

Glomos *FOUNDATIONS*

Book four

Biblical Interpretation

Student edition

By David Parris

Glomos *FOUNDATIONS*: Training Curriculum
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Welcome

To Biblical Interpretation

This module will introduce you to basic principles and practices of Biblical interpretation. You will learn comprehension and obedience to the Word of God so that its meaning is clear and its significance can be applied to your life and those around you. More specifically, you will gain skills to read the Bible devotionally and to study the big picture and details of a book. You will become familiar with the different types of genre and structure in literature, the elements of narrative, and the importance of context and its many levels. You will practice creating a book outline, a sentence diagram and a narrative plot diagram. You will also discover how various study methods relate to and inform one another and how biblical interpretation is both an art and a science. Finally, you will develop ways to guide others in practicing the various interpretation methods covered in the module.

Biblical Interpretation

Student Edition

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Preface

This book is the result of teaching biblical interpretation for fourteen years in seminaries, to church leaders and to para-church organizations. I am fortunate also to have taught courses like this in several countries around the world. Most of the content of this book comes from notes I used for those courses.

The examples I use in this book are primarily from the New Testament, because I teach New Testament courses for Fuller Theological Seminary's program in Colorado. At the same time, I have tried to make sure that the methods included in this book work equally well in the Old Testament. Some information related to genre, which is particularly useful in interpreting the Old Testament is include in Appendix A.

I have tried to write this book so that if all you own is a Bible you should be able to practice most of the methods described in this book. There are a few methods -- historical studies and word studies -- that may require more than just a Bible, but I have tried to keep the number of those types of studies to a minimum. Since the *FOUNDATIONS* program is taught around the world, it is almost impossible to know what resources are available in each location. The methods we cover should be able to be practiced by just about anyone, anywhere.

May God bless you as you grow in your skills at interpreting and teaching the Bible.

David Paul Parris

Editor's Note

In the process of revising our curriculum for *FOUNDATIONS*, we found this resource from David to be a solid approach to properly studying God's Word. In this revision, we left much of his organization and material but have made additions throughout. We also added Chapters One and Ten, and material in the appendices to further prepare our students for this sacred task of properly interpreting Scripture.

Introduction

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.

Isaiah 40:8

Biblical interpretation is often called both a “science” and an “art.” It is a science because it uses various methods and principles to interpret the Bible, engaging your mind and your curiosity. Like any science, a person must practice those methods to learn them. As in the study of chemistry, for example, students need to spend time in the chemistry laboratory doing experiments.

Biblical interpretation is also an art because it often involves our imagination, intuition, emotion, and creative skill, in addition to our rational analysis. Much of the Bible is poetry, story and song, which invite us into their artistry, and into their ability to express things almost too grand for words. Our hearts are as involved in this work as are our minds. And, as we will see, so are our feet and our hands.

In becoming a skilled interpreter of the Bible, there is no substitute for time spent in the study and contemplation of God’s word. In this course you will learn various methods involved in biblical interpretation. But knowing the methods and principles will not make you a good interpreter. You must practice these methods. Practice and familiarity with the tools of Biblical interpretation will help you develop a healthy discernment between interpretations which are solid, vigorous and appropriate, and those which are flimsy and questionable.

Always remember that the Holy Spirit is present to help you in this task. As Jesus *“opened their (the disciple’s) minds so they could understand the Scriptures”* (Luke 24:45), so the Spirit is with you and will do the same. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to shed light and understanding on the Scriptures as you study them. This is a source of great encouragement: God’s Spirit is at work in you, guiding you into all truth, as you spend time studying His Word.

There are three main ideas behind this module: 1) Methods and Principles, 2) A Practical Art, and 3) Personal Growth. The goal of this module is to introduce you to some of the methods for interpreting the bible, to give you time to practice those methods, and as you do, to experience the transforming and life-giving power of God’s word.

1. Methods and Principles

There are numerous methods for studying biblical texts, and this course will introduce you to a few of them. Word studies, historical studies and narrative analysis are some of the different methods we cover in this manual.

2. A Practical Art

You are already students of the Bible. The purpose of this course is to help train you like an athletic coach trains a team. If you are a runner and join a running team, the coach does not have to teach you how to run. The coach's job is to teach you how to run better. In the same way, you have already been studying, interpreting and teaching the Bible before you started this module. The purpose of this course is to increase your knowledge of basic principles and to strengthen your abilities as interpreters — to help you do better what you have already been doing. Practice and patience, in the company of reverence and humility will develop your maturity in handling these priceless words.

You may not be an expert in biblical interpretation when you complete this course, but your skills as an interpreter will be sharpened. Your abilities to discern the truth of God's word will grow as you devote time to this practice. The Bible is a very deep well. Your time spent in its study will continuously bring forth its living water.

3. Personal Growth

The goal of biblical interpretation is not to become an expert at explaining the smallest detail of a complicated verse. **The goal is a changed life**, and not only yours but also the lives of those you teach and influence. The apostle Paul wrote:

“But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5 NRSV).

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17 NRSV).

Saint Augustine said it this way:

“Whoever thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures but interprets them in a way that does not build up the twofold love of God and our neighbor does not understand them as he should. If, on the one hand, someone draws a meaning from them that is used for the building of love, even though it does not disclose the exact meaning that the author intended to express in that place his error is not bad.”¹

A person might interpret the Bible using the most exact methods, but if it is just information, or if the interpretation is used in the wrong way— a way that does not increase the love of a person for God or for others—then the Word of God is understood incorrectly.

The person who allows God's word to change them in the direction of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal.5:22), and who teaches it in a way that changes others, is closer to the meaning of the Bible.

Four Good Habits for Biblical Interpretation

A few good habits can make a difference in how much you will benefit from this course in the years to come. Many people take a course like this with the best intentions of going home and using what they have learned. But all too often people get busy and quickly forget to practice what they learned. Following are some habits you can put into place that protect you from this problem.

1. Ask Questions

First, get in the habit of asking questions any time you are reading the Bible. This may sound easy, but it is a hard habit to form. A good question is more important than a good answer but it will lead you to find an answer. A good question will lead to more answers, insights and often more questions. But do not expect easy and simple answers to all your questions.

2. Write Notes

The second habit to develop is to always have a pen and paper when you study the Bible. A pen is your best memory. We all forget more than we remember. Writing down what you learn separates a student of the Bible from someone who just reads it.

3. Record Action Items and Prayers

Third, one of the goals is to put into action what you learn — this is called application. Besides keeping notes on what you learn from your studies, you will also want to keep notes on how you can apply what you have learned, and on the things God has put on your heart. These may be personal applications, an application for your ministry, or perhaps an insight you had on how you might teach or preach that passage. Keeping a record of your response to God is perhaps one of the most important benefits for you and for those to whom you minister.

Integration and Application

4. Create a Plan

Perhaps the most important habit to develop is having a plan. These are key questions to help formulate a study plan.

- What do you plan to study in the Bible? A book, chapter, story, person, word, or theological theme?
- How long do you plan to do this study? (one week, a month, six months, etc.?)
- Why are you doing this study: for personal reasons, for ministry purposes, for teaching or preaching?
- When and where will you do this study? (At your house on Friday morning or at the church during the afternoons?)
- Will anyone hold you accountable for this study? (Your pastor, ministry team, prayer partners, or no one?)

The Three Levels of Reading

The goal of reading and correctly interpreting the Bible is to know and experience God and to grow in our love of Him and others. To help in moving toward this goal, this book is organized around three levels of reading. The first level of reading is devotional Bible reading; the second level looks at the big picture of a book, its connection to the Bible as a whole, and its literary features; the third level focuses on the details that make up a text. These three levels of reading are inter-related with one another -- what we learn at one level affects how we interpret the Bible at the other levels.

Praying the Psalms

Many of the Psalms praise God for the giving of His word. They help us also to delight in the knowledge that God speaks to us through these marvelous Scriptures.

Psalm 119

*“Praise be to you, O LORD;
teach me your decrees (v.12).
Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law (v.18).
Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors (v.24).
Let me understand the teaching of your precepts;
Then I will meditate on your wonders (v. 27).
Direct me in the path of your commands,
For there I find delight” (v.35).*

Preparing for Biblical Interpretation

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 2:15

Outcomes - The students will:

- Understand how God’s word was communicated to us.
- Prepare their hearts and minds appropriately to study God’s word for themselves and for others.
- Be able to articulate the principle of literal interpretation

“Before we start to ascend our mountain, (we need) to stop and ask ourselves a very fundamental question – a question, indeed, that we always ought to put to ourselves whenever we embark on any line of study in God’s holy book. The question concerns our own motives and intentions as students. We need to ask ourselves: What is my ultimate aim and object in occupying my mind with these things? What do I intend to do with my knowledge about God, once I have it?

... If we pursue theological knowledge for its own sake, it is bound to go bad on us. It will make us proud and conceited. The very greatness of the subject matter will intoxicate us, and we shall come to think of ourselves as a cut above other Christians because of our interest in it and grasp of it ...

Our aim in studying the Godhead must be to know God himself better. Our concern must be to enlarge our acquaintance, not simply with the doctrine of God’s attributes, but with the living God whose attributes they are. As he is the subject of our study, and our helper in it, so he must himself be the end of it. We must seek, in studying God, to be led to God. It was for this purpose that revelation was given, and it is to this use that we must put it.

J.I. Packer: from *Knowing God*.²

Getting Started

Think about when you first became a Christ follower and began reading God’s word for the first time.

- What did you experience? What was your greatest positive experience?
- What was the most difficult aspect of reading the Word?
- What would you say is your aim and motivation for learning to interpret the Bible at this time?
- What do you intend to do with your knowledge once you have it?

The process of learning how to study the Bible is both exciting and daunting at the same time. It is exciting because you will be gaining new tools to use as you study the Bible, both for yourself and for your church. It is daunting because interpreting God's holy word is a sacred task and a skill which takes time and discipline to do well. It is learned through spending time in it and practicing specific methods for digging deep into the Word.

One of your biggest challenges as a pastor or church leader will be carving out the time needed to properly study and carefully prepare your teaching and your messages, using the tools provided in this course. It will be worth it, both for you personally and for those to whom you minister.

Remember what God's Word says about itself in these verses:

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3-4).

As the verse from 2 Timothy (which opens this chapter) tells us, we must do our best to handle God's word correctly. We have been given a sacred stewardship as pastors to present Scripture as accurately as possible to our people, capturing the original meaning of the passages and helping them apply the principles practically. Before beginning to study the tools in the next chapters, it is important to understand two key concepts: 1) How God communicated His message to us and, 2) What we, as interpreters, need to do to *"correctly handle the word of truth."*

Going Deeper

God's Communication Process

1. Revelation/Inspiration

Both Peter and Paul, in the following verses, speak of the divine source of the Scriptures.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

*“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, **but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**” (2 Peter 1:20-21).*

When God gave His message to human kind, He oversaw every word in the original text. Every word was inspired. God used the personalities of human authors and placed His message within the context of biblical history, but the text was as God wanted it to be. Though we no longer have original manuscripts, God in His sovereignty, preserved His word in both the Old and New Testaments down through the ages giving us amazingly reliable ancient copies of both the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Greek New Testament from which we draw our modern translations.

2. Transmission

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Matthew 24:35

The next step in God’s communication process was the accurate transmission across time of His message in human language.

Many have asked the question: **How reliable are the documents as they have come down to us?** This issue is a stumbling block for some as they approach the Bible, and they bring up legitimate concerns: *“But the books were written so long ago and there have been so many translations. Haven’t the words and meaning changed?”*

These questions move an honest seeker toward a field of study called “textual criticism.” This is the literary science of evaluating ancient manuscripts, which has set up standards for determining the authenticity and reliability of the texts for documents from antiquity. This field focuses much of its attention on the Old and the New Testament.

The summation of their investigations is that both the Old and New Testament have a high degree of reliability when compared to any other documents of antiquity (i.e. Plato’s *Republic*, Caesar’s *History of the Gallic Wars*, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, etc.), whose authenticities are rarely questioned. Thousands of copies of the New Testament exist beginning within 200 years of their original composition, while only a handful of copies of the documents listed above exist, removed by more than a thousand years from the originals.

How Accurate is The New Testament?

The New Testament is preserved in more than 5,800 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 other manuscripts in various other ancient languages

including Syriac, Slavic, Ethiopic and Armenian. These manuscripts and other portions of manuscripts date from A.D. 200-600. Two complete New Testament manuscripts from the 4th century -- *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus* – are in existence. These were written on prepared animal skins (parchment), are well preserved, and can still be read. The books which comprise the New Testament were highly revered in their own time and were transcribed and preserved with great care.

What about the preservation of The Old Testament?

Very early the Hebrew people developed both a useful alphabet, and a precise and rigorous discipline for scribes who were trained to copy and preserve their sacred writings. That tradition still exists. Honored and highly trained scribes still hand copy the words of their Holy Scriptures onto scrolls, in Hebrew.

Two complete copies of the Book of Isaiah the Prophet were found among the many archeological treasures that came to be known as *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. These scrolls were copied by scribes living in a Jewish monastic community approximately 100-200 years before the birth of Christ and placed in stoneware jars in caves above the Dead Sea, where they remained until they were discovered in 1947. They are a priceless resource for all who love and study the Old Testament.

You can read directly from these Isaiah scrolls now on line, translated from the Hebrew, and read the familiar words of Isaiah which are printed in our Bibles today. The words that were carefully copied down by Jewish scribes in Palestine more than 2000 years ago, from scrolls that were also copied by their ancestors for some 1400 years before that, have come down to us almost completely intact.

Beginning around A.D. 600 and continuing into the 10th century, a family of Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes devoted themselves to preserving the scriptures in Hebrew. They continued in the precision and care of the ancient scribes.

“They (the Masoretes) transmitted the Hebrew text with incredible accuracy which in all likelihood was characteristic of the Jews throughout the preceding centuries since they were the custodians of this sacred literature.”³

Because of constant reverence and care over the ages, the content of the writings that comprise the Old Testament are remarkably preserved. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in 250 B.C. (known as the *Septuagint*), and into Latin in A.D. 400 by Jerome (known as the *Vulgate*). There are naturally some variations in some of the texts, but a startling consistency exists.

“As far as the Hebrew Bible referenced by the Old Testament is concerned, almost all of the textual variants are fairly insignificant and hardly affect any doctrine...It is fair to say that the verses, chapters, and books of the (Hebrew) Bible would read largely the same, and would leave the same impression with the reader, even if one adopted virtually

every possible alternative reading to those now serving as the basis for current English translations."⁴

The entire Old Testament, one of the most ancient of all documents, revered and beloved through the ages, was painstakingly preserved.

There is widespread consensus among both biblical scholars and those who study ancient texts, that both the Old and New Testament are remarkably preserved and reliable documents. For those of us who revere them as the word of God, we proclaim with the psalmist:

*"Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
You established the earth and it endures.
Your Laws endure to this day, for all things serve you."
Psalm 119: 89-91*

3. Translation

The goal of translators through the years has been to render the original language manuscripts as accurately as possible into their own languages. The King James Version, written in English in 1611, was the foundation of translations for many years. With recent discoveries of more ancient manuscripts and other relevant archaeological discoveries, modern translators have been able to provide even more accurate translations from the original languages.

Translators have followed different philosophies as they translated from the original languages. They are listed below.

Formal Equivalence: In this case, translators attempt to translate as directly as they can the **words** of the best available manuscripts. Their goal is a literal translation. In the English language, *The King James Version*, and versions that have come from it - the *New American Standard Bible* and the *English Standard Version* to a lesser extent, belong in this category. This may be different in other countries, where the original manuscripts were translated more literally, word for word. The strength of these translations is that they are close to the language of the original manuscripts. The weakness is that the language is often stiff or formal, and awkward to read.

Functional Equivalence: In these cases, translators attempt to keep the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words but to translate them into words and sentences which are more understandable in modern language and culture. In the English language, *The New International Version* is an example of this method of translation. The strength of these translations is their readability in modern languages.

The *New Living Translation* and the *Good News Bible* are a sub-category of this called "**Dynamic Equivalent Translations.**" These are not paraphrases but seek to

convey in a modern language what a biblical writer would have said speaking in their own time.

Free Translation: Often called paraphrases, free translations contain both modern language and biblical concepts communicated in modern ways. Sometimes free translations offer a fresh expression of a passage. In the English language, *The Message* and *The Living Bible* are good examples of free translations. The weakness of free translations is that they can be more of a commentary of the translator's interpretation of the passages, and as such they are not very good as study Bibles.

4. Interpretation

This is the process of finding what the original author meant by what he said and putting that meaning into an equivalent contemporary expression. This principle will be developed further in this manual.

One of the difficulties, however, is that every one of us comes to the process of interpretation with our own biases (our internal lenses through which we interpret what comes in). We will develop this concept more later, but it is good to understand that this bias is a strong reality which colors how the interpreters see things, a reality that is impossible to get away from.

Should we avoid interpretation or not preach the word with confidence because we come with preset filters? No. But we must recognize that our personal bias exists, and that any interpretation must be done in humility with the understanding that to the best of our abilities, this is our interpretation at this point. We need to remain open to correction and to additional information which might help us more fully understand the text.

At Global Action, we believe effective biblical interpretation is so important that we devote this entire manual and course to it. Sound interpretation is foundational for our doctrine and our practice. If we use only our own experience as the basis for our Christian life and our interpretation of Scripture, we will lose the authority of the Word and its intended purpose.

Note: We offer our recommendations of books for your study library in the *Additional Resources* section at the end of this manual, but first on the list is a good study Bible. It will contain helpful information at the beginning of each book of the Bible, useful charts, and commentary on the different verses as you read.

5. Application

The goal of this final stage of biblical interpretation is to arrive at an appropriate application of the principles from the passage. The book of James provides us with a warning in 1:22-25:

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

The Holy Spirit indwells each of us as believers. Through each different stage in our maturing as Christians, the Spirit guides us in applying the principles we have studied, empowers us to be able to be obedient to His Word, and transforms us from within.

The Principle of Literal Interpretation

This concept is the foundation for what follows in this manual. The *Principle of Literal Interpretation* simply summarizes what we do every day in our communication with each other, verbally or in writing:

The meaning of the words is in the mind of the speaker or writer.

The interpretation of the words is in the mind of the listener, or the reader.

When we want to communicate a message to another, we have an idea of what we want to say to that person. We formulate the words that match the meaning in our minds then communicate those words. The person receiving the message interprets the meaning of that message, and then responds. This is the basis for everyday conversation.

The authors of the book, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, state it well:

“... In our study of the Bible, we presuppose that we seek to understand God’s revelation. In the Bible, God has communicated a message to his people. Though a given passage may be capable of being understood in several ways, our goal is to determine what (of those various possible meanings) the text most likely would have meant to its author and its original readers. This is why people communicate: they expect that what they express will be understood as they intended it.

The original biblical text alone was inspired, for its meaning was encoded in the original historical context. We seek, therefore, the original meaning of that original text.”⁵

Our goal then is do our best to determine what the authors, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, communicated to their readers in the Word, and then to discern what that means for us today.

The Interpreter

There are four truths we need to keep in mind about ourselves as interpreters as we approach the biblical text.

1. The Interpreter comes with Preunderstandings

Earlier we mentioned the **bias** that each of us bring when we come to the study of the Bible. Another term for bias is "*preunderstanding*." This consists of the total framework of being and understanding that we bring to the task of living: our language, gender, social conditioning, intelligence, cultural values, physical environment, political allegiances, and even our emotional state at a given time.⁶

Our preunderstanding functions in several areas, and each of these areas affects how we read and study the Bible:

- (1) **Informational:** This is how much we already know about a subject prior to approaching it.
- (2) **Attitudinal:** This is our preconceived ideas about a subject and includes our prejudice.
- (3) **Methodological:** This is the actual approach we take in explaining a specific subject.

