
Understanding Your Bible

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How To Understand the Bible
by Woodrow Kroll

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INTRODUCTION

God wants you to know about yourself—your sin and your need for a Savior. He also wants you to know about Himself—His character, His hatred of sin and His deep love for you. He wants you to know of His plan for your future as well. So He recorded it all in His Word, the Bible.

The problem comes, however, when you pick up your Bible and start reading it. At that point it must filter through your understanding and interpretation. And you certainly don't want to interpret what God said in a way that He didn't intend. How can you understand it, especially when it doesn't seem to make sense? How can you be sure you are interpreting it correctly? This study is designed to help you understand the Bible as God meant for you to understand it.

LESSON 1

BEGIN WITH PRAYER

When you prepare to study the Bible, find a quiet place where you can be alone. As you turn your attention to the Word of God, begin with a time of prayer. I suggest your prayer usually contain these four petitions.

1. Pray for guidance (Read James 1:5)

- A. Who is the source of this wisdom?
- B. What is God's attitude toward your request?

Beyond the Text: Look up the words “knowledge” and “wisdom” in your dictionary. Based on these definitions, how would you distinguish between the two?

2. Pray for truth (Read John 8:32)

- A. What does truth do?
- B. What does this imply about things that are not true?

Beyond the Text: Think of a time when you did not tell the truth. How did that affect you?

3. Pray for insight (Read 1 Corinthians 2:10)

Insight is the ability to see below the surface of a subject—to get to the heart of a matter.

- A. Who is able to help you do that?
- B. What does He do?

Beyond the Text: List three areas where you need insight.

- (1) _____
- (2) _____
- (3) _____

Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give you insight into these concerns as you study God's Word.

4. Pray for application (Read James 1:22-25)

A. The Bible is compared to what item commonly found in the home?

B. According to v. 23, the Bible and this item share what purpose in common?

Beyond the Text: What truth have you learned thus far that you can apply today?

Sample Prayer:

Heavenly Father, as I come to Your Word, I ask for the guidance of Your Holy Spirit. May He open my eyes to Your truths and give me insight into Your Word. Help me to apply what I learn to my life today.

The basic rule of biblical interpretation can be summed up as this: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”¹

Beyond the Text: Why is it important to know if the Bible is speaking literally or figuratively?

PRINCIPLE 2: Accept the Bible as a Progressive Revelation

God revealed His Word over a period of many centuries. Everything He said was true, but He didn’t say everything at once. When God revealed His truths to Moses, He knew everything, but He didn’t choose to reveal everything to Moses. Instead, He chose to reveal additional truths centuries later—some to Paul, others to John and so on.

3. When we realize this truth, we understand the importance of the Old Testament, but also the necessity of the New Testament. Genesis, for example, is the book of beginnings. What do we find beginning in each of these passages from Genesis?

- A. Genesis 1:1-25 _____
- B. Genesis 2:23-24 _____
- C. Genesis 3:6 _____
- D. Genesis 3:15 _____

4. In the New Testament, we find additional insights that build on these beginning ideas. What new information do we discover about each of the above concepts?

- A. Romans 8:20-22 _____
- B. Ephesians 5:22-33 _____
- C. Romans 5:12 _____
- D. John 1:29 _____

Beyond the Text: How would you apply the principle of progressive revelation to your study of the Bible?

PRINCIPLE 3: Accept the Bible as Truthful

Never interpret a text in a way that contradicts other passages of the Bible. When you find something in your Bible study that doesn't make sense or seems to be saying the opposite of what you've read elsewhere, assume there is a reasonable explanation. Remember that just because you don't have an explanation for such a problem doesn't mean that none exists.

5. Example #1: Philippians 2:12 says, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." You might assume that salvation is something you work for. However, when you read Ephesians 2:8-9, it seems to contradict this. (Write out Ephesians 2:8-9 below.)

