication. Edifying communication is language that brings grace to the listener. This context shows that corrupt communication is more than profane language; corrupt communication is any talk that tears down rather than builds up. If my words do not bring grace to those who hear me, I am using corrupt communication. Do you see how word study is useful – and convicting?

(2) How does the author use this word in other places?

In John 3:16, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” A search for the range of meanings for *world* in scripture shows that it can mean:

- The physical universe
- The human race

- People who are alienated from God
- A particular group of people such as believers

Some good teachers argue that John is using *world* in this last sense; they say Jesus is speaking only of those who are elected to belief. However, when we look at *world* in other places, we see that John most often uses *world* to refer to those who have rebelled against God and his purposes.

- John 1:10 "He was in the **world**, and the **world** was made by him, and the **world** knew him not." The world did not know him.
- John 7:7 "The **world** cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil." The world hates him.
- John 14:17 "Even the Spirit of truth; whom the **world** cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." The world does not receive the Spirit of truth.

John uses *world* to describe those who are alienated from God. This shows the extent of Jesus' promise: "For God so loved those who were alienated from himself, that he gave his only begotten Son." Jesus is not speaking of an elect group. Rather, God so loved those who are alienated from himself that he gave his Son so that all could be saved.

(3) Does the context suggest a meaning?

Sometimes the broader context of the verse shows the meaning. In Luke 1:71, the context shows that *saved* refers to political deliverance; Zacharias prays that Israel will be "saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us." This is deliverance from an enemy. Deliverance (salvation) will fulfill the promise that God made to Abraham (Luke 1:73).

Six verses later, Luke uses *salvation* in a deeper sense. Through the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Zacharias sees that his son will be "called the prophet of the Highest... to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins." Here, salvation is linked to forgiveness of sins.

Both meanings of the word *save* are used in this prayer. We determine the meaning from the context of Zacharias' prayer.

Let's return to the word *prove* in Romans 12:2. We saw that *prove* could mean to approve, to allow, or to test God's will. Paul writes that as our mind is renewed, we will be able to prove what the will of God is. It does not appear that he is telling us that we will demonstrate the truth of God's will to someone else. Instead, we will know ourselves what God's will is. This narrows the meaning to testing or discerning God's will in our lives. To *prove* is to examine something critically to determine if it is genuine.

This is the same sense in which Paul uses this word elsewhere in Romans. In Romans 2:17, Paul describes a Jew who claims to know God's will because of his obedience to the law.

Paul writes that this person will “know his will and **approve** what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law.”¹³¹ This is a person who claims to test and know God’s will through obedience to the law.

To *prove* the will of God is to test and discern his will. Through God’s Spirit working in our transformed minds and surrendered lives, we will be able to discern the will of God. Facing life’s choices, we will have the ability to test alternatives and determine God’s best.

Romans 12:2 gives confidence that we can know God’s will. We are surrendered fully to him (“present your bodies a living sacrifice”). We have turned from the world (“be not conformed to this world”). We have been transformed by the renewing of our minds. As a result, we will be able to know and follow God’s perfect will.

A Word Study on *Present* (Romans 12:1)

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

What is the range of meaning for *present*? Looking in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, we find that the Greek word translated *present* (Gk 3936-*paristemi*) is used in several ways:

- In Luke 2:22, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple “to **present** him to the Lord.” They were fulfilling the Old Testament law of the firstborn; “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.”¹³² *Presenting* the firstborn represented God’s ownership of the child.
- At his arrest Jesus asks, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”¹³³ In Matthew 26:53, *paristemi* means to “**make available or put at someone’s disposal.**”
- Mark 14:47 describes the scene at Jesus’ arrest, “And one of them that **stood by** drew a sword, and smote a servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear.” Here, *paristemi* means to stand beside something or someone.
- Acts 1:3 says, “He **presented** himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”¹³⁴ To *present* means to show himself to his disciples.
- Acts 4:26 uses *paristemi* as “to oppose or stand against an enemy.” “The kings of the earth **stood up**, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.”

¹³¹ Romans 2:17-18

¹³² *English Standard Version*

¹³³ *English Standard Version*

¹³⁴ *English Standard Version*

- In Acts 24:13, *paristemi* means to prove something. “Neither can they **prove** the things whereof they now accuse me.”

When we focus on Paul’s use of this word, we find these meanings:

- Romans 6:13: “Neither **yield** ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but **yield** yourselves unto God.”
- Romans 14:10: “For we shall all **stand** before the judgment seat of Christ.”
- Romans 16:2: Paul commends Phebe and asks the Roman Christians to “**assist** her in whatsoever business she hath need of you.”
- Ephesians 5:27: Christ wants to sanctify and cleanse the church “that he might **present** it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.”

From a Bible dictionary, we find that *paristemi* includes several meanings:

- To place beside or near, as in Acts 1:3
- To stand beside, as in Mark 14:47
- To make available, as in Matthew 26:53
- To prove, as in Acts 24:13
- To yield, as in Luke 2:22 and Romans 6:13
- To provide or assist, as in Romans 16:2

Present or *paristemi* has a broad range of meaning. So, what does *paristemi* mean in Romans 12:1? What does it mean to present ourselves as a living sacrifice?

Remember that context determines meaning. Paul has been showing God’s great mercy in giving salvation through Christ (Romans 1-11). Now he shows our expected response to this great salvation. We can quickly see that some possible meanings (“to place near,” “to stand beside,” “to prove,” or even “to assist”) do not fit the context.

