



### 3 • UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

Becoming a disciplined student of God's Word. (John 8:31-32)

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

John 5:39 *You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.*

Romans 10:17 *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*

2 Timothy 2:15 *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

#### SUGGESTED READING

*Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* by Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel Van Cleave

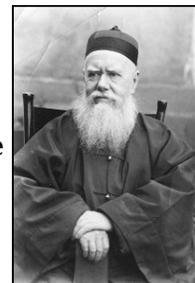
*Understanding Scripture* by A. Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera M. Mickelsen

*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart

*Grounds For Living* by Jack W. Hayford

#### THE BIBLE IS A “FOREIGN LAND”

1. We can easily forget that Scripture is a cross-cultural experience. To open the Word of God is to step into a world where things are very unlike our own. Because we believe that the Bible is God's Word to us we tend to read Scripture our way so that it makes sense to us.
2. **Most of us tend to assume that our understanding of the text is the same as the Holy Spirit's intent.** As well, we bring everything we are to the text: our experiences, culture, former teachings, etc. Unless we learn the actual intent of a Scriptural passage, to whom and why the words were written, we may end up with an interpretation that is very different than the actual meaning.
3. **Hudson Taylor** (1832-1905) was an English missionary to China and recognized the need to immerse himself in the Chinese culture in order to relate the Gospel to the people in ways that made sense to them. He learned their language and lived as close to their lifestyle as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). This was extremely inappropriate for that day! We must approach God's in the same fashion.



## THE BIBLE FOR ALL PEOPLE • *Contextualizing God's Word.*

Because the Bible is God's Word to us, it has contemporary and eternal relevance. It speaks to ALL mankind, in EVERY age and in EVERY culture. God chose to speak through human words in human history. Therefore, every book is conditioned by the language, culture and historical environment in which it was originally given. To interpret the Bible correctly we must not only understand God's Word but understand Bible culture as well.



4. *Because the Bible had been in the European culture for centuries, they believed that their cultural values and norms were the true expressions of Christian life and universal for all cultures.* Hudson Taylor disagreed and brought Christ to the Chinese people in their “context.” He founded the China Inland Mission which included 205 mission stations with over 800 missionaries, and 125,000 Chinese Christians!
5. **The Bible was written to the first hearers or readers with a specific intent on God's heart.** God wanted *them* to understand what He was saying and therefore needed to put it into the language and life situations that they would be able to understand. The words, phrases, or passages that come before and after a particular Scripture, helps to explain its full meaning.

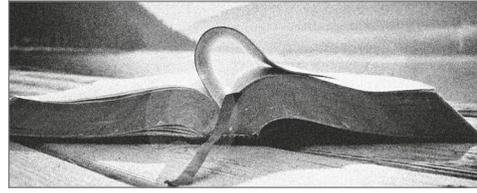
In this lesson we will learn a few basic approaches that will enable us to understand the true meaning behind Scriptures so that we can accurately apply that meaning to our lives today.

### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

1. The unconverted cannot see or understand Biblical Truth.
  - A. 1 Corinthians 2:14 *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* (John 3:3)
2. We must be delivered from a secular mindset. Our minds may be filled with the world's knowledge and trivia but void of Biblical understanding and wisdom.
  - A. 1 Corinthians 3:19 *...the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.* (Proverbs 4:4-9)
3. It is in His light (His Presence) that we see light. Read God's Word *in fellowship with Him.* Psalm 36:9 *For with You is the fountain of life, in Your light we see light.*
  - A. Psalm 119:130 *The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.*

4. Learn to meditate on Scripture. Biblical meditation, unlike the worldly mediational practice of emptying our minds, is filling our hearts with God's Word and pondering on its meaning.

A. Joshua 1:8 *Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.* (Psalm 119:11-16)



5. Develop a pure life style to hear God's voice. Matthew 5:8 *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* (Hebrews 12:14)
6. Always begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to be your Guide. (John 16:13)
7. Read Bible passages in context. This is understood by the passages that precede and follow it.
8. Interpret the Bible as a progressive revelation of God. The Old Testament is largely foundational truth. The New Testament is largely fulfilled truth.
9. Never interpret the Bible in a way that contradicts the rest of Scripture. Wherever possible, let Scripture interpret Scripture. (Matthew 13:18)
10. Bible interpretation is singular, Bible application may be plural. the Bible should be interpreted literally, exactly as it is written, where it is applicable.

