

**CBC Sunday School**  
**Bibliology: How to Study the Bible**  
**October 31, 2021**

**I. Pray for Illumination**

- A. Illumination: illumination occurs when the Spirit of God gives human minds the ability to understand, affirm, and faithfully apply the words of God. Illumination is God “turning on the light” in our hearts and minds.
- B. If we are to understand the words of God, we need the Spirit of God at work in us.
  - 1. Matthew 13:10-16; Isaiah 6:9-10 – God in His sovereignty grants understanding.
  - 2. Ephesians 1:17-18 – God gives wisdom, revelation, and opens eyes of understanding.
  - 3. 1 Corinthians 2:10-13 – We cannot understand God’s truth without God’s help.
  - 4. John 14:26; 16:12-15 – The Spirit repeats and teaches what the Son and Father say.
- C. Scripture interpretation is more than just understanding syntax and grammar. Many scholars may, and do, understand the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words, and have a wealth of knowledge concerning the biblical material, yet have hearts that do not worship God, or even desire to do so. If we are to truly understand Scripture, God must move in our hearts and minds.

**II. Pay Attention to Genre**

- A. Scripture is written in many different genres. Very often, one part of Scripture exists in overlapping genres (for example, Revelation is an epistle and an apocalyptic work). We read comic books differently than novels, or news reports, and so on. So also we read different parts of Scripture according to the rules of their own genre.
- B. Basic Biblical Genres
  - 1. Narrative

Includes many subgenres, as there are many kinds of stories. Its basic objective is to tell an historically accurate and significant story. In Scripture, the intent is also to tell a theological story – a story that teaches us about God. Meaning is conveyed when we understand the plot, setting, characters, and especially dialogue. Often the reader is left to determine the intended application of the story – what it means to us.
  - 2. Law

Law is intended to give legal codes and case laws that govern the community. Law is often placed within the context of narrative. Scriptural law gives a sense of the heart and holiness of God, establishes His will for His people and how they are to live as distinct community on earth, lays out promises or curses for faithfulness or disobedience, and ultimately exposes our inadequacy before a holy God. As Christians, we are not under the Mosaic/Old Covenant Law, so interpretation and application is difficult. We will need to determine what principles and characteristics of God are transcendent, true, and applicable to us.

3. Poetry

Poetry comes in many forms, but generally speaks from the perspective of the human experience, speaking in prayers, laments, praises, etc. Almost all books of the Bible contain at least some poetry. Poetry communicates truth through artistic impression.

4. Prophecy

Prophecy contains both predictions of the future and judgments on the present. It is often built upon the foundation of law, as God's prophets serve as His prosecuting attorneys, delivering verdicts and judgments upon the actions of God's people, penalties for failure to keep the law, warnings of disaster that will come on God's people and/or the nations, yet also hope in God's future redemption and restoration. Prophecy is often delivered in poetic and apocalyptic styles. The fulfillment of future predictions often happens or will happen in stages, always culminating in Jesus Christ and His kingdom.

5. Wisdom

Wisdom literature speaks in general truths about life, often garnering its wisdom from the ordered ways of creation, as opposed to the specific revelation of God regarding a specific circumstance. It is truth that can be grasped by anyone who can accurately observe the way the world works, as God has made it. Therefore, it is universally applicable, but not always true in each and every circumstance. Instead of providing the answer for every situation, wisdom literature calls the reader to ask questions and apply a certain way of thinking to their own situation (see Proverbs 26:4-5).

6. Gospel

A gospel is a report of good news, and was very often an announcement of a military victory. In Christ, the four gospels became a specific genre of telling the story of the Messiah, telling of his life, teaching, and ministry, all culminating in the cross. The gospels tell the good news of who Jesus is and what He has done. They are not strictly biographies, as they do not seek to tell every detail of Jesus' life. Rather, they are more concerned with telling readers what they must know about Jesus for the purpose of faith and salvation in Him. Like other narratives, the gospels contain many subgenres, such as parable, discourse, genealogy, miracle story, passion narrative, etc.

7. Epistle

Epistles are letters, often with knowable authors and recipients. They are the most straightforwardly didactic of all genres, intending to teach specific truths. They are also generally occasional, in that they speak to a specific circumstance and context. Often, universal truth is applied to specific situations, and the interpreter is called to apply that universal truth to other similar situations. Sometimes, the teaching or counsel given is contextual and limited to a specific context. Much of the difficulty in interpreting epistles lies in determining when an instruction is universally applicable or merely contextually specific, and intended only for a certain time and place. New Testament epistles generally base their moral imperatives on the truth of Jesus Christ.