The sense of Matthew 26:53 could fit; Paul may be calling us to “make ourselves available” to God. However, Romans 12:1 uses the imagery of Old Testament sacrifice. This points to something deeper than being available to God; it suggests a complete yielding of ourselves to God. Just as a sacrificial animal belonged completely to God, a Christian yields himself without reservation to God. We present ourselves as a sacrifice on the altar, a living, holy, and pleasing sacrifice. In Romans 12:1, *present* means to yield ourselves completely to God. Romans 1-11 shows how Christ freely gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins; therefore, we should give ourselves freely as a sacrifice to God.

A Special Case: Figurative Language

In Lesson 5, 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

language. In figures of speech, the important thing is not the literal meaning of the words, but the imagery of the author.¹³⁵

Interpreting figurative language does not deny literal interpretation. To interpret language literally means to understand language in the way the author intended. When a biblical author intended a figure of speech, literal interpretation asks us to interpret it figuratively.

All of us use figurative language. Imagine that you are looking at a neighbor's garden. You ask your neighbor, "How do you grow such beautiful plants?" She answers, "I have a green thumb." Your neighbor is not telling you, "The largest digit on my hand is green." She is using a figure of speech that means, "I have an unusual ability to grow plants."

The Bible speaks in the same way. Jesus called Herod a fox.¹³⁶ Doing a word study on this verse is not a matter of finding out how many times the word *fox* is used in the Bible, determining its range of meaning, and then studying the context to narrow the meaning. In this case, a study of *fox* requires asking, "What characteristics did a fox suggest to Jesus' listeners?" To call someone a fox meant that they were cunning and perhaps cowardly.

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. We do not expect Joseph's dream to tell a literal story about sheaves of grain bowing to each other or of the sun, moon, and stars bowing 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 and 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! A Bible dictionary tells us that the sword was a large ceremonial sword carried by a conquering king. 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 5. 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 contained in this image?"

¹³⁵ 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).

¹³⁶ Luke 13:32

In Revelation 5, the Lion of the tribe of Judah appears before the throne of God. This does not make sense unless you recognize the figure of speech. A Bible dictionary will tell you that "Lion of the tribe of Judah" is a messianic title. You then 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.

Conclusion

This chapter contains much technical information; please do not feel that this is too complicated to be of practical value. God's Word is a storehouse of treasures. As you dig deeper into God's Word, you will find new riches each day.

The writer of Proverbs made this promise to the person who seeks wisdom; "If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God."¹³⁷ There is no greater source of wisdom than God's Word. Your study of scripture will pay eternal rewards.

Lesson 6 Key Points

(1) Word study examines the Greek and Hebrew words behind our translations.

(2) There are mistakes to avoid when doing word studies:

- Misunderstanding root words
- Misunderstanding a word in its original time period
- Defining a word the same way each time it is used

(3) There are three steps in word study:

- Choose words to study.
 - Focus on words that are important to the meaning of the passage.
- Determine what the word could mean.
 - Use a concordance to determine the possible meanings of the word.
- Determine what the word means in context. To do this, ask:
 - Is there a contrast or comparison that defines the word?
 - How does the author use the word in other places?
 - Does the context suggest a meaning?

(4) There are two times to interpret a statement figuratively:

- When the passage tells you to do so
- When a literal meaning is impossible or absurd

¹³⁷ Proverbs 2:4, 5

Lesson 6 Assignments

(1) Using a concordance, look up *power* in Acts 1:8. How many times is this word used in Acts? How is the Greek word translated each time?

You will find that this word *dunamis* can be translated “miracles.” What about the context of Acts 1:8 which suggests that “power” is a better translation than “miracles” for this verse?

(2) Look up the word *hope* in a concordance.

- Paul uses this word in Romans 4:18. How many times does he use this same Greek word in his letters?
- How many times is this Greek word used in Matthew, Mark, and Luke?
- Is this the same Greek word for *hope* that is used in 1 Corinthians 13:13?

(3) Do a word study on *temptations* in James 1:2. Determine the range of meaning for this word. Then determine its meaning in this verse.

- If you are studying with a group, share your study with the group.
- If you are studying alone, prepare a short Bible lesson based on your word study.

(4) In Lesson 1, you chose a passage of scripture to study throughout this course. Read this passage and do a word study on important words in the scripture you are studying.

Lesson 7

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 a selected passage 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 a scripture or listen to a sermon, are you able to find application to your life?

Robert said, "Pastor, can we meet? I have a big question about the Bible." Later that week, we met and looked at several scriptures that addressed the issue Robert faced. After a few minutes, Robert 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."

The problem for Robert 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)

"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,
English Standard Version

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 the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in

his season.”¹³⁸ Satan tries to keep us out of the Bible. He knows that we will shrivel and die spiritually if we don’t take in the nourishment of God’s Word.¹³⁹

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 never 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 in 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 liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”¹⁴⁰

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, “...Thou art the man!...”¹⁴¹

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.”¹⁴² After we properly interpret scripture, we must not fail to put it into action. We must not substitute interpretation for application.

We Substitute Partial Compliance 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 read, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.”¹⁴³ From a word study, we know that “corrupt communication” is any talk that tears down our listeners.¹⁴⁴ In the application step, we examine our important relationships. We ask:

¹³⁸ Psalm 1:2-3

¹³⁹ Material in this lesson is adapted from Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

¹⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 12:5-6

¹⁴¹ 2 Samuel 12:7

¹⁴² James 4:17, *English Standard Version*

¹⁴³ Ephesians 4:29.

¹⁴⁴ See the word study in Lesson 6.

