

A Practical Guide for Studying God's Word

Kevin Gary Smith

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A Practical Guide for Studying God's Word

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To my mother
Joan Smith
for her sincere faith
and amazing support

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Introduction

My purpose in writing this book is to provide practical guidance to help serious Bible readers interpret the Word of God soundly. With a lot of perspiration and a little inspiration, every child of God can interpret the Word of God correctly. While learning the biblical languages and having advanced theological training helps, by applying simple principles of interpretation with hard work and a seeker's heart, you can become a skilled interpreter "who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Although most of this book is devoted to teaching practical principles for studying the Bible, I am convinced that your attitude is more important than all the principles together. If you love and respect the Scriptures enough to seek God in them passionately, diligently, and prayerfully, you will probably interpret them better than some highly trained theologians who study them 'professionally'. A key word here is *diligently*. You will have to work hard—actually, think hard—to make progress. There is no such thing as instant or inspired interpretation. The single biggest hindrance to handling the Word correctly is expecting instant payoff. Remember, 90 percent perspiration, 10 percent inspiration.

I have tried to keep the principles simple and illustrate them with many examples. Books about how to study the Bible often confuse readers with philosophical arguments and abstract principles, offering little or no practical guidance. After reading them, you are left feeling, 'How on earth do I actually do this?' I

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pray this book will leave you with the opposite feeling. I hope you will find the principles simple and the examples encouraging and inspiring, so that you put it down feeling, 'Oh wow, that's so obvious; even I can do it!'

The book has three logical divisions: preparation for interpretation (chapters 1-3), expository Bible study (chapters 4-9), and other types of study (chapters 10-11). The first three chapters deal with preparation for interpretation. They examine three preliminary steps to prepare for Bible study.

1. The interpreter's task
2. The interpreter's character
3. The interpreter's tools

To be a good student of the Scriptures, you need to meet at least three preliminary qualifications. First, *you must know what your task is*. What is the goal of Bible study? What are you trying to accomplish when you study a text? How do you measure success? You cannot hit a target if you don't know what it looks like or where it is. Second, *you must be spiritually prepared*. Bible study has spiritual objectives. Without the leading of the Spirit and a right attitude towards the Scriptures, you cannot interpret well. Third, *you must have the right tools*. You need to know how to use key tools like translations, commentaries, and dictionaries.

The body of the book, chapters 4-9, focuses on the process of interpreting a passage of Scripture. We call this *expository Bible study*. 'Expository' means setting forth the meaning or purpose of a writing (Merriam-Webster 2003, 'exposition'). Expository Bible study starts with a passage of Scripture and seeks to set

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forth its purpose and meaning. Its point of departure (a text) and objective (to set forth its meaning and purpose) distinguish expository study from devotional and topical study. As I see it, this process involves six major steps. A chapter is devoted to each step:

4. The literary step
5. The historical step
6. The verbal step
7. The christological step
8. The theological step
9. The personal step

The first three steps lead you to a provisional interpretation of the passage. Step 1 is to examine how your passage fits into its book and section. Next, you explore the historical-cultural setting of the passage, trying to understand the circumstances in which it was written. Finally, you analyse the words and phrases in detail.

By the end of the third step, you will have a good idea of what the passage means. In the next two, you *test* your interpretation against the teachings of Christ (step 4) and all Scripture (step 5). Using the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, you complete and clarify your understanding of your text.

The ultimate purpose of Bible study is not understanding, but responding. However, proper response depends on correct understanding. The final step is to summarise your interpretation and make appropriate applications. This makes it personal. It moves you from theory to practice, from information to transformation.

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Expository is the ‘default’ kind of Bible study. The principles of expository study apply to all forms of Bible study. Having mastered the principles of expository study, you can use them in other types of study. The last two chapters are devoted to two other types of Bible study:

10. Devotional Bible study

11. Topical Bible study

Devotional Bible study is reading the Bible as part of your daily communion with God. The goal of this kind of reading is not to master the Scriptures, but to meet and respond to the Lord. Your focus should be on responding to what you do understand, not on probing the meaning of what you don’t. It is not an excuse for abusing the author-intended meaning of a passage. The normal rules of interpretation apply, but the goal is different.

Topical Bible study attempts to understand what the Bible (or part of it) teaches about a particular subject. You find all the relevant passages, analyse each one in context (using the principles of the expository method), then summarise what they teach about the topic.

I pray that your journey through this book will ignite in your heart a passion to study God’s Word and a heartfelt belief that you can do it well. Sound interpretation is not the domain of scholars and experts. The Holy Spirit wants to illuminate his message to every child of God.

Chapter 1

The Interpreter's Task

In addition to Christians, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, the New Age Movement, and even many radical political movements all 'believe in the Bible', yet in spite of this shared belief, these groups have almost nothing in common. Christians believe in a Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but Jehovah Witnesses say only the Father is God. Mormons claim there are *many* gods, and the New Age Movement holds that *everything* is God. How is this possible? How can different groups read the same Bible, yet arrive at such contradictory beliefs on even the most fundamental biblical teachings?

The answer lies in the principles and methods used to interpret the Bible. These sects each have their own (inadequate) approach to interpreting the Bible. Their doctrines are the result of their methods of interpretation. In fact, your method of interpretation always determines your doctrinal beliefs. If your method is flawed, your conclusions will be faulty.

If we are to "correctly handle the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), we must learn and apply correct principles of interpretation. Hermeneutics deals with the principles and procedures of Bible interpretation. We study hermeneutics so that we can interpret the Bible correctly. Our theology and our teaching can never be better than our hermeneutics.

The field of interpretation

The division of theology which deals with how to study the Bible is called *hermeneutics*. Bernard Ramm's (1970:1, italics added) definition of hermeneutics is more-or-less standard:

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation.

Simply stated, hermeneutics is the study of how to interpret the Bible consistently and correctly. It lays down the principles and procedures which should guide the way we interpret any passage of Scripture.

The word 'hermeneutics' comes from the Greek word *hermeneuō*, which means 'to interpret' or 'to explain'. This word is used in Luke 24:27, where Jesus "*explained* to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (italics added). Jesus taught them how to interpret correctly the Scriptures which spoke about him.

The goal of interpretation

When we study the Bible, we hope to discover what the author communicated to the original readers through the text, and then to determine how that meaning is still relevant to us today.

The goal of interpretation is to discover *the author-intended meaning*. We must discover what message the author wanted to communicate through the text to his original readers. The most

common error is to substitute *the reader-response meaning*,¹ the meaning which we (modern readers) see when we read the text as if it were addressed directly to us.

The books of the Bible were written for us, but not to us. They are a message from God to us, but that message is channelled through other people in different circumstances. We receive the message indirectly, as it is refracted through the original readers. Only once we know what the text meant to them can we know what it means for us.

The author-intended meaning is a *single-sense interpretation*. The author sets out to convey a particular message to his readers; he intends one meaning. Each word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph has one meaning in its original context. No utterance can have two different meanings at the same time. Although a passage has only one correct interpretation, it may convey many principles which apply to an infinite number of situations. Thus, while we have one meaning, we can have many applications.

To move from the author-intended meaning to a valid response, we must pass through three stages: (a) interpretation; (b) principles; and (c) applications. *Interpretation* refers to the message the original author conveyed to his original readers. *Principles* are universal truths drawn from the original message; they apply to any people of any time in any place. *Applications* are ways in which the universal principles can be applied to specific people or circumstances today.

¹ 'Reader-response' has a technical meaning in modern books about hermeneutics. I am not using it with any technical meaning in mind.

Literal interpretation

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to interpretation—literal and allegorical. Allegorical interpretation is a process in which we spiritualise the text, taking it and its details to mean something totally unrelated to what the author intended. John MacArthur offers this example of how one preacher spiritualised the book of Nehemiah:

Jerusalem's walls were in ruin, and that speaks of the broken down walls of the human personality. Nehemiah represents the Holy Spirit, who comes to rebuild the walls of human personality. When he got to the king's pool (Neh. 2:14), he said this meant the baptism in the Holy Spirit; and from there he went on to teach the importance of speaking in tongues (MacArthur 1992:108).

Allegorising robs the Bible of any authoritative meaning. When we allegorise or spiritualise, the meaning no longer comes from the Bible, but from the interpreter. We impose random interpretations upon the text. There can be no correct interpretation, no definite meaning for any passage of Scripture, because each reader is allowed to decide for himself what things symbolise. There remains no way to decide what the Bible teaches, because we are allowing the Bible to mean whatever we choose to make it mean.

Literal interpretation is the opposite of allegorical interpretation. To interpret literally is to take words at face value, to interpret them in just the same way we would interpret any other written words. We interpret literally when we assume a speaker

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means just what he says. Literal interpretation is thus the common, natural, normal way of interpreting words.

Literal interpretation must not be confused with wooden literalism, slavishly taking every tiny detail literally. Normal speech and writing make use of all sorts of figures of speech. When the writer uses figurative language to make his point, we need to recognise that he is speaking figuratively. Literal interpretation takes figurative language figuratively. For example, when John describes a vision of Jesus with eyes like a flame of fire, feet like fine brass, and a sharp sword coming out of his mouth, he is using word pictures to describe what Jesus *is* like, not what he *looks* like (see Rev. 1:12-16). If we were to treat this as a physical description of Jesus' looks, we would be taking figurative language literally. John seems to be saying Jesus is all seeing and all knowing (eyes like a flame of fire), solid and immovable (feet like fine brass), and his word is irresistible (a sharp, two-edged sword in his mouth). Since these figurative meanings are part of John's intended point, we are taking him at face value rather than spiritualising his vision (that is, imposing meanings the author did not intend upon the text) when we interpret it this way.

The steps in interpretation

The Bible is an ancient text. We are separated from it by various gaps—culture, language, time, and history. To understand an ancient text's meaning for its original readers and its significance for us today, we need to apply three stages of analysis.

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a) *Observation: what does the text say?* The first step is to read the text repeatedly and make careful observations of what it says. The process is *read, observe, and make notes*. As you read, you will use five question words: *who? what? when? where? how?*

b) *Interpretation: what did the text mean?* The second step is to determine what the text meant *to its original readers*. Now you apply the sixth question word to your observation: *why?* What a biblical text means to us can never be different from what it meant to its original readers. How we apply it in our modern context may differ, but the basic meaning of the text cannot change. In the interpretation step, we try to place ourselves in the original readers' situation and imagine how they would have understood the text.

c) *Application: what does the text mean?* The last step is to discover what significance the text has *for us today*. Here we are converting the historical, timebound message it conveyed to its original readers into universal, timeless principles and seeking ways to apply those principles to specific modern situations.

By way of illustration, let's consider Judges 7 and work through the three steps.

What does the text say? The Lord had sent Gideon to fight the Midianites. He started with 30,000 men, but God said he had too many, so Gideon allowed all those who were afraid to go home. Then he had 10,000 men. He still had too many, so he sent home those who got down on their knees to drink water. With the remaining 300 men, Gideon defeated the Midianites.

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What did the text mean? Why did God want Gideon to reduce the size of his army to 300 men? He wanted everyone to know *he* saved the Israelites, not their own strength. That is the point, the message the author intends the reader to receive from the passage. The author's intended meaning was not that they should not be fearful or that they should be alert to danger when they drink water. The point was that when God's people repent and cry out to him for help, he alone is able to save them from any enemy.

What does the text mean? One timeless principle we learn from this story is that we should trust in the power of the Lord to deliver us from danger; we should not rely solely on our own strength. Another principle is that God wants people to recognise his work. We should be careful to give him the credit for what he does.

Now let's look at a second example of the three steps at work. Jeremiah 29:11, one of the most famous promises in the Bible, reads as follows: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" There is more to this promise than meets the eye. Let's examine the context of Jeremiah 29:11 in more detail, working through our three steps.

What does the text say? It is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles after Nebuchadnezzar carried them off as captives (vv. 1-4). He indicates that their so-called prophets were promising them that God would soon deliver them from Babylon (vv. 8-9). He reminds them that the Lord has said they will be in captivity for seventy years (v. 10), and counsels them to make themselves at home there (vv. 5-7). He reassures them that after

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the seventy years have passed, the Lord will restore them to Jerusalem (v. 10).

What did the text mean? Jeremiah 29:11 was a word of comfort and reassurance to the exiled Israelites. Although they were not in a good position and would not be for some time to come, God remained committed to their highest good. He would eventually fulfil his covenant promises to bless them. We could paraphrase, 'Even though everything looks hopeless now and there is no sign of an immediate change of fortunes, rest assured that I have not abandoned my plan to prosper you.'

What does the text mean? This is not a promise of constant blessing. It does not mean, 'Let the good times just keep on rolling.' Rather, it means that when all looks lost and we cannot see any light at the end of a dark tunnel, the Lord is faithful to his people, his promises or his plans. We must hang tough, and continue to serve him faithfully until he fulfils his good purpose for us.

The interpreter's task

The interpreter's task, then, is to discover the one meaning the original author intended to convey to his original readers, and then translate it into timeless principles which we can apply to our circumstances. To achieve this goal, we must interpret literally, that is, we must take the Bible at face value and allow it to mean exactly what its author intended. We employ three major steps to achieve this goal: observation (what does the text say?), interpretation (what did it mean to the original readers?), and application (what does it mean for us today?).

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How we interpret the Bible determines our theology, because the methods we use predict the conclusions we reach. Without good methods, we cannot have good theology. Without good theology, our ministries of preaching, teaching, counselling, and leading suffer. Therefore, all the effort we invest to become skilled interpreters is worth it.

Although being a good interpreter requires you to master principles and apply them with skill, it requires much more. There are crucial spiritual qualifications for being a good interpreter.

Chapter 2

The Interpreter's Character

What kind of person can interpret God's Word correctly? Can a brilliant sceptic apply the principles of interpretation and arrive at the true meaning of a passage in spite of his unbelief? Certainly not! This has been tried—with disastrous results. Who you are dramatically affects how you interpret! Only a spiritual person can grasp spiritual truth.

If the ultimate goal of Bible study is to obey the truth, not to master facts, if our objective is transformation rather than information, a brilliant sceptic is less equipped than a simple believer to grasp the Spirit's intent. Without certain spiritual qualities, you cannot be a good interpreter of Scripture. You might be able to become an influential theologian, but your theology will not be faithful to the intent of the Author.

In this chapter, we shall examine three minimum requirements for "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV). Meeting these requirements does not guarantee you will be a good interpreter, but without them you have no chance of handling God's Word correctly.

We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit

The person best able to interpret any writing is its own author. If you know the author of any book personally and have the opportunity to ask him, 'What did you mean when you said ...?', you are unlikely to misinterpret his book.

