

The Basics of Bible Study

Grant Kaul

God has revealed Himself in the Bible so that He may be personally known. The overarching theme that ties the books of the Bible together is the revelation of the glory and character of the personal Triune God who sovereignly reigns supreme in His kingdom and eternally redeems His people. Read the Bible to discover who God is, what He loves and hates, and how we are to live in relationship with Him according to His revealed word.

The word of God is to shape our way of life. Our spiritual diet directly affects our spiritual health. Spiritually healthy disciples of Christ routinely engage the Bible to revive their hearts with God's everlasting love and treasure His perfect character and divine revelation for their lives.

Two practices that will yield spiritual maturity in Christ's disciples:

- **Regularly reading the Bible** cultivates our ongoing fellowship with God. The consistent reading of passages and books of the Bible refuels our faith, restores our perspective, replenishes our hearts, and reminds us of God's character and truth.
- **Studying the Scripture** develops a deep understanding and application of God's word.

The fruit of reading and studying God's Word is food for our spiritual lives. The process begins with opening the Bible and culminates in personally applying the Scriptures as Spirit-filled disciples of Jesus Christ. The goal of personal time in the Bible is to know and love God and live out His word. As Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Each time you read or study the Bible, ask God for the following: 1) a desire for God and His truth, 2) a greater devotion and delight in Him, and 3) development, discernment, and direction for your life. Fulfill the charge given in 2 Timothy 2:15 to "accurately handle the word of truth," by growing in the inductive **Bible Study Basics: Observation, Interpretation, and Application**.

1. OBSERVATION *"What do I see?"*

When observing a passage of Scripture, one takes a detective-like approach. When we observe the text, we go from a casual reading of the passage to a more in-depth, inquisitive consideration of the details. Go from just being familiar with the text to investigating its importance. Ask questions of the passage such as the following: What is this passage saying? What words did God select to communicate this thought? What do I see from this passage about God, Christ, His kingdom, life, humanity, sin, the gospel, trials, and faith? Ask the important questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how. When you ask these questions of the passage, let the text answer them as much as possible.

2. INTERPRETATION *“What does it mean?”*

The next step after observation is interpretation to discover God’s intended meaning. Understanding the “authorial intent,” which God intended the original recipients to understand, is the goal of interpretation. When we come to interpretation, the focus is not on “What does the passage mean to me?” but on “What does the passage mean as intended by the original author?”

A proper understanding of the Bible depends on 1) the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit; and 2) the interpretive work of the reader. The Spirit of God opens the believer’s understanding of the word of God so that the work of God may be accomplished in their lives. Discipline and diligence, however, will do us little good if they are not pursued with a conscious sense of dependence upon the teaching and illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit who actively worked in the writing of Scripture (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Correctly comprehending and responding to Biblical truth requires the grace of God (Eph. 1:17-21; 2 Tim. 2:7).

Transformation begins with accurately understanding the word of truth. If we are to follow Christ, we must have the ability to understand and apply His word to our lives. Apart from accurately handling the word of truth, we will fail to understand God’s revelation as He intended. Worse yet, we may develop habits of making the Bible say what we want it to say.

Two errors to avoid when studying the Bible:

- Creating foreign meanings of Bible passages
- Assuming the Bible changes meaning over time

We must be able to correctly determine what the Bible is teaching and discern if what people are saying is really what the Bible is presenting. Understanding and applying the basic principles for interpreting the Bible allows us to arrive at the true meaning God intended. To understand the intended meaning of Scripture, we must follow basic principles of interpretation. The study of these principles and methods of interpreting the text of the Bible is called hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics: the study of the principles and methods of interpreting the Bible to understand the intended meaning of the text

Six Hermeneutical Principles for Correctly Interpreting the Bible: L-I-G-H-T-S

The goal of hermeneutics is to understand what the original author meant. Proper hermeneutics are the interpretive rules applied to Scripture to find the meaning intended by God. The English word “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuo* and the noun *hermeneia*. These words point back to the wing-footed messenger god Hermes from Greek mythology. He was the messenger or interpreter of the gods, especially for his father Zeus. Thus, the verb *hermeneuo* came to refer to bringing someone to an understanding of something in their first language (explanation) or in another language (translation).