- “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 father.”
- “Do I build up my wife?” “No; I am often negative in my responses.”

My communication with my wife is the place where God’s Spirit wants to change me. Satan tempts me to substitute obedience in other areas for a life-changing application of this text to my relationship with my wife. He tempts me to accept partial obedience instead of committing myself to full obedience.

We Substitute Rationalization for Repentance

A lawyer asked Jesus, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.”

The lawyer understood scripture. “But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”¹⁴⁵ His problem was not interpretation; his problem was application. The lawyer rationalized his lack of love.

Perhaps God’s Spirit says, “Your words are not edifying to your wife; this is corrupt communication.” I have read the Word; I have interpreted the Word; it is now time to apply the Word. Instead, I may rationalize, “You don’t know my wife. She is always negative. If I am negative, it is because she is so negative. It isn’t my fault!” What have I done? I have rationalized my behavior rather than repenting of my 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.¹⁴⁶ 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 I hear Ephesians 4:29 taught at a marriage seminar. In a time of commitment at the end of the seminar, I say to my wife, “I’m sorry. I want to speak positive words. I’ll do better!” However, I soon fall back into my old habits of harsh words, negative statements, and corrupt 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.

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

¹⁴⁵ Luke 10:25-29

¹⁴⁶ James 1:23-24

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.”¹⁴⁷ It is not enough to hear the Word, we must apply the Word. What is necessary for proper application of scripture?

Step 1: Know

In order to properly apply scripture, you must know two things.

(1) You must know the text.

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.”¹⁴⁸ 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 the 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. “All things” did not mean worldly success; “all things” meant endurance in the face of opposition. Paul learned to be content in all circumstances because through Christ, he could do all things. This did not mean a life of comfort; it meant that he did not lose his spirit of contentment in the face of difficulties.

(2) You must know yourself.

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.”¹⁴⁹ 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 am prone to negativism. 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

¹⁴⁷ James 1:25, *English Standard Version*

¹⁴⁸ Philippians 4:13, *English Standard Version*

¹⁴⁹ 1 Timothy 4:16, *English Standard Version*

strengthen me to faithfulness. I can do all things **through Christ.**" This takes the verse from the first century to the twenty-first century.

Step 2: Relate

John Wesley wrote, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."¹⁵⁰ 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.

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?"

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.¹⁵¹ Careful application of scripture makes the gospel attractive to the people around us.

Step 3: Practice

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."¹⁵²

As you study scripture, ask, "Is there an area of my life where I should practice this truth?" If so, 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

¹⁵⁰ Preface to John and Charles Wesley's 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.

¹⁵¹ Titus 2:10

¹⁵² Hebrews 12:1, *English Standard Version*

to warn you when they hear you using corrupt communication. This becomes a way to practice God's Word on a daily basis.

Practicing Bible Application

In college, I had a friend who struggled with a certain area of temptation. Woodrow loved music, including some styles with texts that tempted him in his area of weakness. Woodrow wanted victory over temptation, but he did not apply scripture consistently in his life.

In September, we would have school revival. Woodrow would go to the altar. He would return to our 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, we would have a Bible conference. Woodrow 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 Woodrow 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. Woodrow'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

In one of my college classes, I ask students to keep a journal as they read through the Bible. The students ask five questions as they look for ways to apply scripture to their lives.

(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, the answer is not despair. The answer is willing obedience to His Word.

(2) Is there a promise to claim?

Sometimes application is simply claiming God's promises. We must be careful here that we interpret the promise correctly. Some promises were made to certain individuals or to the nation of Israel. We must be careful that we don't 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 straightforward. Sometimes Christians look for profound truths, while ignoring the simple application of what they already know!

A writer wrote about the danger of looking for deep truths while ignoring the obvious truth. He wrote about his first studies in New Testament Greek. "When Jesus says, 'Take up your cross and follow me,' the original Greek is - well, 'take up your cross and follow me.' It was not understanding the meaning, but obeying it, that is hard."¹⁵³

Sometimes all that is needed is a simple, "Yes, Lord. I will obey."

(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. Recently I taught a class 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 that you made in earlier lessons on this text. Then list three specific things you can do to apply this text in your life.

¹⁵³ Andy Crouch, "Information and Formation" in *Christianity Today*, March 2014, 7

► 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.

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 that "when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."¹⁵⁴ 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.

Are You Hungry? The Importance of Daily Bread¹⁵⁵

For a long time I didn't understand the concept of feeding my soul. I studied the Bible professionally and out of Christian duty. I enjoyed it, but the feeding of my soul was more accidental than purposeful. I picked up the Bible constantly to prepare for ministry duties, but not for "the sincere milk of the Word."¹⁵⁶ I didn't realize the importance of a spiritual diet.

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.

¹⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:27

¹⁵⁵ This section was written by Dr. Stephen Gibson.

¹⁵⁶ 1 Peter 2:2

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 7 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 compliance for complete obedience.
- We can substitute rationalization 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 text.
 - Ourselves and how the text speaks to our needs.
- Relate the scripture to the real world.
- Practice application on a daily basis.

(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 7 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 8

Principles of Interpretation

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Understand basic principles of Bible interpretation.
- (2) Apply these principles in selected passages of scripture.
- (3) Be aware of how failure to follow these principles may lead to doctrinal error.

Introduction

My father was a handyman. He loved to do maintenance projects. Over many years he had collected tools and materials from his projects. Most of the materials were carefully organized in his toolshed, but some things (a few screws, nails, a roll of tape, etc.) ended up in a miscellaneous drawer. This drawer contained items that didn't fit anywhere else. Although this drawer seemed disorganized, the Miscellaneous Drawer was important when he needed those items.