2. The Interpreter Must Experience Spiritual Regeneration

"The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." 1 Corinthians 2:14

Just as a deaf man cannot judge a music festival, a person who does not know Jesus Christ as their Savior cannot accept spiritual truths nor can they understand them as God intended without the Holy Spirit's discernment. When we receive Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, who indwells us, and enables us to understand Scripture more clearly. That is our next point.

3. The Interpreter is Dependent on the Holy Spirit

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, Paul challenged the Corinthian church on their inability to receive solid "meat" from the Word:

"Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready."

Living by the Spirit -- being filled with the Spirit -- is essential, because it is God's Spirit who illumines the Scripture and speaks powerfully into our lives.

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (John 16:13). “But the Advocate, 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” (John 14:26).

It is important to remember: **The Holy Spirit has not been given to us to make Bible study unnecessary, but to make it effective.**

4. The Interpreter Must be Patient and Diligent in their Study of the Bible

Our introductory Bible verse, 2 Timothy 2:15, challenges us *“to do our best ... to correctly handle the Word of Truth.”* For it is God to whom we present ourselves. This is a holy, serious, and delightful task. The more we study Scripture, using good tools to interpret it and learn to depend increasingly on the Holy Spirit to guide us as we read and study, the more God will speak to us in ways which will transform our lives.

Integration and Application

How would you respond to the following case study?

You have a young believer that you have been discipling for several months. They heard about an exciting new book that proposes a new way of approaching the Bible. It is entitled *“Opening the Spiritual Door of the Word!”* In the book, the approach to interpreting the text is as follows:

God wants us all to be happy. He gave us the word to assist us in becoming as happy as we want to be. When you open the Bible, pray first for the right place to randomly turn to. Then close your eyes, open to any page, point your finger to anywhere on the page, and where your finger lands, that’s God’s word for you for the day. If the verse is negative, then do it again, because God wants us to be happy first of all, and any message from the Bible should be that—a positive word of encouragement. The verse should speak to you in the way that you want it to speak to you!

How would you respond to your young friend, and help them return to a better understanding of how to read Scripture and why?

Praying the Psalms

Psalm 119: 9-16

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

*Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees.
With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.
I rejoice in following your statutes, as one rejoices in great riches.
I meditate on your precepts, and consider your ways.
I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.*

Chapter 2

First Level of Reading: Devotional Reading

“This may be the single most important thing to know as we come to read and study and believe these Holy Scriptures: this rich, alive, personally revealing God as experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally addressing us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, at whatever age we are, in whatever state we are – me, you, us.

*Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.”*⁷ Eugene Peterson

Outcomes - The students will:

- Be able to explain why devotional Bible reading is a form of biblical interpretation
- Recognize and identify situations when devotional Bible reading leads to other levels of biblical interpretation
- Have a better understanding of both Inductive Bible study and *Lectio Divina*
- Be motivated to spend more time in intimacy with God through His word

Getting started

What has been the most significant way that God has spoken to you in your devotional time with Him in the Word this past month? What has been the most difficult time in spending time with Him in His Word, especially as a minister? Why is it important to spend time in God’s Word for yourself, in addition to the time you spend preparing for your messages?

Going deeper

Level One: Devotional Reading

Devotional reading is first and foremost an act of love. It begins with a hunger for God Himself. Reading the Bible for devotional purposes is not characterized by asking questions about grammar, word meanings, or theology. This level is more simply about spending time with God in the fullness and beauty of His word. It is here that we come into His presence and find that He is speaking to us.

When we read God’s word devotionally, we grow in our relationship with Him. He speaks to us, and we respond, thankfully, humbly, obediently. Devotional reading is not a religious box that we check off and get on with our day. It is meant to be the time we spend with God, being loved by Him and returning that love through our worship and our obedience. It is a time of intimate connection with the Trinity. Time with God is never wasted!

The first level helps us to become familiar with the stories, letters, poems and other content that make up the Bible. As we read the Bible in our daily devotions, we learn the story of the Bible, from Adam and Eve to the marriage feast of the Lamb. With a text as rich and comprehensive as the Bible, an understanding of the big picture is not something that is gained quickly. It requires regular reading over many years.

Devotional reading provides much more than just a grasp of the big picture. Devotional reading also involves our spirits, our hearts and our imagination. As we read the Bible, we begin to visualize the people, scenes, conversations or dramatic encounters in our mind, and in a sense “enter into” the Bible with our imagination. This is true whether you are reading one of Ezekiel’s visions, a Psalm, one of Jesus’ parables, or one of Paul’s letters. To see yourself sitting on a hillside under the bright Palestinian sun listening to the Sermon on the Mount and feeling what the first audience might have felt, is a grand work of the imagination, and a place where the Spirit is present.

As you read the Bible devotionally, the Holy Spirit often speaks to you through the text in ways that you may not expect. You may never be called by God to give a message of prophecy like Jonah, but as you read the *Book of Jonah*, God’s Spirit can speak to you about what it means to obey His word, and what it might be like to resist God’s plan for your life.

Note: This chapter discusses personal devotional reading of the Bible, but we should also know that the assembled church draws life as well from the reading and hearing of God’s word in ways that often go beyond “mental understanding.” Discipleship follows closely alongside devotion as we spend time in the Scriptures (privately as well as corporately), changing us sometimes quietly, sometimes dynamically as we immerse ourselves in the Word.

*“From the very beginning (scripture) has been given a key place in the church’s worshipping life, indicating that it has been understood not only as part of the church’s **thinking** but also as part of the church’s **praise and prayer**.” This practice “... indicates the implicit but powerful belief that the Bible continues to be both a central way in which God addresses his people and a central way in which his people respond.”*

“Reading and studying scripture has been seen as central to how we are to grow in the love of God; how we come to understand God and his truth more fully; and how we can develop the moral muscle to live in accordance with the gospel of Jesus even when everything seems to be pulling the other way.”⁸

N.T. Wright

Three Suggestions for Devotional Reading

1. Read as you would any other good book. Find a quiet, comfortable location that is good for reading. Set aside an undistracted period of time for devotional reading, not

just five minutes. Find a time and place that works best for you.

You will be amazed at how well you will get to know the Bible if you set aside time each day to read it. If you read four chapters in the Old Testament and two chapters in the New Testament, you should be able to read through the entire Bible in one year.

2. Read from a couple of different Bible translations if you are able. Because the words and phrases are different in various translations, the Bible can seem new and fresh once again. Different translations will also give you different perspectives on the meaning of the passage you are reading. If you know more than one language, you may want to read the Bible in different languages. A passage translated into one language can sometimes convey a different feel than the same passage in another language.

3. When reading devotionally, begin and end with prayer. Devotional reading is similar and closely related to prayer. When you pray, you have the privilege of bringing your needs, desires, plans and your hearts before the throne of God. Imagine you are sitting beside God's throne as you read. This helps you to be quiet and reverent and to hear what God is saying to you personally through His Word.

Two Methods of Devotional Reading

There are several tried and true approaches to reading the Bible devotionally. One is an ancient practice which has been used through the many years of the church and is considered among the traditional spiritual practices. The other is a variation of it that takes a slightly more organized or rational/logical approach to hearing God. The purpose of both methods is not only to hear God through His word and with His Spirit, but to draw near to Him, and to let His life move into you and transform you as you take His holy words into yourself.

1. Lectio Divina – How to Read That Which is Divine

This is a four-fold practice which has been described as, "*feeding on the word of God.*" Eugene Peterson in his aptly titled work, *Eat This Book*, begins with the story of John in the Book of Revelation commanded by the angel to eat the scroll.⁹ The word of God is living food and will work its life-giving sustenance in us.

But how do we "eat" the scriptures?

- **Step One is to Read.**

Simply read. Feast with your eyes. Sit down at the table. Relax. Take your time. Say grace as you begin. Thank the Lord for the banquet. As for His help and guidance. Read aloud also. Have someone read it to you. Read it to your congregation. There is not always a need for immediate interpretation. Sometimes it is good to just let the words hang in the air, create a delicious aroma so to speak. The word of God was first heard. At the time these words were first given, and for centuries afterward, most people could not read. Their ears took it in the stories, the songs, the poetry.

Don't assume too much. Language is both precise and mysterious. And much of God's word is not technical. It is lyrical, poetic, metaphoric, and lovely. And it is full of life.

- **Step Two is to Think on These Things.**

Ponder what you have heard or read. Chew on it, savor it, ruminate slowly. None of this practice is hurried. Like a great meal – enjoy it. Engage the story now. Enter in to it. Let your mind and heart go to work on it, always remembering that it is a very large story.

“We meditate to become empathetic with the text. We move from being critical outsiders to becoming appreciative insiders. The text is no longer something to be looked at with cool and detached expertise, but something to be entered into with the playful curiosity of a child.”¹⁰

- **Step Three is to Pray These Words.**

Sooner or later in this process the realization strikes -- God is speaking to me; this is my story also. God reveals Himself through language, and He gave us the gift of language. The conversation is two-way. Prayer is us responding to our God who speaks to us.

To talk with the Lord God Almighty from our most authentic and genuine self is often the hardest part. The Psalms have always helped us here as their authors were not afraid to express the full range of their emotions. The Lord is deeply interested in you, and he already knows you better than you know yourself. But we all have our social defenses, well developed personas and masks, and we wear them just as often with God.

But here, in response to the deep, deep things of God that rise to the surface as we engage His word, you can be completely yourself. You can pray with anger even, or tears, or confusion or silence. You are engaging God. It is no wonder that the name given to Jacob was *Israel*, meaning “he wrestles, or struggles, with God.” It is OK. Anything goes in this real relationship – the more real the better. It is also perfectly good to pray, “Lord, help me to be authentic with you.”

“Prayer is the way we work our way out of the comfortable but cramped world of self into the self-denying but spacious world of God.”¹¹

- **Step Four is to Let Yourself Be Changed.**

As food works its way into our bodies, and then becomes our bodies, so the word of God enters into us, becomes us, and changes us. We are not entirely passive digesters however. This part of the process is the everyday living out of the marvelous food of God's word. Sometimes it does look like determined obedience. God speaks clearly to your heart and you set your mind to do what you heard.

But other times it is more subtle. It is that moment, in resentment and murmuring as you are performing a not-so-pleasant act of service, when you remember Jesus' words, "*What so ever you do for the least of my brethren, you do for me,*" and somehow the work is utterly transformed into worship. The living out of this "bread of life in me" is moment by moment and day by day.

*"Lectio Divina is not a methodical technique for reading the Bible. It is a cultivated, developed habit of living the text in Jesus' name."*¹²

2. Inductive Bible Study

This method of digging into the scriptures does not rely on outside sources or information beyond the text itself but is a way of personally spending time in God's word in a more organized fashion.

Choosing the Scriptures you wish to study is an important first step. This method is better for shorter studies -- passages, stories or possibly a brief chapter. As with all time spent in the Bible, begin with prayer. Select a passage which appears to express a single theme or tell a single story. Be sure to read around that passage, before and after, to understand any background, setting, or context the author has intended for it, however.

If you have a study Bible you might read some introductory material on the book as a whole. But do not go to commentaries or other research material. That can happen later.

The inductive method typically is a process involving three things: *observation* (what do you see in the passage?), *interpretation* (what does it mean?), and *application* (how is God speaking to you?). The following steps will help you in this exploration.

- **Rewrite the verse in your own words.**

After you have read through or listened to the passage several times, go through it verse by verse. Think on each verse, and then write out what you think the verse is saying. Don't add anything to it (your prior knowledge or opinion), just write out very simply in your own words what you think the verse (or sentence) actually says.

Example: Mark 2:23-28.

Verse 23: "*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.*"

You might rewrite this as follows: "Jesus and his disciples were walking through fields of grain on the Sabbath and they started to pick some of the grain"

Verse 24: "*The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*"

This verse could be restated this way: "The Jewish religious leaders criticized them, asking Jesus why they were doing something that was against the Sabbath laws."

Continue to summarize all the verses of the passage in this fashion.

- **Group the verses into similar thoughts or paragraphs and summarize them.**

When you have paraphrased each of the verses, read through your summaries and group together those which seem to form a single thought. This is somewhat like arranging the thoughts into paragraphs. Then write a summary for the paragraph you have created. A short sentence is fine. (These do not have to be profound or exact. They are just a way of slowing down and seeing what the author really was trying to say here).

Example: The two verses mentioned above form the setting for the teaching which follows. Those two verses could be summarized: “Jesus and his disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath which some religious Jews thought was unlawful.”

If your passage needs several paragraph summaries (most of them do) then write out another simple single sentence which summarizes the entire passage.

Example: This passage appears to have three sections, first the setting, which we summarized above, followed by a teaching of Jesus where he reminded the Pharisees of a similar story of David in their Scriptures. It finished with two proclamations by Jesus where He clarified the meaning of the Sabbath and then claimed to be Lord over the Sabbath.

A summary of these three paragraphs might be: “Jesus corrected the Pharisees about the meaning of the Sabbath and about who He was.”

- **Think about why this passage is here.**

Why is it in Mark? Why is it in the Bible? Is there something it is trying to teach? Is there a lesson in it? Is there a moral to the story? What is its purpose?

Example: You might see that this passage does not appear to be a teaching on Sabbath behavior, but more on who Jesus is. Jesus was not so much correcting wrong ideas about how to observe the Sabbath, but He was letting the Pharisees know that someone comparable to David was among them (this would be a good time to look up that Old Testament passage in 1 Samuel 21:1-6) and that He is Lord over the Sabbath. This is quite an astonishing statement. Perhaps this passage is here to tell us something about Jesus.

- **How does this passage apply to you?**

Is there something here that touched you, or speaks to you? How do you feel about Jesus’ final statement? Could you imagine being there as one of His disciples, or as one of the Pharisees. Read through the passage again now that you have spent time in it. What is the most important aspect of this passage for you? Does it change you in any

way? Should it?

Write out an application for this passage. Then write a prayer in response.

An application might be: “Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath! But is He fully my Lord? Am I standing with the disciples or with the Pharisees, or am I just on the side observing?”

Example - Author’s Note: As I was reflecting on this passage I was taken with the two groups of people present – the disciples, who were following and learning to trust in the person Jesus, and the Pharisees who were concerned about honoring God through keeping rules. Jesus always seems to me to be majestically in control even in a short passage like this. He is a little daunting, but so compelling. Why is it that some moved toward Him, and others backed away? Being involved in a relationship with a sovereign God is not as controllable as rule keeping and requires the submission of the self to a person.

So my personal application became a prayer, *“Lord, help me to see you better as you are, and to remain tender in my heart toward the majesty that is you. Help me to see and to soften places in my heart which are rebellious and unsubmitted, and to take my stand firmly in the company of those who say, ‘You are my Lord.’”*

Activity

Now it is your turn to practice this method. Take the next passage, Mark 3:1-6, and on a fresh piece of paper follow the steps above for Inductive Bible Study, taking special time with step 4. When you have finished, gather in small groups to compare your thoughts and results.

Note: Another example of an inductive Bible study method, produced by The Navigators, is included in *Appendix B*.

The First Level of Reading and the Need for Interpretation

Devotional reading is the foundation for the other methods of biblical interpretation.

There are two reasons why devotional reading needs other levels of reading.

1. As you read the Bible for devotional purposes, you will come across sections you do not understand or that raise questions. Something may seem odd in the passage, or you don’t understand what the author was trying to say. As a result, you begin to ask questions about the meaning or background of the passage you are reading. This is a signal that you need to study this passage at the second or third levels of reading.

2. We need other levels of reading is because the first level of reading can be more influenced by the assumptions we already have about the Bible itself or by ideas we bring from our own culture and times – our **pre-understandings**.

Example: We might see a picture of a beautiful mountain with the words of Psalm 121:1-2 written beneath it: *“I look up to the mountains - does my help come from there? My help comes from the LORD, who made the heavens and the earth.”* Because my culture and others see mountains as beautiful, I understand Psalm 121:1-2 as saying something like, “Look how beautiful the mountains are! God created the mountains just as He created the rest the heavens and the earth. This same God is the one who helps me. Praise God!”

But is this the way the person who wrote this Psalm would have understood it? If we do a background study (one of the methods in the third level of reading) in *The Old Testament*, we find that mountaintops were often the places where other religions had their temples and altars. Also, traveling through the mountains was dangerous because robbers hid in them (the story of the Good Samaritan is one example). And finally, this Psalm is part of the Psalms of Ascent (Ps. 120-134). The Psalms of Ascent were written to be sung as the people walked to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts.

Imagine you were one of those Jewish pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, singing this Psalm. Would you have been: 1) Praising God for how beautiful the mountains were, 2) Asking God to protect you from robbers, or 3) Looking at the altars to foreign gods on the hill tops and realizing that your God is far greater than the false gods they worship?

This is one example of why devotional reading is not enough. The way you understand the Bible (like Psalm 121 in this instance) may not be correct and you may need to study the Bible more carefully in order to correct your misunderstandings.

This leads us to the second and third level of reading. As we examine the next levels, we move from listening to what God may be saying to us through the Bible, to asking questions about what it might mean and using various methods to find answers to those questions. This first level of reading makes us aware that God is speaking to us. Other levels of reading will help us interpret what He is saying and understand better how to respond.

Integration:

Think about the reading you have done in your devotional times with God over the last few weeks and write down what you remember.

- What are some key passages God used to speak to you personally?
- What are some passages that prompted more in-depth study?
- How would you describe your devotional time with God in His word?

Praying the Psalms

Psalm 119

*“Your decrees are the theme of my song
wherever I lodge.
In the night I remember your name, O LORD
And I will keep your law” (54-55).*

*“Oh how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long” (97).*

*How sweet are your words to my taste,
Sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (103).*

*“I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
That I may meditate on your promise” (147-148).*

Second Level of Reading: Literary Reading

“In addition to all its other virtues, the Bible delights the people of God. Its pages brim with adventure, humor, and pageantry. It is a book of aesthetic beauty. Surely God gave us this marvelous message to enjoy! God’s message has come to us in various kinds of highly crafted literature. It would be difficult not to appreciate the Bible’s assorted literary qualities and genius ...

The Bible’s diverse literature – OT epics, strange apocalyptic prophecy, tightly reasoned epistles, the skillful sustained argumentation in Hebrews – inspires and captures our interest. The Book itself arouses intellectual and emotional enjoyment. It invites us to appreciate its multifaceted beauty. But above that, the Bible’s beauty and the pleasure it promotes reflect the beauty and personality of the God who inspired it. Its beauty sings his praises just as the stars and planets do (Psalm 19).¹³

Outcomes - The students will:

- Be able to explain why literary reading is important to biblical interpretation.
- Understand the importance of the concept of genre as they interpret biblical passages
- Have a broader grasp of the literary meaning of “Context, Context, Context!”
- Enjoy the Bible even more as literature

Getting Started

Do you have a favorite Bible story or passage? Do you know why it is your favorite? Read it again at this time and ask yourself, “What is it about this passage that speaks to me?” We will ask you to read it again at the end of these chapters on the second level of reading.

Going Deeper

The second level of reading is a literary approach to reading the Bible. This takes devotional reading to another level. When we read the Scriptures devotionally we are engaging spiritually with God’s word, and with God. We are bringing our stories, and our lives, into God’s story. We are not reading to gain more information, we are reading to grow in our relationship with God and His people.

Eugene Peterson moves us toward the next level in his wonderful resource, *Eat this Book*. He uses the word *exegesis*, a word which describes the process of proper biblical interpretation as we are learning in this course.

“Exegesis is an act of love. It loves the one who speaks the words enough to

want to get the words right. It respects the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says.

It follows that we bring the leisure and attentiveness of love to this text, cherishing every comma and semicolon, relishing the oddness of this preposition, delighting in the surprising placement of this noun. Lovers don't take a quick look, get a "message" or a "meaning," and then run off and talk endlessly with their friends about how they feel¹⁴

Peterson's statement is a good bridge from the first to the second level of reading. In the second level, we dig deeper, and investigate more thoroughly the passage we are reading. The second level of reading involves asking questions about the literary nature of the text such as, "What was the author's intent?" or "What is the main argument in this book?" or "What was the primary purpose in the writing of this letter?" For one of the gospels, a question might be, "Why did the writer choose this format to tell his account of Jesus' life?" We also ask questions about how a book fits into the larger context of the Bible.

Most of us are exposed to the Bible in a fragmented manner during worship services or Bible studies. We read a few verses or one paragraph at a time, and then consider the meaning of those verses. But if you received a letter from a close friend would you just read a few sentences and then put it aside until later? If your spouse asked you what the letter was about, would you only share a line or two from the letter with them? To understand your friend's letter, you would read the entire letter. And if you were going to explain the letter to your spouse, you would need to tell them what was in the entire letter, from beginning to end.

Yet how many of us have ever heard a sermon based on the entire Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Romans, or even the twenty-five verses in Jude's epistle? Not many of us.

This Level of Reading Focuses on Four Areas:

- What type of literature are we reading (genre)?
- What is the big picture of the Book?
- What is the context of the text?
- What are the literary tools used by the author? (This fourth point will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5)





1. Genre

Genre simply means a style or a type of writing. It describes the literary form an author chose to best express what they wanted to say. To understand the author's meaning, it is good to know something about the characteristics of the genre in which they wrote. There are many different genres in literature, such as poetry, stories,

history, letters, etc. Books which share similar features and characteristics (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for example) are considered one type of genre -- a gospel. But even within a large genre such as the Gospels we will often find the presence of sub-genres. (This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.)

Different genres of literature have different guidelines for interpretation. They can be compared to different types of games. There are rules to the game of Cricket. But if you do not know the rules, you cannot understand much of what is happening in a Cricket match. It may be fun to watch, but you will not fully appreciate what is taking place. It is also not appropriate to apply the rules of one game to another. The rules for baseball do not apply to cricket. Genres in literature are similar. It is good to know what kind you are reading.

Some of the Genres of Literature Found in the Bible

Style	Genre	Structure
Poetry	 Psalms Wisdom Apocalyptic Parables	 Lines and Stanzas
Prose	 Narratives Historical Narratives Epistles Expository Writing	 Paragraphs

The genre, or style, of the *Psalms* is poetry. They are hymns and songs in poetic form. Other books in the Bible are also composed as poetry, such as *Song of Songs*, *Proverbs* and most of the *Isaiah*. Poetry is also found within other genres in the Bible as well. Poetry is typically arranged by stanzas (lines) and is easy to recognize, while books like Genesis, 1 and 2 Kings, or the Gospels, which are historical and theological narratives, are organized by paragraphs.

The reason we are interested in genre is that when we understand what type of

text we are studying, we will have a better grasp of the author's meaning.

For example, In Luke 18:10 we are told, “*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*” If we just looked only at this quote, we would assume that Jesus was telling us a story about two men who actually were praying in the temple. But because Luke tells us in verse 18:9 that, “*Jesus told this parable...*” we understand that we should not read this as a true story, but as an illustration, a fictional story, told to convey a truth. This is not an historical account but a *parable*.

A good study Bible should tell you the genre of books in the Bible and offer some principles of interpretation for that genre. We touched on genre in our introductory courses to the Old and New Testament.

Note: Please see Appendix A for an overview of biblical genres (p. 83).

Multiple Genres in One Book

To complicate matters, some of the books of the Bible contain more than one genre. The book of Revelation, for example, opens with, “*The revelation of Jesus Christ ... to his servant John.*” The Greek word for “revelation” is *apokalupsis* (the source of the English word “apocalypse”). The use of the word “apocalypse” in the first verse tells the reader what type of genre they are reading: it is **an apocalyptic text**.

This is similar to a story in English which begins with the words “*Once upon a time.*” These four words tell us (if we are familiar with this genre) that this is a fairy tale. We also know how this story is related to real life -- it is a made-up story whose meaning does not lie in historical facts. This phrase tells us what kinds of characters and themes we can expect in the story (princesses, fairies, evil stepmothers, etc.), and that we should look for truth below the story line. This clue as to the genre also happens in the first verse of *Revelation*.

Apocalyptic literature was a form of writing used in ancient Israel and the surrounding nations. Apocalyptic books were used to teach spiritual ideas. The books often described dreams or visions and were written as a theological response to a nation under foreign domination (Daniel is one example). As a genre, apocalyptic literature intended to give hope to oppressed people by giving a vision of God with all things under His control— despite the appearance of things on earth.

But *Revelation* also has qualities of the genre, **prophecy** (see 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). While prophetic and apocalyptic literature both are concerned with God's future plans, there are differences between the two genres. One difference is that in prophetic literature, God accomplishes His plans in history through people. In an apocalypse, God intervenes in history, in dramatic ways, to accomplish His purposes.

In addition, *Revelation* is also a **letter**. It opens with a greeting (1:4–5) and closes with a blessing, like many letters of the day (22:21), and contains seven letters to the

seven churches (Chapters 2 and 3). Also included in this intricate book are **poetry** and sixteen **hymns** (4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12b, 13b, 11:15b, 17–18; 12:10b–12; 15:3b–4; 16:5b–7b; 19:1b–3, 5b, 6b–9).

The overlaid genres in the book of Revelation will keep readers on their toes from start to finish. It requires us, as interpreters, to be able to recognize five different genres and to know something about how we should read each of them.

2. The Big Picture

Imagine attending a course on the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616), where the teacher read and studied only a few lines from the play. Wouldn't you wonder if he or she really understood the meaning of this play? But this is often the situation we find ourselves in when we study the Bible and teach it in our churches. One of the goals, therefore, in biblical interpretation is to understand the message of an entire book, the big picture.

For example, the question you should ask as you study any part of Paul's letter to the Galatians is, "What is the main idea Paul was trying to communicate in this letter?"

How can we begin to grasp the big picture of a book in the Bible?

- **Read and Read and Read Again**

The most straightforward way to gain the big picture of a book of the Bible is simply by reading and re-reading it. A recommended way to begin is simply to read the book many times over, perhaps daily for a week or two, from start to finish. A longer book, like Isaiah or Genesis, might be broken into daily sections of about 15 chapters long, but you can still apply this principle. Record your questions and make notes as you read. Read from several translations if you are able. You will be amazed at your increased familiarity and ability to see the overall purpose and intent of the author.

- **Look at Outlines**

Along with repeatedly reading a book of the Bible, studying an outline of it is very useful for seeing the big picture. Most good biblical commentaries and study Bibles will contain outlines of each book showing the overall content and structure. Books can often be outlined in more than one way, and comparisons of different outlines for the same book are very telling. Outlines are so helpful that the entire next chapter will discuss them in greater detail.

3. Context, Context, Context!

To understand what someone means by what they say, you need to know the context in which it was said. If I held up a cup of tea and said, "*This is poison!*" what do you think I mean? Based on the limited information I have given you so far, it would be natural to assume someone has put poison in my cup and is trying to kill me.

But what if I told you that I liked a really strong cup of tea? Then my statement

could be a criticism of that cup of tea, *“You call this tea? It is too weak and tastes horrible!”* Or perhaps I believe sugar is unhealthy and someone had put some sugar in my tea. Knowing more about me provides you with a context to understand what I meant when I said, *“This is poison!”* This brings us to the primary guideline for the second level of reading.

The correct question for biblical interpretation is:

What is *this* author, saying in *this* passage, in *this* book?

Example:

To understand some of what John was trying to communicate when he wrote about Nicodemus, we need to know the big picture of the Gospel of John. That big picture provides us with a context to understand the story in 3:1-10.

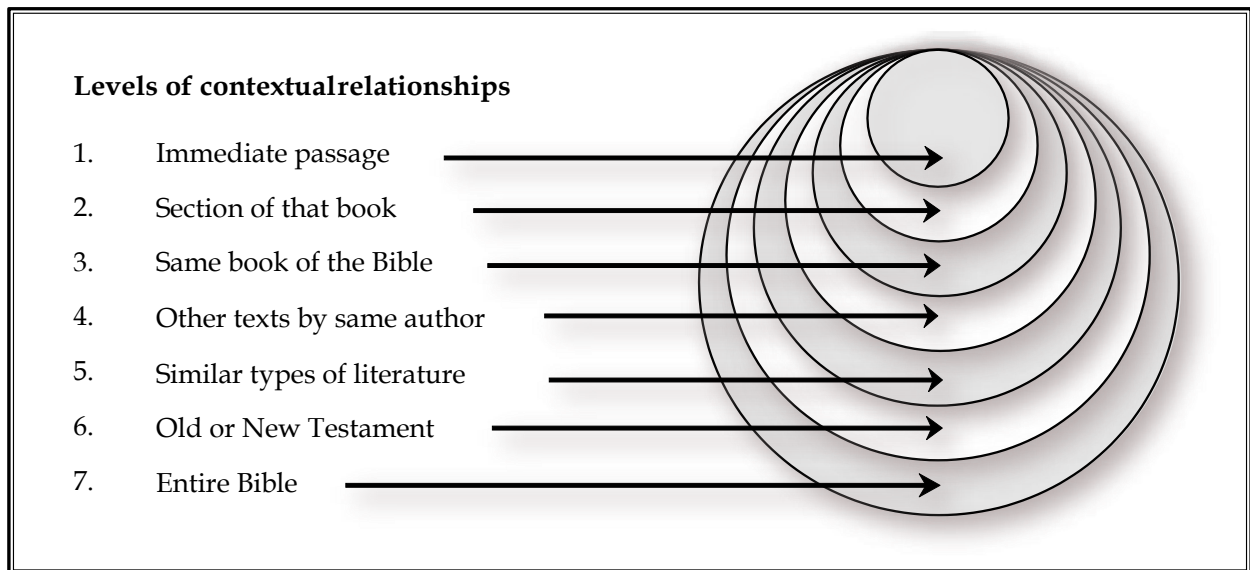
The first time we meet Nicodemus, John tells us that he has come to visit Jesus at night (Jn. 3:1-2). In this gospel, light and darkness are themes used throughout. In Chapter 1: 4-5, we are told that Jesus is the light of all people that shines into the darkness, and the darkness is not able to overpower or comprehend it. We need to see Nicodemus’ visit with Jesus in this context. He came to see Jesus, the light of the world, at night. Nicodemus is a person who is moving from darkness into light.

In Chapter 7, we meet Nicodemus again. This time he asked the other members of the Jewish council if they shouldn’t question Jesus personally. One of the other leaders asked him, *“Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?”* which implied that Nicodemus might be a follower of Jesus (7:50-52 NRSV).

The last time we see Nicodemus is at Jesus’ burial. Nicodemus brought one-hundred pounds of spices to prepare Jesus’ body for burial (19:39). He is no longer hiding under the cover of night but is openly committing himself to the Light of the World. Nicodemus is shown as a man on a spiritual journey in this gospel. But we must understand the big picture - the entire gospel of John - in order to understand some of the significance of Nicodemus’s visit in Chapter 3.

Levels of Context

There are several levels involved in the guideline **Context, Context, Context!** As a rule, those levels that are closer to the passage itself will usually be more important.



- **The first level of context is the verse or immediate passage you are studying.** In the example above, John 3:1-10 is the immediate passage. This story occurs in the section of John’s gospel (Chapters 2-4) which includes the stories of the wedding in Cana, the cleansing of the temple, Nicodemus, and the woman at the well.
- **The next level of context is how the story of Nicodemus fits into the overall message of John’s gospel (as described above).**
- **Then we look at how the story of Nicodemus fits with the rest of John’s writings (1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation).**
- **One level further out from this would be to compare the story of Nicodemus with what we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke (the other gospels).**
- **From there we look at this story considering the entire New Testament.**
- **Finally, we might ask, “How does story of Nicodemus fit into the context of the entire Bible?”**

These levels of context can help us to better understand the story of Nicodemus.

Integration

Is the story of *The Rich Young Man*, told in Mark 10:17-22, primarily a teaching about the burden of wealth which will keep people from spiritual truth, with the lesson being that we need to sell what we have and give to the poor? Or was it placed here with a larger purpose as well. It is a mistake to stop with only the story itself, and not spend time looking at the context which surrounds it.

Activity

We will be working together in small groups in class, but you can look at the passage, *The Rich Young Man*, in Mark 10:17-22, and identify the seven levels of

context and their relevance to understanding this passage. This passage does not sit in isolation but has many layers of connection. We will discuss in class.

Second Level of Reading: Outlines

Outcomes - The students will be able to:

- Use outlines found in other resources to create their own outline for a book of the Bible.
- Explain how outlines help them to understand the big picture of a book of the Bible and why this is important.

Getting Started

If you have never studied outlining you can gain a certain idea about it from looking at the arrangement of this manual. The Contents page at the beginning shows how the material in this book is divided into chapters. As you look through each chapter, you will see that they are broken into sections with titles, headings, sub-headings, and numbered items or bullet points indicating how they are organized.

The difference in a more formal outline is that they are organized from broad subjects to details using numerals and letters. Following is part of an outline from our *Introduction to the New Testament Manual* with some more detail added to show formal outline form.

An Example of an Outline of the Gospel of John

- I. Introduction (1:1 - 1:51)
 - A. Prologue (1:1 - 1:18)
 - B. John and the Disciples (1:19 - 1:51)
- II. The Book of Signs and Discourses (2:1 – 12:50)
 - A. Jesus and Jewish Tradition (2:1 – 4:54)
 1. The Wedding at Cana
 2. Jesus Clears the Temple
 3. Nicodemus
 - a. introduction
 - b. unexpected revelation
 - c. explanation
 - B. Jesus and Jewish Feasts (5:1 – 10:21)
 - C. Jesus – the Resurrection and the Life (11:1 – 11:57)
(we have not included the entire outline)

Going Deeper

An outline is one of the best methods for understanding the big picture of a book. The process of trying to create an outline for a book of the Bible is a highly beneficial one, and so is the study of outlines others have made.

Creating an outline of another's work forces you to organize the author's thoughts and to see how they arranged their composition to accomplish their purposes. A good outline shows how the various parts relate to each other.

Suggestions for Outlining

Outlines are meant to be revised. They are pencil, not pen, projects - so you can erase them and start over. As we study the book we are outlining, we constantly learn more about that book. The more we learn, the more our outline might need to be revised.

Step 1: Look for Paragraphs in your Bible

It is good to have a Bible which includes paragraph breaks when you attempt to write an outline. The various translations and versions of the Bible divide paragraphs differently. Remember, the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts did not have paragraphs.

Some translations indicate paragraph breaks with bold print for the verse number or they use a paragraph mark (§). If you are unsure which method your Bible uses, read the introduction. The publishers will usually say which method they used for paragraph breaks.

Paragraph breaks reflect how the translators interpreted that book. Therefore, you have the freedom to disagree with where they decided to place the paragraph breaks. Keep in mind that the translators probably invested a lot more time than you have in making those decisions.

The same is true for the chapter breaks. The original Greek and Hebrew texts did not have verse numbers and chapters. These were added later to make it easier to find passages in the Bible. Chapter and paragraph breaks in our Bibles should be consulted when we are working on outlining a book. At the same time, we have the freedom to disagree with where the translators placed these breaks, if we have a good reason.

Step 2: Reference Other Outlines

Some books on interpretation will ask you to write your own outline before you look at someone else's outline. But isn't this why outlines are included in commentaries and other reference works — to provide us with the big picture? Therefore, we recommend consulting the outlines other people have done (especially if they are an expert on that book) at the very start of your work. Why reinvent the wheel?

Two advantages are gained by looking at outlines others have done. First, it will save you time. Second, if we are serious about the idea that we are part of the body of Christ, then we should take advantage of the work our brothers and sisters have done. Some of these people are gifted interpreters and can see things in the Bible we would not have seen without their help. By consulting their outlines, we are not only practicing good theology (making use of how God has gifted the body), but also are

benefiting from their work and insight.

How do we make use of the outlines others have done?

1. See if you can find two or three outlines done by different people. Comparing outlines is helpful as you can see the different ways content can be organized. If you have a study Bible, with notes, maps and cross references, it probably includes an outline for each book. Bible handbooks and dictionaries often contain outlines, as will any good commentary.

2. Once you have several outlines collected, copy them onto one piece of paper in separate columns so that you can compare them with each other. (See the example included on Jude.) The goal is to notice where the outlines agree with each other and where they disagree. If they all agree that the first four verses are the introduction, then you can be pretty sure that you can trust them on this point.

If you find a section where the different outlines all seem to disagree with each other, then you know that you will need to spend more time on this section as you write your outline. Often you will find that you will like one part of one outline, and another part in a different outline. You may end up mixing and matching parts from outlines as you create your own.

Step 3: Check the Outlines Against the Bible

Once you have compiled several outlines side-by-side, check their work against the biblical text.

- Do you agree with how they described that section of the outline?
- Do you agree with where they made the major breaks in their outline?
- How does their outline reflect the big picture for that book?
- Does their outline indicate how the different parts are related to each other, or is it just a collection of ideas?

As you compare the different outlines against the Bible, have a pencil ready to make any corrections to the outlines. Once you have completed this, you are ready to write your own outline. The result will probably end up being a mixture of sections from the outlines you copied and your own observations.

One final suggestion is to write out the points of your outline in full sentences. If you write in an outline of Philippians, “Jesus’ example, 2:5-11,” you may not remember what you meant by this a year from now. Make your outline points more descriptive. A better outline heading for Philippians 2:5-11 would be, “Jesus is the ultimate example of humility and how God honored Him.” Write out a statement you will still understand a few years from now.

Group Exercise: How does your Bible mark its paragraphs? Look at a few others and see how they do it as well. Compare these with others in your small group.

Note: Chapter and verse numbers are not part of the inspired text. They were added much later to make Bible reading and study easier. They do not always coincide with a smooth flow of thought. You are free to disagree with their placement.

Exercise: Outlining Jude

Below are copies of three outlines on the letter from Jude, placed side by side. Look at how these outlines are laid out and answer the following questions:

- Where do these outlines agree with each other and where do they disagree?
- Compare these outlines with the letter of Jude in your Bible. Which outline do you think best captures the message of the letter?
- Which outline helps you understand the big picture of Jude better?
- If you were going to write an outline on Jude, based on these outlines, where will you have to spend more of your time and effort?
- Finally, write your own outline of Jude based on these three outlines and the letter of Jude itself.

As you will notice, the outlines are lined up horizontally according to the verses. The first point in each outline addresses verses 1 and 2.

In looking at these outlines, notice how all three agree that verses 1 and 2; 3 and 4, 14-16; and 24 and 25 are individual points in their outlines. You can be confident that you can make the same breaks in your outline as well. However, verses 5-14 and 17-23 will take more thought since they each have a slightly different way of outlining those verses.

Outline #1	Outline #2	Outline #3
<p><i>a.</i> The author and his readers (1,2)</p> <p><i>b.</i> The letter he did not write and the letter he did (3,4)</p> <p><i>c.</i> Three warning reminders (5-7)</p> <p><i>d.</i> The analogies of judgement applied (8-9)</p> <p><i>e.</i> Diatribe against the false teachers (10-13)</p> <p><i>f.</i> The prophecy of Enoch applies to them (14-16)</p> <p><i>g.</i> The words of the apostles apply to them (17-19)</p> <p><i>h.</i> Exhortations to the faithful (20-23)</p> <p><i>i.</i> Doxology (24-25)</p>	<p>1-2 Address and greeting</p> <p>3-4 Occasion and theme</p> <p>3 Contend for the faith</p> <p>4 Background to the appeal: false teachers, their character and judgement</p> <p>5-23 Body of the letter: 4 prophecies of doom of the ungodly</p> <p>5-10 Text #1: 3 OT types & interpretation</p> <p>11-13 Text #2: 3 more OT types & interpretation.</p> <p>14-16 Text #3: A very ancient prophecy & interpretation.</p> <p>17-19 Text #4: A very modern prophecy & interpretation.</p> <p>20-23 The Appeal</p> <p>24-25 Concluding Doxology</p>	<p>Greetings, 1-2</p> <p>Purpose of the letter, 3-4</p> <p>Three Warning from previous judgements, 5-7</p> <p>The false teachers, 8-11</p> <p>Their use of Agape, 12-13</p> <p>Their destruction prophesied by Enoch, 14-16</p> <p>Exhortation to the faithful, 17-23</p> <p>Doxology, 24-25</p>

Summary

Outlining is a very helpful way of stepping back and taking in the picture of an entire book of the Bible. Trying to interpret small passages and individual verses without an understanding of the whole book can produce disastrous results.

Second Level of Reading: Narrative Studies

“There was a man who had two sons.”

“The Lord is my Shepherd...”

“Behold a great dragon, with seven heads and ten horns...”

If these excerpts were the only information we had about the Bible, they would be enough to dispel a common misconception. Because the Bible is a book with religious authority, we tend to assume that it is a theology book. But if we look at how the Bible presents its material, it resembles a literary work more than anything else. It is filled with stories, poems, visions, and letters.

The thing that it is emphatically not ... is a theological outline with proof texts attached.”¹⁵

Outcomes - The students will:

- Have a better understanding of the characteristics of narratives and be able to use them to analyze and interpret a biblical story.
- Know the difference between a narrative and expository writing
- Be able to see when theological symbolism is present in narratives
- Have a sense of Hebrew literary technique
- Appreciate even more the depth and richness of biblical stories

Getting Started

Discussion Question: Think about your childhood for a moment. Did your parents tell or read you stories or did they tell any stories from your family history? Do you remember a favorite story? What is it about stories that we remember them, even years later?

Nearly half the Bible is in the form of stories or narratives. These stories can be about actual events, such as the historical narratives in the book of Act, or they can be fictional stories such as the parables. As a genre, narratives follow different rules than other types of texts. For these reasons, it is essential that we know how to interpret a narrative.

Going Deeper

The Bible is a story. It is one grand epic story from start to finish – the story of God and people – the story of the redemption of humankind. Within it are stories large enough to be epics in themselves (The Exodus); stories of heroes and heroines (Joseph, Esther); stories of pastoral life and family (Abraham and Ruth); stories of encounters with God, stories of miracles and manna, serpents and shipwrecks, barrenness and babies; stories of everyday life; stories of supernatural glory.

To say that something is a story does not mean that it is fictional or made up, however. Biblical stories were written to convey truth. Some of the truth is factual and historically verifiable; some of it is moral truth; and all of it contains spiritual and theological truth. The truth is told in many ways in the Bible, but for more than half of the Bible authors chose the literary form of narrative – story -- with characters, conversations, settings and action.

Old Testament stories were part of an oral tradition, they were spoken. Even after they were written down, people still told them to one another. The Hebrew people told stories of their origins, family and history to remember their great encounter with God. People like stories, they remember them, and they pass them on to their children. Good stories tell us about ourselves.

The New Testament authors also had to pick and choose, arrange and order their accounts of Jesus, as any good teller or writer of true stories must. How they did it shows remarkable skill and brings these stories into the category of great literature. These authors (except Luke) were Jews who were well versed in Hebrew story telling technique from their exposure both to the great stories of the Old Testament and to their culture's rich oral tradition.

Genres and Sub-genres

Though much of the Bible is told in narrative form, other types of literature are found in and around the stories. Within the large genre of Gospel, for example, we find other genres or sub-genres, such as *exposition*, *parables*, *speeches*, *proverbs*, etc. The authors, and Jesus Himself, also used literary techniques such as metaphor, simile, exaggeration, irony, puns, and others. (Some of these techniques are defined in Appendix C, p. 95)

In good Biblical interpretation, as you have been learning, it is important to know what type of writing you are reading. Let's look at the first chapter of John to see what we are reading as the book opens. We will work our way toward a literary analysis of two of his early narratives.

In John 1:1-14 we have a type of writing known as *exposition*. In "expository writing," the author tells us something directly. In this case, John tells his audience who Jesus is. Though this is transcendently beautiful language and has the feel of direct "*revelation*" -- God telling His truth through John -- this is not a narrative; this is still explanation, or commentary by the author.

In verses 6-8, John mentions John the Baptist, bringing his readers out of the great expanse of eternity into time, into history, and in verse 15, John the Baptist speaks, a human voice declaring the eternity of Christ, but even though there is a character mentioned and speech quoted, this is still *exposition* by the author.

Then in verse 19, John moves into an *historical narrative*. Now John is not telling us about something, he is showing us something through the conversation of the Baptist with religious leaders. The information is conveyed less directly than in *exposition*. There are characters, dialogue, some conflict (or controversy), and a specific setting (at Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan where John was baptizing). His meaning comes through the words of the characters, and the author does not comment on it.

The reader, or hearer, is invited to enter the story. The imagination of the audience is a part of the story. We begin to fill in the look of the setting, the appearance of the characters, the tone of voice in our minds. The concise, almost sparse, telling of these stories, which is very Hebrew in nature, leaves us much room to visualize the story ourselves.

In this unique, living word of God, we are even more a part of the story than is possible in any other type of writing. This is not history about events long past. The main character still lives and interacts with us through these words. Amazing! These stories are unlike any other.

Analyzing Two Narratives

For the rest of Chapter 1, we are in an *historic narrative*, as much of the Gospels and Acts are. In analyzing a narrative, the most important question to ask is:

What is the author telling us, and how?

We will look at this narrative, and the one which follows it, *The Wedding at Cana*, with literary eyes. The tools which authors use to create the story are the same tools we can use as interpreters to glean their meaning. When we analyze a story by looking closely at its literary components, the author's intent many times will come into clear focus.

1. Jesus is Introduced: John 1: 29-51

The following elements are found in most narratives and our awareness of them will help us understand how a narrative works.

- **Character** – These are the people who inhabit the scenes.

John the Baptist is the main actor in the first section (1:29-34). We are told nothing about him in terms of appearance, background, temperament, etc. There is no description of him, but we hear his voice. Though he is the one speaking, all attention in this scene is focused on Jesus, who is mentioned only in the first line as, "*coming*

toward” John. John’s voice, declaring who Jesus is, is the actor, and the action. He is the herald, the announcer. In a sense, Jesus has walked on stage, and John introduces Him.

In the second scene (vs. 35-42), two more characters appear. We are told only a few things about them, but with them comes some action, and interaction with Jesus. Minimal information is given about these characters, or about the brother (Simon Peter) who is brought to Jesus. But it is enough to engage our imaginations. Jesus is still the focus of the passage, and the one providing its direction. Jesus’ vision (both in the natural and the supernatural) and his eye contact provide the sense of his command of the situation.

Two more characters are introduced in the third scene (43-51). We learn a bit about them, but they also serve primarily to tell us who Jesus is. They have names, places of origin (this is historical narrative) and we know something of their character, but they are secondary, or simple characters. Peter will become a main or “complex character” later in the story, but all the characters in this passage are “simple characters” who serve only to highlight Jesus Himself.

- **Setting** - The setting is the place, the time, and the situation of the story.
- **Place:** The setting is generalized and vague. First, they are by the river, then more intimately at the place where Jesus was staying, and the third scene is “set” more in a frame of mind -- they are getting ready to head somewhere: Jesus is leaving for Galilee.

Sometimes the setting is just a backdrop and the reader fills in the details, but sometimes it is key to the scene and can contain important symbolic meaning. In the story of Nicodemus, the fact that it was night was theologically significant.

- **Time:** The time is chronological, taking place over three days, introduced by the phrase “*The next day ...*” We are now with Jesus in real time; things are progressing, but not hurried. The setting of time is used to form the arrangement of the three scenes. On the second day we learn that two disciples spent the day with Him and that it was now four in the afternoon. Why do you think John included this detail?
- **Plot** - Plot is simply the order of events as they occur in the story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Plot gives the overall structure to a story. It is the glue that holds the story together. As a rule, plots revolve around some form of conflict or tension, and its resolution.

But in this narrative, there is no conflict, only slight movement, and tremendous revelation. This is an introduction. It sets the stage and announces the main character in a very loud voice, followed by a chorus of voices. The primary action is the attraction of these five men to Jesus.

- **Dialogue** – This is the “language” of the narrative. These are the quoted conversations, declarations, and even the inner thoughts of the characters.

John tells us important information here through carefully selected details of dialogue. We discover that we are in an *introductory narrative*. John the Baptist provides the stunning introduction of Jesus in the first section, on the first day, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!*” (1:29).

We are then given a glimpse of Jesus and his first disciples in the next two sections on the second and third day. These disciples tell us in their own words who Jesus is. Andrew declares to his brother Simon, “*We have found the Messiah*” (Jn. 1:41). Philip tells Nathanael, “*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote...*” (1:45). And Nathanael declares to Jesus Himself, “*You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel*” (1:49).

- **Other Techniques**

Repetition – When words, ideas, or concepts are repeated in the story, the author is emphasizing something important and adding rhythm to his words.

The use of “*The next day...*” three times sets the framework for the three scenes. These three days also bring us into the next story – “*On the third day a wedding took place...*” (2:1).

Symbol -- Three is a common form in Hebrew stories for emphasis, but three days also has a strong symbolic element for the entire biblical story. “*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*” (Matt. 12:40).

“Seeing” is dominant in this passage in John 1:19-51 both as action and as symbol. See how many times the verb is used in these verses. Much more is going on here than physical sight, though you can almost feel what it might be like to have Jesus look directly at you.

We will do this next activity in class, but you can get started researching on your own.

Activity: Write down all the times the words “look” or “see” are used here. When is John talking about physical sight? When is he talking about spiritual sight? (He will fully develop this theme later in his gospel in the story of *The Man Born Blind*.)

Foreshadowing -- *The Lamb of God* is the title given to Jesus which foretold, for all who understand The Passover, the great purpose of His coming. Jesus also changes Simon’s name which is a premonition of the role he will play. The narrative ends with a powerful prophetic word from Jesus, which reaches back to the familiar story of Jacob’s dream in the Old Testament (Gen. 28:12). Jesus tells these men that they will see

heaven open and declares himself to be the stairway Jacob saw, bridging heaven and earth. Unimaginable things are foretold, and we are pulled further into the story.

2. The Wedding at Cana: John 2:1-11

Teacher Note: Read this passage aloud to your class as before, with Bibles closed, so that they can just listen.

John focuses on one specific event in this narrative and tells it in a brilliant compact manner. As we have already seen, John is keenly aware that more is going on in and around Jesus than meets the natural eye. This is a very brief story, with minimal detail, and huge symbolic meaning.

Setting

Setting is listed first here, because it is important. We are told in the first line that this takes place on the third day, at a wedding. Both of these are undoubtedly true, but their powerful symbolism is not lost on John. We are also told the name of the town because John is letting us know that this happened in a real place. This miracle is part of an *historic narrative*.

The place is not described. We have some sense that the family is well off because they have servants, and there seems to be plenty of space for the events to progress without everyone seeing what is happening, but we have to draw these conclusions ourselves. Some cultural background helps: in that time a wedding celebration took place over the course of a week, and the family had the obligation of hospitality. To run out of wine was embarrassing and would be seen as a lack of honorable manners and generosity.

The water jars are described in some detail – their appearance, size and function. They hold the water, the wine and much meaning. They play a key role.

Character

Jesus and his mother are the main characters. The disciples are present, as invited guests, but they play no part in this scene. All other characters are secondary or simple characters, though the servants play both an ironic and symbolic role (discussed below).

We learn a few things about Mary from the brief interaction she has with her son, but not a lot. She seems confident that he can help solve the problem; she pays no attention to his excuse of premature timing, and she has some authority over the servants. She introduces the problem and pushes the scene forward.

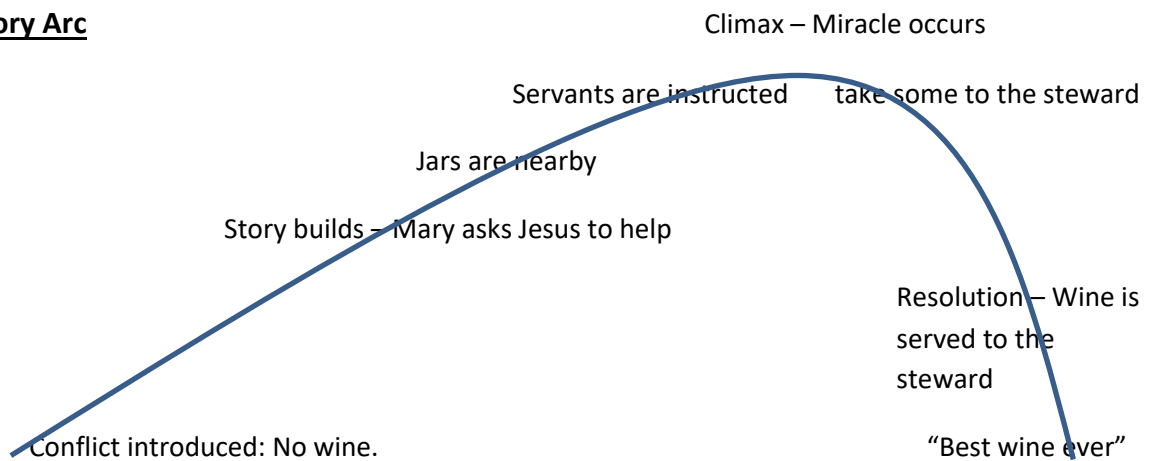
Again, Jesus is the main actor, though we don't learn much about Him either. He is a complex character though because he is surprising and puzzling, and the action/resolution comes through Him. But the spotlight is not focused so much on Him, as on the miracle itself, until the final verse. In verse 11, we move again to an *expository*

statement by the author. John comments on the passage letting us know that Jesus' glory was present, and that the disciples put their faith in Him.

Plot

In modern story telling we would say this passage follows a classic story arc. A brief introduction is followed by the introduction of a conflict. The scene then builds to a climax-- the miracle (which takes place out of sight) -- and then plays out in the resolution. This is illustrated in the diagram below and is a helpful way to look at many stories.

Story Arc



Jesus, Mary and the disciples are
comment at a wedding on the third day

Summary
by the author

In Hebrew storytelling, a different pattern was often used. This story is a very good illustration of the Hebrew literary form called, "*chiasm*." This pattern shows up frequently in the Bible. It is a stairstep pattern with the most important point in the center, and parallel passages on either side which mirror each other, but not exactly. Some very long passages, and even some entire books (possibly *Hebrews*) in the Bible follow this pattern.

This is illustrated below.

Hebrew Story Pattern: Chiasm

Miracle:	
(somewhere between 2:7 and 2:8)	
Servants obey (2:7)	Servants obey (2:8)
Jars of water (2:6)	Jars of wine (2:9)
No wine (2:3)	Best wine (2:10)
A wedding in Cana in Galilee (2:1) (2:11)	miracle performed at Cana in Galilee

Dialogue

The dialogue is short and to the point, primarily giving orders, until we come to the speech of the master of the banquet. He lets us know the quality of the wine and speaks a strong symbolic/prophetic statement.

Symbolism

This first miracle at a wedding has layers of meaning, as does its occurrence, "On the third day" (2:1). John the Baptist tells us that Jesus is "the bridegroom" (Jn. 3:29). He has arrived and is giving a taste of what is to come. There is wedding banquet and a bride in His future as well (Rev. 19:6-9). Paul tells us also that in a profound and mysterious way the relationship of husband and wife is a portrait of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). Jesus blessed this celebration and this couple greatly and made the party a whole lot more fun.

The servants play a key role. They obey and are witnesses to the miracle. They know something wonderful that most people at the banquet do not -- a type of irony. Do they also tell us something about the blessings in store for those who serve the bridegroom?

The stone jars for Jewish ceremonial washing held twenty to thirty gallons of water each. This became more than one hundred and twenty gallons of the finest wine. Is this a message of the kind of abundance that comes with the kingdom? Jesus changed the water of ritual cleansing into the wine of celebration. The comment by the Master of the Banquet could well be applied to the new covenant which was beginning, "You have saved the best till now" (2:10b). The days of Messiah have arrived, and there will be another joyous "third day" further down the road in this amazing story.

John has packed so much into this little story. He is a good storyteller, but the truth is that he didn't have to reach that far for the huge meaning it carries. This kind of depth and richness came with Jesus. But John was able to capture it.

Integration and Application

Narratives in Scripture, though not meant to tell us directly what to do, illustrate important truths about what God is like, what we are like, how God deals with his people, etc. There are important lessons in these biblical narratives. The story is our story, and there is much to be gained by looking into the mirror of the timeless stories of Scripture.

Now it's your turn to analyze a narrative. Let's look first at a familiar parable, and then a story from the Old Testament, from a literary perspective. You can look at these passages before we investigate them in class.

Suggested Activity: This can be done in small groups, then the results shared as a class.

Read the Parable in Luke 15:11-32. It has been called the *Parable of the Prodigal (or Lost) Son*, but that name is based on one way of interpreting it. We may find, as we spend time in the story, that it has a larger or different meaning. Titles given to the parables, and headings, which are at the beginning of sections of Scripture, were added later and were not a part of the original texts.

A parable is not an historic narrative. They are fictional (made-up) stories told to illustrate a point. Jesus' parables are very Hebrew in tone (succinct, rich, often layered in meaning, as is the Hebrew language) and many have said that Jesus was the master of the parable, perfecting the form which was imitated from then on.

"There are many famous first sentences in the stories of the world, but none more famous than this one: 'There was a man who had two sons...' It is one of the most memorable moments of literature ...

*The parable of the prodigal son epitomizes Jesus' parables ... Here we find literary artistry, profound depth and insight, combined with simplicity, elemental emotion and spiritual intensity."*¹⁶

Spend time individually looking at the following parts of the story. Write down your observations of:

Characters – What are we told about them?

Setting – General setting and important details of the setting

Plot - Story arc, or other (Chiastic) form, conflict/tension, building of the plot, climax or high point of the story, secondary conflict (?), resolution

Dialogue, and interior dialogue (a person speaking to themselves)

Symbols - (pigs, for example)

Introduction and ending.

Any other aspects of the story -- Irony, humor, contrast, etc. or questions it raises (cultural, religious, context – to whom was Jesus speaking, etc.)

- Why do you think Jesus told this parable?
- What did he want people to understand?
- Who do you identify with in the parable? Why?

Read the story of *Jacob's Dream at Bethel*, Genesis 28:10-22.

Do the same kind of analysis on this story. This is one scene in the much larger historic narrative of Jacob. This story may be the focal point, high point, or turning point in Jacob's whole story. After you and your group have taken the story apart, answer the following questions:

- What is the meaning of this story? Is there more than one meaning?
- Why is this story included?
- Do you identify with Jacob in any way?
- Does this story touch you emotionally or speak to you personally? How?

Personal Activity

Now that you have finished this section on literary reading, read your favorite Bible story again. Do you see things you did not see before? How do these lessons change how you might interpret that story?

Psalm 119: 111

"Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart."

Third Level of Reading: Studying the Details

“But when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth”

John 16:13a

Outcomes - The students will:

- Understand why it is important to study details in the Bible
- Be able to explain how the third level is related to the first two levels of reading
- See the purpose of the three primary questions that need to be answered at this level of reading, and be able to apply them
- Understand the connection between these types of studies and their own life and ministry.

Getting Started

Take a look at Matthew 10:34-36. Here Jesus says, *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn*

*‘a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household”*

This is a difficult verse. What is Jesus saying here? If we do not do our homework (applying all three levels of reading) we may miss Jesus’ intended meaning and the correct application to our own lives.

- What questions should you ask yourself about this passage?
- What further research should you do to shed some light on the meaning here?

Going Deeper

What Does the Text Say?

This is the level of reading many people think of when we speak about biblical interpretation. The first level of reading is devotional reading and the second is focused on the understanding of the big picture of a book and its literary characteristics. This level then examines the details contained in a passage. This is the level of reading where we do word studies, historical and cultural background studies and theological studies.

Many times, students of the Bible tend to jump right in and do a word or grammatical study to find out what the text really means. But as we learned in the

previous chapters, the first two levels of reading are as important as studying the details in the text at this third level.

