

## Lesson 10

# Principles of Bible Study

It is impossible to overestimate the value of studying Scripture. If you want to continue growing as a Christian and in your knowledge of God, you must begin to systematically study the Bible on your own. It is the author's prayer that these studies have been helpful to you, but it probably isn't practical for you to spend the rest of your Christian life working through one published Bible study after another. At some point you need to learn how to handle God's Word yourself and to interpret it yourself. Doing that will do three things for you: (1) it will keep you from falling into error; (2) it will sharpen your cognitive skills and reasoning abilities; and (3) it will give you a greater depth of insight into God's Word and what He wants for your life. God's entire plan of salvation and most of His will for your life are all recorded in the Bible. Read the following Bible passages. How important is it to study the Bible and to be firmly grounded in the Word?

Acts 17:11

2 Timothy 2:15

2 Timothy 3:14-17

Ephesians 4:14

1 Peter 2:2

In these final lessons you will be learning some general rules of Bible interpretation and how to use Bible study tools. You also will be given some practical training in using your newly acquired skills. But before you begin, you must realize that it is impossible to ever fully understand Scripture apart from a relationship with Christ. What do these verses say about how we understand Scripture?

1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:14

Psalm 119:18

The unsaved can learn to study Scripture, but they'll never be able to fully understand it because the things of God are spiritually discerned. It is only as the Holy Spirit opens your eyes that you will truly understand what you read. But the leading of the Spirit in your life should not be an excuse for *not* developing good Bible study skills. There are many people today who believe that they need only to let the Bible open randomly, read a solitary verse and ask, "What does this mean to me?" That, my friend, is a flippant and dangerous way to handle God's Word. No one would dare open a novel or textbook, pick out a random sentence somewhere in the middle, and ponder its meaning. A lifetime of such practices would leave one completely ignorant of the true meaning of anything, even if he memorized every sentence or verse. The Word of God is important, and it deserves our careful study. The Holy Spirit guides us, but God has given us a brain to be used. He expects us to carefully study what He has written so we can know His message.

The study of the principles for interpreting Scripture is called "hermeneutics" and the practice of these principles is known as "exegesis." There are some differences of opinion when it comes to hermeneutics, but there are some basic principles of interpretation that most agree on.

### **The Rule of Context**

One of the fundamental rules of Bible study is to always interpret a verse in light of its context. Sometimes the meaning can be properly understood in the context of just a few sentences or a paragraph. For example, read 1 Corinthians 2:9 without looking at any surrounding verses. What is the verse talking about and what do you think it means?

Now read 1 Corinthians 2:7-10. How does your interpretation change as a result of reading the verse in its context?

In this example, the meaning of the verse in context is just the opposite of what we originally thought. Many a preacher has used 1 Corinthians 2:9 to describe the wondrous things God has prepared in heaven for us — things we cannot even imagine here on earth. But a careful study of the verse in its context tells us the author is speaking of wisdom and what has *already* been revealed to us by the Spirit.

Let's try another example. Read 1 Corinthians 10:23. According to this verse, what is permissible for the Christian to do?

Does this really mean that Christians are permitted to do *anything* — even commit murder, adultery or to steal? Of course not. The context of the verse forbids that interpretation. Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-14. What are some activities that are not permissible for Christians according to these verses?

So, right away we know that not everything is permissible. If you look more closely at the verse in the New International Version, you will notice that the phrase, "Everything is permissible," is in quotation marks. Paul is quoting a statement by some in the Corinthian church, not setting a precedent. A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 will help you to better understand what Paul was trying to say — Even in the realm of things that *are* permissible, we still can't do *anything*.

Now look at Romans 7:14-20. What conclusion could be drawn about the "normal" Christian life?

But how should this passage be interpreted in light of Romans 6-8?

Sometimes a verse might require the reading of an entire book of the Bible in order for you to understand it. Read Jonah 4:1-3. What is happening in this passage?

Jonah is angry; he tells God how gracious, compassionate, loving and forgiving He is; and then, out of the blue, he says he'd rather die than live. The passage makes no sense unless you read the entire book. Skim through the first three chapters of Jonah. Now, why did God's compassion make Jonah so miserable?

Can you see how reading a verse in its context helps you understand the true meaning?

Ultimately, though, each verse must be interpreted in the context of the Bible as a whole. The Bible never contradicts itself, so if there appears to be a discrepancy, you must make sure your interpretation is based on the teaching of the whole of Scripture. If you are a new Christian unfamiliar with much of the Bible, this might be difficult at first. But as you continue to read and study, and as your knowledge of the whole of Scripture increases, you will be better able to discern the general principles that are woven throughout the entire Bible. When it comes to context, there is no substitute for reading through the Bible from beginning to end. That is the only way to ensure a proper understanding of Scripture.

What wrong conclusions might someone make based on these verses taken out of context?

Luke 12:19

Matthew 5:29

John 6:53

Luke 14:26

Taking verses out of context to “prove” a particular viewpoint is known as “proof-texting,” and you can readily see how easily it can lead to error.

