

Lesson 13

THE BIBLE

HOW SHOULD I STUDY THE BIBLE?

INTRODUCTION

On the grounds of Hampton Court in London is a maze of bushes planted to form solid walls, head high. In the center, on a high platform, sits a guide. When people get lost working their way through the maze, they look up to the guide, who points them to their next move.

God's word is our guide for living in this world. But as with any guide, we must follow its directions as given, without adding, subtracting or substituting. Just as you would not think of changing a doctor's prescription given you, neither should you change God's prescription, His word.

Now we come to the most practical part of this study: THE INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE. You must learn to study the Bible for yourself. We urge you not to trust your soul to someone else when it comes to the study of the Bible. Jesus said, "***Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.***" (Matt 15:14 NIV) We will look at some principles that will help you in determining what the Bible teaches.

Before you begin you must realize that our circumstances and experiences inevitably create in us assumptions that affect the way we view reality. These assumptions or presuppositions are present in all areas of study, including Bible study. Therefore, we should seek the best presuppositions and use them in studying the Scriptures.

SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS

THE SCRIPTURES ARE INSPIRED OF GOD

At one time nearly all professed Christians in America believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures. Hardly any significant denomination would ordain as a minister one who even hesitated to affirm his confidence in the Bible as **the inspired word of God**. This is no longer true. Many pulpits are filled today with preachers who could care less about what the Bible teaches or about the fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion.

It is not our purpose here to prove the inspiration of the Scriptures because we did that in Lesson IV **Are The Scriptures Inspired Of God?** If you have any question about the inspiration of the Scriptures please refer back to that lesson and study it well before proceeding.

If you are not fully persuaded that the Scriptures are inspired of God you will not profit greatly from your study of the Bible.

SCRIPTURE CAN BE UNDERSTOOD

The apostle Paul taught that the Scriptures could be understood. In Eph 3:3-4, "***How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby,***

when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ).” Also in Eph 5:17 Paul said, *“Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”* (KJV)

Even the Reformers taught that the Bible could be understood. God has given His word to us in such a way that anyone can read its pages and discover divine truth. One does not need to depend on a church, creed, or council to interpret the Scriptures. Our approach to Bible study begins with the Bible, not human opinions about it. Therefore, we will approach the text first in the belief that it can be understood.

SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

The third presupposition for our Bible study is that the Bible best interprets itself. Because God’s word is unified, coherent, and fully inspired, the best way to understand any single passage is to interpret that text in light of the entire Scriptures. The Bible does not contradict itself so don’t try to make one passage contradict another. Notice some important principles resting on this presupposition.

First, unclear passages should be interpreted in light of clear texts.

For example, Luke 14:26 contains this difficult statement of Jesus: *“If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”* (KJV) Does this mean that Jesus is anti-family? Must we hate those we love the most in order to love Jesus Christ? This passage is clarified by Matthew in 10:37, *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;”* (NIV). Therefore, Luke means that we are to “hate” our families only in the sense that we place them under Christ in priority and commitment. Furthermore, other passages also help us to understand this same truth. Children are commanded to honor their parents (Ex 29:2; Deut 5:6; Eph 6:2-4; I Tim 5:8).

Second, no major doctrine should be based only on one verse.

It was characteristic of the sacred writers to make one condition of pardon stand for all the conditions of pardon. Therefore, it would be wrong for one to take one passage mentioning one condition and make that the only condition of pardon. Consider the following passages: Rom 5:1; Lk 13:3; I Jno 4:2; I Pet. 3:21.

Third, passages that are brief should be studied in light of passages of greater length.

In other words, we should study a single verse in light of the larger passage in which it is found, and this passage in light of its book, and then the book in light of the entire Bible if necessary. As we consider the larger counsel of God’s word, we allow Scripture to interpret itself.

Fourth, if two biblical statements appear to us to contradict, we must accept both.

Divine truth is not bound to human logic, and often must be expressed by stating two truths that seem at odds with each other. This is called an “antinomy” –the acceptance of two principles that seem mutually exclusive but are each independently true.

For example, believers are often troubled by the question: *“If I have complete freedom of will, does this limit God’s knowledge and control of the future? Or, if God knows the future, how can I have freedom of choice?”*

The fact is, the Bible often states both principles as true: I have free will, and yet God is in control. For instance, Jesus says, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father”* (Matt 10:29). But two verses later He calls us to decide: *“So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”* (v. 31).

