

How to Study the Bible

As Christians we believe God speaks to us through the holy Scripture of the Bible. It is our duty, then, to do our best to understand what the Bible says to us. Since the Bible was written a long time ago, many of the cultural references and literary styles used are unfamiliar to us today. To truly understand the Bible, we need to understand the background of life and literature 2000 to 3000 years ago as the Bible was being written.

Bible Interpretation

There are four keywords to understanding any Bible passage - observation, interpretation, evaluation, and application.

* Observation: What are the facts? What do the words mean? What comes before and after to put the passage in context? Who is speaking? And to whom?

* Interpretation: What did the passage mean to the original audience two or three thousand years ago? Are we making the mistake of interpreting the passage through our own experiences rather than those of the original audience? Is the passage using literary techniques like allegory, hyperbole, metaphor or parable to make its point?

* Evaluation: What does the passage mean to us today? Can it be applied directly today, or do we need to apply the underlying principle to conditions very different than when it was originally written?

* Application: How should I apply what I learn from this passage to live a more godly life? Do I need to change my attitudes or actions as a result?

(Adapted from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary (c)1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

As an example, we can try using this method to understand Exodus 20:3-5.

* Observation: Looking back to Exodus 19, we see that the Hebrew people had escaped from slavery in Egypt three months before and were traveling to the Promised Land. This is the first of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. The passage forbids making or worshipping idols or worshipping any other gods. Idols are images or symbols of false gods that are worshipped. Most of the Hebrews' neighbors were pagans at that time in history, and idol worship and worship of multiple gods was very common.

* Interpretation: When the ancient Hebrews got discouraged, they often lapsed into worshipping the idols and multiple gods of the pagan peoples they came in contact with instead of worshipping God. This Commandment said that, even in hard times, they must put their trust in God alone.

* Evaluation: Paganism has virtually disappeared from Western culture today. So, does this Commandment mean anything to us? What are we tempted to substitute for God in our lives? Do we put our trust in wealth more than in God? Do we seek power over others instead of seeking God? Do we look for fulfillment in pleasure instead of in God? Many people believe these things are the idols and false gods of today's world.

* Application: We may need to honestly and prayerfully examine our priorities to see if God is really more important to us than anything else in our lives.

The Observation and Interpretation steps are fairly objective, and Bible commentaries and other study materials are very helpful. The Evaluation and Application steps are very individual. It is in honestly and prayerfully considering these steps that we can deepen our understanding and faith.

Literary Forms of the Bible

It is helpful to understand the styles of writing used in the Bible, especially since some of those styles are no longer commonly used.

A parable is a simple story that helps us understand a spiritual or moral concept. Jesus was the master of the parable, and a large part of His teachings come to us in the form of the parables he told to his disciples and other people. The plain facts of a parable story are usually meaningless in

themselves. It is by analogy or similarity with the story that we gain an understanding of the spiritual or moral lesson of the parable. In the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-8) Jesus tells a story about a man who sowed seed on a farm. Some of the seed fell on rocks or pathways or among thorns where it could not grow. Other seed fell on good ground where it produced a bountiful crop. However, the point of this story has nothing to do with farming techniques. As Jesus explained in Luke 8:11-15, the seed represents the Word of God, which is offered to all people. Like the seed that fell in bad places, the Word of God does not produce good results in people who reject it for one reason or another. But, like the seed that fell on good ground, the Word of God grows strong within people who are receptive and it bears good (spiritual) fruit.

A simile uses "like" or "as" to give us a mental picture of something by comparing it to something else. "As the deer pants for water, so I long for you, O God." (Psalms 42:1) and "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." (Matthew 23:27) are examples of similes.

A metaphor is just a simile with the "like" or "as" left out. "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11) does not mean Jesus herds sheep. It is a metaphor meaning Jesus is our master and protector in the same way as a shepherd is master and protector of his sheep. "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) does not mean we glow in the dark. It is a metaphor meaning our good example can show others the way to Christ like a lamp shows us the way in the dark.

Hyperbole is deliberate exaggeration to make a point and is very common in the Bible. Examples include "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, Because men do not keep Your law." (Psalms 119:136) and "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25).