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The Holy Spirit is the primary author of Scripture. The human authors of the Bible "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). The Spirit guided their thoughts and words so that their message was his message. Although he did not override their human personalities, he ensured they wrote the message exactly as he intended. Every Scripture has two authors, but only one meaning, because the Holy Spirit guided the human writer so that his will was in perfect harmony with God's will as he wrote. Therefore, in one sense we may speak of John's intent or Paul's purpose. It is equally true to refer to the same message as what the Holy Spirit says. The early church could speak about Psalm 2 in this way: "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David" (Acts 4:25). The author of Hebrews cites a string of Old Testament passages in chapter 1. He introduced each one as what *God said* (see Heb. 1:5-14).

When we read the Bible, the Author is with us and in us. Jesus promised, "The Spirit of truth ... lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:17). Jesus further promised:

But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ... But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13).

Part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to teach us, to guide us into all truth. He not only gave us God's Word; he also remains with us to help us understand it and respond to it. When we read it, we can turn to him and ask him to show us what he means.

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When we ask him in faith (Jas. 1:5), the Holy Spirit will lead us to his intended meaning.

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, Paul taught boldly that nobody could truly comprehend the Scriptures without the help of the Spirit. He declares:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

The word translated 'accept' means 'receive, welcome'. The man without the Spirit does not welcome the Lord's truth. He resists it because he does not wish to submit to God. Satan has blinded his mind (2 Cor. 4:4). His heart is hardened by sin (Eph. 2:1-3). His unspiritual mind finds it foolish. He cannot understand it!

Only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God (v. 11). God has given us his Spirit *so that we may understand* (v. 12). Paul is echoing the same principles Jesus taught in John 14-16. On our own, we cannot understand God's truths. Therefore, he has given us the Holy Spirit, who knows the mind of God. He will help us grasp God's Word, especially what the Scriptures reveal about his Son, Jesus Christ.

How does the Holy Spirit work with us to help us understand the Scriptures? Zuck (1991:23-25) explains a few things he does *not* do. He does not reveal special hidden meanings which are different to the normal, literal meaning. He adds:

The place of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible means that He does not normally give sudden intuitive flashes of

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insight into the meaning of Scripture. Many passages are readily understood, but the meaning of others may come to light only gradually as the result of careful study. The Spirit's part in hermeneutics does not suggest some mysterious work that is unexplainable and unverifiable.

The Holy Spirit gently guides us into the truth (John 16:13), helping our minds to grasp the spiritual truths God intended to convey through particular Scriptures. He directs our thoughts and expands our understanding as we diligently and prayerfully meditate on his Word. He helps us to see more clearly than we could without his guidance.

If the Spirit leads us to his intended meaning, why do devout believers arrive at different interpretations? The way the Spirit inspired the Scriptures ensured that they are infallible, but he does not guarantee the same for our interpretations. He guides us to a clear understanding of the essentials (Deut. 29:29; 1 Cor. 13:8-12).

We need a right attitude towards Scripture

Many of the world's most acclaimed theologians reject both the truthfulness and the authority of the Bible. These brilliant sceptics master Greek and Hebrew. They explore the biblical world and its cultures in depth. They know the principles of interpretation intimately. Yet they concoct some outrageous interpretations, such as: Mary was not a virgin when she conceived; Jesus and his disciples engaged in homosexual practices; Mary Magdalene seduced Jesus; Jesus did not rise from the dead; Jesus will not return. I could go on and on. What leads great minds to ghastly interpretations? A low view of

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Scripture! They do not believe the Scriptures to be true. Rather than God's infallible revelation, the Bible is just an imperfect record of people's religious experiences and beliefs. As a result, they do not feel bound to accept its teachings. Instead of submitting to its authority, they concoct wild and woolly theories.

You will never interpret the Word of God correctly without a right attitude towards the Scriptures. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things which come from the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:12). He may understand the words, but he rejects their truthfulness and authority.

So what does it mean to have a right attitude towards the Scriptures? A right attitude begins with believing the Bible is fully inspired by God and authoritative for life and doctrine. The key Scripture is 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

If we believe this verse, we will have three vital attitudes towards the Scriptures: (a) trust in its truthfulness; (b) respect for its purpose; and (c) submission to its authority.

We must trust in the truthfulness of Scripture. "All Scripture is God-breathed"! The word translated 'God-breathed' is often translated *inspired by God*. God personally guided the authors of Scripture so that their words were his words. If we accept that the Scriptures are divinely inspired, we shall read them as a true record of God's actions and revelations. In particular, we shall

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believe the Bible's account of the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we trust in the truthfulness of Scripture, we shall not entertain allegations of historical errors, but rather seek explanations which account for all the facts. We shall not concede the presence of contradictions, but rather seek to harmonise all the details. We shall not cower in the face of blasphemous reconstructions of the life of Christ, but rather defend his integrity vociferously.

If we do not hold unshakable confidence in the truthfulness of Scripture, we shall be willing to bend on these sorts of points. If we bend on these issues, Jesus will no longer be "an anchor for our soul" (Heb. 6:19). Our faith will be afloat on a sea of uncertainty. Do not be deceived—a right attitude towards Scripture and a vibrant relationship with Christ are inseparable. If your trust in Scripture crumbles, your faith in Jesus will collapse.

Therefore, anyone who hopes to interpret the Bible correctly must approach it with trust in its truthfulness. Our verse implies a second crucial attitude.

We must respect the purpose of Scripture. "All Scripture is God-breathed *and is useful* ...". Because Scripture is inspired, it is useful! God gave us his Word for a purpose. This is the purpose: "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 17). God gave his Word to equip his church. The Word of God exists to prepare the man of God.

If we do not approach the Scriptures seeking God and his will so that we may be equipped for every good work and may use it to equip others for life and service, we cannot interpret it

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correctly. To study the Bible purely out of academic interest is to abuse it. To read it solely out of historical interest is to waste it. Even to analyse it only out of doctrinal curiosity is to drain the life out of it.

The Lord gave us his Word to help us know him, love him, obey him and serve him. If we read it without these as our ultimate objectives, we violate its purpose. Reading it as a theological textbook, an historical artefact or a religious repository is like using a hammer to drive in a screw—simply not how God intended us to use it.

To interpret the Scriptures correctly, you must share God's purpose for it—to equip the man of God for every good work. The Word is useful when we use it as its Author intends. Now, let's look at the third attitude.

We must submit to the authority of Scripture. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*” (v. 16). How does God's Word achieve his purpose of equipping his people? By four valuable means:

- teaching: relates to right beliefs
- rebuking: relates to wrong behaviour
- correcting: relates to wrong beliefs
- training: relates to right behaviour

The Scriptures reveal God's will. They show us how to live and what to believe. They guide us towards right behaviour and expose our wrong behaviour. They tell us what to believe and what not to believe.

If we hope to understand God's will from his Word, if we hope to benefit from its revelations, we must be willing to

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submit to its authority. We must receive its teachings and obey its commands. We must let it direct and correct our beliefs. We must not treat its commands as suggestions. We must stand under its instruction with soft hearts and open minds instead of placing ourselves above it in judgement and scepticism.

Jesus himself taught that obedience precedes understanding and submission insight. We can only fully understand his teachings when we are open to them, willing to follow them. Jesus once said, “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17). His teachings only make sense to those truly seeking ‘to do God's will’. A little later, he announced:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

Is Jesus saying we only really *know* the truth when we embrace his teachings, when we are willing to follow them? I think so.

We need a right attitude towards our task

We not only need a right attitude towards the Scriptures, we also need a right attitude towards our task—interpretation. Let us look at three essential principles we need to heed if we hope to study God's Word well.

We must be seeking God. Ultimately, the Word of God points us to the Son of God. God gave the written Word to show us the living Word, Jesus Christ. The ultimate objective of studying

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Scripture is to meet Jesus and grow to know him better. We must approach the Scriptures as people seeking God.

Jesus Christ is the full and final revelation of God. The author of Hebrews tells us:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their inadequate approach to the study of Scripture. They studied it as a book of rules to live by. As a result, they missed the heart of its message. They interpreted it incorrectly, because they were not seeking the Lord. This is what Jesus said to them:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

He also corrected two of his disciples for the same error.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).

The Bible is God's Word given to reveal his Son. If we are to understand it correctly, we must approach our task as men and women seeking him.

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We must be seeking God prayerfully. We acknowledge our need for the Spirit's help by asking him prayerfully to lead us. We can echo the psalmist's prayer:

Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law (Ps. 119:18).

We could also echo Paul's prayer:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better (Eph. 1:17).

Martin Luther spent two to three hours in prayer every morning, because he believed he could not study well unless he had prayed well. Daniel was a man of prayer. Is it any wonder he had more insight into the Scriptures than his contemporaries (see Dan. 9:1-2)?

We must be seeking God prayerfully and diligently. Interpreting Scripture correctly is no simple task. It demands hard work. Paul urged Timothy to work hard at it:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

Instead of 'do your best', other translations say 'be diligent' (NKJV) or 'work hard' (NLT). The best dictionary describes the meaning of the Greek word Paul used like this: "to be especially conscientious in discharging an obligation, *be zealous/eager, take pains, make every effort, be conscientious*" (Danker 2000, 'σπουδάζω', §3). Like the art of making a flawless Swiss watch, 'correctly handl[ing] the word of truth' calls for careful, diligent

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attention to detail. To do it well, we must pray well and work hard.

We live in an age when people expect instant payoff on all their time investments. Gone are the days of waiting ten years for a promotion; we want it in six months. We can access information at the touch of a button, travel across the globe in a day. We expect instant everything.

I often meet Christians who expect instant payoff from reading the Bible. They devote five minutes a day for a week or two to reading, then conclude, 'It didn't work for me; I got nothing out of it'. They don't get it. Mastering God's Word is more like preparing fine wine than a microwave dinner—it demands patient, diligent, conscientious study. God did not give us fast food. To feast on his Word, we must prepare the field, plant the seed, harvest the grapes and so forth. Hard work yields a harvest of insight.

The Old Testament had a wonderful way of calling people to work hard at learning the Word. It calls them to *meditate* on God's Word. This is what God told Joshua:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Josh. 1:8).

Psalm 1:2 describes a 'blessed man' like this:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

The Hebrew word translated 'meditate' means 'to mutter' (Koehler 1999, I. מנן). It pictures a man softly reading or

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repeating a portion of Scripture to himself over and over again, musing on it, pondering its meaning. To 'meditate on his law day and night' demands effort and patience, but it has great rewards.

If we are to handle the word of truth correctly, we must approach our task as men and women who are seeking God prayerfully and diligently. Our aim is to know Jesus better. Our attitude must be prayerful. In our approach, we must be willing to work hard to discover truth.

So, who can interpret?

Intellect alone will not make you a great Bible interpreter. The Bible is a message from God, who is Spirit, about spiritual things. The ultimate goal of studying it is not to master facts, but to meet and obey the Master. It makes sense, then, that there are spiritual qualifications for interpreting the Bible. We need to depend on the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We also need a right attitude, both towards Scripture and towards our task, seeking God prayerfully and submitting to the truth and authority of his Word.

So far, we have examined the interpreter's task (ch. 1) and character (ch. 2). If we are to study the Bible successfully, we must know what constitutes success. We must have a clear sense of the goal, namely, to discover the author-intended meaning and apply it to our lives and ministries. To achieve this goal requires a spiritual attitude and approach. It also requires some basic study tools. We now turn our attention to these tools.

Chapter 3

The Interpreter's Tools

Just as a carpenter needs the basic tools of his trade (hammer, saw, screwdriver), so too a Bible interpreter needs some basic tools. In this chapter,² we are going to look at how to use five essential tools:

- Bible translations
- Bible concordances
- Study Bibles
- Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias
- Bible commentaries

The carpenter's tools come in different types and sizes. He might use a star screwdriver or a flat-head screwdriver; he may have an electric screwdriver or a plain one. So too the interpreter's tools. Some are easy to read and use; others are complex, written for scholars with advanced knowledge. You will start with the simpler ones and progress to more advanced tools later.

Let's begin with the most important tool of all—a Bible.

Bible translations

Assuming you have not yet learned the biblical languages (mainly Hebrew and Greek), you will need to study the Bible from a translation.

² I am indebted to Peppler (2005) for much of the discussion presented in this chapter.

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The good news is that there are many good English translations. You should avoid asking, 'Which is the best translation?' Different translations have different readers and goals in mind. To choose suitable translations, you need to understand a little about translation theories and methods.

In essence, translators use one of two methods of translation. *Literal translations* (formal equivalence) try to translate word for word. This helps to keep the translator's interpretative bias to a minimum, but also makes the translation hard to understand, because it tends to use awkward English. *Dynamic translations* (functional equivalence) try to translate thought for thought using modern English style. They are much easier to understand, but run the risk that the translator may misinterpret the original. Translations can be placed on a continuum from hyper-literal to very dynamic; beyond dynamic are paraphrases, which are even more free (less literal) than dynamic translations. Table 1 shows the main differences between literal and dynamic approaches.

Literal	Dynamic
Awkward English	Natural English
Reader interprets	Translator interprets
Hard to understand	Easy to understand
Good for serious study	Good for casual reading
Suitable for experts	Suitable for everybody

Table 1: Comparison of translation methods

Table 2 shows where the best current English translations fall on a continuum from literal to loose.

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Very literal	Fairly literal	Fairly Dynamic	Very Dynamic	Loose Paraphrase
NKJV	ESV	NIV	NLT	JB Phillips
NASB	NRSV	NET	NiRV	Living Bible
MKJV	HCSB	TNIV	CEV	Message
RSV	BBE	GW	GNB	

Table 2: English Bibles, from literal to dynamic

If you are not sure what these abbreviations mean, see the list of Bible versions on page 121. In each column, I have placed my preferred translation at the top. Hence, of the fairly literal translations, I prefer the ESV to the NRSV, which I prefer to the HCSB. The literal versions are best for serious study, the dynamic ones for devotional reading.

When doing serious Bible study, try to use at least three different translations, preferably from three different levels of literalness. Where the translations differ significantly, the reason is usually an ambiguity in the Hebrew or Greek text. Where competent translators differ, it should alert you to a problem you need to explore. For this reason, some experts insist on at least seven translations. I suggest at least three, preferably five.

Bible concordance

In days gone by, an exhaustive concordance was an indispensable tool for Bible study. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, based on the King James Version, was the preferred concordance for most, but there are also exhaustive concordances available for the NIV, NASB and several other translations.

