

 GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

---

A COURSE FOR SERIOUS BIBLE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15*

Written by Dr. Joel James, Pastor-teacher of Grace Fellowship, Pretoria, South Africa

---

## THE PRESUPPOSITIONS

*This notebook assumes the following truths about the Bible:*

- 1.) The Bible is God's written revelation to man, and thus the sixty-six books of the Bible given to us by the Holy Spirit constitute the plenary (inspired equally in all parts) Word of God (1 Corinthians 2:7-14; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- 2.) The Word of God is an objective, propositional revelation (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Corinthians 2:13), verbally inspired in every word (2 Timothy 3:16), absolutely inerrant in the original documents, infallible, and God-breathed. We teach the literal, grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture which affirms the belief that the opening chapters of Genesis present creation in six literal days (Genesis 1:31; Exodus 31:17).
- 3.) The Bible constitutes the only infallible rule of faith and practice (Matthew 5:18; 24:35; John 10:35; 16:12-13; 17:17; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- 4.) God spoke in His written Word by a process of dual authorship. The Holy Spirit so superintended the human authors that, through their individual personalities and different styles of writing, they composed and recorded God's Word to man (2 Peter 1:20-21) without error in the whole or in the part (Matthew 5:18; 2 Timothy 3:16).
- 5.) While there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently applies the literal grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17; 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:7-15; 1 John 2:20). It is the responsibility of believers to ascertain carefully the true intent and meaning of Scripture, recognising that proper application is binding on all generations. Yet the truth of Scripture stands in judgement of men; never do men stand in judgement of it.

*Oh how I love Thy law!*  
Psalm 119:97

## SECTION 1: PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

### Two Wrong Ways

Through the centuries of Christianity Bible students have practiced many wrong methods of interpreting the Scripture. Here are two common ones you'll want to avoid.

- 1) **The allegorical method:** An allegory is a story in which the people and events of the story have hidden or symbolic meanings. Those who interpret the Bible allegorically by-pass the clear, historical meaning of the text, and make imaginative associations between their Christian experience and persons or events in the text.

For example, one church father interpreted the parable of the good Samaritan by making the following associations: The traveler who was attacked represents a person seeking salvation. The robbers represent Satan. Naturally, the good Samaritan is Christ. The oil and wine the Samaritan administered to the injured man's wounds picture the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. The donkey is the gospel because it was the vehicle that carried the injured man to the inn (the church), where the man recovered.

Although Jesus taught the parable to answer a specific question ("Whom must I love as my neighbor?"), that is ignored. That church father "found" a deeper, mystical, not-readily-apparent meaning for the passage by means of imaginative association.

*Evaluation of the allegorical method:*

- The allegorical method obscures the true meaning of God's word by ignoring what the writer actually said.
- Since the plain sense of the text is ignored, there is no means of checking whether an allegorical interpretation is true or not.
- An allegorical interpretation tells you more about the interpreter's imagination than it does about God's word.

- 2) **The "What it means to me" (or Neo-orthodox) method:** This method comes in two packages: one scholarly, one popular. Let's start with the scholarly. The Neo-orthodox or reader-response method of interpreting Scripture is based on a particular view of the Bible. Modern theologians don't believe the Bible is infallible or inerrant; they don't believe the Bible in itself *is* God's word. It is merely a record of how men in ages past experienced God. Therefore, it is *suggestive*, but not *authoritative* in our day: your experience of God might be different than Moses' or Paul's or Peter's.

For the Neo-orthodox theologian the Bible isn't God's word. It *becomes* the word of God when you have a significant experience while reading it. Truth is not the concern; that is different for every person. The issue is how the words strike you as you read them. What the original author wrote is merely a tool that assists you in shaping your own concept of God and how to please Him. This view of God's word is very popular in today's post-modern, everyone-is-right, no-one-is-wrong academic atmosphere. The reader's response determines the meaning, not the words themselves.

This method of interpretation is also wide spread on the popular level, reflected in the motto, "What this verse means to me is..." God's intent is not the concern. The historical, theological context is irrelevant. Only how it immediately and intuitively strikes the reader matters. In such circles, diligent study is frowned on, even vilified. The reader's intuitive, unstudied response determines the meaning, not the words themselves.

