



HOW TO  
UNDERSTAND



THE  
BIBLE

— *A Simple Guide* —

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MEL LAWRENZ

To the Reader 9

Part I APPROACHING THE BIBLE 12

1 How Can We Understand the Bible Better? 13

2 How Will Our Lives Be Better if We Understand the Bible Better? 17

3 What Is the Big Picture of the Bible? 22

4 What About Bible Translations? 26

5 What Help Can We Get So We Understand the Bible Better? 30

Part II UNDERSTANDING THE OLD TESTAMENT 35

6 How Should We Understand the Stories of the Old Testament? 37

7 What Is the Big Picture of the Book of Beginnings? 42

8 How Should We Understand the Law? 46

9 What Is Important About the Land of the Bible? 51

10 How Should We Interpret What the Prophets Had to Say? 55

11 How Should We Read the Psalms? 60

12 What Should We Take from the Books of Wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job)? 65

13 What Is Important About the Era of the Kings? 69

14 What Do We Learn from the Exile and the Return? 74

Part III UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT 79

15 What Should We Understand About the World of the New Testament? 81

16 What Are the Gospels? 86

17 How Should We Understand the Teachings of Jesus? 90

18 What Was Jesus Teaching in the Parables? 94

19 What Place Does the Acts of the Apostles Play in the New Testament? 98

20 How Should We Read the Epistles of the New Testament? 103

21 Who Was Paul, and How Should We Understand His Epistles? 107

22 What Is Unique About the Books of James and Hebrews? 111

23 How Should We Understand the Book of Revelation? 116

Part IV INTERPRETING THE BIBLE 121

24 What Is the Most Natural Way to Read the Bible? 123

25 How Can We Hear God's Voice in Scripture? 127

26 What Are the Proper Ways to Apply Scripture to Life Today? 131

27 How Can We Refine Our Understanding of Biblical Theology? 136

28 How Can We Know if Someone Is Giving False Teaching? 141

29 What Are Some Good Plans and Disciplines for Reading Scripture? 146

30 A Final Word About Faith 150

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(Regal, 2007)

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(Jossey-Bass/Leadership Network, 2009)

*Patterns: Ways to Develop a God-Filled Life* (Zondervan, 2003)

*Putting the Pieces Back Together: How Real Life and Real Faith*

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Mel is a thoughtful analyst of church life today. Best of all—he actually does what he writes about.

—John Ortberg, author and pastor

Having known Mel Lawrenz for thirty-five years in various capacities as student, intern, colleague, and eventual successor as senior pastor of Elmbrook Church, I can testify to his keen mind, his profound respect for and knowledge of history, his forward-looking curiosity, his undoubted communication gifts, and his many years as a seasoned practitioner of church ministry.

—Stuart Briscoe, author and pastor

Mel Lawrenz's vision of a local church that actually reflects the wholeness and beauty of God as it engages with the Lord, one another, and the community is a much-needed call back to God's original Plan A – a plan that has too often been cast aside in the name of specialization, church growth, and expediency.

—Larry Osborne, author and pastor

HOW TO  
UNDERSTAND  
THE  
BIBLE

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MEL LAWRENZ

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## To the Reader

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Whether you are just starting to read the Bible or have been reading it for decades, it is always helpful to step back and gain some perspective on why we do this, and how we should do it.

By “how to” I do not mean approaching Bible reading in a mechanical way. If Scripture is the word of God, then reading it is an intimate, dynamic, mind-bending, soul-shaking experience—anything but mechanical. The “how-to’s” of this process include knowing the historical background of the portion we are reading, and knowing how words work: the difference between a psalm and a proverb, the special characteristics of epistles, the power of prophecy, the extraordinary teaching methods of Jesus, and so on.

I wanted this book to be short and practical. If you are motivated to go on to larger works about Bible backgrounds and interpretation, that’s great. But having been a pastor for quite a few years, I know that a great many people have yet to read an introductory survey about understanding the Bible. This compact book is a beginning orientation.

*How to Understand the Bible: A Simple Guide* is not one person’s interpretation of what the Bible means, but a guide for how to prepare yourself and orient

yourself for reading Scripture. Knowing Scripture is about knowing God. In it is a lifetime of discoveries.

For supplemental resources for individuals and groups:

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# Part I APPROACHING THE BIBLE

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# 1 How Can We Understand the Bible Better?

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If you wish you understood the Bible better, you're in good company.

It is not just newcomers reading the Bible for the first time who think the Bible can be challenging to understand. Mature believers think that. Bible scholars think that. Even biblical writers thought that. Second Peter 3:16 says: “[The apostle Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand.”

This should not surprise us. It should, instead, enthuse us and inspire us. It should fuel our curiosity and compel us to worship. If, when we hold a Bible in our hands, we have the word of the Creator of the universe—a Creator who loves us so much that he chooses not to leave us in silence—then we should not be surprised that it can be mysterious, complex, and deep.

We should not want it any other way.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

If the Bible were as easy to understand as a news magazine or someone's blog, then God would not be greater than a journalist or a blogger. If we could understand all of the Bible the first year we read it, what more would there be for us for the rest of our lives? If the Bible did not take some work and patience to grasp, how could it possibly be a reliable guide for the great challenges of our lives? Think of it this way: if you went to a great banquet where there was a 30-foot-long buffet table with dozens of different foods, you would not be discouraged if you walked away having tasted only some of the amazing foods there. You would, instead, be enthused to return to it another day in order to taste more.

The Bible is challenging because it challenges. Mark Twain put it this way: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." The word of God is wonderfully subversive. Scripture is like the scalpel that cuts, but also like a salve that heals. No empire or civilization can suppress the truth of the word of God because:

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,

and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

(Isa. 40:22)

This is the God who has spoken—to us.

Vast numbers of people respect the Bible, but they long to understand it better. That includes people who have read the Bible for many years, and those who have been hesitant even to try. Here is great news: The Bible, written by many authors over many years, and believed to be the word of God by billions of people, is God talking to the human race. And God wants to be understood.

The Bible is God's word in human words. The prophets and apostles were real people, urgently proclaiming, teaching, correcting, and warning. These writers of Scripture meant specific things in what they said.

If the Bible has stood the test of time across the ages and within thousands of different cultures, then we can be sure that this word of God will prove reliable for any circumstance of our lives.

This small book, *How to Understand the Bible: A Simple Guide*, is not an argument for the authority of the Bible—a topic covered ably by many other books. This book is a concise and practical guidebook for any believer wishing to read the Bible and understand it as the word of God—to understand what God is saying in it. It is meant to encourage and enthuse you, and motivate you to feed on this truth. As Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good." The great

prospect of better understanding the Bible is that we also come to understand God better.

And that is why God spoke in the first place.