But if we do not do historical, cultural, and language studies, then what we learn at the first two levels of reading might still be based too much on our own thinking — our pre-understanding. It often happens that without this further detailed level of study, our understanding of the Bible only repeats what we have been taught or reinforces what we already believe a passage means.

The goal of the third level of reading is to discover, as best as we can, what the author originally meant when he wrote that book of the Bible (or what Jesus meant when he taught). We want to discover the historical and cultural background behind the ideas, words, and events recorded in the Bible. This helps us to realize just how different the world of Abraham, the prophets, or the apostles was from our own day and age.

As we discover how the author intended his work to be understood, we may realize that what we thought the Bible meant, may not be what it actually means after all. When this happens, our thoughts are provoked, our interests are raised, and the Bible will speak to us in fresh and new ways.

Three Primary Questions

There are three primary questions we should ask at the third level of reading.

1. How is this book in the Bible a response to a question, need, or problem?

This is an easier question to answer when we study epistles (letters) but is important to ask for all genres. We should ask, *“Why did Paul write his letter to Philemon? What was the problem he was trying to solve in writing this letter?”*

In this instance, the problem Paul was addressing involved a slave named Onesimus, who belonged to Philemon. It appears that Onesimus ran away from his master and ended up in Rome where he met the Paul and converted to Christianity. Instead of sending Onesimus back to his master (who we learn was also a Christian, a leader of his local church and a friend of Paul’s), Paul protected Onesimus in Rome and found him very useful for the ministry there. In this letter, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a brother in Christ, and to give him his freedom.

The letter to Philemon is a relatively easy text to study to find out the problem Paul was addressing – the reason he wrote the letter. Others, like the letter to the *Hebrews*, are more complicated and require additional research. The *FOUNDATIONS* manuals, *Introduction to the Old Testament* and *Introduction to the New Testament* provide some background information of this type. Study Bibles and Bible dictionaries are also excellent sources for investigating the immediate background of a book in the Bible.

2. What are the key historical or cultural background ideas that I need to study in order to understand this passage better?

To have a good perspective on what Paul wrote in the letter to Philemon, we need to know something about the practice of slavery during that time. For example: What were the Roman laws governing slavery, and how could a slave that had run away be punished?

To answer questions like these, we will have to do some historical research. Following is a summary telling about slavery during Paul's day which helps us set this letter in an historical context.

During the Roman Empire, slaves were the property of their owner; much like I own a tool, they owned slaves. Owners could do just about anything they wanted to with their slave. At the same time, if their owner paid them anything, slaves could save some money and purchase their freedom, if they saved enough money.

Run-away slaves were a big problem in the Roman Empire. Because the empire was based on slavery, the government passed laws that forbid slaves running away from their masters. There was even a thriving business that hunted down run-away slaves and returned them to their masters for a reward.

If a master recaptured a run-away slave, punishment could be very severe, even death! Someone who helped a slave in his or her attempt to gain freedom could be held responsible by the slave owner. For example, if the master claimed the slave earned him one denarius a day working in his fields, and the slave had been gone for 30 days, the owner could demand that the person who helped the slave escape pay him 30 denarii. (Parris)

Exercise: Cultural Background

Consider how the information about slavery helps you understand the letter to Philemon.

- How does this information help you understand the situation Onesimus was in?
- What information on slavery helps you understand Paul's statements in Philemon 18-19?
- Do you think Paul is guilty of any crimes, according to Roman law? (See verses 10-14; 19b)
- What do you think Paul is asking Philemon in verse 21?
- Finally, this letter was to be read to Philemon in the presence of the church that met in his house (verse 2). What type of situation do you think that put Philemon in, as this letter was read before the church with Onesimus there?

3. What Does the Text Say to Me?

To keep our studies from becoming a collection of lifeless historical facts, we need to constantly ask, *"What is this text saying to me?"*

For example, as we understand better what Paul originally meant when he wrote his letter to Philemon, assumptions we may have had about Philemon will be corrected. When this happens, we need to ask, **“How does my new understanding of Philemon address issues I face today?”**

In the case of the letter to Philemon, we may not have slaves in our culture. But, what we notice is how Paul applied the message of the gospel to our treatment of other people. (See Galatians 3:28-29 also.) For Paul, the gospel message transformed Onesimus from a slave to a brother in Christ and from a servant of Philemon, to a servant of Christ.

Integration

Exercise: What does this text say to me, today?

There are several ways Philemon can address us today. Take a minute and consider the following questions:

- Are there certain types of people in my culture that we see or treat as lower than others?
- If Paul was to meet one of these people (the ones we treat as lower than ourselves), how do you think he would have treated them?
- If Paul was to write a letter to us about how we treat these people, what do you think he would write? (Try to use his ideas in Philemon and Galatians 3:28-29 for your answer.)

Summary

As you investigate the details of the Scriptures you are studying, you will find yourself sometimes on a journey you did not expect. Meanings and applications are not always readily apparent, and there are surprise turns in the road. God’s thoughts are higher than ours, as you already know. It is good to remain open and curious.

In the passage from Matthew at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus says things which are hard to understand. As we follow the clues back into the words of the Prophet Micah, we are thrown into the genre of *prophetic poetry* and into a whole other world of history, culture, and word usage.

It appears that much of the meaning of Jesus’ message in Matthew comes from his identification with this prophesy in Micah.

*“The day of your watchmen has come,
the day God visits you ...
But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD,
I wait for God my Savior;
My God will hear me.” (Micah 7:4b, 7)*

Third Level of Reading: Historical and Cultural Background Studies

“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.” Esther 2:17

Outcomes - The students will:

- Understand why historical and cultural background studies are important when studying the Bible.
- Know what is meant by *Salvation History* and be able to apply it to interpretation
- Have a stronger sense of the importance of understanding Hebrew history and culture
- Be able to explain the difference between tracing the history of a person, place or idea (*diachronic* study), and the examination of them at one particular point in time (*synchronic* study).

Getting Started

One morning in your daily time in Scripture, you randomly turn to the verse in Esther 2:17 at the beginning of this chapter. What questions would you have about the verse, the people mentioned, the historical setting? Is there anything puzzling about what was stated in the verse?

This chapter will help you to address issues which are behind questions like these.

Christianity and Judaism are based on a belief in historical events: specific places and times when God revealed Himself to real people. Those revelations took place and were recorded by people whose lives, cultures and history we can study. The foundational Christian belief is that God took on human flesh, and became the man, Jesus Christ, who lived, taught, ministered, suffered, died and rose from the grave in Palestine during the Roman Empire. History is exceedingly important for us as Christians. It is the medium through which God reveals Himself and came to us.

Therefore, it is essential that we know how to interpret the Bible historically, and as part and parcel of that, culturally. The historic context is more event based; the cultural context is socially based.

Going Deeper

Four Historical Contexts

Remember the guideline we learned in chapter two: **Context, Context, Context!** Context provides the environment and the circumstances for us to understand what was going on in a situation

The primary purpose of historical and cultural studies is that of placing these ancient texts into their own time and place. We want to learn as much as we can about what was going on and why, so that we can understand the situation the writer of the Bible was experiencing.

1. The Context of Salvation History

Salvation history is a term that refers to the story of God's redemptive plan in the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The principle of interpretation we want to follow in this long history is that of interpreting later events in light of earlier ones, not the other way around.

When we read 1 Corinthians, we need to place that letter in the context of Paul's life and ministry as we are told in the book of Acts. This then falls into the larger context of the New Testament. Knowing where it falls in the overall history of the New Testament will help us put this letter in its proper place. Also, Paul was an educated Jew, a Pharisee, who converted to faith in Christ, so he knew and quoted the Old Testament frequently as he wrote to the Corinthians. Therefore, we need to know what is in the Old Testament and its history in order to understand how and why Paul quotes it.

This is one reason why the first two levels of reading (devotional and big picture) are important. It is at those levels where we learn the overall story and history of the Bible.

Therefore, our first task, when studying the historical background to any biblical passage, should be to find out where that story occurs in salvation history. This will help us to know which stories occur before this passage and can provide possible background information, and which stories occur after it. Remember, the books and events recorded in the Bible are not always listed in chronological order.

Example: Psalm 23 was most likely written by King David. Therefore, everything that took place in the Old Testament before this Psalm was written may serve as background information, especially events from the life of King David. But we do not want to interpret this Psalm in light of John Chapter 10 (where Jesus talks about the Good Shepherd) or Luke 15 (the *Parable of the Lost Sheep*), because they come much later than Psalm 23. Psalm 23 does, however, provide background information that we should examine when we study Luke 15 and John 10.

2. The Context of World History

Events and conditions happening in the countries surrounding Israel when the books of the Bible were composed provide the second context in which to interpret the

Scriptures. The Bible did not just suddenly appear, nor was it revealed to someone in a vision. It was written by people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who were trying to explain God's actions and revelation to others in a particular historical situation. The authors often include historical events, situations and people both inside and outside of Israel in their writings.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand Jesus' life without knowing something about the history of Israel and its relationship to the Roman Empire. For example, Simon, one of the 12 apostles, was a Zealot (Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13). A Zealot was a Jew, who believed that they needed to fight to free Israel from the Roman Empire. If we want to understand Simon's relationship to Jesus, we need to know something about the Zealots and Roman control of Israel.

When the Jewish teachers asked Jesus if it was right to pay taxes to the Romans (Matt 22:16-22), they were asking questions similar to those Simon might have asked, such as, "How should we, as Jews, live under the control of this pagan nation?"

And, it was under the authority of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, that Jesus was crucified. In order to understand Simon, the question of paying taxes, or Pilate's role in Jesus' death, we need background information on how Rome ruled Israel during Jesus' day.

(Chapter 2, *The Contexts of Christ*, in *FOUNDATIONS Manual 1, The Life Ministry and Uniqueness of Christ*, contains background information on the time of Christ.)

3. The Context of Hebrew Culture

"The Bible is an Eastern book. We see it through the colored glasses of Western culture. Much is lost. We miss the subtleties of humor and many of the underlying assumptions. We do not understand the ingrained attitudes that illuminate a story or illustration ... What lies between the lines, what is felt and not spoke, is of deepest significance."¹⁷

The culture of the Bible is a very different one than most of us live in today. Through most of the Old Testament the Hebrew people lived close to the earth as herders and then farmers in a culture based on strong family structure, and religious tradition. Though other cultures pressed in on them over their history, the Jews (with God's help) managed to keep a strong cultural identity as a people, and still do.

As you seek to understand and interpret the Bible well, for yourself and for those you pastor, it is so important to grow in your understanding of the Hebrew culture. These are the people to whom God gave His revelations and this is the family into which Jesus came. Their language, customs and traditions color the entire Bible, and their religious practices and writings foreshadow the coming of God's son.

Understanding Hebrew culture and religion is of great importance in understanding the context of the Bible and discerning the meaning of most Bible stories. For example, in the Book of Ruth, Boaz steps into a significant traditional role as “kinsman redeemer,” a role which also prefigures the role of Christ. Also, if you do not understand the Jewish idea of “clean” and “unclean,” which came from the Law, you will not grasp how radical Jesus was to touch lepers, and to allow himself to be touched by a sinful woman. Radical indeed! His interpretation of Sabbath rest also ran up against long held Jewish traditions.

The rich, deep, God-infused culture of the Hebrew people is a joy to study and to discover and casts a beautiful light onto our reading and interpretation of the Bible.

Note: A recommended resource for research on Hebrew History and Culture is in *Additional Resources* at the end of the manual.

4. The Immediate Context of a Passage

While it is important to understand a passage’s background in both salvation history and world history, the immediate context of the passage is perhaps the most important context. Salvation history and world history provide background information, but it is how an idea or word is used by the author in a particular passage that really determines how we should interpret it.

An Example of Historical Contexts

Paul’s Triumphal Procession in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)

The image of being led in a triumphal procession provides the perspective to understand Paul’s view of ministry. Paul’s statement that God, “*leads us in triumphal procession,*” indicates that he does not see himself as an officer or soldier in Christ’s army. Rather, Paul sees himself as someone who was once Christ’s enemy and is now a prisoner who is being marched in Jesus’ triumphal parade.

A triumphal parade celebrated an army’s victory when the soldiers returned from battle. In a triumphal parade, the victorious army would march through Rome (or another city) to the temple of Jupiter (the god of war) with large banners depicting their battle. There would be samples of the war treasures on wagons and a selection of prisoners to be sacrificed at the temple (the others would be sold as slaves) being led along. While the parade was a celebration of victory, its main purpose was an act of worship to the god that had given them victory.

However, Christ’s victory does not come through force or power. It is the triumph of grace and love. It is through Paul’s weakness (as a prisoner) and his sufferings (having to march before all) that the power and triumph of Christ’s love for us is displayed to all those who see the parade. While the image in this passage is clearly taken from the Roman triumphal processions, the theology behind this passage is Jewish.¹⁸

This passage, 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, requires that we examine three historical contexts: salvation history, world history, and the immediate context (Paul's ministry).

Diachronic and Synchronic Studies

There are two types of historical studies which are helpful. We can trace the history of how an idea or a place developed or evolved through time (a diachronic study); and we can examine what happened at one particular period in history (a synchronic study). Let's consider the history of the city of Corinth in terms of diachronic and synchronic studies.

An Example of a Diachronic and Synchronic Study

Tracing the history of Corinth and comparing it to what it was like in Paul's day

Corinth was always famous for its wealth. It was situated on the narrow bridge of land (about 4 to 6 miles wide) between mainland Greece and the Peloponnese (the lower part of Greece, which is like a large island), putting it on main land travel route. It was safer and easier to cross over the narrow isthmus that Corinth was on than to sail around the dangerous waters off the Peloponnese. It was also a bustling port city, with harbors on both the Aegean and the Adriatic Seas.

Around 600 B.C., King Periander built a road across the isthmus so that light ships could be hauled over land. The other Greek cities were jealous of Corinth's wealth, especially Athens. From 500 B.C. to around 300 B.C., Greek poets and philosophers in Athens criticized Corinth. Aristophanes turned the name of the city of Corinth into a Greek verb, '*to Corinthianize*,' which meant to be sexually immoral. The philosopher Plato called prostitutes "Corinthian girls." It was also rumored that there was a temple to Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) in Corinth that had over 1,000 temple prostitutes.

All of this came to an end in 146 B.C. The Roman Empire conquered Greece in 200 BC. In 150 B.C., Greece rebelled against their Roman rulers. One of the cities that led this revolt was Corinth. In 146 B.C., Rome attacked Corinth and destroyed the city. Only a small village remained.

One hundred years later, in 44 B.C., Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth. He understood the economic potential of this location. Most of the people who settled in Corinth were freed slaves or former Roman soldiers. Within 50 years, Corinth was a large and wealthy city again, but now it was a Roman city, not Greek.

As a new city Corinth attracted residents from across the Roman Empire. There were temples to Roman, Greek and Egyptian gods in the center of Corinth. The rebuilt temple to Aphrodite was small and could only hold 30-40 people. The ruins of several Jewish synagogues have been found in Corinth. The religious diversity of Corinth attests to its ethnic diversity also.

How does this historical background help us understand Paul's letters to the Corinthians?

First, the idea that Corinth was a corrupt and immoral city comes from the time of Plato (450 B.C.). The Corinth that Plato wrote about, and the Corinth where Paul planted a church, were two very different places. This is a diachronic study: tracing the history of Corinth.

Second, the city's location helps us to understand why Corinth was such a large and important city.

Third, on the synchronic side of our study (what Corinth was like when Paul was there), we learned the following points: when Paul visited Corinth, the city was less than 100 years old; and it was a diverse (ethnically, religiously and economically) and busy port city. This means that the people at Corinth were more open to new ideas and religious teachings than the other cities, like Athens.

This historical background helps us to see that the potential of Corinth for ministry outweighed other drawbacks the city might have had. It was an excellent city from which to spread the gospel. The large number of people who passed through the city made it an ideal place to convert people, who in turn would take the message of Jesus back to their homeland.

Also, in contrast to Athens, which was not open to the gospel, Corinth was a city eager for new ideas. This created a unique situation in Corinth and is reflected in Paul's letters to the believers there.

Guidelines for Historical Background Studies

1. Locate good sources for background information.

There are several sources to find background information. Study Bibles often have notes that contain some historical and cultural information. However, this information is often limited and may be out of date.

A good commentary will often contain a discussion of the historical and cultural background of the book it is describing.

If you have access to the Internet (at a school, library, or an internet cafe), there are many websites with good historical and biblical information. When using the Internet (or any source) it is important to distinguish between what is good, reliable information and what is poor or misleading information.

One of the most important steps you can take before you begin to do historical background studies is to inventory the reference works that are available to you. Once you know what reference works are available to you, then you will have an idea how well you can do this type of study.

If your passage's background is in the world of the Old Testament, then you will need to find material on the culture and times of ancient Israel. If it is in the wider context of world history or literature, then you will need other types of research material.

2. Make sure to study the passage in its context in the Bible first

Ask yourself these questions: How does this passage fit into the book of the Bible that it is part of? How does this book of the Bible fit into the overall story of the entire Bible? Remember the principle: "Context, Context, Context!"

3. Focus on understanding the passage better

The purpose for doing all this work is to shed light on the biblical passage you are studying. Therefore, you must constantly ask yourself, "How does this material help me to understand this passage in the Bible?" Historical information is good, but our job is not to be historians. We use history to study and teach the Bible.

4. Use the material to enhance your teaching and preaching.

These types of studies will give you information that will help your listeners imagine and understand the Bible better. It allows them access to the historical background behind the Bible and they will understand the original purpose of the author more clearly. It can also give you great illustrations to make your preaching come alive.

Integration and Application

We will be doing the following activity in class, but if you want to work ahead, read the exercise and begin to do your own research on the passage we will be studying in class from Revelation 3:14-22.

Background studies provide an opportunity to enrich our Bible study, because it puts the passages we are studying into a context. The Bible was not written in a vacuum. The more we can understand the historical, cultural, geographical and political background of a passage, the more we will be able to understand its meaning.

To prepare for this chapter in class, take the time to read Revelation 3: 14-22. This short letter to the church in Laodicea raises many questions of contextual and historical background necessary to properly understand the meaning of the text. Read the passage slowly and write down several questions regarding background information you might need, and where you might find that information. We will do this exercise in class.

Praying the Psalms

Psalm 111: 1-3

“Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,

In the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD,

Studied by all who delight in them.

Full of splendor and majesty is his work,

And his righteousness endures forever. (ESV)

Third Level of Reading: Word Studies

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

Psalm 119:105 KJV

Outcomes - The students will:

- Understand how dictionaries work and know why this is important to know when doing word studies.
- Have a greater value for words and their meanings in understanding the Bible
- Know what is meant by “range of meaning” for word definitions
- Make informed decisions about which words to study in a passage.
- Be able to do a word study using their Bible and other resources they have available.

Word studies are perhaps the most popular method of biblical interpretation, and for good reason: the message of the Bible is conveyed through words. Word studies can shine considerable light on the meaning of the passage, but they should be used in conjunction with other types of studies and methods of interpretation. Most of us can remember sitting through sermons where it seemed that word study was the only preparation. The meanings of words and phrases can be fascinating and can open our eyes to ideas and concepts in a passage we might otherwise miss. When used with historical, cultural and theological studies, word studies are a powerful tool.

The primary goal of this chapter is to introduce you to some of the principles and methods which you can use when doing word studies in the Bible.

Getting Started

Words as Symbols

Everyday when we drive we see the importance of this concept. Think about the regulatory road signs. Give an example and the significance of it. What would happen if people ignored the important meanings/behaviors attached to those words?

Going Deeper

Words can be wonderfully specific and at the same time elusive things, whose meanings change and evolve over time. The original languages of the Bible, -- Hebrew, Aramaic and *koine* or “common” Greek – are very different from the languages most of us speak and read today. Ancient Hebrew contained fewer than 9,000 words. The common Greek of Jesus’ day had closer to 50,000 words, while modern English has more than 100,000 words. Words in Hebrew carried many more meanings, and the context of the passage was key to understanding how the word was used.