Lesson 8 of this course could be called the "Miscellaneous Drawer." We will be looking at general principles that should guide your interpretation. I put this lesson after the lessons on the process of interpretation because the first thing we should do is to focus on the text itself.

However, the principles in this lesson are important to the study of scripture. These are principles that wise Bible teachers have developed to guide their study. Please take the time to understand these principles and apply them in your study.

► Find a scripture on which members of your group disagree. (If you can't find an area of disagreement, you can discuss a scripture where your interpretation is different than another church's interpretation). Discuss this question: "What presuppositions about the Bible led me to my interpretation?" At this point, your goal is not to prove your interpretation. The goal is to understand **why** you believe what you believe. In order to benefit from this, be honest in recognizing your own presuppositions and be respectful of the presuppositions of those with whom you disagree.

Start With the Text, Not With Your Conclusion

I entered an address in my GPS and clicked for directions. The GPS came up with a series of turns. I looked at the directions and said, "The GPS is wrong." I entered it again. "Wrong again!" My passenger said, "How do you know the GPS is wrong?" I responded confidently, "I know the directions. The GPS is wrong." A few hours later, completely lost, I admitted defeat and began to follow the directions from my GPS. What was my mistake? I started

with the conclusion. I was sure I had the right answer, so I refused to listen to a map that gave a different answer.

Some people read the Bible in this way. I once heard 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 presuppositions. We start from a particular point of view. That is fine. The problem is when our presuppositions 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 presuppositions to cause us to ignore the text.

An Example

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven 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 then read the scripture.

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 "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good." We are to have perfect love.

Scripture Teachings Do Not Contradict Scripture Teachings

When we read a book by a human author, it may contradict itself at some point. Certainly 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.¹⁵⁷ Because of this, his Word is consistent – even when spoken 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. 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, I should ask if I have misunderstood one of the scriptures. When I fully understand each passage, I will see that both passages are true.

¹⁵⁷ James 1:17

An Example

"A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

"A man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (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.

Since scripture does not contradict itself, we know that both teachings are correct. We are justified by faith, not by works. But, by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

The rest of James and Paul's letters demonstrate that the two apostles agree: obedience to the law (works) does not earn salvation. However, James and Paul agree: if we are justified by faith, our entire manner of living (works!) will be different. Our daily lives provide a testimony to the reality of the faith by which we have been saved. In the words of the Reformers, "We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith which is alone."

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."¹⁵⁸ By studying all of scripture, we allow plain passages to shed light on more difficult passages.

An Example

"Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15:29).

Does this verse tell us that we should baptize representatives on behalf of the dead? Some people think so, but Paul does not command baptism for the dead.

Some interpreters believe that this indicates that some first century Christians were baptized on behalf of new believers who died prior to baptism. Paul says that this practice makes no sense if there is no resurrection. Other interpreters believe that "baptism for the dead" simply refers to Romans 6:3-5 where baptism unites us with Christ in his death. In neither case does Paul command baptism for the dead.

¹⁵⁸ Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 132.

Regardless of our interpretation, the principle that "Scripture is the best interpreter of scripture" guides 1 Corinthians 15:29. When we read Matthew 28:19, and Acts 2:41, 8:12, and 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.¹⁵⁹

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.

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, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."¹⁶⁰ The purpose of God's Word is to guide us, not to hide the truth.

"Unique interpretations
are usually wrong."
- Gordon Fee,
How to Read the Bible

No special keys are necessary to unlock the message of God's Word. Be very cautious of books that claim to "unlock the hidden codes of the Bible." God spoke so that we could understand His Word.

An Example

"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).

Every few years, someone will claim, "God has revealed to me that Jesus is returning next year." A popular book in 1987 predicted the rapture in 1988. The same author wrote a book the next year predicting the rapture in 1989. Harold Camping became famous for repeated predictions of the rapture. So called "prophecy experts" such as Jack van Impe and Marilyn Agee have made repeated predictions of the Lord's return. They then move the date when they are proved wrong.

When you hear someone predict a specific date for the Lord's return, you should remember that Jesus said, "No one knows" when these things will happen. How can any person today claim to know more than Jesus about the Father's plans? The plain sense of this verse warns us against anyone who claims to know the day of Jesus' return.

A Biblical Command Implies a Biblical Promise

Not all evangelical writers accept this principle, but I believe it is essential to interpreting scripture. The principle teaches that if God gives a command, he makes obedience possible.

¹⁵⁹ This example is courtesy of Dr. Stephen Gibson. Information on interpretation comes from the *English Standard Version Study Bible* and the *New Bible Commentary*.

¹⁶⁰ Psalm 119:105

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,"¹⁶¹ they say, "God knows that we cannot obey his commands." John Calvin said that God requires the impossible. He mocked those "who measure the strength of men by the [commands] of God."¹⁶² Calvin believed that God may command us to do something knowing that we cannot obey. Do you believe God is worse than an earthly father?

We do not measure the "strength of men by the commands of God." **We measure the commands of God by the strength of God.** In our strength, we cannot obey God's commands, but a loving Heavenly Father empowers his children to obey his commands. We believe that 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, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."¹⁶³ This is both a command to obey and a promise to be received. 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

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

From the context, we understand that Jesus is referring to love, not performance. 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 that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect."¹⁶⁴

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 Reformers used the term *sola scriptura* ("by scripture alone") to mean that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation. Today, we continue to hold this principle.

