

# How to Study the Bible

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## What One Must Believe in Order to Interpret the Bible Well

1. The *Inspiration* of Scripture (by the Holy Spirit)
2. The *Illumination* of Scripture (the Holy Spirit enables us to understand Scripture)
3. The *Authority* of Scripture (it is the final authority – higher than personal experience or tradition)
4. The *Unity* of Scripture (both Testaments witness to Jesus Christ)
5. The *Clarity* of Scripture (Scripture interprets Scripture)
6. The *Sufficiency* of Scripture (the Bible contains all we need to know for salvation)
7. The *Necessity* of Scripture (it gives us truth we cannot obtain from any other source)

## How To Begin

1. Begin with prayer asking for the illumination of the Holy Spirit.
2. Read the passage many times.
3. As you read, ask 3 questions:
  1. What does it say? (Observation)
  2. What does it mean? (Interpretation)
  3. In what specific ways does this meaning apply to my life? (Application)

## I. Observation: What does it say?

### 1. Marking is essential to observation:

- It slows you down so you pay attention to the words.
- It helps you to see relationships between the words.
- It helps you to remember the details of what you read.
- If you know the biblical languages, translating the biblical passage can help you slow down and observe as well.

### 2. In order to learn what the passage says, ask 5 W's & an H.

#### Who?

- Who are the characters?
- How are they described?
- Who is speaking/writing?
- To whom is he/she speaking/writing?
- Who is affected by the action?
- What is the relationship of the characters?

### **What?**

- What is the exact order & details of the actions & events?
- What are the conversations & how do the characters respond to each other?
- What did the characters see, hear & feel?
- What is the event or major idea & what is the purpose of the passage in the overall book?
- What do we learn about the people, the events or the teaching from this text?
- What instructions or warnings are given?
- What words or phrases are repeated? What do they tell us about the main idea?
- What is the tone of the conversation? - eg. friendly? angry? joyous?
- What is the context of a word, sentence, and passage? (What comes before and after it?)

### **When?**

- What is the progression of events? Is the event in the present, past or future?
- When did, or will, the events, outcome or consequences happen?
- When did or will he/she say it?

### **Where?**

- Where did or will this happen? (Locate the place on a map.)
- Where was the writer writing from?
- Where are the intended recipients from?
- What are the geographical features of the place?
- What is the cultural, spiritual significance of the place?

### **Why?**

- Why did the events happen the way they did?
- Why did the events happen where or when they did?
- Why did the characters act or respond as they did and could they have responded differently?
- Why did the characters/author say what they did?
- Why was so much or so little place devoted to this particular event or teaching?
- Why did different people respond or speak differently to the same thing?
- Why is a particular word or phrase repeated so often?
- Why did something change?

### **How?**

- How did/does/will something happen?
- How does the event begin? What are the causes?
- How does the event end?
- How does an action affect the characters?
- How is a truth illustrated?
- How does a truth relate to other parts of the story/book/Bible?
- How does a character/reader know something?

### 3. Other Things to Observe

- Lists – causes, consequences, results, commands (Also conclusion signal words like “finally”)
- Repeated words – often a clue to the theme or meaning
- Contrasts – look for connecting words like: but, however, never the less (focus on differences)
- Comparisons – look for similes or metaphors (focus on similarities)
  - Similes – comparison using like or as (“We all like sheep have gone astray” Isa 53:6)
  - Metaphor – comparison not using like or as (Your word is a lamp for my feet” Ps 119:105)
- Cause & effect (or purpose & results) –look for words like: if, for, because, therefore, so that, for this reason
- Means by which effect or purpose are accomplished – look for the word “by” - eg. “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”
- Emphatic words: Truly, verily, behold, indeed, especially, I tell you
- Significant theological words: example – righteousness, Kingdom of heaven
- Progression from general to specific or from specific to general
- Questions & answers
- References to other parts of the Bible – i.e. Bible verses quoted in this passage and places later in Scripture that quote this passage (eg. Ps. 110 refers to Gen. 14 and is quoted often in the NT)