**Note:** Always be charitable to those who may differ with your interpretation. A good rule is this: In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

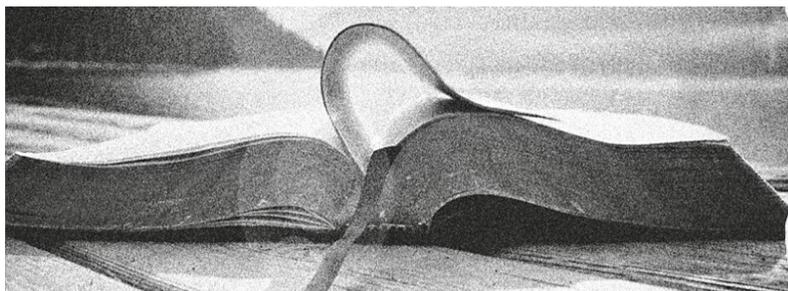
### **WRONG ATTITUDES IN READING THE BIBLE**

If our expectations about Bible study are to be fulfilled, we must be aware of attitudes that work against our understanding of Scripture. They include:

1. The **scientific method**, the approach that there is a "cause and effect" to every miraculous event recorded in the Bible (Matthew 14:13-21).
2. We can be more **committed to erroneous ideas** and beliefs taught in our childhood than we are to the actual teachings of the Bible.
3. A **fear of paradox**, the tension of two apparent contradictions may confuse us.
4. Using **selective literalism**, obeying the commands or teachings we like and ignoring the ones we do not like.
5. **Looking for easy answers** to complex problems, even at the expense of Truth.
6. **Reading and interpreting God's Word through our own understanding.** We, by nature, rely on our own cultural context to make sense of what we're reading. Consequently, the

reader draws his or her own subjective conclusions, without always considering what the passage meant to the original audience.

- A. Do the teachings you have been taught about the Bible such as water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, predestination, women in leadership, or the second coming of Christ influence the way you interpret certain Bible passages today?



**EXEGESIS**, discovering the original and intended meaning of Scripture.

**HERMENEUTICS**, bringing contemporary relevance to ancient texts, the Bible's meaning for today.

## UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT

To understand the meaning God intended for the original hearers and to apply that meaning to us today is the exegetical challenge.

1. Because the books of the Bible differ in the type of writing — narrative (a story real or imaginary, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words), poetry, prophecy, New Testament epistles, etc. — our approach to understanding the context will differ. We can begin by using tools such as books that deal with the ancient customs of that day such as a reliable Hebrew and Greek resource and a *carefully chosen* commentary.
2. At times reading Bible passages such as the epistles seems to be deceptively simple in that the text appears to be self explanatory. However, not all passages are quite that obvious as a reading through 1 Corinthians would prove. For example...
  - A. How are we to take Paul's opinion in 1 Corinthians 7:25 as God's Word? How does the excommunication of a brother in chapter 5 apply to today when lawsuits are waiting to happen or he could simply go to another church? How do chapters 12-14 relate when churches do not believe that spiritual gifts are valid for today? What do we do with 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 about women being silent in the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12)?
  - B. Although the epistles, letters written by Paul, James, Peter, John and Jude, are filled with theology, they were not written for that purpose alone. In many cases, they apply theology to people in a specific time in history with a specific need.
3. In a very basic sense, the exact meaning of a specific passage of Scripture (context) is normally controlled by what precedes and follows it. The basic types of context are:
  - A. **Historical context.** Determining what was going on in the history of the readers whose thinking was deeply influenced by the circumstances of their day.
    - Is there war going on? Against whom? Is there economic depression or drought, etc?

- B. **Cultural context.** The culture of Biblical times was very different from ours, and its writings must always be considered in light of its culture. (Quote page 1, Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes )
- Cultural behavior is usually never explained because the readers were knowledgeable of their particular social customs.
- C. **Literary context.** This asks questions such as: What was the basic purpose of this writing? What is the flow of thought? What comes before it and what follows it? What type of writing is it?
4. Basic context is the paragraph, chapter, or book. Why was it written? What is its basic message? When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians he did so to answer a call for help because of serious problems. When he wrote 1 Timothy he was dealing with false teaching in the church at Ephesus.
- A. Studying the book of James, directed to Jewish believers scattered among the nations, one might sense the apparent “contradiction” with Paul’s teaching on Grace in Romans 4. Paul’s teachings focus on our justification (salvation) while James focuses on the works that flow from our salvation. We can see Paul’s parallel in Galatians 5:22-23.
5. Similar words may not always have the same meaning. The word “mystery” in Ephesians 3:3-6 refers to the relationship of Jew and Gentile as “one new man,” while “mystery” in Colossians 1:25-27 refers to “Christ in you.”
- A. What is the meaning of the word “flesh” in Romans 8:12-13 and Philippians 1:22-24?