So this is how, in this small book, we'll walk through the question of understanding the Bible. First, some questions on "Approaching the Bible," like "What is the big picture of the Bible?" "What about translations?" "What help can we get so we understand the Bible better?" etc. Next, we'll answer basic questions about "Understanding the Old Testament," to be followed by "Understanding the New Testament." Finally, we'll say some things about "Interpreting the Bible."

We'll begin with a question of motivation: "How will our lives be better if we understand the Bible better?"

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## 2 How Will Our Lives Be Better if We Understand the Bible Better?

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It is fair to ask the question: “How will my life be better if I understand the Bible better?” because it certainly is possible to own a Bible, carry a Bible, read the Bible, listen to Bible teachings and sermons, and neglect working to understand what the Bible actually means. It is worth everything to understand the Bible better.

First, understanding the Bible *leads to a fruitful life*. The very first words of the very first Psalm say this:

Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams  
of water,

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers. (Ps. 1:1-3)

We need to be intentional about what kind of people we are. Do we want to be “planted” in a place of health and fruitfulness, or to wander in sin and even wickedness?

One day Jesus taught that understanding and applying his words *leads to a stable life*.

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” (Matt. 7:24-25)

Jesus’ words are at the core of the word of God, but they must be understood and lived. Building your house on the sand of human opinion, popular sentiment, or arbitrary expertise leads to one outcome only... to be washed away.

The apostle Paul explains how the word of God *leads to a quality life*.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in

## How Will Our Lives Be Better if We Understand the Bible Better?

righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

What an enormous blessing it is to have Holy Scripture, breathed out by God, which does these four things: (1) teaching (that is, telling us the truth), (2) rebuking (that is, telling us when we're off track in our lives), (3) correcting (that is, getting us back on track), and (4) training in righteousness (that is, helping us stay on track). This is quality control for our lives. It is God speaking to us in all candor, honesty, support, and confrontation. It is the firm hand of discipline with the gentle touch of love.

Love is really why we have Scripture—why God breaks the silence and silences the noise. The writer of Hebrews put it best:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Heb. 1:1-3)

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

The major turning points in the Bible are not merely history. They are acts of love—God building God’s own story exactly how he wanted it. The law of the Old Testament is God patiently teaching human beings about holiness. The prophets screamed their warnings and proclaimed great promise—both acts of love. And then came God’s speech through his Son. In Jesus we get truth, which is greater than just “truths.” The Son is radiance, glory, purification, authority. Those red letters we read in the Gospels are not moralistic maxims. They are piercing beams of light.

How will our lives be better if we understand the Bible better?

When I was a teenager and a brand-new believer, I was in a Christian coffeehouse where someone taught a while, and then someone sang for a bit, and all of us sat around rustic round tables talking about life. A young man at my table who was a few years older than me had with him an enormous Bible, almost the size of what you see on altars in churches, with wooden covers and gilded edges. I will never forget him looking me dead in the eye and saying, “Whatever else you do—pay attention to the words of this book. It has everything you need.” I will never forget that huge Bible, the intense look of conviction in the eyes of that young man, and his simple, focused admonition. From that moment on, I read Scripture differently, with eyes

## How Will Our Lives Be Better if We Understand the Bible Better?

of faith. I felt like the Bible was reading me, rather than me reading the Bible, which exposed me to a power—benevolent, consistent, and constructive—I had never known before.

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## 3 What Is the Big Picture of the Bible?

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If you walked into someone's home, picked a big book off a shelf, and read a single line on a random page, one thing is certain: you would not understand it. That is because *we receive meaning through words by seeing them in their context.*

One of the most helpful things we can do to understand the Bible better is to gain a clear comprehension of the whole sweep of the biblical text. To see "the big picture." Grabbing a verse here and there for life meaning is like saying to God that we will only listen to him if he uses Twitter to send us tweets.

No, the Bible is a vast, epic story. The story of God, and the story of humanity.

The Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians call "The Old Testament") are a collection of writings that dozens of authors wrote over hundreds of years. It is breathtaking. The books of the Old Testament include history, prophecy, poetry, wisdom, and law.

## What is the Big Picture of the Bible?

The Pentateuch (“five books”)—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—tell the story of beginnings. The creation of the universe, the fall of humanity into sin and corruption, the development of humanity. We learn about the character of God, a personal God who uses a particular family to show how he would work through covenant. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Out of love God delivered this people from slavery (Exodus), gave them definition for life (the commandments and laws), and brought them eventually to a land of their own.

The 12 books of history that follow (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther) continue the story of God with humanity. This is not history in the modern sense of facts and statistics. It is a true drama filled with tenderness and violence, success and failure, faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Hundreds of thousands of descendants of Abraham enter the land of promise, they struggle to live under God’s authority since the lure of sin is always so strong. So they install a king and a government like the other nations. But after merely three generations, the kingdom becomes divided and the following 200 years are full of disappointments broken up with occasional revivals. Eventually the superpowers from the regions to the northeast—Assyria and then Babylonia—sweep down on the divided kingdom. They destroy, they exile. But

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

after five decades, small numbers of Hebrews are allowed to return to rebuild their community and their nation.

Next, we have the books of Poetry and Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. The authors of these books let loose praise, anguish, affirmation, and longing. We learn much here about what is in the human heart, and in the heart of God.

The books called the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and the 12 Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) include prophetic oracles, history, and poetry. Kings and governments are not the answer to human chaos, so God uses the prophets to confront, instruct, and guide the people of God.

Four hundred years after the last book of the Old Testament, human history is transformed with the emergence of Jesus the Messiah. The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell the story of Jesus both as personal history and as expressions of faith. They are “gospel,” good news. Luke continues the story by telling the dramatic events in the mission of Jesus’ designated representatives in the Acts of the apostles. The promise made to Abraham 2,000 years earlier, that through his family “all the nations of the earth would be blessed” is dramatically revealed for

## What is the Big Picture of the Bible?

the first time as the message about Jesus spreads across empires and continents.

The letters the apostle Paul wrote to Christian communities and individuals and the “general epistles” of the New Testament contain fresh new teachings about life, usually in response to problems. They also reveal the character of God, now viewed from the higher plane of revelation following the pouring out of the Spirit of God.

The book of Revelation both fascinates and puzzles us. Its kaleidoscope of oracles and judgments and images knocks us out of complacency. But Revelation is also a book of comfort. God sets things right. And so things come full circle. From garden to paradise.

This is “the big picture.” In it we will find harsh truths and life-giving truths, but only as we read them in the light of the great reality of God.

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## 4 What About Bible Translations?

