

Essentials

Bible Study Keys

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All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Acknowledgments

Essentials: Bible Study Keys has been developed under the direction of Village Ministries International, Inc. Since its inception, the mission of VMI has been to reach villages and remote areas of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Often, the window of opportunity for missionary activity is open for only a brief period of time. Our organization's goal has been to identify gifted men native to these areas and equip them to carry on the delivery of sound Bible teaching after foreign involvement is discontinued, thus "making disciples" in fulfillment of the *Great Commission* given to us by our Lord and Savior.

VMI hopes to provide Bible training materials to the parts of the world where training is so desperately desired but not available. Through this ministry, VMI is able to efficiently and effectively equip a rapidly growing number of indigenous pastors and teachers with sound Bible training and teaching materials.

Many people need to be thanked for their dedication and efforts in preparing this material. First and foremost, we acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ who, in His grace, has provided our so great salvation and everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). Secondly, as with any effort of this nature, there are also many who selflessly offered of their time, talents and gifts in bringing this vision to reality. They are the invisible heroes.

Preface

This portion of VMI's *Equip* program is called Essentials: Bible Study Keys, which is designed to assist the new student of the Word of God to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet 3:18). Therefore, the emphasis throughout Essentials: Bible Study Keys is not only to understand the significance and depth of God's Word but also to aid the student in the development of his own spiritual life.

This booklet contains the basic information that a student of God's Word needs to know. Part 1, "Getting Started," considers the importance of spiritual preparation and then gives an overview of God's Word. Part 2 presents "Basic Principles of Interpretation."

It is our sincere prayer that this booklet will let you more fully embrace our Lord Jesus Christ through the spiritual walk of faith revealed in His Word.

Welcome to the excitement of God's Word!

Part 1:

Getting Started

Personal Preparation

A. Six Principles of Personal Preparation for Bible Study

1. Believe in Jesus Christ

Personal preparation in the study of the Scripture cannot be overemphasized. If you have not believed in Jesus as the Messiah, this is where to begin your study, because the “natural man” (the man without Christ) cannot accept or understand the Spiritual things of God (1 Cor 2:14). Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. Good works will not save (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). The key issue of the gospel that eternally saves one’s soul is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. To be saved you must believe that Jesus is the Messiah: that He died for your sins, was buried and rose again on the third day. It is putting your trust in the finished work of the Lord for personal deliverance from the Lake of Fire. There is no “work” you can do to be saved other than the “work of faith” that is to believe (John 6:29).

2. Accept that the Bible is Divinely Inspired

God’s Word proclaims itself to be divinely inspired (2 Tim 3:16-17). Any study of the Word ought to begin by acknowledging that fact. No “leap” of faith is necessary; just a mere acceptance of the fact that the Bible is true and accurate.

3. Pray

Prayer is necessary to understand Scripture. God’s Word instructs that if anyone lacks wisdom, and asks for it, God will give it freely (Jas 1:5). Sincere prayer for correct knowledge and discernment will be answered, because these things are clearly within God’s will (1 John 5:14 compare [cf.] Matt 7:7-8).

4. Study Diligently and Have Patience

Since many passages of God’s Word are not readily understood, diligence and patience are necessary when studying (2 Tim 2:15). When we, as limited human beings, attempt to understand the unlimited mind of God, we must be aware that a competent grasp will take some time.

5. Consistently Confess Your Sins

It is also important to confess sin consistently, permitting God to cleanse our lives, so that a greater fellowship with Him may be attained (1 John 1:6-10). Realizing the need to confess our sins keeps us consistently sensitive to any thought, speech, or action that is not in accord with God’s will.

6. Be Willing to Live God’s Will

The Lord Jesus Christ said, *“If anyone is willing to do His [God’s] will, he shall know of the teaching”* (John 7:17). If the objective is to develop a relationship with the Living God, then any knowledge gained ought to support and clarify that relationship. Knowledge without love results in pride (1 Cor 8:1). If your objective is simply an intellectual quest and not a relationship with the Living God, then the knowledge you gain will be lacking and distorted.

B. Five Benefits of Personal Bible Study from God’s Word

1. Greater Faith

The greatest theologian of the Church, the apostle Paul, said of himself that he, *“walked by faith and not by sight”* (2 Cor 5:7). We all enter into salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9); and according to Paul, just as we have entered, so are we to walk (Col 2:6-7).

2. New Knowledge

There is new knowledge to be gained from God's Word as we "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet 3:14-18). This knowledge leads us to a greater appreciation of His grace. But along with growing in knowledge, we grow in faith as we "hear" God's Word through the Scriptures (Rom 10:17) and trust Him for everything.

3. Purification of Our Life

God's Word is necessary for the purification of our lives because His Word is Truth (John 17:17). Although we are Believers, we do have problems with sin in our lives (1 John 1:6-10), so we must learn God's Word in order to determine what sin(s) may be present. We then can pray intelligently for healing and cleansing (Psa 51). Please note that Christians have often "added to" God's Word and made these additions a basis of righteousness. This is called "legalism," which means that men have made their own laws the standards of righteousness. The Lord Jesus Christ clearly challenged this practice (Mark 7:1-13), so we must be careful to pay careful attention to God's stated standards.

4. Power in Ministry

With the Holy Spirit at work in our lives as we study the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor:14-16), there will be power in our ministry (Eph 2:10). We are in a war with Satan and his forces; therefore, we need power beyond our own strength and ability (Eph 6:10-18). The power comes from our submission to God's will because it is God who is at work in us "*to will and to work His good pleasure*" (Php 2:13).

5. Equipment for Service

With this knowledge of God's Word, we can practice the truth the name of the Lord Jesus (Col 3:16-17) and proclaim it to a lost and dying world (John 17:17-19; Heb 5:12). A primary objective for the communication of God's Word is "*equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*" (Eph 4:11-13). To "equip" others requires that we must first be equipped ourselves.

The Bible

A. What is the Bible?

1. The Written Word of God

The Bible is not simply a common book. It was written by more than forty authors whose lives spanned over 1,500 years. Jesus Christ called it "The Book" (Heb 10:7). Without it man cannot know the absolute standard of righteousness nor the need for grace in his life. God chose to have His words written down so that His standards would be clear. The written Word is accepted by faith and proven by history (events that have already occurred). Man speaks to God through prayer. God primarily speaks to man through His written Word.

The great majority of people use translations of the Bible from the original languages of Scripture. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. The only exceptions are found in the Book of Daniel, chapters 2 through 7 and in the Book of Ezra, chapters 4 through 7. These chapters were written in a sister language to the Hebrew called Aramaic which was the language spoken by most of the Jews at the time these books were written. All of the New Testament is written in Koiné (common) Greek.

The chapter and verse breaks were added by man after initial inspiration to make it easier to find various passages. Thus, they are not inspired by God, but they do serve a valuable purpose in helping us to understand how these sections have been traditionally understood.

2. The Inspired Word of God

Every single part of the Bible is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16-17) and is, thus, profitable. "Inspiration" is more than human genius, illumination and revelation, because it is divinely initiated. It is "God's breath" expressing itself through a human personality.

3. The Revelation of the Living Word of God

The Bible is the written revelation of the Living Word of God—our Lord Jesus Christ. "Revelation" means to give new information. "Illumination" occurs when the Holy Spirit, at work inside us, makes "revelation" understandable for the student of the Word. The written Word is not the Living Word; it is the divine description of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 4:12 cf. John 5:39-47).

These are important distinctions to make. The paper and ink do not contain the power, but the Power behind the paper and ink is the Spirit of God making the difference in people's lives. To view the words as powerful in and of themselves, without being awestruck by the Author (Heb 12:2), misses the point.

B. Organization of the Bible

1. The Two Major Divisions

The Bible is divided into two Testaments, the Old and the New.

There are 66 total books: 39 in the Old Testament, written by over 30 different authors, and 27 in the New Testament, written by 10 authors. There are 1,189 chapters: 929 in the Old Testament, and 260 chapters in the New Testament. The Old Testament contains 23,214 verses; the New Testament contains 7,959 verses (for a total of 31,173 verses of Scripture).

A "testament" is a covenant or contract in which something of value has been offered by one person, then accepted by another person. For example, when someone desires to purchase any product, an offer is made and then accepted or rejected. Once the offer is accepted, a covenant or contract has been made. The covenant contains promises that are to govern the relationship between the two parties. A good example of a covenant is found in the vows taken for marriage. These vows are a covenant between the bride and the groom, acting as the foundation of the relationship.

The Old Testament contains the original covenants that God made with man concerning the coming Messiah. Later in our study, we will examine these covenants.

2. The Five Divisions of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is grouped as follows:

a. The Law

Called the “Torah” (in Hebrew) or “Pentateuch” (in Greek it means “five books”), The Law is comprised of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

b. Historical Books

There are twelve historical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

c. Poetical Books

The five poetical books are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

d. Major Prophets

The five major prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel.

e. Minor Prophets

There are twelve minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

3. The Three Divisions of the New Testament

The New Testament documents the arrival of the Messiah and contains the new covenant made thereafter.

There is, of course, a variety of topics within the books. The historical books, for example, contain some prophecy (Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), just as the book of prophecy contains some epistles (Revelation 2–3). The general designation of any book is based simply on its overall content. The New Testament is grouped into three divisions, as follows:

a. The Historical books

The five Historical books are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts.

b. The Epistles

The Historical books are followed by 21 Epistles (letters): Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 1, 2, 3John, 1, 2, Hebrews, James and Jude.

c. Prophecy

There is one book of Prophecy: Revelation.

An Historical Overview

The beauty of God's Word is in part due to its internal consistency, even though it was written by so many different authors over such a long period of time. History looks at events that happened in the past. The sequence of the events outlined below shows a marvelous motion through the unfolding and then the folding up of human history. By looking at these major events, we can clearly trace the introduction and conclusion of such a marvelous story. We can also gain some clear insights into a question philosophers have been asking for centuries: "Why are we here?"

The following overview is designed to be just that, an overview. We will spend the rest of our lives filling in the details. For now, let us learn from the major historical events that God has placed in front of us. Later in this lesson, we'll see an excellent overview of God's wonderfully consistent plan.

A. Description of the Events

1. Creation

In the beginning of the Bible, Genesis documents the original creation of the heavens and earth (Gen 1:1; 2 Pet 3:6). At the end of the Book in Revelation, the original creation is destroyed, making way for the creation of a "New Heaven and New Earth" (Rev 21–22).

2. Satan's Rebellion

Sometime before the creation of man, Satan rebelled against God (Isa 14:12-14; Ezek 28). The purpose of this first rebellion is intricately woven throughout the Scriptures, and all of the ramifications of this conflict are not easily understood. What is understood is that a war has been raging between God and Satan since before man's creation (Rev 12) and that Satan's final rebellion will occur after the 1,000 year reign of Jesus Christ on earth, just before the creation of the new heaven and earth (Rev 20:7-10).

