## INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE 7

**Lecture Seven**

**Practical Guidelines to Understanding God’s Word**

## General and Practical Guidelines

In this section we will outline in more practical terms, some basic and general guidelines to help us to interpret Scripture as accurately as possible. These are only guidelines and should be borne in mind or taken into consideration when examining Scripture. The aim of these guidelines is to help achieve a better understanding of the Word of God.

### True Meaning of Words Used

Always bear in mind that the Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew and Greek and our English Bible is a translation from these languages.

Not everyone has a working knowledge of these ancient languages and therefore we need to work on the exact meaning of key words for our own benefit. It is extremely difficult to find word-for-word translations between different languages and often one Greek or Hebrew word may imply a whole concept or clutch of words in English. A good example here is the Greek word Soteria, which translated into English means salvation. But in the Greek the word implies healing, delivering and saving. This can also work in reverse, where different Greek words with quite distinct meanings have been translated by the same word in English. Best example here is the English word “love” that has been used to translate any one of four different Greek words.

Every word of Scripture is inspired, with God-breathed authority and we therefore need to understand every word properly, especially to understand what it meant to the author when he wrote it. The best advice here is, if you are going to study the Word of God in depth, always compare translations and have on hand a good expository dictionary of Greek and Hebrew words. It is also very useful to have a concordance and to check the uses of a word in question. From examining how the word is used in other places, you will gain a better understanding of the word and what it generally meant.

### Form of Expression

Many different forms of expression are used in Scripture, such as poetry, drama, history, allegory, symbolism, narrative and so on. It is important to discover which literary from is being used in any passage we may be reading. It’s literary form will help us to know whether it should be understood literally, figuratively or metaphorically. A great deal of Scripture is literal and historical yet some books are full of symbolism, such as Daniel and Revelation and we must bear that in mind when seeking to understand such passages.

The New Testament parables are another example of where the literary form has to be taken into careful consideration. Jesus used parables to convey deep spiritual truth.

But the Lord never intended every single detail of a parable to be taken literally or to have a literal translation. By the same token, we must not mistake literal descriptions for a parable - a good example here being the final section of Matthew 25 - many people think of it as the parable of the sheep and the goats, but it’s actually a literal description and words such as “when” and “then” confirm it.

Scriptures such as Judges 9:7-15 and 2 Kings 14:9 are obviously allegorical. But we must avoid going to an extreme and taking factual accounts as symbolic, such as the stories of the Garden of Eden and Jonah and the whale. They too are factual accounts and referred to as factual accounts by Jesus and the New Testament writers.

### Background

Background knowledge of the Bible, i.e. its writers, people, lands, circumstances etc. is helpful in interpreting Scripture in proper context. History and geography shed much light on many Old Testament prophecies and give an important contextual setting to understanding those prophecies. A knowledge of the customs and manners of Bible lands is also useful, for example, the phrase “nailing it to His cross” from Col 2:14 takes on new meaning when we understand the custom of the day. If you owed money in those days, it was a debt against you but if that debt was paid the piece of paper or IOU was taken and nailed to the town notice board so that everyone could see that you no longer owed anything. That is what Jesus did for us. The “handwriting of the ordinances” was against us, through sin we were in bondage and debt and would have had to pay with our lives. Yet Jesus, in bearing our sins, paid that debt, and nailed it to the cross for all to see! In the same way, it is important to find out in any passage of Scripture, who is speaking, and who the intended readership was. Verses such as Gal 3:26-29 take on special meaning when you realise Paul was writing to Christians of Jewish background, and verses such as Phil 3:8-9 when you consider who is writing them. Background information is extremely useful when studying the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Often people skip over many prophecies, hardly understanding them and believing them to be irrelevant. But a knowledge of the time when those prophecies were given and the circumstances in Israel at that time, will shed light on what God had to say about the various problems they faced. It then becomes much easier to apply the advice to our situation today and to understand what God has said about the future. A classic example would be Jeremiah 29:11, an incredible verse in the light of the background (see verse 1).

