

## A Passion for God's Word

# 9

## Principles of Bible Study

In our previous lessons we have seen how:

- The Bible can be an open book for you
- The Bible is “living and active” – packed full of wisdom and revelation
- The Bible points to Jesus – to whom we go to have life
- The Bible’s most vital ingredient is what you yourself must add – faith
- The Bible contains “hidden treasures” for you to locate, dig up and store

In this lesson, we will explore the practical guidelines for hands-on study of the Word of God. But before we begin, let’s first establish the foundational premise of Bible study:

**First Premise:** That every believer has the right and ability to study God’s Word for himself or herself.

This is the essential premise established during the Reformation of the Church that began in earnest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Reformation, among many things, placed the Bible in the hands of the believers. But much more than this, the Reformation abolished the need for a “middle man” – whether it be priest or pope or preacher or pastor.

### Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6

There is no mediator through whom you need to go to gain forgiveness from God, save one – the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no mediator through whom you must pass to gain access into God’s presence, save one – the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is no mediator through whom you must go to get the Word of God, save one – the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is vital for every Christian to understand. God has placed leadership gifts within his Church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (**Ephesians 4:11**) – in order to equip and enable the average believer to live for God. The responsibility of the pastor and teacher, for example, is to train the believer to hear from God for himself or herself, within the guidelines set by the Word of God.

### Read 1 John 2:20-21,26-29

As we saw in Lesson 101-01, John is not trying to tell us that we no longer need teachers. Rather, he is trying to warn against false teachers. The fact that we have the anointing of God's Spirit, he says, means that we are taught the truth directly from God. This is our guard against being led astray by false doctrine.

**Second Premise:** No person's interpretation of Scripture is infallible.

The second premise of Bible study balances the first premise. Even though each student of the Bible has the ability to search out God's Word for himself, there are some caveats. A student of God's Word must always be open to correction. This is one of the main functions of leadership within the Church – to provide “banks to the river.”

### Read 2 Timothy 2:24-26

**Third Premise:** In order to understand the truths in God's Word, a believer must be “connected to the whole.”

The third premise of Bible study is an extension of the second premise. Because no person's interpretation of Scripture is infallible, we need one another. Some of the worst errors have crept into Christian lives because of disconnection with the rest of the Body.

### Read Colossians 2:18-19

The Body of Christ has value on two levels for the Bible student:

- The Body of Christ is the *testbed* for any revelation you have in God's Word. Other Christians, and particularly leadership within the Body, can act as a sounding board against which your revelation can be tested.
- The Body of Christ is the *hotbed* where deeper revelation of the Lord can ferment. **Colossians 2:2-3** says that *in Christ* is “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” But the Lord Jesus identifies himself so closely with his Church that it can also be said that *in the Body of Christ* is “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The Body of Christ has been designed by the Lord to “keep you honest” and to “keep you on track.” God has opened a vast resource of wisdom and revelation for you to explore personally, but he has also placed safeguards to make sure that you don't become ensnared by error.

## The Need for Safeguards

The study of God's Word is an exciting and rewarding exercise. Like driving a car, however, there are certain “safety principles” that need to go into operation before you can successfully navigate through the truth of God's Word. There are “rules of the road” that, if broken, can cause grief and damage.

**Read 2 Corinthians 11:2-4**

These three verses contain the most important principle of all. Any genuine truth from God's Word should strengthen and enhance your "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Anything that distracts from your relationship with God is not from God. Let's boldly state that again:

*Anything* that distracts from the integrity and simplicity of your walk with God is *not* from God.

**Read Ephesians 4:14-15**

The world is swayed by fads. Like the Athenians of the first century, the average citizen of today's world spends an inordinate amount of time – in the workplace, on the street, on TV talk shows, in popular magazines – "talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (see **Acts 17:19-21**). And this craze for "the latest and the best" has also seeped into the Church.

**Read 2 Timothy 4:3-4**

The Word of God doesn't tickle the ears. It stabs directly at the heart (**Hebrews 4:12-13**). Note again, if you reread **Ephesians 4:14-15**, that the Word of God is one-eyed in its purpose – that "in all things [you will] grow up into...Christ."

The Bible uses a word to describe anything that steers you off this course of a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" and of "grow[ing] up into...Christ." That word is *deception*.

**Guarding Against Deception****Read 2 Timothy 2:24-26**

Deception is a real and present danger. And it is a weapon skillfully used by our Enemy. **2 Corinthians 4:4** describes deception as a blinding of the spiritual eyes, a reverse of the revelation which comes from God, whereby the eyes of our heart are enlightened (**Ephesians 1:18**). Like many other New Testament letters, the book of Galatians was specifically written to address a deception which had gripped the Galatian church (note **Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1; 5:7-10**).

No one is immune to deception. Remember Peter? (read **Matthew 16:13-23**). In one breath, Peter declares a revelation so pure that Jesus proclaims that "this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

Then, almost in the next breath, Peter speaks words that Jesus attributes not to revelation from God but to Satan himself, capping off the incident with the words: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

**Read Romans 16:17-18**

Paul talks about "the appearance of wisdom" (read **Colossians 2:20-23**) and

“the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge” (read **1 Timothy 6:20-21**). Jude challenges the teachings of “godless men” whom he calls “clouds without rain, blown along by the wind” and “autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted – twice dead” (**Jude 4,12**), and Peter speaks of “false teachers among you” (**2 Peter 2:1**).

Satan is portrayed throughout Scripture as an artful wielder of God’s Word. He twists Scripture, takes it out of context, breaks all the rules, does anything to steer a person off the course that God has set for him.

### Read again 2 Corinthians 11:2-4

So what does this mean for you as a student of God’s Word? How do you navigate through this seeming minefield of potential deception? How can you know for sure that you are hearing the pure message of God’s Word as you study the Bible?

The good news is that under the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the protective boundaries of the Church, you are on safe ground. There are clear boundaries which, if you stay within them, will prevent you from moving off into error. Let’s take a look at some of the guidelines which keep you on track in your study of God’s Word.

## Guidelines for Studying God’s Word

### Read 2 Timothy 2:15

As a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ and as a “workman” approved by God, the Lord’s objective is to train you to be one who “correctly handles the word of truth.”

In this section we will examine a number of practical principles that will enable you to correctly handle the Word of God.

#### **Principle 1: *Do not read into God’s Word what you want to find***

It’s important to approach the Word of God with a heart of humility and a readiness to align your life to God’s Word, not God’s Word to your life. When you read the Bible, ask the Lord questions. Be willing for God to challenge your assumptions and even your theology. After all, any tradition that does not stand up to the scrutiny of God’s Word must be abandoned. Any philosophy and view of the world that does not match the view established in the Bible must be rejected.

### Read 1 Corinthians 4:6

### Read Proverbs 30:5-6

#### **Principle 2: *Discover the original intent of the writer***

As a student of God’s Word, it is important for you to discover what the writer was originally seeking to communicate to his readers. The Scripture should never be construed to mean something it could never have meant to the writer and his original readers.

Before you begin to ask the Lord what a passage of Scripture means to *you* (personal application), you need to ask the Lord what that passage of Scripture meant *for the original readers or hearers* (historical application). This is a vital principle of Bible study. The foundation of personal application of God's Word is first of all understanding the historical application of that Word to its original readers or hearers.

Let's look at one example.

### Read Luke 9:23

What is Jesus saying here? What does he mean by "take up [your] cross daily and follow me"?

Now it may be easy to spiritualize his command. Many a message has been preached on the imperative to "die out to self" and "crucify yourself daily" based on this verse. But is that what Jesus is really saying? We are in fact interpreting his words through a doctrinal lens that, as we shall see in a later module, is not in reality supported by Scripture.

So what was Jesus meaning when he said "take up [your] cross." You have to place yourself in the shoes of the original hearers and discard, for the moment, the cultural and doctrinal trappings that have encumbered this phrase for so long. What did the cross mean to the Jews of the first century. It was, as we know, a means of execution, and a cruel one at that. It was associated with great shame and even had the curse of God declared against it (**Deuteronomy 21:22-23**).

When Jesus said that a disciple of his must "take up his cross daily," Jesus was talking about a willingness to lay down one's life for the kingdom of God. In today's language, he would have said, "Anyone who wants to be my disciple must take up his gallows or his guillotine or his electric chair daily and follow me!" The people hearing Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. If they were to follow Jesus, they needed to be willing to put their lives totally on the line and even be willing to face an excruciating and shameful death.

Note the following scriptures and how they are in line with this basic interpretation of what it means to "take up [your] cross daily."

### Read Philippians 2:8

### Read Hebrews 12:2

### Read Hebrews 13:12-13

Whenever you read a scripture, always seek to discover what the original intent of the writer was. This is the basis of your personal application of that scripture.

### **Principle 3: *Although the whole Bible is God's Word, this does not mean that every verse applies directly to you***

Even though the Bible was authored by the Holy Spirit, he directed his words in answer to specific historic and cultural situations. George Ladd once wrote:

“The Bible is the Word of God given in the words of [people] in history.”<sup>1</sup>

As Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart write in their excellent book, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*:

“Because the Bible is *God’s Word*, it has *eternal relevance*; it speaks to all mankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God’s Word, we must listen – and obey. But because God chose to speak His Word through *human words in history*, every book in the Bible also has *historical particularity*; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written (and in some cases also by the oral history it had before it was written down). Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the ‘tension’ that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*.”<sup>2</sup>

Take a look at a few examples of “historically particular” passages:

### Read 1 Thessalonians 5:26

This was a cultural injunction. Many cultures today do not use a kiss on the lips as a greeting, but in the first century, this was common practice in the Gentile churches. Once we understand the cultural background, we see that this verse is not a command for you to kiss all your Christian brothers, but rather a specific direction to the Thessalonian church. There are, however, cultural equivalents that express the same kind of brotherly love as Paul intends in this verse.

### Read Matthew 10:14

Jesus tells his disciples to “shake the dust off your feet” as a witness against a town which rejected their message. Is this something that we are supposed to do today? In the culture of the first century Jews, shaking the dust off one’s feet was an indictment against a home or village and was clearly understood by all concerned. The act carried an unspoken statement: “Even the dust of your town that would cling to our shoes, we now shake off.” Today, “shaking the dust of one’s feet” has no meaning in most cultures, although the general principle of not carrying the effect of the town’s rejection with you when you leave could be said to continue to apply.

### Read Luke 10:1-4

Why would Jesus say, “Do not greet anyone along the way?” In those days, it was common practice to make long flowery greetings which could hold a person up for many minutes and sometimes even hours of formal conversation. Jesus is impressing upon his seventy-two disciples the urgency of their mission and commanding them not to get deflected from their purpose. It would be a mistake if we missed this cultural meaning and believed that when we go out evangelizing today we should not answer anyone who says “hello” to us as we travel.

Let’s take a look at the instructions Jesus gave his twelve disciples when he sent them out two by two:

**Read Matthew 10:5-10**

Note here Jesus gives some very clear commands:

- Do not go among the Gentiles or Samaritans. Go only to “the lost sheep of Israel.”
- Preach this message: “The kingdom of heaven is near.”
- Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.
- Do not take any money with you.
- Do not take a bag or any extra clothes, shoes or staff.

Now we are all agreed that this passage is part of God’s Word. These are the words of Jesus himself, and his commands do not appear to have any conditions. So are we supposed to obey them as they stand?

We know that the command to heal the sick is a continuing injunction, as we see in **Mark 16:17-18**, **1 Corinthians 12:9**, **James 5:14-15** and from the ongoing ministry of the believers recorded in Acts. But what about the rest? Are we not allowed to preach to the Gentiles? And if we are not allowed to go to the Samaritans, why did Philip do so in **Acts 8:5-8**? Are we not allowed to take money with us when we preach the Gospel? Or a bag? Or extra clothes or shoes?

**Read Luke 22:35-36**

Note how this passage undoes what Jesus had previously commanded. The commands in **Matthew 10:5-10** were time-specific. They had a use-by date. Although they remain part of God’s Word, they were given for a specific group of people at a specific time. Some parts of the passage no longer apply to us today.

Another example of this is the book of Job. Even though the words of Job’s friends are part of the Bible, the Lord rebukes them because “they have not spoken of me what is right” (**Job 42:7**). It would, therefore, be unwise to base our teaching directly on the words of Job’s counsellors (for example, **Job 11:1-6; 25:4-6; 35:4-8,12-16**), even though they may be a part of God’s Word.

**Principle 4: Always read a verse or passage in its context**

This principle is arguably the most important of them all. Always, *always*, read in context. Read what goes before a verse and what comes after.

God’s Word was never meant to be read as stand-alone verses. In fact, the chapters and verses were only added later to help Bible students navigate their way around the Bible. Each verse flows on from the one before, whether there is a chapter division or not.

As examples, read the following verses, then check the verses before them. See how they flow on without a pause.

**Read Romans 4:1; 3:31**

**Read 1 Corinthians 13:1; 12:31**

**Read 2 Peter 2:1; 1:21**

By reading each verse in its context, we ensure that we interpret that verse in the flow of the intended meaning of the whole passage. Without this principle in operation, we can easily pick any verse that sounds good and base our teaching on it, even though the context does not support that meaning. A verse taken out of context can be made to support *anything*.

Let's take a look at a couple of examples. Read the following verse first of all *without* looking at its context.

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:31**

What is this verse saying? Many have interpreted it to mean that Paul was saying he died to himself everyday. This verse is often used in connection with **Luke 9:23** that we read earlier. Look, Paul said he had to die to himself every single day! We too must die to ourselves every day!

But is that what Paul was saying? Now read the context, from **1 Corinthians 15:12-32**. What is the context of Paul's intended meaning? He is talking about the physical resurrection of the believer's body when Christ returns. He is actually seeking to refute a heresy which had crept into the Corinthian church that there was no future resurrection of the body. And so, to prove his point, Paul asks the question in verse 30:

“And as for us, *why do we endanger ourselves every hour?* I die every day – I mean that, brothers – just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? *If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’*”

The moment we read verse 31 in its context, we see that Paul is not talking about “dying out” to himself. He is talking about real physical danger and real physical death. “Why,” he asks, “if there is no future resurrection, do I risk death every single day?”

Let's look at one more example. Read the following verse, again without checking out its context.

**Read Philippians 4:13**

This is a familiar verse, isn't it? But what is Paul *really* meaning when he says, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength”?

OK, now look at the context of this verse. In verses 11-13, Paul says:

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances*. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. *I have learned the secret of being content in any and*



*every situation, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*

Notice how the flavor of this verse suddenly changes the moment we see it in its context. Paul is talking about being able to handle any kind of situation, no matter whether he has plenty or has nothing. It makes no difference. Christ’s strength empowers him to “do everything” regardless of the circumstances.

So to recap: Never put spiritual blinkers on when you read a verse. Always read that verse in its context – what goes before and what goes after – to see its meaning in the flow of the whole passage. As Louis Cassels phrased it:

“Any single verse of the Bible, taken in isolation, may actually be dangerous to your spiritual health. Every part of it must be read in relation to the whole message.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Principle 5: *Always check the tense of Scripture***

The tense of a sentence – whether it be past, present or future – makes all the difference to its meaning. In the Scripture it is the same. Many Christians, because they have not taken note of the tense of a verse, have often asked God to do what he says he has already done, or to give them what he says he has already given.

#### **Read Ephesians 1:3**

This is not future tense. The scripture is not saying, “God will bless us.” It is a past tense scripture. He has *already* blessed us in Christ “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms.” Because we recognize the tense, we don’t *ask* the Lord for these blessings, but rather *thank* him for having already given them to us. And so the tense of a verse can make all the difference to our expression of faith!

Now, read the following verses and note the tenses:

#### **Read Romans 6:6-11**

## **Two Academic Words**

Bible scholars often use academic terminology to explain the principles of biblical study. Here are two of the most important ones:

### **Exegesis**

Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of a Bible passage to discover the original, intended meaning. This is the “historical application” of a Bible passage.

To “exegete” a scripture is to uncover its original meaning and intent.

### **Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is the application of biblical principles in order to apply the meaning of a Bible passage to today’s circumstances. This is the art of interpreting God’s Word, bringing a passage of Scripture from the first century (for example) into the twenty-first century.

Hermeneutics is the “personal application” of a Bible passage.

**Read 2 Corinthians 5:17**

**Read Colossians 1:13**

**Principle 6: *Any truth must be established upon the balance of Scripture.***

A truth in God’s Word is never established in isolation to the rest of Scripture. The Bible builds precept upon precept. The biblical principle of “Every matter should be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (**2 Corinthians 13:1**) applies also to the truths in God’s Word.

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:29**

This is a tricky verse that many have pondered over. Note that this falls in the same context we were examining before for the verse **1 Corinthians 15:31**. The background context is the argument Paul is building against those who deny a future resurrection of the body.

Paul appears to be neither supporting nor refuting the practice of baptism for those already dead. He is, in fact, not really concerned about addressing the issue at all. He simply draws upon it to illustrate his point, noting only that there are “those” who baptize for the dead.

Yet the Mormons have usurped this verse to support their doctrine of baptism for the dead. There is no other supporting verse, and there is no indication that Paul in any way condones the practice.

In summary, then, principle 6 requires that any truth in God’s Word be supported by the balance of Scripture.

**Principle 7: *Ask questions***

As long as you are asking questions, your heart will be open to what God desires to reveal of himself in his Word. And as long as you are asking questions, answers will come (note **Matthew 7:7-8**).

As you read a passage of Scripture, it is helpful to ask five essential questions:

- **Who:** Who wrote the book?
- **Whom:** To whom was the book written?
- **Where:** Where is the writer writing from?
- **When:** In what time period and circumstances did the writer write?
- **Why:** Why is the writer writing the book? What is his intent?

These and other questions are like keys that unlock a deeper understanding of the Word of God. If you don’t understand a verse, ask the Lord about it. Keep asking and, sooner or later, the Lord will reveal himself in that verse. It is often in those hard to understand passages where the greatest revelations of the Lord lie dormant, awaiting discovery.

## Looking for Patterns

God has woven astounding patterns into his Word. These patterns, once seen, reveal a structure to Scripture which further enhance its meaning. Here are just a few of many, many types of patterns that can be found in God's Word.

### *Time patterns*

You will often find that a series of verses displays a pattern of tense - past, present and future. Let's look briefly at one example:

#### Read 1 Peter 1:3-5

**Verse 3:** God has given us new birth (past tense) into a living hope (future tense).

**Verse 4:** We have an inheritance kept in heaven for us (future tense).

**Verse 5:** Through faith we are shielded by God's power (present tense) until the coming of the salvation that is to be revealed (future tense).

By noting the tenses used in a series of verses, you can pick out the relationships between the verses. In this passage, the living hope (future tense) is connected to the inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade (future tense), which is connected with the coming salvation to be revealed in the last days (future tense).

### *Trinity patterns*

You will often find in verses and passages patterns that reveal different aspects of the three Persons of the Godhead. For example, see **1 John 5:6-8**.

As another example, we see in the baptism of Jesus the participation of all three Persons of the Trinity (Luke 3:21-22). Jesus, the Son, is being baptized. The Holy Spirit comes upon him in the form of a dove. And the voice of the Father is heard from heaven.

### *Mirror patterns*

There are many times when we see statements mirrored in various parts of the Bible, often with small differences which are very revealing.

#### Read Romans 8:15-16

#### Read Galatians 4:4-7

- In Romans, the Spirit "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" whereas in Galatians "we [have received] the full rights of sons."
- In Romans, we "did not receive a spirit that makes [us] a slave again to fear, but [we] received the Spirit of sonship [or adoption]" and in Galatians, we are "no longer a slave, but a son."
- In Romans, it is *by the Spirit of sonship* that we cry, "Abba, Father," whereas in Galatians, it is *through us* that *the Spirit of his Son* cries out, "Abba, Father."

- ➡ In both Romans and Galatians, we are named heirs, as a natural outworking of us being sons.

As you can see, the patterns in God's Word are varied and endless. Now that you are armed with the principles of biblical study, we encourage you to begin to use these tools to dig deeply into God's Word and uncover the marvels that reside there.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor George Ladd, quoted by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), p.19.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Cassels (1922-1974), quoted from *Draper's Quotations for the Christian World*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.