Because Scripture interprets Scripture, all biblical principles are true, even when they transcend our human logic. God’s word can be understood, believed and obeyed.

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

Martin Luther once compared his method of Bible study to gathering apples from an apple tree. First, he said, he would lay hold of the trunk, shake it and collect the fruit that falls to the ground. Then he would climb into the tree and shake each of the larger branches separately. After that he would gather from each separate limb. Then he would inspect each twig. And finally he would look under each leaf to see what else might be found. (Martin Luther, *Table Talk* 2:244-45; quoted in Conyers, 58).

In other words, before we can study any particular verse in the Bible, we should first examine the book in which it is found. Only when we are familiar with the trunk can we climb it and harvest its fruit.

It is helpful to first read the entire book in which your text is found, if possible. Note briefly your first impressions and questions about the book, major ideas, and other items of interest. Then you can study the following questions:

WHO WAS THE WRITER?

First, who was the writer of this text and book? As with any literature, knowing the author, if possible, is the necessary starting point to understanding the text.

WHO ARE THE RECIPIENTS?

To whom is the author writing? A church, a group of churches, or an individual? What can you learn about their historical and cultural circumstances? Often you can tell a great deal about both the writer and his recipients from the text itself. For instance, Paul’s introduction to his letter to the Philippians names the author (1:1), indicates that he knows his readers personally (1:3), and shows that they are his very special friends (1:5-8).

Once you have examined the text, next check a good commentary. In fact, if you have access to several commentaries read more than one.

WHAT IS THE AUTHOR’S PURPOSE?

What is the reason for the book? Writing in the ancient world was too hard to do without some compelling purpose. Often the text will make its purpose clear. For example, Luke defines his reason for writing at the outset:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:1-4

Notice also what John said near the end of his gospel:

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:30-31

Consult a good commentary for more discussion of this vital question and then keep the reason for the book clearly in mind as you study.

WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE IS THIS?

The Bible is composed of many different kinds of literature: history, law, poetry, letters, figures of speech, apocalyptic literature, etc. The way you would read poetry is not the way you would approach history. It is important that you approach the book you are studying in a way that is consistent with its type of literature. Only then can you see the intended meaning of the text, which is the object of all Bible study.

HISTORY: You should read history as factual narrative, seeking truths and principles within the events themselves. You should avoid attaching symbolic meaning to historical occurrences. For example, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact of history, not merely a symbol for renewed hope in the disciples.

LAW: Law should be read to discover principles for living today, except where it is renewed in the New Testament and retains the force of law for Christian faith and practice. For example, murder is wrong not because it was forbidden in the Ten Commandments but because it is condemned in the New Testament.

POETRY: This should be read symbolically, without pressing the details for historical accuracy or specific promises. For example, the Psalmist states, *“The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night”* (Psa 121:5-6). This poetry is obviously concerned with God’s larger care for His own, not the specific problem of sunburn or exposure.

LETTERS: These should always be read with their immediate audience and concerns in mind. You must not apply a letter’s meaning to your situation until you are sure of the author’s intended application to his audience.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE: This language is highly visionary, and tends to be symbolic and future-oriented. The method you choose for interpreting these books will largely determine the meanings you find there.

STUDYING THE TEXT: THE “FOUR-FOLD” APPROACH

Read the text you have chosen three or four times in different translations. Note what seems to be the major idea of the passage, and its relation to the author’s purpose for the book. At this preliminary point, ask these basic questions of the text:

- Who is speaking or writing?
- What is the subject of the text?
- When is this occurring?
- Where is it happening?
- Why and/or how?

It is very important to have these answers in mind as you approach the study of the passage.

First, study the **grammar**—the words and sentences.

Second, study the **history**—its geography and historical context.

Third, study the **theology**—its central ideas and truths.

Fourth, study the **practical**—how to apply these truths to life today.

GRAMMATICAL PRINCIPLES:

Because we believe that the Bible can be understood, we will begin with the text itself—with its words and phrases. You should delay your interpretation and application until you know what the words of the text mean to say. The text itself is to be studied in stages.

Word Study: Begin with the actual words of the passage. They must be studied carefully because we want to know what the author intended to say, not just what the word seems to say to us today. Words that survive long in any language acquire added meanings and implications. We must be sure we know the meaning of the word the author intended.