## COMMON ERRORS OF INTERPRETATION

Here are some common errors that people commit in looking for answers from the Bible. Although some of these practices may at times happen under the direction of the Holy Spirit, they are not to be common practices as we learn to correctly interpret Scripture.

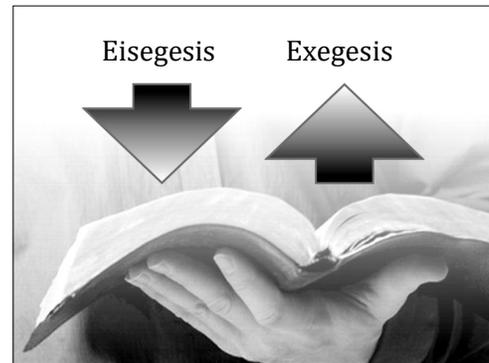
1. **Allegorizing** — Instead of concentrating on the actual meaning of a parable, the text is extended and application is applied beyond the true meaning of the story. This can be done to a wide variety of texts.
2. **Decontextualization** — By ignoring the full historical and literary contexts and concentrating on small units only we miss the overall message. If we decontextualize enough, we can make any part of Scripture say anything we want to.
3. **Selectivity** — This is somewhat the same as decontextualizing. It involves picking and choosing specific words or phrases to concentrate on, ignoring others, and ignoring the overall sweep of the passage being studied.
4. **False Combination** — This approach combines elements from various places in Scripture to make a point using the combination as the interpretation, even though the elements are not directly connected.

5. **Redefinition** — When the meaning of a text produces no immediate spiritual delight or does not say what we want to hear, people are often tempted to redefine it to mean something else.
6. **Extra-Canonical Authority** — By using some sort of special external key to interpret Scripture, usually a series of doctrines or a book that claims to reveal Scriptural truth not otherwise knowable, people suppose they can “unlock” the mysteries of the Bible.
7. **Moralizing** — Attempting to derive a specific principle for living from all the passages of a narrative (Bible story). An example would be, “What can we learn about adversity from the time the Israelites were mistreated by the Egyptians?” Although we may at times do this without contextual damage, the fallacy here is that many times it ignores the fact that narratives were written to show the progress of God’s history of redemption, not always to illustrate principles.
8. **Personalizing** — Although we are to apply the meaning of a text to our own lives, at times people read Scripture in a way that supposes that it applies specifically to them as individuals in a way that does not apply to anyone else. An example would, “Solomon’s building of the Temple is God’s way of telling us that we have to build a new church building.”

## APPROACHES TO CORRECT INTERPRETATION

We are to study and do our best to present ourselves to God as disciples who accurately handle and skillfully teach the Word of Truth. (2 Timothy 2:15) Before we address the two correct practices of interpretation, we need to reveal a very common but erroneous practice of reading our own interpretation into Biblical text.

1. **EISEGESIS** — The erroneous but common practice of forcing our own meaning *into* Scripture as opposed to exegesis, discovering the writer’s original and intended meaning in a Biblical text.



- A. Distortion of original meaning — A classic example is how Augustine, an early church historian, 354-430 AD, interpreted the parable of the “Good Samaritan” in Luke 10:30-37. Mankind started down the road of life but fell into sin which beat him and left him helpless in the ditch. The law of Moses came and passed him by. Finally, the good Samaritan, Jesus, bound up his wounds and brought him into the inn of safety, the church. Understanding Jesus’ intended meaning of this parable results in a completely different interpretation of this parable!
- B. Wrongly established beliefs — In John 5:31-47, the Jewish leaders had a pre-determined notion about Jesus that did not allow them to see Christ for who He was: the Promised Messiah!
- C. Exaggerated interpretation — John 13:1-17 records the washing of the disciples feet. However, people have interpreted this to be a religious act of worship. Why *did* Jesus wash their feet?