- It's based on an errant view of the Bible's inerrancy and infallibility.
- The Bible is divine truth, not suggestive, non-authoritative, human experiences.
- These methods fail to recognise that the intent of the original author is what determines the meaning of a document—the memo means what the boss who wrote it says it means. What the Bible meant to the human authors (as God's Spirit moved them to write) is what the Bible means. We don't impose our meaning on what God said; we work to discover the meaning He initially and eternally intended.

We can find that meaning by reading the Bible according to the normal rules of written communication. What are those rules? How do they apply to the Bible? What is the right way to interpret the Bible?

## The Right Way: Carefully and Normally

The right way to interpret the Bible is to read it as carefully and normally as possible. In fact, 1 Timothy 2:15 commands that we be careful readers of God's word: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." While not forgetting its unique characteristics—it is the God-breathed word—we must let the Scripture mean what it means based on what the words say. Interpretation is not a magical or mysterious process; it is reading carefully and normally, not looking for fanciful, allegorical, personal meanings.

Of course, since the Bible is God's book, to understand it we must seek God's wisdom: "Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18). Having sought the necessary grace to handle the divine message, as a carpenter who measures twice and cuts once, we must accurately cut straight the words and sentences of Scripture. The twelve principles on the following pages are the basic guidelines for reading God's word carefully and normally.

## Twelve Principles of Interpretation

### 1) The Clarity of Scripture

The Bible can be understood because God meant it to be understood.

**I am the Lord, and there is none else. I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land...I, the Lord, speak righteousness declaring things that are upright. Isaiah 45:18-19**

**The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law. Deut 29:29, emphasis added (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17)**

Not everything in the Bible is easy to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16). However, as Deuteronomy 29:29 indicates, God revealed His word to be understood and lived: the revealed things—the words of the law—are ours (cf. Deut 6:1, 6-7; Matt 7:24-27; James 1:22-25). That means we study God's word *expecting* to discover a coherent message. When we do come across theologically obscure passages, we must give precedence to the clear sections of Scripture that address that issue.

### 2) The Accommodation of Revelation

God revealed His truth in terms that human beings can understand. For example, the Scripture was written in well-known human languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. When it speaks of infinite or divine concepts, it does so in terms we can relate to. For example, 2 Chronicles 16:9 says God's *eyes* move throughout the earth.

That doesn't necessarily mean that God the Father, a spirit being, has physical eyes. He doesn't. But God knew that eyesight is the most perceptive of the human senses; therefore, He described His infinite perceiving abilities that way. Accommodation means God stoops to our level, describing Himself in ways we can understand.

### 3) One Meaning of a Text

**Although a text may have many different applications, it has only one meaning—the meaning of the original human author, moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).**

Consider, for example, the command, "Do not steal." For the ten year old, that might apply to shoplifting a candy bar. For an adult it might apply to doing non-work related activities while his employer is paying him to work. Those are two different *applications*. However, there is only one meaning to that text: Don't take something that is not yours or not yours to use in that way.

### 4) Harmony of Scripture

Even though written over a period of 1500 years by more than thirty human authors, the Bible agrees with itself, amazingly so—or not so amazingly when you consider its one divine author, God. Because the Scripture was spoken by the God who knows everything and never lies, the Bible does not contradict itself.

There is a danger lurking in this principle. We must avoid the practice of determining what we believe based on *one* text and then forcing every other passage to "harmonise" with that view. That leads to bad, even dishonest theology.

### 5) Normal Interpretation

This means we read the Bible following the reading practices we would consider normal for any other important document. When the office manager sends the maintenance man a memo instructing him to change the flickering florescent globe in the hallway, the maintenance man doesn't read a mystical, secret meaning about spiritual light into it. He reads the memo normally and fetches a new globe and a step ladder. That's normal interpretation, and we need to read our Bibles that way, too.