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An exhaustive concordance provides four main features. It gives a complete, alphabetical list of all words appearing in a translation. Under each word, it gives a full list of all the verses in which the word appears. Beside each entry, it includes a number; each number refers to a particular Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic word. At the back of the concordance is a short lexicon (Hebrew-English and Greek-English dictionary) listing all the words by their assigned numbers. Here is an example from *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*:

NETS

<i>n</i> of checker work, and wreaths of	1Ki 7:17	7638
the wicked fall into their own <i>n</i>	Ps 141:10	4365
woman, whose heart is snares and <i>n</i>	Ec 7:26	2764
they that spread <i>n</i> upon the	Is 19:8	4364
of <i>n</i> in the midst of the sea	Eze 26:5	2764
shalt be a place to spread <i>n</i> upon	Eze 26:14	2764
be a place to spread forth <i>n</i>	Eze 47:10	2764
And they straightway left their <i>n</i>	Mt 4:20	1350
their father, mending their <i>n</i>	Mt 4:21	1350
straight way they forsook their <i>n</i>	Mk 1:18	1350
were in a ship mending their <i>n</i>	Mk 1:19	1350
of them, and were washing their <i>n</i>	Lk 5:2	1350
and let down your <i>n</i> for a draught	Lk 5:4	1350

This entry lists all the occurrences of the word 'nets' in the KJV. Each entry includes a brief extract from the verse itself (note the word 'nets' is abbreviated by its first letter), the chapter and verse reference and the numerical code. Numbers in italics are Greek, while those in regular typeface are Hebrew. The entry shows there are four Hebrew words translated 'nets' (2764, 4364, 4365 and 7638), but only one Greek word (1350).

If we needed a little more information about the Hebrew word for 'nets' in Ecclesiastes 7:26, we would look up the Hebrew

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number 2764 in the lexicon at the back of the concordance. This is what we would find:

2764. חֶרֶם *hêrem*, *khay'-rem*; or (Zech. 14:11)

חֶרֶם *cherem*, *kheh'-rem*; from 2768; phys. (as *shutting in*) a *net* (either lit. or fig.); usually a doomed object; abstr. *Extermination*: - (ao-) curse (-d, -d thing), dedicated thing, things which should have been utterly destroyed, (appointed to) utter destruction, devoted (thing), net.

A concordance serves one main purpose: it helps you find verses in the Bible. If you vaguely recall a verse, but do not know where to find it, as long as you know one key word from the verse you can look it up in a concordance. For example, if you vaguely remember a verse which speaks about 'snares and nets', you could look up 'nets' in *Strong's* and you would find that Ecclesiastes 7:26 is the verse. If you are preparing a topical study and want to consult all the verses which speak about 'nets', a concordance will list them for you. If you are studying Ecclesiastes 7:26 and want to find cross-references, the listing in the concordance will point you to other places where the English word 'nets' appears, and alert you to whether or not it translates the same Hebrew or Greek word.

I said an exhaustive concordance *was* an indispensable tool. The rise of electronic Bible software has made it obsolete. I gave all my concordances away years ago. I have not used one since. Why? Because even basic Bible software programmes do everything a concordance can do and much, much more—and they do it in a fraction of the time! The power and speed of advanced programmes such as Logos Bible Software (also

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known as Libronix) and Bible Works is amazing. Even free programmes such as e-Sword (see www.e-sword.net) far outstrip a traditional concordance. The Bible Gateway is a website which provides searching facilities for 21 English translations of the Bible as well as many other functions.

The power and speed of these electronic Bible programmes makes it senseless to work with a traditional concordance, unless you do not have convenient access to a computer. I would strongly recommend you begin using a software package as a Bible study tool.

Study Bible

A good study Bible is an invaluable aid to a serious student of the Bible. However, it is important to know which study Bible to buy and how to use it.

Which study Bible is best? If you walk into an average Christian bookstore and browse around the Bible section, you will see dozens of study Bibles. The Dake Study Bible, the Thompson Chain-reference Bible, the Life Application Bible and the Spirit-filled Life Bible are among the most popular. You may also see a range of specialised Bibles for teenagers, women, businessmen or leaders.

I remember how daunted I felt when I went to buy my first study Bible. Which one should I buy? Which one is the best? In my opinion, two stand out. For devotional purposes, I recommend the Life Application Bible, either with the New International Version or the New Living Translation as the biblical text. Its notes are simple, clear and focused on application; just what you need for devotional reading. For study

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purposes, the NIV Study Bible towers above all others. If you are a serious student of God's Word—pastor, teacher, theology student—try to get yourself an NIV Study Bible.

What is outstanding about the NIV Study Bible? These are just some of its many excellent qualities:

- An international, interdenominational team of evangelical scholars wrote it. The quality and diversity of its contributors ensure it is unsurpassed in accuracy and balance.
- It contains more than 20,000 study notes located on the same pages as the verses to which they refer, helping to bring understanding to the Scriptures. The notes treat difficult passages in a balanced manner; where evangelicals hold different views, the notes present the views without bias.

Although not technically a study Bible, the NET Bible is also an outstanding study tool. The name 'NET' literally stands for New English Translation, but doubles as a deliberate play on 'net' as an abbreviation for 'Internet'. The NET Bible is a new translation produced by a team of scholars and available online (for free!). However, it is much more than just another translation. The NET Bible includes over 60,000 scholarly footnotes. The notes take three forms: (a) *translators' notes* present alternative translations and explain the rationale for the translators' choice; (b) *study notes* discuss obscure phrases, literary contexts, historical or cultural backgrounds and theological significances of passages; (c) *text critical notes* discuss variant readings. You can use the NET Bible online or

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download an electronic copy. For details, go to www.netbible.com.

How to use the NIV Study Bible. The NIV Study Bible has several features which help with studying the Scriptures. The most important of them is *the study notes*, 20,000 explanatory notes keyed to specific verses in the NIV text. The other helps include introductions, maps, concordance and cross-references.

The study notes serve many purposes. These are some of them:

1) *The notes explain important words and concepts.* For example, Leviticus 11:44 says, "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature which moves about on the ground." This helpful explanatory note appears at the bottom of the page:

11:44 *be holy.* Quoted in 1Pe 1:16 (see note there; see also Introduction to Leviticus: Theological Themes). Holiness is the key theme of Leviticus, ringing like a refrain in various forms throughout the book (e.g., v. 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8, 15; 22:9, 16, 32). The word "holy" appears more often in Leviticus than in any other book of the Bible. Israel was to be totally consecrated to God. Her holiness was to be expressed in every aspect of her life, to the extent that all of life had a certain ceremonial quality. Because of who God is and what he has done (v. 45), his people must dedicate themselves fully to him (cf. Mt 5:48). See Ro 12:1. *I am holy.* When God's holiness is spoken of in the Bible, reference is to (1) his incomparably awesome majesty (the mysterious, overwhelming presence of his infinite power,

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before which the whole creation trembles), and (2) his absolute moral virtue (a presence so infinitely pure that it unmasks and judges every moral flaw or fault). Sometimes one of these aspects is foregrounded, sometimes the other, but often both are evoked together (as in Isa 6:3-5).

2) *The notes interpret difficult verses.* We find a good illustration in Malachi 1:3, “Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.” The explanation helps readers to understand a difficult verse.

1:3 *Esau I have hated.* If Israel doubts God's covenant love, she should consider the contrast between God's ways with her and his ways with Jacob's brother Esau (Edom). Paul explains God's love for Jacob and hatred for Esau on the basis of election (Ro 9:10-13). God chose Jacob but not Esau. For the use of “love” and “hate” here, cf. how Leah was “hated” in that Jacob loved Rachel more (Ge 29:31, 33; cf Dt 21:16-17). Likewise, believers are to “hate” their parents (Lk 14:26) in the sense that they love Christ even more (Mt 10:37). *wasteland.* Malachi's words about Edom echo those of the earlier prophets (see Isa 34:5-15; Jer 49:7-22; Eze 25:12-14; 35:1-15; Obadiah). Between c. 550 and 400 B.C. the Nabatean Arabs gradually forced the Edomites from their homeland.

3) *The notes draw parallels between specific people and events.* Consider Exodus 32:30: “The next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’” The NIV Study Bible's note has this to say:

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32:30 *make atonement for your sin.* By making urgent intercession before God, as the mediator God had appointed between himself and Israel. No sacrifice that Israel or Moses might bring could atone for this sin. But Moses so identified himself with Israel that he made his own death the condition for God's destruction of the nation (see v. 32). Jesus Christ, the great Mediator, offered himself on the cross to make atonement for his people.

4) *The notes describe the historical and textual contexts of passages.* With reference to 1 Corinthians 8:1—“Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”—the note provides several helpful pieces of information.

8:1 *Now about food.* Another matter the Corinthians had written about (see note on 7:1). *sacrificed to idols.* Offered on pagan altars. Meat left over from a sacrifice might be eaten by the priests, eaten by the offerer and his friends at a feast in the temple (see note on v. 10) or sold in the public meat market. Some Christians felt that if they ate such meat, they participated in pagan worship and thus compromised their testimony for Christ. Other Christians did not feel this way. *knowledge.* Explained in vv. 2-6. *Knowledge puffs up.* It fills one with false pride. *love builds up.* Explained in vv. 7-13. The Christian should love his brother who doubts.

5) *The notes demonstrate how one passage sheds light on another.* An example is the note on Psalm 26:8, “I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells.”

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26:8 where your glory dwells. The presence of God's glory signalled the presence of God himself (see Ex 24:16; 33:22). His glory dwelling in the tabernacle (see Ex 40:35), and later the temple (see 1 Ki 8:11), assured Israel of the Lord's holy, yet gracious, presence among them. Jn 1:14 announces that same presence in the Word become flesh who "made his dwelling among us."

The NIV Study Bible has many other features which will help you with your Bible studies. These include the following:

1. *Introductions*. At the start of each book of the Bible, there is a concise but informative introduction to the book, covering things such as its author, date, background, structure and theology.
2. *Concordance*. At the back of the Bible, you will find a short concordance and two useful indexes, an 'index to subjects' and an 'index to notes'.
3. *Cross-references*. In a middle column, between two columns of Bible text, there are selected cross-references for almost every verse.
4. *Maps*. At the back, there are 16 full-colour maps. There are also many sketch maps scattered throughout the text of the Bible.

Together, the study notes and the other helps make the NIV Study Bible a one-volume treasure for Bible students. In one resource, it provides a portable Bible concordance, dictionary, atlas, and commentary.

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Bible dictionary or encyclopaedia

Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias contain articles on a wide variety of subjects related to the Bible. The articles cover such things as biblical books, customs, doctrines, events, geography, history, people and words. Because they contain a wealth of information about the Bible, they are an invaluable aid to Bible students.

There are many outstanding Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias. They range from single-volume to multi-volume works. *The New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed., edited by Wood 1996) is an excellent, affordable one-volume dictionary. I would advise you to purchase it. If you can afford a much more detailed, multi-volume resource, the revised *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Bromiley 1988) would be my first choice. It is a four-volume, soundly evangelical encyclopaedia.

A few of the best older dictionaries and encyclopaedias are available in free Bible software programmes. e-Sword, for example, includes two of the best older ones: James Orr (1915), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* and MG Easton (1897), *Easton's Bible Dictionary*.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias are reference tools in the truest sense of the word. When you are studying a particular passage, use their articles to provide you with essential information about what you do not know. For example, I often wondered why Jesus asked the apostle John to care for his mother, Mary, after his death (see John 19:25-27). Reading the articles on 'John, the apostle' and 'Salome' in Orr (1915), I discovered that Salome was John's mother. Salome and Mary

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were sisters. Therefore, Mary was John's aunt. Furthermore, John's family was financially well off. This information sheds light on why Jesus asked *John* to take care of Mary.

Bible commentaries

A commentary is an interpreter's analysis and comments on a book of the Bible. A commentary is an aid to exegesis, not a substitute for doing your own hard work. *Never consult a commentary until you have made every effort to understand the text for yourself.* Consult commentaries *after* doing your own study.

There are different kinds of commentaries. Devotional commentaries provide inspiring comments, focusing on application instead of detailed analysis of the text. Homiletical commentaries are written for preachers. Critical commentaries are mainly for scholars, analysing complex technical data. Exegetical commentaries seek to interpret the text, discussing its meaning and exploring difficult passages in depth. For serious Bible study, exegetical commentaries are the most useful kind.

Fee (1985:35) discusses seven criteria you should use when selecting a commentary. This is my paraphrase of them.

1. The commentary should focus more on interpretation than application.
2. The author of the commentary must know Hebrew or Greek well.
3. The commentary must discuss all the possible meanings of the text and evaluate each one.
4. The commentary should discuss text-critical problems.

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5. The author should discuss the historical background of the text.
6. The commentary should give bibliographic guidelines, so you can do further research.
7. The commentary should start with a thorough introduction to the book.

Fee considers number 3 the most important criterion—the commentary must critically evaluate all the possible interpretations, not just give the author's personal preference as if it were the only way to understand the text.

I must emphasise again—a commentary is a tool, not a crutch. Do your own work first; consult a good commentary afterwards to sharpen and confirm your insights.

Conclusion

You must own and learn to use basic Bible study tools. If you have a tight budget and cannot afford to spend much money getting started, organise a copy of e-Sword Bible software (see www.e-sword.net). Then, even more important, teach yourself to use it properly. If you can afford to buy some good resources, consider one of the premier electronic software packages, currently either Logos Bible Software or Bible Works. Electronic reference works offer many advantages over paper editions.

Chapter 4

The Literary Step

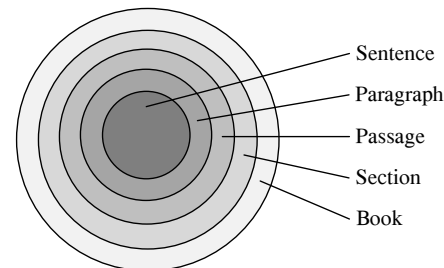
The first step in expository Bible study is to *analyse the literary context*, to position your passage properly in its book. How does the passage contribute to the purpose of the book? How does it relate to the surrounding paragraphs? These questions form the starting point in the search for the meaning of a portion of Scripture.

The literary context

The Bible was not written in verses; it was written in books! Therefore, God's message to the original readers existed primarily at the book level. Books are composed of sections, sections of passages (also called pericopes), passages of paragraphs, and paragraphs of sentences (see Figure 1). Therefore, we must interpret every statement in the light of its sentence, paragraph, passage, section, and book.

The golden rule is that no verse or phrase can mean in isolation something which it does not mean within its wider context. Therefore, we must make every effort to understand how a sentence (statement) fits into its paragraph, how its paragraph contributes to the larger passage or section, and how the major sections make up the argument of the whole book. We shall briefly look at the book context and then other contexts, which we shall group under the heading immediate context.