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If you are wondering what English translation of the Bible to use, know this: you are blessed with an array of excellent choices. In the past few hundred years, interest in and reverence for the Bible has inspired major efforts involving thousands of researchers, linguists, and translators. The complete Bible is available in about 500 languages today, with thousands more having portions of the Bible in translation.

The purpose of Bible translation is to accurately render the meaning of biblical texts from their original languages—Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New Testament—into a “receptor language.” Scholars and committees of scholars use the latest knowledge of ancient manuscripts to express accurately what the original authors of Scripture meant.

Why are there dozens of different English translations? It is because there are options as to how Bible translators carry the meaning of Greek and

## What About Bible Translations?

Hebrew texts into the receptor language. For example, some translations aim at rendering the meaning of texts word-for-word (sometimes referred to as “literal” translations). The upside to this approach is that the Bible reader can know the specific word choice and phraseology of the biblical authors. The downside is that Bible texts translated in this way can be more difficult to read. Until one gets used to the style, it can seem stiff, wooden, and unfamiliar—but one can certainly get used to it.

Another approach is to translate thought for thought. Translation done in this way will have language that is more familiar to English readers, and thus probably easier to read. Translating in this way can still be regarded as accurate, if the true meaning of the original text is carried across.

Then there is the method of free translation or paraphrase, the purpose of which is to give readers the flow of the biblical text idea by idea, oftentimes rendering the meaning of whole sentences in new ways, rather than carrying over the exact words of the Hebrew or Greek. A paraphrase may use the word *flashlight* instead of *lamp*, for instance.

Heated debates surround the issue of Bible translation. People who take the Bible seriously want translations that are accurate and faithful to what the writers of Holy Scripture intended to communicate. But the typical Bible reader can be assured that there is

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

not just one accurate translation. In fact, for the serious believer, the best thing is to have and read different translations for devotional reading, but especially in studying the Bible or preparing to teach it.

Keep this in mind: the best Bible translation is going to be the one you will actually read. If you purchase the latest Bible translation but you don't actually read through it, or if it gathers dust on the shelf, that Bible will be of less value to you than one that you consume because you understand it.

I can speak personally about this. As I was growing up, I tried many times to read the standard mainstream Bible I'd been given in church and failed. But when someone put a brand-new paraphrase of the New Testament in my hand when I was 17 years old, I started reading it and could not put it down. My life was changed that early summer. A year later, I started reading one of the most literal translations available. It was hard work, and it took me the better part of a year, but it was beneficial to me at a different level. In the decades that followed, I got used to referring to numerous translations as I prepared teachings and sermons. I have so much respect for the diligent experts who have given us these gifts.

Here are some of the most popular versions of the Bible in English sold today:

*New Living Translation*—an easy-to-read

## What About Bible Translations?

thought-by-thought translation from Hebrew and Greek

*New International Version*—a standard translation using universally used English (thus, “International”)

*King James Version*—the classic 1611 translation that is a landmark in English literature, but far removed from contemporary English

*New King James Version*—a very literal translation, updating the language of the King James Version

*English Standard Version*—an “essentially literal” update of the widely used Revised Standard Version

*Common English Bible*—a new translation blending word-for-word and thought-for-thought approaches

*New American Standard Bible*—widely seen as the most literal translation produced in the 20th century

*The Message*—a free translation by Eugene Peterson using everyday modern English, idea for idea

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## 5 What Help Can We Get So We Understand the Bible Better?

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“Do you understand what you are reading?” That was the question Philip the apostle asked a man from Ethiopia who was riding in a chariot on a desert road leading from Jerusalem toward the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 8). The man was the finance minister of Ethiopia, but he had been in Jerusalem for Pentecost and somehow obtained a copy of Isaiah the prophet. The man’s answer? “How can I [understand it] unless someone explains it to me?”

Every person who has ever read the Bible has wondered: *Who can I find who will help me understand what I am reading?* Some will go looking for a book or commentary that explains this or that portion of Scripture; far more people simply let their pastors or other teachers do the heavy lifting of Bible interpretation, and they go along with what they hear as long as they trust the person they listen to.

## What Help Can We Get So We Understand the Bible Better?

But most believers come to a point of realizing that they need to let the words of Scripture speak to them, without influence from a human interpreter. This is a healthy instinct because God's word really is a gift from God directly to the believer. Great spiritual movements have happened when ordinary believers rediscover the Bible for themselves. On the other hand, we are meant to live in fellowship with other believers, and to learn the meaning of God's word—together.

There must be a balance here: a work of the Spirit of God in the minds and hearts of the believers as they are illumined by the biblical text for themselves, but with appropriate assistance from more mature people, and from experts on the Bible who are archeologists, historians, linguistic experts, etc.

So, assuming that we know we need to read the Bible for ourselves, and enjoy a lifelong process of discovery and enrichment, what outside resources are available to us to help us along the way?

**1. *Study Bibles.*** One of the most common ways we can find reliable guidance and information is in the pages of a good study Bible. Most of the common Bible translations have a "study Bible" version, which is the biblical text with further explanation via charts, maps, illustrations, and notes. The notes are brief explanations of words, phrases, people, and events. A study Bible may have tens of thousands of notes in total, usually prepared by a variety of Bible experts.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

There are dozens of different study Bibles in English. Two that are distinguished by broad-based scholarship are *The NIV Study Bible* (Zondervan) and *The ESV Study Bible* (Crossway).

**2. Bible Dictionaries or Encyclopedias.** For much more information than is contained in the notes of a study Bible, use a Bible dictionary (one or two volumes) or a Bible encyclopedia (multiple volumes, with much more detail). Any serious Scripture reader should acquire at least a one-volume Bible dictionary. A good dictionary contains thousands of brief articles, usually updated every few years, on people, places, doctrines, history, geography, archaeology, and more. In a Bible dictionary, you can look up *the book of Acts*, or *John the apostle*, or *Jericho*, or *sanctification*, or *Messiah*, or *mustard seed*, or *Jordan River*, or *Pontius Pilate*, etc. Bible dictionaries include maps, drawings, charts, and illustrations. They are amazing tools. They don't tell you what specific passages mean, but they give you information that you wouldn't be able to get on your own, to help you understand the Bible better.

**3. Bible Commentaries.** On the desert road, Philip knew the man from Ethiopia was reading a very important Messianic prophecy from the book of Isaiah. When asked about the passage, Philip offered an explanation which led, ultimately, to the Ethiopian becoming a believer and asking to be baptized! Bible commentaries are explanations of the biblical text book

## What Help Can We Get So We Understand the Bible Better?

by book, passage by passage, verse by verse. The experts who write commentaries help us understand where and when biblical books were written, the historical context from which they have come, the possible meanings of the biblical authors, and ways to work out difficult passages. Commentaries are not sermons. They offer exegesis—which means “working out” the meaning of the original authors.