Many words do not have an absolute meaning. The meaning of a word, to a large extent, is determined by how it is used. This means that words have some flexibility — the same word can be used in different ways to express different ideas.

At the same time, the meaning of a word is not so flexible that we can use it to mean anything we want. If this were true, we would not be able to communicate with each other. We would not understand what the other person meant when they used a word. So, when we talk about a word's definition in this book, we will refer to its "*range of meaning*." *Range of Meaning* tells us that the same word can be used in different ways. But there are limits to the word's meaning.

Once again, we come back to the principle of **Context, Context, Context!** The meaning of a word is determined by how someone uses that word, in that situation.

Dictionaries

A dictionary lists the various definitions a word may have— its *range of meaning*. Some words have a very limited range of meaning; they may have only one or two definitions in the dictionary. Other words have a very large range of meaning; they may have ten or more different definitions.

How Do Dictionaries Work?

Dictionaries use four ways to communicate the range of a word's meaning.

1. They give another term for the word — a synonym.

Example: Under "*world*" it may give the term "*earth*."

2. They may describe the word by giving a phrase as an explanation.

Example: *World* may be defined as "*the planet on which we live*."

3. They may list the various ways that a word can be used.

Example: Under the word *world* it may list: (1) the planet earth, (2) all the people on the earth, (3) everything that exists, (4) a part of human life — the English-speaking world or the ancient world, and (5) a person's whole life — his or her whole world.

4. They may cite examples of how the word is used in various contexts.

Example: "*She was doing her best to help save the world*."

Exercise: The Greek Word: *Kosmos*

When we look up the word *kosmos* in a Greek dictionary of the New Testament, we learn that this word can have the following meanings:

- The created universe; the earth, heavens
- The earth as opposed to the heavens
- The world of people, mankind
- Human existence, "*Life in the world*"

- Adornment, like jewelry, nice clothing, or makeup
- Human social systems, like governments or armies

Following are examples of how the word *kosmos* is used in the New Testament. In each verse the English word *world* has been substituted with the Greek word *kosmos*.

- *“God so loved the kosmos that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish”* (John 3:16).
- *“Do not love the kosmos or anything in the kosmos. If anyone loves the kosmos, the love of the Father is not in him”* (1 John 2:15).
- *“Your beauty should not come from outward kosmos, such as braided hair . . .”* (1 Peter 3:3).
- *“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the kosmos began”* (John 17:5).
- *“... those who use the things of the kosmos, as if not engrossed in them”* (1 Cor. 7:31).
- *“For we brought nothing into the kosmos, and we can take nothing out of it”* (1 Timothy 6:7).

What do you think?

Which of the six definitions best explains how the word *kosmos* is used in each of these verses?

How would you translate each of these verses? (Do not use the word “world” in your translation.)

How does your Bible translate *kosmos* in each of these verses?

Activity

Guidelines for Doing Word Studies

1. Decide Which Word to Study

Before you begin a word study, you will need to determine which words you want to investigate. Use the following guidelines to help you decide which words in a passage you should study.

- Study words that are **Theologically Loaded**. This is especially true for words which

we think we may already know. Do you understand how Paul may be using “*righteousness*” in 1 Corinthians 1:30? What about words like *hope*, *grace*, or *redemption*?

- Study words that are **Culturally Loaded**. This will include learning more about the cultures in which the authors of the Bible lived. When Paul refers to himself as a *“servant of Jesus Christ,”* we might ask how did the people of his day view “servants” or “slaves?” What cultural values were associated with these words?

- Study words that serve as a **Main Theme** in a passage. These are repeated or used with other words that mean close to the same thing. Example: In Matthew 13, the word *“parable”* is a theme Jesus is discussing.

- Study words that make a **Significant Impact** on the meaning of the passage. Often these words will be the ones the commentaries or study Bibles give more attention to. Example: Again, in Matthew 13:11, the words that make up this phrase are significant: *“the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you”*

2. Use Your Bible to Find the Other Uses of a Word

Make a list of as many passages as you can find where this same word is used. Depending on the word you have chosen to study, you may find that this word is used frequently in the Bible or it may have been used only one or two times. If your Bible has cross references or an index to words in the back, you can use these tools to find other places where your word is used.

If you have access to a computer and the internet, the site, BibleGateway.com has a feature which shows you where every occurrence of a word you are seeking is found in the Bible. It also gives you access to versions of the Bible in many language.

- List the passages where the word you are studying occurs.
- Once you have a list of different verses where the same word appears (that is, the same word in your language), look at how that word is used in each of those verses. Try to notice the different ways the word is being used, (the different definitions or the range of meaning).
- Write your own dictionary definition for the word. List its different definitions and give an example for each one.
- Return to the original passage with the word you are studying. How has your word study helped you to understand the passage better?

3. Use the Principle of “Context, Context, Context!”

In order to understand the range of a word’s meaning, it is important to collect examples of how it was used in different contexts. In a sense, doing a word study is like writing a dictionary definition for how that word is used in the Bible. As you collect

examples of how a word was used in the Bible, pay careful attention to how that word is used in the immediate context of the surrounding words and sentences.

Layers of Context

A. Context in the Particular Passage

Determine the meaning of the word in the context of the passage you are studying. Look for the following elements in the passage to give you clues about the word's meaning.

- **The Writer's Comments**

Often a writer will define or specify how they are using that word in that passage. For example, in 2 Timothy 3:17, Paul uses the Greek term *artios*, which can mean complete, proficient or fully qualified. But Paul tells us which definition of *artios* he had in mind in the next phrase, ". . . *equipped for every good work.*"

- **Sentence Structure**

The structure of the sentence also helps explain what the author meant. What did Jesus mean in Matthew 5:13 when He said we are, "*the salt of the earth*"? Because Matthew continued to record what Jesus meant by the phrase, "*salt of the earth*," in the second half of the verse, we have a good idea of the meaning of this phrase.

B. Immediate Context

Pay close attention to the immediate context (two or three verses around the verse you are studying), as an author may change how he uses a particular word in that book. In 1 Timothy 5:1, 17 and 19, Paul uses the Greek word *presbuteros* (often translated as "elder," "older person" or "priest" in English) in different ways — even though the occurrences of the word are close to each other. Look at these verses in 1 Timothy 5 and see if you can determine how Paul uses the same Greek word in different ways.

C. Context in Parallel Passages

These may help shed light on how the term is being used. This is especially true if those parallel passages were also written by the same author. This rule goes back to what we learned about levels of contextual relationships in Chapter 3. However, be very careful about how much weight you give to parallel passages in other books, written by other authors.

D. Other Usages of the Word Within the Same Book

How the word is used in the context of that book of the Bible will often give us clues for how we should interpret that word. In Romans 8:5-8, "*flesh*" and "*spirit*" are compared and contrasted with each other. This same comparison between "*flesh*" and "*spirit*" seems to run through the entire book of Romans.

E. Context in Other Passages

If you have time, it is useful to compare how this word is used at several other levels of context in the Bible. (See the section on Levels of Context in Chapter 2 for

more information.) The following questions will help you study the context of the word in other passages.

- How is this word used in other passages in that same book of the Bible?
- If the author of your passage wrote other books in the Bible, did they use this word the same way in those other works?
- How is the word used in other books of the Bible that are of a similar genre? (If you are doing a word study in one of Paul's letters you would want to see if Peter, James and John use this word the same way in their letters.)
- How is this word used in other books of the Bible in the same Testament? (If you are doing a study in the New Testament, then how do other books in the New Testament use that word?)
- How is this word used throughout the entire Bible?

The general rule to follow at this step is that the closer the other passages are to your passage (in terms of the levels of context), the more important a role they should play in how you interpret that word in your passage.

Finally, write out your conclusions on the various meanings of the word as it is used in the New Testament. Be sure to say how it is being used in your passage.

Concordances and Word Studies

A biblical "concordance" is a reference containing an alphabetical list of important words used in the Bible, and passages where they can be found. Study Bibles often have a concordance/dictionary as an appendix, which contains significant words with definitions and page numbers. A full biblical "exhaustive concordance" will contain nearly every word in the Bible (except for words such as "the," "in," etc.) and will also have Hebrew and Greek dictionaries with cross references to the main language.

Other Word-Study Tools

Much information is available for doing word studies. Bible dictionaries are another useful tool. A good Bible dictionary will provide you with well-written articles on different words in the Bible. They also tell how this word was used outside of the Bible, which helps in seeing if biblical authors were using the word in a special way or not.

Some Bible dictionaries specialize in either the Old or New Testaments. While these tend to be more expensive, they often have more detailed information.

Other Aspects of Word Studies to Keep in Mind

Vagueness

One of the mistakes people sometimes make when studying a word is trying to find an exact meaning. The author may not have used a word in an exact manner. Instead,

they may have used the word in a vague manner. We must be careful not to force a more exact meaning for a word than the author may have intended.

There are many reasons why someone may use a word in a vague manner. Someone in business or government may say they will “*take steps*” to correct a situation, but not define what steps they will take. And a word like, “*warm*” is not a precise term. What is warm to one person, may feel cool or hot to another.

Metaphors and Other Figures of Speech

Metaphors are a way to describe something using words in a non-literal way. All of language is full of them and so is the Bible. A metaphor relies on an accepted use of a word but uses it in a new way to express something broader, or symbolic. Jesus often referred to Himself using metaphors: “*I am the gate,*” “*... the bread of life,*” “*... the light of the world*” (Jn. 10:9, 6:35, 8:12). Metaphors stimulate thought, provide an image to see something in a new way, and can give insight to spiritual truth.

- **Metaphor Exercise: *Shepherd***

What does it mean when Jesus says, “*I am the Good Shepherd*” (Jn. 10:11,14)? What was a shepherd, literally? How does this literal meaning compare with how Jesus is using the idea? How does Jesus shepherd people? If He is the shepherd, what does it mean that His flock are sheep? What does the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep tell me about my relationship with Jesus?

To say that Jesus is the Good Shepherd communicates more than just the idea that Jesus takes care of us like a shepherd cares for his sheep. It also calls to mind Psalm 23. It is a comforting image and one that creates an attitude of trust and faith.

- **Metaphor Exercise: Psalm 139:13-16**

How many different metaphors and other figures of speech can you find in this passage? What do these figures of speech communicate to you?

Visualization: Revelation 21:9-21

John’s description of the New Jerusalem in the book of *Revelation* is stunning. Is it meant to be taken literally -- a city, 1500 miles square cubed, made of pure gold? The description immediately follows the statement, “*Come I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*” This is an image attempting to describe the indescribable – something so perfect, and so beautiful. John is describing the Church. This is an image meant to overwhelm our imagination, and our hearts.

Mistakes Associated with Word Studies

Historical Mistakes

Mistakes in this area occur when we take a current definition for a word and apply it to a word used in the Bible. Our word “*dynamite*” comes from the Greek word *dunamis*. Preachers have referred to this word in Romans 1:16 and said that Paul is talking about God’s explosive power.

The problem is that when we define what Paul meant in Romans 1:16 this way, we take our current definition of “dynamite” and apply it to what Paul said 2,000 years ago. Dynamite was not invented until the middle of the nineteenth century, so it is highly unlikely that Paul had this definition for the word in mind. We are reading history in the wrong direction. We must always use earlier sources to explain later uses of words, not the other way around.

Root Word Mistakes

Many times, an understanding of a word’s meaning can be derived from looking at its root words, but not always. The history of a word and its meaning is called “etymology.” Some dictionaries will include a word’s etymology at the end of the definition. For example, the word “etymology” comes from *etumon* in Greek, meaning “the literal sense or original form of a word,” and *-ology*, meaning “the study of something.”

Though the history of words can be very helpful in word studies, you cannot always assume that the original meaning has held. The English word “nice” was derived from the Latin word *nescius* which means “ignorant.” No one who speaks English today has the Latin root word meaning in mind when they refer to someone as being “nice.”

Another example of a root word mistake is often made for the word, “the church” in Greek, which is *ekklesia*. Some books still define the Greek word *ekklesia* as being made up of two Greek words, *ek*, which means “out of,” and *kaleo*, which means “to call.” Thus, they say, *ekklesia* means “called out ones,” referring to those God has called out of the world. This might make a good preaching point, but it is a poor word study. The way they find the meaning for the Greek word for church is by looking at its root words.

Before the New Testament was written, Greek authors used this word to refer to a city council. At the time the Old Testament was translated into Greek from Hebrew (300 BC), *ekklesia* appears to be a word that the translators used to refer to any group of people, without a specific meaning. When the translators of the Old Testament wanted to talk about people who believed in God or were part of God’s chosen people, they used the Greek word *synagoge*, which is where the English word “synagogue” comes from.

In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles used the Greek word *ekklesia* for the church instead of *synagoge*, because *synagoge* was used by the Jews and the apostles did not want to confuse the church with the synagogue. When the apostles chose to use the word *ekklesia* to speak about the church, they most likely chose a common Greek word for a gathering of people and gave it a new meaning for the people who worship Jesus Christ as Lord.

One Size Fits All

This is a simple mistake, but one that even the best interpreter can fall into. We make this mistake when we apply the entire range of a word's meaning to a particular usage of that term. All the variations in meanings which a term can potentially have are seen as being behind every use of the word. This is a common mistake that can easily be avoided by applying the principle of *Context! Context! Context!*

Integration:

Word Study Exercise: Read Mark 2:1-12

Use the principles for determining which words to study and select four words in this passage that you think need to be studied. Be sure to give the reasons why you selected these words. Do a word study on one of those words (more if you have time). If you have a concordance, use the steps for doing a word study with a concordance (in Appendix D). Write up a dictionary-like definition for your word. Make sure you indicate how this word is being used in Mark 2:1- 12.

Third Level of Reading: Theological Theme Studies

Outcomes - The students will be able to:

- Explain what a theological study entails and how they are related to the other methods used in biblical interpretation
- Explain the balance between unity and diversity in looking at Biblical theology
- Apply the five guidelines to their theological studies

Getting Started

Theology means the study of God. In Christianity when we speak of theology we are speaking of the understanding we have about who God is, what He has done, and what the response of people must be, which are expressed in the totality of our Holy Scriptures. For example, Christian theology holds that God is trinitarian in nature, that He came in the flesh in the person of the Son, that his death on the cross accomplished the redemption of the world from sin and from death, and that those who believe in him are joined to His life. Each book of the Bible joins its voice to the larger chorus of Christian theology.

In a theological study, we study one theme or one theological idea in one book of the Bible. The goal is to find out what the author says about that theme in that book. In order to accomplish this type of study, you may need to use many of the techniques explained previously in this manual. This is why we are covering this method last of all.

An example of a theological study is, “*God’s plan of salvation in the Book of Romans*,” also called the “*Roman Road*.” This study examines Paul’s explanation of how a person is saved in his letter to the Romans. Another example would be to look at the presence of the Trinity in John’s gospel.

Going Deeper

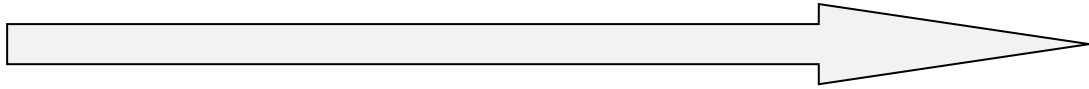
The Relationship Between Biblical Interpretation, Theological Theme Studies and Systematic Theology

Theological studies are distinct from *systematic theology*. The goal of systematic theology is to form a comprehensive theological system explaining and organizing all the teachings found in the Bible. When you go through the *FOUNDATIONS* module on doctrine, “*Telling the Truth in Love*,” you will be taking a course on systematic theology.

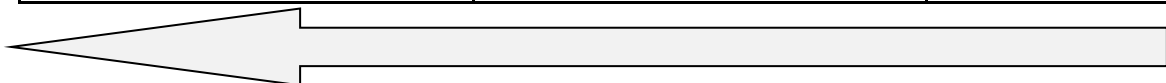
Theological studies are different from systematic theology in that they do not try to assemble what the entire Bible teaches on a theological topic, rather they focus only on the teachings in one book in the Bible on that topic. Theological studies are a bridge between Bible interpretation and systematic theology. By paying attention to what that

author is saying in one book of the Bible, we can recognize the unique contribution each book makes to the overall message of the Bible. (See the section below on Unity and Diversity for more on this.)

The following chart shows the relationship between biblical interpretation (the focus of this manual), theological studies in a particular book (the focus of this chapter) and systematic theology (covered in *“Telling the Truth in Love.”*)



Biblical Interpretation	Theological Studies	Systematic Theology
Interprets the Bible to find answers to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The historical background behind the books. • The outline and overall message of a book. • What the words in a passage mean. 	Interprets the Bible to find out what an author says in a book about a theological topic. Examines how this theme is related to larger theological themes in the Bible.	The goals are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To arrive at theological teachings which are able to cover all the teachings and passages in the Bible in a fair manner. • To arrive at the Big Picture for the entire Bible and what the church believes.
Interpretation is focused on particular texts and passages	Interpretation is focused on how one theological theme is taught in one book of the Bible.	Is concerned with theology of the entire Bible, Church history and teachings, philosophy, and other questions.



Explanation of the Chart

The Upper Arrow:

Each of these types of studies is related to each other. Biblical interpretation is the basis for doing theological studies in a book of the Bible. What is learned in theological studies becomes the data used in systematic theology. These are represented by the upper arrow in the chart.

The Lower Arrow:

Systematic theology provides a valuable check on our theological studies and biblical interpretation (depicted by the lower arrow in the chart). Systematic theology represents the collective wisdom and study of hundreds of church leaders and teachers over the past 2,000 years. Theological statements, like the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creeds, represent a concise and clear summary of the teachings of the entire Bible. Therefore, it is wise to make sure that the conclusions drawn from our biblical interpretation and theological studies are in line with the teachings of the church.

Unity and Diversity in the Bible

Theological studies raise the question about the unity and the diversity of the Bible. Theological studies reveal to us that different authors in the Bible express theological truth in different ways. Each author makes a unique contribution to our knowledge of God.

And yet a consistent unity exists in the message of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation we see how God has worked in history to redeem humankind. Balancing both the unity and the diversity of the Scriptures can be challenging at times for the interpreter. There are those who have argued strongly in favor of the unity of the Bible, trying to make all the authors of the Bible say the same thing. Others, focusing on the diversity of the books, make the Bible appear to be a collection of unrelated books.

The relationship between unity and diversity can be compared to a piece of music. If all the books of the Bible said the same thing on every topic, it would be like everyone in an orchestra playing the same note at the same time. When an orchestra plays a piece of classical music, the horn section plays one part of the music, the drums another and the string instruments a third part of the music. Together they contribute their own unique sound and make for beautiful music.

The same is true with the Bible. Each author adds their own contribution to overall theological truth. Together, all the books of the Bible give a much richer picture of our both transcendent and immanent Almighty God, than if they all said the same thing in the same way.

1. Diversity

Theological theme studies operate at the level of diversity. We want to study each author's theological contribution to the Bible. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul's teachings on the church concern the local churches in Corinth. But in Ephesians, when Paul writes about the church, he is talking about all believers around the world, not a specific local congregation. No matter which book we are studying, we need to be careful that we do not force one book to say the same thing the other book is saying about the church.

Activity: Jesus Walking on Water

John 6:15-20; Matthew 14:22-33; and Mark 6:45-52

Compare these three accounts of Jesus walking on the water.

- In which ways are the stories similar?
- What are some of the more obvious differences between these stories?
- Are there any stories (or other types of passages) in the Old Testament that can provide background information to help us understand this story?
- What are the themes that Matthew, Mark, and John want us to notice?

2. Unity

Simultaneously, the unity of the Scriptures is strong and clear. The Hebrew community and the early church decided on the books which make up the Old and New Testaments for several reasons: (1) These books were recognized by the Church and/or the Hebrew communities as the Word of God; (2) They were used in worship and in study and were applied to daily life.