### Word Meanings which Change

Some words, in the English translations especially, tend to change their meaning or drop out of use with the passage of time. This especially needs to borne in mind when we use older translations such as the King James (Authorised). A good example here is the word conversation. To us today it means our “talk”. When used in the KJV however, it means our “way of life”. So if the Scripture says we must keep our conversation holy, it doesn’t mean so much that our talk must be clean, but that our way of life must be consecrated unto God, set apart for Him. Use of a number of translations and a good commentary will help in this area.

**Scripture Comparison**

The Bible does not contradict itself and that is a vitally important thing to remember. If you believe the meaning of a verse to be such and such and yet it contradicts another verse or the general teaching of Scripture, then it is your interpretation that is wrong, not the Bible. In other words, we should always seek to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Obscure or vague verses will always become clear in the light of other Scriptures and we must never base doctrines or beliefs on isolated, obscure verses which seem to have little or no backing in the rest of Scripture. Too much error has entered the church today because of beliefs based on just one verse, or even one phrase or word. If a belief is a true doctrine of Scripture it will have abundant evidence throughout all of Scripture and be in line with the general teaching of the Bible.

**Avoid Fanciful Interpretations**

Although symbolism and allegory are in Scripture, at the same time we must not let our imaginations run riot when it comes to interpretation. For example, if a story or detail in Scripture is to be construed as a “type”, then there should be a confirmation of this somewhere in Scripture. When we speak of Jonah as a type of Jesus, it is confirmed by the fact that Jesus himself said that just as Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a fish, so the Son of Man would be crucified and buried and rise again on the third day.

Avoid coming up with ingenious and intricate interpretations if there is no Scriptural warranty. For example, Jesus used parables to convey spiritual truth to people who would not be able to bear the straight truth. But through parables, they could receive and understand the story and maybe later realise how it actually applied to them. But we must remember in interpreting the parables, that not every single minute detail necessarily has a parallel in interpretation, some of the detail is there as background to the story, it’s the principle we are to be concerned with.

**“Conflicting” Accounts**

People often think that parallel accounts of the same event in Scripture conflict because of differences in detail. This is especially so when we read the gospels for example, and consider such things as the four accounts of the resurrection morning. The accounts only appear to differ, but in truth, they are just different viewpoints. The different writers tend to be selective in their material and details left out by one may be included by another. What we need to do is put the accounts side by side and construct a harmony. Rather than the accounts conflicting, we will see that together they give us the whole picture. The incident of Jesus healing the demoniac of Gadara is another good example. One gospel account makes it clear that there was more than one demoniac. The accounts do not conflict, rather, extra details are given in one, which are left out of the other. Another example is the death of Judas. Matthew 27:5 says he hanged himself, whereas Acts 1:18 says he fell headlong in a field and burst asunder and his bowels gushed out. So what happened? Both! A person’s bowels don’t just gush out when they fall over. Matthew’s account is based on the factual report of what Judas went and did. Luke’s report highlights what had happened to Judas’s body after it had been hanging sometime. His corpse was obviously rotting where it hung, eventually fell from the tree and being a decomposing body, burst open upon hitting the ground. In Acts we have a report of what someone saw later.

### Anthropomorphic Language

People often think of God as a white haired old man with flowing robes seated on a cloud-mounted throne somewhere in the heavens. this is obviously not true, yet at the same time, the Bibles uses anthropomorphic or “human” language to describe God to us in a way that we can identify with. For example we read of the hand of God, the arm of the Lord, God guiding us with His eye etc. God doesn’t have these human attributes in a physical sense because He is a Spirit (John 4:24), yet the Bible uses such language to help us understand Him and relate to Him.