There are some one-volume commentaries on the Bible, but a commentary devoted to just one book of the Bible is much more helpful. But be aware of this: some commentaries are highly technical, getting into great detail about the Hebrew and Greek text, and they are difficult to use unless you know those languages. Other commentaries are much more usable to the average Bible student, getting right to the meaning of the text without losing the forest for the trees. A commentary series I am particularly fond of is *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, Series Editors J. A. Motyer and John Stott).

There are other tools to help us understand the Bible: Bible handbooks; online Bibles, which help us quickly find passages; atlases; etc. But the three main tools listed above will generally give us all the help we need when we, like the Ethiopian, say, “How can I understand it unless someone explains?”



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Part II UNDERSTANDING THE OLD  
TESTAMENT

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## 6 How Should We Understand the Stories of the Old Testament?

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When I was a boy, I was given a set of recordings of dramatized Bible stories, and they captivated my attention. They were well-produced audio narrations complete with sound effects like the clanking of swords, rushing waters, roaring lions, chariots, and nails being driven through Jesus' hands. The stories lodged in my head as I listened to the recordings over and over.

It is common in Christian churches for children to be taught the Bible story by story. Then, somehow, we get the idea that as adults we can handle the higher truths we find in places like the epistles of the New Testament. But this is to miss the grand scheme of the Bible. The backbone of the Bible is story or narrative. If we look at the whole sweep of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, there is one grand story: the creation, the fall of humanity into sin and corruption, God's efforts

at redeeming humanity, and the final remaking of all things. This is the metanarrative of the Bible.

That big story is divided into two large narratives: God working through a chosen people (the old covenant), and then, with the coming of Jesus, how God forged a new covenant open to people from every part of the world. Break that down further, and we get to the individual stories of Joseph, of the exodus, of Ruth, of Joshua, of the destruction of Jerusalem, of Daniel in Babylon—and hundreds of others. So how should we understand the narratives of the Old Testament, which constitute almost half of the Old Testament text?

**1. *We should read individual narratives in their specific contexts, but with the wider narratives in mind.*** The story of Ruth, for instance, is a rich and poignant story within itself, about struggle, commitment, faith, and redemption. But then we learn that Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David, so she fits into the wider Old Testament picture. More amazing, this woman from Moab is listed in the genealogy of Jesus because of her lineage with David (Matt. 1:5). So the significance of the story of Ruth goes beyond her relatives and the harvesting of grain.

**2. *We should take Old Testament narratives at face value, reading for the natural sense.*** The purpose of narrative is to tell us what happened and to help us understand the broad significance of what happened.

Not every story has a moral. The account of Joshua leading the Hebrews across the Jordan River means exactly that. We should not assume there is some symbolic meaning to the river, or to Joshua, or to the place where they crossed. It is wrong-headed to impose a symbolic or allegorical meaning on a biblical story. It is misleading and it is arbitrary. It assumes there is a hidden meaning to biblical stories, which leaves the normal Bible reader to ask: "I wonder what I'm missing here?" No, we should assume the biblical writer meant something specific, coherent, and intelligible story by story. This is to read Scripture on its own terms, respecting the intentionality of the biblical authors. Taking Old Testament narratives at face value removes much of the anxiety we might have if we are always looking for some supposed hidden meaning.

3. *We should also avoid moralizing or spiritualizing every Old Testament story we read.* What, for instance, might be the moral to the story of Jacob deceiving his brother Esau and later his uncle Laban? The text does not condemn what Jacob did, nor does it endorse his actions. The narrative simply tells us what happened. The story of Joshua's battle for the city of Ai does not mean we ought to obliterate our enemies in life. The story of Isaac finding a wife (Gen. 24) does not give us a method of dating. And Moses going into the tabernacle under the cloud of God's

glory is not a guideline for how we should pray or worship. These stories have great significance in the wider narrative of Scripture, but we reduce that significance when we go looking for a “moral to the story.” However, these stories do illustrate truths or morals that are taught elsewhere in Scripture. That is the best way to read them.

**4. *We should learn from the complex lives of the characters of biblical stories.*** We could feel a lot of tension over the fact that even the great heroes of faith in the Old Testament had faults and overt transgressions. The narrative usually doesn't come right out and flag what was honorable or despicable behavior. It is assumed we will figure that out based on the parts of Scripture that do teach morality. The Bible is wonderfully honest. The characters in the narratives are all sinners, yet they are part of the historic unfolding of the greatest story of Scripture: the story of God.

**5. *We should read through biblical narrative seeing it as the great story of God who is its central character.*** The narrative of the Old Testament reveals the Creator of all things as the God of holiness and of love. In the stories we witness the God of holiness for whom right and wrong, good and evil, really do matter. And his love is seen in his patience, forgiveness, guidance, protection, and mercy.

## How Should We Understand the Stories of the Old Testament?

What is true of all great narratives, and especially the narratives of Holy Scripture, is that every time we go through them, we will see something new. A detail here and there. An attitude in one of the characters. A sight, smell, or sound. A silhouette of an attribute of God. And we will see ourselves, not by imposing ourselves on the narrative, but when we recognize a hope we've had or devastation we've experienced. We see our sins, not just the sins of the characters in the story. And we see hope for all of us who would be without hope if not for the mercy of God.

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## 7 What Is the Big Picture of the Book of Beginnings?

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If someone were to ask you to take as much time as you wanted to answer the question “Who are you?” you would start at the beginning. Your birth, your parents, your hometown, your ethnicity. To fully understand a person, a people, or a place today, you must go back to their beginnings.

That is why the Bible starts with “In the beginning.” Generations of believers have found the meaning and purpose of life—including its tragedies and triumphs—by reading Genesis, the book of beginnings. When we read Genesis we should see the larger part of the God-story in it. The book is not merely a sequence of events. It is a theology about God’s intention in creating humanity, about the dreadful corruption within humanity, and about God’s way of restoring humanity, beginning with one man and one tribe.

## What is the Big Picture of the Book of Beginnings?

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”—in other words, everything. Right there in just a few Hebrew words, *Bereishit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets*, we have a specific definition of reality. First, there is a singular God who chose to create. This eliminates the main alternatives: atheism (no god), polytheism (many gods), and pantheism (god is the universe). In many other ancient religions, there is a god who competes with the sun, moon, stars, and sea monsters who also are gods. In contrast, in Genesis God is Creator of all. It sets forth the perspective carried all the way through Scripture, that there are only two categories in the universe: Creator and created. One Almighty God, and everything else.

And there is order in the creation. God speaks it into existence, and then God commands the way life should work. There is thus a harmony and logic in the creation. For this reason we should not see science and the Bible as exclusive of each other. Science is based on being able to predict the way things will be because there is an order and predictability in nature. This is theologically true, and empirically true.

Genesis puts humanity at the apex of creation, whereas in other religions human beings are slaves to the gods. The revolutionary idea that humanity was created “in the image of God” affirms the dignity and value of human beings. The disobedience of the man and the woman and the fall into sin is all the more

tragic because it is a fracturing of the image of God. The book of beginnings describes the genesis of sin in human beings as succumbing to the temptation to rise even higher than their noble place, to believe that they know better than the command of God.

So Genesis speaks of multiple beginnings: of the universe, of humanity, of sin, of the nations, and of one nation in particular which God would use to define the right life. Most of the book of Genesis (chapters 12 through 50) tells the story of the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the sons of Jacob who produced the tribes of the Hebrews numbering hundreds of thousands by the end of the book. This is the people of God. A particular tribe whom God used in particular ways in order to establish universal principles.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul interprets Genesis as he describes the essence of the meaning of Abraham's story. Grace through faith. Righteousness as right relationship. Patience in the promise. And so on. The truth of Genesis reaches to where we live. Abraham was justified by faith, and thus it always must be (Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Heb. 11).

We see in the narratives about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and many others a raw depiction of human virtue and vice, of faith in God and contention with God. We are not to take their behaviors as prescriptions for what we

## What is the Big Picture of the Book of Beginnings?

should do in our lives, and there isn't necessarily a moral to every story. The text does not tell us story by story which actions of these people were right and which were wrong. Genesis gives the narrative, and the whole of Scripture is the magnifying glass through which we examine it.

We need to read Genesis in context so we'll get the whole sweeping truth of it. Occasionally it is beneficial to read Genesis all the way through in three or four sittings, looking for the big themes. When we do so, we'll see in it the greatness of God, the dignity and tragedy of humanity, and the piecemeal, plodding process whereby one tribe learns lessons for all of us. Genesis sets the tone of everything else in Scripture. It contains the DNA of the people of God.

So if someone asks you to take as much time as you want to say who you are, you might consider starting with Genesis.

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## 8 How Should We Understand the Law?

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Most people who start to read the Bible from the beginning for the first time will typically have this experience: Genesis is fascinating with the story of creation, Babel, the flood, and the epic stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The exodus story is gripping. And then comes the law. Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments are familiar. Next come the flurry of laws and stipulations, many of which are so far removed from our culture and hard to understand that the Bible reader can get bogged down. Mid-Leviticus, typically.

What is “the law”? What is the purpose of the more than 600 regulations? And, very importantly, how much of this applies to our lives? Why do we believe that “You shall not commit adultery” in the Ten Commandments applies to us but “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” does not?

## How Should We Understand the Law?

In Scripture “the law” may refer to the more than 600 regulations Moses passed on to the people in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, or it may refer to the first five books of the Bible, or as shorthand for the entire pattern of religious life and rituals in the Old Testament. Law is a way for any society to define the proper bounds of behavior both for protection and for flourishing. But the law of the Old Testament is unique in that it was God’s way of shaping his relationship with a covenant people.

This will help us understand the sometimes bewildering array of laws, some of which seem strange to us. The Hebrews were chosen to live in a distinctive way by how they dressed, what they ate, and how they worshipped. Most of these laws do not carry over after the coming of Christ, when the old covenant gave way to the new covenant, and the way of living in obedience to God comes via a higher kind of law.

In Exodus through Deuteronomy there are three kinds of laws. First, there are *civil regulations*, for instance, property rights; marriage and divorce standards; laws sanctioning theft, murder, and other crimes; health regulations; etc. Then there are *ritual instructions* that define the sacrificial system, the festivals, the role of the Levites, and the specific physical features of the tabernacle. Finally, there are *moral principles*, which include sexual ethics, the major themes of the Ten Commandments, and more. These

three types are sometimes called the civil law, the ceremonial law, and the moral law.

So how do we know which of the 600 laws in the Old Testament apply to Christians today? Should we avoid eating shellfish? Ought we to observe Passover? Is it wrong to steal? Do we have to observe the Sabbath (i.e., rest on the seventh day of the week, Saturday)? Are sexual relations between blood relatives wrong? Is tithing (i.e., giving 10 percent of your income) an eternal commandment?

We have to answer this question on something better than our intuitions. The terms of the new covenant must guide us here, and what we find in the New Testament is that the civil law was God's way of shaping Hebrew society; it's not binding today. The ritual law used sacrifice and festivals and the tabernacle to teach lessons about sin and atonement, but it has now been superseded by the work of Christ. (See the teaching in the New Testament book of Hebrews.) Moral laws have ongoing validity, but mostly because they are repeated in one form or another in the New Testament.

But lest we repeat the legalism and self-righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law of Jesus' day, we are guided in the new covenant by this one transcendent principle: the law of love or "the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Jesus said the whole old covenant law can be summed up by "Love the Lord

your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-40). Paul put it this way: “the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14), and “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

It would be reasonable to ask: “So if most of the Law in the first five books of the Bible does not apply to us today, in what sense is it part of the word of God for us?” Here is where we need to set aside all self-centeredness. The whole sweep of the biblical narrative is the story of God moving among and within people in order to bring salvation to humanity, but that doesn’t mean every verse is about us. The law of the Old Testament is the word of God for all people for all time, but given to specific people groups in the context of God’s dynamic, upward development of a covenant relationship with human beings. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “The law was our guardian [custodian, tutor] until Christ came that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).

So the law stands as a true expression of the will and the ways of God, expressed in a particular era, subject to modification, providing the basis for ever higher revelations of what it means to be the covenant people of God. Jesus summed it up when he said: “I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17).

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

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## 9 What Is Important About the Land of the Bible?

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One of the ways we know that the truth of the Bible is rooted in reality is that the story of the Bible—the drama of God’s interaction with humanity—unfolds in a real place. This is a real God engaging with real people across a timeline that goes for thousands of years in a specific part of the world. The Bible is not detached philosophy. It tells us what *happened* (in history) so that we can understand what *happens* (in life).

After the Pentateuch (the first five books of Scripture), there is a major transition as the wandering Israelites entered the ancient land of Canaan. Under Joshua, the Israelite armies conquered this territory promised to them by God as an inheritance (Josh. 1:1-6). The small land of Israel, just 200 miles long and 100 miles wide, would be the main stage for the drama of redemption until the world-changing mission of the apostles—altogether a span of two millennia.

What is it like, this “good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8)? To the Hebrews who had left slavery in Egypt 40 years earlier, it was a true blessing. It wasn’t paradise, but the plains and hills were a good land for farmers who grew crops of wheat and barley, who developed groves of olive and fig trees, and tended vineyards. The coastal climate is similar to that of Southern California.

In the Old Testament, we find the connecting points between land, life, and theology. The three great festivals (Passover, Firstfruits, and Ingathering) corresponded to the beginning and end of harvests. Rain is the grace of God. Food on the table is the blessing of God. Drought is a time of testing. The land also supported the herding of sheep and goats. So it was easy to describe God’s care as his shepherding (Ps. 23), and Jesus as “the good shepherd.” Real land, real life, real people, real God.

But Israel was a difficult land to live in from a political point of view. The surrounding kingdoms were an almost continual threat, and part of that has to do with the geography of the land of Israel. If you look at a map of the region, what you will see is that this small strip of land is hemmed in by the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Arabian Desert to the east. Then, to make things even more complicated, the region to the north and east—known as Mesopotamia—was home to a succession of aggressive

empires: Assyria, Babylonia, Persia. To the south and west of Israel lay the great land of Egypt. So Israel is a small bridge of land between sea and desert, standing in the way of superpowers to the northeast and the southwest. This explains much of the history of the Old Testament. It is amazing, actually, that there were even brief times when Israel was strong enough to have security and stability.

To understand more about this place and the events that transpired there, picture this bird's-eye view of the land. Going across the land from west to east, there are five main regions (picture them like strips running north to south). First, is the coastal plain. Flat, fertile, and lush, this is a desirable part of the land, and thus contested by people like the Philistines who occupied the southern coast for centuries. Chariot battles happened here—not so in the central mountainous region of the land.

To the east of the coastal plain are the foothills known as the Shephelah, which slope upwards to about 1,300 feet. The gentle hills of this region are also fertile, crisscrossed with olive groves and fig trees. It is also the battleground for many fights in the eras of Joshua and the Judges, and it's the region where David famously stood up to the Philistine champion Goliath.

Moving east again, we come to the central mountainous region including Judea and Samaria. These low mountains—rising to just 3,500 feet—are

rocky limestone hills, undulating across the landscape. Jerusalem sits on a set of such hills, as does Bethlehem.

The fourth region is the Jordan River Valley, which drops dramatically from the central mountains to below sea level.

And finally, to the east again, the high plateau region known as Transjordan rises. From here Moses viewed the Promised Land he was not allowed to enter.

In the north is the fertile plain and productive sea known as Galilee. More about that when we get to the New Testament.

This is “the land.” More than geography or a patch on a map, it is central to the covenant promise of God. Yet by the time we get to the new covenant, we find that God’s geography and the mission of his people extends to the whole world, just as he promised to Abraham, the man from Mesopotamia who walked across the chalky hills—“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3).

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## 10 How Should We Interpret What the Prophets Had to Say?

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It's okay to be honest if you're having difficulty understanding sections of the Bible. Remember, our difficulty understanding Scripture is not a problem. It is what you'd expect of a body of scriptures that speak into the complexities of human experience, and contain the high truth of a transcendent God. When we come to the Prophets, typically the questions that get asked are: *What are they talking about? Is this about them or us? Is prophecy about the past or the future?*

Remember that when you're interpreting the Bible, the simplest and most natural explanation is always best. When Jeremiah speaks about Babylon, he means Babylon. Amos was really warning about the armies of the Assyrians descending on Israel. Haggai's words about the rebuilding of the temple were about events during that period when the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Most of the events the Old Testament prophets spoke about were fulfilled in the

era in which they were spoken. What we get to do all these centuries later is pull out and apply these truths and principles, and apply them in fresh ways in our lives.

In the Old Testament, the prophet was a person who was called to bring the word of God to the people. The prophet was not a fortune-teller or soothsayer. He was not reporting the headlines of the news, mysteriously, before they were written. The prophet was a proclaimer. He brought words of assurance and promise, as well as confrontation and warning. Many people are called prophets: Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, etc., whose prophetic activity (i.e., being God's representative to the people) is embedded in the historical narratives.

There are 16 Old Testament books we call "the Prophets." Four "Major Prophets": Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel; and the so-called "Minor Prophets": Amos through Malachi. ("Major" and "Minor" only mean their length, not their importance.) All of these books were written within a narrow 300-year span, from 760 to 460 B.C. This helps us understand their purpose. All the prophetic books of the Old Testament were God's word to his covenant people, warning them and bolstering them during periods of pronounced spiritual and national danger.

The honest truth of the Bible is that men and women—even those blessed to be the covenant people

of God—kept falling into sin. It is sobering to read through the Old Testament and encounter never-ending cycles of obedience and disobedience. So God spoke through the prophets. They confronted, warned, and assured. They did offer predictions, most typically showing the cause and effect of disobedience and unfaithfulness. Every oracle of every prophet means something specific. The challenge is that most of us do not have an encyclopedic knowledge of Tyre and Sidon, of Persia, of Darius, of the Nazirites, of Ekron, and of Meshek and Tubal.

Some passages in the Prophets clearly point to events to be fulfilled centuries later, for instance predictions of the coming Messiah. Isaiah 53 is widely understood to be pointing to Jesus. “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (v. 3).

Then there are some passages that appear to be fulfilled in the era of the prophet, but also extend out to the Messianic Age or the end of time. It is possible for a prophecy to have multiple fulfillments, though we have to make sure this is clearly called for in the passage.

So here are some recommendations on reading the Prophets:

1. *Read these books naturally and in ample segments, not verse by verse.* Listen for the spiritual movement within prophetic oracles, rather than getting

bogged down in details. Catch the big-picture spiritual dynamics and message of the oracles. For instance, the disposition of God (e.g., disappointed, indignant, sorrowful, tender, caring), the condition of the people addressed (e.g., frightened, disobedient, humbled, arrogant), the predictions of what might or will happen (e.g., captivity, deliverance, famine, restoration). The best thing we gain from the prophetic books is not about events on timelines, but the great spiritual realities of life, including insights into disobedience and sin, and the judgment and mercy of God.

**2. Use Bible helps.** In reading the Prophets, we will benefit greatly from good Bible dictionaries and commentaries. Look for commentaries where the original setting and meaning of the Prophets are respected and explained. Unfortunately, there are many commentators, preachers, and teachers who assume prophecy is mostly about events yet to unfold in our day, when the biblical text indicates otherwise. This is crystal ball interpretation. It is arbitrary, misleading, and does not respect the call of the Prophets. It overlooks the plain meaning of the biblical text, which must be our first priority.

**3. Go ahead and apply the spiritual lessons of the Prophets to life today.** These 16 Old Testament books are the word of God to us, as long as we allow for the different terms of the old covenant and what we stand on today, the new covenant.

4. *Be enriched by the word of the Prophets.* Don't be discouraged by their complexity or sometimes-dire message. It is only because God loves humanity that he spoke through the prophets—hard truth included.