There are five important questions to answer:

- **How was the word defined?** You should define all important or unclear words in your text, with the help of a Bible dictionary.
- **What is the context of the word?** Often the immediate context will explain the meaning of a word or phrase. For example, Jesus referred to the “*kingdom of God*” in the Model Prayer (Matt 6:10). What does the term “*kingdom*” mean? Jesus defined it Himself: “*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” This is the use of a kind of Hebrew poetry called “parallelism,” where the second line repeats or defines the first. Thus the “kingdom” is where God’s will is done.

- **What is the history of the word?** A Bible dictionary will give you the background and root meanings of the word. Again, be careful to confine your study to meanings current when the author used the word. The history of its translated word may have nothing to do with the author's original intent.
- **What are other biblical uses of the word?** A Bible concordance or dictionary will help here. Because Scripture interprets Scripture, other passages can often help clarify the meaning of the words of the text.
- **What is the cultural background behind the word?** In other words, what practices were current in the author's day that would have affected his use of the word? For example Jesus said, ***"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two"*** (Matt 5:41). What did Jesus mean by ***"forces you?"*** The Roman custom was that a subject could be forced to carry a soldier's pack for one mile. This was more an act of slavery and oppression than a physical burden. Jesus is saying if someone humiliates you, allow him to humiliate you even farther. Treat even your enemies with humble service. The cultural background clarifies the word.

Sentence Structure: Often the grammar of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text will affect its meaning for us. It helps to know the sentence structure of any text you are studying. Here a good commentary is very helpful. You do not have to know the original language but it helps to read a commentary written by someone who does.

An important example of this is I John 3:9. The King James translates this verse, ***"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."*** The Greek verbs are in the "imperfect" tense, which means a continued action. Therefore, the NIV translates the verse: ***"No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."***

Literary Type: We discussed this earlier regarding the kind of literature that comprises the book under investigation. However, the specific text should also be investigated in the same way. For instance, in the Gospel of Matthew, which is the "gospel" or "narrative" literature type, there are symbols, teaching discoursing, and apocalyptic sections. You must be careful to determine the literary type of your specific text also.

Figure of Speech: This is a common, powerful communication tool. One biblical figure of speech is the **"metaphor,"** an illustration using a direct comparison that is not intended to be taken literally. For instance, Jesus says, ***"I am the true vine"*** (John 15:1), clearly a metaphorical statement. Another figure of speech is the **"simile,"** a comparison using "like" or "as." For example the statement, ***"the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire"*** (Exodus 24:17, KJV) is a simile. A third is the **"hyperbole,"** a statement that uses exaggeration to make a point. Again, it is not intended to be read literally. For instance, Jesus says, ***"if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away"*** (Matthew 5:29). Here it is vital that you interpret the text as Jesus intends!

Context: One last step in "grammatical" interpretation involves considering the larger context of the passage in question. Three questions should be asked. **First**, what is the general idea of the larger passage where the text is found? **Second**, how does the text contribute to the flow of

the author's thought in the larger chapter and book? **Third**, is this passage teaching "prescriptive" or "descriptive" truth? Prescriptive statements are intended as commands for the reader. For instance, "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged*" (Matthew 7:1) prescribes behavior for all readers. Descriptive statements simply describe the event, without endorsing it as proper then or now. For instance, I Kings 11:3 states that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. This description does not prescribe this behavior for us today.

In studying the context of a passage, begin with the immediate verses, and then study their context in the chapter, then the section of the book, then the book itself, then the Testament, and then the entire Bible if necessary. Always heed the old proverb: "**a text without a context is only a pretext.**" Make sure you understand the text in its larger setting and purpose.

HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES:

While you have already investigated the history behind some of the words of the passage, now it helps to understand historical considerations related to the passage itself. Two major ideas are important here.

Geography: Often the location of biblical places has a direct bearing on the interpretation of associated texts. In addition, the more you know about the land where the biblical events took place, the better you will understand the events and their significance. For these reasons it is a good investment of your time to familiarize yourself with the basic layout of the biblical lands. A good atlas or map will help you here. In addition, you should know the geography behind any specific text you are seeking to study.