Spiritual transformation requires accurately understanding the word of truth. These "Six Hermeneutical Principles" have been offered not to exhaust the subject but rather to provide competent rules by which the Bible may be read and understood. The Bible is not a book to which we can freely assign whatever ideas we want or can imagine. God has spoken to us through His word that we might know His truth. Authority rests with the text God has given us, not in the interpreter who decides an acceptable meaning of the text for today that may seem more compatible with modern cultural trends. The focus of Scripture interpretation is not on what the passage means to you, but on what the passage means as intended by the Author.

2 Peter 1:20-21 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

As you read your Bible each day, do so with the "lights on" by being mindful of the acronym **LIGHTS**, which highlights six hermeneutical principles for correctly interpreting Scripture:

Principle #1: "L" Look for the natural, normal meaning

Principle #2: "I" Identify the meaning in context

Principle #3: "G" Gain an understanding of the original words and flow of thought

Principle #4: "H" Historical context gives insight into meaning

Principle #5: "T" Take into account types of literary styles

Principle #6: "S" Scripture interprets Scripture

These six guidelines for interpretation are not procedures or steps that one systematically undertakes when studying the Bible. Instead, these principles constitute the "mindset" of the interpreter, which governs and guides one's study of the Bible. The following is an overview of what is commonly called the "Literal-Grammatical-Historical" method of biblical interpretation.

Principle #1: "L" Look for the natural, normal meaning

We are to understand Scripture in its natural, normal sense. The foundational rule when reading and studying the Bible is this: seek the basic, most obvious, customary meaning of the words. This principle prevents the interpreter from distorting the text with a deeper, secret, imaginative, allegorical, or spiritualized meaning. In the same way you would read and understand a newspaper, letter, constitution, or a history book, look first for the clear understanding of Scripture, not some hidden meaning that the original author did not intend.

Any text's natural, normal meaning will be either the plain, normal sense or a figurative expression that colorfully presents a thought. As Martin Luther reportedly stated, "When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense." Much of Scripture is written in a plain, literal sense.

You will also find a wide variety of figurative expressions and imagery in the Bible. Figures of speech (such as a simile, metaphor, or hyperbole) are an unusual, more vivid way of expressing a thought. These forms of expression convey meaning or heighten effect, often by comparison or identifying one thing with another.

We are familiar with figures of speech and understand the natural, normal meaning intended by them such as: "I could have died of embarrassment." "I guess I'll have to face the music." "Alvin is as mad as a hornet." "I've told you a million times!" "My team is flying high!" "That argument doesn't hold water." (The argument is as useless as a bucket with holes.)

For instance, when John the Baptist said, "Look, the Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29), he was not pointing to an animal but to Jesus, who was compared to a lamb. The individuals hearing those words, and readers today reading those words, are challenged to think of how Jesus is like a lamb. Since the Jews frequently sacrificed lambs, John no doubt had in mind Jesus's forthcoming sacrificial death on behalf of others and in their place.

As we read the Bible, "Look for the natural, normal meaning," and seek out the most apparent meaning of the words. As you study the Scripture, remember, "When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense."

Principle #2: "I" Identify the meaning in context

Context provides the correct interpretation.

context: the setting of surrounding words, phrases, and sentences in which a particular word or statement appears that gives understanding to its meaning

Correctly understanding a word, verse, or passage of Scripture depends on its relationship to the surrounding context. Context is essential to accurate interpretation. For example, consider the meaning of a phrase such as, "I need a fan." In the context of a hot day, one idea comes to mind. In the context of a basketball game in which you are playing, a "fan" might mean something entirely different.

When statements are taken out of context, they can be presented in a way that completely distorts their original meaning. The same error occurs by taking phrases and verses of the Bible out of context. For example, someone could declare that it is foolish to believe in God because the Bible clearly states three times, "There is no God" (Ps. 10:4; 14:1; 53:1). Check it out. Context will bring clarity.

Proper interpretation is a result of considering the following:

- 1. Immediate context:** the passage exerts the most important control over the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences

- 2. Book context:** look for how the passage relates to the book as a whole
- 3. Bible context:** identify how the passage relates to the Bible as a whole and highlights the nature of God and godliness, our need for and resources found in relationship with Christ, and the redemption He provides

Always try to understand what the author had in mind when interpreting a portion of the Bible. Do not twist verses to support a meaning that is not intended. Never take a Scripture out of its context to make it say something contrary to the text. Incorrect meaning often results from isolating a phrase or passage from its context. When interpreting the Bible, the goal is to understand authorial intent and identify the meaning in context.

Principle #3: "G" Gain an understanding of the original words and flow of thought

The correct interpretation of Scripture comes from understanding the intended and customary meaning of the words in the context in which they occur. An in-depth study of a Bible passage examines the meaning of words and their relationship with one another.