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

¹⁶¹ God commands this multiple times, not just once. (See Leviticus 11:44, 45; 20:7; and 1 Peter 1:16.)

¹⁶² John Calvin's commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:23 from *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*.

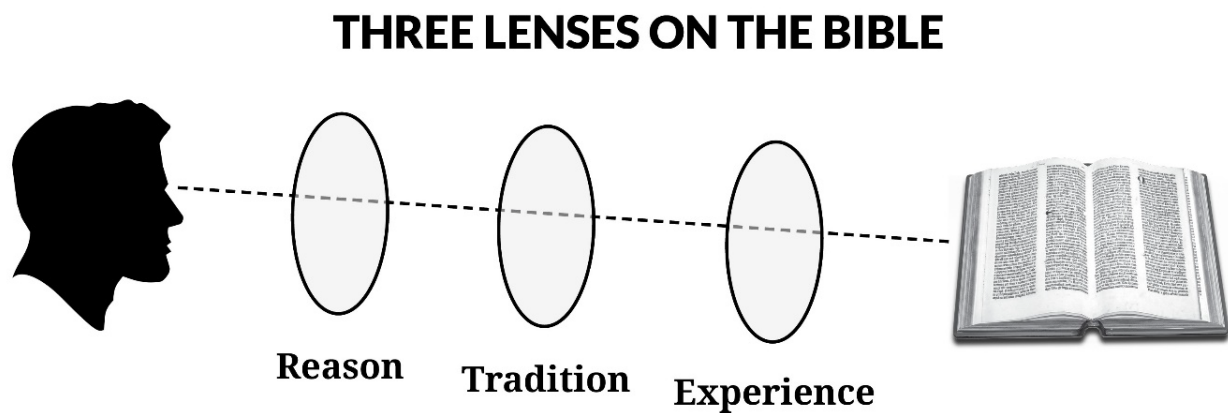
¹⁶³ Matthew 22:37

¹⁶⁴ Psalm 18:32

the Bible. These lenses do not replace the authority of scripture in any way. They are simply the windows through which 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 windows 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.¹⁶⁵



Lens 1: Reason

Reason is the first 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.

Some Christians oppose the use of reason; they argue that our fallen minds cannot be trusted to understand God's Word. 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 2: Tradition

The second lens through which we look at scripture is *Tradition*. Tradition asks, "How have Christians throughout history understood this scripture?" Tradition tests our understanding of the text against the insights of other Christians throughout history.

¹⁶⁵ 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 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 authoritative tradition is what has been taught by the church everywhere and in all times. The tradition of individual denominations should be considered, but it does not have as much authority as the tradition of the universal church.

"Tradition is the fruit of the Spirit's teaching activity from the ages... It is not infallible, but neither is it negligible, and we impoverish ourselves if we disregard it."
- J.I. Packer, "Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today"

God speaks through tradition to help us understand his Word. If you find something in scripture that no one in 2,000 years has ever seen, you should assume you are mistaken!

Lens 3: Experience

Experience is the last lens. This lens asks, "Does my understanding match the experience of other Christians?" By placing experience last, we avoid subjectivism that places personal experience above objective truth. However, experience is valuable when balanced with tradition and reason.

Each of these lens is important. If we use only tradition, we will fall to the Roman Catholic error of viewing church teaching as equal to scripture. If we use only reason, we will fall to rationalism that views the mind as the final authority. If we use only experience, we will fall to emotionalism that replaces the teaching of scripture with personal experience. Each of these must be used in our study – and each must be submitted to the authority of scripture.

An Example

"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,... that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:14-21).

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?

Reason. When reading Paul's prayer, our reason asks, "Is 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.

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."¹⁶⁶ 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 exchange "glory for glory," becoming more and more filled with all the fullness of God. In the seventeenth century, the French Catholic Francois Fenelon wrote that, through God's gracious strength, we can "live as Jesus lived, to think as he thought...."¹⁶⁷ Through God's grace, we can be conformed to his image.

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 filled by God's grace.

Your Turn

At the beginning of this lesson, you looked at a scripture on which members of your group disagree. After studying the principles of interpretation in this lesson, go back to that scripture. Ask these 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?
- 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 my experience and 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.

¹⁶⁶ As quoted in William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostles to Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 38

¹⁶⁷ *From the Apostles to Wesley*, 85

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, ask if 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 principle of *sola scriptura* means that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation.
- (8) We look at scripture through three lenses that help us understand God's Word:
 - Reason: a rational understanding of the meaning of the text.
 - Tradition: the insights of other Christians throughout history.
 - Experience: the spiritual experience of Christians.

Lesson 9

Building a Bible Study Library

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Recognize the importance of developing a good Bible study library.
- (2) Have a plan for developing a library.
- (3) Know inexpensive and free sources for Bible study.

Introduction

► Discuss the books that are most helpful to you in your sermon or Bible lesson preparation.

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. 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 tool box. I visited a pastor who had almost no library. It wasn't because he was too poor to buy books; he had many books and DVDs for entertainment. As we visited, he 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.

"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,
English Standard Version

In this lesson, we will learn how to build a library. Because books can be expensive, we will do this in stages, with the most important books listed in the first stage. We will look for free online sources when possible.

Many of the books in this lesson have already been mentioned in earlier lessons. This lesson will collect all the information in one place to guide you in developing a good Bible study library. This lesson will help you to fill your toolbox.

Step One: The Basics

The first tools you will want to add to your toolbox include:

Concordances

An exhaustive concordance is one of your most important tools for Bible study. A concordance is an index to the Bible; it lists all the words of the Bible alphabetically, with every verse in which the word appears.