An Anthropomorphism attributes human characteristics or experiences to God. Examples include "The eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His". (2 Chronicles 16:9), and "For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil. (1 Peter 3:12). These verses do not mean that God, who is Spirit, has eyes, ears and a face like us. Instead, they tell us that God is always seeking righteousness among us and opposing evil.

Irony is saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Paul's tongue-in-cheek praise of the vain false teachers in 1 Corinthians 4:8 is an example of irony in the Bible.

Apocalypse comes from a Greek word meaning "uncovering" or "revealing." Apocalyptic literature uses elaborate visions, powerful symbols and numbers to reveal heavenly secrets. The New Testament book of Revelation and parts of the Old Testament books of Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah are written in apocalyptic form.

Most of the apocalyptic works were written during times of severe persecution. The symbols were clearly understood by the initiated but not by the persecutors. In Revelation, "Babylon" is used as a code word for Rome and the Roman Empire (Revelation 14:8, 16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 10, 21). Hebrew letters were also used for numbers, and the beast whose number is 666 (Revelation 13:18) is often assumed to be a reference to the Roman emperor Nero because of the similarity of "Nero Caesar" and "666" when written in Hebrew.

Context

The Bible is not a collection of "one-liners." All verses must be interpreted in the context of the verses that come before and after them, the whole passage, the chapter, the book and even the whole Bible. It is the nature of language that it takes many sentences or even paragraphs to convey a complex concept. A single Bible verse or passage often tells us only one aspect of a topic. We must look at all the Bible passages on a particular topic to get the true picture. If we look

at just one or a few verses, we can get an incomplete view or even a totally wrong view of the Bible's teachings.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (NIV, 1 Thessalonians 5:2)

Taken by itself, it would be difficult to even guess what this verse means; it could be interpreted many different ways. But in the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 as well as Matthew 24:42-44, Mark 13:33-37 and Luke 12:40, it clearly means the second coming of Jesus will be sudden and unexpected.

John 3:16 is one of the best known and most loved verses in the Bible and is an excellent one-sentence summary of the Christian faith:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (NIV, John 3:16)

Some people think this means that all we have to do is believe in Jesus as God's Son to assure our salvation. But in the context of John 3:16-21 as well as many other New Testament passages (e.g., Matthew 7:21-23, 25:31-46, Luke 10:25-37, John 14:21-23, Romans 2:6-10, Hebrews 10:26-31, James 2:20-24), it is clear that the word "believes" in John 3:16 also implies repentance and obedience to God's commandments.

Progressive Revelation

Around 1250 B.C., the Jews escaped from slavery in Egypt and spent 40 years wandering in the desert before coming to their new homeland. God gave the original Old Testament Law to Moses at that time. As the Jews developed a stable civilization, God sent numerous prophets to correct their errors and to refine their understanding of Him and His intentions for His chosen people. Finally, God sent His Son, Jesus, to accomplish His plan of salvation.

Jesus and His disciples radically reinterpreted the Old Testament Law; they brought a new era of the rule of love and spiritual truth instead of rule by law (Luke 10:25-28, John 1:16-17, 13:34-35, Romans 8:1-4, 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, Ephesians 2:14-18).

If we are looking for guidance on a topic, we must consider which Bible teaching reflects the most recent revelation from God. The Bible's teachings about retaliation and revenge are a good example of progressive revelation. First, at the time of Abraham, unlimited revenge for a wrong done was considered normal and proper (Genesis 34:1-2, 25-29). Later, the Law of Moses limited revenge to an equal injury for any injury done:

If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured. (NIV, Leviticus 24:18-20)

Finally, when Jesus came, He said we should not take any revenge at all:

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (NIV, Matthew 5:38-42)

Exegesis vs. Eisegesis

Exegesis means drawing out the true meaning of a Bible passage, and it should be the goal of all

Bible study. It means understanding the meaning of all the words in a passage. It means putting the passage in the proper historical and textual context to determine what it meant to its original audience. Finally, it involves thought and prayer to determine how it applies to today's world and to our own lives.

Eisegesis means reading one's own ideas into interpretation of the Bible. We all have our own beliefs, world view and biases, and letting them influence our interpretation of the Bible is an ever-present danger! Sometimes we think we understand a passage and unintentionally read our own meaning into it without going through the steps required for proper exegesis. Emotionally charged topics like abortion, sex, salvation and church doctrine pose a great temptation to prove a point by quoting a verse out of context or quoting selected verses while ignoring other relevant passages. But we must let God speak to us through the Bible and not try to make it say what we would like to hear.