Figure 1: Five levels of literary context



The book context

Each book of the Bible is a literary unit, written or compiled by a particular person at a certain time for a definite purpose. Therefore, each book is intended to convey a clear and unified message. Since the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors, ensuring that they successfully communicated his message, there can be no contradictions between different parts of the same Bible book. The interpretation of an individual passage must be consistent with the purpose and the flow of thought of the book in which it is found. If one passage of a book seems to teach something which would be inconsistent with what another passage teaches, the correct interpretation is the one which harmonises the two passages.

Therefore, whenever you study a passage, you need to begin by familiarising yourself with the book. Who wrote it? When? What do we know about its original readers? What was the purpose of the book? How is it structured (that is, the major sections and the flow of argument)? A working knowledge of

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these matters is vital for an accurate understanding of how each individual part contributes to the message of the book.

Enough theory. Let's work through some examples to see how important it is to understand a whole book.

At various times in church history, 1 John 3:6-10 has been used to support the belief that if someone is really saved, he will no longer sin at all (doctrine of complete sanctification). Did John intend to teach that we could be sinless in this life? These words seem to suggest this, don't they?

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. ... 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 (1 John 3:6, 9).

Faced with false teachings, John wrote this letter to believers "so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). The letter presents a number of tests (characteristics) for recognising those who are born of God. The test implied in 1 John 3:6-10 is a significant change in lifestyle. If someone is born of God, sin should no longer rule his life. John was not claiming he would not commit sins at all. He made this crystal clear when he wrote:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1John 1:8-10).

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The two passages harmonise easily: true believers do commit sins (1:8-10), but their lives are no longer ruled by sinful habits as they were before they received Christ (3:6-10). If there was no change, they were not truly born of God.

Hebrews 10:26-27 is a passage which used to strike fear into me (and many others). This is what it says:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Does the author of Hebrews mean that, if Christians commit deliberate sins, they will forfeit their salvation? I used to think so until I understood the book context. Hebrews addresses Jewish Christians who were considering returning to Judaism. The entire letter has one major purpose—to persuade them that Christ is the fulfilment of Jewish hopes, so a return to Judaism would be fatal step backwards.

In Hebrews 7-9, the author argued at length that Jesus' death was the only sacrifice able to remove the guilt of sin. The Old Testament animal sacrifices were only shadows of his atoning sacrifice. In 10:19-39, he makes a series of applications based on the truths he taught in chapters 7-9.

The key phrase, therefore, in our passage is "no sacrifice for sins is left" (v. 26). This is literally true. If they exchange faith in Christ for a return to Jewish law, there is 'no sacrifice' in Judaism that can atone for their sins. With no sacrifice left, all they will have to look forward to is "a fearful expectation of judgement". What then is the 'deliberate sin'? It must be

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abandoning their commitment to Christ and returning to Judaism.

Viewed in this light, Hebrews 10:26-27 is not saying that every Christian who commits a deliberate sin has no further hope of salvation. Rather, it teaches anyone who exchanges faith in Christ for another belief system, that no other religion offers an atoning sacrifice for sins, so they are sentencing themselves to eternal judgement.

Preachers who hold to ‘the prosperity gospel’ often interpret Job 3:25 in a way which violates the book context. This tradition holds that our thoughts and words have creative power. Positive thoughts and words draw good to us, but negative ones attract harm. Now can you see how they would read Job 3:25?

What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.

They claim Job’s fear caused the disasters which befell him. His negative thoughts drew calamity towards him.

What is wrong with this interpretation? It contradicts the plain teaching of the book. The first two chapters of Job tell us why the disasters befell Job—God permitted Satan to test him with suffering (see Job 1-2). God himself said Job was blameless and upright. His suffering did not come from negative thoughts. Satan’s attacks, not Job’s thoughts, were responsible for his sufferings.

The immediate context

The immediate context includes the paragraph, passage, and section levels. The immediate context of any part of Scripture

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consists of the sentences and paragraphs around it, that is, the paragraph in which a statement is found and the paragraphs before and after it. A group of sentences form a paragraph and a group of paragraphs form a section. Any verse or sentence must be interpreted in keeping with the flow of thought which runs through the section in which it is found.

Gordon Fee (1985) encourages Bible students to learn to ‘think paragraphs’, not verses. A verse is a half-thought; a paragraph is a complete thought. The surrounding paragraphs complete the thought found in a single paragraph. One way to be sure you understand the big idea in a section of Scripture is to trace the relationship between the main points of each paragraph.

Let’s work through some examples of how the immediate context can guide us to the right interpretation. We shall begin with a simple example.

Did Paul really mean it when he said, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13)? Was he claiming he could do anything to which he set his mind? Did Paul think his faith in Christ gave him unlimited human potential? Not at all.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I

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can do everything through him who gives me strength (Phil. 4:10-13).

Paul was really saying he could cope with all circumstances; he could flourish in good and bad times because Christ gave him strength. He was content “in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (v. 12). He was claiming that Christ’s presence was enough to help through every hardship.

My first local church belonged to a fellowship of churches which used Galatians 2:9 as a proof text to justify the practice of formally taking people into membership in the church. Here is verse 9a:

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.

My church saw in this verse a pattern of leaders (James, Peter, and John) welcoming newcomers into fellowship with them.

There is nothing wrong with churches having a membership system, but this is definitely not the intent behind this verse. The passage, Galatians 2:1-10, records how Paul and Barnabas met with the leaders of the Jerusalem church—Peter, James, and John—to explain the gospel they had preached among the Gentiles. As a result of their meeting, the Jerusalem leaders recognised God’s hand at work through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Therefore, they agreed to work together, which is the meaning of the phrase “gave us the right hand of fellowship” (v. 9). They agreed that God had sent Paul to the Gentiles just as he had sent Peter to the Jews.

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A theme verse in the missions strategy of the same fellowship of churches was Psalm 2:8, “Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.” We spent much time praying for God to give us the nations as our inheritance. Our hearts were pure, but our proof text was poor. The immediate context suggests judgement more than salvation.

Saint Augustine came to faith in Christ after hearing Bishop Ambrose preach from 2 Corinthians 3:6b, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Ambrose claimed ‘the letter’ refers to literal interpretation of Scripture, ‘the Spirit’ to spiritual or allegorical interpretation. Hence, interpreting Scripture literally kills, but interpreting it ‘spiritually’ gives life. This paved the way for Augustine to believe. He found it difficult to believe some parts of the Bible literally. If he could spiritualise or allegorise those parts, the obstacle to believing disappeared.

In the immediate context, ‘the letter’ actually referred to the old covenant, in which the law of Moses held centre stage (letter = law). ‘The Spirit’ alluded to the new covenant, the age of the Spirit. Paul did not mean to say anything about literal versus allegorical interpretation in this verse.

Finally, let us briefly look at the first line of Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God”. Chris Pepler (2005:58) ponders:

Psalm 46:10a appears in more than one modern ‘chorus’ which portrays God as saying, ‘Just relax and let me handle the problem for you.’ Is this what is actually meant in the psalm?

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The immediate context is the final stanza of the psalm, verses 8-11. The stanza celebrates God's unmatched power displayed in "the desolations he has brought on the earth" (v. 8). His might leaves his enemies speechless, forced to acknowledge that he alone is God.

In each of the examples we looked at, our instincts threatened to lead us astray. Our first impressions as to what a text meant proved flawed when we looked at the text in its literary context. The immediate context pointed us in the right direction.

In summary, then, there are five levels of literary context: sentence, paragraph, passage, section, and book. Each level may have a bearing on the meaning of a passage. Carefully studying the literary context of a passage guides you to the correct interpretation in both negative and positive ways. Positively, it helps you to follow the author's train of thought, which helps you to get his point(s). Negatively, it protects you against faulty interpretations by exposing illegitimate interpretations. But, as important as it is, it is only the first step in the process. Now let's look at step 2, the historical setting.

Chapter 5

The Historical Step

The second step in expository Bible study is to *analyse the historical-cultural setting*. Step 1 covered the internal context; step 2 examines the external context.

The external context

What we are calling the historical-cultural setting encompasses the whole external context, the world in which biblical texts were written. It includes a vast array of different kinds of external factors which can have a bearing on how we understand a particular Scripture. Zuck (1991, ch. 4) discusses eleven kinds of historical-cultural gaps we need to bridge: political, religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, clothing, domestic, geographical, military, and social.

Why is the external context critical? In all communication, meaning is the sum of language and context (see *Figure 2*). That is, when you are trying to convey a message to someone, part of the message is encoded in the words you use, and the rest is present in the context of the communication.



Figure 2: How meaning is constructed

In direct communication, such as when you are speaking to a friend, most of the contextual information is shared by both

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parties. This makes communication easy. However, when you read the Bible you are separated from the original readers by thousands of years. You share almost none of the external context which the author shared with his original readers. This means that many clues to the author's meaning, which the original readers would have automatically understood, are not available to you. Therefore, you are much more likely to misinterpret the message than they were.

The golden rule is that *the meaning of the text cannot be fully grasped without an adequate knowledge of the external context which gave rise to it*. We are separated from the original context by historical, political, geographic, economic, religious, cultural, and social gaps (see *Figure 3*). Any or all of these factors may have a significant influence on the meaning of the text. Therefore, as Bible interpreters, part of our job is to reconstruct as much of the external context of our text as possible. The better our knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the passage, the more likely we are to understand it as its original readers would have understood it.

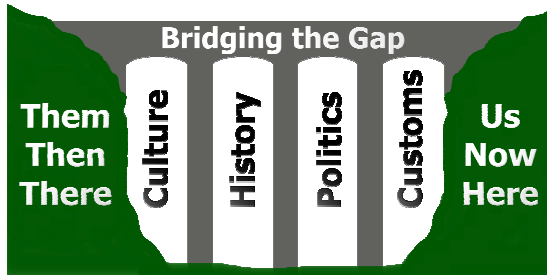


Figure 3: Bridging the gaps from them to us

Figure 3 illustrates the massive gap between the original readers and modern readers. Between the then-and-there and the here-and-now, massive cultural, historical, political, and social changes have occurred; these affect the way we will interpret the text. Our task is to build a bridge between the then-and-there and the here-and-now. We do this by studying the historical and cultural context of the text we are trying to understand.

What happens if we do not bridge the gaps properly? We read the Scriptures as if they are addressed directly to us. We use our cultural assumptions to decode the author's meaning, often with disastrous results. In my culture, if I were to greet another man with a kiss (Rom. 16:16), he might beat me up. Casting lots to select church leaders (Acts 1:26) would not go down well either. Scripture was written for us, but not to us. If we are to interpret and apply it sensibly, we must make every effort to appreciate its original setting.

The external context at work

A few simple examples should help you to appreciate the power of studying the historical-cultural background of a passage.

Understanding the geography of Bible lands often enriches our appreciation of a passage. There is a nice example in John 4. This is what verses 3 and 4 report.

When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria.

In the geography of ancient Palestine, Samaria lay between Galilee and Judea, so the shortest route from Galilee to Judea would go through Samaria. However, there was such hatred between Jews and Samaritans that the normal (preferred) route from Judea to Galilee went around—not through—Samaria. So why does John say Jesus *had to go through Samaria*? The necessity was not geographical, but spiritual. His Father had planned a meeting in Samaria.

The meaning of some verses is so closely tied to ancient customs that they make no sense to the uninformed. As a new believer, I mainly read the NKJV. Can you imagine how lost I was when I first stumbled on this verse:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:13, NKJV).

What on earth does “gird up the loins of your mind” mean? In Bible times, men wore long robes. When they needed to move quickly and freely, they would tuck their robe into their belt

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(Keener 1993). A traveller would do this when preparing for a trip, a warrior for a march or a battle. This was girding up the loins. Peter's point, then, was "prepare your minds for action" (NIV). The CEV is even more forceful: "Be alert and think straight." Now that I understand the custom, I like the NKJV because it paints a vivid picture in my mind.

What was really going on in this exchange between Elijah and Elisha?

And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" Elisha said, "Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me" (2 Kgs 2:9).

What did Elisha want when he asked for "a double portion of your spirit"? If we count their recorded miracles, Elisha performed twice as many as Elijah. Was he asking to have double the anointing, twice the power Elijah had? Not at all! In the culture of the day, the oldest son received a double portion of the family estate as his inheritance. If the father had two sons, he divided the estate into three parts; the oldest got two thirds. If he had 10 sons, he divided it into 11 parts; the oldest got two elevenths. With the double portion came the primary responsibility for looking after his mother and family. By asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, Elisha was really asking to be his mentor's successor, to be the one chosen and anointed to continue Elijah's ministry (see Deut. 21:17).

One amusing example of how historical distance can confuse interpreters comes from ancient Jewish rabbis. Exodus 23:19b, "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" (cf. Exod.

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34:26; Deut. 14:21), is the chief biblical basis behind the Jewish practice of not combining milk and meat. How does one conclude from Exodus 23:19b that God does not want you to mix meat and milk? Several hundred years after Moses wrote this command, a group of rabbis struggled to understand what God intended by it. They concluded he did not want them to mix meat and milk. Modern archaeological discoveries have shown that this practice was part of a Canaanite religious ritual. The point of the command was to prevent the Israelites from participating in a pagan ritual which might lead them into idolatry.

We could look at thousands of places where our grasp of God's point depends on knowing the ancient context. Who were the Pharisees, and how did they come to prominence? How does the political and military history of the great empires help us to understand Daniel's prophecies? How does Roman law shed light on Jesus' teaching to go the extra mile? What impact did Paul's Roman citizenship have on his life and ministry? How did John use his knowledge of the history and culture of the seven cities to drive home his letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3? Almost every page of the Bible contains examples. By now you are probably wondering how you can find the information you need to interpret these Scriptures properly.

Sources of historical information

If you are convinced it is essential to know the external context, you are probably also concerned about how you can bridge the gap. You should be wondering, 'Where can I find the

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historical, cultural, geographic, political, and other kinds of information I need to interpret Scriptures correctly?’ Assuming you do not have the time necessary to study the biblical worlds in detail, there are two main sources of essential information.

Bible commentaries should discuss historical and cultural details. In particular, these are two invaluable reference works you should try to purchase and use regularly:

- Keener CS 1993. *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Matthews VH, Chavalas MW, and Walton JH 2000. *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

These two commentaries specialise in providing vital background information for each passage of Scripture. They are the ideal starting point.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Due to space constraints, however, commentaries usually only provide a brief sketch of historical details. For more detailed information, you should consult articles in Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias. There are many good ones on the market. I personally like these two:

- Wood DRW (ed.). 1996. *The new Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.). Downers Grove: IVP.
- Bromiley GW (gen. ed.) 1986. *The international standard Bible encyclopedia* (rev. ed., 4 vols). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

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Wood (1996) is a user-friendly, single-volume dictionary, while Bromiley (1986) is much larger, four-volume reference work.