Because these books were chosen and placed in what we call the canon of the Old or New Testament, they are now part of a larger collection of writings we call the Bible. The inclusion of a letter, like *Romans*, into the collection of books that make up the Bible means that we can interpret it in the context of the rest of the Bible. When we study *Romans*, we should not interpret it in isolation from the other books of the Bible.

Activity:

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, there is unity in Scripture regarding the sinfulness of humankind. Take a few minutes, either as a class or in small groups, and identify several places in both Old and New Testament that testify to the sinfulness of humankind. (Hint: Paul and other New Testament writers demonstrate this when they used Old Testament Scriptures to affirm or reinforce what they taught. A good example is Paul's use of the OT on this issue of the sinfulness of humankind in Romans 3: 9-23.)

Unity, Diversity and the Analogy of Faith

The Analogy of Faith is a doctrine which developed early in the history of the church and was reaffirmed during the Reformation. The statement which sums up the Analogy of Faith is, "Scripture determines or interprets Scripture." This is a basic theological concept which has been understood and practiced in the church for over 1,700 years. It is a widely accepted doctrine in the Christian faith affirming the importance of the unity of the Bible.

There are three ways that the Analogy of Faith is significant for biblical interpretation:

1. Difficult passages should always be interpreted in light of passages which are easier to understand.

2. Any conclusions reached in our interpretations must be tested in the light of the entire Bible teaches.
3. The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testaments is of great importance when studying a book in the New Testament. The Old Testament contains the promises, foreshadowing, types, prophecies and the foundation of God's plan which was "fulfilled" in the New Testament, in the life of Jesus.

Guidelines for Doing a Theological Study

- Be careful to use good methodology when doing theological studies. You will want to use techniques you have learned in this course such as word studies, outlines, historical and cultural studies, etc.
- As you do a theological theme study, keep in mind what this author is writing, in this passage, about this specific issue, and to whom is he writing it. In other words: **Context, Context, Context!**
- Theological theme studies ask the question, "**What is this author teaching about this topic in this book?**" Our goal is to describe the theology of this author in this book of the Bible.
- Theological studies concentrate on how this author employs key words, phrases, and concepts in this text to develop his theological themes. This means you will also need to examine related ideas. If you are studying Paul's theology of the "*Christian's life in Christ*" in his letter to the *Ephesians*, you will want to examine how Paul uses the phrase "*in Christ*" throughout *Ephesians*. You would also need to see how Paul used the related phrases of "*in the Lord*," "*in Jesus*" and "*in him*" in *Ephesians*.
- Applying the "Analogy of Faith" means that you will need to test what you have learned from your theological study against what you know about the rest of the Bible and sound doctrine.

Integration and Application

Practice Doing a Theological Study

Activity: Theological Study of The Church in 1 Peter

1 Peter contains quite a bit of theology about the church. Surprising though, Peter only uses the word "*church*" one time in this letter. Instead, he talks about the church using metaphors and other types of images.

The goal of this theological study is to explore what Peter teaches us about the church through these images. The images are grouped together to help your study:

- Elect Aliens and Strangers: 1:1-5, 18; 2:11; 4:3-4 1:1; 5:13
- Three Images from the Old Testament:
 - Royal Priesthood: 1 Peter 2:9-10 (see: Exodus 19:6)
 - A People: 1 Peter 2:10 (see: Hosea 1)
 - Living Stones: 1 Peter 2:4-8 (see: Isaiah 8:14, 28:16 and Psalm 118:22)
- The Flock: 2:25; 5:1-8

Include any other images or verses in 1 Peter that you think should be included in this study on the church (optional).

Suggested Steps (we will also be spending time on this in class, but get started to become familiar with how this process works.

1. Examine the verses listed.
2. If you can do a word study on the words, Peter uses to describe the church, it would be very helpful.
3. If you need to look at the Old Testament for background information, then do that type of study.
4. For each image, summarize your findings.
5. When you have completed the entire study, summarize what these images teach you about Peter's theology of the church in this letter.
6. Write down three or four points you can apply to your life and/or ministry based on your study of the church in 1 Peter?

Summary

There is great value in doing theological studies, but there is also a necessary caution. The value of these studies comes from seeing how major truths are developed consistently through the sweep of the biblical record, spanning two thousand years. Though many human authors were used, there is One Author, who worked through these writers to communicate what He wanted us to know. What an encouragement this is to us as we see the unity of Scripture, expressed through such diversity, to provide the timeless and sacred text that is the Written Word!

But caution is also needed because of the danger of building a single narrow system of theology which becomes the primary filter through which all of Scripture is interpreted.

As we discussed earlier in this course, a rigid theological system can become part of our **preunderstanding**, which can negatively impact the process of interpreting Scripture correctly.

Psalm 119: 167-168

*“I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly.
I obey your precepts and your statutes,
for all my ways are known to you.”*

Principles for Proper Application of Scripture

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
Or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers,
But whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and
night.*

*That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither –
whatever they do prospers.*

Psalm 1:1-3

Outcomes - The students will be able to:

- Avoid common mistakes people make when reading and applying the Bible
- Discern the abiding principles which are applicable to the reader in the present day
- Understand the importance of being a “*Doer of the Word, and not a hearer only.*”

Getting Started

As we conclude this course in biblical interpretation,

1. What has been the most important thing you have learned?
2. How has it affected how you read and study the Word?
3. Most importantly, how has it changed your life?

This last question is the most important one. Jesus said this to His disciples when He gave them the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20: “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them **to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*”

“*To obey.*” Not just to know, but to do what Christ commanded His disciples to do. We have already looked at James’ exhortation to be doers of the word (James 1). Jesus Himself said this as He drew His Sermon on the Mount to a conclusion:

*“Therefore everyone who **hears these words of mine and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on*

sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” (Matt. 7:24-27).

Paul gave these warnings to his disciple Timothy in his final letter (2 Timothy) as he faced his death in a Roman prison: *“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money. . . having a form of godliness but denying its power. . . always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

These descriptions seem to describe the age in which we live. Read these words in 2 Timothy 3:1-7, and the ways Paul describes these people in the last days. Perhaps he was describing our own times. It is important then, to ask this question as we conclude this course: “What bearing does the biblical message have on life today—on life in general and on my life in particular?”

We want to provide some guidelines for applying what we read and interpret in Scripture. But before we do that, we need to look at some misapplications.

Going Deeper

The Two Most Common Misapplications of Scripture

1. Complete Neglect of Any Context

This is a superstitious use of Scripture. It generally involves randomly turning to a page of the Bible, closing your eyes, and pointing to a place on the page. Whatever verse your finger lands on becomes God’s instruction for you for the moment.

Perhaps a young man is wondering whether to go to college or join the Navy. He closes his eyes, opens his Bible randomly to Ezekiel 27 and his eyes fall on verse 25: *The ships of Tarshish serve as carriers for your wares. You are filled with heavy cargo as you sail the sea.* He sincerely believes God is telling him to join the Navy!

Can God lead that way? Yes, and sometimes He does, but the danger of this approach to Scripture is that the Bible becomes a kind of magic book, and we lose the authority of Scripture as we neglect what God was trying to communicate by placing his message the way that he did in a time, place, people, and culture. This approach leads to unbelievable abuse and misuse of Scripture.

2. Partial Neglect of the Context of a Passage

This is where most misapplication takes place. A verse is pulled out of context and made to promise something it never intended or is misapplied to a situation. It is easy to do when speakers focus on one verse in their message, instead of looking at the verse in the context that it was written.

An example is a misuse of Philippians 4:13 which says: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (NKJV). If I claim that verse and try and perform heart

surgery as an application of that verse, both the person I am operating on, and I are in big trouble!

The context of Paul's statement goes back to verses 10-12, where he is thanking the Philippian church for their support, but also communicating to them that he has learned to be content both in poverty and in plenty. He can do both because of Christ's sufficiency. This is not a promise for all believers to claim for any situation.

A statement I often use when discussing Scripture is this: *"Although the Bible was not written to us, all the Bible is for us."* This distinction is important when coming up with appropriate applications. The gospels, for example, were each addressed to different readers, which we discussed in our New Testament course. Paul wrote the book of Galatians to the church in Galatia. Our task as readers, in a different culture, in a different time, is to discern the "abiding principles" for us today, and to apply those principles to our lives, as the Spirit empowers us to do so.

The *Life Application Study Bible* defines good applications of the Scriptures this way:

*"Application begins by knowing and understanding God's Word and its timeless truths. But you cannot stop there. If you do, God's Word may not change your life ... A good application focuses the truth of God's Word, shows the reader what to do about what is being read, and motivates the reader to respond to what God is teaching."*¹⁹

Four principles for discerning how to apply a particular passage to our lives.²⁰

1. Determine the Original Application(s) Intended by the Passage.

Questions to ask at this stage are these:

- What did the original author want his readers to know and how did he want them to then respond?
- Is there an example to follow or to avoid?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there a warning to pay attention to?
- Is there a truth to believe?
- Is there a teaching that needs attending to?

We ask those questions in the original context in which it was written.

For example, Exodus 20:17 was a clear commandment to the people of Israel that God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."* Not coveting my neighbor's wife or house has timeless application to all of us.

But what about the other aspects mentioned in the verse? Very few of us have servants, maybe a donkey, probably not an ox. The last phrase in that verse gives us the key to application in our day and times which would include our neighbor's car, computer, or anything that my neighbor has, that I want for myself.

2. Evaluate How Specific the Original Application Was

Some important questions at this level are: How does the Bible reader know when certain commands, examples, promises, etc. are culture-bound (i.e. limited to their original context), or when they are timeless and universal? The other question is: Does the application of the timeless principle change in different cultures?

There are a couple things to remember that will help us decide.

A. The Principle of the Progress of Revelation

The Bible is the story of God's redemptive history with humankind which began in Genesis with Creation and concludes in Revelation when God finishes his plan of redemption and creates "a new heaven and a new earth." It is the story that unfolds through the pages of Scripture. There are aspects of that story that change.

An example is the dietary restrictions that God placed on his people Israel in the Torah. In the New Testament, those restrictions were lifted in a dream that Peter had in Acts 10: 9-48. Not only did God declare all foods acceptable (10:15), but his plan of salvation (the Gospel) was now made available to the Gentiles. Was the Bible contradicting itself? No, the story was unfolding from the Old Testament to the New. The guiding principle here is: If we see God doing something in the Old Testament, is there later revelation from the New that fulfills it or changes it?

Example: Now that Christ has fulfilled the law and became God's perfect sacrifice for our sins, we no longer have to offer sacrifices for our sins. In the Old Testament, there was a specific group of people (the Levites) who carried out the priestly responsibilities. In the New Testament that changes. Peter declared that all believers are now priests in 1 Peter 2:9: "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*"

On the other hand, the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind from Deuteronomy 6:5, was repeated by Jesus in Matthew 22:37. The Old Testament commandment is not replaced by anything different in the New in this case.

B. The Principle of the Analogy of Faith

The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. When we read a passage, it is helpful to look at cross references for that verse or passage. If you have a study Bible, it will contain those verses in the margins. There may be parallel passages offering additional insight. The gospels have different accounts of some of the same events in

Jesus life. For example, the feeding of the 5000 is in all four gospels, but each has their unique way of telling that story.

Example: Perhaps you want to do a study on fasting from Isaiah 58: 5-12. Follow the guidelines for interpretation we have developed in this course first.

Context:

- What do the immediate verses before and after say about his topic?
- How do the chapters before lead up to the discussion in this chapter?
- To whom was Isaiah writing?

Other Bible teaching on this same subject:

In the back of many study Bibles will be a *Concordance* listing different verses throughout the Bible which contain the word you are studying. Look up *fast* or *fasting* and the verses where they are found in the Scripture. What new insights do these verses bring to your study? The *Life Application Study Bible* also has a master index which includes helps in different topics, in addition to a concordance.

As you gather both Old and New Testament references to fasting, what conclusions do you come to regarding this discipline? Is there enough biblical material available for you to prepare a sermon or two on fasting?

3. Identify the Cross-Cultural Principles

Once we have discerned the principle and its application in that cultural context, we next decide the extent of its application in our own culture. Most of us are familiar with the story of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22. We (hopefully) understand that God is not asking us to take one of our children and offer them as a sacrifice. But is there a broader principle this story shows that has application for us?

Thinking broadly for a moment, we can conclude that the story illustrates the principles: “God is always in control,” or, “We obey God no matter what, even in situations that seem impossible.” But does God promise that he will always get us out of impossible situations?

Other passages such as 1 Corinthians 10:13, and Romans 8:35-39, tells us that God’s love remains steadfast towards us, despite what happens, and that He will provide what we need to go through the testing. But he doesn’t always take away the testing. If we limit ourselves to understandings present in the book of Genesis, God made his promise to Abraham about supplying numerous descents through Isaac (Genesis 17:19). Yet Abraham took God’s commandment seriously, took his son to be sacrificed, even while wondering how God was going to do to keep his promise to Abraham (Hebrews 11:17-19).

One abiding principle from this story is that God does keep His promises.

4. Find Appropriate Applications Which Embody the Broader Principles

A simple principle which had a specific application in Paul's day, needs to be applied differently in our time. In 1 Thessalonians 5:26 believers are told to "*greet all God's people with a holy kiss.*" Do we apply that literally in our churches today? In some countries, yes. That is appropriate and practiced. In other countries, a kiss on the cheek wouldn't work.

But what is the broader principle that this verse communicates? Once that broader principle is identified, what is the appropriate application in the reader's current culture? A sincere, heartfelt handshake? An appropriate hug? Is the application different for men than for women?

Two key passages containing guidelines for dealing with areas of difference are Romans 14, and 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23. The passage in *Romans* provides principles for discerning how to make the best choices and be sensitive to our brothers and sisters who are not at the same place we are in their walk with Jesus. The passage in *1 Corinthians* focuses on our behavior and witness to those who don't know Christ. Each passage is worth studying in detail, but for now we will focus on Romans 14.

Here are some questions to guide you in your study of this important passage.

- What "*areas of difference*" does Paul address in the first six verses of Romans 14?
- What are some areas of difference that exist in your churches today?
- What are the guiding principles Paul identifies as important in deciding a person's choices, especially in being sensitive to other Christians who are in a different place than you are?
- Are those principles limited to Paul's day and age? How do you decide?
- What other Scriptures can inform you regarding the relevance of the principles that Paul identifies?
- If you were to state Paul's teaching in contemporary terms for your culture, how would you do it? State four principles Paul taught that apply to us today, regarding this issue?

Final Thoughts on the Role of the Holy Spirit

We have sought to provide sound principles to help you carefully study God's Word. There is no substitute for thoughtful study of God's word. But we must always remember our simultaneous dependence on the Holy Spirit and His ministry to help us properly do our job of understanding and then applying Scripture. Seminary professor Roy Zuck offers good guidelines on the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation. We have summarized some of them:

- The Holy Spirit does not give new revelation on the same level as the Bible.

- The Holy Spirit does not guarantee that our interpretations are absolutely correct.
- The Holy Spirit does not give one person new insights that no one else has.
- Spiritual devotion on the part of the interpreter is crucial.
- There is no substitute for diligent Bible study.
- Lack of spiritual preparation can hinder correct interpretation.
- The Holy Spirit does not make all the Bible equally clear, nor does the Spirit ensure comprehensive understanding.
- With practice, humility, and maturity, we grow in our ability to interpret Scripture and depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us in our Bible studies.²¹

These final comments are meant to provide a balance as we conclude this important course. Without the Holy Spirit's illumining ministry our study of the Bible becomes a dry academic exercise. Without careful Bible study, applying the principles we developed in the preceding pages, we can lose the authority of Scripture and open ourselves up for error and wrong teaching that falls outside the realm of sound Bible study.

Praying the Psalms

Psalm 19: 7-11

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul.*

*The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.*

*The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.*

*The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.*

*The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever.*

*The ordinances of the LORD are sure
and altogether righteous.*

*They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;*

*They are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.*

*By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

Appendix A: Guidelines for Different Genres in Scripture

1. Epistles

Main Idea: the primary distinctive of all Epistles is that they are occasional documents,

These letters arose out of a need to address such things as:

- Doctrinal error -- such as Galatians
- A behavior issue or problem -- such as 1 Corinthians or Hebrews
- A specific opportunity -- such as Philippians
- Or a more formal treatise -- such as Ephesians or Romans

Procedure in Exegeting an Epistle

Some key interpretive things to remember:

A. Study the historical context well.

Using a Bible dictionary or intro to commentary, sometimes the notes at the beginning of your study Bible will be enough. 1 Corinthians is a good example of the need to study the history of the city.

B. Read the whole book in one sitting.

C. Learn to trace the argument of the book (especially the Pauline epistles) think in paragraphs. See I Corinthians 3 for an example.

D. A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or their readers.

E. Whenever we share comparable, similar, specific life situations with first century hearers, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them.

Some dangers to avoid: Do not make a truth meant for a specific time and people binding for us today. Conversely, if there is a timeless truth in Scripture which applies to us today, recognize it. The problem in interpretation comes in deciding which issues were cultural and intended for the specific reader of that day, and which apply to us today. Some of the cultural issues included foot washing, head coverings, food sacrificed to idols.

2. Narratives

Main Idea: Narratives are stories—purposeful stories retelling the historical events of the past. They are intended to present what happened but also to add meaning and many times will illustrate more than meets the eye. Their meanings often lie beneath the story line.

Three levels of narratives:

1. Metanarrative: The story of redemption, the big picture
2. Second level: The narrative of God's redemption of his people

3. First level: The hundreds of individual stories within the larger stories

Some key interpretive things to remember: Narratives are not necessarily intended to teach moral lessons, nor are they allegories, filled with hidden meanings. They generally do not teach directly but illustrate through the action and dialogue what to do or not to do.

In preaching from a narrative, the most important thing to remember is that if you are going to develop a big idea, it will mostly be as an illustration of an imperative found elsewhere in the Bible. Don't personalize them for the purpose of proving a point.

The biggest danger to avoid is: Using a narrative as a direct revelation from God to us.

3. Acts – Historical Narrative

Main Idea: Acts is a transitional book of history and its primary purpose is to describe the origin and early development of the church, and its shift from the Jerusalem based church to a church expanded far into the Gentile world.

Luke is a historian and his skills as a historian are demonstrated by how he wrote the book. He is not as interested in individual stories, as he is in the Christian movement. In the metanarrative (his big over-arching story), it is clear that this is the story of the Holy Spirit and His involvement in the foundation and the expansion of the church.

Some key interpretive things to remember: Always ask the question: "Why did Luke include that in the story?" When Luke included specific details or stories, was he establishing an important precedent, illustrating a principle, or recording an event in the history of the early church.

The sorting out of those things which are "for us," and those which are "to us" in Acts provides good practice for reading this and other narratives.

The biggest danger to avoid is: Basing a doctrine or a teaching on an isolated incident recorded in the book of Acts, where there are little grounds elsewhere in the New Testament. Look for repeatable precedents elsewhere.

Example: Acts 2 vs. 1 Cor 14 -- The use and abuse of spiritual gifts.

4. Gospels

Main Idea: The four gospels record the facts about Jesus, recall the teachings of Jesus, and bear witness to Him.

Two things are critical here:

1. The historical context of Jesus: Remember that the gospels were written down some thirty to sixty years after the Resurrection and they recorded the oral sayings of Jesus. Sometimes the writer included a context but sometimes they did not. The context of one writer might be different than another, though the sayings were similar.

The sayings themselves sometimes had variations, as in the retellings of *The Sermon on the Mount*. In Matthew's case, he grouped sayings into topics such as: parables of the kingdom at work in the world (13:1-52); and teachings on relationships and discipline in the kingdom (18:1-35).

2. The historical context of the evangelist: Luke's bent is different than Matthew's and each gospel writer emphasized different aspects of Christ's ministry. Mark emphasized Christ as the suffering servant, while Luke emphasized His humanity, and Matthew showed Christ as the Jewish Messiah.

