

The Living

Word

Nathan Pitchford

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## **Introduction: How Should We Study the Word of God?**

When we honestly ask the question, "How should we study the word of God?", we are, in effect, admitting two things: first, that we have a fundamental need which we are unable to provide for ourselves. If we had no need in ourselves, it would be an entirely unnecessary and unprofitable labor to study anything at all. If we had no need, we would have no room to be profited. The second thing that we are acknowledging is that the word of God holds the solution to our need. If we have a need which we cannot meet by ourselves, it would be foolish to search for a solution in anything from which we have no hope of finding our answers. From the outset, then, our approach to the study of scriptures must be marked by humility and faith - humility because we are admitting our own insufficiency, and faith because we are acknowledging that the word is able to help us. In light of these observations, our first objective as we begin our study is to determine from scriptures the nature of our problem and the solution that the bible holds forth for this problem.

### *Our Desperate Need*

Before we can understand the nature of our need, we must first understand our true purpose. What were we created for? How far are we from fulfilling our created purpose? We may find very clear answers to these questions from the scriptures:

1. We were created for God's glory (Rev. 4:11, Is. 43:7)
2. We have fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23)
3. Our fallen condition has led to
  - a. Our blaspheming the God we were made to worship (Rom. 1:21)
  - b. Our plunging our own selves into hopeless misery (Eph.2:1-3)

### *Our Only Solution*

It was only by disregarding the word of God that man first brought about this twofold failure, and now it is only the Word of God that is able to help him in his hopeless position, and remedy the problem. Man fails to glorify God; but

through the word, God places man into a position of glorifying him as Redeemer. Man fails to attain to the joy and fulfillment that he was created for; but through the word, he can find the true joy which he has lost. What is it about the word that enables it to accomplish this glorious task? If we read it merely as a great work of literature, we will miss its power. We might as well be reading Homer, or Shakespeare. If we read it as a mere guide to moral living, we will miss its power. All of our own attempts to follow its precepts will be considered "filthy rags." The bible is different from any other work of literature simply by reason of the one whom it reveals. There is nothing magical about the words themselves that will make us able to do what we are naturally unable to do, and give God glory. It has life-changing power; but its power resides solely in its ability to direct our eyes to Christ. God's word always accomplishes his intention - but only through the person of Christ. This is why Christ himself is called "the Word". And this is why, when we study the word, we must be looking, first and foremost, for a person. Consider the following principles:

1. The word of God displays his glory as Creator, by declaring and accomplishing his will; (Gen. 1:1-3)
2. The word of God displays his glory as Redeemer, by declaring and accomplishing his will; (II Cor. 4:5,6)
3. Christ, who alone declares and accomplishes God's will (both in creation and redemption), is therefore called the Word by the apostle John; (John 1:1-3)

When we understand these truths, it changes everything about how we read the bible. The written word is powerful because it points us to the living Word. And the living Word, Christ, is able to meet every need that we have. When we study the scriptures, our first objective should not be finding impersonal truths that we can strive to follow; it should be getting to know the One who is able to write God's law on our hearts. And this is in fact what we discover as we search what the scriptures have to say about themselves. The most radical and all-encompassing claim that the bible makes for itself is that, when we look in its pages, we see the glory of Christ (II Cor. 3:15-18; Heb. 1:1-3). And it is only Christ, the living Word of God, who can restore us from our fallen estate (Acts 4:12). I appreciate the way John Piper has expressed this truth:

I love my Bible the way I love my eyes - not because my eyes are lovely, but because without them I can't see what's lovely. Without the Bible I could not see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). Without the Bible I would not know "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). Without the Bible I would not know that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. I love the Bible because it gives the wisdom that leads to salvation, and shows me that this salvation is nothing less than seeing and savoring the glory of Christ forever. And then provides for me inexhaustible ways of seeing and knowing and enjoying Christ.<sup>1</sup>

If we begin our bible study with this goal in mind, we have already taken a vital step towards interpreting the scriptures correctly.

### *Some Foundational Principles for the Study of the Word*

In addition to the previous considerations, the bible contains much motivation for us to give it our careful and diligent study. Examine the following biblical principles and consider how they ought to motivate us to be diligent in studying the scriptures.

1. From the beginning, God has only desired conformity to his word as the mark of true spiritual worship (Gen 2:16,17; Jer. 7:22,23)

The following quotation from John Calvin emphatically illustrates this first principle:

Unless God sheds light for us from his Word, there is among us not true religion, but mere sham and superstition. This is how we can distinguish true religion from superstition: when the Word of God directs us, there is true religion; but when each man follows his own opinion, or when men join together to follow an opinion they hold in common, the result is always concocted superstition.<sup>2</sup>

2. God has made his word clear and available to each of us (Deut. 30:11-14);

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1 Quoted from the article "Good English with Minimal Translation: Why Bethlehem Uses the ESV", found here:  
[http://www.desiringgod.org/resourcelibrary/Articles/ByDate/2004/1534\\_Good\\_English\\_With\\_Minimal\\_Translation\\_Why\\_Bethlehem\\_Uses\\_the\\_ESV/](http://www.desiringgod.org/resourcelibrary/Articles/ByDate/2004/1534_Good_English_With_Minimal_Translation_Why_Bethlehem_Uses_the_ESV/)

2 Calvin: Calvin's Commentaries, Calvin, Jean. Haroutunian, Joseph (Editor/Translator) Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Page 79

3. In fact, God himself teaches the word to each true believer (Mic. 4:2; Jn. 14:25,26; I Jn. 2:27);
4. This teaching is sufficient for everything we need for our joy and God's glory (II Tim. 3:16,17; Jn. 17:17; Ps. 1:119).
5. The study and proclamation of the word is our primary responsibility as Christians on this earth (Mat. 28:19,20; Rom. 10:14-17).

### *Some Basic Considerations for Proper Methodology*

We have already encountered many foundational principles that should give us the motivation to study the word of God. Now the question arises, "How should we go about our task of studying?" At this point, it is vital that we understand what it is about the word of God that makes it so unique. Before we begin our studies, we must realize that the bible is both a divine book and a human book. Many wrong approaches of interpretation have failed to take one or the other of these truths into account. It is essential that we understand both of these aspects of the bible, because they both have some bearing on how we go about the process of reading and studying it. The following are some of the truths we can understand about the bible by realizing its twofold nature.

#### 1. As a *divine* book

- a. It is perfect, infallible, and inspired (II. Pet. 1:20,21; II Tim. 3:16,17; Lk. 21:33; Is. 55:11);
- b. It is only spiritually discerned (I Cor. 2:12-16).

#### 2. As a *human* book

- a. It addresses human needs;  
God had no need in himself that necessitated his word; he can learn nothing, already knowing everything. Therefore, in that he speaks, he speaks to us, with all the communication that is necessary for us to please him.
- b. It was written in human language;
- c. It has human authors;
- d. Its context is within human history.

Any proper interpretation of scriptures takes into account both of these elements. Scripture must be interpreted grammatically and historically; without that understanding, the church goes apostate. The Reformation was largely a recovery of the grammatical interpretation of scriptures. It must also be understood spiritually; without that understanding comes the rise of academic liberalism. Some of the most linguistically accomplished Bible scholars have no true understanding of Christ.

### *A Basic Outline of this Book*

First, we will examine some essential elements of hermeneutics (a word which simply means "principles of interpretation") with an understanding of the divine nature of the word. We will address

1. The Necessity of Regeneration and the Holy Spirit;
2. The Centrality of Christ;
3. The Agency of Faith;
4. The Role of the Body.

Second, we will examine some essential elements of hermeneutics with an understanding of the human aspects of the word. We will address principles such as grammar, context, historical setting, figurative language, and authorial intent. We will also discuss a variety of study helps such as dictionaries, concordances, systematic theologies, commentaries, and bible software, and consider some effective ways of using them.

Third, we will practice the use of the principles of our study, employing them to interpret and apply passages of scripture from various Old and New Testament genres.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What are our reasons for studying the word? What can we expect to gain from it?
2. What is it about the bible that sets apart from all other works of literature?

3. How important is the study of the word? How would you compare its importance with family, work, and other vital aspects of life?
4. When we study the word, what are we primarily looking for? (cf. II Cor. 3:14-18; Lk. 24:27)
5. Can we find any confidence from the bible that if we will come humbly and in faith to seek Christ in the word, we will not be disappointed? Where?

# The Necessity of Regeneration

## *The Need for Regeneration*

The Bible is a book that contains all we need for spiritual growth and understanding; however, man in his natural state has no spiritual discernment; therefore, unless he has been given spiritual life, with a new ability to discern spiritual things, the bible will be of no benefit to him. He may interpret every passage flawlessly, with a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic - but the true, life-giving realities contained in it will be of as little benefit as if one were to pour pure, fresh water down the throat of a corpse. This is not to say that the unregenerate can have no valuable insight into the treasures of scripture; rather, those insights that God is pleased to give him will do him no good - they will only benefit the regenerate. This is consistent with God's manner of working in human history: Exodus 12:35,36 relates how God took the wealth and labor of the Egyptians and used it to enrich his chosen people. Similarly, God has ordained that some whom he has not chosen to bless with spiritual life would give their lives to study the grammar and historical contexts of his word. With this labor he enriches the spiritual understanding of those whom he has chosen, so they can reap the benefits of the heathen's study and employ them for spiritual benefit. Thus, the linguistic/historical studies, and technical commentaries even of liberals and unbelievers may be used by believers for God's glory. However, for the unbelievers themselves, who have no true understanding, their fruit of their labors is entirely lost on them. The bible delineates several reasons for the necessity of regeneration for all who would truly profit from the study of scriptures.

1. The natural man is dead (Eph. 2:1; Jn. 3:3)
2. The natural man has no spiritual understanding; (I Cor. 1:18) this is because
  - a. He has no spiritual nature (I Cor. 2:14,15)
  - b. God has hardened his heart and blinded his eyes (I Cor. 1:19; Is. 6:9,10; Mat. 13:13-15; Jn. 12:37-40; Mk. 4:11,12; Acts 28:26,27)
  - c. Satan has blinded his eyes (II Cor. 4:4; Jn. 8:43-45)

3. The natural man may study scriptures assiduously, yet he will miss its central message: Christ (Jn. 3:9-14; Jn. 5:38-40)

### *The Benefits of Regeneration*

It is apparent, therefore, that, unless a man be given spiritual life, the scriptures will profit him nothing. The question then arises, how may a man be given spiritual life? The answer to that is that he must come to Christ, humbly seeking the truth that Christ alone has to offer (Jn. 7:37,38; Jn. 3:14,15). However, the natural man will never come to Christ, because he does evil, and so hates the light (Jn. 3:20; Jn. 6:44). Therefore, we are presented with an impossible situation: but, what is impossible with men is possible with God (Mat. 19:25,26). Although man is naturally unwilling to come to Christ, God has chosen to draw some supernaturally (Jn. 6:35-40); these will inevitably come to Christ, because the almighty God has chosen them. Elsewhere, Christ calls them his sheep, because they alone will hear his voice (Jn. 10:1-5;14). These, Christ's sheep, because they are regenerate, do profit from scriptures. This is because:

1. God himself teaches those whom he regenerates (Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:33,34; I Thes. 4:9; Heb. 8:10; Jn. 6:45)
2. Christ prayed that the Father would sanctify them through his word (Jn 17:17); and the Father always hears the prayers of the Son (Jn. 11:42)
3. Christ promised to send his Spirit to the elect, to guide them into all truth (Jn. 14:26;15:26;16:13)
4. The Spirit whom Christ sent gave to all believers an anointing, so that they may know all things (I Jn. 2:20,27)
5. We have the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2:16)

The regenerate, therefore, in sharp contrast with the unregenerate, have all things they need for sanctification and growth. But they must avail themselves of these benefits through the study of the word. It is through the word that Christ prayed for believers to be sanctified (Jn. 17:17). This is because the word shows us the glory of Christ (II Cor. 3:18); and it is only as we behold this glory that we are changed into the same image. The more clearly we see Christ, through the word, the more we will reflect that image. We see Christ but imperfectly now, therefore we reflect him imperfectly; but when we see

him as he truly is, then will we be perfectly like him (I Jn. 3:2). This will only take place as we remain in his word; and remaining necessitates obedience (Jn. 15:10; James 1:22-25).

### *Some Concluding Observations*

Hopefully by now it is sufficiently clear that regeneration is absolutely essential for a proper understanding of the word, and for the benefits that such an understanding gives. But do we reflect this understanding in practical application to our lives? It is only as God gives us knowledge of Christ through the word that we may be changed. Remember how desperately hopeless you were as an unregenerate sinner, until God shone the light of his gospel in your heart (II Cor. 4:6). Now, how foolish would it be to suppose that something that God alone could begin may be completed by any human means (Gal. 3:1-5)? If we truly believe that God alone can save and sanctify, through the word alone (cf. Rom. 10), then how can we explain how our practice so frequently denies this principle? How many of us, in struggling with our sanctification, will try anything to increase our will-power and resolve, yet allow the word to lie dusty on our shelves? Or how many times have we sat through invitations at the conclusion of sermons that seem to take for granted that we have the natural ability, apart from Christ, to change ourselves? Is it possible that the time spent with heads bowed and soft music playing in the background, in an emotional/volitional tour-de-force, could be better spent humbly seeking for God to display Christ to us in the scriptures which we are examining, and thereby to form Christ in us? What about our methods of evangelization? Does it do any good to reason with young-earth or internal-consistency arguments with one who has no spiritual perception? Would it not be better for us to say with Paul "And I, brothers, when I came to you, did not come with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (I Cor. 2:1-5, MKJV)? All the best arguments in the world, until God chooses to regenerate a sinner, will be like putting glasses on one who is totally blind. But praise be to God, who gave us new spiritual sight when he regenerated us!