In addition to commentaries, dictionaries, and encyclopaedias, there are many good handbooks, atlases and study Bibles which also provide helpful historical information. Before we leave this topic, we must look at one more crucial aspect.

Cultural or eternal?

How do we know which teachings and commands were limited to the there-and-then, and which are still binding on us? Few questions are more important. Recent debate about whether the Bible *forbids* homosexual marriage highlights the far-reaching impact it can have on your life, theology, and ministry. Liberal scholars argue that the passages which condemn homosexuality are culturally conditioned; they condemn ancient customs of homosexual prostitution, not committed, loving relationships between same-sex partners. This might seem like an extreme example, but it reflects a trend to treat more and more biblical teachings which modern man finds offensive as cultural rather than eternal.

Here is a list of some biblical commands, examples, and statements (largely adapted from Zuck 1991:91-92). Which ones do you think we should obey or follow? Which would you label culturally conditioned?

- We should keep the Sabbath holy (Exod. 6:8-11).
- We should honour our parents (Exod. 6:12).
- We should pray three times a day (Dan. 6:10).
- We should not take any oaths at all (Matt. 5:34).
- You should give to everyone who asks to borrow (Matt. 5:42).
- Believers should not pray in public (Matt. 6:5-6).

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- Missionaries should go out in pairs (Mark 6:7).
- We should wash one another's feet (John 13:14).
- You should not have sex before marriage (Acts 15:29).
- Believers should greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16).
- We should put the sexually immoral out of the church (1 Cor. 5:5).
- Women should wear head-coverings in church (1 Cor. 11:5).
- Tongues and prophecy should be part of our worship (1 Cor. 14:5).
- Women should remain silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34).
- Wives should submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:25).
- Women should not be allowed to teach in church (1 Tim. 2:11-12).

How did you decide which are cultural and which are eternal? What principles did you use? Did you have clear, principled reasons for considering some binding and other obsolete? God gave both temporary and permanent commands. We need some guidelines (principles) for distinguishing the cultural from the eternal.

Zuck (1991:92-95) offers four principles. His principles are quite complex. I would simplify and restate the main points this way.

1. If a command, principle or situation is moral, spiritual or theological in nature, it tends to be permanent and transferable to us.³
2. If a command, principle or situation is addressed to God's people in general and is repeated elsewhere in both testaments, it tends to be permanent and transferable.
3. If a command, principle or situation is addressed only to particular people or groups *or* is neither moral nor

³ Since moral commands and spiritual truths originate in the nature of God, which does not change, these are timeless.

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spiritual in nature *or* is not repeated *or* is later revoked, it tends to be cultural and non-transferable.

4. If a command, principle or situation speaks to cultural circumstances which are partially or completely dissimilar to ours, the principles undergirding it are timeless and transferable to similar situations.

These four principles are only guidelines. They do not solve all our difficulties, but they do help us to make sound judgements. Let us consider how they would help with some of the items in the list above.

The first two come from the Ten Commandments. Must we keep the Sabbath laws? This command was given only to a particular group (OT Israel). The New Testament does not repeat it; in fact, it revokes it. However, the principles of rest and worship remain important. Should we still honour parents? This command is moral in nature. Both Old Testament and New Testament affirm it repeatedly. Therefore, it remains binding.

How about sending out missionaries in pairs? Jesus gave this as a specific command to a particular group for a designated mission. Although the Great Commission does not mention it, we do see Paul making sure he does not travel alone. I think the principle stands—missionaries should not go alone. However, they need not always go in pairs.

As for washing one another's feet, my culture has no comparable custom. We should apply the principle Jesus modelled (humble, servant leadership) in culturally relevant ways. We need not imitate the act itself (foot washing).

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By the end of step 2, we have looked all *around* the text, both the external, historical-cultural setting and the internal, literary context. Now it is time to look closely *at* the text—what exactly did the author write? This brings us to the verbal context.

Chapter 6

The Verbal Step

The third step in expository Bible study is to *analyse the words and grammar* of the text. We call this the verbal step, because it deals with words and their relationships to one another. At this point, we look closely at the passage, noting *exactly* what the author said. This involves two levels of analysis—the meaning of words and the relationships between them (grammar). We shall examine each of these.

Word studies

Principles

The individual word is the most abused level of Bible interpretation. How often do we hear preachers say that a particular Greek word really means a whole lot more than its English translation? What these preachers have usually done is to consult a Greek-English dictionary and discover a whole range of English translations (called ‘glosses’) offered for that word. They immediately assume that Greek is a much richer language than English and proceed to base large chunks of theology on the various meanings of a single word.

This is horrible hermeneutics. To base your interpretation on the meaning of a single word and invest too much meaning into that word is not a sound way of interpreting the Bible. Words only have meaning in context. If you take a word out of its

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context (its sentence and paragraph), you make it meaningless, because it only has meaning insofar as it contributes to the entire message.

Perhaps the most common error is to read too much meaning into a single word in a particular context. This often results from failure to appreciate the two levels of meaning a word encodes; words carry *denotative* meaning and *connotative* meaning.

1) *Denotation* refers to the object or action in the real world which the word denotes. The same word may denote more than one object or action, but in any particular context it can have only one denotation. The denotation is an objective component of meaning which does not vary from speaker to speaker.

At the level of denotations, here is the golden rule: *a word may have many definitions in a dictionary, but can have only one meaning in a sentence*. The context both defines and limits a word’s meaning. The task of the interpreter is to choose the correct meaning of the term in a given passage from the range of meanings given in a dictionary. A few examples should drive home the principle.

The New Testament uses ‘world’ (usually as a translation for *kosmos*) in at least three major senses: (a) the physical world, the universe; (b) the world system which is opposed to God; and (c) all the people who live on earth, mankind. In “God so loved the world” (John 3:16), it refers to all human beings, but God sent “his Son into the world” (John 3:17) can only mean planet earth. What about “do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15)? He surely does not mean ‘do not love human beings’ or ‘do not love the earth’; he means ‘do not love this

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world system'. Although 'world' has different meanings in the dictionary, only one of those meanings fits when used in a sentence.

Consider the word 'spirit'. When they use it, the New Testament writers sometimes mean *the Holy Spirit* (for example, "Jesus was led by the Spirit", Matt. 4:1). At other times, it may mean *the human spirit*, such as when Jesus "gave up his spirit" (Matt. 27:50). They may mean *spirits*, such as angels or demons (such as, "when an evil spirit comes out of a man ...", Matt. 12:43). At times, they do not mean any of these; 'spirit' simply describes a person's *attitude, disposition or way of thinking*. What else could "blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3) mean? Despite the fact that 'spirit' has such vastly different meanings, the context seldom leaves any doubt as to which meaning the author intends.

Did you notice that the three different uses of 'world' all occurred in John's writings, and all four examples of 'spirit' come from Matthew's gospel? I did this on purpose. The same writer, even in the same book, can use the same word in a variety of ways.

2) *Connotation* refers to the emotional overtones linked to a particular word. The emotional overtones are subjective and vary from speaker to speaker and from context to context. They may or may not be intended in any particular occurrence of a word. For example, a writer might use president, politician or dictator to denote the leader of a country; his choice of word gives colour to his intent. *President* tends to be a neutral word, but both *politician* and *dictator* have negative emotional overtones.

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When conducting a word study, your goal is to identify both the denotation and connotation of the word in the context of the passage you are studying, to understand fully what that word contributes to the author's intended meaning in the passage. Identifying a word's denotative meaning seldom poses problems. Discerning its connotations in a particular context, however, is challenging, but it is worth the effort, because connotations add the emotional flavour which offers great exegetical payoff.

Two approaches shed light on a word's connotations. First, we need to study the various ways and contexts in which the word is used. In our context, this would mean studying all the occurrences in the Bible (actually, experts in the field also look at all other literature from Bible times as well). Second, we need to understand what other words the author might have used instead. His choice of one word in preference to a similar word often signals his intended connotations.

These are crucial principles you need to understand when doing word studies. Now let us translate them into a procedure for studying biblical words.

Procedures

How should one approach a word study? I want to propose a simple method involving five steps. Although you may one day want to learn more advanced methods, these five steps will serve you well.

1) *Choose key words to study*. Not every word requires a word study. When should you consider a word study? In two situations: (a) if you do not fully understand the meaning of a

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word, you should look it up in a good dictionary; (b) if the meaning of a word may influence the interpretation of the passage, conduct a full study of the word.

What kinds of words tend to influence the meaning of the text? First, study *theologically significant* words. Do not assume you ‘know’ the meaning of great theological terms like ‘grace’, ‘righteousness’ or ‘election’. Our studies in systematic theology often colour our understanding of these terms. As a result, when we encounter them in the biblical text, we read into each occurrence the theological definitions we have learned. This is classic *eisegesis*. The problem is that not every occurrence of a term carries all the connotations we may have come to associate with it. We should study these words carefully to ensure that we are not reading more into them than the author intended.

Second, study words which have *unclear meanings*. The Bible contains many *rare words*. Their meaning is obscure because we do not have enough information to determine their exact meaning. In the Lord’s prayer, the word translated ‘this day’ in the line “give us this day our daily bread” occurs only twice in existing ancient Greek literature (only once in the Bible). Its exact meaning is unclear. *Ambiguous words* have two or more meanings (denotations) that would make sense in context. In John 3:3, the word translated ‘again’ in the phrase “unless one is born again” has two meanings that would fit well in this context—‘again’ and ‘from above’. Which one did Jesus mean? You would have to analyse this word carefully if you were studying John 3:1-8. Similarly, among the meanings of the word translated ‘comprehend’ in John 1:5 are (a) ‘to understand’; and (b) ‘to overcome’. Either meaning would make sense in the

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context of John 1:1-18, but the verse has a very different meaning if we translate ‘overcome’ instead of ‘comprehend’.

The easiest way to identify ambiguous words is to read your passage in a few different translations. Consider these three translations of 1 Corinthians 7:1b:

NASB	NIV text	NIV margin
It is good for a man not to touch a woman.	It is good for a man not to marry.	It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

Why is the Greek word *haptesthai* translated as ‘to touch’, ‘to marry’ and ‘to have sexual relations’? This word needs close examination.

2) *Consult a good dictionary*. When you have identified a word you want to study further, the next step is to consult a good dictionary. At times, all you need is to look it up in a good English dictionary. Last week, I was meditating on Psalm 2. When I got to verse 4b, “the Lord scoffs at them”, I paused to look up ‘scoffs’ in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2003). The meaning of the verse immediately became clear to me.

If you need to do more than just look up the word in Webster’s, you must first identify the underlying Hebrew or Greek word. A reliable word study must be based on the original language word, not on its English translation. Even if you do not know any Hebrew or Greek, Bible software programmes make it easy to identify the underlying word, to look it up in a dictionary and find all occurrences of it in the Bible.

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A good Hebrew-English or Greek-English dictionary (usually called a lexicon) will give you an idea of the word's possible *range of meanings*. What kinds of information will you find in a good lexicon?

☑ *Definitions*. Every dictionary provides a list of word definitions. Some only list the main denotative meanings of a word, but more advanced ones will discuss finer nuances, such as context-sensitive connotations.

☑ *Etymology*. Etymology refers to how the word was formed. For example, *apostellō* ('to send') comes from two words: *apo* ('away from') and *stellō* ('I send'). Etymologies can be both helpful and dangerous. They may help us to understand a word, but they may also mislead us, because the way a word is used in everyday language is not always based on how it was formed. For example, you may have heard it said that 'enthusiasm' comes from two Greek words, 'in' and 'God', so enthusiasm literally means 'in God'. No, it does not! It means zealous, fervent, passionate.

☑ *Synonyms*. Good dictionaries often include common synonyms (and even antonyms). This can be very helpful information because it allows you to compare the word the author used with related words he might have used, but did not. If the two words would convey slightly different connotations, the distinction between them may alert you to the subtleties of the author's point.

☑ *Examples*. Biblical lexicons give real examples of each use of a word. The best ones give many examples. In the case of

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words which do not occur many times, they often list every occurrence.

Reading a good lexicon entry often provides you with all the information you need to understand the meaning of the word in your text. If it does not, continue with the next step.

3) *Conduct an exhaustive search*. For a crucial word, you may need to look up every place it is used in the Bible. Finding every occurrence of a Hebrew or Greek word used to be difficult. Bible software programmes make it easy. Once you have found all the occurrences, you must carefully examine each one in context to get a feel for the subtleties of the word.

If you were doing a word study on the word translated 'deprive' in 1 Corinthians 7:5, an exhaustive search of the New Testament would turn up these hits:

Mark 10:19 ... do not *defraud*

1 Cor. 6:7 Why not rather be *cheated*?

1 Cor. 6:8 Instead, you yourself *cheat* and do wrong ...

1 Cor. 7:5 Do not *deprive* each other ...

1 Tim. 6:5 ... who have been *robbed* of the truth ...

Jas. 5:4 The wages you *failed to pay* the workmen ...

The word carries connotations of cheating, stealing, robbing or defrauding a person of what is rightfully theirs. What a strong word Paul used to describe a spouse withholding sex from his or her partner!

4) *Compare possible synonyms*. Synonyms are words which have the same general meaning (denotation), but usually carry slightly different nuances (connotations). If the author of your text had more than one word he could have used to convey his

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main idea, then his choice of one word in preference to an alternative word may indicate the finer nuances he wanted to communicate.

Suppose you were studying 2 Corinthians 12:20 and wondered why the word translated ‘anger’ in the ESV is translated in a wide variety of ways in other versions.

For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder (2 Cor. 12:20, ESV).

On investigation, you discover biblical Greek has two main words for anger. *Orgē* suggests a settled state of mind, but *thumos* (used here) a violent outburst. This explains translations like ‘hot tempers’ (GNB) and ‘outbursts of anger’ (NIV).

5) *Conclude as to the word’s significance.* The goal of doing a word study is to identify what the word contributes to the author’s point. You should conclude your word study by summarising the word’s meaning (denotation *plus* connotations) in your passage and how it influences the overall meaning.

We have spent more time on word studies than we shall on the other steps, not because they are more important, but because they are more often abused. Word studies can be a fruitful source of insight into the author’s intended meaning, but it is easy to read more into a word than is really there. When in doubt, you should err on the side of under-emphasising the significance of individual words. We now turn to the other level of word analysis, grammar.

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Grammar

Individual words carry some meaning, but deeper meaning emerges when we string words together in meaningful relationships. This brings us into the domain of grammar (or syntax). Grammar refers to the relationships between words in a sentence. The rules of grammar govern how words relate to each other in a sentence to produce meaning. When we speak or write, we use the rules of grammar to ensure our sentences convey our intended meaning. When interpreting a writing, the rules of grammar help us to understand the relationship between words in a sentence, so that we can figure out what the author was trying to say.