Some key interpretive things to remember: Think horizontally by comparing the gospel accounts of the same or similar event. For example, compare:

Matthew 24:15-16 Mark 13:14 Luke 21:20-21

Mark is thought by many to be the first account written, and Luke and Matthew probably had access to it, but each had independent sources as well. John's gospel is independent of the other three.

A danger to avoid: The key hermeneutical point in the whole New Testament, and in the Gospels particularly, is to understand Christ's ministry in terms of the "*kingdom of God*." The New Testament believers were very eschatologically (end times) oriented. The Kingdom of God was inaugurated with Jesus' coming and we are called to life in the kingdom, which, in simple terms, means living life under his Lordship.

5. Parables

Main Idea: the purpose of the parables was to evoke a response in the hearers.

They were not stories with hidden meanings, though Jesus said that not everyone would understand them (Matt. 13:10-15). They were designed to communicate a simple truth about the Kingdom or to communicate a message to the point of reference in the context, e.g. they were typically a specific message pointed at certain people.

Look at the parable of the Good Samaritan. Who are the points of reference in the story? How about the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Through the years, unfortunately, these parables have been misinterpreted because some have tried to pull more meaning out of them than what was intended, or people have tried to build doctrine on them.

Some key interpretive things to remember: Remember the point of reference and what the parable teaches about the kingdom of God. (For a good book on the Kingdom

to help you understand what Christ's ministry and life has inaugurated, I (RJK) would recommend Dallas Willard's book: *The Divine Conspiracy*.

With parables, look at the context they were written in and especially to whom they were addressed, because that often provides the point of reference.

A danger to avoid: Making them say more than they were intended to say.

Parables can be broken down in three categories:

Stories: *The Good Samaritan*

Similitude: *The Parable of the Yeast*

Metaphors: *"You are the salt of the earth."*

6. The Law

Main Idea: The law was given to the nation of Israel as the code of conduct for them in community with God and with each other. It also served as a protective ethical/moral boundary between Israel and the other pagan nations. It was a covenant relationship between God and His people Israel.

Some key interpretive things to remember: Though the OT law was not written to us, (it was written to the nation of Israel) it was written for us, (there are abiding principles that do apply to us today, i.e. the importance of living a holy life). Therefore, we need to understand the principle being taught to Israel and make relevant application in our own lives. For example, the ritual laws were not for us, but God desires holiness in every aspect of our lives.

So, we look for the abiding principles which are rooted in God's character and framed within New Testament teaching. Some OT laws do have direct application to us since they are recognized by the New Testament authors or by Jesus, such as the 10 commandments, and the Great Commandment.

A danger to avoid: Because we are under the New Covenant, we do not apply the civil and ritual laws to ourselves.

7. The Prophets

Main Idea: The prophets were primarily spokespersons for God. A couple of statistics will help frame their primary purpose: less than two percent of OT prophecy is messianic; less than five percent relates to the new covenant age; less than one percent concerns events future to our time.

So what was their purpose? It was to speak for God to their own contemporaries.

Some key interpretive things to remember:

Get help from other sources. Because of the specific historical context in which the prophetic books were written, they need to be understood in their historical

framework. Much of the prophetic message relates to the details surrounding that prophet.

Also, there are different types of prophetic utterances: woes, lawsuits, promises of destruction, promises of restoration. And there are Messianic prophecies. Know which type you are reading.

Dangers to avoid: 1) Over using Old Testament prophecies to reference end time events. Many, if not most of the O.T. prophecies have already been fulfilled.

2) Using O.T. prophecies the same way the New Testament authors may have used them: for example: 1 Corinthians 10:4.

8. The Psalms - Poetry

Main Idea: The psalms are poems written to the mind through the heart. Much of their language is emotive and not meant to be interpreted too literally.

Parallelism is the most common element or form of Hebrew poetry. *Parallelism* is two lines which form a pattern. Sometimes the second line reinforces the first: “O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath (Ps. 6:1). Sometimes it completes the thought begun in the first: “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you” (Ps. 9:10), and sometimes the second line provides a contrast: “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (PS. 1:6).

There are many types of psalms and they served different purposes. Some of the forms were: personal lament, corporate lament, thanksgiving, hymns of praise, or songs of ascent which were sung on the way to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage.

Some key interpretive things to remember: They can serve as a guide to worship. They show us how to relate honestly with God. They demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation on things that God has done for us.

A danger to avoid: Using the Psalms as a guarantee of a prosperous life. Though in many places they express of God’s goodness and blessing, they are not meant to be universal promises.

9. Wisdom Literature.

Main Idea: The purpose of wisdom literature is to provide us guidance in making wise choices.

Interpretive guidelines: Make a distinction between Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Job and Ecclesiastes are mostly speculative wisdom, i.e. they are dealing with weighty issues of life. Proverbs is more a collection of wise sayings about how to make right choices in everyday life.

Dangers to avoid: Isolating proverbs or other wisdom literature without looking at the argument or similar proverbs of that same theme. Claiming proverbs as promises is also not helpful. They are not promises per se; they are pithy common-sense generalizations about how to live our lives.

10. Revelation

Main Idea: This book is apocalyptic literature which is concerned primarily with coming judgment and deals with the consummation of history. Much of it was not written within history but looks beyond it. The letters to the seven churches are a different genre with it.

Interpretive guidelines: Understand the author's intent. What was John trying to communicate? Remember that much of Revelation borrows symbols from the OT books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and parts of Isaiah. Seek much outside information when tackling Revelation.

Dangers to avoid: There are many! One of them is not making the distinction between tribulation and wrath. As Christians we will not experience God's wrath, though we will face tribulation.

Appendix B

Inductive Bible Study

from the Navigators²²

1. Background

Who is the author? Why was it written? Learn the historical background, dates, key people and so on. Some Bibles have summaries at the beginning of each book that will provide some of this information. A Bible dictionary or online commentary can also be helpful.

2. Personal Paraphrase

Write out each verse or section of verses in your own words. This helps you understand each verse in wording that makes more sense to you.

Example: Original Verse: “*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope ...*” (1 Timothy 1:1, NIV).

Personal Paraphrase: *Paul, a proclaimer of Jesus Christ, obeying the instructions of God who is the One who saves us, and of Jesus Christ who is our hope.*

3. Questions and Answers

Write down and then answer any questions you have about the passage or any confusing terms.

Example: (Q) What does the word “apostle” mean? What does it mean to be one?
(A) The Greek word *apostolos* comes from the verb *apostello*, which means “to send forth.” So to be an apostle means to be someone who is sent forth—in this case by Christ to spread His message.

4. Cross References

Make note of any similar or related passages that come to mind while you’re reading, paraphrasing, and asking questions about the passage. Consult a concordance, study guide, or footnotes to collect additional related passages.

Examples: Apostle: 2 Corinthians 1:1; God my Savior: Titus 1:3; Christ our hope: Colossians 1:27

5. Insights

If you observe something that relates to any part of the passage, write it down. **After** completing your own thoughts and analysis, consult a Bible commentary for additional insight.

Example: Paul was commanded by God to be an apostle. It wasn’t something he decided to do on his own.

6. Personal Application

Example: (1 Timothy 1:1): *Just like Paul, I need to see that I'm tasked with being Christ's ambassador, authorized and sent out with a divine message. I'll only be effective in my mission if I'm aware of my status as a divinely appointed witness.*

7. Title and Summarize

After completing a verse-by-verse analysis of a chapter, give it a title and identify a key verse or verses. This helps solidify the chapter's message in your mind. Write a summary paragraph outlining the chapter's thesis. Repeat the process for each chapter until the book is completed, and then give it a collective title.

Appendix C

Definitions of Some Literary Terms

Analogy – A comparison of something to something else – *“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head...”* (Ps. 133:1-2a).

Contrast – Opposites placed beside each other: the Pharisee and the Publican.

Exaggeration/Overstatement – To make something larger than it is or to say something extreme to make a point: *“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off”* (Mark 9:43).

Foreshadowing – Alluding to or predicting something before it happens: *“The axe is already at the root of the trees...”* Matt. 2:10), and *“Then the Pharisees went out and plotted with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus”* (Mark 3:6).

Irony – Something which is not what you would expect: *“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). In John 11:50, the high priest, Caiaphas, ironically, utters a truth far different than he meant, *“... it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed”* (NRSV).

In drama, it can mean that the audience, or certain characters know something that other characters do not.

Metaphor – A figure of speech which makes a comparison between two things: *“See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall...”* (Rom.9:33 cf. Isaiah 8:14, 28:6).

Paradox – An intriguing and puzzling contradiction which contains truth: a widow who contributes two tiny coins is credited with the greatest gift (Mark 12:41-44); Someone will gain their life only by losing it (Luke 17:33).

Parallelism – A second line which reinforces the first. This form comes from the poetry of the Bible, but many times Jesus used this technique in his speech: *“When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me”* (Jn. 12:44-45).

Proverbs – A short saying which embodies a general truth: *“Where your treasure is there your heart will be also”* (Matt. 6:21).

Pun/Wordplay – The humorous use of a word to suggest a different meaning, or using words which sound alike: “*You strain out a gnat (galma in Aramaic), and swallow a camel (gamla)*” (Matt. 23:24).

Repetition – Using the same form three or more times: As when Abraham bargained for the righteous in Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33)

Simile – A figure of speech comparing two things using the words “like” or “as”: “*...Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*” (Matt. 10:6). The Pharisees were “*like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones...*” (Matt. 23:27b).

Symbol – A detail in literature which has both its own literal meaning and stands for something else: In the wedding at Cana, the water of ceremonial cleansing, becomes the wine of celebration (Jn. 2: 1-11).

Appendix D:

How to use an Exhaustive Concordance for Word Study in the Original Languages

If you want to study a Greek or Hebrew word (and you do not know Greek or Hebrew), the best reference work you can purchase is a Concordance with Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic numbers or references. One of the most common ways this is done in a concordance is by means of what is sometimes called the Strong's (named after the man who first used this system) numbering system. If possible, your concordance should be based on the version of the Bible you read.

The following steps will help you use a concordance with a numbering system.

1. Look up the word you are studying in the concordance. If you wanted to study the word "world" in John 3:16, the first thing you would do is look up the word "world" in the concordance. Once you have found the listing for the word "world" you will notice that it is used around 300 times in the entire Bible. (It is used 351 times in *The New Revised Standard Version* but only 261 times in *The New International Version*.)

Somewhere in the middle of all the listings of where the word "world" is used, you should see its use in John 3:16.

Note: When a concordance lists all the places where "world" is used, it starts with how it is used in Genesis and finishes with Revelation. When it lists the verse where the word appears, it will include a short quotation from the verse to show how it is used. Its use in John 3:16 would be shown something like the following:

John 3:16 ...so loved the world that he...

Some concordances will only show the first letter of the word, so it would appear something like this:

John 3:16 ...so loved the w that he...

Next to the entry for "world" in John 3:16, you should see a number. (If there is no number next to this entry, then your concordance may not have Strong's numbering system.) Write down this number as it will be essential for your work! For example, in the NIV Concordance, the number next to the entry for "world" is G3180. (The 'G' just lets us know that this is a Greek word. If we were looking at a word in the Old Testament, the NIV concordance would have an 'H' before the number to let us know that it is Hebrew word.)

2. Then turn to the back of the concordance and look up the Greek or Hebrew word in the Hebrew and Greek dictionary. Use the number you wrote down in the previous step to find your word in the dictionary.

3. Once you find the Hebrew or Greek word you are studying, you will see a listing of how your version of the Bible translated this word at different places in the Bible. This shows you all the different possible ways that a Hebrew or Greek word is translated in your version of the Bible.

Write down the other ways the word you are studying has been translated.

4. Now, go back to the section of the concordance where all the words and verses are listed. Look up the words you wrote down in step 3. This will show you all the other verses where your word is used in the Bible but may not be translated as “world.” As you look up these uses of your word, make sure that it is the same number you noted in step 1.

Example: If we looked up “*world*” in the NIV Concordance, we would find it is number G3180 (step 1). For this listing, G3180, in the Greek dictionary, one of the translations is “adornment” (step 3). Now go back to where words and verses are listed and look up “adornment” (step 4). In this case, it is only used in 1 Peter 3:3. If “adornment” were used in other verses, you would want to make sure that it is the same number (G3180). If it is not the same number, then the word “adornment” in your translation would come from a different Hebrew or Greek word. At this point, you only want to look at those passages which have the same Strong’s number.

Remember our famous principle: **Context, Context, Context!** Look for uses of the word in the same text, similar texts by the same author, other texts by the same author, similar texts by other authors (and the same timeframe), same Testament, and finally, the Bible as a whole. Other usages of the word that are closest to the context of the word you are examining should receive more weight than those usages that are farther away in context.

5. Finally, summarize your findings in a dictionary-like definition. (Just like we did in doing a word study without a concordance. Also, most of the other guidelines we noted for doing a word study apply to using a concordance as well.)

Write out the conclusion of the word as it is used in the New Testament in your passage.

Appendix E

Additional Resources

Resources for Further Study in Biblical Interpretation

Alter, Robert, and Frank Kermode, editors. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. Almost an encyclopedia on the various literary features in the Bible. A good reference work to have if you are interested in genre and other literary aspects of the Bible.

Briggs, Richard. *Reading the Bible Wisely*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003. Since Richard is a good friend, I had to include his book! An easy to read book filled with a lot of wisdom and humor about interpreting biblical interpretation.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993. This is an excellent book that examines the different types of literary genres contained in the Bible and how we should read them. This book focuses primarily on the first and second levels of reading

Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 3rd Edition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). A wealth of information. This one volume has historical and cultural background to help you understand the New Testament. Included are chapters on political, cultural, social, religious and philosophical background issues. Often you can find the first or second editions (which are still good) for very reasonable prices.

Klein, William H., Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993. Covers the most widely accepted and practiced contemporary methods of biblical interpretation taught in seminaries today.

McQuilkin, Robertson. *Understanding and Applying the Bible: An Introduction to Hermeneutics*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1983. Covers much of the same territory that the previous book does but is easier to digest. Filled with solid advice for interpreting the Bible according to the historical-grammatical approach.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Focuses on the first level of reading. Peterson is concerned that we learn to read the Bible spiritually: to listen to God and respond in prayer and obedience.

Matthew, Victor, *The Cultural World of the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to Manners and Customs 4th Edition*. Baker Academic. 2015. This book offers students a reliable guide to the manners and customs of the ancient world. From what people wore, ate, and built to how they exercised justice, mourned, and viewed family and legal customs, this illustrated introduction helps readers gain valuable cultural background on the biblical world.

Resources for a Bible Study Library

Editor's Note:

We recognize that the available tools in your language and country limit the list provided below. We are relying on your local teachers to guide you in this area and offer their knowledge in helping you be most effective in the study of the Word as you build your study library. Don't be afraid to ask them about what is available in your language!

A Good Study Bible

When you look for a good study Bible, there are two important things to look for. The first is a translation that is true to the original text and is most readable for you as a student. This varies from language to language, so getting more information from other pastors or serious students of the Bible in your region and what they recommend can be helpful.

Secondly, a good study Bible will contain several helps besides a solid translation: good maps in the back, helpful commentary on the verses, cross references in the margins, a small concordance so you can look up words in different verses.

Bible Dictionary

A Bible dictionary lets you look up names, places, books, people, and events in the Bible and read some brief background on the term you are interested in. This is a very useful tool for getting the general background of a biblical book or for answering specific questions about unfamiliar terms in a particular passage. In English, *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* is a good, comprehensive, generally doctrinally sound Bible dictionary.

Bible Handbook

A Bible handbook gives an overview of the contents of the Bible. It may also discuss customs, weights, measures, the literary background of each book (author, date, situation, background, etc.) and other related issues. There are many different types of these books, but for your basic Bible study library, in English, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* edited by J.I. Packer and M.C. Tenney is a helpful start.

Bible Atlas

If your Bible does not have good maps in the back that illustrate Israel and the world at different points in the biblical timeline, an atlas will provide geographical context for the biblical narrative. These are very helpful for visualizing the geographic settings of the Bible.

Concordance

The limitation of most small concordances in the back of study Bibles is they do not contain the use of a word you are interested in studying more throughout Scripture. An **exhaustive** concordance will have every word listed in the Bible, and every verse where that word is used. It will also have a system for looking up each word in the **Greek** or **Hebrew** dictionary that is included in the concordance. It is important that this tool

match the translation you are using, as different words are used in different versions. Exhaustive concordances may not be available in the language of your study Bible.

Commentaries

Commentaries on individual books of the Bible can be helpful as they provide more in-depth information about the book and verses you are studying. Critical commentaries are more scholarly and offer detailed information on the interpretation of the text in its original language. Devotional commentaries focus more on life application. The limitation of commentaries is that they are the authors' opinions of the biblical text, and therefore need to be recognized as such.

End Notes

Introduction

¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. 1.36.

Chapter 1

² Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*. 1973, p. 21, 23.

³ Holy Bible, Master Reference Bible. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville, TN: Royal Publishers, Inc., 1968.

⁴ Stuart, Douglas. *Old Testament Exegesis*, 2009, p. 83.

⁵ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard. 2004, p. 186.

⁶ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard. 2004, p. 155.

Chapter 2

⁷ Peterson, *Eat this Book*. 2006, p. 28.

⁸ Wright, N.T. *Scripture and the Authority of God*. 2011, p. 3.

⁹ Peterson, 2006, p. 21.

¹⁰ Peterson, 2006, p. 102.

¹¹ Peterson, 2006, p. 108.

¹² Peterson, 2006, p. 106.

Chapter 3

¹³ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 2004, p. 475.

¹⁴ Peterson, 2006, p. 55.

Chapter 5

¹⁵ Ryken, Leland. *Words of Delight, A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. 1992, p. 11.

¹⁶ Ryken, Leland. 1992, p. 416, 418.

Chapter 7

¹⁷ Bailey, Kenneth. *The Cross and the Prodigal*. St Louis, Concordia, 1973, p. 9.

¹⁸ Hafemann, Scott. *NIV Application Commentary*. pp. 106-112.

Chapter 10

¹⁹ *Life Application Study Bible*, NIV. Wheaton, Ill. Tyndale House. 1991, P. xvii.

²⁰ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard. 2004, p. 586.

²¹ Zuck, Roy. *The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics*. Referred to in Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard. 2004, P. 504.

Appendices

²² Navigators, 2018, <https://www.navigators.org/resource/inductive-bible-study/>

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Ryken, Leland. ***Words of Delight, A Literary Introduction to the Bible***. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1992. A wonderful overview of this subject.

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Warren, Rick. ***Bible Study Methods***. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006.

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About the author

David Paul Parris taught for Fuller Theological seminary for more than fourteen years. He and his wife Catherine served with Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru) for nearly 25 years and have ministered on four continents. He has an M.Div. from the International School of Theology, a Th.M. from Fuller Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. from the University of Nottingham.

Take home exam: Biblical Interpretation

Instructions: As you prepare for the Biblical Interpretation class, please use your manual to find the answers to this exam, write down your answers in the space provided, then be prepared to tear this test out from your manual and turn in to your instructor **at the beginning of the first day of class in the Biblical Interpretation course**. A reminder: this is important because it constitutes 50% of your grade for this module. The questions are very straightforward, and the answers are found **directly** from the manual.

1. What are the four habits the author encourages you to develop in the introduction regarding biblical interpretation? **4 points**

2. What are the five stages of God's communication process? **5 points**

3. What are four truths about ourselves we need to keep in mind as we read the Bible? (found in chapter one) **4 points**

4. Define the principle of literal interpretation. **2 points**

5. What are the four steps in *lectio divina*? **4 points**

6. Define *genre* and list four different genres found in the Bible. **5 points**

7. What are the four historical contexts that we need to be aware of when we do historical and cultural background studies? **4 points**

8. What is the difference between diachronic and synchronic studies? **2 points**

9. What are two most common misapplications of the Bible? **2 points**

10. What are the four principles in applying a passage to our lives **4 points**

11. In the appendix, ten different genres are presented. List seven and give the main idea of each one that you list? **14 points**