First, consider Jeremiah 13:1-5:

This is what the LORD said to me: "*Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water.*" So I bought a belt, as the LORD directed, and put it around my waist. Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time: "*Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks.*" So I went and hid it at Perath, as the LORD told me. (NIV)

This seems a rather routine text, until we learn that Perath lay 430 miles from where Jeremiah received this command. The long, arduous, and dangerous trip described points up the sacrifice often necessary to obedience.

Second, remember Luke 2:4: "*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David.*" This was a journey of some ninety miles, made on a donkey's back by a woman who was about ready to deliver her child. Fulfilling God's promise that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) required great sacrifice for His mother. The geography of the text makes it seem alive and relevant.

Social Context: Often knowledge of the customs or general historical situation greatly illuminates the biblical text.

First, consider **material objects**. For instance, Matthew 27:34 says, "*There [on the cross] they offered [Jesus] wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, He refused to drink it.*"

However, John 19:28-30 describes Jesus' requesting and drinking wine on the cross. This seems to be a confusing contradiction until we study the wines themselves. The drink Matthew refers to was a kind of narcotic customarily given to crucifixion victims to dull their senses. Jesus refused this anesthetic, choosing to be fully awake and alert. John's reference occurred six hours later when Jesus said, "*I thirst.*" He received a mild vinegar-wine to moisten His lips.

Second, study **social customs**—practices or rites which society observed in biblical times. For example, Jesus' speaking to the Samaritan woman at Sychar shocked her: "***You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?***" (John 4:9). This question makes sense when we learn that the Jews hated the Samaritans, and that Jewish rabbis often would not speak to any woman in public during the day. Jesus thus broke with popular prejudice in winning this woman to Himself.

Third, investigate **historical facts**. Often basic facts of life in the biblical period are presupposed by the writer but unknown to readers today. For example Jesus said in Matthew 25:1-3:

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them." (NIV)

What made these women so foolish? As any of Matthew's original readers would have known, ancient oil lamps were made very small so that three or four could be held in the hand at once. Not to take more oil was very foolish, as a marriage vigil could last as long as three hours and so exhaust the supply of oil in the little lamps. The foolish virgins were not condemned for their inability to predict the time of the groom's return but for their **lack of readiness** in the things they knew to be doing. From the historical facts behind the text, we discover its application for our lives today.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES:

The third major part of this "four-fold approach" deals with theological principles contained in the passage.

Scripture interprets Scripture: Now that you have developed the grammatical-historical meaning of the text, relate that meaning to the rest of God's word. Using a topical Bible or concordance, see what other passages say on this subject. But be careful: never take any other passage out of its context to make it fit your study here. Only relate those texts that are intended by their author for this application.

General Theological Concepts: Now apply the meaning of the text to general theological questions. For example, see what the passage says about:

- God
- Man
- Sin
- Salvation
- Futurity

Suppose you were studying Matthew 5:13: ***“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”*** In studying the grammar and history of the text, you have learned that salt was a common preservative in Jesus’ day. Theologically, Jesus is therefore saying that His disciples are essential to His saving work on earth. As we fulfill our mission, we help preserve the world from judgment through salvation. But if we lose our “saltiness” and become like our fallen world, we lose our purpose in life. Seeking to share Jesus Christ with a lost humanity is God’s purpose for us today.

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES:

This is the last area in our approach to the study of a passage. Because human nature does not change, biblical truth is always relevant and must be applied personally and practically. The Bible was given that it might be applied to daily life. If you do not seek the practical application of the text, you have not completed its study and interpretation. There are five steps to take in applying the text practically:

Write out the intended meaning of the text: On the basis of your grammatical-historical study, define the meaning and purpose of the text for its author and original readers.

Note differences in setting and context: In your historical investigation, you will have observed changes in culture and context from the text to our day, some of which will significantly affect its contemporary application. For example: The parable of the Good Samaritan.

Make direct applications where intended by the author: Where the writer’s intended purpose and meaning “transfers” directly to our culture and needs, make this application as practically as is appropriate. For instance, Jesus’ statement, ***“You are the salt of the earth”*** (Matthew 5:13) is a “**prescriptive**” truth which applies as directly to us as it did to His first disciples. Make this application, pointing out its practical consequences today.