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:

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/strongs-exhaustive-concordance/>

There are concordances linked to other versions of the Bible. Use an exhaustive concordance that lists every occurrence of each word. The small concordance in the back of many Bibles is incomplete; it will show only a few examples of each word.

Bible Dictionaries

Bible dictionaries provide background information on terms, places, and people. A dictionary of Greek and Hebrew words allows you to do basic word study even if you have not studied the original languages. 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.

Online Bible dictionaries are available at <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 Handbook*.

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 <http://www.bibleatlas.org>.

Bible Translations¹⁶⁸

Regardless of your preferred translation, reading an alternative translation can give new insights on a verse. Translations vary based on two major factors:

The target audience

Some translations are addressed to an audience with a smaller vocabulary. Here is 1 John 2:2 in two translations:

<i>King James Version</i>	<i>New Living Translation</i>
"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">• The wrath of God against sin• The mercy of God in providing a way of atonement <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>

¹⁶⁸ 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. 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:

<i>King James Version</i>	<i>New Century Version</i>
"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*, 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. Here is 2 Corinthians 10:13 in different translations:

More Literal Translations	
<i>King James Version (KJV)</i>	"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."
<i>English Standard Version (ESV)</i>	"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."
Freer Translations	
<i>New International Version (NIV)</i>	"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."
<i>New Century Version (NCV)</i>	"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."

I suggest that you use a translation that is close to the original to begin your study. Then, if a verse is unclear, a freer translation may help you. In my own reading, I use the KJV and ESV translations because they are close to the original language. When I need a simpler understanding of a verse, I read the NLT or another translation. You can compare several translations online at <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. One or two screwdrivers are 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 commentary, Bible handbook, concordance, and atlas all wrapped into one volume. Because the commentary reflects the theological biases of the authors, you must be careful. However, 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 one hundred 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. I think this is one of the most valuable sources you can buy. (You can see the topic chains used in the Thompson Bible at <http://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*, *New American Standard*, *New International*, and *New Living Translation*.

Bible Commentaries

A one volume commentary provides notes on each verse without the depth (or cost) of individual volumes on each book of the Bible. As you develop your library, you will want to add commentaries on individual books; however, you may want to begin with a one volume commentary.

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 <http://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 Pentateuch often responds 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

My father was raised in an unbelieving home, and he did not have the opportunity to attend Bible college. Dad did not have a college education, but after he was called to preach, he wanted to rightly divide the word of truth.¹⁶⁹

My father understood that he would need to develop a good toolbox in order to serve his congregations. Throughout a ministry of nearly fifty 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 I have mentioned here.

More importantly, my father 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. My father 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.

While my father never received a college diploma, he was truly a student of the Bible. He used these resources to better serve his congregations. I hope that you will use the resources in this chapter to build your toolbox for effective ministry.

¹⁶⁹ 2 Timothy 2:15

Lesson 10

Putting It All Together

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Practice applying the steps of interpretation to selected passages of scripture.
- (2) Prepare a paper or oral presentation doing a detailed study of a Bible text.

Introduction

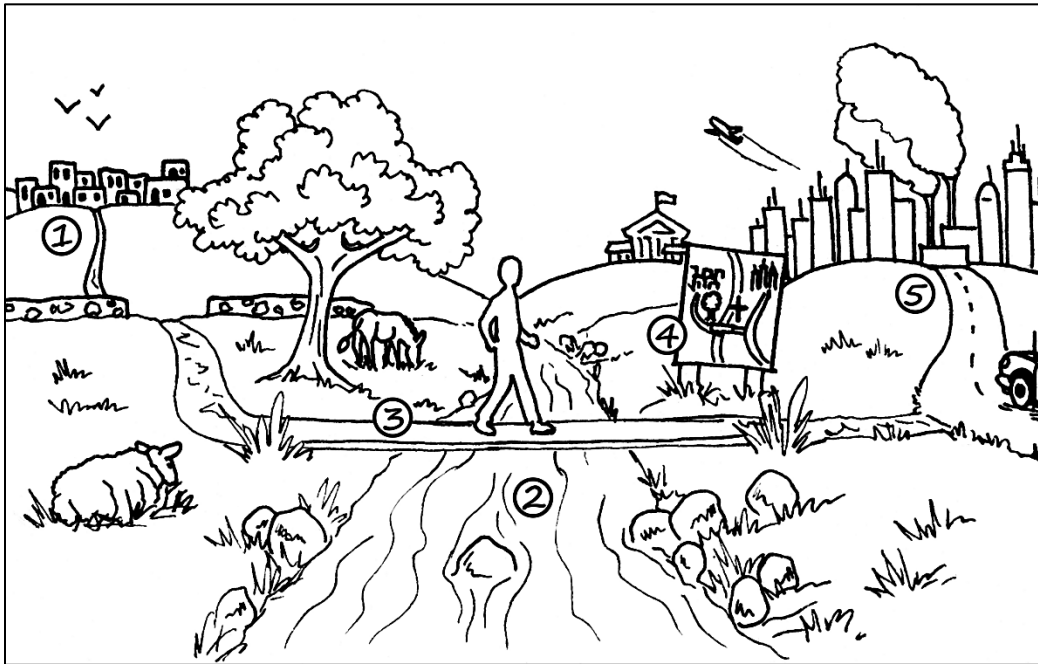
In this course, we have looked at the steps of observation, interpretation, and application. We have observed dangers to avoid in interpretation. We have learned important principles to follow when studying scripture. We have looked at tools that should be in your toolbox as a biblical interpreter. We have practiced each step in turn.