The golden rule for Bible interpretation is that *the interpretation must be consistent with the normal rules of grammar*. We must take the grammar of the Bible seriously, because it will prevent us from making certain wrong interpretations. Grammar does not always limit us to one possible interpretation, but it does eliminate many illegitimate interpretations—those the author could not have in mind because they are inconsistent with the rules of grammar.

One of the fundamental rules of good interpretation is that we should interpret the text according to the normal rules of grammar. Even if you are working from a translation, you should take note of the grammar of your translation. To be a good exegete, you need to understand the basics of good grammar. This is not the place to offer grammar lessons. If you want to improve your skills as an interpreter, you would do well to brush up on your English grammar (or, even better, learn the

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biblical languages). For our purposes, I want to offer some guidelines and examples of how grammar can influence meaning.

Guideline 1: Pay careful attention to verbs

The tense and mood of verbs are very important for accurate interpretation. *Tense* refers to the time and/or kind of action. Is the action past, present or future? Is it so with reference to the writer (absolute time) or some other event (relative time)? Is the action portrayed as complete or incomplete, once-off or ongoing? *Mood* describes the relationship between the action and reality. There are three main moods. The indicative mood makes a statement of fact, the subjunctive expresses possibility and the imperative gives a command. Tense and mood can profoundly affect interpretation.

Here, more than anywhere else, you are at a disadvantage working from a translation, because the English verb system differs significantly from both the Hebrew and the Greek verb systems. Nevertheless, you can still guard against bad exegesis by paying attention to the way verbs are used. Let's work through some examples.

If you read John 14:1 in the NKJV and the NASB, you will see an important difference.

NKJV	NASB
"Do not let your heart be troubled. <i>You believe</i> in God; believe also in me."	"Do not let your heart be troubled. <i>Believe</i> in God; believe also in me."

"You believe in God" states a fact, but "believe in God" gives a command. Was Jesus saying his disciples already believe in God

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or commanding them to believe in God? The answer depends on whether you understand the verb's mood as indicative (stating a fact) or an imperative (giving a command). This is a small point of grammar with a big impact on meaning.

Commanding the church to discipline a man for having an affair with his stepmother, the apostle Paul wrote, "hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). Leaving aside other difficulties for a moment, I once heard a gifted preacher proclaim this verse as a promise—if the church disciplines a sinning brother, his spirit will be saved on the day of the Lord. A little more attention to detail would have protected the preacher from making a serious error in interpretation. Paul did not say 'his spirit *will be* saved'; he said 'his spirit *may be* saved'! Once again, the mood of the verb makes a world of difference.

Verb tense can be just as important. If you read Matthew 6:12, part of the Lord's prayer, in the NIV and the NKJV, you will see an interesting difference:

NIV	NKJV
Forgive us our debts, as we also <i>have forgiven</i> our debtors.	And forgive us our debts, as we <i>forgive</i> our debtors.

In the NIV, we ask God to forgive our sins as we have forgiven others *in the past* (that is, based on our track record). In the NKJV, we ask God to forgive us as we *right now* commit to forgive others. I am sure you agree there is a vast difference between these two.

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For another illustration of the importance of tense, consider 1 Peter 4:6.

For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit (1 Pet. 4:6, NKJV).

Did Peter mean unbelievers could hear the gospel after they die and have another chance to repent? This would certainly be the meaning if he had said, ‘the gospel *is* preached to those who are dead’. But he did *not* say that. He said, “the gospel *was* preached to those who are dead” (note the past tense of ‘was’). In other words, it was preached to them before they died. The NIV adds the word ‘now’ to ensure readers do not miss the point— “the gospel was preached even to those who are *now* dead”.

Guideline 2: Pay careful attention to small words

Small words often have a large impact. By small words, I mean prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and adverbs. A few examples should prove the point.

Adverbs. In my first local church, at each communion service one of the elders would read 1 Corinthians 11:27 from the KJV:

So that whoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord *unworthily*, he will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:27, KJV; italics added).

He would follow the reading with a solemn warning for each person to examine their hearts for hidden sins so that they do not sin “against the body and blood of the Lord”. The elder had sincerely misinterpreted the verse. He interpreted it to mean this:

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‘If any *unworthy person* eats this bread or drinks this cup ...’; this makes *unworthy* an adjective instead of an adverb. The NIV reflects Paul’s intent better: “Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord *in an unworthy manner* will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (italics added). Paul was warning the Corinthians that the entire manner they celebrated communion dishonoured the Lord.

Pronouns. A pronoun is a word which stands in the place of a noun; it points to a noun. Identifying the noun to which a pronoun points can have a significant impact on interpretation. Consider Ephesians 2:8-9:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and *this* not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Eph. 2:8, italics added).

To what does ‘this’ refer? Does it refer to ‘faith’ or to ‘salvation’? If to faith, Paul is teaching that even our faith in Christ is a gift from God. If to salvation, he is saying salvation (atonement) was provided by God as a gift, but this leaves room for our faith to be real (that is, *our* faith).

After his resurrection, while eating a meal with his disciples, “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than *these*?’” (John 21:15, italics added). What did Jesus mean by ‘these’? The other disciples? ‘Simon, do you love me more than these disciples?’ The fishing gear lying beside them? ‘Simon, do you love me more than you love these things?’ Either is possible. I think Jesus was pointing to the fishing gear.

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Prepositions. Prepositions are small words which combine with nouns to form phrases which function as either adjectives or adverbs. They can have a profound effect on the meaning of a sentence. Two examples will illustrate the point.

Jesus' words in Revelation 3:20 are well known from the NKJV: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." Look closely at the preposition *to* in the clause "I will come in to him". Evangelists often interpret this as a promise that Jesus will come *into* a repentant sinner. The Greek preposition translated *to*, however, means *towards*, not *into*. There is a big difference between 'in towards' and 'into'. This verse does not speak about Christ *indwelling* a convert (true as this may be).

The NIV text of 1 Corinthians 12:13 reads, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body". The margin, however, has '*in* one Spirit' instead of '*by* one Spirit'. The Greek preposition *en* can mean either 'in' or 'by', and deciding which idea Paul intended is difficult. The point here is to note what a big difference it makes. Is the Spirit the agent who baptises us ('by one Spirit') or the object in which we are baptised ('in one Spirit')? How you answer this has implications for your pneumatology.

Small grammatical nuances can turn the meaning of a passage around 180 degrees. This is the reason experts work so hard to learn the biblical languages. If you cannot learn Hebrew and Greek, you should at least take steps to ensure you have a good grasp of English grammar.

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Summarise your provisional interpretation

By the end of step 3, you have studied the literary and historical context of your passage and analysed its contents (words and grammar) in detail. You should have a provisional understanding in mind. At this point, you should summarise your interpretation. In the next two steps, you will test your interpretation against the teachings of Christ (ch. 7) and the rest of the Bible (ch. 8).

Chapter 7

The Christological Step

The fourth step in expository Bible study is to *examine the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ* to see what he taught about the topics addressed in your text. Jesus' teachings will confirm, correct and/or complete what you discovered in steps 1-3.

The christocentric principle

Jesus Christ was God's full and final revelation of himself. Hebrews expresses this idea best:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

The gospels tell the story of Jesus' life and teaching, his words and works. The Old Testament lays the foundation for the mission and ministry of Christ. The remainder of the New Testament (Acts, the epistles, and Revelation) explains and applies the implications of Jesus' ministry. Figure 4 illustrates what Peppler (2005) calls the christocentric principle of interpretation.

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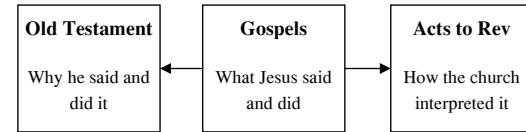


Figure 4: The christocentric principle

Peppler's view of the relationship between the three divisions of the Bible draws attention to the central place of the gospels in our theology. We should always look to the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus to elucidate our understanding of a topic. Peppler (2005:61) puts it like this:

If we believe that Jesus Christ really is God the Son and that the Bible is fully inspired and that God the Father has chosen to speak to mankind in and through His Son, *then* the prime basis of our interpretation of Scripture must be *what Jesus said and did* (see John 14:10, 24; 17:8; Matt. 7:24).

We should first determine *what* Jesus said or modelled in the four gospels concerning any given topic. We need to do some research in the Old Testament to find out *why* He said and did it. Then we need to draw on the balance of the New Testament to discover *how* to interpret and apply what He said and did. This is what I call the Christocentric principle.

We need to use this christocentric principle properly. We should not act as if the gospels are more inspired than the rest of the Bible. "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV). We should use it as a tool for interpreting the links between portions of Scripture. The Old Testament points

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towards Christ. Therefore, when studying the Old Testament, we should explore how Jesus interpreted, applied or fulfilled it. The rest of the New Testament builds on the ministry of Jesus recorded in the gospels. Therefore, we must understand what Jesus said and did in order to interpret Acts, Paul, Hebrews, James, Peter, Jude, and Revelation soundly.

Properly used, Peppler's christocentric principle is the first *corroboration step*. What is a corroboration step? After steps 1-3, examining the literary context, the historical-cultural setting, and the words and grammar, you will have a provisional interpretation in mind. Now you need to check how well your interpretation fits with the rest of the Bible. You need to *corroborate* your interpretation. You begin this by analysing anything Jesus said or did that relates to your passage.

The christocentric principle at work

Suppose we are studying 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 in which Paul teaches about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. After a detailed analysis of the text, we come up with four summary statements of the main points the apostle makes.

1. To ward off the temptation to sexual immorality, married couples must not deprive each other of sexual intimacy, but must meet each other's needs through regular intimacy (vv. 1-7).
2. The unmarried (including widows and widowers) are encouraged to remain single, but are free to remarry (vv. 8-9).
3. Married couples may not divorce. If they do divorce, they may not marry a different partner (vv. 10-11).

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4. Christians married to unbelievers must not cause or initiate a divorce, but are free to remarry if their unsaved partner abandons the marriage because of their faith in Christ (vv. 12-16).

Now we want to check what Jesus taught that might confirm, contradict or complete these points. The first step is to find all the passages in the gospels where Jesus addressed topics related to marriage, divorce or remarriage. I found these passages:

Passage	Summary
Matthew 5:27-30	Jesus denounced adultery and lust in the strongest possible terms, showing his high regard for marriage and sexual purity.
Matthew 5:31-32	Jesus emphatically prohibited divorce <i>and</i> remarriage. He allowed one exception: marital unfaithfulness.
Matthew 15:16-20 Mark 7:20-23	Jesus condemned both adultery and sexual immorality (that is, any sexual relationship outside of a marriage covenant).
Matthew 19:1-12 Mark 10:1-12	This was Jesus' most extensive teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• He affirmed marriage as a sacred, spiritual, and <i>permanent</i> covenant between a man and woman.• Divorce is never God's ideal. In the OT, it was a concession, not a command.• Marital unfaithfulness is the only listed grounds for divorce and remarriage; otherwise, it is adultery.• Celibacy is desirable as a gift from God, but marriage is good and is the normal state.

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Passage	Summary
Matthew 22:1-14	Jesus tells a kingdom parable which, although it does not teach about marriage as such, shows his positive estimate of marriage.
Matthew 25:1-13	Jesus tells a kingdom parable which, although it does not teach about marriage as such, shows his positive estimate of marriage.
Luke 16:18	Jesus condemns divorce and remarriage as a form of adultery.
John 2:1-10	Jesus attended a wedding feast. Although the passage does not teach anything regarding marriage, it illustrates Jesus' positive attitude towards holy matrimony.
John 8:1-11	Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery, refusing to execute her for her sin. At the same time, he condemns her actions and commands her to 'sin no more'.

How does this brief survey of Jesus' teaching influence our understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:1-16? Let's discuss our four summary statements one by one.

1. In our records, Jesus never specifically taught about the sexual duties of married partners. He did confirm the moral obligation of partners to remain faithful to each other, denouncing adultery and sexual immorality. He also held high standards of sexual purity, which fits well with Paul's commands.

2. Jesus displayed a positive attitude towards both marriage and singleness. Taken in isolation, Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 may give the impression he considered

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marriage as second best, little more than an antidote to lust. Jesus never gives this impression. He valued marriage as part of God's plan for man's highest good.

3. "Not I, but the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:1) indicates Paul's instructions are based on Jesus' teaching. Our survey confirms this. Jesus did teach that the married must not divorce; if they do, they may not remarry. Jesus permitted one exception, which Paul does not mention, namely, "except for marital unfaithfulness" (Matt. 19:9). Paul makes explicit something which Jesus did not state directly—after a divorce, the partners may reconcile with each other.

4. Jesus never addressed this particular situation, hence Paul gives his own opinion ("I, not the Lord", v. 12). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul added a second exception—if a believer's unsaved spouse abandons him or her, he or she may remarry. However, even their divorce is not God's first choice, which fits well with Jesus' attitude.

Our survey of the words and works of Jesus confirms, clarifies, and completes our interpretation of Paul's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Since nothing contradicts our initial summary, we are comfortable that we are on the right track. Before we summarise and apply our interpretation, we need to carry out one more check, namely, what does the rest of the Bible teach?

Chapter 8

The Theological Step

The fifth step in expository Bible study is to *search the rest of the Bible* to see how it confirms, corrects or completes your interpretation of the passage. We can call this the scriptural context, since the entire Bible provides a framework for interpreting any part of the Bible. We can also call it the theological step, because the process examining what the entire Bible teaches about a topic moves us from doing exegesis to doing theology.

Scripture interprets Scripture

Just as the Holy Spirit watched over the writing of each individual book of the Bible to ensure that there are no errors in the books, he also supervised the writing of all the books to ensure there are no contradictions between the books. Therefore, the correct interpretation of any passage of Scripture will never contradict the correct interpretation of any other passage.

The golden rule is that *the interpretation of a solitary passage must be consistent with the teaching of the entirety of Scripture*. The Bible cannot contradict itself. The Reformers coined the phrase *Scripture interprets Scripture* to describe this rule.

When conducting an in-depth study of a Scripture, you should weigh all your observations from earlier steps and form a tentative understanding as to what the author intended to convey

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to the original readers. However, before accepting any interpretation, you should pause and ask yourself, 'How well does this interpretation harmonise with the teachings of the whole Bible?' The final step is to synthesise your interpretation with the overall teaching of Scripture.