- D. Satan is a master in the practice of eisegesis! Notice how he twisted Scripture to suit his own purposes in Matthew 4:3-11.
2. **EXEGESIS** — The careful, systematic study of God’s Word to discover the writer’s original and intended meaning, taking into consideration the historical and literary contents and the social/cultural issues of the time of writing — to whom was it written and why.
- A. Exegesis literally means “to lead out of.” The explanation of a text proceeds from and is based on an objective analysis of its context.
- B. Correct application of a text must FIRST begin with an understanding of the original intent. Otherwise the text can be made to mean whatever it means to any given reader throughout history!
- C. **Important** — A text can never mean what it never meant to the original authors and readers of that message.
- A simple example is found in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 *...But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.* Some believe that the “perfect” is the New Testament and imperfect is tongues, prophecy and knowledge. However, people in Paul’s day could not have known about the New Testament *because there was no New Testament.*
3. **HERMENEUTICS** — This is the entire field of Biblical interpretation. In a narrower sense, it is bringing contemporary relevance to ancient texts, the Bible’s meaning for today. Remember, a Bible text can never mean to us what it did not mean to the original hearers and readers.
- A. The proper practice for hermeneutics is found in understanding the original intent of a Bible text first (exegesis). Otherwise the text can be made to mean whatever it means to any given reader.
- B. The problem of cultural relativity arises when God’s Eternal Word has been given in a particular historical and social setting and now we have to interpret that in situations that are similar to ours.
- Whenever we share comparable particulars (similar life situations) with the readers of the original text, God’s Word to us is the same as His Word to them.
- C. The practice of extended application involves the “right” to extend the application of one text to other contexts without proper research. This is similar to the practice of allegorizing a parable, mentioned earlier.

## QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever interpreted Scripture only to find out later that you needed to “adjust” your interpretation? Give an example along with scriptural references.
2. Is the phrase, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” in 2 Corinthians 6:14 written to mean marriage? If not, what does it mean?

3. Describe the results of Christians practicing “selective literalism,” personally determining what is literal or figurative?

### **USING BIBLE STUDY WORKSHEETS**

*Acts 17:11 Now (the Bereans) were more noble and open-minded than those in Thessalonica, so they received the message of salvation through faith in the Christ with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

Berea was an ancient city in Macedonia (northern Greece) north of Mount Olympus. The town is mentioned in Acts as a place where the Paul, Silas, and Timothy preached the Gospel. The people there are described as noble, meaning of high in rank, possessing high ideals and excellent moral character. Their outstanding characteristic was that, even though they believed Paul, they were not satisfied with only his teachings. They wanted to search out the Old Testament Scriptures for themselves.

### **Bible Study Resources**

1. Bible Handbooks: Hayford’s Bible Handbook; Halley’s Bible Handbook; Eerdman’s Handbook.
2. Concordances and word study books: Strong’s Concordance; The Complete Word Study of the Old and New Testaments (Zodhiates); Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words.
3. Bible dictionaries and atlas: The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary; Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Eerdman’s Handbook to the Bible is useful for studying Bible times and cultures.
4. Theology: Foundations of Pentecostal Theology (Duffield and Van Cleave)

### **Basic Format**

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you understanding.
2. Write out the passage or reference.
3. Identify the type of literature: History, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, etc.
4. Briefly describe the historical and cultural context. Use books such as Haley’s Bible Handbook, Bible Atlas, Eerdman’s Handbook to the Bible, Manners and Customs of the Bible (Freeman), etc.
5. **What does it SAY? (OBSERVATION)**
  - A. Use books such as: Hayford’s Bible Handbook, and Talk Thru The Bible Handbook.
  - B. Describe what is happening (outline the story plot, narrative). Where and why do the events occur?
  - C. Who are the characters?

D. What is the key verse or thought?

6. **What does it MEAN?** (INTERPRETATION)

A. Use books such as: The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible (Zodhiates), etc.

B. What is the writer saying to the original hearers? Why did the writer say what he did?

7. **How does it CONNECT to other Scriptures?** (CORRELATION)

A. Use books such as: Nave's Topical Bible.

B. Where is the message or theme stated in other books of the Bible? Link the message of the passage to major teachings of Scripture and give references.

8. **How does it APPLY to me today?** (APPLICATION)

A. Use books such as: Life Application Study Bible.

B. Discover the important applicable truths. Are there commands to obey? Are there errors to avoid, sins to forsake? Are there promises to receive?

C. What does this passage suggest I should be or do as a believer in Christ?

**WORKSHEETS**

Go to the Institute website and download/print one of the sheets (**Click here**). Read the passage or book and answer the questions.

**CONCLUSION** — What is the main thing you have learned from this lesson that changes the way you read the Bible? Write down your thoughts.

**WEEKLY ACTIVITY SHEET** Ephesians 5:16 *...redeeming the time...*

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

2. My accountability partners are \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3. Journal and write the memory verse from memory before class.

4. Assignment

- Memory verse
- Read the assigned lesson and/or book.
- Special assignments.
- Use the Weekly Time Sheet.
- Meet with your accountability group.

Check  each box below as you do the activity for that day.

ACTIVITIES	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED
Personal Prayer Time							
Bible Reading							
Lesson Reading							
Fasting							
Scripture Memorization							
Journaling							
Sunday AM							
Accountability Meeting							
Volunteer Service (specify below)							