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## 11 How Should We Read the Psalms?

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The Bible is not just a book. It is relationship in words. God's word to men and women, boys and girls. A living action between the almighty Creator of the universe and his most cherished creation: humanity. We do not understand Scripture unless we hear in it the divine-human dialogue.

The Psalms prove this. In the beloved 150 songs and poems in the middle of the Bible, we witness not just God speaking to us, but the privilege we have of speaking to God. This is the essence of relationship: two parties interacting with each other. And what an interaction! The Psalms express the full range of states of the human heart:

Thanksgiving and praise... "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 107:1).

## How Should We Read the Psalms?

Lament... “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” (Ps. 22:1).

Celebration... “I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven” (Ps. 123:1).

Wisdom... “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Judgment... “Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents” (Ps. 69:24-25).

In the Psalms we find honest, sometimes brutal, expressions of the human heart. The Bible would not be valuable if it were a string of sentimental platitudes or religious propaganda. But it is not. The songs and poems that are the Psalms express the highest joy and the deepest sorrow. Their authors plead with God, shout at God, beg God for forgiveness. They exalt virtues and righteousness, and they condemn in the bitterest terms the ugly abuses people sometimes carry out. The Psalms teach about the attributes of God (“the LORD is my Shepherd,” 23:1) and the history of God (“[he] swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea,”

136:15). They speak of humanity's great potential ("You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor," 8:5) and the darkness of human depravity ("shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause," 25:3).

So how should we read this "treasury," as Charles Spurgeon called it? First, some facts. The Psalms were the songs written to be used by the Israelites in their worship life—both personal and communal. The titles on the Psalms indicate that almost half of them were "of David," and some others are identified as being written by various composers—"sons of Asaph," "sons of Korah," Solomon, Moses. They were made into a collection after the Jews returned from exile.

The many quotations from the Psalms that appear in the New Testament reveal that these songs were deeply embedded in the minds and hearts of the Jews. Most people today love the Psalms, and whether they realize it or not, the poetry has much to do with it. After all, one could state the proposition: "God is timeless, but people come and go." Or one could paint with words, which is what Psalm 90 does:

A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.  
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—

## How Should We Read the Psalms?

they are like the new grass of the morning:  
In the morning it springs up new,  
but by evening it is dry and withered. (vv. 4-6)

The Psalms are the most sensory part of God's word, including this delicious invitation:

Taste and see that the LORD is good;  
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.  
(Ps. 34:8)

So how should we read the Psalms with understanding? For one thing, we should read slowly and deliberately in order to take in the sights and sounds, taste, touch and smell in which the truth of God is contained. Try reading a Psalm a day aloud—which is how all people in the ancient world read. For millennia people have meditated on the Psalms, storing up their treasures, frequently to be recalled during critical times of life.

We should also pray the Psalms. Let the voice of the Psalm you are reading be your voice, even if your life circumstance is not the same of the particular Psalm you are reading. Put yourself in the shoes of the writer, and you will understand the realities in the Psalm. For example, sense the pathos in Psalm 137, composed in the exile:

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
for there our captors asked us for songs. (vv. 1-3a)

This should put a lump in our throats.

Do not look down at the Psalms with a magnifying glass. Pray them upwards with a megaphone. The word *heart* appears 131 times in this book of the Bible, which seems only appropriate since in the Psalms we have the heart of humanity reaching out to the heart of God.

What a privilege to have this pathway to God.

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## 12 What Should We Take from the Books of Wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job)?

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If you were to stumble upon a long-lost manuscript that no eyes had seen for generations, and if you were to read its opening lines which offered a “wisdom” like what’s described in the following lines, you might consider it one of the greatest discoveries of your life.

Proverbs... for gaining wisdom and instruction;  
for understanding words of insight;  
for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,  
doing what is right and just and fair;  
for giving prudence to those who are simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the young—  
let the wise listen and add to their learning,  
and let the discerning get guidance. (Ps. 1:1-5)

These are the opening lines of the book of Proverbs,  
one of three books in the Old Testament (Proverbs, Job,

and Ecclesiastes) called “wisdom literature” (although other books contain sections of a similar kind). So, in addition to historical narrative, law, prophecy, and poetry, the Bible also has this lively, deep, and profound set of books referred to as “wisdom.” These are books about real life.

Proverbs is a book of practical wisdom. Job is an epic story exploring the deep issues of suffering, purpose, and God. Ecclesiastes offers a sharp-edged perspective on the hard realities of life. Once again, we see the utter honesty of the Scriptures. We see the disordered state of the world and human nature, and guidance on seeking the order of God.

Any believer would do well to read the book of Proverbs once a year, if not more often. These Hebrew proverbs (*meshalim*) are short, pithy statements of truth and practical guidance. They address life issues like attitude and speech, sexuality, poverty and prosperity, marriage and family issues, and much more. The statements are brief, vivid, and memorable. Because of this style, they include figures of speech, so we must understand the main point of the statement.

For instance: “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (3:9-10). You may not be a farmer who owns barns and vineyards, but you can still get the big point: Honor God with all that you own,

making giving a top priority, and you will do well in life.

When you read the Proverbs, always keep in mind that *they are general statements of what is generally true*. The writer does not claim they are promises from God or guarantees of what *always* happens. The original readers did not assume that if you honored God by giving the firstfruits of your crops, the barns would always and forever overflow. Droughts happen. Barns burn down. Thieves prowl. Life happens. But the principle is *generally* and *typically* true.

Many parents have counted on Proverbs 22:6, which says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (ESV). Therefore, some are bewildered when their grown-up children do “depart” from lives of virtue and health. They may be left thinking, *We must not have done the training part right*. But the proverb is not a guarantee. It is guidance—true, helpful, and clear. Parents should take the moral development of their children seriously; and most of the time, those planted seeds will bear fruit. But not every time.

The book of Proverbs is good as gold as a divinely inspired guidebook for right living. It confronts us about sloth and anger and theft and lewdness and gossip. It guides us toward prosperity through prudence, and contentment through simplicity.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

It is important to *read the book of Proverbs in sections, rather than one verse at a time*. Selecting a single verse out of context will lead to misunderstanding and prevent us from seeing the whole. We must look at the painting, not the brushstrokes. As in reading the Psalms, let the power of the images hit home. And when you do find a single statement that could be a landmark verse for you, go ahead and memorize it (as long as you understand it in context). "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (3:5-6).

Finally, just a word about two other Old Testament books that are unique. The book of Job contains wisdom, but embedded in it is the heart-rending story of a man undergoing unbelievable suffering. The main characters in the drama say many things that aren't true at all; for instance, all suffering is the direct result of specific sins and failings. But in the end, Job finds solace in God himself and not philosophical answers.