Inexperienced interpreters often fall into the trap of reading later Scriptures back into earlier ones. For instance, in Genesis 24, Abraham sends out his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac. I have heard at least three preachers claim this passage is about 'the Father (Abraham) sending the Spirit (the servant) to find a bride (the church) for his Son (Jesus)'. This is not what we mean by Scripture interprets Scripture. This is simply reading into the text meanings which the original author never intended.

The principle that Scripture interprets Scripture means two things. First, the interpretation of any passage may not contradict the overall teaching of the Bible. Second, other passages may help us to understand the author-intended meaning of a passage we are studying. Earlier passages may have influenced the author of our text; understanding them will help us to understand their influence. Later passages can show how inspired writers interpreted your passage. Thus, other Scriptures can help you discern the intended meaning of a Scripture.

It is impractical to do an exhaustive study of what the whole Bible teaches each time you study a passage. Let me suggest three guidelines for checking your interpretation against the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

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Guideline 1: Identify real cross-references

First you must identify other passages of Scripture which deal with similar subject matter to your text. These are called cross-references. Unless you are doing an advanced, in-depth study, a few good cross-references should be enough. Be careful, however, to find *real* cross-references. A real cross-reference is a passage of Scripture which deals with the same subject as your text. Just because a passage uses the same words does not mean it is a real cross-reference.

If you were studying Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (NKJV), David’s statement “salvation belongs to the Lord” (Ps. 3:8, NKJV) would not be a good cross-reference. Paul was talking about spiritual salvation through the preaching of the gospel, whereas David’s reference is to physical or military deliverance. The two passages do not deal with the same subject. 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (NKJV), on the other hand, is an excellent cross-reference to Romans 1:16. Both passages are ‘about the same thing’! They are both about boldly standing up for the gospel of Jesus Christ (= the message of the cross) because it bears God’s power to save sinners.

Guideline 2: Analyse the informing theology

The informing theology refers to other (earlier) Scriptures which may have influenced (informed) the author’s thinking or theology. The most common form of this is when a writer cites

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or alludes to an earlier Scripture, such as when the New Testament cites the Old Testament or alludes to one of its people or events. Another good example is when a New Testament epistle alludes to the life or teaching of Jesus. A third instance is when an author may have used another Biblical book as source material for his work, such as if Matthew or Luke made use of Mark when writing their gospels. Whenever a text has clearly been influenced by another text, you should probe how that influence affects the meaning of the later text.

When Paul wrote “not I, but the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10), he was alluding to the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ about marriage and divorce. Thus, it would be important to examine what Jesus taught when interpreting 1 Corinthians 7:10. In Romans 3:9-18, Paul offered a shotgun blast of Old Testament quotations to drive home his lengthy argument (1:18-3:8) about the universal sinfulness of man. He cited five Psalms and one text from Isaiah. A key element of Paul’s gospel was that no man could be saved by keeping the Law. This string of Old Testament quotations drives home the point that even the Old Testament portrays man as lost in sin and unable to save himself by doing good. No study of Romans 3:9-18 could escape the need to look at each of the texts Paul quotes, since they clearly influenced his theology. Similarly, no study of Hebrews 2:6-9 would be complete without looking at Psalm 8 and Genesis 1:26-31, since these two Old Testament passages clearly influenced the thoughts in Hebrews 2.

Most good study Bibles will point you to selective cross-references and identify any direct quotations and strong allusions

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to other texts. You should, at the very least, look up all the cross-references in your study Bible.

Guideline 3: Test your conclusions theologically

The final step is the most important one—harmonise your interpretive conclusions about your passage with the overall theology of the Bible to ensure that your interpretation does not conflict with Scripture as a whole. This is the final verification of your interpretation. You need to ask if there is any specific *text* of Scripture which challenges your interpretation, or if the overall *tenure* of Scripture makes any aspect of your interpretation unlikely.

Gibbs (1994:107) suggests three helpful principles for theological interpretation:

1. Clear passages should clarify obscure ones.
2. Multiple passages should clarify isolated ones.
3. Explicit teaching should clarify implicit teaching.

Now let's work through a few examples of theological interpretation, observing how the whole Bible is the ultimate context for any part of the Bible.

Do the words “and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20) imply that all human beings will eventually be saved? Taken in isolation, this verse could mean all men will eventually be reconciled to God. However, since *multiple clear teaching* passages definitively declare that only those who receive Jesus Christ by faith will be saved, this verse cannot mean all will one day be saved. There can be no contradiction between the

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teachings of Scripture. Whatever this verse means, one thing is certain—it does not mean everyone will be saved.

The Church of Christ (a denomination) uses John 3:5 to support its belief that if you are not baptised, you are not saved. This is what it says:

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5).

It seems unlikely the phrase ‘born of water’ refers to water baptism. Even if it did, though, there are many clear teaching passages which indicate we are saved by faith alone. The Church of Christ’s case for baptismal regeneration (the belief that baptism saves) is based on four main Scriptures, namely, Mark 16:15-16, John 3:5, Acts 2:38, and 1 Peter 3:20-21. Each of these verses is obscure and problematic. It is irresponsible interpretation to build a doctrine on them.

A biblical teaching may be partial in one passage and more complete in another. In such cases, we should harmonise the partial one with the complete one. The record of Jesus’ teaching on divorce in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 illustrates:

Mark 10:11	Matthew 19:9
Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.	... anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.

The big difference is that Matthew’s version includes an exception clause which is absent in Mark’s—“except for marital unfaithfulness”. There is no contradiction here. Mark’s account

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is true, but Matthew's is more complete. The exception clause is difficult to interpret. Mark may have omitted it because it was not relevant to his Roman readers. Believe it or not, many biblical experts argue that the fact that this clause is missing in Mark's version means that Jesus never said it; instead, Matthew added it (that is, 'put these words in Jesus' mouth'). This tells you a lot about their view of Scripture. As one committed to the inspiration of Scripture, I cannot accept this theory. It would have Jesus saying something he never said; it would drastically change his meaning. To me, this seems like an obvious example of one text being partial (Mark) and the other complete (Matthew).

The theological step is crucial. Scripture interprets Scripture. The Holy Spirit never contradicts himself. Therefore, we must check to see that our interpretation of each passage is in harmony with the overall teaching of the Bible. Although crucial, this is not the final step. Resist all your natural instincts to rest content in your mastery of the passage's meaning. Your task is not complete until you take the personal step!

Chapter 9

The Personal Step

The final step in expository Bible study is to *summarise your interpretation and apply it to your life*. This is the personal step. Bible study is not complete until it is personal. You change when you know what God wants and you put it into practice (see Matt. 7:24-27; Jas. 1:22-25).

The ultimate goal of Bible study is not information, but transformation, not mastering the Scriptures, but meeting the Saviour, not knowing but doing and being. Since the Bible can never mean something to us which it did not mean to its intended readers, the road to application must pass through observation and interpretation.

Believers tend to make one of two errors—either only application or no application. The one group, in their eagerness to hear from God and respond to him, dive straight into application, without taking time to make sure they understand what it means. The other camp treats interpretation as an end in itself, stopping short of application and response.

Both extremes abuse God's purpose for Scripture. God intends our study of Scripture to transform us and equip us (2 Tim. 3:16-17), so stopping short of application defeats the purpose. On the other hand, proper application builds on sound interpretation. If you do not interpret the text well, you are likely

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to misapply it. Which is worse—no application or wrong application?

We must move from interpretation to application, from what the text meant to its original readers to what it means to you and me. In this chapter, we shall explore the process of moving from meaning to response. After working through the first five steps, what remains to wrap your study is to summarise your interpretation and move towards application.

Summarise your interpretation

After steps 1-5, you have mined all the raw materials you need to make an informed interpretation of your text. You understand the literary context and the historical setting. You analysed the words and grammar of the text closely. You explored how the broader biblical context confirms, corrects or clarifies your initial sense of its meaning. All that remains is to put all the pieces together and refine your hard work into a polished explanation of the passage.

Remember, your interpretation focuses on the there-then-them. It describes the message the author intended to convey to his original readers. We have not yet crossed over the bridge to see what the passage means to us in the here-and-now. We are summarising what it *meant*, not stating what it *means*. In the final step of the process, application, we shall turn our attention to what God wants to say to us through the passage.

The goal of this step is simply to produce a short summary statement of the passage's original meaning. This statement will serve as a platform for application. There are no special skills to master. In fact, this process is so simple it hardly requires a

chapter of its own. This could be a summary statement for 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

God inspired the Bible by directing those who wrote it to write exactly what he wanted (cf. 2 Pet. 1:21). Because it is inspired, it is useful for guiding our beliefs and behaviour. The ultimate purpose, however, is to equip the people of God for life and service.

If we are content merely to summarise the author-intended meaning of the passage, we have stopped short of God's goal. He wants the Word to equip us for every good work. Our task is not complete at interpretation; we must move towards application.

Make appropriate applications

Making appropriate applications is not as straightforward as you might imagine. Most texts do not lend themselves to direct application in our contexts. There are two main reasons for this.

1) *Many texts do not make explicit applications.* Passages like Ephesians 4:28, "He who has been stealing must steal no more ..." tell you exactly how the author intended his readers to apply his message, but most biblical texts do not state the author's intended application directly. The account of David slaying Goliath, for instance, does not spell out any expected response. Neither, for that matter, does a passage like Acts 2:4, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." Before we can apply these passages in appropriate ways, we must discern the

implicit applications the author (or Author) expected his readers to make.

2) *Many texts do not address comparable situations.* We live in vastly different times to the first readings of the Bible. In the age of flush toilets, how would one apply this instruction directly?

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement (Deut. 23:12-13).

Even "slaves, obey your earthly masters ..." (Eph 6:5) does not lend itself to direct application in cultures where there is no slavery. To apply messages which originally spoke to different settings, we must first identify *comparable situations*, that is, points of similarity between their situation and ours which enable us to transfer the principle implied. Is there enough similarity between modern employer-employee relationships to apply Paul's command to slaves to employees? Maybe, although we should proceed cautiously because the similarities in the situations are at best partial.

So, then, how do we move from interpretation to application? I suggest three steps: principles, applications, responses.

1) *What underlying principles do you see?* Even if texts do not address comparable situations and/or do not make explicit applications, they always contain underlying principles which can serve as bridges between them and us, gateways to application. Principles are the timeless truths implicit in specific stories, poems or instructions. Although a passage has only one

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meaning, it may imply several principles. If you can identify the principles, you should be able to make valid applications from them.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exod. 20:8) is no longer a law Christians must keep. Jesus explained, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). God instituted the Sabbath to meet some human needs. If you study the Old Testament Sabbath laws, you will find two purposes: rest and remembrance (worship). These needs have not changed. The timeless truth is that human beings need time for rest and worship.

Jesus said, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Really? Does he really want me to wash people’s feet? When I was a brand new convert, fresh out of atheism, a foot-washing preacher visited our church. I remember thinking, ‘This is just weird! He’d better not try to wash my feet.’ Since we no longer travel by foot along dusty roads wearing open sandals, foot-washing would serve no practical function in our culture. Is there a timeless truth undergirding Jesus’ words? Yes—his chosen leaders must be willing to perform the most humble and menial of tasks out of loving service for their followers. This principle remains relevant, even if foot-washing itself does not.

2) *What appropriate applications can you make?* When you have identified a timeless truth, you must think of ways to apply it in your context. The key here is finding comparable particulars. What kind of attitudes and actions in your culture or setting would fit the spirit of what God was saying to the original readers of the Scripture? So let’s revisit the two

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examples above, Sabbath and foot washing, looking for ways to apply the principles today.

How might we heed the Sabbath *principle*, namely, we need to set aside time for rest and worship? Many believers set aside Sunday to worship and rest from their daily work, honouring the spirit of the Sabbath law without being bound by religious legalism. What matters is not so much when and how we set aside time for worship and rest, but *that* we make a principled decision not to be so immersed in work that we neglect these needs.

As a Christian leader, you can obey Jesus’ command to “wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14) by doing humble, menial tasks to serve those we lead. You might wash their dishes instead of their feet. You could baby-sit a couple’s children so they can spend quality time together. You may help your deacons set out the chairs for a church meeting. The act of washing feet was one expression of an attitude Jesus wanted to see in his leaders. What matters is demonstrating the same attitude; how you do so is less important.

3) *What specific responses does the Lord want from you?* The final step is to make the applications personal. Zuck (1991:289-291) suggests you ‘write action responses’. These should be *personal*, using ‘I’ and ‘me’ instead of ‘we’ and ‘us’. They should also be *specific* and include a *time element*. Instead of writing, ‘I must love my wife more’, say ‘I will take my wife to dinner on Friday night’. Finally, be *selective* in your action responses. Don’t write down a shopping list of things you could do. Choose *one thing* and *do it!*

9. The Personal Step

Conclusion

Application completes the process of Bible study. The ultimate goal is change, becoming like Jesus. You change by doing, not by knowing. But you cannot do unless you know. You must put in the effort to ensure you know what the text means (that is, meant to its original readers), but you dare not stop there. After you know, you must do. This means you must find contextually appropriate ways to respond to the message.

Chapter 10

Devotional Bible Study

Devotional Bible reading is part of every believer's (hopefully) daily communion with God. A key way to nurture our relationship with the Lord is to spend time with him through his Word. This is the main way we hear from God and feed our spirits. Sadly, many committed Christians struggle to connect with God, finding their devotional reading dry and dead. The purpose of this chapter is to offer some practical advice to help you connect with the Lord and benefit from daily times in his Word.

Reasons to read

Perhaps you are one of the many Christians who have given up on daily reading. Here are three reasons why you should reconsider this decision and recommit yourself to regular reading.

1) *The Lord urges us to study his Word.* Therefore, Bible reading is an act of obedience to him. Jesus said, "If you love me you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). One way we show our love for Jesus is by spending time reading his Word. You may be pondering two silent objections: (a) Where does the Lord command us to read the Scriptures? (b) How could he have given such a command when few believers had access to the Bible? Let's take these objections in turn.

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There are a few places where God urges his people to read his Word. In Psalm 1:2, he portrays a righteous man as one whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." He gave an almost identical command to Joshua when he became Israel's leader:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Josh. 1:8).

Moses urged families to discuss God's commands all the time (Deut. 6:6-9). The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42a), no doubt focusing on the words and works of Jesus. Paul exhorted the Colossians to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16), and John promised "blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy" (Rev. 1:3), referring to the book of Revelation. Is it not clear that God wants his people to immerse themselves in his Word?

Admittedly, until recently most believers were illiterate or did not have their own Bibles, so most could not read the Scriptures daily. To compensate for this, the public reading and explanation of the Scriptures played a prominent role in biblical faith. Moses often relayed and explained God's instructions to the Israelites, and commanded families to internalise them (Deut. 6:6-9). Ezra and the priests "read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh. 8:8). Paul commanded Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of

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Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). God wants his people to be saturated with his Word. We are more privileged than most Christians throughout history, because we have ready access to the Bible, yet we disgrace this privilege by our indifference to it.

