

Understanding and Applying the Bible

Believers should approach the Bible humbly and prayerfully, asking God to speak through the passage being read.

As you read, ask yourself:

- What does this say?
- What does it mean?
- How does it apply to me?

Consult more than one translation. Use secondary study aids. If your Bible contains footnotes and cross-references, read those. Take advantage of the excellent scholarly work that others have done.

Some ground rules for Bible study:

- 1) Remember that the Bible is not intended to be a history book or scientific text, even though it is reliable in the historical and scientific matters it contains. The Bible speaks in *phenomenological* language, describing things as they appear to be rather than in precise scientific terms, just as we speak of “sunrise” and “sunset” even though we know the sun is not moving around the earth. The Bible has been understandable in all cultures and throughout history because of the phenomenological way it describes things.
- 2) Where the Bible record is incomplete, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is incorrect. Scientific and archeological discoveries have overwhelmingly confirmed rather than contradicted the biblical record. Where conflicts arise, it is necessary for us to carefully investigate to see whether the supposed conflict is between biblical teaching and scientific fact or simply between an *interpretation* of scripture and an *interpretation* of those facts. Is the conflict a scientific difference or a philosophical difference?

Remember, the Bible has been the same for 2,000 years, but science has been constantly changing as new discoveries are made – apparent conflicts that exist today may be resolved tomorrow.

- 3) Beware of making the Bible say things it doesn’t really say. Understand that the Bible contains a wide variety of literary styles, including similes, metaphors, hyperboles, parables, proverbs, and poetry as well as straight narrative passages. Some parts of the Bible were meant to be taken literally and others figuratively. Language intended to be taken literally should not be spiritualized to make the passage mean something more than it does. The standard rule of interpretation is that words should be given their normal meaning unless the context clearly indicates that a figure of speech is intended.

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- 4) Understand the context in which a verse or passage appears. Don't take verses out of context and try to make the Bible say something different from what it means. Don't let "proof-text" thinking take the place of responsible study and research. "A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof-text," says D. A. Carson, quoting his father.
- a) Consider the context of the Bible as a whole. The Bible does not contradict itself. If you are faced with an apparent contradiction, do some research to find an explanation.
 - b) The message of each passage of scripture is part of a book of the Bible that was written for a specific purpose and interpretation must be in keeping with the purpose of the book.
 - c) Consider the specific audience to which the book was written. While all scripture is equally inspired by God, not all scripture is equally applicable. It is important to distinguish between primary and secondary applications of scripture. Primary application may extend only to the group or individual to whom the scripture is addressed, whereas the secondary application conveys particular truths that can be more generally applied to a larger audience. [Example: OT law was specifically addressed to Israel, but we can benefit from studying it.]
 - d) Consider the immediate context of the verse or passage. Scripture which precedes and follows any given verse helps the reader to better understand that verse. Taking scripture passages out of context gives rise to bad theology (with the result that we may the Bible say what we want it to say rather than hearing what God has to say).
 - e) Look at similar teachings elsewhere in the Bible. A theological statement in one part of the Bible should be harmonized with any similar statements in other parts of the Bible. Some writings are complementary to others; for example, Revelation draws upon prophecy in the book of Daniel.
- 5) Accurate exegesis of the individual words of a given text is important. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, and often there is difficulty in precise translations. Thus, a knowledge of the original language, or at least the ability to recognize the need for knowing the original language, can be helpful in determining the nuances in meaning in a particular passage. Students of scripture who do not know Greek or Hebrew can still be aided by commentaries and analyses by writers who do have an understanding of the original languages.
- 6) Realize that the Bible has some literary features that are culturally unique, such as the use of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. A knowledge of the literary style can enhance one's understanding and appreciation of the passage. Remember that reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience: it was not written in English or addressed to modern Americans. Understanding the cultural context will help to understand the passage.

Choosing an English Translation

(adapted from How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart)

Literal Translation: Attempts to translate by keeping as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing in the original language, yet still make sense in English.

Examples: King James Version, New KJV, New American Standard Bible, Revised Standard Version, New RSV

Free Translation: Attempts to translate the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original (paraphrase) – usually written by one person.

Examples: J.B. Phillips, Living Bible, “The Message”

Dynamic Equivalent: Attempts to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into precise equivalents in English – provides “updates” in matters of language, grammar, & style in order to improve clarity & readability.

The best translational theory for reading and study.

Examples: New International Version (recommended), New American Bible, Good News Bible, Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible

Compare translations of Romans 12:20 –

“coals of fire” KJV (no one talks like this), “burning coals” NIV, “live coals” NEB.

Literal translations can be more ambiguous than dynamic equivalent because of changing word meanings and modes of expression. Free translations can be more of a commentary than a translation.

Consider a good study bible, which contains added helps, a built-in concordance, background information on each book of scripture, and a running commentary. Just remember that the commentary is not scripture, even though it is printed as part of a particular bible.

Other study aids:

Bible Dictionary – a mini-encyclopedia of bible topics. Very helpful for providing greater detail on people, places, events, customs, and things mentioned in the bible.

Bible Handbook – an overview of the background of individual books of the Bible. Gives information on the historical setting, the writer, the date of writing, the intended original readers, the themes, and how the book relates to scripture as a whole.

Concordance – lists all uses of a given word in a given translation by book, chapter, and verse. It can be very helpful for finding a verse that you may remember in part but can't remember where to find it. It also helps you locate other verses where the same word is used. The best concordances also tell you what the original Greek or Hebrew word was.

Topical Bible – lists all verses in the Bible that deal with specific themes or topics.

Word Studies – provide the original Greek or Hebrew words and definitions.

Commentaries – detailed analyses of specific books of scripture.

Software – for finding verses, doing topical studies, comparing translations, etc.

The Internet – for those with computers and internet access, this can be a great resource. Be careful, though – there's a lot of weird stuff out there, too.

Recommended reading:

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Fee and Stuart

Understanding and Applying the Bible, by Robertson McQuilkin

Knowing Scripture, by R. C. Sproul

The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings, by Robert H. Stein

How to Study the Bible for Yourself, by Tim LaHaye

Principles and Guidelines for Understanding and Applying the Bible

Principles:

1. Since the Bible was written by human beings, it must be treated as any other human communication in determining the meaning intended by the writer.
2. Since Scripture is God-breathed and true in all its parts, the unity of its teachings must be sought, and its supernatural elements recognized and understood.
3. Since Scripture is God-breathed, it is absolute in its authority for doctrine and life.

Guidelines for Principle #1:

1. Base the study on the historical, physical, and cultural setting.
2. Research each unclear and important word.
3. Analyze the structure of the basic unit of thought, the sentence.
4. Examine the immediate context: the passage as a whole, the book as a whole.
5. Identify figurative language and determine its literal meaning.
6. Interpret parables strictly according to the special principles required by this type of literature.
7. Use the parallelism of Hebrew poetry to gain insight into meaning.

Guidelines for Principle #2:

1. Compare Scripture with Scripture for light on each passage, and discover the unity of its teaching.
2. Establish the coherence of revealed truth.
3. Since we hold that the Bible is God-breathed and true in all its parts, when a statement appears to be in error, we are committed to seek an explanation.
4. To understand predictive prophecy in Scripture, faithfully observe biblical guidelines.

Guidelines for Principle #3:

1. Every teaching of Scripture is to be received universally, unless the Bible itself limits the audience, either in the context of the passage itself or in the other biblical teaching.
2. God desires the response of faith and obedience to both the direct teachings and the principles of Scripture.