In this final lesson, we will pull everything together. This lesson is in two parts. In the first part of the lesson, we will look at how the journey of interpretation works in two specific genres of scripture.¹⁷⁰ You will have an opportunity to practice the steps in both Old and New Testament passages.

In the second part of the lesson, you will apply the entire process to a scripture passage. Using the text you chose in Lesson One, you will prepare a study in which you move through each step of the interpretation process.

¹⁷⁰ Much of the material in this section is drawn from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Interpreting the Bible¹⁷¹



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

The Journey of Interpretation: New Testament Letters

Much of the New Testament is in the form of letters. Paul's letters were addressed to churches and pastors. James, Peter, John, and Jude wrote letters to churches. 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.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ 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: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

¹⁷² For example, Ephesians 1:1 states Paul's apostolic authority: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God."

2. **Situational.** New Testament letters often addressed specific situations or problems. For instance, Galatians was written to a church threatened by legalism. Paul emphasized our freedom in Christ. In contrast, the church at Corinth was taking freedom to the extreme of tolerating gross immorality. In 1 Corinthians, Paul emphasizes our responsibility to obedience.
3. **Addressed to Believers.** The promises in the New Testament letters are promises to God's children. As we read Paul's commands to holiness, we should remember that these are commands to believers. Paul does not presume that an unbeliever can become holy in his own power; it is only through God's grace that we are made holy. These are letters to Christians.

Structure of NT Letters
<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author's name and position • Recipients • Greeting • Introductory prayer <p>Body (Primary message of the letter)</p> <p>Conclusion (Includes material such as)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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)

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.

Observation

When you receive a letter from a friend, you don't read one paragraph on Monday, a second paragraph on Tuesday, reading bit by bit. Instead, you sit down and read the entire letter. Read Paul's letters in the same way. Read the entire letter to gain an overview of Paul's message. As you read, make a list of observations, using questions we learned in Lessons 2 and 3. The more details you observe, the better equipped you are to interpret the letter.

Interpretation

After you read the entire letter, you are ready to study smaller sections. Mark the paragraphs, so that you study complete sections. A paragraph may include only a few verses, or it may include an entire chapter. You want to study an entire section as a whole. Interpretation of a letter includes three major questions:

(1) What did this text mean to the original audience?

To answer this, you will use the tools from Lesson 9 to answer questions such as:

- What was the relationship between the author and his audience?
- What circumstances inspired this letter?
- What are the important words in this text? Do a word study on these words.

(2) What are the differences between the biblical audience and our world?

To answer this, examine the historical-cultural context of the passage. Use a Bible dictionary to study the original culture and to learn all you can about the world of their day. This allows you to compare their world with our world.

(3) What principles are taught in this text?

This is the key question for interpretation. A biblical principle is universal; it is not limited to one cultural context. State the principle in 1-2 sentences.

To ensure that the principles you find are faithful to scripture, ask:

- Is this principle clearly taught in the text?
- Is this principle universal? Is it true for all times and all people?
- Is this principle consistent with the rest of scripture?

Application

Finally, apply the principle to our world. Remember that the principle you find in step 2 may be applied in many different ways. In this step, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in living God's Word in daily life.

Let's Practice

Let's take Hebrews 12:1-2 through the journey of interpretation.

Observation

Make a list of observations about these verses. If you are studying in a group, discuss your observations. You should ask questions such as:

- What came just before these verses? *Wherefore* points back to a previous section.
- Who is the *we* and *us* in these verses? Are they believers or unbelievers?

- Who is the *cloud of witnesses*? Your answer will relate to the first question.
- Make a list of other questions you can ask about this text.

Interpretation

(1) What did this text mean to the original audience?

As you study Hebrews, you learn that these believers had a Jewish background. They were discouraged because of persecution and were tempted to return to their Jewish traditions. The author encourages them to persevere in the faith. This is how he encourages his readers:

- The author uses the metaphor of a race to illustrate the Christian life. A race requires specific commitments:
 - They must lay aside any weights that would hinder them.
 - They must persevere; this is a marathon, not a short sprint.
 - They must run the race that is set before them or marked out. They cannot run a different path.¹⁷³
- The author gives two great encouragements to faithfulness:
 - A great cloud of witnesses has completed the race.
 - Jesus endured the cross and is our advocate at the right hand of the throne of God.

We can summarize the message of Hebrews 12:1-2 for the original audience: "Using the image of a race, the author challenges his readers to persevere in their commitment to Christ. The examples of saints from the past and of Jesus show that the readers can successfully complete the race."

(2) What are the differences between the biblical audience and our world?

- Most Christians today are not converts from Judaism.
- Many Christians today do not face physical persecution.

(3) What principles are taught in this text?

You can find at least three principles in Hebrews 12:1-2:

- The Christian life requires effort and endurance. Hebrews shows that **it is possible to fail in the race** if I do not run with perseverance.
- The example of past saints gives encouragement in our Christian race. Hebrews shows that **it is possible to complete the race** through the grace of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷³ These believers were being tempted to take the "easier" path of Judaism.

- To complete the Christian race, we must reject anything that hinders our progress and focus on Jesus and his example.

Application

In this step, we ask, “How will I apply the principle to my life?” Be specific in this step. For example, the first principle I listed was the effort and endurance required for completing the race. In the application step, I might write:

I will live out Hebrews 12:1-2 by faithful attendance to worship, daily prayer and Bible reading, and by seeking God’s grace for victory over temptation.