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and a few sections in Aramaic. Eventually, the Bible was translated into other languages, such as English. In the process of interpretation, it often helps to go back to the original languages to gain greater insights and clarification to the biblical words and the sentences in which those words are found.

Word studies help us understand a word's particular meaning in the context in which it appears. Identifying the original word and determining the specific meaning can quickly be done with apps and Bible programs such as Logos, Olive Tree, and Accordance that give you easy access to scholarly research that illuminates the original word's significance and range of meanings. Look up the word "sanctify" from John 17:17 and see what you can learn.

To further advance your understanding of the text, examine the syntax, which refers to the grammatical arrangement of how the words are put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. By noticing the subjects, objects, verbs, and which phrases are primary and which are supporting, the student of the Bible develops a clearer understanding of the text. Also, look for parallels, contrasts, and how thoughts are developed to understand better what a verse or passage is communicating.

Principle #4: "H" Historical context gives insight into meaning

God's word came at particular times, in specific places, and to unique people. Only as we stand in those people's sandals and understand what God was saying to them can the words have full meaning for us. The Bible was written in a culture and land vastly different from our own. Knowing the manners and customs of the time is important to understand the Scripture fully. When examining the historical context, look at the cultural and geographical setting when the biblical author wrote down the passage.

cultural setting: the material and social culture such as traditions, community life, and values

geographical setting: the earthly location and natural features of the place

The **cultural setting** refers to the total ways, methods, manners, tools, and institutions by which a group of people carries on their existence. Because God gave His word to people in differing cultures at different times, the biblical interpreter must grow to understand the customs and world of the original author and initial recipients. For instance, understanding Israel's marriage customs and ceremonial and civil laws will significantly enhance your understanding of various passages (see Matt. 1:18-19; Luke 17:11-19).

The historical context also considers the **geographical setting**. The specific geographical location serves like the backdrop and props in a play by adding important context to various passages and books of the Bible (see Jonah 1; Luke 4:9-13; 8:26-39). The historical principle helps us "see with their eyes" and "hear with their ears" by giving the cultural and geographical background that informs the correct interpretation of a biblical passage.

Principle #5: "T" Take into account types of literary styles

The Bible has four primary types of literary styles, each with unique features. Considering these types of literary styles and their distinctive characteristics aids the biblical interpreter in understanding and appreciating the various literary genres found in the Bible.

Historical Narrative: Genesis through Esther; Matthew through Acts

Key Characteristic: The author selected particular historical events to convey specific themes and lessons. These narratives accurately record events and teach theology through these accounts.

Hebrew Poetry: Most of the "Wisdom Books" (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes); Song of Solomon; Psalms; some of the Prophets

Key Characteristic: Note the particular use of words to create vivid imagery. A unique feature of Hebrew Poetry is parallelism, in which the thought expressed in an initial phrase has a significant relationship to the idea appearing in the following phrase. This develops or reinforces meaning and makes it memorable. Insight into meaning is gained by observing the various parallelism presented in Scripture such as the following examples:

synonymous parallelism: repeating a statement using similar words as in Ps. 120:2

antithetic parallelism: brings together opposing ideas in marked contrast as in Prov. 10:12

synthetic parallelism: involves the completion or expansion of the first part in the second part as in Prov. 21:27

emblematic parallelism: occurs when one statement renders figuratively the literal meaning of another as in Prov. 27:17

Prophecy: Isaiah through Malachi; Revelation

Key Characteristic: The blending of themes such as blessing, wrath, restoration, peace, judgment, future hope, and Messiah, which are uniquely arranged in a non-chronological manner to provide perspective, to call people to personal purity, and to renew a passion for God and His kingdom work.

The two general categories of Prophecy:

Forthtelling: These prophecies contain a message about the present or immediate time they were given. Often this is a call to godly living in the light of Scripture that God has already delivered. Forthtelling comprises the bulk of prophetic literature and offers instruction, reproof, spiritual insights, and exhortation.

Foretelling: These prophecies contain a message about what God will do in the future, presenting insights into what God will accomplish in the immediate and distant events. These prophecies demonstrate that God is in complete and sovereign control over history. Most of these predictions have already been fulfilled because they concern the judgment of various nations, including Israel and Judah.

Hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament are made regarding the coming Messiah and many were fulfilled in the first advent of Jesus, the Son of God. The remaining Messianic prophecies await fulfillment in the events associated with Jesus Christ's second coming.