## II. Interpretation: What does it mean?

1. The key to interpretation is reading the passage in its proper *context*
  - A passage can have several contexts:
    - a) *The immediate (or literary) context* (eg. the psalm a verse is in, the section of the letter, a group of stories with a common themes that occur one after another)
    - b) *The biblical (or canonical) context* (eg. a verse in the context of Paul’s theology as a whole, a passage about the exile in the context of the Davidic covenant)
    - c) *The historical context* (eg. a knowledge of the history of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires helps us comprehend the prophecies of Isaiah better)
      - Note that there are two kinds of historical knowledge
        - a) That which is provided in the Bible itself (eg. Isa. 36-39 or Luke 2:1-3)
        - b) That which is not in the Bible but discovered by archaeology or ancient history
      - The first kind is there precisely to provide the necessary context for understanding Divine revelation, which comes to us in history culminating in the Incarnation
      - The second kind is *not* essential for understanding the Bible (otherwise people in earlier centuries would not have been able to understand it), but it can be interesting and helpful
      - It can be used to illustrate Scripture rather than explaining Scripture
      - There has been a large increase in archaeological and historical knowledge in the past two centuries

- At the same time, as a result of the materialistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, some people believe that the historical meaning is the only real meaning
  - By “historical” meaning they mean what the original author meant to say to the original audience in the original situation as reconstructed by scholarly means
  - The “historical-critical” method of interpretation seeks to understand the text as a human product of this world, rather than as a supernatural miracle of God’s providence
  - The word “historical” here is said to refer only to non-miraculous events that happen according to the laws of nature in this world of time and space, which means that divine revelation and miracles are not “historical” in this sense
  - But Christians believe that God does miracles in this space-time world so we cannot agree to restrict the meaning of “historical” in this way
  - So we have to reject the narrowness of the “historical-critical” approach in order to see Divine revelation as historical
- d) The theological context (eg. debates about the interpretation of a passage in church history such as the Roman Catholic versus Protestant debates about the meaning of justification by faith in Paul’s letters)
2. Check the cross references listed in your Bible. (You’ll start to remember more as you study.)
- a. Is this passage quoting earlier Scripture?
  - b. Is this passage (or part of it) quoted later in Scripture? (eg. in the New Testament)
  - c. Are there parallel passages to this one? (eg. some parables are in more than one Gospel)
- This is often the key to the proper interpretation of your passage (eg. Heb. 1:8-9 quotes Ps. 45:6-7 and this is the key to seeing a Christological interpretation of Ps. 45)
  - Compare other places in your Bible where similar words, ideas, phrases or stories are told. (Study Bible notes, Commentaries, Bible dictionaries & handbooks, concordances are helpful)
3. Ask:
- What is the context of a word, sentence, story?
  - What is the implication of . . . ?
  - Are there commands I should obey? – Are there promises I can trust?
  - Are there warnings I should pay attention to?
  - What do I learn about God, Jesus, Holy Spirit?
  - What do I learn about Satan, temptation, evil and sin?
  - What do I learn about the church, family, government?
  - What do I learn about myself? My body? My emotions? My mind?
  - What is revealed about relationships?
4. Check other sources to confirm your understanding. (Commentaries, Bible dictionaries, etc.)

### **III. Application: What is God Saying to me (or us) in this passage?**

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand how to apply the truth of the passage. Begin with yourself before you consider what it means for others.
2. A passage may have more than one application; it may have different implications in different situation.
3. An application may go beyond the literal or plain sense as discovered by observation, but it will never contradict it.
4. You must be ready to obey whatever the Spirit commands at this point or you will not understand. (This is where a lot of false interpretation and false doctrines originate.)
5. Personalize the interpretation by putting it into a statement, which you pray to God. Examples:
  - a. You are a faithful God; therefore I will trust you with . . .
  - b. Thank you for . . . working through imperfect people like me.
  - c. Forgive me for . . .
  - d. Help me to begin to . . .
  - e. Help me to stop . . .
  - f. Help me to continue to . . .
  - g. I will trust you to . . .
  - h. Show me the idols in my life.
  - i. Give me specific ideas of how to show love to my neighbour.
  - j. Help me to understand this passage.
6. If you are teaching this passage in a Bible study or sermon, you will need to consider what God is saying through it to the church today or in general. Ask yourself the following questions as you reflect on this passage you have studied. As a result of the study of this passage . . .
  - a. What should we believe?
  - b. What should we do?
  - c. What can we hope for?
7. Ask the Holy Spirit to continue to teach you from this passage.