8. Apocalyptic

An apocalypse is a disclosure or revealing of significant information. Apocalyptic literature reveals by showing, often through signs, visions, illustrations, and dreams, and often through angelic intermediaries. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is usually to show significant events yet to come, often regarding the end of the world, or at least the end of the “present age” in world history. Apocalyptic literature also tends to portray the conflict of good and evil, and in Scripture gives comfort by showing God’s conquering of the forces of evil that plague His people. Through supernatural visions and signs, apocalyptic literature portrays transcendent reality to those who otherwise would have limited perspective.

### **III. Read the Passage Repeatedly, Using Different Translations**

- A. The more you read a passage, the more you become familiar with its themes, structure, flow of thought, repeated words, etc. Ideas that weren’t originally apparent become clear and more pronounced upon multiple readings.
- B. Especially for epistles, reading the whole book can bring greater understanding of a text.
- C. Using different translations (we are blessed by many good English translations!) can help confirm what is clear in meaning, and also highlight words and phrases that have multiple possible interpretations.

### **IV. Make Observations and Ask Questions**

- A. The basic key to good interpretation and study is simply stating what you know and observe, and asking questions of anything you don’t initially understand.
- B. The best interpreters of Scripture are those who ask the best questions.
  - 1. Who is writing?
  - 2. Who is the audience?
  - 3. What is the historical setting, circumstance, or context?
  - 4. Is the author speaking to one person, or multiple?
  - 5. What words are repeated?
  - 6. Are there any quotations or citations of other passages? If so, what is the meaning and context of the words quoted?
  - 7. Are the sentences commands, questions, statements, praises, prayers, etc.?
  - 8. What is the mood of the text? Is it joyful, ominous, optimistic, condemning, etc.?
  - 9. What parts of the passage are confusing, or don’t make sense?

### **V. Place Your Text in Context**

- A. No word or text exists in a vacuum. All come in a context that determines meaning.
  - 1. The great rule of real estate is “location, location, location.” The great rule of Bible interpretation is “context, context, context.”
  - 2. The phrase “the results were negative” can vary wildly in its meaning depending on the context.
- B. There are multiple layers of context that shape the meaning of any given text.
  - 1. Words exist in the context of a sentence.

2. Sentences exist in the context of a paragraph.
  3. Paragraphs exist in the context story or larger section.
  4. Stories and sections exist in the context of a book.
  5. Books exist in the context of the Old or New Covenant.
  6. The Old and New Covenants exist within the context of God's plan of redemption.
- C. There are three basic "story" contexts, or layers, for each passage of Scripture.
1. The story of the individual.
  2. The story of Israel and/or the Church.
  3. The story of cosmic redemption.
  4. Example – David's defeat of Goliath is significant and carries impact for his personal story, the story of Israel, and the story God's redemption of creation.
- D. We have all seen and heard the Scriptures taken out of context and misapplied. Determining context will help safeguard against misapplication of Scripture.
1. This is how Satan sought to tempt Jesus, by quoting Scripture itself and taking it out of context. See Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13.
  2. Consider how context shapes our understanding of Matthew 18:19-20, Revelation 3:20, or Philippians 4:13.
- E. For example, consider Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son. How does the context of the immediate two parables (lost sheep and lost coin), and that fact that Jesus is speaking to Pharisees and scribes, help to determine the meaning of the prodigal son?

## **VI. Outline the Passage**

- A. Determine the main point and main idea of the verse or passage.
- B. Determine the supporting points. What ideas are primary, and what ideas or words are simply supporting the more primary truth(s)?
- C. Try to summarize the passage in one sentence. Summarizing the passage in one sentence can help clarify the overall purpose of the text.
- D. For example, consider Matthew 8:5-13. How would you outline and summarize this passage? What is its main point? Is it simply about faith and Jesus' ability to heal, or is there a greater point being made, and a greater reason for its inclusion?

## **VII. Determine the Theology of the Passage**

- A. Every passage of Scripture says something true about God, humanity, creation, and/or the story of our faith and God's plan of salvation. That is, every passage is theological.
- B. Good interpretation will ask what theological truths are being taught, and how those truths relate to other theological truths.
- C. Over time, we will begin to develop a theological system or grid that guides our understanding of life and our understanding of Scripture. Everyone has a theological grid. The question is whether or not your theological grid is biblically faithful and true.
- D. As you read Scripture, certain parts may cause tension with your theological grid. At this point, you will need to either adjust your grid, or determine if your interpretation is correct. This is because of our presupposition that God cannot and will not contradict Himself, and He is not inconsistent. Therefore, any inconsistency derives either from a deficiency in our current understanding, or a deficiency in our interpretation.