It is important to remember that the prophets did not always indicate the time intervals between events or routinely write their prophecies chronologically. When a prophet gave a foretelling prophecy, he could refer to any of the following: 1) a present, near fulfillment, 2) a future fulfillment, or 3) a twofold fulfillment, which would include both a near fulfillment and a later future fulfillment. Prophets sometimes highlighted future events, like pointing out distant mountain peaks. Just as mountain peaks appear to be close together but have significant gaps between them, the prophets sometimes combined future events without referencing the great periods of time between them.

Epistolary Literature: Romans through Jude

Key Characteristic: These are "letters" composed with thoughtfulness and purpose that address relevant issues, particular problems, or develop specific themes. These epistles establish people in a deep relationship with the Triune God by developing solid theology and by giving believers in Christ direction on how to respond to His truth and walk with Him in life as a member of His church.

Principle #6: "S" Scripture interprets Scripture

The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. When you come to the unclear, consult that which is clear. For example, read Matthew 26:26 and then reference the parallel passage of Luke 22:19. Another example is to read Luke 14:26-27 and then consult Matthew 10:37-39 to clarify the intended meaning.

A wealth of excellent tools is available to gain insight into any passage. Here are a few "tools for the task" to enhance the discovery process and to gain further understanding of the correct interpretation and original meaning of the passage:

Study Bibles: MacArthur Study Bible, Nelson Study Bible, ESV Study Bible, Tony Evans Study Bible, CSB Study Bible, Ryrie Study Bible

Bible Programs: Logos Bible, Accordance, Bible.org, Blue Letter Bible, Olive Tree Bible

Conservative Bible Commentaries that hold that the Bible is the inerrant (entirely truthful) and infallible (completely trustworthy) word of God

Take time to study and pray about the passage before consulting other resources. Remember, the goal of hermeneutics is to understand what the original author meant.

3. APPLICATION *"What should I do?"*

Application is the crowning step in Bible study! The process begins with opening the Bible and making observations of the text. We then move to interpretation to understand authorial intent. The culmination of our study is application by which we live out the truth found in God's revealed written word. The fruit of our study of Scripture becomes the food for our spiritual lives. Our objective is to become self-feeders of God's word whose lives are transformed by our relationship with Jesus Christ as evidenced by both our convictions and conduct.

As Christ-centered believers, we study the Bible to apply the timeless Scriptures to our daily lives, as seen in our beliefs, attitudes, values and behavior. Practical application of the Bible will transform our lives, our relationship with God, the church's health, and our relationship with others. When considering the application of Scripture as a follower of Jesus, prayerfully ask questions such as:

- What have I learned about God, Christ, His kingdom, life, humanity, sin, the gospel, trials, and faith? What does this reveal about my life that requires the work of Christ?
- How does this passage point me to Christ for wisdom, perspective, love, healing, forgiveness, strength, and grace?
- Why did God have this recorded?
- What am I learning about the everlasting love of God and His perfect character?

- What are the principles and “timeless truths” emphasized in this passage?
- How should I apply this as a Spirit-filled believer in my personal life, relationships, responsibilities, and circumstances?

Apply the passage by considering these **“PACES”** as you walk with God:

Principles to remember

Action steps to take

Convictions to develop

Examples to follow

Sins to confess

God desires His people to become fully mature followers of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:28). Through the study of Scripture, God cultivates a genuine love for Jesus and a healthy maturity in how we go about our lives and relationships. We desire Christ’s presence and wisdom to manifest in the personality that God has given us. Read the Bible regularly. Enjoy God and His truth. Ask God to identify applications for you. The word of God is to shape our way of life.

From the well-spring of our growing relationship with God, we find our character and earthly relationships becoming all He desires. The Bible was written so that anyone who wants to truly know God and how to live in a way that pleases Him can read it and find out. God desires to bring us into intimacy with Himself. The Bible was not merely written for our information but for our transformation. God has given us His word so that we may fully live out the LIFE we have in Christ.

Through reading, observing, interpreting, and applying the Bible, God develops His relationship with His people based on love, truth, and trust. We are the people of the Book. As followers of Christ, we treasure the reality that God’s word is the authority in our lives.

1. Why is it important to grow in your skills to correctly understand and apply Scripture?
2. How does Luke 6:46-49 underscore the importance of understanding and correctly applying the word of God to your life and your personal experience with this process?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Living By The Book](#) by Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks