

HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

If scholars disagree about how to interpret the Bible, how can we hope to make sense of the Scriptures? While such a question can seem overwhelming, it doesn't need to be. What can be understood by the average layman is far more important than what scholars disagree about.

Most important, the Author of the Bible has not left the reader alone. Paul signaled God's commitment to help us when he wrote, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Tim. 2:7 NIV). With this confidence, we offer in the following pages a simple rule that can provide focus for a lifetime of study and discovery.

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HOW TO MAKE THE BIBLE SAY ANYTHING

An American President once said he would rather live in Russia than in America. What President would make such a remark? It was said by the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln.

But he's being quoted out of context. He actually said, "I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance." Lincoln wrote these words while expressing regret about a dangerous trend he saw in America. He feared that many wanted to change "all men are created equal" to "all men are created equal, except non-whites." If that were to happen, Lincoln suggested, he would be more comfortable in a land where the government didn't pretend to stand for liberty. The context makes all the difference, for it tells us exactly what Abe meant to say.

But did you know that though Lincoln hated slavery, the Bible condones it? The Bible tells slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5). It even appears to encourage us to view Africans differently than we view other people when it says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard its spots?" (Jer. 13:23). Why would the Ethiopian want to change his skin unless it were a less than desirable condition, and why would the author link Ethiopians to leopards unless he wanted his readers to think of black people in less than human terms?

Again, these words have been twisted out of their original setting and intent. Quoted in context, Jeremiah was not putting dark skin in an unfavorable light, any more than he was being critical of the beauty and distinctive design of a leopard's coat. Jeremiah's message is that if the leopard could change his own spots, and if an Ethiopian could change the color of his skin, then "may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The immediate context shows that Jeremiah was saying we cannot change our own hearts any more than we can change the color of our skin. Any changes we make are merely cosmetic. The context shows exactly what Jeremiah meant to say.

But did Paul encourage slaves to obey their masters? Yes, and his comments must once again be understood in light of the times and spirit in which the apostle wrote. Slavery in Roman days was often the result of war or unpaid debts. Paul taught Christians to be free if they could (1 Cor. 7:21). If that was not possible, he encouraged them to show by their behavior that their well-being was not in the hands of human masters but in the hands of God, even in bad circumstances (1 Cor. 7:20-24). When two Christians found themselves in a master-slave relationship, Paul appealed to them to treat each other as equals and as brothers who were both accountable to God for the way they treated each other (Eph. 6:5-9; Phile. 15-16).

Context. If the immediate and wider contexts are not considered, a person can make the Bible say anything he wants it to say.

ONE RULE TO STUDY THE BIBLE WITH CONFIDENCE

One basic rule of Bible study underlies all others. It is the law of context. In what setting and with what intent were the words written? Equipped with this one basic principle, a student can begin immediately to spend a lifetime looking for and discovering the treasures of the Bible. Let's begin by seeing how this pursuit of context will lead naturally into a careful consideration of (1) immediate setting, (2) normal usage of words, (3) the Bible as a whole, and (4) foundational truths of sound doctrine.

One Rule To Study The Bible With Confidence Context Of Immediate Settings

Even experienced Bible students are often surprised to see what a familiar Bible quotation means when understood in light of its immediate setting. Difficult problems of understanding often evaporate simply by determining how a text is framed by the main idea running through that section of Scripture.

Behind every statement of Scripture is an immediate setting. This provides clues as to what was on the author's mind. In every immediate setting there are similar or recurring ideas and words that help to signal the main idea. Once that main idea is identified, it becomes the key to opening up the meaning of the text in question.

To discover the flow of ideas streaming through a passage, good Bible students become childlike and at the same time scientific in asking questions: Who is the author? To whom is he writing? Why? When? Where? How? Wherefore?

Careful students interrogate the page to expose its logic and flow of ideas. They don't assume that the author is saying what they think he is saying, until they have done their spade work. They don't try to plant an idea in "unworked ground." They dig and turn over the soil of the biblical environment until they discover the growing, living, life-changing ideas that God has planted.

Let's look at some examples of specific texts whose immediate contexts have been ignored.

Misquote #1: "The Bible says that if you confess your sins you'll be saved." It really says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 Jn. 1:9). These familiar words are often quoted as a formula for salvation. But the presence of the word we in the immediate context makes it clear that John was not addressing the unsaved. Rather, he was talking to people who were already believers in Christ (vv.6,7,8,10), and was showing them how to be restored to a right family relationship with the God who had saved them. If we don't consider the immediate context, we might conclude that we are saved by admitting our sins rather than by believing the gospel of Christ.

Misquote #2: "The Bible says that it's wrong to wear jewelry." The actual quote is: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward--arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel" (1 Pet. 3:3). Some have used these words to say that godly women should not style their hair, use cosmetics, or wear jewelry. But if we read on, we find the words, "rather let it be the hidden person of the heart" (v.4). By these additional words we see that the apostle's main purpose was not to tell women that they either should or should not style their hair or wear jewelry. He was saying that they should focus on the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit rather than relying on outward appearance.

To focus on whether or not jewelry or cosmetics are permissible can cause us to miss issues of the heart that Peter was concerned about.

Misquote #3: "The Bible says that studying for knowledge isn't necessary." It actually says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (Jas. 1:5). These words of James have been seen by some as a promise that we can receive unlearned skills and knowledge if we just pray. More than a few college students have claimed this promise before taking an exam they had not prepared for.

The immediate context, however, is describing a reason for the joy we can have when difficult circumstances test our faith. James' promise is not that we can be successful without effort, but rather that God does not leave us alone when He allows trouble or temptation to come into our lives. James assured us that if we don't know how to let God do His work in us, we can have wisdom for the asking.

Later in the same letter, James told his readers how to recognize this wisdom when it comes. He said it is not marked by envy or selfish ambition, but is "pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (Jas. 3:17). This is the kind of wisdom James had in mind.

Misquote #4: "The Bible says that I can do anything with God's strength." More specifically it says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). This optimistic comment is often taken to mean that if our faith is strong enough we can do anything we set our mind to do. But the immediate setting in which Paul said this is important. The apostle was

talking specifically about his ability to live by God's strength in times of great poverty as well as in times of plenty. Paul wanted us to know that the person whose confidence is in the strength God supplies can live and thrive in all kinds of situations.

These are just a few examples to show that misinterpretations of Bible texts can often be avoided if the immediate setting is taken into account. Looking at the verses that precede and follow a passage is a natural and logical first step in understanding the Bible. It is a way of giving God the same consideration we want for ourselves. No one wants to be quoted out of context.

One Rule To Study The Bible With Confidence Context Of Plain And Normal Meaning

The second rule of context says that the language of the Bible can be taken at face value. The Word of God does not have to be decoded to find deeper, hidden meanings. When studied and interpreted in context, the authors of Scripture say what they mean and mean what they say.

Take for instance the account of Balaam and the talking donkey recorded in Numbers 22. According to this familiar account, the donkey on which a disobedient prophet was riding became frightened when she saw an angel with a drawn sword. The donkey lurched sideways, crushed the foot of her owner against a rock, refused to go any farther, and complained to her rider in complete sentences.

Because donkeys don't talk, some might say this is simply a parable meant to show that even dumb animals sometimes make more sense than their human owners. Others, however, could claim deeper truths.

For example, someone might point out that the story of Balaam and the donkey is actually a visualization of what happens when we find ourselves faced with the pains of self-conflict. To illustrate this internal struggle, the crushed foot represents the physical pain we often incur in the process of acting against our own conscience. The talking donkey depicts how our own stubborn thoughts can turn around and talk back to us. Then there's the angel. That's our human spirit. At the right moment, it intervenes with our plans, startles our troubled mind, and talks to us from a different level of consciousness.

The trouble with the above interpretation is that it says far more about the imagination of the interpreter than about the text. More seriously, such imagination, as spiritual as it may sound, actually twists, ignores, and denies the real meaning of the Word of God. Emptying words of their plain meaning and filling them with spiritual content doesn't honor the words nor the Author of the Bible.

The story of Balaam and the donkey isn't treated by the text as a parable. Neither is it about personal internal conflict, even though that is in the text. The plain, normal language of the text

calls for us to interpret it as a real historical narrative. It presents a record of real events that show God's miraculous ability not only to deal with a rebel prophet but, more important, His ability to miraculously bless and preserve His chosen people Israel.

The normal meaning of figures of speech. We use word pictures in everyday conversation not to hide our ideas but to express them. Take for example the expression, "I'm getting cold feet." Context and normal usage make its meaning obvious. If a person were to make this statement while ice fishing, and just before saying, "I wish I'd worn that other pair of socks," it would have a literal meaning. But if someone were to say these words a couple of days before signing papers for a home mortgage, we could probably assume that something else was in view, especially if the person then said, "I'm going to refigure our budget."

Christ often used figures of speech with plain and obvious meaning. On one occasion He said to the apostle Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:19). No one needs to question whether Jesus was talking about real physical keys or keys as a figure of speech. The kingdom of heaven is not enclosed within a material wall with a door that requires an actual key. Neither was Christ promising, as some have imagined, that Peter and the disciples would be able to bind anything they wanted to bind (including Satan).

In time, the "keys" would have a specific meaning for Peter. In Matthew 16, Christ gave Peter authority to open the doors of Christendom. He used that authority for Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), for Samaritans when he laid hands on the people who believed the message of Philip (Acts 8), and for Gentiles when he preached in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). Peter had opened the door to all nations to receive Jesus as Savior and King. No one would ever again be able to "bind" a Jew or a Gentile who believes in Christ from coming into the kingdom of God.

When read in context, there is usually a plain and ordinary sense to figurative and symbolic language. In many cases, the Bible even immediately explains its own symbolism. But what if the intent of the author is not clear? What if it's not clear whether the Bible is using words in a plain or figurative sense? Then the safest rule is to go with the literal meaning of the text in its immediate context. Because of the integrity of Scripture, we can be confident that the ultimate truth in view will correspond to the plain and ordinary sense of the words. "Good fruit" won't mean "bad results."

One Rule To Study The Bible With Confidence Context Of The Bible As A Whole

A third rule of contextual interpretation is to consider the passage in its relation to the whole Bible. Because the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are all "chapters" of one Book, those who want to live by the whole counsel of God need increasingly to be able to see each individual part in light of the whole.

The many perspectives of the whole Bible cannot be quickly mastered. Gathering and combining the insights of the whole Bible is the process of a lifetime. This is one reason the Bible says that God gives pastors and teachers to His people. Those who know more than we do about the Bible can help us to balance our understanding of individual passages with complementing perspectives.

The Lord Himself showed how important it is to be able to see one passage in light of another. On the occasion of His temptation in the wilderness, He skillfully quoted from the Old Testament to offset the devil's own use of Scripture. The devil first challenged the Lord to prove that He was the Son of God by turning stones into bread. Jesus refused, and quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 to make it clear that He was determined to live by His Father's provisions rather than His own. Satan then transported Jesus to the highest point of the temple and again challenged Him to prove that He was the Son of God. Satan quoted from a messianic section of Psalm 91, which says, "He shall give His angels charge over you," and "In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (vv.11-12; Mt. 4:6). But Jesus replied by saying, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Mt. 4:7 NIV). By quoting Moses, Jesus indicated that it was not right for a man to wilfully put God to the test. Something Moses wrote as many as 1,500 years earlier allowed Jesus to show that it is not our right to arrange circumstances in such a way as to attempt to force God's hand of provision.

Let's look at a few examples that show why the context of the whole Bible is so important.

Example #1: What is "also written" about forgiveness? While individual sections of the Bible might lead you to conclude that it is never right to withhold forgiveness, the counsel of the whole Bible is that there is a time to forgive and a time not to forgive.

There is a time to forgive. Paul wrote that we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Jesus said that if we don't forgive others, God will withhold forgiveness from us (Mt. 6:14-15). And from the cross, Jesus freely forgave those who applauded His death when He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34). If you read only these passages, you might conclude that Christlike people will always and immediately forgive any harm done to them. But these passages represent only part of the picture.

There is a time not to forgive. "It is also written" that God forgives us in response to our repentance (Lk. 18:9-14). In the process of extending "family forgiveness," which renews and restores children of God who have sinned, God forgives when we confess our sins (1 Jn. 1:9). Forgiveness is not unconditional. It depends on the willingness of sinners to acknowledge and believe what God says about their sin. Many passages of Scripture show that we should not freely forgive those who have knowingly sinned against us but have not shown any remorse (Mt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5:7-13).

But what about Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them." Didn't He freely forgive those who had carried out His execution? Yes, but the key to understanding His words is found in the immediate context. He went on to say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what

they do." This was not a request for their salvation, but rather a plea for individuals who didn't know that their hands had lifted the Creator of the universe onto an executioner's cross. Jesus mercifully asked that they not be held accountable for being chosen by time and circumstance to be the hands of the whole fallen human race.

The key to forgiveness is found in the following questions: What do love and truth require? What would Jesus do in this situation? (For more help on this subject, see the RBC booklet *When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* CB 941).

Example #2: What is "also written" about our spiritual enemy? While some sections of the Bible seem to leave the impression that Satan is no longer a threat to us, other parts of Scripture show us that in some ways we have power over him, and in some ways we don't.

We have power over the devil. Some passages of Scripture picture Satan as a defeated enemy. The apostle James made it clear that those who are in Christ can resist the efforts of the devil and by so doing cause him to flee from them. James said, "Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7). The apostle John told the Lord's children that the One who is in them is greater than their spiritual enemy (1 Jn. 4:4). Jesus also displayed the advantage of His family when He sent out His disciples to cast out demons and to heal all kinds of sickness (Mt. 10:1).

We don't have power over the devil. It is "also written" that while we have power to resist Satan, we don't have authority over him. God has not yet "bound the dragon" (Rev. 20:2), who is still prowling like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). Neither has God given us authority to bind the enemy ourselves. Instead, the Scriptures encourage us to have a healthy respect for the one who still troubles the world. The New Testament writer Jude reminded us that even Michael the archangel did not presume to act as if he had authority over Satan, but instead said, "The Lord rebuke you!" (Jude 9). And while Jesus had at one point sent His apostles to cast out demons and heal all kinds of sicknesses (Mt. 10:1), He showed on a later occasion that the terms of their assignment and authority were subject to change (Lk. 22:35-38).

Example #3: What is "also written" about real Christians? While individual passages of the Bible might lead you to believe that real Christians will always prove by their actions that their faith is genuine, the whole counsel of God shows that real Christians often live far below their potential in Christ.

Real Christians will act in a Christlike way. Many sections of the Bible give us reason to expect new and consistent behavior from genuine Christians. James said simply, "Faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2:20). Paul said that anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation." He said that old things were passed away and that all things were new (2 Cor. 5:17). The apostle John agreed that true children of God have a new nature that does not express itself in a sinful life (1 Jn. 3:4-9). Throughout the whole of Scripture there is a consistent theme that God expects His children to live in a manner that shows their relation to Him.

Real Christians will disappoint us. It is "also written" that real Christians can behave in ways that are demonic (Jas. 3:13-16). The same James who wrote that "faith without works is dead" also described the dark side that remains in true Christians. He warned about the dangers of prejudice (2:1-7), careless conversation (3:1-12), and warned the people of God about the desires that cause believers not only to harm one another (4:1-4) but also to act like enemies of God. In a similar way, the apostle Paul acknowledged that most Christians are still preoccupied with their own interests rather than with the interests of God (Phil. 2:21). Paul confronted so much out-of-character behavior among those who claimed to be believers that he took comfort in this truth: "'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity'" (2 Tim. 2:19).

Reading one passage in the Bible by itself can be like looking at a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. As you analyze it, you see elements of form and color, but you understand that it is only one essential part of the bigger picture.

But there is another basic and essential element of context. There are some truths in the Bible so basic that new believers need to be quickly oriented to them. Without a grasp of these foundational truths, the Bible can be especially difficult to understand.

One Rule To Study The Bible With Confidence Context Of Foundational Truths

This fourth rule of context, like the third, calls for a wide view of Scripture. There are some basic, foundational truths in Scripture that when understood can help to provide orientation, background, and backdrop for the interpretation of many individual passages. These truths can be discovered by self-study. But the sooner they are understood, the sooner a child of God can begin to see where individual ideas fit in the whole picture of what God has revealed.

Law And Grace. In one sense "the law of God" refers to the commandments of Moses. In a broader sense, however, law is any statement that describes the high standards of God. Some of these laws are social. Some are moral. Some are spiritual regulations for worship.

If anyone could keep all of God's laws, that person could be assured of heaven and of continuous Christlike spirituality. But in reality, no one has ever qualified for eternal life by keeping the law. Neither has anyone ever grown to spiritual maturity by trying to keep the commandments of God (Gal. 3:1-5). Both salvation and spirituality occur not by trying to keep the perfect principles of God but by believing what God has said.

The grace of God, which is offered to those who believe, is a system of mercy and undeserved help. Without grace, no one has ever been saved. Without grace, no one has ever taken the smallest step toward God. Without grace, no child of God has ever grown in Christlikeness. Grace is God's offer of relationship and help. It is His way of living His life through all who will humble themselves enough to call out and surrender to Him.

Justification And Sanctification. Justification is the legal act by which God declares righteous all who trust His Son for salvation. The only thing we can do to qualify for this status is to believe in Christ. To be justified is a free act of God's grace. We cannot earn it (Rom. 3:24).

Because of His life, death, and resurrection on our behalf, Christ our Savior can justify every wicked and ungodly person who comes to Him for grace (Rom. 4:5).

Sanctification is the process by which God continues to set apart and distinguish those who have believed in His Son. A first act of saving sanctification "sets apart" a believer for God forever. That act is followed by a planned, progressive process of being set apart from sin to God.

If the ideas of justification and sanctification are confused, we might make the mistake of thinking that our salvation has never been secured. Some who lean toward a law rather than a grace view of God will never have the assurance of sins forgiven and of full acceptance and adoption into the family of heaven. A right view of the distinction between justification and sanctification allows us to see that a believer in Christ is born into the family of God, fully justified, and ready for the lifelong process of practical sanctification.

Israel And The Church. Much confusion can be avoided by seeing the clear distinction between Israel and the church. While both worship the same God, there is a fundamental distinction.

Israel is a nation of individuals who can trace their ethnic, blood relationship back to Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. Israel gave us the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Messiah of the world. Israel is a nation with whom God made specific covenants for time and eternity. It is the nation that was set aside shortly after Jesus' appearance and rejection as Messiah. It is the nation, of all the nations on earth, that has been chosen by God to show Himself to the whole world. Israel is the nation, according to the Scriptures, that will be in the center of world events in the last days.

The church has no single ethnic identification. It is made up of men and women of every nation who confess Christ as Savior and Lord. Beginning at Pentecost, the church will remain on earth until supernaturally removed in an event often called "the rapture" (1 Th. 4:14-17; Jn. 14:1-3).

Two Phases Of Christ's Return. Among the Lord's people, there is disagreement about when Jesus will return. On one hand, the Bible tells us to be ready because "the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Mt. 24:44). But the Scriptures also say that Christ will return to the earth at the end of a terrible time of cosmic and world tribulation (Zech. 14:4-5; Mt. 24:29-31).

These differences can be explained by a two-phase return. Just as two comings are commingled by Old Testament prophets, so two phases of His return are intermingled in the New Testament.

In the first phase, which could occur at any moment, Christ comes in the clouds for His church (1 Th. 4:16-17). The second phase will occur at the end of the tribulation when Christ returns to the earth to save Israel from worldwide persecution, and to establish on earth His long-awaited political kingdom (Isa. 2:1-4; Acts 1:6).

While these two phases of Christ's return are not spelled out by the New Testament any more than the Old Testament spelled out two main comings of Christ, it is a way to make sense of (1) the distinct missions of Israel and the church, (2) two different descriptions of Christ's return, (3) the absence of the church in Revelation 4-18, (4) the warning that Christ is coming at a time we do not expect, and (5) the need for people in nonglorified bodies to enter the millennial kingdom.

FOUR ESSENTIALS FOR FINDING TRUTH IN CONTEXT

While interpreting the Bible according to the rule of context, there are some timeless considerations that need to be kept in mind (see graphic).

Dependence On God. The author of Psalm 119 reminded us of the role God can have in our Bible study. He prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (v.18). His confidence in God's ability to help is similar to what the apostle Paul expressed when he wrote, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Tim. 2:7 NIV).

A Good Conscience. A bad conscience creates a conflict of interest for the Bible student. Those with unconfessed sin, and therefore something to hide, are predisposed to avoid the truth. They are out of step with God, who has promised understanding to those who, by obedience, keep a good conscience (Mt. 5:8; Jn. 14:21).

Self-study. Christians of the New Testament community of Berea are an example for all of us. They searched the Scriptures to make sure that what the apostle Paul was telling them was true (Acts 17:11). Without personal involvement, the Scriptures remain second-hand, pre-digested, and subject to the accuracy of the teacher.

Use of Gifted Teachers. Teachers are a gift from God (Eph. 4:11). Along with self-study, they can provide a depth and breadth of contextual knowledge. For the new believer, they provide orientation; for the mature believer, reminders (2 Pet. 1:12-13).

THE INDUCTIVE STUDY METHOD YOU CAN DO

While God's plan has been to give His people pastors and teachers, there is no substitute for personal and direct involvement with the Scriptures. Many have found that they don't get much from their teachers until they have become personally involved in regular and systematic Bible study.

One method of personal Bible study is called the inductive method. This method challenges the student to form conclusions only after observing and analyzing the elements of immediate context and normal word meanings. After asking the Author of Scripture for insight, the inductive student explores the inspired page with pencil in hand and the curiosity of a prospector looking for something more precious than gold (Prov. 3:13-18).

The overall strategy of the inductive student is: (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) application--in that order.

STEP #1: OBSERVATION: What does the context say? The primary purpose of this stage is to collect as many facts as possible about the context. Inductive students are curious. They don't take anything for granted. They ask and list as many questions as possible: Who? What? Why? Where? When? How? Wherefore? What words need to be looked up to determine a range of possible meanings? What logic indicators can be found and marked in words such as therefore, then, and, also, but, however, or nevertheless. What is the main point of the section? What recurring words indicate a main idea? What elements, arguments, or illustrations does the author use to support that main point?

It is at this stage that a chapter might be outlined or a sentence diagrammed to see how the ideas of the author relate to one another. The purpose of this stage is focus. Discover the context. Explore it.

STEP #2: INTERPRETATION: What does the text mean? Only after doing the spade work of careful observation is the inductive student in a position to ask, "What, then, does the author mean by these words as they relate to the words that precede and follow?" Not "What do these words mean to me?" But "What did they mean when they flowed from the pen of the original author? What was his intent?" While we can assume that he said what he meant and meant what he said, the only way to discover what he really meant is by observing the context.

While word forms, definitions, and a range of possible meanings may have been noted in the step of observation, it is at the point of interpreting in context that the way the author was using a word is best understood. It is at this point that the Scriptures come alive with the pulse and throb of the author's own heart and intent.

STEP #3: APPLICATION: What does this text mean to my life? Only after discovering the meaning of a text in its own biblical time and place is the student encouraged to ask, "What does this mean to me?" Care is given to distinguish between cultural facts and timeless principles. Focus is put on the main idea. What are the primary issues of the heart? What does this say about my relationship to God? The Bible can now explode in significance.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY

To understand prophetic portions of Scripture, a Christian must be aware of one basic principle and follow six rules of interpretation.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE

The prophets often described future events in one picture without indicating that they would be separated by periods of time. This has been compared to seeing mountain peaks in one view without seeing the valleys between them.

Jesus used the principle of prophetic perspective when He read the Scriptures in a Nazareth synagogue. He opened the scroll to Isaiah and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:18-19).

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. People familiar with Isaiah 61:1-2 must have wondered why Jesus stopped in the middle of the second verse. He did not read on because the last part of verse 2, "And the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn," speaks of the great tribulation. Jesus said He fulfilled the first part of Isaiah's prophecy (Lk. 4:21). The last part is about His second coming. The prophet, seeing it all in one look, did not know that at least 2,000 years would separate those two phases of his prophecy.

The prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 also has a double fulfillment. The first part came to pass at Pentecost, as indicated by Peter in his sermon (Acts 2:17-21). But the second part, referring to the moon turning to blood and other supernatural signs, will be fulfilled in the tribulation.

SIX RULES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY

1. Interpret in context. As with all Bible passages, consider the speaker, the situation, the people addressed, and the subject of the prophecy.
2. Interpret literally. Give words their normal meaning, recognizing figures of speech. When prophets specify numbers of days or years, take them literally.
3. Be careful with symbols. Don't give a prophetic passage a symbolic or spiritual meaning when literal interpretation makes sense. For example, the earthquake of Revelation 6:12-17 is exactly that; it does not represent the breakup of society.
4. Look for immediate fulfillment. Look first for the elements of a prophecy that were fulfilled within a few years, then consider fulfillments during Christ's first and second comings.
5. Be consistent. Don't treat Christ's predictions in a different way from Old Testament prophecies.
6. Don't go too far. Some questions about endtime events must remain unanswered.

SELECTING A STUDY BIBLE

A study Bible can be helpful in providing textual information and comment. It shouldn't replace your own study but should assist you.

The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible. Its main feature is an elaborate system of indexed topical summaries of 4,200 subjects in the Bible. These topics are arranged in a way that makes a wealth of information readily available to the Bible student. Other useful features are an analysis of each Bible book, outlined biographies of Bible characters, a harmony of the Gospels, and an indexed Rand-McNally Atlas.

The Ryrie Study Bible. The footnotes of this Moody Press publication by Charles Ryrie form an abbreviated commentary on the entire Bible. A marginal cross-reference system and valuable index are provided, along with Hammond maps and timeline charts. Each Bible book is outlined in detail.

The New Scofield Reference Bible. This classic work of C. I. Scofield was updated in 1966. It provides cross-references, summaries of doctrines, maps, and footnotes with a premillennial, pretribulational, and dispensational approach to Bible study. Introductions are given to each Bible book. Chapter and section headings are also provided.

The NIV Study Bible. For those looking for a modern translation with good study helps, cross-references, introductions, outlines, charts, maps, concordance, and subject index, this would be a good choice.

THE BIBLE STUDENT'S ONE-SHELF LIBRARY

A Study Bible will provide introductions and outlines for each book of the Bible, footnotes, maps, cross-references, doctrinal summaries, historical and cultural background, time charts, and a basic commentary on the text.

An Exhaustive Concordance such as Strong's offers an alphabetical listing of every word in the Bible and every place where that word is found. Strong's Concordance also has a helpful numbering system that provides a number and root word meaning for all of the original language words of the Bible.

A Bible Dictionary provides definitions and general background information for the people, places, and ideas of the Bible.

A One-Volume Commentary offers helpful explanations that can show the student how others have interpreted a passage of Scripture.

Computer Bible-Study Software. This is by far the most revolutionary breakthrough in Bible study. The whole Bible can be searched in a few seconds for words or combinations of words. Word studies, cross-references, topical studies, original language work are all built into easy-to-use study software for Macintosh or PC formats.

One program called the Online Bible (MAC, PC) is an exceptionally good program and has been distributed as freeware by developers intent on serving the body of Christ.

HOW TO USE A COMMENTARY

Commentaries are books that analyze and explain the text of the Bible. The better ones deal with every verse--giving the meaning of the words, explaining the setting, and offering light from other places in the Bible. Many of them are the product of careful, prayerful, and diligent scholarship. Some are published in one or two volumes, others in entire sets. Commentaries are indispensable to effective Bible study, but they must be used properly. We recommend that you consult them only after you have carefully worked through the passage yourself.

After you have done your best to understand a passage, then consult three or four good commentaries. If you use them before you have done your own work, you will short-circuit your thinking. If you evaluate only what others have written, you are robbing yourself of the thrill of discovery and the joy of creative, Spirit-led Bible study.

What will the effective use of good commentaries do for you as you study the Bible? Here are some results you might expect.

1. Sometimes they will confirm your understanding of the passage. When you find that all of the commentaries you consult interpret the passage essentially the way you did, you can be confident that you are on target in your conclusions.
2. Sometimes they will refine your understanding of the passage. The commentators may present insights that didn't come to your mind, thus deepening and enriching your understanding of the passage.
3. Sometimes they will lead you to reevaluate your interpretations. Occasionally you will find that the commentaries present conclusions somewhat different from your interpretation. You may also discover that the commentators differ from one another. When this happens, you'll be glad you did your own spade work. It will help you evaluate the views expressed. After careful thought, you may select an interpretation quite different from the one you had when you started.
4. Sometimes they will show you that your understanding of the passage was almost entirely wrong. Reading the commentaries may give you information that will make you realize you have overlooked or misunderstood an important element in the passage or verse you have been studying. When this happens, go back to the text and think it through again.

"THE BIBLE IS OURS"

Many people feel they won't be able to understand the Bible, no matter how hard they try. Bill and Gwen Petroski felt that way--till something happened that opened God's way for them. Here's their story.

"One of the greatest blessings in our lives has been the discovery that we can read and understand the Bible for ourselves. You see, both of us were raised in a religion that did not emphasize the Bible.

"After we were married, we began a spiritual quest. We felt vaguely dissatisfied. We wanted our children to know God and to have Christian values. So we began to search.

"Then the day came when both of us received Jesus Christ as personal Savior. We began attending a Bible-preaching church and hearing the Word of God proclaimed. Gradually we realized that the Bible is ours and that we can read and study it for ourselves."

Gwen: "I still remember vividly the first time I read the book of Hebrews. One Sunday morning I read it through in one sitting. Tears flowed then, and still do now as I realize that all barriers between God and me are broken down, and that I have access to God."

Bill: "When I first read Ephesians 2:8-9 and understood salvation by grace through faith alone, I was filled with gratitude to God. This passage will always be one of my favorites.

"We now know that the Bible is ours. As we continue to read and study it, it means more to us than ever before. We are trying to put its teachings into practice so that our four girls will see that it can be real to them."

These testimonies of Bill and Gwen highlight the thrill of discovering rich spiritual truth through personal Bible study. The Holy Spirit ministers to believers in a special way through the Word, but He also brings understanding to non-Christians who read it with a sincere desire to know God.

Carl Armerding told about an Australian sheepherder and his wife who came to know Christ this way. They began reading the book of Romans out of the old family Bible just to while away the evening hours. After some time, the man said, "Wife, if this book is right, we are guilty sinners before God. We are condemned." At the conclusion of their reading a few days later, he exclaimed, "Wife, if this book is right, we need not remain condemned. A man called Jesus Christ took our punishment by dying for us. He's alive again, and He wants us to believe on Him."

Although these people had very little education, they were able to gather from the Scriptures the basic truths necessary for salvation. When they began reading the Bible, they found that it was for them.

The Bible is for you--it's for everyone.

BIBLE STUDY CHECKLIST

Questions to ask yourself when studying:

Have I asked God for insight into His Word?

Am I studying for relationship with Him?

Have I read the verses immediately preceding and following the passage?

Have I scanned the surrounding chapters?

Have I looked up words I don't understand to discover the range of possible meaning?

Have I asked the questions who, what, where, when, why, how, wherefore?

Have I looked for logic indicators such as then, therefore, but, also?

Have I identified any Old Testament quotes and checked their context?

Have I used a Bible dictionary to identify the people and places named?

Have I used a study Bible to identify and read parallel passages?

Have I checked cross-references in a study Bible to see what else the Bible says about this subject?

Have I kept from focusing on details to the exclusion of main ideas?

Have I double-checked my interpretation with reliable commentaries?

Have I asked what this passage tells me about God, myself, and others?

Are there any sins to be avoided?

Are there commands to be obeyed?

Have I thanked God for the privilege of studying His Word?