3. Earth and Man

God prepared the earth to be inhabited by man (Gen 1:2–2:3: as a footnote, the words "formless" [Hebrew TOHU] and "void" [Hebrew BOHU] mean "uninhabitable" and "void of population," respectively). The problem is that there was an invader, Satan, who continually sought to challenge God. When the Lord imprisons Satan for the duration of the future Millennial Kingdom (1,000 year reign of Jesus Christ, see Rev 20:1-3), He will once again perfect earth for man (Isa 60–66).

4. The First and Last Adam

The first man, Adam, was designed to be the head over all creation (Gen 1:28; 2:4-25). He was placed in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it. The "Last Adam," the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:45), will establish a literal physical Headship for 1,000 years (Rev 20:4). He is "last" in the sense that there is no one else who will come into existence as a perfect being.

5. Man's Battle with Satan

When Adam "fell" in the Garden of Eden, he became subject to Satan, the "ruler of this world" (Gen 3; John 12:31; 16:11). God will later subject Satan to Christ just before the Millennial Kingdom begins (Rev 20:1-3).

6. All of Mankind Judged

God permits man to descend into evil, but He will eventually deal with all mankind. In Genesis 4–10, we find the background that led to the great Flood which occurred because of God's displeasure with mankind's disobedience (Gen 6:1-13). God will again deal with all mankind when Jesus Christ returns at the Second Advent, after the seven-year period of Tribulation. At that time, He will separate the remainder of mankind into the "sheep" (Believers) and the "goats" (unbelievers) (Matt 25:31-46).

7. Babylon

After the Flood of Noah, the earth was repopulated, but soon people began again to turn in the wrong direction—away from God. In Babylon, they constructed the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), which was indicative of their attempt to save themselves. They thought that if they could build a tower high enough, they could escape God's wrath (such as that of the Flood) by ascending to heaven. The foundation they built the tower upon was a religion known as "humanism" which supposes that man can save himself through religious and/or economic means. Beliefs such as this are the basis of all the world's religious systems. Only Christianity realizes that man can't save himself; therefore, man needs a Savior. Some humanistic attitudes are displayed in the Bible by those who stood in opposition to the Living God. These attitudes were found in the Babylon of the past (Isa 47) and Tyre (Ezek 26–27) and remain with us today. The same attitudes are found in the world's religions which believe that man ascends to godhood in stages and, thus, saves himself. During the Tribulation, God will destroy the Babylonian organizations that have been created (Rev 17–18).

8. Israel

After dispersing the people from Babel and distributing various languages to the nations, the Lord called Abraham to be the founder of a new nation, Israel (Gen 12). Through the miraculous conception of his son, Isaac, and the birth of his grandson, Jacob, the promise made to Abraham about the Messiah was continued (Gen 22:1-18; 28:14). The people of Israel were eventually removed from their land and dispersed throughout the world for their idolatrous practices, but the Lord's promises remained. Israel will be supernaturally re-gathered after the Tribulation and blessed with the Millennial Kingdom (Matt 24:29-31).

9. The Advents of Jesus Christ

The First Advent of Jesus Christ took place at the perfect time in God's plan for history (1 Tim 2:6). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John relate the wonderful history of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, burial and resurrection. Jesus Christ was clearly the "Suffering Servant" so beautifully foretold in Isaiah 53. The Second Advent of Jesus Christ will take place after the Tribulation when Christ actually sets foot on the earth again and conquers His enemies (Zech 14:1-8; Rev 19:11-19), thus ushering in the Millennial Kingdom. This time He will come as the "Conquering King."

10. Opposing Ministries

The Gospels also beautifully portray the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt, Mark, Luke, John). Christ's ministry was one of service to others (Matt 20:28). This is in clear contrast to the ministry of the Antichrist (also known as the "man of lawlessness") who will have a "ministry" of self-service, seeking to draw all attention and worship to himself (2 Thes 2:1-12; Rev 6–16).

11. The Church

After the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God the Father, the Church was "called out" to spread the good news of forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Acts of the Apostles). The Church bears the responsibility for "making disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:18-20) until she is "called" up for the marriage to her Lord, the Bridegroom (1 Thes 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:50-58; Rev 19:7-10).

B. Summary

When we analyze the sequence of the events just described, we see a marvelous, symmetrical pattern emerge. It is the unfolding and then the folding up of human history. It is illustrated by the following chart. Match the numbers together and you will see the overview of God's plan.¹

1. **Creation of the original heavens and earth—Genesis 1:1; 2 Pet 3:6**
 2. **Satan's first rebellion—Isa 14:12-14; Ezek 28**
 3. **Earth prepared for man—Gen 1:2-2:3**
 4. **The Headship of the First Adam—Gen 2:4-25**
 5. **Man subjected to Satan—Gen 3**
 6. **All of mankind judged—Gen 4-10**
 7. **Construction of the Tower of Babel—Gen 11**
 8. **Israel called as a nation—Gen 12**
 9. **First Advent of Jesus Christ—Matt, Mark, Luke, John**
 10. **Ministry of Jesus Christ—Matt, Mark, Luke, John**
 11. **Church called out—Acts**
 11. **Church called up—1 Thes 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:50-58**
 10. **Ministry of the Antichrist—2 Thes 2:1-12; Rev 6-16**
 9. **Second Advent of Jesus Christ—Rev 19:11-19**
 8. **Israel re-gathered as a nation—Matt 24:29-31**
 7. **Destruction of Babylonian organizations—Rev 17-18**
 6. **All of mankind judged—Matt 25:31-46**
 5. **Satan subjected to Christ—Rev 20:1-3**
 4. **The Headship of the Last Adam—Rev 20:4**
 3. **Earth perfected for man—Isa 60-66**
 2. **Satan's final rebellion—Rev 20:7-10**
- Creation of a new heaven and earth—Rev 21-22**

¹ Adapted from J. Edwin Hartill, *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 9

A Chronological Overview

Students of the Bible must know the sequence, dates and relationship of several key historical events. Accordingly, this section provides three chronologies. The first lists ten major events found in the Bible and their dates, summarizing the importance of each. The second chronology focuses on key Old Testament events and identifies the books of the Bible that address them. The third lists the sequence of books in the New Testament.

Dates that have "B.C." after them refer to the years "before Christ." Those that have "A.D." refer to the years after Christ. (A.D. was taken from the Latin, Anno Domini, which means "in the year of our Lord.")

The dates given are based on a literal interpretation of God's Word. Many people who have studied God's Word have arrived at different dates for reasons too numerous to mention at this time. Please do not let this be a distraction. Learning the sequence of events is the most important part of this section.

A. Ten Major Events and Their Dates

1. The Fall of Adam (3958 B.C.)

A literal interpretation of the genealogies (sequences of birth) that are given in God's Word lets us arrive at a date around 3958 B.C. for the fall of Adam. The Biblical chronology is given in such a way that we must work forward from the starting point of Adam and also work backward from the 4th year of Solomon (1 Kings 6:1). The Bible gives us information concerning the years between major events. As we connect Biblical events with known dates in secular history, we can then put secular and Biblical history together.

2. The Flood of Noah (2302 B.C.)

When we follow the genealogy of Genesis 5, we find that a span of 1,656 years elapsed from the fall of Adam to the Flood of Noah. This gives us a date of 2302 B.C.

3. The Promise to Abraham (1875 B.C.)

The genealogy given to us in Genesis 11:10-26 establishes that Abraham was born 352 years after the Flood, or 2,008 years after Adam. This would indicate that he was born in 1950 B.C. We learn from Genesis 12:4 that Abraham was 75 years old when he received the promise from God that became the Abrahamic Covenant. This would mean that the promise was made in 1875 B.C.

4. The Exodus of Israel (1445 B.C.)

Genesis 12-50 reveals to us information concerning the direct descendants of Abraham. The children of Jacob (Abraham's grandson) moved to Egypt where they were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians (Exo 1). God delivered them from Egyptian slavery by the hand of Moses. The apostle Paul tells us that a span of 430 years had passed from the promise to Abraham to the giving of The Law (Gal 3:17). This dates the Exodus in 1445 B.C. or 2,438 years after Adam.

5. The Fourth Year of Solomon (965 B.C.)

Solomon was the third king of Israel, following his father, David, and King Saul. In 1 Kings 6:1 we are told that 480 years had elapsed from the Exodus to the fourth year of Solomon when he began to build the Temple. This lets us calculate the date as 965 B.C. or 2,918 years after Adam. We are able to date the fourth year of Solomon from other historical records. This lets us establish a fixed date by which we may work backwards and establish the dates previously mentioned for the Exodus, the Promise to Abraham, the Flood of Noah and Adam. Man has been forced by archaeological discoveries made in the last 100 years to make some adjustments to the B.C. dates of secular history. This is part of the reason for the differences found in various dating systems.

6. The Fall of the Northern Kingdom (721 B.C.)

After the death of Solomon, Israel split into two separate kingdoms which became known as the “Northern Kingdom” or Israel, and the “Southern Kingdom” or Judah. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire in 721 B.C. and ceased to be a kingdom.

7. The Fall of the Southern Kingdom (586 B.C.)

The Southern Kingdom fell to the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C. and was taken into exile for 70 years before the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland in 516 B.C.

8. The Birth of Jesus Christ (1 B.C.)

The “B.C.” and “A.D.” system of dating was not developed until the sixth century after our Lord came. It was designed to reference all historical dates to His birth. When the Church established this system, it was based on an incorrect understanding of when King Herod lived (who was mentioned in the Bible as being in power when Jesus was born, Luke 1:5). Much later it was discovered that a mistake of one or two years had been made, but the system was already well established, so instead of trying to change all the dates that had previously been established with new dates, it was decided to just say that Jesus was born in 1 or 2 B.C. There is a difference between the Julian Calendar which begins January 1 and the Jewish Calendar which begins in September. This is the reason you may see dates written as “1–2 B.C.” or “966–965 B.C.”

9. The Death, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (A.D. 32–33)

The majority of Bible scholars establish the date of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ at A.D. 32–33.

10. The Last Book of the Bible (A.D. 96)

This date is related to the apostle John’s exile to the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9), during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, where the Bible was completed (Revelation 22:18-19).

B. Chronology of the Old Testament Books

1. Adam to the Flood (3958–2302 B.C.)

Genesis 1–5

2. The Flood to the Promise to Abraham (2302–1875 B.C.)

Genesis 6–12

3. The Promise to Abraham to the Exodus (1875–1445 B.C.)

Genesis 12–50; Book of Job

4. The Exodus to the 4th Year of Solomon (1445–965 B.C.)

a. Exodus	e. Joshua	i. 2 Samuel
b. Leviticus	f. Judges	j. 1 Kings 1-5
c. Numbers	g. Ruth	k. Psalms
d. Deuteronomy	h. 1 Samuel	l. 1 Chronicles

5. The 4th Year of Solomon to the Fall of Judah (965–586 B.C.)

a. 1 Kings 6–22	g. Obadiah	m. Isaiah
b. 2 Kings	h. Joel	n. Nahum
c. 2 Chronicles	i. Jonah	o. Zephaniah
d. Proverbs	j. Amos	p. Habakkuk
e. Ecclesiastes	k. Hosea	
f. Song of Solomon	l. Micah	

6. The Period of the Babylonian Exile (586–516 B.C.)

- a. Jeremiah
- b. Lamentations
- c. Ezekiel
- d. Daniel

7. After the Babylonian Exile to the Close of the Old Testament (516–400 B.C.)

- a. Ezra
- b. Nehemiah
- c. Zechariah
- d. Haggai
- e. Malachi
- f. Esther

C. Chronology of the New Testament Books

The sequence in which the authors wrote the various inspired New Testament books (referred to as inscripturation) is generally viewed to be as follows:

1. History of the Life of Christ and the Early Church (A.D. 55–85)

- a. Matt
- b. Luke
- c. Mark
- d. John
- e. Acts

2. Epistles for the Church (A.D. 46–85)

- a. James
- b. Galatians
- c. 1 Thessalonians
- d. 2 Thessalonians
- e. 1 Corinthians
- f. 2 Corinthians
- g. Romans
- h. Philemon
- i. Ephesians
- j. Colossians
- k. Philippians
- l. 1 Timothy
- m. Titus
- n. 2 Timothy
- o. Hebrews
- p. 1 Peter
- q. 2 Peter
- r. Jude
- s. 1 John
- t. 2 John
- u. 3 John

3. Prophecy (A.D. 96)

Revelation

Preparing to Study the Bible

In the last two sections, we were introduced to the importance of knowing significant events that occurred in the past (Section 3) as well as the sequence in which they occurred (Section 4). We were laying a foundation to help answer an important question one must ask when studying the Bible: “When?” As we seek to understand the Bible, we find ourselves constantly searching for answers to questions that are important to “*handling accurately the word of truth*” (2 Tim 2:15). God invites us to bring all of our questions to Him (Matt 7:7-8).

The basic questions that we must ask of every verse are very simple: who, what, when, where, why and how? The answers must be considered while keeping in mind the two primary questions concerning the Christian Life: How does this help us develop a close, personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ (Php 3:10), and how then shall we live (John 7:17)?

A. Six Basic Questions for Every Verse

1. Who?

As we ask the question “who,” we are seeking to determine who is speaking and to whom it is addressed. One example is found in Genesis 22:2 when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, to Him. In this case, God spoke directly to Abraham, not anyone else. Therefore, we, as hearers of the Word, are not obligated to keep that command.

2. What?

“What” deals with the reality of the thing being said. Jesus Christ is referred to in Revelation 5 as “the Lamb.” This does not mean that He is a shaggy, four-footed creature but refers to His sacrifice for sin (John 1:29) which is the “reality.”

3. When?

The “when” question refers us to the time frame to which a particular passage may refer. For instance, Abraham’s marriage to his half sister, Sarah, might be interpreted as immoral until the reader understands that this marriage occurred before the giving of the Mosaic Law which forbade such practice. Since personal sin is not an issue when there is no law (Rom 4:15), we conclude that in Abraham’s case, his marriage was not sin. Clear answers to the question “when” are crucial to complete understanding.

4. Where?

“Where” deals with the geography and culture in which a passage was written. Frequently in the Bible, we find the phrase “up to Jerusalem.” In many cultures, the phrase “up to” has come to mean to travel north. However, the Biblical intent has to do with elevation and not direction. When Jesus came from Galilee and was going “up to Jerusalem,” He was actually traveling south, but going higher up in elevation.

5. Why?

The “why” question is often the most difficult question to answer. The answer is most often found through studying other passages. If one reads the phrase in Isaiah 7:14 which says, “*Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel,*” an obvious question would be “why a virgin?” We might just answer the question with, “that’s the way God wanted to do it.” That answer, while correct, is not complete. As we look for the answer, we will find the passage in Rom 5 which addresses the effect the sin of Adam had on the human race. We find that through the man, Adam, each member of the human race is given a Sin Nature. If Jesus had an earthly father, He too would have had a Sin Nature. The answer to “why,” in this case, is crucial to Christ’s qualifications to pay for sin.

6. How?

The question of “how” is often difficult to answer as well. We might ask, “How did Jesus walk on water?” The answer is simply that He depended upon the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18). We also might ask, “How does God control history when mankind has the freedom of choice?” That question is not as easily answered, and we will explore it later in our study.

B. Two Important Personal Questions

1. How Does This Help Us Develop a Close, Personal Relationship with Our Lord Jesus Christ?

This is one of the most important questions we can ask. The knowledge that we have gained through the study of God’s Word must be united with faith (Heb 11:6), so our relationship with the Lord will grow. We must trust God’s Word as accurate and dependable. The result will be a relationship with the Lord that is grounded in His love and is beyond human knowledge. The apostle Paul said it clearly in Eph 3:14-19 when he wrote:

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

If we are simply studying God’s Word for intellectual reasons and not seeking to grow in our love for God and others (Mark 12:29-31), we are becoming arrogant (1 Cor 8:1). The apostle Paul, who knew more theology than any other man on earth (2 Cor:1-4), expressed his greatest desire in saying, “*that I may know Him*” (Php 3:10). Paul, as a Pharisee, had already been on an intellectual journey, but as a Christian, he began to pursue a vital relationship with the Living God.

Look for God’s promises and trust them, so you might “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet 3:18).

2. How Then Shall We Live?

Once we come to understand the meaning of the verses we are studying, we must seek to understand how it applies to everyday life. We are given a beautiful example of this concept in Heb 12:1-3. Verses 1 and 2 state:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The illustration the writer of Heb chose in these two verses is that of running a race. People in the stands are watching (the heroes of Chapter 11). The race is for speed and distance, and to the victor goes the seat of honor. The contestant removes any additional weight that would slow him down, and/or any obstacles that could trip him up. His eyes are on the finish line, where the One (Jesus Christ) who has already run His race, and won, stands. Potential joy becomes more important than any fatigue experienced, so the runner endures. Then, in verse 3, the writer applies the two verses to our lives as he writes:

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

When we face trials and opposition, pain and sorrow, shame and disgrace for the cause of Christ, we are to consider our Leader and be encouraged by Him! Realize that “*we do not have a great high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (Heb 4:15).

C. What If We Can't Answer All of the Questions?

Questions and their answers are important. We must remember, however, that our relationship with the Living God is based on faith (Eph 2:8-9; Col 2:6), so we won't get all the answers that we seek in this lifetime. However, God has promised that eventually all our questions will be answered (1 Cor:12). Scripture provides enough information to lead us through life.

Part 2:

Basic Principles of Interpretation

Introduction

Part 2 is designed to introduce the student to four basic rules and fifteen basic principles of interpretation. In this section, a rule means a fixed guideline that needs to be observed at all times in our study of God's Word. A principle is an ingredient of the rule that is important to its use but may not need to be applied at all times. As we progress through this portion of our study, the student will come to understand how and when to use the various principles introduced in this chapter.

The correct interpretation of God's Word is a lifelong pursuit. There is no formula where one would be able to open the Bible and in a few minutes be able to understand what each and every passage means. The student should not become so frustrated that he quits searching for the truth! God placed some difficult things in His Word on purpose, so we would have to rely on the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:10-16). While some passages may be easy to understand, others will not be understood this side of eternity (1 Cor 13:12).

If the interpretation of God's Word could be done by a formula, then an unbeliever could interpret all of God's Word. God desires His followers to seek Him and study His Word as part of our process of spiritual growth (2 Tim 2:15). Please use these rules and principles as important guidelines but rely on the Holy Spirit who is the One who will lead you into all truth (John 16:13).

The following list is a summary of the rules and principles we are about to study:

Rule One: Seek to Acquire Facts About God and Christ Jesus by Searching All of Scripture

- A. Principle One: Study the Essence of God
- B. Principle Two: Seek the Way Christ is Revealed

Rule Two: Seek to Understand the Facts by Using the Clear Passage as Your Guide

- A. Principle Three: Realize that Revelation is Progressive
- B. Principle Four: Interpret Literally
- C. Principle Five: Consider the Specifics
- D. Principle Six: Study the Primary Passages
- E. Principle Seven: Recognize Human Volition
- F. Principle Eight: Remember the Covenants

Rule Three: Seek to be Wise by Comparing Scripture with Scripture

- A. Principle Nine: Look for the Differences
- B. Principle Ten: Consider the Context
- C. Principle Eleven: Interpret Comparatively
- D. Principle Twelve: Seek the Harmony
- E. Principle Thirteen: Consider the Dispensation
- F. Principle Fourteen: Be Careful with Prophecy

Rule Four: Seek to Live the Christian Life by Properly Applying God's Word

- A. Principle Fifteen: Proper Application is Built on Proper Interpretation
- B. Five Steps to a Proper Application
- C. Six Hindrances to Proper Interpretation
- D. Eight Ways to Fail the Application

Rule One

Seek to Acquire Facts about God and Christ Jesus by Searching All of Scripture

This rule recognizes the basic characteristics of God's essence, also known as His attributes, as vitally important to correct interpretation. His essence is never compromised nor inconsistent with itself. This rule is based on the fact that the more we know and fully appreciate the awesome nature of God (Php 3:10), the more skilled we will be in understanding what He has to say.

The fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all possess the same essence is Biblical proof of the Trinity. The term "Trinity" refers to the fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three manifestations of one God. They have basically three roles. The Father is the Planner (Acts 2:23), the Son is the Agent (John 5:36) and the Holy Spirit is the Revealer (John 16:13). While we may study their different roles, we must not seek to divide the Trinity. There is only One God (Deut 6:4); since the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all share the characteristics that only God can possess, they are all God and are One.

A. Principle One: Study the Essence of God

There are ten key characteristics that God possesses. They should be memorized and consistently reviewed.

1. Sovereignty

God is SOVEREIGN, meaning that He is King and acts accordingly. Sovereignty is the exercise of supreme authority within a limited sphere. God, free from external control, is the supreme authority over all creation. He is the Creator, not the created (Rom 1:20, 25). Therefore, He has the authority to establish His own plan, His own laws and His own judgments. In short, He has the authority to act as He chooses to act, although His purposes may be hard to understand.

2. Righteousness

God is absolute RIGHTEOUSNESS, meaning that He is perfect in every way. He is the standard of righteousness in every regard. He is morally complete, setting the standard we are to imitate (Eph 5:1).

3. Justice

God is JUST, meaning that He is totally and completely fair. God's justice is a response to the demands of His righteousness. God is not a "respector of persons" (Rom 2:11); He shows no partiality. Where sin (a violation of His law) occurs (Rom 5:13), His Justice must be satisfied.

4. Love

God is LOVE, meaning that perfect and unconditional love is found in Him. Love means doing what is right and best for others, even if doing so is accompanied with unpleasant feelings. Christians are to partake of God's love and spread it to others so that all might come to know Him (John 13:34-35).

5. Eternal Life

God is ETERNAL LIFE. He always has been and always will be. Eternal life has no beginning or end. We as Christians actually possess everlasting life, which has a beginning point, but no end. God's Eternal Life teaches that He is not ever subject to death.

6. Omnipotent–All Powerful

God is OMNIPOTENT, meaning that He has the power to do anything. An example of His Omnipotence is found in the creation of the heavens and earth (Gen 1:1). We are told that the "word of His mouth" created the heavens, and His "breath" all their hosts (Psa 33:6).

7. Omnipresent—At All Places

God is OMNIPRESENT, meaning that He is everywhere at the same time with the same intensity. This does not mean that God is everything (Pantheism), but that He is everywhere. This concept shows us the personal nature of God.

8. Omniscient—All Knowing

God is OMNISCIENT. He knows everything—past, present and future. God knows the outcome of all things, not only the actualities but also all the possibilities. He knows all of the effects, throughout all of time which each decision will bring. His eternal plan has considered all of these factors (Rom 8:28-30).

9. Immutable—Unchanging

God is IMMUTABLE, meaning that the aspects of His Essence never change.

10. Truthful

God is absolute TRUTH. This characteristic tells us that everything God says is totally believable (Num 23:19). It is in fact impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2).

B. Principle Two: Seek the Way Christ is Revealed

The second principle realizes that all of history is focused around Jesus Christ. It recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things (John 1:1,3,14; Col 1:16-17), the Alpha and Omega, “the beginning and end” (Rev 1:8), the one and only God who became man (Php 2:6-8).

As we seek to understand God’s Word, we must determine how our interpretation of a given passage conforms to the Truth of the Lord Jesus Christ. One way to do this is to determine what each person, place, thing or event in Scripture teaches us about our Lord. We are encouraged to study and look for “the good things” (the real truth, our Lord Jesus Christ), not just to look to the old Law which was merely a “shadow” of these good things (Heb 10:1; John 14:6). All of the people, places and events in the Old Testament were placed there by God as examples to help us understand and learn about Him (1 Cor 10:1-6).

An example of a *person* teaching us about the Lord would be found in the prophet, Jonah. As you may remember, Jonah did not want to go to the Assyrians as he had been commanded by God. Instead, he got on a ship and went in another direction. A storm occurred and Jonah was thrown overboard. He was swallowed by a great fish and, three days later, vomited up on an Assyrian beach where he then decided to comply with God’s commands. The three days and nights came to be called the “sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt 12:39-40), which revealed the time that Jesus would be in the tomb.

A *place* can also teach us about the Lord. Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) which means “house of bread.” Jesus was indeed bread which came down out of heaven and was the Person who would sustain spiritual life (John 6:35).

There are many *things* that are directly designed to teach us about the Lord. The Tabernacle and Temple fall into this category. If we just consider the Holy Place where the Table of Showbread, the Golden Lampstand and the Golden Altar of Incense were located, we can easily determine that they represent Jesus. Again, He is the Bread (John 6:35). He is also the “Light of the world” (John 8:12) and the One who hears our prayers. (Incense represents the prayers of the saints [Rev 8:3-4], and prayer is a “sacrifice” [Heb 13:15-16]).

Events, like the offerings made by the Levitical priests, also teach us about the Lord. All of the offerings (described in Lev 1–7) were designed to point us to Jesus as the “one offering for all time” (Heb 10:10-12). He indeed was the “*lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*” (John 1:29).

The student can also look at the themes of each book in the Bible and see that Jesus Christ is the main subject.²

Genesis:	Creator and Seed of the Woman (1:1; 3:15)
Exodus:	Lamb of God Slain for Sinners (12:1-13)
Leviticus:	High Priest (entire book)
Numbers:	Star out of Jacob (24:17)
Deuteronomy:	Prophet like unto Moses (18:15)
Joshua:	Captain of the Lord's Hosts (5:13-15)
Judges:	The Judge (11:27)
Ruth:	Kinsman Redeemer (3)
Samuel:	Lord of Kings (2 Samuel 7:18-20)
Kings/Chronicles:	Lord of Heaven and Earth (entire books)
Ezra:	The Restorer (1:1)
Nehemiah:	Faithful (9:32)
Esther:	Worthy (10)
Job:	Risen and Returning Redeemer (19:25)
Psalms:	Blessed Man (1)
	Son of God (2)
	Crucified One (22)
	Risen One (23)
	Coming One (24)
	Reigning One (72)
	Leader of Praise (150)
Proverbs:	Wisdom (4)
Ecclesiastes:	Forgotten Wise Man (9:14-15)
Song of Solomon:	My Beloved (2:16)
Isaiah:	Suffering Substitute (53)
Jeremiah:	Lord Our Righteousness (23:6)
Lamentations:	Man of Sorrows (1:12-18)
Ezekiel:	Throne Sitter (1:26)
Daniel:	Smiting Stone (2:34)
Hosea:	David's Greater King (3:5)
Joel:	Lord of Bounty (2:18-19)
Amos:	Rescuer of Israel (3:12)
Obadiah:	Deliverer upon Mount Zion (v. 17)
Jonah:	Buried and Risen Savior (entire book)
Micah:	Everlasting God (5:2)
Nahum:	Stronghold in the Day of Wrath (1:7)
Habakkuk:	Anchor of our Faith (2:4)
Zephaniah:	In the Midst for Judgment and Cleansing (3:5, 15)
Haggai:	Smiting Shepherd (2:17)
Zechariah:	Branch (3:8)
Malachi:	Sun of Righteousness (4:2)
Matthew:	King of the Jews (2:1)
Mark:	Servant of Jehovah (entire book)
Luke:	Perfect Son of Man (3:38; 4:1-13)
John:	Son of God (1:1)
Acts:	Ascended Lord (1:8-9)
Romans:	Righteousness (3:22)
1 Corinthians:	First-Fruits from the Dead (15:20)
2 Corinthians:	Made Sin for Us (5:21)
Galatians:	End of the Law (3:10, 13)

² Adapted from R.T. Ketcham, D.D.; found in J. Edwin Hartill's *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*

Ephesians: Our Armor (6:11-18)
Philippians: Supplier of Every Need (4:19)
Colossians: Pre-Eminent One (1:18)
1 Thessalonians: Returning Lord (4:15-18)
2 Thessalonians: World's Returning Judge (1:7-9)
1 Timothy: Mediator (2:5)
2 Timothy: Bestower of Crowns (4:8)
Titus: Great God and Savior (2:13)
Philemon: Prisoner's Partner (1:9)
Hebrews: Rest of Faith and Fulfiller of Types (9-11)
James: Lord of Sabaoth (5:4)
1 Peter: Theme of Old Testament Prophecy (1:10-11)
2 Peter: Long Suffering Savior (3:9)
1 John: Word of Life (1:1)
2 John: Target of the Antichrist (1:7)
3 John: Personification of Truth (1:3-4)
Jude: Believer's Security (1:24-25)
Revelation: King of Kings and Lord of Lords (19:11-16)

Rule Two

Seek to Understand the Facts by Using the Clear Passage as Your Guide

This rule teaches us to look for the scriptures that are easiest to understand and let those passages guide our understanding of Scriptures that are not as clear.

We will study six principles that relate to this rule. These principles will help the student locate and evaluate the clear passages that establish and define the various topics found in Scripture.

In this section, we will also consider the fact of progressive revelation, or how God expands the disclosure of His plan throughout history. To see how His plan unfolds, we must interpret literally, considering the specifics or details, and study the primary passages on a given topic. We will recognize that human volition exists and how to factor that into our interpretation as well as seeing the role that covenants play in interpretation.

A. Principle Three: Realize that Revelation is Progressive

This principle teaches us that God reveals information over a period of time. For example, the first prophecy of the Messiah, found in Genesis 3:15, is the promised seed of the woman. The Old Testament continues throughout its entirety to give more information about this "seed." We are told that the Messiah would be of the seed of Abraham (Gen 12:3), of the seed of Isaac (Gen 21:12), of the seed of Jacob (Gen 35:10-12), of the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:8-11), of the line of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) and of the house of David (2 Sam 7:12-16). He would be born at Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). He would be both God and man (Psa 110:1). He would be called Immanuel (Isa 7:14). He would be a prophet (Deut 18:18), a priest (Psa 110:4), a judge (Isa 33:22) and a king (Jer 23:5). He would have a special anointing of the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2) and a zeal for the house of God (Psa 69:9).

Revelations that are expanded over a period of time (like the one above) form what is called "Progressive Revelation." The general prophecy is made, then significant details concerning that prophecy are revealed over time.

Therefore, it makes sense to look at the first mention made of a given subject, letting it guide our understanding of subsequent occurrences of that same subject. For example, the business and subtlety of Satan are first seen in Genesis 3:1. As we learn more about this "serpent," we are guided by the fact that he is a deceiver who is the direct adversary of God. Satan does not change for the better throughout all of human history (Rev 12:9; 20:2-3, 10). He has changed his methods over the course of time but has never changed his attitude (Isa 14:12-14; Rev 12:9; 20:7-8) or his approach—arguing perpetually that becoming a god is within reach. This is made clear again when the "man of lawlessness" takes his seat in the Temple during the Tribulation and proclaims himself to be a god (2 Thes 2:4).

Many times we find that the universal truth about a given subject is taught in conjunction with its first mention. Moreover, several topics found throughout the Bible are first introduced in the Book of Genesis. Accordingly, a serious and detailed study of the Book of Genesis is important for the one who wants to interpret God's Word.

B. Principle Four: Interpret Literally

This principle teaches that God says what He means and means what He says. It is an extremely important principle because it guides us in our understanding of the Word. When we instruct our own children, we try to communicate as clearly as possible the things we want them to remember. Often we'll discuss something in many different ways so that their little minds will grasp it and not lose hold (Heb 1:1), and we will often repeat the same information several times. Are we not God's children (1 John 3:1)? Is He not our "Daddy" ("ABBA" in Rom 8:15)? Literal interpretation means that we (as God's children) literally accept what God clearly says is the truth.

It makes sense to look first in the Word for simple, clear, direct and universal statements. Obviously the clearer verses will shed light on passages that are unclear.

One example of a simple, clear, direct and universal statement is found in John 3:16, which says, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” There are no words of uncertainty about God’s love, such as “maybe,” “might,” or “if.” It clearly presents His love for the world and also clearly says that “whoever believes” has eternal life. What God does not qualify with further information, we should not qualify either.

We find the same type of statement in Rom 3:23 which says, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” The condition of sin, according to the Bible, is universal to mankind—with the exception of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:22). The Bible alone establishes the rule, thus, the Bible alone can offer the exception to the rule. We as students are not at liberty to make exceptions to the universal statements that God makes in His Word. Therefore, except for Jesus Christ, we are all sinners.

Automatically assuming “hidden” or “deeper” meanings of Scripture is irresponsible. As we have already discussed, an allegorical approach to Scripture tries to add to God’s Word. A “mythological” approach tries to take away from God’s Word. God has been careful to warn us against either (Revelation 22:18-19), since they negate the importance of the literal meaning of God’s Word.

The Bible is grounded in literal history and is, thus, significant to all of history (cf. 1 Cor 15). Failure to consider it literally has led to many theological distortions throughout the history of Israel and the Church.

Some other examples of universal statements that we should interpret literally are: Rom 8:35-39; John 3:16, 18, 36; Eph 2:8-10; 1 John 2:1-2; and Titus 3:5.

C. Principle Five: Consider the Specifics

This principle recognizes that there are some specific questions that must be answered when interpreting the Bible. For example, we must ask: “Who said this?” “To whom was this said?” “Under what circumstances was it said?” and “Who does this concern?”

The principle also recognizes that God has dealt with three classes of people in history, namely, the Jews, the Gentiles and the Church (1 Cor 10:32). Therefore, we must seek to determine who the recipients were of a given portion of Scripture so that we may know whether a promise, covenant or warning applies to us.

We will see in our upcoming study of covenants that to whom a covenant applies is very important. A Gentile nation (non-Jewish races) for example, may be removed or dispersed because of evil and disobedience to the Lord. The Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian Empires are examples of nations (peoples) to whom this has happened.

God not only promised that He would disperse Israel but also that He would re-gather them. No other nation has these promises. If we were to apply promises to other nations that were given specifically to Israel, we would be in error.

A second example would be the promise of a nation, land and citizenship in Canaan for Israel (Gen 12:1-3, 13:15), and a citizenship in heaven for the Church (Php 3:20). National status and land is not promised to the Church.

A final example would contrast blessings for Israel based on their relationship to God (Deut 8:7-10) and blessings for Gentiles for blessing Israel (Gen 12:3). There are no blessings promised for those who bless the Church or Gentile nations.

D. Principle Six: Study the Primary Passages

This principle recognizes that certain passages are to be read as the primary declaration of God’s attitude on a subject that is vital to our spiritual life. Many times in the Bible, God gathers together several scattered fragments that have to do with a particular truth and places them in one of these primary passages. Some examples include:

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ—1 Cor 15

The Human Tongue—Jas 3

The Restoration of Israel—Rom 11

Triumphs of the Faith—Heb 11

God's Discipline of His Children—Heb 12:1-11
The Church—Eph 1-3
Righteousness by Faith—Rom 3:10-21
Law—Exodus 20
Full Armor of God—Eph 6:10-17
Love—1 Cor 13

This principle requires us to study the primary passage of Scripture to determine major points and then go to related passages for additional information.

For example, the most extensive discourse in the Bible on the qualities of love is found in 1 Cor 13:4-8a where there are sixteen qualities so full of meaning that we could easily spend a week in classroom instruction on these verses alone. Consider that:

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

When we read Mark 12:29-31, we find that Jesus responded to a question concerning the greatest commandments:

The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.

Since the Two Greatest Commandments involve the quality of love, seeking to know what love involves—so we can make correct evaluations of ourselves before God and others—is good common sense. The importance of love is found in Mark 12. Its manifestation is found in 1 Corinthians 13.

If you would like to test your application of “love” defined in the verses of 1 Cor 13, ask yourself these questions: “Am I patient?” “Am I kind?” “Am I jealous?”

Another example of this principle is found in the description of the “full armor of God” (Eph 6:10-17). This is the only place where all of the Believer’s spiritual armor is mentioned together. The belt that one “girds his loins with truth” is referred to in Isaiah 11:5. The “Breastplate” and “Helmet” are referred to in 1 Thessalonians 5:8. The “Sword” as part of one’s “armor” is implied in Hebrews 4:12.

E. Principle Seven: Recognize Human Volition

This principle considers the freedom that God gave mankind to make decisions and the responsibility that goes along with such freedom (John 3:18; Gal 6:7). The principle of human choice is clearly portrayed in the test established for Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3. Because of His Omniscience, God knew that they would eat the fruit of the “*tree of knowledge of good and evil*,” but God was not the cause of that forbidden dinner. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, because they chose to eat. They were then held responsible for their actions and, thus, driven from the Garden.

There are many terms and words that point clearly to mankind’s ability to choose—most notably the words “believe” and “faith” which have the same roots in the Greek language. Because of God’s Omniscience, He has always known who would believe in His Son Jesus Christ and thus be saved (Rom 8:29; 1 Pet 1:1-2). His foreknowledge, however, did not remove the requirement to believe.

The Bible records both the good and the bad decisions made by mankind. This serves as a testimony to its internal honesty. We recognize in this principle that the Word of God records many of the bad decisions of man. These were volitional acts by man that were allowed by God for the purpose of His plan but were never commanded by Him. Just because the Bible records that a person did a particular act does not mean that God condoned that act. Jesus Christ knew that Judas would betray Him, and in fact warned Judas against this act (Matt 26:24), but Judas betrayed Jesus and then bore the consequences.

God gave mankind the freedom to choose, but not the ability to choose perfectly every time. Therefore, we must consider mankind's bad and sinful choices in our interpretation.

F. Principle Eight: Remember the Covenants

This principle recognizes the agreements (or contracts) made between God and men. There are conditional covenants that depend upon man's compliance, and there are unconditional covenants that depend solely upon the truthfulness of God's Word.

Covenants are important because they give us a basic overview of history regarding how God relates to His people. If we understand God's covenants and allow those promises to guide us, we will be kept from incorrectly interpreting passages that seem to conflict. For example, the Israelites may be disciplined during human history with periods of difficulty and disaster (Leviticus 26) but will not be eliminated, as God has promised to protect them.

There are nine covenants that require individual study. We will simply note their titles and present a brief description of each covenant with its location in Scripture.

1. The Edenic Covenant

The Edenic Covenant was made in the Garden of Eden between Adam and God (Gen 1–2). It was conditional based on the man's obedience, and involved God's promise to bless man with a perfect environment (2:8), perfect food, visual stimulation (2:9), perfect weather (1:6-7; 3:8), perfect sex (2:21-25) and daily fellowship with the Lord (1:26-27; 3:8). The covenant was initially accepted by man but broken when he violated God's order not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. The Edenic Covenant is no longer in effect, but many of the blessings will be restored to man during the future period of the New Heavens and Earth (Rev 21–22). Therefore, we must not interpret this Covenant into contexts that do not specifically deal with the Garden of Eden. Mankind will not establish all the blessings promised apart from the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The Adamic Covenant

The Adamic Covenant was made between God and Adam in the Garden after the Fall, before the expulsion (Genesis 3:14-19). It was unconditional. This covenant came as the consequences of the original sin, known as the "Fall." God cursed the instrument of deception (3:14) and brought a conflict into history between the descendants of Adam and the serpent (3:14-15). The woman was given pain in childbearing and a subordinate standing to the male (3:16). The earth was cursed (3:17-19), causing difficulty in the production of food. The man and the woman were scheduled to die physically (3:19 cf. 2:17), and both were expelled from the perfect habitat of the Garden (3:17-19). The Adamic Covenant spans all dispensations and will be in effect for all humanity until God throws the Devil into the Lake of Fire after the conclusion of the Millennial Kingdom (Rev 20:7-10). We must realize that the effects of Adam's fall are passed on to all of mankind (Rom 5:12-14).

3. The Noahic Covenant

The Noahic Covenant, which is found in Genesis 8:20–9:17, was made between God and Noah after the Great Flood. It was made as an unconditional covenant, addressing the destruction of pre-flood civilization. It included a promise that there would never again be a universal flood that would destroy civilization. It also included God's command to repopulate the earth (9:1), the provision of animal flesh for food (9:2-4) and the installment of capital punishment as penalty for murder (9:5,6). The rainbow was given as the sign of God's faithfulness in regard to this covenant. The Noahic Covenant began at the Flood and lasts forever. While there may be local floods that destroy property and cause loss of life, there will be none that brings the universal destruction that the Great Flood brought. The freedom to eat animal flesh was also given, and thus we should not interpret passages that refer to a diet solely of vegetables (Dan 1) to be the standard for all mankind. The final part of this Covenant established God's penalty for murder that is still His will today.

4. The Abrahamic Covenant

The basic promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are found in Genesis 12:1-3, with further additions and explanations given later. It was made with Abraham and was conditional to him until he met the Lord's requirements, then the covenant was extended unconditionally to his descendants. The covenant with Abraham includes the promises of personal blessing, innumerable descendants, real estate, a city, national status, blessing by association, protection and the line of descent of the Messiah (Gen 17:1-8).

The Abrahamic Covenant began with the promise to Abraham. The line of the Messiah was fulfilled at the First Advent by Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). The promises of material blessings associated with the Covenant have been given at various points in history but will reach their potential in the Millennial Kingdom. This covenant spans all dispensations from the promise to Abraham through the Millennium.

The meaning of a particularly confusing passage in God's Word is more readily understood when one applies the principles of the Abrahamic Covenant to it. The passage is found in Matthew 11:20-24 and says:

Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.'

By grace, Israel is given some extra time to repent because of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. If Israel does not repent, the discipline will be severe, but the nation will not be destroyed and removed from history.

5. The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant of Law was made with Moses on Mount Sinai. It can be found in Exodus 20 and several other passages in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This covenant is conditional, based on obedience. Those who obeyed were blessed, and those who did not were cursed (Lev 26). The primary purpose of the Mosaic Covenant was to show the need for the Savior (Gal 3:24-25). It clearly presented God's moral law. The covenant was also given to Israel to establish and set guidelines for the Levitical Priesthood and the Tabernacle.

Jesus Christ came to fulfill this covenant by perfectly keeping the Law (Matt 5:17). This Covenant is only for the Age of Israel, which includes the time from the initial giving of the Mosaic Law (Exo 20) until the Day of Pentecost which began the Church. It will also include the time known as the "Tribulation" which is seven years of human history that will occur after the Rapture of the Church. We must realize that many passages found in the Old Testament refer only to time spent under the Mosaic Law. For example, many animals are declared "unclean" and are not to be eaten (Lev 11). This does not apply to us today, as Jesus Christ made it clear that all foods are now "clean" (Mark 7:14-18).

6. The Davidic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant was made with David and is found in 2 Samuel 7:8-19 and Psalm 89. It is an unconditional covenant, which established national rulership in David's house and the promise of a "Greater Son" who would rule over the nations forever. The Davidic Covenant became effective when it was given to David during his kingship. Part of the Covenant was fulfilled by the coming of the "Greater Son," who is Jesus Christ Himself, at the First Advent (Luke 1:32). The results will extend forever. At one time, the line of David was in the hands of an eight-year-old king named Josiah (2 Kgs 22:1). A Jew living during this time would still have a foundation of hope that is built on the promise of God. Jesus Himself received all authority in heaven and on earth after His

resurrection (Matt 28:18) in fulfillment of this Covenant. The Believer today can have comfort knowing that Jesus is on the heavenly throne (Heb 8:1) and will one day return to establish His earthly throne (Matt 25:31).