### **The Rule of Original Intention**

The Bible definitely is relevant to our lives today. God wants to speak to us through His Word and to convey a message to us. But each individual book was written by an author to a particular audience at a particular time for a particular reason. It was originally intended for them and was understood by them (notice 2 Thessalonians 2:6). Our job is to discern what the author actually said to his readers, the original intention of meaning. Once we’ve done that, we can then look for the general principles taught and how they apply to our lives today. It is foolish to decide the meaning of a verse or passage by only asking what it means to us. There *is* an objective meaning. The original intention of the author is of primary importance.

The author’s purpose for writing can help us understand difficult passages. Sometimes the author clearly states his purpose. Write down John’s purpose for writing his Gospel found in John 20:31.

John records miracles as “signs” pointing to who Jesus was in order to prompt belief. Knowing that, you would want to study each of the miracles recorded in John’s Gospel to see what they reveal about Jesus as the Son of God. Read about the first miracle in John 2:1-11. Many people overlook this miracle because it seems almost trivial. No disease was cured, no demon was exorcised. But why was this miracle important in light of John’s purpose? (see John 2:11)

What does this miracle teach about Jesus as the Son of God and our response to Him? (see John 2:5, 10)

The author doesn't always come right out and tell us why he writes. Sometimes we can infer his purpose by the tone of the letter or by stated prohibitions or corrections of a certain group of people in the letter (e.g. Galatians 1:6-9). Repeated words can also give a clue to the author's purpose (e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 7:5-7). A particularly powerful literary device is used in the book of Esther. Though God's providence is evident in every chapter the book, there is no reference to God at all. The author deliberately left out a word (God) in order to make it more obvious that the word *should* be there.

In order to understand the original intention of the author, it is often necessary to know the historical or cultural background of a book. This information can be found in the notes in a study Bible, in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, or in a commentary. Let's use the story of the Good Samaritan as an example. Read the story in Luke 10:25-37. What is the purpose of the story?

If you were to open a Bible dictionary or commentary, you might read something like this:

*"Back in 722-721 B.C., when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, the land of Samaria [Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom] was repopulated with a mixed people — Jews who had been forced to intermarry with Gentiles. Many of these Samaritans... were of Israelite ancestry.*

*"Around 400 B.C., these Samaritans built an altar on Mt. Gerizim.... Their Bible contained only the Pentateuch. Because of their mixed blood, their worship, and their rejection of much of God's word revealed through the prophets, they were despised by the Jews, who destroyed the Samaritan altar around 128 B.C. This only increased hostility and tension between the two groups, to the extent that, in New Testament times, Samaritans even would deny lodging to Jewish pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem for various feasts — and the journey through Samaria took three days." [Patricia David, *Through the Bible* (Indianapolis: Wesley Press, 1995) p. 183.]*

Does this historical information about the Samaritans bring any additional insight to the parable of the Good Samaritan?

How does it help you to better understand Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-26?

Since Jews obviously didn't travel through Samaria, choosing instead to travel on the other side of the Jordan, what significance do Jesus' words have in John 4:4?

Let's try another example that's a little more difficult. Read 1 John 1:8-2:2 and 3:9. Do these verses seem to contradict one another? What do they say about a Christian and sin?

Some of the confusion disappears when we learn the historical background of the letter. John was writing from Ephesus at the same time a man named Cerinthus was promulgating Gnostic teachings. The Gnostics used a lot of Christian terminology and were confusing many Christians. One of their basic teachings was that the spiritual world (including the spiritual part of man) was completely good, while all physical matter (including the human body) was inherently evil. The soul was held captive in this earthly body and could only be released by a special knowledge (Greek, "*gnosis*"). Because of this belief in dualism, Cerinthus taught that he could do anything he wanted with his physical body and still be "sinless" because his soul was perfectly good. Some commentators think that anytime John writes "if we claim" or "whoever claims," he is referring to one of the gnostic teachings prevalent in Ephesus. How does that change your understanding of 1 John 1:8? Does this verse refer to Christians?

Knowing the customs of people in Bible times can also help us to understand the author's original meaning. Without knowing prevailing customs, how would you interpret Romans 12:20?

Many new Christians are appalled when they read this verse, which is also found in Proverbs 25:21-22. But it doesn't really teach that if we do good to our enemies, we'll make it worse for them in hell ("heap burning coals on his head"). A little study reveals that an Egyptian custom was to walk about with a pan of burning coals on one's head as a public symbol of repentance. Our kindness to our enemies, then, may actually lead them to repentance. The goal is not vengeance, but restoration.

Read the account of Jesus washing His disciples' feet in John 3:1-17. What was the significance of this act?

In Jesus' day men wore sandals and traveled along dusty, dirty roads. Even though they were freshly bathed, their feet would inevitably be dirty. When they entered a house, a servant was generally there to carry out the menial task of washing their feet. This was the custom of the day. Apparently, since Jesus desired to share the Passover alone with His disciples, there was no servant to wash their feet in the Upper Room. How does this information help in your understanding of the significance of what Jesus did for His disciples?