**Personal**

Finally, but most importantly, we should always approach Scripture with an open mind and ask God the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into all truth. The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth by illuminating the Word of God to us, by opening our understanding to what is written in the Word. The Holy Spirit does not lead us into truth by filling our heads with all sorts of things which are divorced from Scripture. He reveals truth to us by and through the Word of God. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Word, saw to its preservation through the centuries and now He still abides with us, watching over the Word to give us understanding of it. We ought never to approach the Bible with closed, preconceived ideas and seek Scriptural confirmation of what we believe. Rather we ought to approach with an open mind and a teachable spirit, prayerfully asking the Holy Spirit to lead us into the truth of Scripture. A good opening prayer to say before studying the Word can be taken from the words of Psalm 119:18 “Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of they law”; and Psalm 19:14 “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

**CONTEXT**

Although we looked briefly at the subject of context in the previous section, it is of such vital importance in the correct interpretation of Scripture that it deserves a closer examination at this point. Much of the false and questionable doctrine floating around today arises from misinterpretation of Scripture, the root cause of which is a disregard of the context of Scripture. You can twist isolated verses and phrases of the Bible to make them say just about anything you want them to say. But God, knowing the corrupt nature of man, has seen to it that correct, contextual interpretation of His Word will always reveal His truth in the way He wanted it known. The Holy Spirit has seen to it that Scriptures read in their proper context and read in conjunction with their preceding and following verses, will always lead the reader into a right understanding of the Word of God. The best way to demonstrate this crucial guideline is by way of example. In Job 36:11 it says: “If they obey and serve Him, they shall spend their days in prosperity and their years in pleasure”. This verse has been used to teach divine prosperity for the believer, that if the child of God simply obeys and serves God, then he shall live in every kind of prosperity, financial, spiritual etc. Though it is true that the believer who obeys and serves God will have all his needs, met, and will achieve success, yet this is not the verse to prove it from. For a start, the person speaking Elihu (see verse 1) and his advice, and the advice of Job’s other three friends, was rejected by God and Job as false. It is plain from a simple study of Elihu’s speeches in this book that much of what he says simply isn’t true, he presents a lop-sided and simplistic view of God. Indeed his statement of verse 11 is proved to be false, because Job did obey and serve God, yet the calamity came upon him. Elihu had made the simple yet wrong deduction that because calamity had come upon Job, he must have sinned specifically to deserve it. Yet we know something that was hidden from both Elihu and Job at that time. We know from the opening chapters that God was allowing a testing of Job’s faith to take place and the devil had been granted leave to bring the afflictions against Job for no other reason. Thought there is some credence to the contention that Job’s fear let the devil in, still it remains that God granted the devil permission, and Elihu’s statement of verse 11 is, in the light of context, not true. You could confirm this by another guideline of interpretation - comparing Scripture with Scripture. The concept of persecution and trouble being used to refine our character is supported in many other passages, such as Romans 5, James 1 & 5, 1 Pet 4 etc. A second good example is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes. People who believe that death brings annihilation and claim that once we’re dead, that’s it, there is no life after death until the resurrection of the body, back their view with 9:5 - “For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything...” They base their argument on that last phrase. But a closer look at context reveals something completely different. Verse 3 says “This is an evil among all things done under the sun...” and verse 6 makes the context abundantly clear - “...neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun”. The setting of this verse is obvious, it is looking at things very definitely from a human, earthly viewpoint, not from God’s eternal, spiritual viewpoint. The context is “all things under the sun”. Once you are dead, then it is obvious that physically you have nothing more to do with life as it continues under the sun. That is from the earthly viewpoint, we know from the reality revealed very plainly in the New Testament that God’s eternal and spiritual view is different. Look too at the verse the phrase comes from and read the very next part of the sentence; “neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten”. This clearly shows the human earthly context of the verse, because in the light of the whole Bible, we know from countless passages in the gospels and the epistles, that there is very definitely a system of rewards after death. The Lord himself shall judge and separate, and those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life shall enter into eternity in the presence of the Lord, while those whose names are not found in the Book shall be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:11-15).

That is why it is so important to interpret Scripture in context. A proper study of Ecclesiastes reveals that the writer is most disillusioned with life. His negative view is somewhat suspect, but at least he concludes that life is worthless without God (12:13-14). What he speaks of relates to earthly truths. If what he says is contrasted with the revelation of the New Testament, we then get a clearer picture of the divine reality, i.e. the picture of what is missing from his view of things. To use the phrase of verse 5 as an argument against life after death is to ignore completely what is written before and after that verse, and to ignore also the context in relation to the rest of Scripture. To interpret correctly, we must always consider a verse in its immediate context and also in relation to the entire teaching of Scripture.