A. What does Ephesians 2:8-9 say about our salvation?

B. How would you reconcile these two seemingly conflicting verses?

6. Example #2: Peter says, "There is also an antitype [symbol, figure] which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). Yet when we go back to Ephesians 2:8-9, it says that we are saved by "grace through faith." How can we resolve this? (Hint: look at 1 Corinthians 12:13 which talks about that time at salvation when the Holy Spirit baptizes [puts, places, immerses] the believer into the Body of Christ. Contrast this with water baptism performed by a person.)

Beyond the Text: If the Bible is not truthful, what does this say about God?

LESSON 3

INTERPRET YOUR BIBLE CAREFULLY

(Principles 4-6)

Individuals have made some very unusual claims for the Bible such as finding a code hidden in the Scriptures which reveals modern day events including the assassinations of world leaders, the Oklahoma City bombing and the election of a particular American president. These claims invariably are based on methods that violate or ignore one or more principles of interpretation. We have looked at three of these principles in Lesson 2; this lesson looks at principles four through six.

PRINCIPLE 4: Consider the Context

Webster defines the word “context” as the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning. A text should always be interpreted in light of the verses around it. Someone has said that a text apart from its context is a pretext. In other words, if you do not consider the verses around the text in question, you stand a good chance of misinterpreting it. Keep these three questions in mind:

1. What is the writer talking about just before he mentions the text in question? For example, a phrase from Isaiah 53:5 is often quoted to support physical healing: “and by His stripes we are healed.” When you read verses 3-5a, what type of healing does the context indicate God is talking about? _____

2. What is the whole chapter/book of the Bible about? Look at 1 Corinthians 15:31 where Paul says, “I die daily.” This is frequently used by people to suggest that we die spiritually to self daily. But step back and look at the whole chapter. Notice what Paul is talking about in verses 4-8, 12-17, 20-23. Then look at what the verses after verse 31 are talking about: 35-42, 56-57.

A. What subject is the focal point of this chapter?

B. In light of the topic of the chapter, which do you think would best explain what Paul was referring to when he said “I die daily.”

(1) Dying spiritually to self

(2) Facing the daily possibility of dying physically

3. Has the writer mentioned the topic of this verse previously? The apostle Paul uses the word “flesh” 25 times in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 8:8 he declares, “So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” We can better understand why Paul says this by looking up the following verses about the flesh. (Summarize the verses below)

Romans 7:5 _____

Romans 7:18 _____

Romans 8:5 _____

Beyond the Text: Why is the context of a passage so important?

PRINCIPLE 5: Consider the Background

The background of a passage differs from its context. The context focuses on the verses that are before and after the text. The background relates to all the other things that help you understand the passage such as the author’s purpose for writing plus any historical, geographical or cultural data that bears on the text.

4. The purpose of the writer: Why did John write the Gospel of John? (John 20:30-31)

5. The historical background: Look up Herod the Great in a Bible dictionary or, better yet, a Bible encyclopedia. If you don’t own one, check your church library or borrow one from your pastor. If you were to look up the article on Herod the Great, you would learn that over his lifetime he had 10 wives. His wives and children plotted against each other and (he believed) against him. He had three of his sons killed (ages 9, 10 and 11), along with the mother of the two older sons. Now read Matthew 2:16. How does knowing Herod’s background help you to understand this verse?

6. The geographical background: Many Christians know little about the geography of the Bible lands. If someone were to ask, “How could Jesus have heard Peter’s confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, when Philippi was located in Greece and Jesus never left Palestine?” How would you respond? (Hint: find Caesarea Philippi on a Bible map)

7. The cultural background: Understanding the cultural background of incidents in the Bible is also helpful in interpretation. For example, Jesus said to Peter, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades (hell) shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). How can gates prevail? We need to understand, however, that the gates of a city in the Middle East were places where those with power and authority met to make decisions. Thus, “gates” became synonymous with “power” or “authority.” With that piece of cultural information, how would you interpret Matthew 16:18?

PRINCIPLE 6: Consider the Grammar

Many students try to avoid grammar when they are in school. But an understanding of grammar is helpful in Bible study. There are some critical aspects of grammar that we should focus on if we want to interpret God’s Word correctly.