In some ways the Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle. We cannot discover its true meaning until we are able to put the pieces together the right way. Prayer, study, group discussions, knowledge of Bible history and an understanding of the life and literary styles of Biblical times are things that help us put that puzzle together.

Where to Start?

Logically, we should read the Old Testament first since it serves as the background for the New Testament, but the life and teachings of Jesus and His apostles are most important for Christians to understand. So, for understanding the most important lessons of the Bible, we recommend reading in this order:

1. Luke is possibly the most complete story of Jesus' life and teachings. Matthew and Mark are similar.

2. Matthew Chapters 5, 6 and 7 contain Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount - the heart of Jesus' ethical and moral teachings and the basis of Christian living.

3. John is a very different Gospel from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Its theological perspective gives us a view into the spiritual meanings of Jesus' life and ministry.

4. Genesis contains the earliest recorded history of the Jewish people and tells their beliefs about God and their relationship with Him. Christianity had its beginnings with the Jews, so our understanding of Christianity cannot be complete without an understanding of the roots of Judaism.

5. Exodus tells of the Jews' escape from captivity under the leadership of Moses. It contains the essence of the Jewish laws, including the Ten Commandments. Like Genesis, it serves as important background for Christianity.

6. Romans is the best summary of the teachings of the apostle Paul, the first and most influential interpreter of Jesus' life and works.

After reading these six books, you should know enough about the Bible to decide what to explore in greater depth.

Which Bible is Best?

Traditional English Bible translations, such as the King James Version, are revered for their majestic style, and their archaic English gives them an air of authority. Unfortunately, the English language has changed a lot since the KJV was last updated in 1769. Many KJV words and phrases, such as Lord of hosts, sabaoth, emerods and concupiscence, would not be meaningful to most people today. Worse, other KJV words, such as charity, trespass, cousin, profit, and remission, have different primary meanings today than they did in the KJV, and that could tend to mislead the reader.

For Bible study, we need a Bible that accurately conveys the meanings of the ancient Hebrew and Greek Bible manuscripts to the modern English reader. We recommend reading from a modern English translation in place of or in addition to the KJV. Here are some good choices for Bible study:

- * For Protestants
 - o American editions: New Revised Standard Version; New International Version; New American Standard Bible; Revised Standard Version
 - o British editions: Revised English Bible; New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition
- * For Catholics
 - o American editions: New American Bible; New Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition
 - o British editions: The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, Anglicized Text; Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha

Bible Study Helps

The Bible was written a long time ago in a culture very different from the modern world, and it often seems confusing and contradictory. Good Bible study references are tremendously helpful for understanding the Bible as it was originally intended. The reference books below provide accurate and unbiased information.

- * William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, Westminster Press, various dates. A series of 17 books that give historical background, interpretation and commentary on each section of each book of the New Testament. The First and Second Editions were published in the mid 1950s. The Revised Editions, edited by Rev. James Martin, were published in the mid 1970s.

- * Bruce Barton, et. al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001. Verse-by-verse explanation of each book of the New Testament with emphasis on application to everyday life.

- * Dianne Bergant, ed., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary - Old Testament*, Liturgical Press, 1992. A collection of section-by-section explanations of each book of the Old Testament. Follows the Catholic arrangement of Old Testament books.

- * Robert J. Karris, ed., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary - New Testament*, Liturgical Press, 1992. A collection of section-by-section explanations of each book of the New Testament.

- * Herbert Lockyer, Sr., ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986. Commentary on people, places, things and doctrines of the Bible, arranged by topic. Includes references to relevant Bible passages.

- * I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition*, Intervarsity Press, 1996. Commentary on people, places, things and doctrines of the Bible, arranged by topic. Includes references to relevant Bible passages.

- * James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary*, Harper, 1988. Section-by-section commentary, interpretation and historical perspective on each book of the Bible from a scholarly viewpoint.

- * G.J. Wenham, et. al., *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition*, Intervarsity Press, 1994. Section-by-section explanations of each book of the the Bible.