Your Turn

Take one of these passages through the journey of interpretation. Share your conclusions with other members of your group.

- Romans 8:26-27
- Galatians 5:16-18
- Colossians 3:1-4
- 1 Peter 5:6-7

The Journey of Interpretation: Old Testament Law

Much of the Pentateuch consists of laws. Jewish rabbis listed 613 commands in the *Torah*. Many of these laws are clearly applicable today.

- “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13).
- “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18).

The purpose of other laws is less clear.

- “Nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19, *English Standard Version*).
- “And the pig... is unclean for you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch” (Deuteronomy 14:8, *English Standard Version*).

In another course, we have studied the value of Old Testament law for the New Testament believer.¹⁷⁴ In this lesson, we will practice interpreting Old Testament law.

Observation

Using the skills you learned in Lessons 2 and 3, read the text and make as many observations as possible. Consider the larger context of the law you are studying. Notice the surrounding narrative. How does the law fit its immediate context?

¹⁷⁴ See the Shepherds Global Classroom course, *Exploring the Old Testament*, Lesson 3.

Interpretation

Based on your observations, interpret the law and find its message for today. Ask:

(1) What did this text mean to the original audience?

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

- Are the people in the wilderness (Exodus, Leviticus) or are they preparing to enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy)?
- 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 Israel's agricultural setting?
- 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 we saw in New Testament letters. For example:

- We no longer visit the temple; the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer.
- We do not approach God through sacrifices; Christ died once, for all.¹⁷⁵
- We do not live under a theocracy;¹⁷⁶ we live under secular governments.

(3) What principles are taught in this text?

Although the concrete application of the Old Testament law may change, we seek the universal 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 ensure that the principle is truly biblical, ask these questions:

- Is this principle clearly taught in the text?
- Is this principle universal to all times and places?
- Is this principle consistent with the rest of scripture?

(4) Does the New Testament modify this principle in any way?

This question must be added to the interpretation process when we study Old Testament texts. If I have located a universal principle in the Old Testament passage, the principle

¹⁷⁵ Hebrews 10:10

¹⁷⁶ *Theocracy* is direct rule by God.

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, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands this to apply to thoughts, not just actions.¹⁷⁷ Jesus’ teaching does not cancel the principle of Exodus 20; it deepens its application.

Application

In this step, you ask how the principle expressed in the Old Testament law will be applied in the life of a believer today.

Let’s Practice

Let’s take Deuteronomy 14:8 through the journey of interpretation.

Observation

For a single verse, you may have few observations. However, it is important to notice the context. The context seen in Deuteronomy 14:2 is important. This verse gives the motivation for all the laws in chapter 14; Israel is to be known as a people set apart from all the peoples of the earth.

Interpretation

(1) What did this text mean to the original audience?

- For a Jewish person, what did it mean to be unclean?
- Did uncleanness imply moral guilt or simply ceremonial guilt?
- What did a person have to do to remove the uncleanness?¹⁷⁸

We can summarize the message of Deuteronomy 14:8 for the original audience: Because Israel was a holy nation set apart to God (14:2), they were to avoid many foods and practices that were common to the other peoples of the earth. They were to be holy; eating these foods made them ritually unclean until they went through a purification ceremony.

(2) What are the differences between the biblical audience and our world?

Under the New Covenant, we no longer live by the specific applications of the Mosaic law.

(3) What principle is taught in this text?

The key principle is holiness (Deuteronomy 14:2). A holy God calls his people to holiness. God’s people must remain separate from sin and all unclean things.

¹⁷⁷ Matthew 5:28

¹⁷⁸ You can study this by looking up the term “unclean” in a Bible dictionary.

(4) Does the New Testament modify this principle in any way?

In Mark 7:15-23, Jesus taught that it is not the things we eat that make us unclean; evil thoughts and desires that come from within defile a person. This is reinforced in Acts 10:10-16.

Application

Interpreting the Old Testament law in light of the teaching of Jesus shows that anything that encourages an impure mind violates the separation that God demands of his people. In the application step, I might write something like this:

I will obey Deuteronomy 14:8 by avoiding anything that hinders my ability to approach God with a pure mind. I will live as a person set apart to God. I will avoid any entertainment, thoughts, or reading materials that defile my mind.

Your Turn

Take one of these passages through the journey of interpretation. Share your conclusions with other members of your group.

- Leviticus 26:1
- Leviticus 23:22
- Deuteronomy 22:8
- Leviticus 23:3

Final 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 are studying in a group, present a lesson in which you show your observations, teach the principles from the text, and show how the text applies to believers today.
2. If you are studying alone, write a 5-6 page paper in which you show each step of the journey of interpretation.

Recommended Resources

Lesson 1

Sources that were used throughout this course are listed here.

Bible. *English Standard Version*.

Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd 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 Karelynn 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

Bible Dictionaries. www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/

Bible Reading Calendars. www.bible.com

Bible Translations. www.biblegateway.com

Online Bible Atlas. www.bibleatlas.org

Lesson 3

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

Seven Minute Seminary. "Why Bible Background Matters." Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wiIK8A2EFk

Seven Minute Seminary. "The Role of Archaeology in Biblical Studies." Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm3HILoNOak

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				
10				

Application for a Certificate of Completion from Shepherds Global Classroom may be completed on our webpage at 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).

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.

World Religions and Cults

This course gives the evangelical believer an understanding of the teachings and proper responses to eighteen 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 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 1

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 2

This course describes how the church expanded and faced challenges through the period from the Reformation to modern times.