Normal reading means statements are assumed to be literal unless it is evident the author was using a figure of speech. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door," we do not conclude that Jesus is made of wood and has hinges. We naturally understand that our Lord was using imagery. Our minds examine the literal meaning, find it unlikely, and accept it as figure of speech.

We should note that even when interpreting figures of speech it is good policy to begin with the literal. What is a door? What purpose does a door serve? Having asked that, then we ask: What was Jesus trying to communicate by comparing Himself to a door? The literal function of a door suggests the meaning of the figure: Jesus is the gateway to eternal life.

### 6) Context

One of the most important summary statements ever made regarding Bible interpretation is, *context determines meaning*. This means that a text of Scripture is given its true meaning only when it is considered in relationship to the words around it.

For example, Philippians 2:3 says, "Do nothing." Is that justification for laziness? No. The rest of the verse says, "Do nothing *from selfishness or empty conceit*." When the words surrounding, "Do nothing," are considered, it is clear Paul was not condoning laziness. Here's another example: Philippians 4:6 says, "Be anxious." Is that justification for worry? No. The rest of the verse says, "Be anxious *for nothing*."

By quoting only a portion of a text, we can completely up-end the obvious meaning of the text. Not considering the context would have led us to *disobey* God if we had applied our "interpretation."

Consider another example: Read Isaiah 1:10. To whom was God speaking? Based on that verse alone, you would conclude God was addressing Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now read the context. Verse 1 says Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—who lived 1400 years *after* the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse 3 says Isaiah was proclaiming God's word to Israel. Verse 8 uses the terminology "daughter of Zion," an OT phrase referring to Jerusalem. And finally, verse 9 uses the phrases "*like* Sodom" and "*like* Gomorrah." Isaiah was making a comparison between Jerusalem of his day and Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities destroyed over a thousand years before.

Context is important. If you had picked out only v. 10, you would have concluded Isaiah chapter one is about Sodom and Gomorrah. Your interpretation would have been embarrassingly inaccurate. Reading the context gives you the true picture. Context determines meaning.

Here are some questions you can ask to grasp the context of a particular passage:

- Who is writing or speaking?
- To whom is he writing or speaking?
- Is there a specific situation addressed in the text that shapes the interpretation?

Let's apply those questions to Jeremiah 29:11—a favorite "sound bite" verse for Christian posters and calendars.

**"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity..."**

This verse is often quoted as if it were a general promise to all believers. However, even a cursory examination of Jeremiah 29 shows that this was part of a letter sent by Jeremiah to the Jews exiled in Babylon. Reading further, you find that this promise was part of God's plan to restore the nation of Israel in the future.

The ones to whom Jeremiah was writing and the specific situation—exile and promised restoration—limits the meaning of this verse. It is definitely *not* a sweeping promise that believers will have an easy and calamity-free passage through life (Jeremiah himself was hated, harried, thrown in prison, kidnapped, and martyred for his faithful preaching—it certainly didn't apply to him!). Context determines meaning.

## 7) Progressive Revelation

God revealed His truth over an extended period of time. In other words, revelation became more detailed as time went on. It *progressed*.

**God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.**  
Heb 1:1-2

The fact that God's revelation has grown more detailed over time means we must avoid the trap of reading *later* revelation back into *earlier* revelation.

For example, in Genesis 12:3 God said He would bless all the families of the earth through Abraham. In Galatians 3, God revealed that part of that blessing is salvation by grace through faith in Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ. It might be a mistake to assume that Abraham understood *all* of that when God gave him the promise in Genesis 12. Only as revelation progressed did God unveil the specifics of His plan.

When studying OT passages, we must take care not to read into them more than the author could have known. Once we have established the author's meaning in his historical context, it is appropriate to fill that out with later revelation. However, those two steps must be kept separate.

## 8) Interpretation vs. Application

There is a difference. *Interpretation* finds the meaning the original author intended in his historical situation. The *application* is the various ways that one meaning can be lived out today.

For example, Jesus said, "Love one another." A wife might say, "That means I need to love my husband better." However, is that really the *meaning*? If it is, her husband is going to have some trouble fulfilling that command—he doesn't have a husband. And, if that is the *meaning*, that wife might get upset when other women in the church try to love her husband better.