Hopefully you can see how much richer and deeper Scripture becomes when we begin to understand the writers' original intentions. Once we learn what a passage meant to the original readers, we are able to apply it to our own lives in a way that is genuinely consistent with the true meaning of the text.



## The Rule of Linguistics

The rule of linguistics is basically to take the plain sense of the words in a verse unless the context forbids it. Most of the time what you read means exactly what it says. Rarely is there some mystical meaning that you must read into Scripture. In order to understand the plain sense of the words, though, you must have a good grasp of the English language. Linguistics includes grammar, syntax (sentence structure) and the meaning of words. Thankfully, there is a version of the Bible for almost any reading level. The King James Version is written on a 12th grade reading level, the Living Bible (which is actually a paraphrase and not a translation from the original languages) is written on an 8th grade reading level and the New International Version is written on a 7th grade level. The average American, however, reads on a 4th grade level, so, if you're not very proficient in English, you might want to begin with the International Children's Bible, written on a 3rd grade level. If you have trouble finding the antecedent of a pronoun (the noun to which a pronoun refers) or knowing the difference between a subject or object, you might want to consider taking an English refresher course or picking up a grammar book to review.

A dictionary is also important when you're studying Scripture. If you don't understand the meaning of a word, you won't understand the meaning of a verse. It sounds simple, but it's important, especially if you're reading from the King James Version, which uses some words in ways that are now archaic (e.g., "quick" means "alive" and "conversation" means "life-style"). In the next course you will learn how to use a concordance to help you understand how specific words are used in the Bible.

Once you are comfortable with grammar and word definitions, you should be able to understand most of what you read in the Bible. Remember: always take the plain sense of the words unless the context forbids it. But when does the context forbid it? In order to answer this question, you need to understand some of the figures of speech and literary devices used in Scripture.

A *simile* is a comparison of two objects which uses the words "like" or "as." An example of a simile would be, "She's as hungry as a horse." It's important that you recognize what characteristics are being compared. The comparison in the above example is not between the woman and a horse, but between her hunger and the hunger of a horse. Look up the following verses and find the similes. What two objects or characteristics are being compared?

Judges 7:12

Job 13:28

Psalms 42:1

Isaiah 9:18

Matthew 17:20

Matthew 25:32

A *metaphor* is also a comparison, but it does not use the word “like” or “as.” It states that one thing *is* another, and the comparison is implied. If I simply told you, “She is a horse,” you could assume (based on the context of our conversation) that she is either as big as a horse, as hungry as a horse or as awkward as a horse. You wouldn’t understand me to mean that she was actually a horse physically. The meaning of the metaphor would be dependent on the context. What metaphors do you find in these Bible verses and what do they mean?

Job 13:24-25

Isaiah 1:31

Matthew 26:26

John 10:7

2 Corinthians 5:1

Ephesians 2:19-22

*Hyperbole* is another type of comparison akin to exaggeration. The exaggeration is deliberate and understood immediately by the reader. Look up these examples of hyperbole. What point is the writer trying to make?

Psalms 119:20

Matthew 5:29

John 21:25

Another literary device used in Scripture is *personification*: when an inanimate object is given human characteristics. What object or characteristic is being personified in these examples?

Deuteronomy 32:1

Isaiah 44:23

Proverbs 1:20

These are just a few of the literary devices used in Scripture. But there are many more. *Symbols* are also used frequently in the Bible. A symbol is anything that has another meaning besides its natural one. Jesus used them all the time in His teaching. He used salt and light to describe the Christian's witness in the world, and He used the image of birth as a symbol to help Nicodemus understand the new birth in John 3. The book of Revelation is filled with symbolic numbers (e.g., seven is the number of completion). We must always be careful when we interpret symbols. They usually have a logical, intended meaning but shouldn't be taken beyond the analogy that the author is trying to make. The context usually explains the symbol, so great care should always be taken to understand the symbol in its original context.

### **Additional Principles of Bible Study**

You should keep these principles in mind whenever you are studying a passage of Scripture:

1. Remember that the Bible is one continuous unfolding of God's plan of salvation for His people. You can't chop it up and throw some parts away. The Old Testament must be understood in light of the New Testament, and vice versa.

2. Remember that the books of the Bible were written to or for real people who lived at a certain time. They were meant to be understood by them. The authors wrote in normal, human language. The Bible was also meant to be understood by you. Don't let deceivers fool you with convoluted ways of carving up Scripture so the only way you can understand it is for them to explain it to you. God gave us a sense of logic, and we should always use it when we study the Bible.

3. Remember that the Bible is God's Word. It is divinely inspired. You should always approach Bible study with reverence and reliance on God to help you understand it. You must be willing to obey what God tells you through His Word, or you'll begin to twist Scripture to fit your own brand of religion. We must let the Word interpret itself, not read into it what we want it to say.

4. Remember that quality Bible study takes time. You should carefully study similar passages to find the most complete meaning of a passage you are studying. Your approach shouldn't be casual. You must make Bible study a priority and give it your earnest effort and attention.

As you put these principles into practice you will experience the exhilaration of truly learning God's Word. It is a lifelong journey of learning the Bible and getting to know its Author. And, as you will find out, it is a worthwhile journey.