8. The meaning and tense of verbs: Look closely at the verbs (the “action” words) in a sentence. Speaking of the promises made by God through the prophets, Paul says it was “concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4). Underline the two verbs in these verses. What do they tell you about Christ?

9. The use of prepositions: Even a small part of speech like a preposition (words such as “on” “to” or “for” that are combined with a noun) can influence the meaning of a verse. For example, Romans 3:21-22 says, “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, *to all and on all who believe*. For there is no difference” (italics mine). In the italicized words, notice that Paul changes the preposition from “to” to “on.” What are the implications of this change?

10. References to time and place: Find John 6:1 in your Bible. The verse begins with the expression “After these things.” This implies that the events of John 6:1 took place after the events of John 1-5. List some of the events that took place before John 6:1 (the first two are given to get you started):

- A. John 1:28 _____
- B. John 1:43 _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____
- F. _____
- G. _____
- H. _____

Beyond the Text: List some sources you might use to become more familiar with the culture and history of the Bible.

LESSON 4**INTERPRET YOUR BIBLE CAREFULLY****(Principles 7-9)**

If you were writing to someone that you cared about deeply, you would want to write in such a way that this loved one would understand clearly your message. God loves you and me (John 3:16, Romans 5:8). It would stand to reason, then, that the Bible was not written with the intent of being difficult to understand. And we can understand it if we follow the principles laid out in these lessons. Let's look at principles 7-9.

PRINCIPLE 7: Let Scripture interpret Scripture

Frequently the Bible will answer your questions if you simply look for the answers within its pages. Let the Bible be your guide in biblical interpretation.

1. In John 6:1-5, Jesus asked Philip where they could get bread to feed a multitude. Some suggest that Jesus asked Philip this question because Philip was the calm and calculating one among the disciples. Others say it was because Philip lived in the area and would know where to find food. Rather than speculate, let's allow God's Word to answer that question. Read John 6:6. What does it tell us about the reason Jesus asked Philip this question?

2. In John 16:7, Jesus tells His disciples, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you." Who is this Helper? (Hint: check John 14:26).

PRINCIPLE 8: Get a Second Opinion

After you have studied a passage in God's Word and think you know what it means, check with somebody else to see if you have the right interpretation. This provides a system of checks and balances to insure that you are not in error.

Who should that person be? It might be your pastor, Sunday school teacher or spiritual mentor. Simply say, "I've been studying this portion of Scripture. I think this is what it means; what do you think? How would you modify my thoughts?"

Another source for a second opinion is a Bible commentary. If you are uncertain which ones are reliable and you are unfamiliar with the authors, check the publishers. Some of them can be trusted to print only what is consistent with the Word of God. Also, ask your pastor for his advice. Through the years, he probably has used many different commentaries and should be able to suggest either a dependable commentary or publisher. Don't be a lone interpreter of the Bible. Share your thinking with others whom you trust. Get their reaction. They may add something you never thought of or they may point out some flaw in your interpretation.

3. List three people/resources that you can go to for a second opinion:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____

PRINCIPLE 9: Be Charitable

Let's be considerate of one another when discussing our differences. Christians who differ in opinion from you are not the enemy; they are brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same body. The enemy is Satan.

Interpret the Bible the way you think God meant it to be interpreted. Hold your beliefs with confidence. But always remember to be charitable to those who differ with your interpretation. After all, they may be right!

4. How does God's Word tell us to treat one another (even when they disagree with us)?

- A. Ephesians 4:32 _____

B. Romans 12:10 _____

C. Romans 14:13 _____

D. James 5:9 _____

CONCLUSION:

Make a commitment with God right now, or renew your commitment, to understand Him better by understanding His Word better. Review the principles discussed in this study, then set aside some time regularly to read His Word. In addition, meditate on it, memorize it and apply what you've read to your life. That's why He gave you the Bible. Take advantage of it.

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