You can see the point. The *meaning* of John 15:12 is a command for the disciples to exhibit a self-sacrificial concern for others. You might be able to stretch that to apply to how a wife is to relate to her husband. However, that application is definitely not the *meaning* of the passage.

Interpretation and application must always be kept separate. Here is one way to do that. Let's assume you are studying Romans 12:1-2. Re-write in your own words those two verses. Start every sentence with the words "Paul said..." Make sure you write *only* what Paul actually said *to the Romans* in that verse. That is the interpretation. From that interpretation, you can develop appropriate applications for your present situation.

*Example: Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world.*

Wrong approach: "To me that means we shouldn't watch television. In fact, this verse means all television is evil. If you own a television you're not a Christian. That's what Paul said to the Romans, you know."

Right approach: *Interpretation:* Paul said the Roman believers should not follow the same patterns of thinking and living unbelievers do. *Application:* Something that influences me to think like an unbeliever is watching television. To keep from being conformed to worldly thinking I should be more discerning about what I watch on television or even avoid watching television all together.

Interpretation—what Paul said—is distinct from how you are to act based on what he said. One interpretation can lead to many legitimate applications; just make sure you actually find the one meaning of the text before you start multiplying applications.

## 9) Grammar and Syntax

A verse does not say more or less than what the rules of language make it say. It might be qualified by the context, but the real meaning of the text is found in what the passage says according to the normal usage of language.

## 10) Historical Appropriateness

One of the great dangers a Bible student faces is reading a modern view of a word or concept into a biblical one. For example, one well-known Christian psychologist defines one of Paul's words for the mind in Romans in terms of the Freudian unconscious mind. However, the unconscious mind—the id, super-ego, and so on—are the manufacture of modern psychology. It is historically inappropriate to read those modern, secular concepts back into Paul's statements. This is called totality transfer: totally transferring a twenty-first century

---

meaning into a first century word. The Freudian concept of human beings simply didn't exist in Paul's day. Always make sure your interpretation is appropriate to the historical situation of the text.

## 11) Word Study

To understand a passage of Scripture, key words within that passage must be defined accurately (as illustrated just above). To do this, it is helpful to consider the other uses of that word in the Scripture—first by the same author and then by others. If there are multiple meanings, the immediate context determines which meaning the author intended in your passage. If you are working in the NT, the OT background of the word must always be considered.

You can accomplish much in word study with just an exhaustive English concordance and some persistence. As you look at every use of a word, you'll naturally see its range of meanings, its nuances in different contexts.

However, today there are also many excellent, usable lexicons, theological word books, and commentaries that provide scholarly explanations of biblical words for the average Bible student. Get them and use them.

## 12) Checking Principle

It's good for a student to check his understanding of a passage against the interpretations of Bible scholars from the ages of Christianity. It is impossible for us to know all the geographic, historical, and interpretational issues in a passage—information Bible scholars spend a lifetime accumulating. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other Bible study tools can shorten that process from a lifetime to five minutes.

Notice that this principle is *last* on the list. There is a reason for that. As a rule it's best to do your own study on a passage, and then compare it with someone else's. Sometimes you'll need to use Bible dictionaries and commentaries early in the process to get a handle on a certain word or theological concept. That's advisable. However, avoid the trap of opening a commentary and reading it as if it were the Bible.

Work on a passage all you can, looking up specific words or concepts you don't understand. Once you've done all you can to process a text, then use good commentaries to fill in the gaps or correct errors. Rather than read the results of someone else's analysis, analyse the passage yourself. You'll understand the message of the text and apply it better if you do.

Use the checking principle. It will save your interpretational life. But don't become so commentary dependent that you never develop your own ability to interpret the Scripture. You can do more than you think!

The twelve principles we've just covered apply to the study of all the Scripture. There are, however, some specific principles that will help you when studying OT poetry like the Psalms and Proverbs, and biblical narrative (the "story" sections of Scripture like Genesis, 1 Samuel, and Acts). The following six pages detail those principles.