Seek principles within the passage when the text does not apply directly to our day: Where the text is a law that is not renewed in the New Testament (such as a dietary code) or a historical event that does not “**prescribe**” a specific application (such as the Battle of Jericho), do not apply the text directly as if it were prescriptive. Otherwise, all Christians would be forced to follow outdated dietary laws, and warfare would be reduced to marching around enemy walls. Rather seek principles within the text that apply to today’s needs, keeping these principles consistent with the author’s intended meaning.

For instance, dietary laws reveal the practical principle that God cares deeply about our bodies and health. The Battle of Jericho shows that God’s will, when obeyed, always leads to the victory He promises. You should find such general principles within the author’s intended purpose and apply them practically.

The use of principles is often the best way to approach culture-bound biblical statements. For example, ***“Greet one another with a holy kiss”*** is a common command in Paul’s letter (Romans 16:16; I Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; I Thessalonians 5:26). The meaning of the words and grammar are just as the verses read. But in Paul’s society persons often greeted one another publicly with a kiss, unlike our culture today. In our context, these verses suggest the principle that Christians should greet one another with great kindness and

love, whether this is by word, hand, or other physical expression. We are commanded to obey the principle of the text.

Likewise, commands to individuals in the Bible are not always commands to us today. Abraham was commanded to offer Isaac (Genesis 22); this prescription is not incumbent on fathers today. We need to apply the principle of the text—as a father; even my sons must be dedicated to God and His will.

By discovering practical principles within the author’s intended meaning, you will find that every passage in the Bible possesses personal relevance today.

Define at least one action that the text suggests today: When you have finished your study of the text, you should be able to describe at least one practical action that you will take as a result of the author’s intended purpose. Then you can determine ways to communicate this application to others.

For example, when you have finished your study of Matthew 5:13 you should be able to describe at least one practical way you can act as a “**preservative**” in your fallen world today. You might resolve to share the gospel with a lost friend, or to do some good deed for someone in need.

OTHER METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

TOPICAL STUDY:

This consists of defining a topic and researching the Bible to see what it says on the subject.

Define the topic carefully: Instead of beginning with every reference in the Bible to the topic in general, limit your research to some specific.

Consult a dictionary, concordance or encyclopedia for an overview of the subject:

Organize your research in contextual ways: First consult the text, then the book, the teaching of Jesus, in the New Testament, and in the Bible.

List personal, practical conclusions from each relevant text, and an overall summary thesis:

BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY:

Here you would gather together the different biblical texts regarding a specific personality.

Decide on your subject: Be careful—the more important the person in the Bible, the more involved your study will be.

List passages in chronological order, and summarize your findings: A concordance or encyclopedia article will help here.

Write conclusions: life, actions, personality, strengths, weaknesses, things to emulate, things to avoid, principles for life today.

WORD-STUDY:

Choose a subject for study: Be careful here because one Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word can be translated several different ways in English. Consult commentaries along this line.

Limit your study: Look at “light” in the teaching of Jesus, for example.

Use a concordance to locate references, in contextual ways:

Record conclusions: For example, the meaning of the word or phrase, its various uses, ways it’s meaning changes in the Bible, and personal and practical applications today.

BIBLE THEMES AND DOCTRINES:

Define a subject: For example, “We should let our light shine before men.” Matthew 5:16

Consult a topical Bible and/or concordance for texts:

Summarize the finding of each appropriate passage:

Organize your findings into a systematic presentation:

Note practical, contemporary applications:

BOOK STUDY:

Decide on the book: (the Gospel of John)

Answer introductory questions: Author, place, purpose, recipients, time frame, historical concerns.

Read the book in one setting: Note its major theme and outline its main ideas. Then revise these with the help of a commentary.

Break down major ideas into sub-points and key verses: Define ways these help accomplish the author’s intended purpose for his book.

Describe ways the book contributes to the larger purpose of the Bible: How does John help us to understand Christ and His purpose in coming to earth?

Note applications of the major theme and from each part of the book for life today:

CONCLUSION

I believe this is the most practical lesson in this series “**An Introduction To The Bible.**” By work and practice, you will soon be able to use these principles with skill and confidence. These principles are simply a means to an end, intended to help you get more from

God's word so that you might better know the Lord Himself and be a better servant. May these principles be used by God to form the character of Christ in you.

Questions

1. Give some presuppositions to a proper study of the Bible.
2. Explain Scripture interprets Scripture.
3. What are some background questions one should always ask?
4. Explain the four-fold approach to the study of the Bible.
5. What are some other methods of Bible Study?