7. The Palestinian Covenant

The Palestinian Covenant is a continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant. This conditional covenant promises dispersion of the Jewish peoples because of disobedience but then a re-gathering into the land after they repent (Deut 30:1-10). This Covenant is for the Age of Israel and will be fulfilled when the Jews are supernaturally re-gathered at the Second Advent (Matt 24:31; Mark 13:27), and the land promised to Abraham, from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates is established (Gen 15:18). From the giving of the Covenant forward, the interpreter should consider that dispersions of Israel from the land are only temporary.

8. The New Covenant to Israel

A New Covenant was made with the House of Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and was reiterated in Heb 8:8-12. This covenant is based on the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb 9:11-14) and is unconditional to regenerate Jews (Jews that have undergone the new birth). The covenant, which includes the promises of the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit and great material wealth (Jer 32:41; Isa 61:8), will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom. It is important to remember while studying the Scriptures that the promises made by God in this Covenant are given to believing Jews only. Jews will not be blessed under this covenant simply because of their race.

9. The New Covenant to the Church

A New Covenant was also made to the New Testament Church (Matt 26:26-28). It is unconditional for Believers in Jesus Christ, based on the cross (Heb 9:11-14) and commemorated in the ritual of the Lord's Table—Communion (1 Cor 11:25). It establishes the universal and royal priesthood of Believers (Heb 9:11) and promises to be fulfilled both in time and for eternity. Jesus Christ became the Mediator of this covenant (Heb 9:15). This Covenant began on the Day of Pentecost with the establishment of the Church (Acts 2) and will last forever. The student should remember that the blessings received under this Covenant will last forever and cannot be taken away. Thus, the Church Age Believer has complete security that, no matter what difficulties one experiences in life, the Lord has not forsaken—and will never forsake—them (Matt 28:18-20).

Rule Three

Seek to Be Wise by Comparing Scripture with Scripture

The third rule is to seek the wisdom that comes from the correct understanding and application of God's Word. We must realize and accept by faith that there is no confusion with God (1 Cor 14:33), so any lack of understanding comes from us. God placed figures of speech and riddles in the Bible to teach us wisdom (Prv 1:2-6).

Most disagreements in interpretation come from failure to properly compare Scripture with itself. An interpreter might overlook a passage or fail to consider how one passage he is aware of relates to another. It is wise for those who seek to know God's Word to pay attention to their own personal humility. Those who miss or do not consider one verse or one word will find that significant differences are made in one's understanding of Scripture.

There are six principles that relate to the use of this rule. We should look for the differences that God establishes in His Word. We do that by considering the context. Comparative interpretation seeks the Divinely established harmony of Scripture, considering the dispensation that the verses refer to and the care one must take with prophetic passages.

A. Principle Nine: Look for the Differences

This principle instructs us to consider differences where God establishes them. In other words, we are to recognize the Biblical difference between such concepts as faith and works, salvation and sin, law and grace and many others. The Bible makes many distinctions. Our challenge is to realize these differences in our interpretation.

An example of realizing differences is exemplified in the study of faith and works. We are told in Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Clearly, salvation is by grace through faith, not of works. Yet the importance of works is not negated. Works are not meant for salvation but are important to the Christian life.

Faith has no merit in itself, because all the merit is found in the object of the faith. For one to have faith in faith is actually to have trust in oneself. We know that we all have sinned and, thus, trusting ourselves is really not a wise choice of objects (Rom 3:23). If a heavy adult were going to swing from cliff to cliff over a large hole, and someone handed him a small piece of twine that is attached to a small branch, it would be difficult to have faith because there would not be sufficient merit in the object. However, if a strong rope were attached to a large branch, the faith would be easier to have because there is sufficient merit in the object. Jesus Christ, who bore our sins in His body on the cross and rose from the dead, has more than sufficient merit to be the object of our faith. Works involve actions that are good in their very nature, such as helping the poor (Gal 2:10). But even good actions will not save us (Titus 3:5). Works are designed by God to be a display of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, we will give an account for the works we have done in the name of Jesus Christ, and we will be rewarded for them accordingly (2 Cor 5:10). Works should be done out of thanksgiving for what the Lord has done for us. They should not be done with an attitude toward personal gain.

Another difference we might consider is between the security of the Believer's salvation and the reality of sin in his life. We are told that the Lord did the greatest work for us when He died to save us, even while we were His enemies. Should we expect any less of Him now that we are members of His family (Rom 5:6-10)?

The Bible makes it clear that Believers can and do sin after they are saved.

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all

unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 John 1:8-10).

It should be clear that this passage refers to Believers. We do not have to read very far in the New Testament to discover the warnings to Believers against our tendency to sin. The question arises, do we as Believers lose our salvation when involved in sin, or not?

In the book of Romans, as well as many other books of the Bible, salvation is attested to be an eternal fact. Paul said, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death”* (Rom 8:1-2). The Corinthian church became heavily involved in a multitude of sins. Paul called them “fleshly” (1 Cor 3:1-2) but never referred to them as “unsaved.” He even refers to them as a “church” composed of “saints” (1 Cor 1:2).

Clearly, Christians may fall into sinful lifestyles. Equally clear is that our salvation cannot be lost: *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful”* (2 Tim 2:13). A Christian’s sinful lifestyle is certainly not without repercussions (consequences). It leads to loss of rewards: *“If we deny Him, He also will deny us”* (2 Tim 2:12). The immediate context confirms that we will not reign with Him if we deny Him.

From these two illustrations, we can begin to see certain differences that God has established within His Word. We will spend a lifetime discovering them and seeking to understand the relationships between the various concepts involved with them.

B. Principle Ten: Consider the Context

This principle is based on the fact that every word, sentence or verse in the Bible has information preceding it and following it (except the very first and the very last word, sentence or verse). This principle pays careful attention to the physical location of each word and verse and the relationship to other words and verses. God sheds light upon a subject either through passages that are nearby—that establish the theme for that section—or through passages that are similar in subject in another part of the Bible.

We should never take a verse out of its contextual setting and give it a foreign meaning. Using verses out of context is a deceptive way to try to prove one’s own ideas and promote personal agendas. This incorrect practice is a form of allegory, which we discussed earlier.

Contextual interpretation basically means that readers determine who is speaking, who is the audience, what is the main theme of the passage and in what time frame and place the teachings are valid.

There are three types of context to consider for every passage of Scripture:

1. The Near Context

The Near Context includes verses within the same paragraph. For example, Galatians 5:1 tells us, *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”* We might have a tendency to apply the term “slavery” to a particular culture in a particular place and time, since “slavery” frequently refers to being physically under the ownership or control of a person or political entity. In context, however, we see that this verse refers to a kind of slavery that is spiritual. The passage refers to those who are enslaved by the rituals of the Law (specifically circumcision) and are not “free” to “serve one another in love” (Gal 5:13).

2. The Intermediate Context

The Intermediate Context includes those verses found within the same book. An example of this is found in Matthew 24:40, which says, *“Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left.”* The context concerns the subject of the “last days.” The question involves who will be taken and who will be left behind. Will the righteous be taken and the wicked left, as at the Rapture of the Church; or will the wicked be taken and the righteous be left, as at the Second Advent when Christ establishes His literal Millennial Kingdom? The Near Context does not answer the question. Matthew 13:49, however, gives the answer. In a passage also dealing with the “last days,” we are told that the *“wicked will be taken out from among the righteous.”* Thus the

Intermediate Context has answered the question of who will be taken and who will be left behind. The passage is referring to the Second Advent.

This Intermediate Context informs us of the importance of studying verse by verse through a book in order to understand and maintain the context. If a student went first to Matthew 24, the answer to the above question would be difficult to find. But, if the student had read the entire book up to Matthew 24, the answer would have already been given.

3. The Remote Context

The Remote Context recognizes the internal consistency of the Word of God. It includes passages throughout the Bible that have a bearing on a particular passage under consideration. A study of the Remote Context considers that a passage might be clarified by another distant portion of the Bible. Studies of a selected word, such as “grace,” “faith” or “love,” by means of a concordance, for example, lead to other remote passages containing that particular word. A concordance is a book that lists—by individual word—verses in which a given word may be found. An “exhaustive” concordance will give a list of every verse containing that word.

Often times the Remote Context must be consulted for more advanced principles, such as the interpretation of prophecy or the understanding of “types” and “symbols.” For example, the Veil in the Tabernacle (Exo 26:31-35) which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, is interpreted for us in Hebrews 10:20 to have represented the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Interpreting contextually is extremely important in our quest to “*handle accurately the word of truth*” (2 Tim 2:15). When we make “doctrinal” statements, we must be able to prove them from Scripture to demonstrate that the Bible is harmonious in terms of its Near, Intermediate and Remote Contexts. If our beliefs are not in harmony with all of Scripture, then the “doctrine” resulting from our study is questionable.

C. Principle Eleven: Interpret Comparatively

This principle of comparative interpretation focuses on the internal consistency of the Word of God, pointing us to the importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture to analyze similarities in subject matter so that we might arrive at correct meanings. It is important to compare subjects similar to one another, such as grace and mercy, and also subjects very different from one another, such as God and Satan. When we compare similarities and differences of subjects in remote contexts, we put together a picture that has been cut into pieces—sometimes a great number of pieces. Theology is developed by putting these pieces together.

Not only the novice (1 Tim 3:6), but also the experienced interpreter must be careful in the development of theology (Prv 3:5-6), realizing that important details within the 31,000+ verses of Scripture may have been overlooked. The sheer volume of material we are trying to understand should keep us aware of the potential for error and, therefore, keep us humble.

As we compare Scripture with Scripture, we come to find out that a given theological issue is considered in many parts of the Bible. One example is the issue of “Justification by Faith” (Gen 15:6; Rom 3–4). When we find a contrasting passage that speaks of a “Justification by Works,” such as found in James 2:14-26, we must consider both passages. When we put both passages together, we understand “works” as necessary in the plan of God, as an outgrowth of the faith that led to salvation but not as a means to acquire salvation. This principle is also taught in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are “*saved by grace through faith,*” and have been “*created for good works.*” This same principle teaches us to beware of building theology or doctrine on passages or textual readings of questionable intent. For example, the Greek text from Mark 16:9 to the end of the book is very uncertain. Some people have built doctrine on these passages, resulting in erroneous theology.

Another example of the importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture is seen in the identification of the “mystery” (namely, something unknown) which is referred to many times in the New Testament. Normally, if we were studying Ephesians 3 and ran into the word “mystery,” we would try to answer the question, “what is the mystery?” Our answer, however, is found in Colossians 1:25-27, which says:

Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God; that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The “mystery” is identified by Scripture as a new intimate relationship with the Messiah. This relationship is for the new era known as the Church Age.

D. Principle Twelve: Seek the Harmony

This principle recognizes the truthfulness and faithfulness of God, that He is not the author of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). In other words, there are no real contradictions in the Bible. The Bible is unified, framed and inspired by the Living God, thus, all its components are consistent. Disagreements concerning interpretations of Scripture are human in scope, not Divine. Many people base their emotional security on their own understanding of God’s Word, but Scripture warns us against doing this (John 5:37; Prv 3:5-6; 2 Cor 5:7). We will never understand some things in the Bible clearly or completely until such time as we meet the Lord face-to-face (1 Cor 13:12). So, the issue for us is always that we walk by faith (Heb 11:6; Col 2:6), trusting God to lead us to our heavenly home.

When we come to understand how two seemingly contradictory verses actually complement one another, we gain wisdom. We are told at the beginning of the book of Proverbs that when we learn to understand difficult statements and riddles, we become wise (Prv 1:2-6). This requires diligent study. For example, as we have already discussed, we must consider both James 2 and Romans 3–4 together to understand correctly the relationship between faith and works.

When looking for relationships between passages, we should be aware of indicators for time or place, realizing that every small detail may not have been written down, or that a problem may exist in the translation. Regardless, we must keep in mind that there are no true contradictions found in God’s Word.

We should also realize that God’s Word frequently states the same principle in different ways so that what is important might be more fully grasped. For example, Romans 3:23 says “all have sinned...” likewise, the book of Leviticus commands all to bring sin offerings. Both passages essentially say the same thing.

What also becomes quite clear from the study of the Bible is that God directed the literary structure of His Word and its organization.

E. Principle Thirteen: Consider the Dispensation

Dispensations are periods of history in which God establishes different responsibilities for His people. They are divisions of history that are categorized by these responsibilities. We are told in Hebrews 7:12, “*For when the priesthood changes, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.*” This verse teaches us that God establishes different responsibilities at different periods of history.

There are Four Clear Dispensations since the Fall of Adam:

1. The Age of the Gentiles from the Fall of Adam to the Exodus from Egypt

This age is covered in Genesis and Job. It extends from approximately 3900 B.C. to 1445 B.C.

2. The Age of Israel from the Exodus to the Day of Pentecost

The Age of Israel is found in all Old Testament books except for Genesis and Job. It also extends to all of the four Gospels and Acts 1. There exist in the Old Testament some passages that refer to the Millennial Age. Two examples are Isaiah 61–66 and Ezekiel 40–48. The approximate dates of this age are from 1445 B.C. until A.D. 33. This Age will also include the time period from the Rapture of the Church until the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, the period known as the “Tribulation” or “Daniel’s 70th Week” (Dan 9:24-27).

3. The Age of the Church from the Day of Pentecost Until the Rapture

(The Tribulation Period, which is the final seven years of the Age of Israel lasts from the Rapture to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ.)

The Church Age is covered in Acts 2–28, the Epistles and Revelation 2–3. The Tribulation period which completes the Age of Israel is found in Revelation 4–19. This age began in 33 A.D. and is not completed until the Rapture of the Church.

4. The Millennial Age from the Second Advent to the Great White Throne Judgment

This age is covered in Revelation 20 and certain passages in the Old and New Testaments.

Dispensations are most clearly understood when we consider the different priesthoods that God has assigned to man. For example, before Israel became a nation right after the Exodus, mankind was in the “Age (or Dispensation) of the Gentiles.” The priesthood of this dispensation was conducted by the elders within one’s own family and is called the “Family Priesthood.” It was practiced by Noah (Gen 8:20), Abraham (Gen 22:2) and Job (Job 1:5). The laws they were to follow were those “*written in their hearts*” (Rom 2:15) by God.

Shortly after the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, the Age (or Dispensation) of Israel began, and the tribe of Levi was called by God as a new and different priesthood which became known as the “Levitical Priesthood.” This priesthood was based on genealogy and descended through Aaron of the Tribe of Levi. The Levitical priesthood carried out its functions in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. Priests of that age were to offer animal sacrifices, to lead in worship and to communicate God’s Word, but by using very specific methods given to Moses by God. The laws they were to follow were recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. As an additional note, it is both interesting and sad that these methods became so distorted by the time Jesus Christ was born that the ritual action itself had become more important than the reality of what it represented (Heb 10:8).

After the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, on the Day of Pentecost, God began a new age or dispensation. This is called the “Church Age” or “Dispensation of the Church.” In this new dispensation, all those who believe in Jesus Christ become priests to God (1 Pet 2:5, 9). These new “Believer-Priests” are not to offer animal sacrifices but are instead to “*present their own bodies as living and holy sacrifices, acceptable to God, which is their spiritual service of worship*” (Rom 12:1). During this dispensation, the form of expression of the priesthood changed. However, the spiritual functions of the various priesthoods did not change. All offered sacrifices, led in praise and communicated God’s Word. Dispensations are represented by the different forms or methods God prescribed to carry out His principles. The Dispensation of the Church is to follow the “Law of Liberty” (Jas 1:25; 2:12) “in the sphere of love” (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8).

The Millennial Age or Dispensation will have a new priesthood that is led by the Zadokite line of the Tribe of Levi (Ezek 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11). The laws will be based on the “New Covenant to Israel” (Jer 31:31-33; Heb 8:8-10) and established by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as He “*rules all the nations with a rod of iron*” (Rev 12:5).

The Dispensational Interpretation, therefore, recognizes changes in the forms or methods but has its basis in principles that are spiritual in nature more than physical. For example, in our current dispensation, we do not need to offer animal sacrifices to our God as a memorial to the ultimate sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 10:10). Instead of offering animal sacrifices, the Church partakes of the Lord’s Table as a memorial, a sacrifice of praise (1 Cor 11:23-34). During the Millennial Age, animal sacrifices will be reinstated as another type of memorial to commemorate the finished work of Christ on the cross (Ezek 43:18-27).

The divisions of history are derived from an interpretative study of Scripture and are not rigidly set. There are several viewpoints as to the exact timing of the change from dispensation to dispensation. This does not negate the Dispensational Principle that God has different responsibilities for people at different points of history.

There is a modern-day trend toward “hyper-Dispensationalism” which seeks to put several small dispensations within the larger framework. We must note that this trend lacks serious Scriptural backing. It can be easily used to promote personal bias and distort accurate interpretation. Extreme rigidity in this principle can lead to legalism and even failure at recognizing opportunities to serve in the Christian life. For example, finding no value for the Church in the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus spoke the principles during the Age of Israel, misses completely what we are told by Paul in 1 Timothy 6:3, that “sound doctrine” and “sound words” are those of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What we should really seek and cling to are the principles that extend from a study of dispensations. The forms and methods of the priesthood changed through the course of the Bible, but the principles upon which they functioned remain the same. All priests of any dispensation have been commanded both to bring sacrifices to the Lord, and to teach God’s Word.

F. Principle Fourteen: Be Careful with Prophecy

This principle recognizes that the Bible foretells future events. The Bible also tells us very clearly that true prophecies come through men moved by the Spirit of God, and that *“no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation”* (2 Pet 1:19-21). There have been many unique attempts at interpretation of prophecy, and sadly, many are totally deceptive. It is well known that cults often use special or unique interpretations of prophecy as a means to win converts. Remember that as Believers in Jesus Christ, we are all priests. Beware of anyone with a new and unique interpretation; beware of those who require you to believe their new and unique interpretation in order to be accepted into their group.

The interpreter of prophecy actually puts together a large picture that has been cut into many thousands of pieces (there are probably 10,000 verses of prophecy). When the picture is complete, we must see the face of Christ, who is the focal point of all history—past, present and future. The picture that emerges must account for all the known facts and must take all pieces of evidence into consideration. It is not our privilege to discount facts that do not fit the picture we think we are going to see.

The study of the interpretation of prophecy can be a course unto itself, as over 1/4 of all Scripture is found in prophetic books. For our purposes in this lesson, however, there are three simple guidelines to be followed.

1. Determine If the Prophet Makes the Interpretation

First, determine if the prophet gives his own interpretation like Jesus did in John 2:19-21 concerning the Temple. The passage says:

Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews therefore said, ‘It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.

Some prophecies such as this one are easy to interpret. Realize too that God may leap over centuries of time without making a comment. He may also leap over centuries of time even within the same verse, such as is seen in a comparison of Luke 4:18-21 with Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus quotes and interprets for us.

2. Determine if the Prophecy Has Been Historically Fulfilled

We should next seek to determine whether other passages of Scripture might reveal the fulfillment of any given prophecy. This lets us know which prophecies are yet to be fulfilled and, thus, in our future.

One example of this principle is the Flood of Noah, which was prophesied 120 years before it occurred (Gen 6:3). Scripture tells us that this was fulfilled (Gen 7–8).

Scripture also prophesies that the Lord will supernaturally re-gather the nation of Israel (Zech 9:14; Matt 24:31). This prophecy clearly has not yet been fulfilled. We determine this not only from Scripture but also from history.

We have to look at external sources, such as secular history books, to discover if and when some prophecies may have been fulfilled. Remember that secular history is not inspired by God and may not agree with His Word at times, but the Bible student always must accept God's Word as accurate.

3. Recognize the Language of Prophecy

In prophecy, we must consider figures of speech (such as the representation of the Lord as the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah" or the "Lamb of God" in Revelation 5), symbols (such as the "Beasts" of Revelation 13) and types (such as the "Earthly Tabernacle" found in Exo 25–40). It should be obvious by now that we must first look for Biblical explanations of prophetic language.

Remember that speculation is not interpretation. Speculations occur when one guesses at the meaning of prophetic language. It is easy for man to attempt to turn personal speculations into "doctrines." We must realize, however, that some prophetic language will not be understood until the appropriate time (Dan 12:4, 8-10).

Rule Four

Seek to Live the Christian Life by Properly Applying God's Word

This rule comes from a direct statement of Jesus Christ found in John 7:17. If we truly want to “know” God's Word, then we must be willing to “do” His Word. This principle encompasses the necessity of intellectual honesty in the study of God's Word. We must seek to set aside our bias and our preconceived ideas and honestly seek illumination from the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14). Applying this principle involves personal soul searching, for example, to evaluate the purity of our motives (2 Cor 13:5). It is easy for us to hold personal prejudice or form unwarranted opinions and then go searching for a Biblical “proof” of them. However, by using that approach, we can “prove” almost anything, because it makes us blind to passages that could lead in other directions or to passages that urge us to seek balance.

For example, one might look at King David's actions concerning Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most loyal warriors (2 Sam 11). Some people might try to use that passage to prove that it is acceptable for a person in power to commit murder and adultery. One simply needs to read the next chapter and compare it with the “Ten Commandments” (Exo 20:1-17) to determine that murder and adultery are not acceptable to our God. David was retained as king because of God's grace displayed toward David's repentance (Psa 51).

A. Principle Fifteen: Proper Application is Built on Proper Interpretation

Proper application of God's Word has to come from proper interpretation. There may be many applications, but there is only one correct interpretation of any particular verse. For example, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 gives the qualifications for an “overseer” in the church. The interpretation concerns real requirements for one who is to hold that position. The application considers that the “overseer” should not be a “new convert” and that the listed qualifications represent qualities of maturity which should be the objective for all men in the church, especially its leaders.

The correct application of God's Word means that one has used the rules and principles that have just been considered in an honest and attentive manner. One has sought a knowledge of God for the purpose of a relationship with Him that is based in faith and grace. One has also sought Jesus Christ by the power and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The clear passage has become the guide for one's life, and the disciple has sought to determine the harmony of God's Word (as far as the extent of his knowledge of Scripture will take him) so as to live a life that is righteous but not legalistic and to share Christ's attitudes about everything.

B. Five Steps to a Proper Application

- Step 1:** Pray for understanding, recollection and proper application of spiritual principle(s) (Jas 1:5).
- Step 2:** Seek to correctly and fully understand the passage being considered. This involves studying the relationships that words have to sentences, sentences have to paragraphs, paragraphs have to chapters and chapters have to books (2 Tim 2:15).
- Step 3:** Determine the spiritual principle that comes from the interpretation of a particular passage. A spiritual principle crosses all time frames and cultures. For example, sexual immorality (a physical relationship outside of marriage) is sin in all time frames and cultures. The spiritual principle is to avoid sexual immorality (Rom 13:8-10).
- Step 4:** Honestly examine your life to see if you are in violation of any principle of scripture, and submit yourself to God for correction of the wrongdoing. This involves an honest recognition of error presented to the Lord (1 John 1:9) and a renewal of one's walk of faith (Col 2:6). The student would do well to read Psalm 51 and note the elements of David's repentance concerning his sin with Bathsheba (2 Cor 13:5).
- Step 5:** Walk in grace and faith. The apostle Paul tells us that “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him*” (Col 2:6). We received Him by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9), and, thus, we are to produce actions that are in accordance with the grace we received (Eph 2:10).

C. Six Hindrances to Proper Interpretation

There can be many hindrances to the proper interpretation of God's Word. We will examine six that lead to mistakes in interpretation. Remember that no one is immune from mistakes. It is wise, in addition, to remember the admonition from Paul found in 1 Cor 10:12, *"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."*

1. Carnality

The first hindrance to proper interpretation is Carnality. Carnality involves an ongoing sinful lifestyle that is often referred to as "fleshly" (1 Cor 3:3). It means that the Believer has chosen to pursue sin through "deeds of the flesh" rather than be led by the Holy Spirit and see His fruit (Gal 5:19-23). This is life with unconfessed sin (1 John 1:9) and lack of repentance (2 Cor 12:21).

If one who studies God's Word is involved in deeds of the flesh—immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these (Gal 5:19-21)—then his interpretation will surely be flawed. For instance, a teacher who is involved in sexual immorality would clearly have the tendency to distort passages that deal with that subject.

Since truth is revealed by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), and the "fleshly" man has chosen to pursue a path of life apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit (if even for a short period of time), the "fleshly" man will get a distorted understanding of truth, because he is not "spiritually appraising" the Word.

The "fleshly" man is similar to the "natural man" (1 Cor 2:14) but slightly different. The "natural man" refers to an unbeliever who *"does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised"* (1 Cor 2:14). The "natural man" does not have access to the Spirit while the "fleshly/carnal" man is the Believer who is not in fellowship with the Spirit. Neither will be able to correctly understand God's Word.

2. Vanity

Vanity is the quest for fame or recognition found in the one who desires the applause of men. Vanity can also directly lead to improper interpretation. We are warned in Proverbs 16:18: *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling."* This is good advice for the interpreter.

While it is true that we should diligently study God's Word, it is also true that we must *"handle it accurately"* (2 Tim 2:15). Our study must be guided by our love for the Lord and others (Mark 12:29-31), not a desire to be recognized for our insightful pondering. Learning something "new," which expands our personal understanding is necessary to spiritual growth, but if we search God's Word for new information to impress others, we are searching in vain because our motives are not pure.

We should not be so proud of our "method" of study that we think it guarantees accurate interpretation, lest we forget the primary role of the Holy Spirit in understanding God's Word.

3. Partiality

The third hindrance to proper interpretation is partiality. Partiality is a prejudice based on individual preferences, and it basically distorts the text with a negative attitude: "I don't *want* something to be this way." If such an attitude is strong enough, it may distort portions of God's Word.

Sadly, some have used their own personal prejudices in an attempt to justify with God's Word such horrific attitudes like racism, even though the Bible is clearly against it.

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal 3:27-29).

If God were prejudiced, then no Gentiles (non-Jews) would be saved.

4. Lack of Consistency

When we try to interpret God's Word but are not consistent in several "SPIRITUAL" practices, we can succumb to incorrect interpretations.

a. The Practice of Consistent Self-Evaluation and Confession

We are told in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to "*Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!*" We are to place not only our actions but also our motives before the Lord for comparison with His standards. When we find that we have failed, we must place the failure before the Lord and be cleansed. 1 John 1:9 says, "*If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Failure to carry out this practice leads to carnality which produces distortion and error in the interpretation of God's Word.

b. The Practice of Consistent Prayer

We are told in Matthew 7:7-8 to "*Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.*" We should consistently pray for understanding and retention of God's Word. Failure to carry out this practice leads to a break in fellowship with God the Father whose Word you are trying to interpret.

c. The Practice of Consistent Study

We are told in 2 Timothy 2:15 that an important part of handling accurately the Word of God is diligence: "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*" A lack of consistency in Bible study will lead to failures in keeping track of the context within which the specific verse is located.

5. Faulty Methodology

Our method of interpretation can also hinder accuracy. Our basic beliefs about the text will certainly affect the way we understand it. For instance, if we don't believe that the entire Bible is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16-17), then we might try to rationalize miraculous events with scientific reasoning. If we do believe that the entire Bible is literally true, then miracles must be interpreted as divine interventions in history.

There are some who believe that only certain Christians have been given the gift of interpreting God's Word. However, the Bible says that all Believers are priests (1 Pet 2:5, 9). As priests we have access into the throne room of God (Heb 4:16) where we can be taught directly by God the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:15).

Others distort the Bible with allegorical or mythological interpretations of passages that ought to be taken literally. Allegory refers to the insertion of foreign meaning into the text. If we claim the Flood of Noah was not literally a global worldwide catastrophe (flood) but, instead, a picture of the sufferings that mankind must endure, then we would be guilty of interpreting allegorically.

Mythology refers to narratives with a small amount of truth and a large amount of exaggeration. If we view the Flood of Noah as only a small, localized flood that was later exaggerated by the local inhabitants into a global disaster, we would be interpreting mythologically. One could say that, in mythology, there is a small amount of truth surrounded by a lot of lies.

Some even go so far as to apply allegorical and mythological interpretations to Jesus Christ, the Cross and the Resurrection. If such interpretations were true, then Jesus did not really die for our sins, nor was he buried or resurrected for our redemption. According to the apostle Paul, we are in serious trouble if these events did not literally happen (1 Cor 15).

A purely literal method that does not consider figures of speech can also hinder interpretation. For example, the book entitled *Song of Solomon* is an extraordinary literary work, which interpreted literally makes absolutely no sense at all. Accordingly, the correct method involves a literal interpretation that recognizes figures of speech and typological language.

6. Faulty Reasoning

Human reasoning can never fully comprehend the infinite God. If we could completely understand God through human faculties, we would certainly become arrogant. We are told in Proverbs 3:5-7 to *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil.”* God wants us to walk by faith and not by our own understanding.

We have been promised that one day we will fully comprehend our Lord. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12 *“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known.”* All the unanswered questions about Scripture that we now have will one day be answered when we are face-to-face with our Lord (2 Cor 3:18).

The Jews of the first century had some problems when they relied solely on their ability to reason, which contributed to the tragic error of not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Consider the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 22:41-46:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, ‘What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?’ They said to Him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘Then how does David in the Spirit call Him “Lord,” saying, The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet”? If David then calls Him “Lord,” how is He his son?’ And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.

Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1, asking the Pharisees how the Messiah can be David’s “son,” and simultaneously be David’s “Lord.” The answer is that the Messiah is both God and man; such reasoning seems to be contradictory to human reasoning, doesn’t it?

D. Eight Ways to Fail the Application

These eight ways are very simply stated but need to be considered by the student of God’s Word because there are degrees of failure within each one. It is best to again refer to the clear verse for our guidance. Let us consider Proverbs 3:5-6 which says *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”*

1. Failure to rely on the Lord for the strength to carry out the application:

There may be times when our knowledge is accurate, but we consider the test too difficult for us to pass. For example, the sins of a person become evident, and they need someone to help “bear the burdens” (Gal 6:1-2), but we avoid the person who needs us.

2. Resistance to changing attitudes or actions that conflict with God’s truth:

There are numerous examples of this in Scripture. One is at the time of the First Advent of Jesus Christ when the Priests and Pharisees saw a man healed who had been born blind, and they refused to believe in the One who performed the miracle (John 9:30-34).

3. Disobedience to the principles known to be correct:

Adam was told to not eat from one tree in the Garden of Eden, or he would die. This is an example of a willful decision to disobey.

4. Succumbing to the pressure of conforming to worldly standards:

There is a constant battle in the life of a Christian to not “love the world,” because it is passing away (1 John 2:5-17). It occurs when the temptations of man—fame, fortune, power and pleasure—become realized in an individual’s life. Some are driven by the desire for recognition, some money, some authority and some lust.

5. Lack of interest in the application of God's Word to your life:

This is exemplified in those who "do what is right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). It is marked by a lack of appreciation of the grace of God and, thus, not giving God the credit that He deserves in one's life.

6. Viewing sin in such a way that it is either legalistic or non-existent:

Some people add to the Word of God and make their additions standards for spirituality. The Pharisees were noted for this, even having regulations that extended to a certain method of washing their hands (Mark 7:1-4). God did not prescribe any particular method. Another situation is when people do not consider as sin that which God clearly spells out. For example, homosexuality is viewed by some as not sinful (Rom 1:26-32).

7. Substituting emotional feelings for wise choices:

Lust is an emotion that will lead one to immorality unless wisdom prevails (Prov 5:1-6).

8. Distortions of thinking due to prejudice, bias or laziness:

We are all equal in Christ (Gal 3:26-29), so to fail to love one another in thought, speech or action is a failure to comply with the "two greatest commands" (Mark 12:29-31).

May this booklet be a blessing to you as you "*study to show yourself approved to God, handling accurately the word of truth*" 2 Timothy 2:15.