2) *The Word of God is our spiritual food.* Our spiritual health depends on feeding our spirits. The Christian life begins with being born again. We start out as spiritual infants who need to grow to maturity. Just as a baby needs milk, so a new believer needs the Word. Malnourished infants never grow into strong and healthy adults. In his conflict with Satan, Jesus emphasised the need for spiritual food: “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word which comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4). Referring to believers’ struggle with their sinful natures, Peter urged: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2).

In the natural, if you do not eat, you get hungry. The longer you go without food, the stronger your hunger pains become. In the spiritual realm, the opposite happens. The less you feed your spirit, the less you hunger after God. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a holy habit of daily Bible reading. Discipline is the key.

3) *The Word of God is our source of guidance.* The Word helps us to understand the will of God and to live in a way which pleases him. It teaches us what to believe and how to live (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17). His “word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). If we live by it, we shall prosper (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2-3). In the words of Christian Johnson, “A Bible

10. Devotional Bible Study

that’s falling apart probably belongs to someone who isn’t” (source unknown).

Many Christians spend their lives trying to discover the will of God for their lives as if it were a mysterious hidden treasure, only to find that God is strangely silent about it. God does not speak, because he has already spoken. The Scripture says, “He has showed you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you” (Mic. 6:8, my translation). He has shown us in his Word what he requires and what he wants. Unless we make an effort to understand what God has already said, we should not expect to receive newer or deeper revelations. To discover his will we must study his Word.

In addition to these three reasons, the Bible also promises many fringe benefits of reading and obeying it. Table 3 summarises a few of them.

Scripture	Promised Benefits
Joshua 1:8	we will be prosperous and successful
Psalms 19:7-11	a) it gives life to the soul b) it gives wisdom to the simple c) it gives joy to the heart d) it gives light to the eyes e) it gives great reward
Proverbs 6:20-23	a) when you walk, it will guide you b) when you sleep, it will watch over you c) when you awake, it will speak to you
John 17:17	it will sanctify us
Ephesians 5:26	it makes us holy and cleanses us

Table 3: Benefits of Bible Reading

A simple system

How should we read the Bible in our devotional times? Before I make some suggestions, a word of caution: *attitude is more important than method*. There isn't one right way to read the Bible devotionally. What matters most is coming to God with an open mind, a hungry heart and a teachable spirit. As one anonymous pastor said,

Devotional Bible study is not so much a technique as a spirit. It is the spirit of eagerness which seeks the mind of God; it is the spirit of humility which listens readily to the voice of God; it is the spirit of adoration which rests in the presence of God.

Closely related to a right attitude is having the right goal. The goal of devotional study is *not* to master the Scriptures, but to meet the Saviour. The purpose is transformation, not information. We should have two major goals: (a) to meet the Author; and (b) to obey the Author.

The first goal is to meet the Author. The Scriptures point us to God. He reveals himself and his will for us through his Word. When we read the Word, God confronts us in a personal way—we encounter him. He speaks to us. This is our first objective—to hear from him.

The second goal is to obey the Author. Our Bible reading must result in a response on our part. We must be hearers and doers of the Word (Matt. 7:27; Jas. 1:22). We do not respond to the command; we respond to God. We do not just obey the Bible; we obey the Lord. When we respond to the Lord's Word, we are responding to the Lord himself.

Keeping in mind the importance of attitude and goals, let me present a simple four-step system which works well for me. The four steps are:

1. *Passage*: read an entire passage
2. *Part*: focus on one part
3. *Point*: ask what God is saying to you
4. *Practice*: respond to God

I use these four steps to help me focus on hearing from God and responding to him.

Step 1: Passage. Read a whole passage of Scripture. Read chapters, not verses. A simple method is to work your way through a book of the Bible, reading a chapter a day. Try to be disciplined and consistent, not jumping around from one place to another.

Step 2: Part. When you read the passage, look for one part which stands out to you. Don't get sidetracked trying to solve riddles. Bypass the parts you don't understand. Remember, your goal is to meet with God, not to master the mysteries of his Word. Read until you find something which you do understand, something which speaks to your heart, something you can apply in your life. In your devotions, overlook the details you don't understand, and find the 'word' God is speaking to you for today. You may have to read a chapter three or four times before something jumps out at you.

Step 3: Point. Once you identify a part which stands out to you, pause to ponder what the Lord might be saying to you through it. Prayerfully ask him, 'Lord, what is your point?' As you focus on this part of the passage, do your best to ensure you

10. Devotional Bible Study

are interpreting it correctly (that is, in keeping with the principles we discussed in chapters 4-9). Equally important, ask the Holy Spirit why he is highlighting *this* part.

Step 4: Practice. The two main goals of devotional study are to: (a) hear God; and (b) obey him. When God speaks to us, we need to respond. This means we must *act* on what he says. The action may take the form of praise, prayer, confession, apologising to someone, passing on a word of encouragement, and so on. Researchers say we remember less than 10 percent of what we hear, but up to 90 percent of what we do. If you read one chapter of the Bible and put one principle into practice each day, can you imagine how your knowledge of the Scriptures will grow? Can you imagine how much your life will change in a year?

All the principles of application we discussed in chapter 9 apply to putting devotional messages into practice. Be selective. Make it personal. Be specific. Set a time limit. Most of all—do it!

Helpful tips

I want to close the chapter on devotional Bible study with four helpful, practical tips.

First, get a translation you understand. Since the goal of devotional reading is respond to what you understand rather than to wrestle with difficult passages, you should use a translation you can understand easily. For most believers, a translation towards the dynamic end of the spectrum (see Table 2) is best. If your Bible knowledge is mediocre, I recommend the NLT or the CEV.

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Second, use the acronym SPECS to guide you when looking for things to put into practice. Zuck (1991) coined SPECS, which stands for:

- S** Is there a sin to confess?
- P** Is there a promise to claim?
- E** Is there an example to follow?
- C** Is there a command to obey?
- S** Is there something to share?⁴

Third, use a system of colour coding to help you remember and find important verses. Coloured pencils or highlighter pens work well. For example, you could use a colour for each letter of the acronym SPECS. I use a seven-colour system:

- Purple God, his person or works
- Red salvation
- Blue command or example
- Green the mission of God
- Yellow principle or truth
- Orange promise
- Brown sin or judgement

Marking your Bible is an effective way to personalise it. It does help you find important passages. There is an old adage which says, 'Clean Bible—dirty Christian. Dirty Bible—clean Christian'. Don't be afraid to write in your Bible. It doesn't offend God. He wants his Word to be a fire in your heart and a weapon in your hands. Marking helps—so go for it!

⁴ Zuck has the last S as 'a stumbling block to avoid', but I prefer asking whether there is something I can share with others.

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Fourth, try journaling. Journaling is keeping a diary in which you write down what God says to you through his Word. In your journal, you should write down three things: (a) *verses*: write out the verses which speak to you; (b) *truth*: write down the truth in that verse which speaks to you; and (c) *response*: write down what you must do in response to that truth. In other words, jot down the part, the point and the practice.

Conclusion

A friend wrote these inspiring words in the front of my first Bible. I hope they will mean as much to you as they have to me.

This is the Word of God:

supernatural in origin
eternal in duration
inexpressible in value
infinite in scope
infallible in authority
universal in interesting
personal in application

Read it through

Write it down

Pray it in

Work it out

Pass it on

Chapter 11

Topical Bible Study

Whereas expository Bible study begins with a text, topical Bible study begins with a subject or a theme. The goal of a topical study is to understand what the Bible (or a part of it) teaches about a particular subject. The topic could be anything at all—a person, an idea, a doctrine, an object, an event, a symbol.

Topical studies do not always cover the whole Bible. You can limit the scope of your study by examining only a particular book or group of books. For example, you might study what Jesus taught about generosity in the Synoptic Gospels or what Luke said about the Holy Spirit in the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Every believer, especially those involved in a ministry, should know how to study the Bible to determine God's will about a particular issue or subject. Pastors need to be able to give their congregations a summary of what God's Word teaches about doctrine and life. Counsellors need a balanced, overall sense of what Scripture teaches about issues such as marriage, divorce, anger, forgiveness, jealousy, and many more. God holds Christian parents responsible for teaching their children his will and ways. How can they do it unless they can turn to the Scriptures and find out what he has said?

How should you go about doing a topical study? Here are four steps to follow:

11. Topical Bible Study

1. Find all the passages on the topic.
2. Examine each reference in context.
3. Classify references into categories.
4. Summarise the main principles.

Let's look at each step. To illustrate the process, I shall do a short topical study about *Angels in the Book of Acts*.

Step 1: Find all the passages on the topic

The first step is to find the biblical materials on the topic. Which passages of Scripture address the subject?

Will your study be exhaustive or selective? An exhaustive study examines *every* passage which treats the topic, while a selective approach focuses only the most important passages. In an ideal world, we would always do exhaustive studies, because this is the only way to make sure we do not distort the Bible's teaching on the topic. However, time does not always allow us to examine every verse. For many topics, this would take months, if not years. If you are preparing for a sermon or a teaching, you may only have a few hours. In this case, you have to focus on selected passages.

Will you use direct and indirect references? Direct references are passages which specifically speak about your topic. They use the word itself, so you can find them by using a concordance. Indirect references touch on your topic without using the word. You need to skim read the Bible to find them (although articles in Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias may flag them for you).

Now, let's begin our study of angels in the Book of Acts. Table 4 shows the results of a word search for 'angels' in the NIV:

11. Topical Bible Study

Passage	Allusion
Acts 5:19	An angel let Peter and John out of jail.
Acts 6:15	Stephen's face was like that of an angel.
Acts 7:30, 35	An angel appeared to Moses at the burning bush.
Acts 7:38	An angel spoke with Moses on Mt Sinai.
Acts 7:53	The law was put into effect through angels.
Acts 8:26	An angel told Philip where to go.
Acts 10:3-7, 22 Acts 11:13	An angel appeared to Cornelius in a vision, telling him to send for Peter.
Acts 12:7-11	An angel let Peter out of jail.
Acts 12:15	The disciples did not believe Peter was free. They said, "It must be his angel."
Acts 12:23	An angel struck Herod down in judgement.
Acts 23:8-9	The Pharisees believed in angels.
Acts 27:23	An angel brought Paul a message from God.

Table 4: References to angels in Acts (NIV)

In addition to these passages, the 'two men' who appeared to the disciples when Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9-11) were also angels.

Step 2: Examine each reference in context

The second step in a topical study is to examine each text in context to ensure that you are interpreting it correctly. In other words, you should do a miniature expository study of each passage. Usually, the meaning of some passages is self-evident, but others need a little more attention.

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In our list of references to angels in Acts (see Table 4), Acts 6:15 and Acts 12:15 need special attention.

- What does 'his face was like the face of an angel' tell us about angels? Most commentators believe it means his face had a radiant glow. There was something glorious and magnificent about his appearance.
- What does the disciples' statement, "It must be his angel", mean? Stanley Toussaint (1983:385) comments: "This statement implies a belief in personal angels, that is, angels who are assigned to individuals (compare Dan. 10:21; Matt. 18:10). It also suggests a belief that an angel may look like the person with whom he is identified!" It is not clear whether Luke intends us to share this belief in guardian angels.

Step 3: Classify references into categories

Now, in step 3, you must group references which belong together. In other words, try to identify logical categories and place the references into them. This helps you to organise the material in a way which makes it more manageable.

Returning to our example, angels in Acts, a couple of categories emerge at a glance. Many references portray angels serving as God's messengers, delivering a message from the Lord (1:9-11; 7:30, 35; 8:26; 10:3-7, 22; 11:13; 27:23). There is a special subcategory amongst these—the ones describing the role angels played in the giving of the Law of Moses (7:38, 53). Three passages describe angels carrying out acts of judgement (12:23) or deliverance (5:19; 12:7-12) on God's behalf. The three remaining references (6:15; 12:15; 23:8-9) do not fit neatly

11. Topical Bible Study

into categories, although in both 12:15 and 23:8-9 the idea of angels as messengers is implicit.

Step 4: Summarise the main principles

The final step is to summarise the clear biblical principles which emerge from the study. This may take the form of a single overarching statement, or it may involve a few separate principles.

This is how I would summarise the brief study of angels in Acts:

Acts portrays angels as powerful servants of God, who both speak and act on God's behalf, especially protecting men of God and delivering messages to them.

This summary captures the essence of what we learn about angels in the Book of Acts.

Conclusion

My goal has been to help ordinary Christians who are serious about interpreting the Word of God soundly to: (a) believe they can do so; and (b) understand and apply the essential principles of good interpretation.

Hermeneutics is one of the more difficult branches of theological studies. If you have made it all the way to the end of this book, you are clearly serious about handling the word of truth correctly. God must be well pleased with your commitment. If you have understood and begun to apply the principles we have covered, you are on your way to being a faithful steward of God's Word. Even if you find applying these principles challenging, and it feels a little mechanical at this stage, do not be discouraged. Using the tools you have learned in this book is a little like driving a car. At first, you have to concentrate on every action, but with practice it becomes as natural as breathing. Keep working at improving your skills. You can become a good student of the Scriptures.

I must confess that my real desire for you goes beyond introducing you to some practical tools which will help you interpret the Scriptures better. I pray that using these tools will transform your relationship with God through his Word. May they empower you to experience from the Word a richness and a joy which you never dreamed possible and, as a result, may this mark the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the Scriptures. May our Lord bless you as you use what you have learned!

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CEV	<i>Contemporary English Version</i> . 1995. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i> . 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.
GNB	<i>Good News Bible</i> (2 nd ed.). 1992. New York: American Bible Society.
HCSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i> . 2003. Nashville: Holman Publishers.
LB	Taylor KN 1971. <i>The Living Bible</i> . Wheaton: Tyndale.
Message	Peterson EH 2002. <i>The Message</i> . Colorado Springs: NavPress.
NET	<i>New English Translation</i> . 2006. Biblical Studies Press.
NIV	<i>New international version</i> . 1984. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
NiRV	<i>New International Reader's Version</i> . 1998. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
NKJV	<i>New King James Version</i> . 1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i> . 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
NLT	<i>New Living Translation</i> (2 nd ed.). 2004. Wheaton: Tyndale House.

Bible Versions

NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i> (1995 update). 1995. La Habra: Lockman Foundation.
TNIV	<i>Today's New International Version</i> . 2005. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Phillips	Phillips JB 1972. <i>The New Testament in Modern English</i> (rev. ed.). London: Harper-Collins.
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version</i> . Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems.

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