### **VIII. Determine Meanings of Words**

- A. Sometimes the meaning of a passage can rest on the meaning of just one word. This is especially true in epistles, which are more didactic. Consider the word “flesh” in 1 Corinthians 5:5. If flesh means “physical body,” then Paul is advocating for the man to suffer physical death, and Paul’s call is for punitive judgment. If flesh means “sinful nature,” then Paul’s call is for the man to be cast out that his sinful self might be destroyed, and the purpose for discipline is redemptive.
- B. That said, context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of individual words. For example, to understand Romans 3:22-26, you must have some understanding of what Paul means when he says “justified” (as well as “propitiation” and “righteousness”), and this is determined by context. Here “justified” means “to be made or declared righteous.” Paul uses the word differently than does James in James 2:18-26, where it carries a meaning of “to be proven/demonstrated/shown to be righteous.”
- C. Words have a semantic range. Consider all of the definitions of “run.” We do not import all of these definitions into a single use of the word. We understand that each word carries a specific meaning as determined by its context. So, when we say that we are going to “leave the car running,” by context we understand the car will not grow legs and jog somewhere. We know that some definitions of the word don’t make sense in a given context. Again, context is crucial.
- D. Given the previous points, we must be careful not to place too much importance on the meaning of an individual word.
- E. Note where words are repeated. Very often (but not always), the repetition of a word indicates an important theme for and purpose of the passage.
- F. To find the meaning of the word, you will need a good reference tool, like *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, or a Greek or Hebrew lexicon.

### **IX. Determine the Author’s Intent**

- A. Interpretation isn’t complete until you have some sense of the author’s intent in the text.
- B. Sometimes, the author makes his purpose and intent known, as in 1 John 2:1 and 5:13.
- C. Generally, all Scripture is written so that we may know God, repent, believe in Him, give Him glory, and have life in Him.
- D. Within the broader purpose of Scripture, each passage has a more specific purpose. Genealogies were given to ancient Israel so that the reader could know and be encouraged by the family history and lineage of Israel. Some epistles are written to encourage and affirm, some to challenge or correct behavior. Jesus writes to the churches in Revelation to affirm and/or rebuke.
- E. Knowing the author’s intent in writing will help us to know how we are to apply the text.

### **X. Make Personal Application**

- A. The last (but not least significant) step in interpretation is application. If there is no application, then Scripture will have no meaning for us.
- B. We want to be not only hearers of the word, but doers also, as James 1:22-25.
- C. In making application, we ask how the authors of Scripture (both human and Divine) wanted the original audience to respond. How were the original hearers to repent, believe,

behave, react, etc.?

- D. Once we have determined how they were to respond, we can then determine how we are to respond.
- E. Sometimes the appropriate application is an action to take. Sometimes the appropriate application is simply a truth to know; or simply to praise and worship. Not all application is taken in “concrete” steps or actions.

## **XI. Consult References and Helps**

- A. Consulting references is a way of studying in the larger community of the body of Christ. None of us have all wisdom and insight on our own, and all benefit from “conversation” with others looking at the text.
- B. Bibles
  - 1. The ESV Study Bible
  - 2. The NIV Study Bible
  - 3. CSB Study Bible
  - 4. Zondervan NASB Study Bible
  - 5. ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible
- C. Commentaries
  - 1. New Bible Commentary by Wenham, Motyer, Carson, and France
  - 2. Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible by Matthew Henry
  - 3. Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary by Gary Burge and Andrew Hill
  - 4. IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary by Craig Keener
  - 5. New International Bible Commentary by F. F. Bruce
  - 6. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (abridged) by Baker and Kohlenberger
  - 7. Family Worship Bible Guide by Joel Beeke
- D. Dictionaries and Lexical Helps
  - 1. The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible by James Strong
  - 2. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament by Bauer and Danker
  - 3. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon by Brown, Driver, and Briggs
  - 4. New Bible Dictionary by I. Howard Marshall
  - 5. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia by Geoffrey Bromiley
  - 6. New Dictionary of Biblical Theology by Rosner, Alexander, Goldsworthy, and Carson
  - 7. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology by Treier and Elwell
  - 8. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology by Walter Elwell
- E. Surveys
  - 1. An Introduction to the New Testament by Carson and Moo
  - 2. An Introduction to the New Testament by Raymond Brown
  - 3. The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament by Kostenberger, Keller, and Quarles
  - 4. An Introduction to the Old Testament by Longman and Dillard
  - 5. The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament by Merrill, Rooker, Grisanti, and Yamauchi