Now let us be continually increasing the keenness of the sight that he gave to us, when we were totally blind, by gazing on the glory of Christ in scriptures, and letting our spiritual natures feast on that image.

### **Study Questions:**

1. If an unsaved man sits down to study scriptures, with only his natural reasoning ability, how much benefit will he reap?
2. What needs to take place before he can reap true spiritual benefit? Support your answer with scripture.
3. If it is true that the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for a man to understand spiritual things, do humans have any part in the process of learning? If so, what is our part?
4. Does the Holy Spirit teach us today by speaking directly to our hearts, apart from any other revelation? What means does he use to instruct us?
5. What is the content of the teaching that the Holy Spirit imparts to believers? (See John 14-16)
6. Can we have any confidence as believers that we will be profited by studying the word? Are there any scripture passages you can think of that would support that confidence?

## The Centrality of Christ

The scriptures, written as they were by many human authors, over many thousands of years, are nevertheless fully united in one glorious theme: the Christ. There is no testament, genre, book, paragraph, sentence, or word in the Bible that does not have its final reference point in Christ. This is what sets the Bible apart from other books that contain wise moral counsel. This is what makes the Bible life-giving - unique among all the great works of literature in history. Alfred Edersheim begins his famed *Old Testament Bible History* with the statement, "That 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' is also 'the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,' and that, 'they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham,' - these are among the most precious truths of revelation."<sup>3</sup> His statement is forceful and true. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for failing to see him in Scriptures (Jn 5:39,40). Later, on the road to Emmaus, he rebuked his own disciples for the same reason, and "beginning from Moses, and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27). Shortly after that, he opened the mind of his disciples, so that they could understand that all the scriptures were written with respect to him, and furthermore, that it was necessary that they be preached with that new understanding to all the nations of the world (Lk. 24:44-48). This the disciples did: Philip, in Acts 8, took the Old Testament passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading, "and beginning from this scripture, gave him the good news of Jesus." (Acts 8:32-35). This was the consistent approach of the New Testament apostles and prophets. The Old Testament is quoted hundreds of times in the New Testament; a perusal of these quotations, and how they are interpreted by the New Testament authors, makes it plain that Christ is the center of all redemptive history, and that the gospel is the same from one covenant to the next. Hebrews gives us an elaborate picture of the superiority of Christ, applying many OT quotations to him, and showing how all the types and shadows of Israel's national history, cultic rituals, etc., have their true fulfillment in him (Hebrews 1:8,9; 2:6-9,11-13; 5:5,6; 7:1-3; 8:3-6; 9:7-14,23,24; 10:4-7; 14-18; 13:11-13). Galatians 3 and 4 declare plainly that we are the spiritual seed of Abraham, heirs to the promises which were made to his one true seed, Christ, because we, as the OT saints, are in Christ (Galatians

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3 Edersheim, Alfred. *Old Testament Bible History*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, p. xi.

3:6-9,13-16,26,29; 4:21-31). Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost, inaugurating a new dispensation in the ever-unfolding design of God's covenant of grace, shows how David, and all the OT faithful, looked ahead to the resurrected and reigning Christ (Acts 2:25-36). Paul, in Romans 10, tells us that Moses preached the same gospel he did - that is, the gospel that, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:4-13). This is just to draw a handful of examples from an overwhelming supply of evidence. The resurrected, triumphant Christ was the clear hope and central figure of the OT, seen by all true believers, just as he is the central figure and hope of the NT. And in all the various genres of the OT and NT alike, we will find nothing of any true profit except Christ, and we will understand nothing truly unless we understand it as further disclosing to us the blessed person and work of Christ.

Perhaps someone may say, "I can see that the inspired New Testament authors were able to discern the person and work of Christ in the Old Testament, but when I read it all I see is genealogies and old histories and elaborate rituals of purifications and sacrifices. How can I understand what the Old Testament teaches of Christ since I am not an inspired interpreter like the New Testament authors were?" If this is your struggle, you have hit upon an essential truth: naturally, you will not be able to see all the glory of Christ as it lies hidden under the types and shadows of Old Testament literature. But as a Christian, you do not have to read the scriptures like a natural man would, for two reasons: first, Christ, who taught his disciples of himself from the Old Testament, promised to them and all future believers, "I have spoken these things to you, being present with you. But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, whatever I have said to you" (John 14:25,26, MKJV). Just as Christ taught the disciples of himself when he was on earth, so the Spirit performs the same ministry, now that Christ is ascended to the right hand of the Father. Every advantage the disciples had by Christ dwelling with them, we have by the Spirit dwelling in us. And the Spirit "shall not speak of Himself, but whatever He hears, He shall speak...He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will announce it to you" (John 16:13,14, MKJV). In other words, whatever Christ would tell us if he were here, the Spirit does tell us. He takes whatever he hears from Christ and declares it to the believers. But he does this only as we study the scriptures. This leads us to the second reason

that we can read the Old Testament with more than a natural understanding: we have the New Testament now to give us a divinely inspired way of looking at the Old Testament. I say "a way of looking at the Old Testament," rather than, "the interpretation of specific Old Testament verses." The New Testament does interpret specific Old Testament verses. But it also does more than that. Hebrews 9:2-5 tells us, "For the first tabernacle was prepared, in which was both the lampstand, and the table, and the setting out of the loaves, which is called Holies. And after the second veil was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant overlaid all around with gold, in which was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. And over it were the cherubs of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat (about which we cannot now speak piece by piece)" (MKJV). The author of Hebrews has just been giving detailed interpretations of how Old Testament realities pointed to Christ. Now, he says, in effect, "I could give you more of these specific interpretations. But now is not the time. All of those truths are there, waiting for you to discover them. And you are able to do this if you understand the central truth that I have been laboring to emphasize. Namely, that Christ is the central truth of all the Old Testament." Behind all of the specific truths about Christ that the New Testament authors taught us is the foundational truth that the bible, from beginning to end, is about Jesus. And once we grasp that basic truth, we can study all of scriptures "with an unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18). The veil that blinds the natural man's understanding when he reads the bible is done away in Christ. This is the work of the Spirit.

The following outline of the unfolding story of the Messiah, from Genesis to Revelation may help. It is certainly not exhaustive, and not even very detailed, but I hope it gives a very basic glimpse of all of scriptures as one unified, Christ-centered history. I hope it will help some of you "connect the dots" of all the various portions of scripture, so that you can start to trace the scriptural outline, and see a glorious and incomprehensible picture of Christ begin to emerge.

### *Christ: the blessed hope of the Old Testament*

1. God promised he would restore what man lost through a victorious Messiah (Gen. 3:15)
2. God established and guarded that promise through various covenants, which looked ahead to that Messiah
  - a. Noahic: Preservation of all flesh (hence, the Messianic line), and elaboration of the principle of life in the blood (Gen. 9:3-11)
  - b. Abrahamic: Land, seed, and blessing: "I will be your God." (Gen. 12:1-3) Fulfilled in Christ alone, (Gal. 3:16; II Cor. 1:20)
  - c. Mosaic: (Deut. 30:15-18) Added as a guardian until the promise should be fulfilled, to show our need for the promised Christ (Gal. 3:23-25); Never intended to be permanent (Heb. 8:13)
  - d. Davidic: Promised Messiah will reign as King forever (II Sam. 7:11-16)
  - e. New: All who call upon the Lord will be saved (Jer. 31:31-34)
3. True Old Testament believers had this hope from the time Eve bore Cain (e.g. Gen. 4:25; Job 19:25)

### *Christ: the grand reality of the New Testament*

The New Testament differs from the Old, not in its message, but rather in the status of that message. What was a promise in the OT is a grand reality in the NT and today. The declaration of the fulfilled promise in the resurrected Christ was the inauguration of a new stage in redemptive history. This inauguration effected several accomplishments.

1. The Fulfillment of the promise (Heb. 11:13; II Cor. 1:20; I Pet. 1:10-12)
2. Inclusion of the Gentiles in the promise (Eph. 2:11-13; Gal. 3:26-29; Acts 15:14-17)
3. Guarantee of the resurrection of us all (I Thes. 4:14)
4. Guarantee of final victory (II Pet. 3:13)

## *Seeing Christ in the various genres of the Old Testament*

1. Pentateuch: he is the coming Priest
2. History: he is the coming King
3. Prophecy: he is the coming Prophet and the fulfillment of all the prophecies
4. Poetry: he is the celebrated Christ, the believer's Hope, Joy, Rock, Confidence, Bridegroom, Wisdom, etc.

### Study Questions:

1. What was God's purpose in writing the bible? Were there different purposes for the different times he added to the canon? Was there one over-arching purpose? Explain your answers.
2. Why do you think God gave us the bible in so many different styles and genres? How can we learn from all the different approaches that are contained in the scriptures? Is there one unifying theme that makes sense of all the different styles?
3. "Progressive revelation" means that God revealed certain truths obscurely at first, but more and more clearly as time went on. Why do you think God chose to give us the bible in this manner?
4. Read the first three chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation. Do you notice any themes that are common to both passages? (e.g. the tree of life, the problem and solution of sin and sorrow, etc.) Does it sound like the beginning and end of one story? If so, who is the hero of the story? Can you learn anything about the middle of the story by understanding the beginning and end of it?



## The Role of Faith

It is one of the most fundamental truths of Christianity that faith is essential for anyone to come to God and please him (Eph.2:8,9; Heb. 11:6). It is equally clear in scripture that faith is necessary for anyone to benefit by God's word. Hebrews 4:2 explains to us that the Israelites had the same Word that we have today - but they did not profit by it because it was not mingled with faith. When those Israelites grumbled in the wilderness and disobeyed the commandments of God, they revealed their unbelieving hearts. And that unbelief excluded them from the benefits of the Word. But it is perhaps less often recognized that faith is even necessary for a proper interpretation of scriptures. Faith is not simply something that can be decided for or against after arriving at an understanding of biblical teaching. Rather, faith is prerequisite for that understanding. One cannot interpret the word of God correctly while disbelieving it. Unbelief is impossible when its truths are clearly understood. When God causes the glorious light of the gospel of Christ to shine in a person's heart through the hearing of the word, that light cannot be dismissed or rejected. It is too glorious. And that light is the very essence of the true interpretation of scripture. So if someone rejects the gospel, he is clearly showing that he has no true understanding of scriptures. He is blinded in his mind - and this spiritual blindness is because he has hardened his heart in unbelief (Eph. 4:17-19). So on the one hand, it is impossible to understand the true message of scriptures without faith; and on the other hand, it is impossible to have faith in the message of the word, and yet miss its benefits. This is because true faith always produces obedience ("Faith without works is dead" - James 2:14-26). And obedience is the pathway of the blessings contained in God's word. The person who "looks into the perfect law of liberty" and then continues his way unchanged, is merely a hearer of the word, and not benefited at all by it (James 1:22-25). Obedience, then, is the test of whether or not we have actually participated in the blessings offered in scriptures to those who understand God's word in faith. John 15:10 tells us that those who are partakers of Christ's eternal love show it by keeping his commandments. The difference between the one who benefits nothing from the study of the Word and the one to whom the Word is a life-giving fountain of eternal blessing is simply faith. The Bible is a spiritual book; it is alive, and full of spiritual blessing: therefore, in order truly to understand it in its life-

giving reality (unlike any other literary work in the world) faith is an indispensable hermeneutic.

### *The role of faith in the Old Testament*

The Old Testament is very clear that apart from faith, man was devoid of true understanding, and unable to please God, or enjoy fellowship with him. There is no Old Testament example of someone with spiritual insight into God's word that trusted in himself, instead of God, for his understanding. On the contrary, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7). There is no faithless "fear of the Lord". Therefore, without faith there is no understanding of the word of God. The Psalms and Proverbs are filled with this teaching. Moreover, the Old Testament histories are filled with examples that bear this teaching out. It was only those who believed that truly understood God's word. And these were the ones for whom the blessings of God's word were reserved. Just a couple of many possible examples will suffice to illustrate this truth.

1. Abraham (Gen. 15:1-6; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:5-7)
2. Moses (Exodus 33:12-19)
3. David (Psalm 16:8-11; Acts 2:30,31)

### *The role of faith in the New Testament*

We have seen that faith was indispensable in the Old Testament. In the New Testament faith is just as indispensable for a true understanding of scripture; and in addition, faith has been given many additional benefits and supports which the Old Testament had not yet revealed.

1. A greater reason for faith

Matthew 27:51 tells us that at Christ's death the veil of the temple was rent in twain; therefore, when we look to Christ in scriptures, we are able to do it "with an unveiled face" (II Cor. 3:18), seeing him in faith where he has entered behind the veil, as our forerunner, to intercede for us (Hebrews 6:19,20). The result of this is confidence as we come to him (Heb. 4:14-16). We have more cause for confidence when we

speak to him; but more than that, because of Christ we have more confidence when God speaks to us. Hebrews 1:1,2 reveals to us that God has spoken to us through his Son - in fact, John even calls him the Word (Jn.1:1). The sum of all this is that in the New Testament our faith is more firmly buttressed and holds forth more precious promises - and therefore it is even more clear how vital faith is for the understanding of scriptures.

## 2. The great results of faith

The purpose of scripture is so that we may please Christ (II Tim.2:15); and know him (Phil. 3:10; Eph. 1:16-21). But these things only come as faith produces obedience (I Jn. 2:4,5; Jn. 14:21). The word reveals Christ; therefore, we only understand the Word as we know Christ; but we only know Christ if we love him and keep his commandments - which only comes by faith. In sum, faith is the key which unlocks the great and glorious purpose for which scripture was written - to know Christ.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Usually, when we're reading something, we try to *understand* what it's saying first, and then we judge it, to determine whether or not we *believe* what we understand it to be saying. Is this approach legitimate with the bible? Why or why not.
2. Last lesson we talked about the fact that the bible was written to show us the person and work of Christ. Read I Peter 1:8. According to this verse, what is necessary for us to see Christ (spiritually) and rejoice in him, even before we can literally see him with our physical eyes? Does this suggest anything that must be necessary for us to see the true message of the bible?
3. Read II Corinthians 3:13-16. According to this passage, what is the true meaning of scripture? Can everyone who reads the bible understand that meaning? Why or why not?

4. According to the same passage, what needs to happen for the veil that blinds our understanding to be done away with?

## The Role of the Body

When Christ suffered on the cross to secure our redemption, he was doing more than securing the benefits of salvation for individuals who would believe in him. Christ's work does not end with changing individual persons. It has a goal beyond that. An eternal purpose of forging one new man (Eph. 2:14-22), an indivisibly united body of which he is the head (Eph. 1:22,23; Col. 1:18), a spotless bride to worship him in perfect love for eternity (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:6-9). Christianity is not an individualistic experience, and Christian bible study cannot be individualistic. We are all growing up together into a mature man. I can never reach the goal for which we are striving through mere personal bible study. Neither can any other believer, but each one needs the others in growth and learning. This "big-picture-Christianity" is essential to keep in mind as we approach the issue of bible study.

This leads us to the question of the nature and identity of the church "which is his body", as well as that of the local church. Simply stated, the body of Christ is all believers from all epochs of history eternally united in Christ, with a common goal of worshipping him in unity forever (Eph. 3:4-11,21; Rev. 5:9,10). A proper understanding of the nature and importance of this universal, time-transcending commonality leads in turn to a somewhat different understanding of the *local* church than many in Baptist circles have today. True local churches are united in Christ in a vastly more significant manner than they are divided. Their division is simply necessitated by unavoidable constraints of time and space. Their unity transcends all "local church sovereignty" which many so ardently contend for. In reality, a local church is merely a specific manifestation of the body of Christ, sharing a commonality in time and geographical location which it is unable to share with the entire body until the eschatological (i.e. happening in the end times) unification of all believers in a common space-time venue (i.e. at the same time and place). Hence, the recognition of the "local church" is only a logistical division, necessary because of the finite viewpoint of man, which is unable to embrace the vision of the entire body at the same level of immediacy. These local congregations are members of the entire body of Christ, not "little bodies" in themselves (Eph. 4:4). Therefore, when Paul addresses local churches, he commonly recognizes them simply as those who are in Christ, who are together in a specific location (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil.

1:1, etc.). It is vital that we keep this universal unity of believers in mind as we grow in the scriptures, and that we let that understanding shape our approach to study.

This vision of the local church has clear implications for how we should study the word. Consider the following propositions, and how they relate to our approaches to bible study.

1. The church is not a democracy (a common error of local churches in America).
  - My study and growth in doctrine should be aided, protected and supported by those whom God has placed as spiritual authorities over me in his church. (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2,3; Heb. 13:7,17)
  
2. The church is not an autocracy (the error of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, for example).
  - My study and growth in doctrine is something in which I am actively involved, having both the right and responsibility of persuading my own conscience from scriptures of the truth or error of what I am being taught. (Acts 17:11)
  
3. But the church is a *body*, with Christ as its head.
  - My true nourishment and support as I grow in knowledge can only come from my vital connection with our Head, Christ Jesus. (Eph. 4:15,16; Col. 2:19)
  
4. Scripture is given for the mutual benefit and sustenance of the body.
  - My study should benefit others (II Tim. 2:2)
  - The study of others should benefit me (Heb. 13:7; Eph. 4:11-15)
  - The result should be doctrinal unity (Phil. 1:27; 2:2, 4:2)
  
5. This should foster a spirit of urgency and inter-dependence, as we pursue growth in grace.

When we have this attitude in our approach to bible study, what are the results? I have listed two, specifically, but I am sure that I have left unspoken many more benefits than these. The following, however, I consider particularly clear and vital in our quest for doctrinal maturity.

### 1. Humility in interpretation

- a. Care for the growth of the body over individual advancement (Phil. 2:1-4; I Cor. 1:10; 8:1)
- b. Recognize that our understanding is limited (I Cor. 13:8-13; II Pet. 3:16)
- c. Realize that true understanding comes only from the Spirit (I Jn. 2:27; Eph. 1:17,18)
- d. Understand that the same Spirit is in the process of teaching all believers, historical and modern; and therefore, that we can benefit from their spoken or written insights (Eph. 4:2-6)

### 2. Peace in the body

- a. Individual peace is necessary to live by faith (Rom. 14:5,23)
- b. Knowledge must instruct that peace (Prov. 3:13,17; Jm. 1:5; Heb. 10:22)
- c. The results of true knowledge instructing individual peace is body-wide peace and doctrinal unity (Col. 3:15,16)

#### *A Case Study: the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)*

When a doctrinal dispute divided the early church (vs. 5), the response was:

### 1. In humility

- a. They all met together (6, 22)
- b. They gave instruction for the good of the members (19, 28)

2. To seek peace
  - a. From the Holy Spirit (28)
  - b. Through scripture (14-18)
  
3. To result in unity (22, 28)

### **Study Questions:**

1. Does thinking of the church as all believers from all times joined together to worship Christ have any effect on how we study the bible? If so, what?
2. Does thinking of the church as a body, with Christ as the Head and believers as members, have any effect on how we study the Bible? If so, what?
3. God made us as believers dependent on each other as we join together in the fight for faith. How does this affect the importance of my individual bible study? If I neglect to study the word, am I only hurting myself?
4. What are the purposes of corporate bible study? Are they primarily man-centered or Christ-centered?
5. What should knowing the purposes of bible study do to quarrels and arguments over doctrinal matters? Do we have any examples in scripture of doctrinal divisions, and how mature servants of God dealt with them? Where?

## Historical, Grammatical, Contextual Hermeneutics

In the first several chapters, we have examined some spiritual realities that have a vital impact on our ability to understand the word of God, and to profit from that understanding. We have seen that all of our efforts will be futile unless the Spirit opens up the eyes of our heart to see and rejoice in the glory of Christ. But that does not mean that we have no part in the process of growth in scriptural understanding. On the contrary, recognizing that the Spirit uses *scripture* to perform his enlightening work in our heart should motivate us to search the scriptures diligently. This is why the psalmist prays, “Open my eyes so that I may behold wondrous things *out of your law*” (Psalm 119:18). He realized that God had to open his eyes, but also that he would only perform this wonderful work through what he had already written in his law. The attitude of the psalmist is Spirit-dependent, fervent study of scriptures. This is also why Solomon counsels us to seek wisdom as silver, and search for her as hidden treasures (Prov. 2:3-6). The only way to arrive at the knowledge which God gives, is to seek diligently for it. God gives it, and yet we must seek.

This brings up the question, “How then do we seek for God’s wisdom from his word?” In other words, are there practical principles and methods that we can use to ensure that we are studying scriptures accurately? How can we be confident that we are understanding the life-changing, spiritual truths of the bible when we study? This question leads us to a truth that we recognized at the beginning of our study: the bible was written by human authors, employing human language, in contexts of human history, to address human needs. Understanding this is vital, for it tells us that, in order to interpret scriptures accurately, we must know something of human language, biblical history, and the authors whom God used to record his message. We must also know what the needs of the original audience of scripture were, and to what extent we have the same needs in common. In short, we must be well-informed to study accurately. And we must study accurately to be confident that God will give us true spiritual profit from his word. We may sum up this pursuit in one simple goal: let us strive to understand scriptures *literally*. Another way of saying this is, “Let us strive to determine *what* God is saying to us in his word (interpretation), and *why* he is saying it (application). And let us strive to determine this through a normal understanding of human language.” In one way, this should be comforting to us, because all of us understand naturally

how language works. There is no “special set” of rules for interpreting the bible that is different from how we would interpret any written language. In another way it should be challenging to us, for it implies a great deal of work. We are not allowed to read the bible haphazardly and expect real growth.

But what exactly do we mean by understanding scriptures “literally”? It may be easier to explain by saying what we do *not* mean. First, we do not mean “literalizing,” (i.e. rationalistic). That is, we do not deny that the bible has a spiritual meaning, and that we can learn spiritual truths from the histories, commandments, poetry, prophecies, and all other genres of scripture. For instance, when Peter, in a sermon in Acts, quotes the prophecy of Joel,

“And I will give wonders in the heaven above, and miracles on the earth below, blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before that great and glorious Day of the Lord. And it shall be *that* everyone who shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (MKJV)

he first plainly states, “This [i.e. the outpouring of the Spirit resulting in speaking with tongues] is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:14-21). A literalizing hermeneutic will deny that this could really be the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy, since there is no record of literal “blood and fire and vapor of smoke,” or the literal turning of “the moon into blood”. Another clear example of what we mean is found in Galatians 4, where Paul finds spiritual truths allegorized in the histories of scripture (Gal. 4:21-31). The literalizing, or rationalistic hermeneutic will say, “in order to be literal, history must be only history, with no spiritual allegorizing allowed.” It will also demand that prophecy must be fulfilled literally, to the extent that the sea must always be the literal sea, the temple must mean the actual building, Jerusalem can only mean the city in the Middle East, and so on. This rationalistic approach is dangerous and unbiblical. In the bible, we can see that the temple can be understood figuratively to mean the place where God dwells (Eph.2:19-22; Rev. 21:3,22; Heb. 9:11,24). Jerusalem may signify the place where we as Christians have our citizenship, and not the earthly city itself (Gal. 4:25,26). The sea may signify the flood of evils and sorrows that have come upon man since the fall (Ps. 68:22; 78:53; Is. 5:30; 57:20; Jer. 51:41-43; Dan. 7:2,3; Zech. 10:11; Rev. 13:1). This may be clearly demonstrated by Paul’s quotation of Deuteronomy 30, in Romans 10, where he translates going beyond the sea as going into the depths of the abyss

(Deut. 30:13,14; Rom. 10:6-8). And when a literalizing hermeneutic denies this spiritual reality behind the literal sea, the spiritual implications of Moses' song in Exodus 15:1-19, and the heart-stirring promise of John in Revelation 21:1 are sadly missed.

But on the other hand, neither do we embrace a "spiritualizing" (i.e. existential) hermeneutic. This is the approach that says, "Let me find a verse of scripture and see how God will 'speak to me' through it." In other words, I don't have to understand what the original author intended to convey to his original audience, I just have to find out what this verse may "mean to me". This could be quite different from what it "means to you". But that's ok, as long as we both get a blessing from it. It is quite sad that (whether consciously or not) this approach is so common among twenty-first century American Christians. It strips the bible of all real authority, for it makes the basis of what God is saying dependent on me and my feelings, and leaves no solid, objective foundation of truth which is the same for all of mankind. Let's sum up what we've been saying. In interpreting the bible, we need a hermeneutic that:

1. Is not literalizing/rationalistic
2. Is not spiritualizing/existential
3. But that is *truly* literal, and recognizes the possibility of figurative language
  - a. Figurative language that anyone can understand (common). e.g. metaphor, simile, hyperbole, etc. (Lk. 13:32; Is. 1:18)
  - b. Figurative language that only those who know God's purposes can understand (spiritual). e.g. Old Testament types and shadows (Heb. 8:5)

But how do we avoid these pitfalls? What are some practical steps to ensure that we are employing a truly literal hermeneutic when we study the bible? In the next three lessons we will lay out a basic approach to studying scriptures with a literal hermeneutic. In order to determine *what* God is saying (interpretation), we will consider three basic sets of questions to ask of each passage.

1. Historical: Where does this writing fall in the epic story of God's redemptive plan for mankind? To whom was it written? By whom? Under what circumstances?
2. Grammatical: What does each word mean? How does it relate to the words around it. How does the author relate one phrase to the next to create a clear flow of thought?
3. Contextual: How does this verse relate to the paragraph that it is a part of? How does that paragraph relate to the pericope (i.e. one passage of scripture with a unifying theme, or a "self-contained" unit)? How does the pericope relate to the book? How does the book fit into scriptures as a whole?

In order to determine *why* God is saying it (application), we will ask one more basic set of questions:

Applicational: What do I have in common with those to whom this passage was written? What do I have in common with the circumstances in which it was written? What does it reveal about my fallen condition? What does it reveal about who God is? What does it reveal about his plan of redemption in Christ?

Let's put these principles into practice with a brief study of I John 2:3-5.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Can any passage from scripture have different *meanings* for different readers? Can any passage have different *applications* for the different life-situations of readers? Explain your answers.
2. Explain the difference between a truly literal hermeneutic and a literalizing (rationalistic) hermeneutic. Explain the difference between a literal and a spiritualizing (existential) hermeneutic. Why is it so important to have a truly literal hermeneutic when we study the bible?
3. Why is it necessary to interpret scriptures historically?

4. Why is it necessary to interpret scriptures grammatically?
5. Why is it necessary to interpret scriptures contextually?



## Studying the Bible Historically

This lesson begins a segment of the course which will be more hands on. My goal for the rest of the course will be twofold: first, to give practical instruction and clear steps on how to study the bible in the manner that will be the most profitable. Previous lessons have been more theoretical; I hope that the following will be less theoretical and more practical. My second goal is to give all of us practice in using the processes which we are studying. I hope this will be valuable in two ways: first, in teaching us how to study the bible more carefully; and second, in opening our eyes to the riches that the bible has in the passages that we choose to study together. As you can probably guess, this will require real work for all of us. But it will be work that we will find thoroughly rewarding, as we trust in the Lord to open our eyes to the truths which we are studying.

To begin with, we will examine more closely a statement made in the last lesson: it is necessary to study the bible with a historical mindset. At the outset, let me mention three reasons why this is essential, and three levels at which we can put this into practice.

Reasons for studying the bible historically:

1. To gain a better *perspective* on what is being said

If you wrote a personal letter to a close friend, there may be certain thoughts contained in that letter which he would understand immediately, but which we would be completely lost on an outsider. This is because the two of you have a background and experiences in common, and these experiences may be a necessary backdrop for what you have written. The bible, too, was written to an original audience that had certain experiences in common with the authors who wrote to them. The better we can understand this background, the better we will be able to make sense of all that the bible contains.

- Example: Elisha takes up the cloak of Elijah, and strikes the waters of the Jordan with it, so that they part. This action may be better

understood when we recount two events recorded for us in scriptures: the first, in I Kings 19, the second in II Kings 2.

2. To develop the same mindset as the original audience.

Beyond just a common background, the original audience had the same cultural mindset. Any of you who have traveled to a foreign country know that the culture you visited had certain ways of thinking and a certain understanding of various expressions that were foreign to you as an outsider. The more we learn the cultural mindset of the people to whom the bible was written, the more we will understand the foreign expressions of the bible.

- Example: Jesus commands his disciples not to pray as the heathen do. Understanding the heathen culture of the day, specifically the common manner of praying to pagan gods, will help us understand more clearly what Jesus was speaking against.

3. To understand our own history and connection with God's people of other ages.

All throughout the bible we find commands to remember what God has done for us and our forefathers. We are to teach our children the history of God's working among us as a people, and to think frequently, gratefully, and worshipfully of our past. Many of the psalms are historical recollections of God's working in his people. Reading the bible historically will give us a better sense of commonality with God's children before our time. It will make us more personally appreciative of God's great works of redemption and deliverance. It will give us greater faith in his continuing gracious work in our future.

Levels of studying a passage historically:

1. Using indicators within the book you are studying

The authors of scripture often wrote to address specific problems or concerns that they had with a specific group of people, cultural

problem, etc. However, reading the book as a whole will oftentimes allow us to pick up on these specific problems. This in turn will allow us to understand certain passages more clearly.

- Example: Galatians 5:1 tells us to stand firm in the freedom to which Christ freed us. Reading the first two chapters of Galatians will give us a better understanding of the problem he was fighting, and therefore the reason for the command and a more precise idea of what he meant by it.

## 2. Using other books of the bible to give you background.

Many of Paul's letters were written to churches that he became acquainted with on his missionary travels. Understanding the situations in which he started and left these churches will help us understand the letters he wrote to them. The book of Acts is invaluable in providing background information for many of Paul's New Testament letters. Similarly, reading in the books of Samuel the historical background of the psalms that David wrote will give us vital background for understanding many of those psalms.

- Example: I Thessalonians 3:1-13; 5:23 in light of Acts 17:1-10
- Example: Psalm 3 in light of II Samuel 15-18

## 3. Using history books, commentaries, bible atlases, and other study helps.

We have an amazing amount of accurate and beneficial information available to us today in libraries, on the internet, and for sale in Christian bookstores. Learning what some of these sources are, and how to use them, will be a profitable endeavor for us.

- Examples: Alfred Edersheim's works, IVP Bible Background Commentary, Oxford Bible Atlas

## Study Questions:

1. What are some benefits of studying the bible with a historical mindset?
2. How could having a historical mindset affect the way you read and study scripture?
3. Read Isaiah 58:1-12. What is Isaiah rebuking? Think about this in light of the history of the time. We know that Isaiah began his prophecy in the year King Uzziah died (Is. 6:1). We know that he continued prophesying through the days of Ahaz (Is. 7:1). We know as well that his ministry continued through Hezekiah's reign, from the account we have in Isaiah chapters 36-39. Now, study the history of those kings. What does the bible say about the year Uzziah died (read II Chronicles 27:16-23)? What about the reign of Ahaz (read II Chron. 28)? Now, how about Hezekiah (read II Chron. 29-32)? Were there *outward* changes in the wickedness of the land of Judah after Ahaz died and Hezekiah began to reign? Were these outward changes pleasing to God, according to our passage in Isaiah 58 (written during Hezekiah's good reign)? Does this history shed more light on the passage? Make it more applicable to our own respectable, church-going society? Does this study help you see how historical indicators within the book you are studying, as well as in other portions of scripture, can have a vital impact on understanding the passage you are studying?

## Studying the Bible Grammatically

This lesson will give some instruction on how to study the bible grammatically. This will require much work and thought, but it is vital to the goal of understanding scriptures accurately. In this lesson, we will divide the process of studying grammatically into two major steps: first, determining the specific meaning of words: and second, determining how individual words are related to each other.

### *Word Studies*

In determining the exact meaning of a word in any given passage, we first need to figure out the word employed in the original language, and the range of meanings that word can have. Second, we need to narrow down the range of meanings to determine the specific meaning that word must have in the context of the verse we are studying. In order to accomplish this, I have put together a four step process for doing an accurate word study:

1. Find out what word is used in the original language.

There are at least a couple ways of accomplishing this for someone with no knowledge of Greek and Hebrew: one method is simply to use a word study bible. This is a bible that lists the Strong's number under the significant words used in an English translation. Having a Strong's number will help you carry out the next step. A second method is using a Strong's concordance. To do this, note the word (as translated by the KJV) that you desire to study. Then find that word in the concordance, in the specific verse that you are studying. There will be a number listed next to that word, for that verse. Now, remembering that number, go to the Greek or Hebrew dictionary in the back, and find the number cited. There you will find the word in the original language, with a simple definition. There are also bible software programs that will give you the underlying Greek or Hebrew word with just a click of a button. A little later, we'll discuss e-Sword, one of these programs, which is entirely free.

2. Search for a more detailed translation of that Greek or Hebrew word.

Once you have the original word, together with the Strong's number, you can use that information to look up the word in many excellent Greek or Hebrew lexica. The most useful one volume dictionaries for biblical Hebrew and Greek are, respectively, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (ed.s Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker); and Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (ed.s Brown, Driver, and Briggs). There is a variety of useful multi-volume dictionaries, as well. Perhaps the most thorough for the New Testament is the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (ed. Kittel). An excellent two-volume Hebrew dictionary is the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (ed. Harris, Archer, and Waltke).

To use Kittel's, take the Strong's number and simply look it up in the index. This will direct you to a specific volume and page number. There you will find a very thorough study of that word, its equivalents in Hebrew, its usage in Greek literature, other writings of the same author in the New Testament, writings of other authors in the New Testament, and early Christian literature. There is also an index of English keywords, if you don't have the Strong's number, and a listing of words discussed by scripture passage. This would be a tremendously valuable resource, whether or not you read Greek.

To use the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, simply take the Strong's number and look in the index of the TWOT. There you will find the TWOT number listed for you, and you can use that number to look up the word. This is also an excellent resource to have available.

One more possible approach is to use an English dictionary that is based on the original languages, such as Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testaments. To use this, simply look up the word you are studying in English, and it will list the underlying words from the original languages, as well as the specific underlying word for that text.

3. Do a study of the different passages in which that same word is used by the same author; then, a study of passages by different authors in which that same word is used. Strong's or any of the other dictionaries already mentioned will help you to do this study.
4. Do a study of synonyms of the word you are studying, noting the different nuances of meanings in synonyms. Try to determine why the author chose the specific word that he did. Any of the resources we've listed will enable you to do this study. Also, Trench's Synonyms, Robertson's Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament, as well as others, could be beneficial. I hope this gives you some ideas of how to use the many rich resources that God has made available to us today, even if you have no formal education in the original languages, etc.

### *Grammatical Layouts*

Once you have a clear understanding of the significant words used in a text, you will want to determine how these words relate to each other. I have come up with a three step process that may be of some help.

1. Scan through the text and make note of the conjunctions and functional words. Look for words such as the following:

Time: after, as long as, before, now, meanwhile, since, then, until, when, whenever, while

Place: where, beside, upon, above, under, below, on, over, at

Direction: to, toward, from

Continuation: and, also, besides, both...and, furthermore, moreover, likewise, not only...but also, whereupon

Contrast: although, but, however, much more, nevertheless, not only...but also, yet, otherwise, still, whereas

Purpose: in order that, that, so that

Result: so that, as a result, hence, consequently, so, then

Conclusion: therefore, thus, then, wherefore

Reason: as, because, for, inasmuch as, since, whereas, why

Condition: as if, as though, if, lest, provided, providing, unless

Concession: although, yet, in spite of, though, unless, while

Agency/Means: by, through, by means of

Manner: as, how

Comparison: also, as, as...so, just as...so, indeed, in fact, likewise, so also, so as, moreover, than

Example: for, for example, indeed, in fact, namely

Emphasis: indeed, only, finally

2. Use these function words, together with the entire passage, to answer these questions:

Who or what is the subject?

Who or what is the object?

Who or what is being spoken to (direct address)?

Are there further descriptions of the subject, object, or direct address (adjectives or apposition)?

(Ask the following of the *action* or *state of being* mentioned in the verse)

When?            (Time)            when, after, before

Where?           (Location)        beside, above, below

Why?             (Cause)            because, for since

Why?	(Purpose)	that, so that, in order that
Under what circumstances?	(Condition)	if, provided, unless
How?	(Qualification)	although, in spite of the fact
How?	(Comparison)	as, just as, likewise

- Using these answers, separate and label each phrase, to find a clear flow of thought. For example, if you are studying James 1:2-5, you might come up with something like this:

Consider it pure joy [command]

my brothers [direct address]

whenever you face various trials [time - when]

because you know that the testing of your faith produces patience  
[cause - why]

Let patience have its perfect work (command)

so that you may be perfect and complete [purpose - why]

lacking nothing [description]

If any of you lacks wisdom [condition - under what circumstances]

let him ask of God [command]

who gives generously to all [description]

and does not reproach [description]

and it will be given to you [assertion - conclusion]

## *Putting it all together*

After you have done all this work, you will have learned much about the passage you have been studying. It may help to tie everything together by describing and explaining the passage in your own words. For example

This passage gives a commandment to all of us who are believers (James' spiritual brothers), that we should be joyful in the times when God allows us to go through trials. The reason for this is that these trials will cause our patience to grow more mature. God gives us a further command - that we should not refuse to allow these trials to produce patience in us, but should wait for the patience to continue its work in us. The reason for this is that this process will give us more maturity, and supply us with everything we truly need to be pleasing to God, and live wisely on this earth (and so on through the next verse).

Studying the word translated "patience" helped me to understand this passage better: the Old Testament equivalent was used of someone waiting patiently for the Lord. However, the word was not only passive, but indicated an active seeking his face and trusting in him. The word was used in Greek writings of someone standing fast, even in difficulty and assault. James uses the word for someone who continually trusts in God, even in great trials, and eventually receives a great reward. For instance, he uses the same word when speaking of Job's example to us in James 5:11. Similarly, many New Testament authors use it of someone who stands firm in spite of every assault on his faith – from the hostility of the world, the persecutions of the devil, or the weaknesses of his own faith. It is only through the proven character that comes through this patience in difficulty that enables us to stand fast to the end, and lay hold on eternal life (and so on with different key words).

### **Study Questions:**

1. Take the following printout of I John 2:3-5, and do a word study on all the highlighted words. The original Greek word, its Strong's number, and a definition from the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament is included. Compare your passage with other places where the same author

uses that word. Compare your passage with other bible authors that use the same words. Record your findings.

2. Take that same passage and separate and label each phrase, so you know how every phrase is related. Does this help you understand the author's main point any better? If it helps, you can write out a paraphrase of what the author is saying in your own words.

1097 - ginosko      1097 - ginosko  
1Jo 2:3 And by this we **know** that we **have known**

5083 - tereo  
him, if we **keep** his commandments.

1097 - ginosko  
1Jo 2:4 The one who says, “I **have known** him,” and does

5083 - tereo  
not **keep** His commandments, is a liar, and the  
truth is not in him.

5083 - tereo  
1Jo 2:5 But whoever **keeps** his word, truly in him

5048 - teleioo  
the love of God **has been perfected**. By this we know  
that we are in him.

## Studying the Bible Contextually

We have now examined two elements of employing a literal hermeneutic in studying the bible with an understanding of its human nature. In this lesson we will focus on the third element: studying contextually. This hermeneutical principle is necessary for at least two reasons: first, virtually every word or grammatical construct has a broader range of possible meanings than the actual meaning in a specific text. Therefore, it is essential to examine the context, looking for indicators that will narrow down the range of possible meanings of a word to the one specific meaning it has in a particular passage. For example, in Matthew 7:1, Christ commands us not to judge; in Luke 12:57, he rebukes the Pharisees for not judging. Is he contradicting himself? That is where context comes in: looking at the context surrounding these two verses, we find that in Matthew, Christ was speaking of condemning sin that we perceive in others, not recognizing that we ourselves are just as sinful, and just as deserving of the same condemnation that we mete out to our neighbors. But in Luke, Christ is rebuking the lack of spiritual discernment that makes it impossible for the Pharisees to judge between what is wrong and what is right. Failing to apply this principle of context may lead us to a completely misinformed understanding of any number of specific verses. An example of a verse that is commonly misunderstood because of lack of attention to context and specific word meanings is I Thessalonians 5:22. How often have we heard that this verse teaches us not to engage in any activity which might lead others to think we are doing something sinful? In reality, the context makes it clear that we are to discern everything, then to hold to that which the test of discernment recognizes to be true, and to reject that which is evil, every time it appears.

The second reason it is vital for us to study contextually, is that this allows us to understand the author's whole flow of thought, rather than just picking out certain disconnected truths. If we study contextually, we will be interested in knowing the author's major purpose and dominant themes in a specific book, and how each verse relates to that overarching purpose. Furthermore, we will be laboring to understand how each book, with its major themes and purpose, fits into the bible as a whole. This "big picture" understanding of scriptures, reinforced by an accurate understanding of all its smaller parts - books,

paragraphs, verses, words - is the goal at which we are aiming in bible study. And context is a necessary tool to bring us to that understanding.

How can we put all this into practice? I would suggest the following method to help us gain a contextual mindset as we study:

1. Read the entire book that contains the passage you are about to study. Endeavor to follow the general flow of thought, and write down major themes. If you can, try to express the major purpose of the book in a sentence or two (this may require multiple readings).
  - a. In Genesis, pay special attention to the *toledoth* section which contains the passage you are studying. To find the boundaries of this section, look backwards in the book until the first time you see the phrase, "These are the generations of..." Next, look forward in the book until you see the same phrase. The material in between these two phrases is a literary unit within Genesis (There are ten of these sections in all).
  - b. In the psalms, treat each psalm as one self-contained unit. However, the more psalms you are familiar with, and the more *types* of psalms you are familiar with, the more confidence you will have in understanding the psalm you are studying.
  - c. In Proverbs, there are typically sharper transitions and a less easily-defined flow of thought. Therefore, when you are studying individual proverbs, be familiar especially with the chapters 1-3 and chapter 8, and use the principles given in those chapters to help you interpret the specific verse you are studying in any chapter.
  - d. In the gospels, remember that the different gospel accounts of the same event may prove very helpful in your study (particularly in the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Also, remember that each gospel has a different emphasis, and therefore, the different authors may be driving home a different point in dealing with the same event.

2. Read the paragraph that the verse(s) you wish to study is a part of. Read it slowly and carefully several times, laboring to see all the connections and follow the whole train of thought.
3. Do a word study on the significant words and a division of phrases (as we practiced last lesson) on the verse(s) you are studying.
4. Relate the findings of your word study/phrase division to the paragraph. How does this information help you better understand the paragraph as a whole?
5. Relate your findings to the book as a whole. How does this fit into the major themes being developed? How does it clarify your understanding of the author's purpose?
6. Relate your findings to the bible as a whole. How does this fit into God's plan of revealing his Son and proclaiming the plan of redemption that he has eternally purposed in Christ?
7. Apply your findings to your own life and circumstances. How does this passage affect me? Does it give me instruction on how I ought to live? Does it reveal anything about my heart? Does it reveal anything about the person and work of Christ, and how his work can change my heart and enable me to live in a manner pleasing to the Lord?

### **Study Questions:**

1. Take the passage that you did a grammatical study on last week (I John 2:3-5), and relate it to its context: first, read the whole book of first John, and relate this passage to the major themes of the book. Then, compare the passage to the writings of John as a whole. Finally, relate these verses to the bible as a whole: What information does I John give us that is necessary for us to understand the epic story of the redemptive work of Christ? What does this passage specifically tell us about who Christ is, and the results of what he has done on the cross in the believers' lives? How can you take these truths and apply them to specific struggles and situations in your own life?



## Putting It All Together

We have now examined foundational principles of bible study relating to the divine nature of the word, as well as principles relating to its human nature. With respect to the latter, we have looked at the necessity of studying with a historical, grammatical, contextual hermeneutic, and examined some methods of putting those three principles to use. In the next five lessons, we will look at some differences in the various genres of scripture (e.g. histories, psalms, prophecies, New Testament epistles, etc.), and how those differences will affect the way we study. But for now, it may be beneficial to have a review of the last five lessons, and put it all together in an overview of how to approach a thorough study of any passage. The following steps may help us to bring all of the related concepts we've been studying into one unified plan of attack.

1. Before beginning the study, pray that the Spirit of God would open your eyes to the glories of the truths in the passage. Confess your faith in him, and sincerely and fervently ask for him to show you Christ, and change you into that same image, through the verses that you are about to study.
2. Study the history of the passage. Use the historical indicators of the book you are studying, as well as relevant material from the rest of the bible. It may be helpful to consult Bible histories, atlases, and background commentaries.
3. Study the context of the passage, relating the verses you are studying to the themes of the book, and the Christological focus of the bible.
4. Do a word study on the significant words in the passage. Find the word used in the original language, and study its range of meanings from different occurrences of the word in scripture, as well as the specific meaning that it must have in the context.
5. Divide each phrase, and label it according to its relationship to the phrases surrounding it.

6. With this better understanding of the passage, relate it to its biblical context once again.
7. Take the timeless truths of human nature, Christ, his work, and the effects of his work on believers, and apply them to specific circumstances in your own life.
8. Share the results of your study with other believers in the body, and listen to any insights they may have from studying the same passage or related passages.
9. Thank God for the riches of his revelation of Christ to us, and glorify and worship the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world!

### *E-Sword: A Helpful Tool*

By now, you may realize the many benefits of extra-biblical resources that God has provided for us through his saints from all ages. You may not have the ability to purchase many of these resources on your own, or the time to spend hours thumbing through pages. God has graciously led one of his servants to put together a software program that contains many helpful resources in an easy-to-use format, and to make it available for all believers at no cost. This program will install various translations of the bible on your computer, valuable dictionaries based on the original languages, the ability to look up the original words with a click of the mouse on the text you are studying, and a variety of historical/background works, grammatical and devotional commentaries, systematic theologies, etc. If anyone is interested in useful software for bible study, but cannot afford the more expensive options, I would encourage him to visit [www.e-sword.net](http://www.e-sword.net) for free and helpful downloads.

### *Back to I John 2:3-5*

Now that we've spent some time and effort studying I John 2:3-5, let's put all the pieces together, and go through the steps of examining this paragraph in a corporate time of worship. Use the following printout of the passage to take notes on.

**1Jo 2:3** And by this we know that we have known him, if we keep his commandments.

**1Jo 2:4** The one who says, “I have known him,” and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

**1Jo 2:5** But whoever keeps his word, truly in him the love of God has been perfected. By this we know that we are in him.



## Understanding Historical Narratives

Today we begin the third and final segment of our study together. The first five weeks we spent examining foundational principles that come from our understanding the word of God as *divine*. In the next five lessons we looked at necessary hermeneutical elements that arise from our understanding of the *human* aspect of God's word. In the five weeks which remain, we will apply these principles to the different genres that the bible contains. How are the historical narratives of the bible different from the psalms? How are the prophecies different from the epistles? How does every genre point to the centrality and all-sufficiency of Christ? How can we employ a historical, grammatical, contextual hermeneutic that is appropriate for each particular genre that we study? These are some of the questions that will occupy our attention for the remaining five weeks of class. The first genre that we will examine together is that of the historical narrative.

Historical narratives are in one sense one of the easiest genres in scripture to understand. It may be difficult to follow the logical progression in some of the epistles, or to make sense of all the symbols and understand the time frames throughout the prophets, or to discern who is speaking and who is being spoken to in many of the psalms. But anyone can follow a story. And history is simply the story of a person or a nation or an epoch. The historical narratives typically flow smoothly from one event to another, often in chronological order. The dialogue is usually straightforward, and clearly attributed to one speaker. Many of the interpretive questions we labor to answer in the other genres seem simple and obvious in history. But in another sense, historical narratives can be one of the most difficult genres to understand. It is easy to determine *what* is being communicated; it is far more difficult to determine *why*. It is easy to see why the epistles were written, and how they point to Christ. It is easy to see the reason for the psalms and the prophets, and the vital role they play in pointing to the coming Messiah. But why did God have the histories of individuals and nations recorded for us in his word? And why did he choose the particular persons and events that he chose, and not others which he might have chosen? What was God's overriding purpose that determined which historical events he would record for us? These are some of the difficult questions with which we must grapple as we turn to the historical portions of our bible. In this light, our interpretive task in the historical

narratives is more difficult than it first appears. However, this task will be greatly facilitated if we keep two basic principles in mind that deal with God's purpose in setting down an inspired historical account for his people to study.

1. The history contained in the bible is *redemptive* history.

Another way of saying this is that bible history is the history of the advance of the kingdom of God. Bible history is not a history of the great nations of the world. It is not a recounting of the lives of influential world figures. It is not even the history of one small nation to which God chose to give his oracles and commandments. Instead, it is the history of God's kingdom, the history of God's great purpose of redeeming and purifying for himself a people that would be his inheritance, as he would be their God. And if the bible is the history of a kingdom, the central figure of that history is the King. If the bible is a history of God's redemptive purpose, the central figure of that history is the Redeemer. If the bible is a history of God's covenant dealings with man, the central figure of that history is the Mediator and Fulfillment of the covenant. If the bible is a history of God's promise to fallen mankind that he would restore fellowship with them and would be their God and would dwell among them, the central figure of that history is Immanuel, God with us. As we look to the historical portions of the bible, we must be looking for the advance of a kingdom built upon the covenant promises of God, a kingdom whose citizens would be purified and redeemed from the curse, a people whose God would be Jehovah forevermore. Furthermore, we must recognize that every advance and growth and unfolding and blossoming of that kingdom is the glorious work of one individual, Son of God and Son of Man, the Redeemer, the Messiah, the promised Seed, the Conqueror of all evil, the Destroyer of the serpent, the King of all ages, reigning on the throne of David forever. From Genesis to Revelation, every historical account in the bible is an account of this great kingdom. And it is a glorious history indeed.

2. The history contained in the bible is *typical* history.

If a great artist were passionately in love with a woman, he would not be content merely to describe her beauty and worth as he conversed with a few friends. Everything he did, at some level or another, would be about her. When he painted, his paintings would be filled with images of her in every conceivable setting, and engaged in all of her customary activities. When he sculpted, she would be his theme and subject. When he wrote, his poems would be suffused with glimpses of her attributes and qualities. In short, he would not be content simply to *describe* her - he would also *picture* her and *illustrate* her in everything that he did. When God designed his glorious kingdom of redeemed worshipers, and entrusted to his beloved Son that work of *accomplishing* this mighty redemption and subsequently *enjoying* the effects of his victorious labor as he reigned triumphantly over all the world, he did not stop with simply telling us this glorious truth. That alone should have been enough to fill our hearts with worship and delight for all the ages. That alone should have been a grand enough truth to shape our thoughts as we looked at every circumstance in life. But we are a weak and near-sighted people, and how easy it would have been for us to lose the sight of our all-encompassing Savior as we looked at the mundane things of the world, and the age-old histories of mankind. But God, the Planner and Shaper of history, wisely and graciously purposed that, beyond just *telling* the world of the glories of his Son, he would picture and illustrate those truths in every conceivable manner. As we examine the histories of the bible, it becomes apparent that so many people and so many events reflect in such a startling manner who Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross, that it is impossible to call them coincidence. Rather, the God who planned the redemptive work of Christ also planned all of history to foreshadow in a thousand diverse ways that one grand accomplishment. All of history moves toward the fulfillment of one great Messiah accomplishing one great work. But on the way to that final, universal fulfillment, we have that person and work pictured over and over again.

*Examples of types in the Old Testament*

1. Example of persons who clearly typify the Messiah
  - a. Abel
  - b. Noah
  - c. Abraham
  - d. Melchisedek
  - e. Isaac
  - f. Joseph
  - g. Moses
  - h. Joshua
  - i. Gideon
  - j. Sampson
  - k. David
  - l. Solomon
  - m. Jonah
  - n. Hosea
  
2. Examples of things and events which clearly typify the advent and work of the Messiah
  - a. Abraham's slaughter of the kings
  - b. Abraham's praying for the life of the Pharoah
  - c. Sarah's being given a miraculous conception of a promised seed
  - d. Joseph's being betrayed by his brothers, persecuted on false pretexts, cast down into the pit, raised up to a glorious position at the right hand of the king, supporting the whole world with life-giving bread, amassing great riches, graciously reconciling himself to his wicked brothers, seeing his brothers bow down before him, etc.
  - e. The Passover
  - f. God's redeeming Israel from Egypt
  - g. The crossing of the sea
  - h. God's provision of bread in the wilderness
  - i. The Rock which flowed with water
  - j. The pillar of cloud and fire

- k. The Tabernacle
- l. The sacrificial system
- m. The defeat of the tribes of Canaan
- n. The wealth of the nations flowing in to Solomon
- o. The queen of Sheba coming to hear Solomon's wisdom, etc.

### **A Study of Genesis 4:1-17**

1. How does this passage tell the story of the unfolding of the kingdom of God?
  - a. We find the first glimpse of the coming of God's promised seed, when God gives Eve the first "seed" ever born into the world. This sets the stage for the avenue of the coming king, and for the multiplication both of his enemies that he must destroy and his people that he must redeem, in accordance with the prophecy in Genesis 3:15.
  - b. We find the first account of personal faith as requisite for entering the kingdom: first, from Eve, whose response to the Lord's giving her a seed indicates faith; and second, from Abel, whose sacrifice demonstrates true faith.
  - c. We find the first division of all mankind into two radically separate classes: believers, who are counted righteous with God, and whose true country is not of this world; and unbelievers, who make this world their home, and are under the curse of sin and the wrath of God.
  - d. We find the first hint that God sovereignly chooses citizens of his kingdom contrary to man's expectations, when, as with Jacob and Esau, the younger brother is chosen, while the older is rejected.
  - e. We find the first account of the people of the world persecuting the people of God.

- f. We see the beginnings of the widespread effects of sin and the curse, as the whole world begins to be peopled with those who are wicked.
- g. We see for the first time God's design in giving political authority to the nations of the world that did not know him, and actively promoting and supporting that authority.
- h. We see that, despite all the intentions of an unbelieving world at enmity with God, God's church can never be destroyed by the serpent.

2. How does this passage foreshadow the coming Messiah?

- a. We glimpse the bloody sacrifice of Christ on Calvary in Abel's bloody sacrifice on the altar.
- b. We foresee Christ's being rejected for speaking the truth as Abel was despised and rejected of his brother for displaying the truth.
- c. We foresee Christ's being slain by wicked men because he is just, as Abel was killed for his righteousness.
- d. We see Christ's blood crying out in condemnation of all who reject his sacrifice, as Abel's blood cried out from the ground.
- e. We see God rising up to judge the enemies of his holy Son, as he rose up to judge Cain for his wickedness against his brother.
- f. We see Christ's role as the great Shepherd of the sheep, as Abel, the first man born twice, is a shepherd of sheep.
- g. We see how those of future ages would falsely speak well of Christ, while despising him in their hearts (in his day and ours), as Cain pretended to speak peaceably to his brother, but when they were alone, rose up and slew him.

h. We see that all attempts of the ungodly to support and sustain life after they have rejected the life Christ offers must finally fail; as Cain found no nourishment from the fruit of the ground after he had been counted displeasing to God.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Study Genesis 1:1-21. Look for how this passage relates to the progression of redemptive history and the kingdom of God, and how it typifies Christ. Express how we can understand Christ more clearly because of this passage. Find principles that the author intended to communicate, and apply those principles to specific situations in your own life.



## Understanding the Psalms

The Psalms are essentially a collection of the prayers of faith arising in the hearts of redeemed men and ascending to the throne of God. This causes them to take on a very different character from the rest of scripture, and invests them with their own peculiar set of difficulties - e.g. to what extent are they normative and authoritative for the lives of believers today? Or, how may we derive divine instruction from that which was intended for a divine audience? In other words, how can we find a word from God in prayers to God? These questions may not have a simple, easy answer, but consideration of them, at the least, leads to a recognition of some basic criteria that have been consistently assumed by the church throughout history, and that are invaluable in a proper understanding and interpretation of the Psalms. Some of these are as follows:

### *Foundational Principles of Interpretation of the Psalms*

1. The Psalms are harmoniously united with the rest of scriptures.

Luther referred to the book of Psalms as "a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament." In other words, not only does the book of Psalms not contain any doctrine which is incompatible with the rest of scriptures; but more than that, it contains the entire scope of biblical doctrine, in its own distinctive style and form, and for its own distinctive purpose. There is no major doctrine that does not find an accurate expression in the Psalms.

2. The Psalms center on the person and work of Christ.

From the days that Christ declared to the disbelieving Pharisees that the scriptures are "they which testify of me", through the unmistakably Christocentric treatment of the psalms by the New Testament apostles and prophets, and down through the modern church era; doctrinally sound, spiritually mature believers have found Christ at the center of all the Psalms. Not only are there many psalms which explicitly look ahead in prophecy to the days of the Christ; but beyond that, all the psalms - all the confessions of faith, all the descriptions of the blessedness of the forgiven, all the pleas for

deliverance, the outpourings of praise, the cry for justice against those who are opposed to God and mercy for those who truly love him - all of these have their root in the work of the coming Messiah. Furthermore, all of them arise from hearts that have been well-grounded in the faith of that coming Messiah. Very consciously, then as now, the church's hope rested in Christ alone for forgiveness and blessedness. Cf. Acts 2:25-31; Rom. 4:4-8 .

3. The Psalms are personal and emotional expressions of doctrinal truths.

What sets the Psalms apart from the rest of scripture has nothing to do with doctrine: doctrinally, the Psalms are identical with the whole Bible. Rather, it is the mode of expression of that doctrine which makes the psalms unique. The Psalms take the great doctrinal truths of scripture and express them in excruciatingly personal ways. They express how orthodoxy shows up in the life of a believer. Therefore, they are not only absolutely true, but they are also intensely applicational.

4. The Psalms are broadly divergent in style, function, and purpose.

The Psalms lack the clear logical progression of, say, the New Testament epistles. Instead, psalms are more self-related than collection-related. In other words, each psalm is a self-contained unit, and should be treated as such in study. These self-related poems are broad enough to showcase the proper response of man to God in virtually any situation. Basically, the psalms relate the amazing glory and grace of redemptive history to every conceivable personal situation, in an emotional manner. That personally-appropriated, emotional expression of redemptive history has its perfect manifestation in the Messianic psalms, where Christ himself, as the God-man gives expression to his human emotions; it is also faithfully expressed by the "holy men of old" pouring out their own hearts under the inspiring ministry of the Spirit.

This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it should be representative of a basic attitude that the church has historically possessed in the interpretation of the psalms. As with any scripturally-derived understanding, certain elements of this approach have historically come under attack, and are even under attack today. Specifically, and perhaps most dangerously, there is sometimes a naturalizing approach to the Psalms, which fails to see Christ at their heart, but relates them instead to an evolution of religion as it finds expression in Israel's history. These underlying ideas are evident in many commentaries, etc. As in other matters, the wise Christian will employ discretion, under the Spirit's guidance, whenever he reads commentaries and hears preaching that pertains to this topic.

### *Various types of Psalms*

We make our interpretive task easier when we recognize that the psalms may be grouped together under several basic headings, or classifications. There are various ways that the psalms may be classified: the original compilers of the canonical psalms, organized them into five books, that are loosely connected thematically. Each of these books begins with an introduction to the book as a whole, and concludes with a doxology, or call to praise. In a broader sense, Psalm 1 stands as an introduction to the entirety of the psalms, and Psalm 150 concludes with a grand doxology/call to praise. This can be a helpful organization to keep in mind, and many translations today indicate the beginning and ending of each of the five books (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150). Another classification that can be valuable to note is the organization of psalms by author. Many of the psalms are Davidic; some are written by Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, or anonymous writers (many of whom wrote during the time of the exile). This organization is helpful, because it allows us to place the psalm in its historical context. Perhaps the most useful classification is into types. The weakness of this approach is that it has no objective, canonical basis, as the other two organizations. However, if we understand that weakness, and never let our determination of the type control our interpretation, but instead, use it to compare the psalm we are studying with other psalms of similar themes for a fuller understanding, this organization can be particularly helpful. The following is a listing of some of the more commonly recognized types of psalms.

## 1. Laments

Many of the psalms express lamentations over various struggles in the lives of the psalmists. These psalms are beautifully applicational to us as believers today, for they recognize that the Christian life, this side of the eternal state, is a life full of striving and difficulty occasioned by the weakness of the flesh, the opposition of the wicked, and the generally trying circumstances of life in this world. However, as the psalmist looks beyond these problems to the certain hope and victory accomplished for us by Christ, he is motivated to call upon the Lord, and seize the unshakeable hope that comes from who Christ is, even in the midst of inconceivably hard trials. These psalms are an unspeakable comfort to all of us today who have the same struggles and the same Christ as these early psalmists. Some laments are personal (e.g. Psalm 3), while some are corporate (e.g. Psalm 12). Both of these hold forth tremendous comfort as we struggle with despair in our personal lives or despair for the state of the church as a whole.

## 2. Penitential Psalms

Our despair and earthly struggles are so often related to our own sins and failures. What encouragement there is in reflecting on the penitential psalms (e.g. 32) and rejoicing in the grace of God, who, because of Christ, does not impute the sins of his people to their account, but freely forgives those who confess their sins and trust in the Messiah!

## 3. Psalms of Trust

We get a clear picture of the centrality and practical outworking of faith in the lives of believers from psalms such as Psalm 11, where the saints of old reflect on the sure faithfulness and trustworthiness of our God, who gave us his Son to heal every disease of the body and soul for all who put their faith in him.

#### 4. Wisdom Psalms

It is intensely applicational to look at how the life of faith in Christ fleshed itself out in daily wisdom for believers of old, as we reflect on the wisdom contained in such psalms as Psalm 37.

#### 5. Thanksgiving Psalms

As with the laments, these psalms may be divided into personal (e.g. 18) and corporate (e.g. 66). As the Christian meditates on God's gracious help in the time of difficulties, his response is to pour out his heart in praise of Christ. We are a people too prone to forget the benefits of the Lord, and these psalms aid us in remembering with thanksgiving all that Christ has done for us. Some make a distinction between psalms of praise and psalms of thanksgiving, one of which (thanksgiving) relates more specifically to particular events that God has wrought in our midst. However, there is more similarity than distinction between the two, because the praise of God as a gracious God involves the recognition that his grace has concrete manifestation in our lives.

#### 6. Salvation History Psalms

These psalms (e.g. 78) are closely related to psalms of praise and thanksgiving, but more specifically, they relate the story of God's redemptive dealings with man, and use that history as a motivation for great praise and thanksgiving. How quick we are as a church today to forget the whole history of God's being gracious to us as his people through the work of Christ! These psalms are vital in keeping an eternal, historical, redemptive, Christocentric outlook before our eyes always.

#### 7. Imprecatory Psalms

Imprecatory psalms are often difficult for modern Christians to accept. They emphasize the fact that, just as Christ is gracious to those who are his, he is no less holy and just. And his justice and wrath is the

peculiar portion of those who do not belong to him. It is a good and glorious thing that Christ advance his holy kingdom by destroying its enemies and judging the wicked. Although believers must not finally assume who is called to be given grace, and although we must extend the invitation of God's free grace to all mankind, nevertheless we must recognize that not all men are chosen to be saved. And it is appropriate that we pray that Christ would vindicate his holy name and program by destroying the enemies of righteousness, just as he preserves those who love his name. Psalm 137 is an example of an imprecatory psalm. Among other things, it indicates that there is a necessary relationship between mercy for the church and judgment for the enemies of the church.

## 8. Royal Psalms

Many psalms express the glory of the kingdom God built for David, with an understanding that the Davidic kingdom is identical with the eternal kingdom of Christ, who reigns on David's throne, now and forever. Our eyes today are far too easily consumed with an awareness of the earthly political context, and far too easily blinded to the truth that the kingdom of which we are citizens is the eternal Davidic kingdom of Christ. How profitable it would be for us to exult in the sight of our true political orientation, and be consumed with the knowledge of the glorious Messianic kingdom of eternity, as we feast on such royal psalms as Psalm 72! How profitable to exult in the sight of our spiritual Zion, the dwellingplace of God, the seat of his kingdom, from such psalms as Psalm 87!

## 9. Messianic Psalms

In one sense, every psalm in the bible could be called Messianic. Every psalm is rooted in the knowledge of who Christ is and the benefits he holds forth to those who trust in him. Every psalm is saturated with praise for who Christ is and all the mighty works he has done. But some give more specific prophecies than others of the person and work of the coming Christ, e.g. 2 and 22.

## *Poetic structure*

One way in which the psalms are distinct from much of the bible, is that they are poetry, not prose. Therefore, understanding the structure of Hebrew poetry will help us understand more exactly what the psalms mean (as well as other poetic portions of the bible). The following list of poetical devices and tips for interpretation should be helpful not only in the psalms, but also in Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, major portions of the writing prophets, and poetic content that shows up all throughout the Old Testament, even in many of the historical writings.

### 1. Parallelism

Hebrew poetry is built on the principle of parallelism. This is distinct from English poetry, which is built on the principle of regular rhythm, and often employs rhyme. Understanding Hebrew parallelism, will enable us to understand the emphases of the authors, as well as the relationships between various concepts. There are three basic types of parallelism that it would be profitable for us to understand.

#### a. Synonymous Parallelism

Synonymous parallelism repeats the same essential thought for emphasis. Where synonymous parallelism is employed, we should not look for two different meanings of the parallel phrases, but understand one meaning, very emphatically stated. e.g. Proverbs 1:28 .

#### b. Synthetic parallelism

Synthetic parallelism gives one truth, and builds upon that truth. Where synthetic parallelism is employed, we should look for a truth that is built upon, or organically related to the truth which precedes it. e.g. Psalm 1:1 .

### c. Antithetic parallelism

Antithetic parallelism states one truth, then gives its opposite, or a contrasting truth. Where antithetic parallelism is employed, we should look for both the positive and negative side of one basic truth. This helps us to make necessary connections - if this is true, then it must mean that this is false. If this results in blessing, it must mean that this results in cursing, and so on. e.g. Psalm 35:26,27 .

## 2. Stanza division

Just as in much of English poetry, Hebrew poetry is frequently written in stanzas. Breaking up a psalm into its different stanzas will help us better understand its logical progression and flow of thought. For example, Psalm 29 may be divided into five stanzas: Verses 1,2; verses 3,4; verses 5-7; verses 8,9; verses 10,11 .

## 3. Progression of dialogue

In one aspect, Hebrew poetry resembles the old English ballads: in both of these poetic forms, the text moves largely by way of dialogue. And usually, this dialogue is not indicated by the introductory statements that you would expect in prose. Consider the following excerpt of an old Scottish ballad:

"O where have you been, my long, long love,  
This seven years and more?  
O I'm come to seek my former vows  
Ye granted me before.

O hold your tongue of your former vows,  
For they will breed sad strife;  
O hold your tongue of your former vows,  
For I am become a wife."

Notice that the story unfolds along the lines of dialogue, but the dialogue is not set off by any introduction such as you would expect in prose (e.g. "he said," "she responded," etc.) In order to follow the story line, the reader must pick up who is speaking, and to/about whom he is speaking, from contextual clues alone. Now consider the following excerpt from Psalm 108:

Psa 108:8-13 Gilead is Mine; Manasseh is Mine and Ephraim is the strength of My head; Judah is My lawgiver; Moab is My washpot; I will cast out My shoe over Edom; I will triumph over Philistia. Who will bring me into the strong city? Who will lead me into Edom? O God, have You not cast us off? And, O God, will You not go out with our armies? Give us help from trouble; for vain is the deliverance of man. Through God we shall do mighty things; for He shall trample our enemies. (MKJV)

In the same way as the Scottish ballad, the plot of this psalm unfolds along lines of dialogue that are not specifically set off: in verse 8,9 The Lord is speaking to the covenant community; in verse 10, the psalmist is speaking to his own heart; in verses 11 and 12, the psalmist is speaking to the Lord; and in verse 13, the psalmist is speaking to the covenant community. Using contextual clues to determine who is speaking, to whom, and about whom is vital for interpretation of the psalms.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Do a study of Psalm 2. What type of psalm is this? How can it be divided into stanzas? How is parallelism employed (where and what kinds)? In each verse, who is speaking? To whom? About whom? What do we learn about Christ from this psalm? How can we apply it to our own lives?



## Understanding the Prophets

The difficulties involved in arriving at a certain understanding of the writings of the prophets are more obvious and numerous than perhaps in any other biblical genre. These difficulties have long been recognized even by some of the most respected interpreters of scripture throughout history. For instance, Martin Luther once observed that, “They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.” Klein, Bomberg, and Hubbard, in An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, recognize that, “[Readers] may find it difficult to decide when one message ends and the next begins...Many prophetic messages also strike them as hopelessly obscure. What is one to make, they wonder, of all those spooky creatures flying or crawling all over the earth?”<sup>4</sup> These questions pose real difficulties. In the prophets, more perhaps than any other genre, a great deal of labor is necessary to make sense of what is being said. However, the task is not hopeless: God inspired the prophetic portions of the bible for our edification, and he included in scripture the necessary foundations to understand them and benefit from them. Recognizing some key foundational principles of the prophets will greatly aid us in understanding their message.

*The prophets enforce and apply the law and covenants.*

The prophets did not come up with a new, strange theology or way of looking at the world. Everything in the prophets’ message is there to some degree in the foundational work of the Pentateuch and other Old Testament writings. The prophets may become more specific in relating the message of the law and covenants to the people, but there is nothing brand new in their prophecies. When the prophets denounced the sins of the people and pronounced coming judgment, they did so in strict accordance with the blessings and cursings of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the covenant as recorded especially in Leviticus 26:1-39; Deuteronomy 4:15-40; and Deuteronomy 28:1-32:42. Understanding these passages will give us the necessary foundations for understanding the writings of the prophets. Involved in this application of law and covenant is both the cursing prophesied for unfaithfulness, and the mercy

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<sup>4</sup> Klein, William w., Craig l. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. *An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, pp. 370-371.

promised in spite of that unfaithfulness, because of the unconditional character of the covenant God established. Leviticus 26, in particular, emphasizes both these elements that are found so often in the prophets.

## 1. Application of law and covenant to Israel

- a. Israel is cursed for violating the law.  
Virtually every commandment given in the Pentateuch is used by the prophets to condemn and accuse the wickedness of Israel, and to pronounce coming judgment. Many prophecies refer to specific commandments which Israel had broken; for example, Hosea 4:2,3, which specifically refers to the third, ninth, sixth, eighth, and seventh commandments, and pronounces judgment on that basis. On the other hand, some passages refer to the law as a whole, and pronounce judgment because of a wholesale violation of all the commandments.
- b. Israel is given hope because of God's gracious covenant.  
The prophets do not end with a message of cursing, promised as a retribution for unfaithfulness from the time of Moses. Their prophecies are also full of unconditional promises of hope, made on the basis of every covenant God had established. Some prophecies of hope even allude to many covenants in the same context, such as Ezekiel 37:24-26.

## 2. Application of law and covenant to Gentiles

- a. The prophets contain many denunciations of Gentile nations, but these are not specifically related to the law which was given to Israel. Instead, they are usually condemned for pride, idolatry, and violence; more particularly, they are often condemned for their mistreatment of God's people.
- b. The prophets give much hope to the Gentile nations, on the basis of the New Covenant, which will turn the Gentiles into true Israel, the people of God's favor.

### 3. Application of law and covenant to Christ

- a. Christ would vicariously bear the curses of the law (Isaiah 53)
- b. Christ would usher in all the covenant blessings (Isaiah 55:3-5)

*The prophets emphasize the exile and restoration of Israel.*

Central to understanding the message of the prophets is the idea of an understanding of the exile (based on unfaithfulness to the law) and the restoration (based on God's continuing covenant of grace). The judgment of the exile is extreme, even to the point of God's casting off his people so thoroughly that they become "not my people". But the promise of the return is also extreme, so that those who were called "not my people" shall be called "my people." This restoration of true Israel, involves God's creating a people for himself from every nation, just as Paul interprets this passage from Hosea in Romans 9. Hence, the promise of restoration extends beyond what happened when Cyrus sent the exiles of Israel back to Jerusalem. This was merely a type and a foretaste of the massive restoration that was yet to come in the time of Christ.

*The prophets clearly demonstrate the centrality of Christ.*

1. Christ is the consummation of the prophets.
2. Christ is the consummation of the prophecies.
  - a. With regard to the curses of the law and the blessings of the covenant

The clear message of the prophets is that the law had been broken, and this demanded God's promised curse; but that the Lord had sworn with an unchangeable oath to be merciful to the seed of Abraham, to the house of David, and to his throne in Jerusalem. The many prophecies of the Christ answer perfectly to both these concerns: Christ is prophesied both to suffer a substitutionary death for the curses of the law and the transgressions of his

people; and he is prophesied to bring the blessings of all the covenants, reigning on the throne of David, and being God with us, the heart of all the covenant blessings.

b. With regard to the coming exile and restoration

We can best understand the exile/restoration motif of the prophets when we view the work of the coming Christ in those same terms. God would reject his people. But this rejection, extreme as it is, could never be sufficient to placate God's wrath against sin, and usher in a restoration of mercy. However, there are prophecies of a coming Messiah, who would likewise undergo rejection and exile. Because of his perfect righteousness, he would be a sufficient sacrifice to placate God's wrath and purchase his mercy so that an undeserving people would know the restoration of his grace. In other words, "The very process that the elect nation must undergo in exile and restoration finds its personalized expression in the sufferings and exaltation of this distinctive servant of the Lord".<sup>5</sup> Not only would Christ suffer exile, being "stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted;" he would also be "exalted and lifted up, and made very high" (Isaiah 52:13;53:4). And not only would he win a glorious restoration for himself, but he would likewise purchase a worldwide restoration, that would affect the remnant of Israel, and all the nations, and even the very earth itself. In light of the massive implications of the prophesied restoration, it becomes clear that, "Reconstitution of Israel in the land that underscores Jewish nationalism and builds walls of separation between them and the Gentile peoples cannot possibly qualify as the restoration depicted in the writings of the prophets".<sup>6</sup>

## **Symbolism and Prediction in prophecy**

The obvious symbolism and figurative language of the prophets may seem somewhat daunting, but if we keep the previous principles in mind, we will be

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5 Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Prophets*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004, p. 479.

6 *ibid.*, 492

much better equipped to deal with the many figurative predictive prophecies contained in the prophets. In particular, we should keep two principles in mind as we approach these portions of scripture.

1. Let symbolism be symbolism.

The prophets contain much of symbolism and figurative language. Much of it is clearly explained as such, for instance the prophecies of the strange creatures that Daniel saw, which the Lord declared were representations of coming world powers. In the same spirit, we should allow for symbolism even in those prophecies which do not have explicit interpretations of their figurative nature. The locusts that have horses' heads and women's hair in Revelation 9 are probably never going to appear literally as the weird beasts John saw. Instead, they represent in some way the trials that God is bringing to judge the earth in the end times. A refusal to let symbolism be symbolism may bring serious problems to the interpreter, even causing him to deny the nature of true Israel, as the New Testament clearly teaches (e.g. Romans 9, Ephesians 2,3, Galatians 3,4, I Peter 2, Acts 15, etc.). Or perhaps causing him to look for a God-ordained return to the sacrificial system, which the author of Hebrews denounces as a blasphemy to the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Ezekiel 40-48 describes in detail the coming temple of the Lord, with all its sacrificial systems, that has never been literally fulfilled in its massive proportions (covering hundreds of square miles). Instead of looking for some literal future fulfillment, we should understand what Christ said about his body being the temple of God, in which God himself dwells among mankind; as well, the New Testament teaching of the church as the temple of God, which extends throughout all the world (in accordance with Ezekiel's prophecy of a massive, world-filling temple). In this temple, God's people, his kingdom of priests (I Peter 2) offer the spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving and well-doing (Hebrews 13). This is a beautiful fulfillment of the vision Ezekiel saw of a coming massive temple, full of priests and sacrifices.

2. Let the main point be the main point.

Much of predictive prophecy is intentionally obscure, so that the readers could have a general understanding of God's eternal purposes in Christ, then look back after the fulfillment to see how beautifully the obscure prophecies were fulfilled. When Daniel saw a vision of the coming kingdom of Greece as a he-goat with one massive horn who moved so quickly that his feet never touched the earth, later readers could look back and see how perfectly that was fulfilled in Alexander the Great, a single, immensely powerful leader, who conquered the known world with almost unfathomable swiftness. Similarly, when all the prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled, we will be able to look back on history and see how perfectly they were accomplished. In the meantime, we should not get bogged down with postulating precise sequences and events of history, and miss the main point that in the end God will pour out wrath on the earth; Satan and his kingdom will fight furiously against Christ; and Christ will gloriously triumph, and secure the worship of his people in unity and adoration for ever and ever.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Do a study of Ezekiel 17. What symbolism is used? What are the main points of the figures of speech being employed? How does an understanding of the history involved clarify Ezekiel's meaning (cf. II Kings 24:15-20; I Chronicles 36:10-13; Jeremiah 37:1-8)? How does this prophecy relate to law and covenant? To exile and restoration? What does it tell us of Christ?

## Understanding the Gospels

In our attempt to understand the gospel accounts, it would do us well to examine three different aspects of this unique biblical genre: first we will examine the question, “What is the gospel?” Second, we will look at the contrasts and similarities between the different gospel accounts. Third, we will discuss the use of parables, a literary device that is found almost exclusively in the gospels.

### *What is the Gospel?*

The word translated “gospel” simply means “good news,” or a “joyful message”. This is an excellent summary of what is contained in the gospels, the joyful account of the birth, perfect life, mighty miracles, profound teachings, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection of Christ, the promised Messiah. The gospels are the very center and pinnacle of redemptive history. Without them, Christianity would be nothing. They are the actual, historical fulfillment of all the prophecies and types for which the Old Testament saints were waiting. They are the sole substance of the New Testament teachings and doctrines. They are the only basis for the church’s faith in the present blessings of forgiveness and reconciliation, and its hope for the coming glorious banishment of all sin and suffering and doubt that still plague her today. Therefore, a proper understanding of the gospel, as related to us by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is absolutely necessary for our growth in grace and in the knowledge that leads us to eternal life. In examining the question, “What is the gospel,” it would perhaps be helpful to note how the authors of the New Testament defined the term. In Romans 1:2-4, Paul speaks of “the gospel of God (which He had promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures), about His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was marked out the Son of God in power, according to *the* Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from *the* dead” (MKJV). The gospel is nothing unforeseen in the history of mankind. We see from this text that “the gospel is a testimony of the revealed salvation, which had formerly been promised to the Fathers in an uninterrupted succession of ages. It points out, at the same time, a distinction between the *promises* which kept the hope of the people in suspense, and this joyful message, by which God declares that he has accomplished those things

which he had formerly required them to expect”.<sup>7</sup> As Paul says later in Romans, “the righteousness of God is openly *manifested*, which was *testified* by the Law and the Prophets” (Romans 3:21). In summing up the significance of the gospel, John Calvin makes the following observations:

Paul means not only that Christ is the pledge of all the blessings that God has ever promised, but that we have in him a full and complete exhibition of them; as he elsewhere declares that “all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him amen,” (2 Cor. i.20.) And, indeed, the freely bestowed adoption, by which we are made sons of God, as it proceeds from the good pleasure which the Father had from eternity, has been revealed to us in this respect, that Christ (who alone is the Son of God by nature) has clothed himself with our flesh, and made us his brethren. That satisfaction by which sins are blotted out, so that we are no longer under the curse and the sentence of death, is to be found nowhere else than in the sacrifice of his death. Righteousness, and salvation, and perfect happiness, are founded on his resurrection. The Gospel, therefore, is a public exhibition of the Son of God “manifested in the flesh,” (1 Tim. iii. 16,) to deliver a ruined world, and to restore men from death to life. It is justly called a good and joyful message, for it contains perfect happiness. Its object is to commence the reign of God, and by means of our deliverance from the corruption of the flesh, and of our renewal by the Spirit, to conduct us to the heavenly glory. For this reason it is often called “the kingdom of heaven,” and the restoration to a blessed life, which is brought to us by Christ, is sometimes called “the kingdom of God”: as when Mark says that “Joseph waited for the kingdom of God,” (xv. 43,) he undoubtedly refers to the coming of the Messiah.<sup>8</sup>

Note particularly how Calvin deals with the terms “the kingdom of God,” or “the kingdom of heaven,” which are used frequently in the gospels. A proper understanding of this terminology – the kingdom of God being the present reign of God in the hearts of believers by the gospel – is vital for understanding the message of the gospels. Dozens of times the gospels proclaim that the kingdom has arrived. But not all understood its nature: Jesus, “being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He

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7 Calvin, John. Pringle, William, trans. *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 16. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003, p. xxxvi.

8 *ibid.*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii

answered and said, The kingdom of God does not come with observation. Nor shall they say, Lo here! or, behold, there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20,21). Understanding this kingdom of God as the universal spread of the gospel, which has already begun and will be consummated when Christ returns, is vital for understanding the message of the gospels.

In Summary, the teaching of the gospels is that God has

1. Fulfilled the prophetic promises
2. Proclaimed the beginning of the kingdom through Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Servant of the Lord
3. Accomplished mighty works through Christ, who lived a perfect life of obedience and righteousness, and manifested in the flesh the very nature and power of God
4. Delivered him up to be crucified as the spotless, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of those who believe on him
5. Raised him from the dead, giving testimony to Christ’s completed work and victory over sin and death; and exalted him as Messiah, the Son of God and Lord of all
6. And God will send him back as Judge and Savior to consummate the kingdom of his eternal reign
7. In response to what God has done *in* Christ and what you have done *to* Christ, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ of you for the forgiveness of your sins.”<sup>9</sup>

#### *Similarities and distinctions in the gospel accounts*

Because of the earth-shattering significance of what God accomplished by Christ through his birth, death, and resurrection, the Spirit inspired four accounts of Christ’s life and ministry. Every one of them proclaims the good news of what Christ has accomplished, focusing specifically on his death, burial, and resurrection. But each of them also has different major themes and

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9 List taken and slightly modified from Rhodes, A. B. *The Mighty Acts of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964, pp. 253-254.

emphases that are more clearly developed than in the other gospel accounts. This distinction is the most dramatic in John, which shares little material in common with the other three, known as the “synoptic” gospels, because they have the same essential point of view. In light of these differences, it would be beneficial to note the prominent characteristics of each of the gospel accounts.

### 1. Matthew: The Gospel of the Promised Messiah

Matthew emphasizes the Old Testament scriptures, and how Christ fulfills them; he gives special attention to the parables of Jesus, containing several that are not found in any other gospel. He emphasizes the discourses of Jesus, (The Sermon on the Mount [5-7], the charge to the twelve [10], Parables of the Kingdom [13], Teaching on Kingdom Life [18], and Teaching on last things [24-26]). He emphasizes the victory of the church, and the destruction of her enemies (16,18,23).

### 2. Mark: The Gospel of the Wonder-Working Servant

Mark gives a very fast-paced account of the life and miracle-working power of Christ. Mark emphasizes the prophesied “Servant of the Lord,” (Isaiah 53, et. al.), and his divine power.

### 3. Luke: The Gospel of the Savior of All Sorts of People

While Matthew and Mark seem relatively more Jewish in perspective, Luke makes very clear the fact that the restored Israel is composed of every tribe, tongue, kindred, and nation. Luke relates the birth of Christ to the world political situation (2:1,2), and includes the prophecy of Simeon that the child was “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (2:32). Luke emphasizes Christ’s concern for the Samaritans and women, sinners and outcasts, the poverty-stricken and the Gentiles. Luke also emphasizes the joyfulness of the gospel message, the significance of prayer, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. John: The Gospel of the Son of God

John is the most distinctive of all the gospel accounts. John emphasizes more the doctrinal truths connected with the work of Christ than the historical accounting of his life. After the other three gospels were written, John wrote to draw out the full theological significance of what had been recorded. Accordingly, he begins with a strong affirmation of Christ's deity, and the benefits he holds forth to the elect. Throughout the gospel, John emphasizes the miracles of Christ which prove his deity, and His "I Am" statements (I am the bread of life [6:35], I am the light of the world [8:12], I am the gate [10:7,9], I am the Good Shepherd [10:11,14], I am the resurrection and the life [11:25], I am the way, the truth, and the life [14:6], I am the true vine [15:1,5]). A key verse for understanding the message of John is the purpose statement he gives for his gospel in 20:31, "But these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name."<sup>10</sup>

When we study the gospels, we should note the distinctive emphases and themes of each gospel-writer as we read his account of an event or teaching of Christ. We should also gain a fuller understanding of the passage by comparing it with parallel accounts in the other gospels.

#### *Dealing with the Parables*

A parable has been defined as "a true to life short story designed to teach a truth or to answer a question".<sup>11</sup> This definition sets it apart from an allegory, in that an allegory is not true to life. For example, Jesus' calling himself the Vine is an allegory, because in real life, people are not vines. But a parable deals with people as they actually are, and events as they could happen in reality. It is essential to note Jesus' own instruction on the purpose for which he spoke in parables: "And the disciples said to Him, Why do You speak to them in parables? He answered and said to them, Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them. For

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10 Headings taken from A. B. Rhodes and slightly modified. *ibid.*, pp. 256, 257, 259, 262.

11 Mcquilkiln, Robertson. *Understanding and Applying the Bible*. Chicago: moody Press, 1992, p. 185.

whoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whoever does not have, from him shall be taken away even that which he has. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not; nor do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which said, 'By hearing you shall hear and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see and shall not perceive; for this people's heart has become gross, and *their* ears are dull of hearing, and they have closed their eyes, lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with *their* ears and should understand with *their* heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.' But blessed *are* your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 10:13-16, MKJV). The parables, then, are designed to convey truth to those who are called to understand the mysteries of the gospel, and to conceal truth from those to whom God has not chosen to give this gift of understanding. The following list, taken from Robertson McQuilkin, gives some instruction on how to interpret the parables.

1. Begin with the immediate context (the reason for telling the story, and the explanation of the meaning, if it is included)
2. Identify the central point (e.g. Luke 16:1-15)
3. Identify irrelevant details (e.g. Luke 17:7-9)
4. Identify relevant details
5. Compare parallel and contrasting passages (e.g. Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 19:11-23)
6. Base doctrine on clear, literal passages (e.g. Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 18:15-17)<sup>12</sup>

### **Study Questions:**

1. Do a study on Luke 11:5-8, following the steps we discussed for interpreting parables: Examine the immediate context; identify the central point; identify irrelevant details; identify relevant details; compare parallel and contrasting passages (e.g. Matthew 6:7-15; Luke 11:11-13); base doctrine on clear, literal passages.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 186-194

## Understanding the Epistles

The final genre we will examine in our study is that of the New Testament epistle. The letters of the New Testament are some of the easiest portions of scripture to see the Christological significance of. The authors of these letters labored to interpret other portions of the bible, showing how everything recorded was about the person and work of Christ. They endeavored to lay out very clearly and logically the significance of what Christ accomplished in his time on earth; what he is accomplishing right now, at the right hand of the Father, sitting on the throne of David and interceding for us; and what effects his once-for-all sacrifice and ongoing ministry have in the lives of believers of this era. But the doctrinal richness of this section of our bibles carries with it a very solemn responsibility on our part as interpreters. Because of the vast significance of the epistles and the solemn, life-giving truths they contain, it is vital that we do not let a lack of attention to every tiny detail of what is recorded lead us astray in the doctrinal matters that are given to us. Peter indicates that there are things in Paul's letters which are difficult to understand (II Peter 3:15,16). But because of eternal weight of what he has to say, it is imperative that we give all diligence to understanding even the most difficult things correctly. With the great riches of the epistles comes a great responsibility for the readers. In order to aid us in this joyful and solemn responsibility, I have noted two characteristics of the epistles, and from these characteristics I have derived four principles to keep in mind as we study.

### *Characteristics of the Epistles*

1. The epistles contain the clearest and fullest expression of the truths of redemptive history ever recorded for us.

One thing we have noted many times in our study is the progressive nature of God's revelation to us of the person and work of the promised Christ. Just as a mustard seed growing and blossoming until it becomes a great tree, so God's plan of redemption began as a tiny seed in Genesis 3:15, and continually grew in clarity throughout the law, the histories, the psalms, and the prophets of the Old Testament. The reached an unprecedented height in the gospels, where we see the long-awaited Christ actually fulfilling all the promises. But in the

epistles, we see yet another step taken, when God, in straightforward language unburdened by the customary types and symbols, declared the full, eternal significance of what Christ had accomplished. There was never a time before the apostles wrote that we had such a clear, plain expression of the riches of God's redemptive plan, and the true nature of the kingdom of Christ.

2. The original audience of the epistles have more in common with us than any previous audience of biblical writings.

We as believers of today have a very real connection with God's people in the Old Testament. Paul tells us that those who believe are the true seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:7,29). Today, Jews and Gentiles without distinction are accepted into the family of God's people as the true Israel, the heirs of all the promises given to Israel in the past (Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:6; Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28,29; 11:24-26). However, there has been a major change in the nature of God's people from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament, believers approached God through typical sacrifices; today we approach only on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Old Testament Israel approached God through a mediating human priest; we approach God through the priesthood of Christ. Old Testament Israel looked to a human king. We look to Christ, our eternal king, reigning on the throne of David. This confident access to God's very presence through Christ alone, without any Old Testament shadows, first became a reality with the original audience of the epistles.

Nothing of the nature of our relationship to God as believers in his precious Son has changed in two thousand years. The status of our relationship with him is precisely the same as it was among the first Christians, but largely different from the status of God's people in previous times. These two truths should shape our approach to the epistles in several ways.

### *Principles for Studying the Epistles*

1. Give special attention to historical, grammatical, contextual hermeneutics

Because of the systematic, logical unfolding of redemptive truths in the epistles, it is especially important that we pay careful attention to all the particulars of historical, grammatical, contextual hermeneutics. If we miss one logical connection, or misunderstand the meaning of one word in the epistles, that small mistake could lead us to great errors, and cause us to misinterpret entire passages. If we misunderstand a word in a historical narrative, most often we can still get the point of the passage. In the epistles, this is not always the case. In the epistles it is vital that we be detail-oriented, and not overlook one word or one logical connection.

## 2. Let the epistles interpret other scriptural genres

Since the epistles are the clearest expression of the doctrinal truths previously given only in types and shadows, it is fitting that we allow the clear truths of the epistles to explain the meaning of the symbolic language and veiled references of so much of the previously written scriptures. The New Testament is full of Old Testament quotations and interpretations. We should never hesitate to let the divinely-inspired writings of the New Testament authors interpret for us the significance of Old Testament passages. Furthermore, we should never understand any Old Testament type or symbol in any manner not consistent with the clearly expressed doctrine of the New Testament.

## 3. Labor to understand the timeless principles being taught in connection with specific problems

The New Testament authors addressed many specific problems of their day, such as gnostic heresies which denied that Christ had literally come in the flesh, and Judaizing heresies which demanded submission to Old Testament types for salvation. While it is helpful to be aware of these specific problems, we should also note that Paul and the other writers did not stop with merely denouncing specific heresies. They brought out the root of the problem, and delineated eternal principles that would apply to it. For instance, when Paul was

speaking against Judaizers among the churches of Galatia, he did not merely say that submission to the Old Testament law as a way of salvation was heresy (although he did say that). He went further than that, and said that attempting to complete God's work of grace through *any* labor of the flesh was heresy (Galatians 3:1-5). It is vital that we see the full weight of the principles Paul gives to us. We may never contend with the specific heresy of the Judaizers. But we do contend with heresies that come from the same root problem. It is important for us to see the timeless principles contained in the epistles, and not only the specific situations being addressed.

4. Endeavor to see the circumstances in our own lives that are similar to circumstances in the lives of the original audience of the epistles

In order to make legitimate applications of the epistles to our own lives, we must be able to see when we have the same root problems as first century Christians had. We must see in our own lives the struggles with pride, dependence on works of the flesh, indifference to sexual sins within the church, minimizing of the weight of gossiping and backbiting, and so on. The early church struggled with all of these things, just as we do. And the New Testament epistles strongly condemn these sins, and show us the only answer to our problems – the all-sufficient grace of Christ, and the righteousness which he applies to us through faith alone.

### *Conclusion*

The epistles contain some of the greatest doctrinal riches in all the bible. But with those great truths comes a solemn responsibility for us to be diligent and careful in our study. However, we should not let this responsibility paralyze us, but remember instead that we have the Holy Spirit teaching us all things. As we pray for his enlightenment and give all diligence to careful accuracy in our studies, we will be richly rewarded with a fuller knowledge of our precious Savior Jesus Christ, and a deeper understanding of the wisdom that leads us to salvation. Eternal praise be to the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!