To some people, the book of Ecclesiastes reads like a statement of hopelessness. Rather, it is a brutally honest description of the dark side of life, which ought to propel us onto the mercy of God.

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## 13 What Is Important About the Era of the Kings?

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I remember when I first read the Old Testament books that recount the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah. David's and Solomon's reigns are epic. But then begins the long and oftentimes sordid story of about 40 successive kings, most of whom were "evil." I remember thinking: *This is hardly encouraging reading!* Yet buried in the history is the story of God, and we must understand it.

In the middle of the story of the Old Testament is an era spanning five centuries in which we hear about the checkered history of the kings of Judah and Israel, the high points and low points of the people of God, and many lessons about integrity and faithfulness, sin and destruction. This is the era of the kings, a complicated narrative that is an important part of the word of God because it describes the crooked pathway that eventually led to the coming of the Messiah.

The era of the kings began with the people saying it wasn't enough for God to be their king—they wanted a man to rule them, just like all the other nations. They did indeed become like all the other nations—but not for the good.

The era of the kings stretches from the reign of Saul, a thousand years before Christ, to the destruction of Judah and the exile of the last king in 586 B.C.

Before there was a king, the Israelite tribes lived in scattered, small settlements with judges like Gideon, Deborah, and Jephthah providing a degree of leadership. Then the period of the kings, as told in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, is divided into two parts. The first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—spanned more than 100 years in what is sometimes called the “golden age” or “the united monarchy.” After Solomon there was civil war, and the 12 tribes of Israel divided themselves into a northern kingdom, called “Israel,” which included 10 of the tribes, and a southern kingdom made up of the remaining two tribes, called “Judah.”

After the disappointing narrative of the reign of Saul, the mostly optimistic accounts of the golden era under David and his son Solomon describe Israel as a rapidly expanding empire that eventually enjoyed a period of peace and stability. David established Jerusalem as the capital, and the center point of the

## What Is Important About the Era of the Kings?

spiritual life of the nation. Solomon advanced that with the building of the temple.

But faithfulness to God is a fragile thing. After Solomon's reign, civil war split the kingdom in two, and for hundreds of years the bitter fruit of unfaithfulness shaped life in Israel and Judah. As we read the books of Kings and 2 Chronicles, we are struck with almost monotonous patterns: bad kings, good kings who become bad kings, a few good kings who kept their integrity and even introduced reform and revival to the people.

We also learn about the spiritual dynamics behind these movements. Those kings who "did evil in the sight of the LORD" and brought bad times on the people were guilty of the worship of foreign gods, of sacrificing outside the rules defined in the law, and sometimes of stooping to the low level of the foreign religions, including human sacrifice. Whole generations lived in complete violation of the Ten Commandments. They forgot their heritage and their God, and they didn't even know there were Scriptures that had defined them as a people.

So the stories of revival and reform under kings like Hezekiah and Josiah are like sunbursts breaking through a heavy overcast sky. Josiah smashed the sites of idolatrous worship and removed the illegal shrines and priests, mediums, and spiritists. He removed pagan statues that previous kings had put at the

entrance to the temple, of all places. And he reinstated the celebration of Passover for all the people of Judah, which had been neglected for centuries.

Here is the sum of it:

Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses. (2 Kings 23:25)

And in this narrative we have one more proof of the power of the word of God in Holy Scripture: Josiah's revival began after his officials discovered the long-lost and forgotten Book of the Law while carrying out Josiah's orders to repair the temple of the Lord. This was the turning point. When Josiah heard the words read to him, everything suddenly made sense. Generations of corruption. Spiritual confusion. Aimlessness. Josiah tore his robes in repentance. This is one more example of the power of the written word to release people from longstanding spiritual paralysis. It is a lesson for us.

So how should we understand the era of the kings? We must read these books as history, but not just political history. These narratives show us spiritual movements downward and upward. Most of the

## What Is Important About the Era of the Kings?

prophets fit into this story by interpreting how God's people could sink low, but also where there was restoration.

We must not artificially lift verses out of context and claim them as our own. These are the stories of real people in a real place. History does offer lessons. History tells us what happened in the past so we can understand what happens in our world, because human nature remains a constant, for good and for ill.

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## 14 What Do We Learn from the Exile and the Return?

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The grand narrative of Scripture speaks to the most urgent needs all people have, including the needs to be connected and grounded, to be protected and to belong, to know who you are and where you fit in. The Bible contains the stories of the people of God when they lost all of that. People torn away from their land, torn up as a people, and torn down by humiliating loss. This is the meaning of the exile in the last sections of the Old Testament in which Israel in the north is destroyed by the Assyrian empire, and Judah in the south is taken into exile by the Babylonians.

It is a heart-rending and poignant part of the old covenant narrative. Remember that the land which the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah occupied is located precariously between the various empires of Mesopotamia to the northeast (Assyria, Babylonia, Persia), and Egypt to the southwest. The ruthless Assyrians waged war with Israel in the north,

defeating the tribes in 722 B.C. Prophetic warnings about the Assyrian raids were sounded loudly and clearly by the prophets Amos, Hosea, Joel, Isaiah, and others. The Assyrians resettled their captured lands with other people groups, resulting in a mixed population. This is where we get the Samaritans in the New Testament.

The Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar assaulted Judah in the south. This is when the unthinkable happened. Jerusalem, the City of David, Zion, the site of the temple, was put under siege in 597 B.C. The walls were eventually breached, and the Babylonian army took all of the educated and skilled members of the community into exile, hundreds of miles away, into Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel was among them.

But even though God's people were displaced from their land, their homes, and their temple, God was still present with them: "While I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezek. 1:1). And what visions they were! Four fantastic living creatures, chariot-like wheels covered in eyes careening through the sky, a valley of dry bones, and on and on. The prophets Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel also spoke about the impending exile.

I remember when I first read these parts of the Old Testament thinking I had no clue how to understand

them. There were people and places and images that were a bit familiar to me, but the big question was how to put it all together. I also remember being put off by teachers, authors, and preachers who seemed to be connecting details of the oracles of the prophets with events in my own time in an arbitrary way. They seemed to be reading Ezekiel as if it were written just about us, and their interpretations seemed stretched, to say the least.

Remember, the meaning of the text of Scripture for us is grounded in what it meant for its original audience. So the prophetic predictions of war and exile and eventual return are primarily about the real history of God's people six and seven centuries before Jesus. It is a compelling story, full of insight about human nature and the nature of this world, which we must apply fully to our lives today. But we must use all means to understand what these oracles meant back then. Here is where excellent commentaries and Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias are indispensable. We must still read these late texts of the Old Testament in an uncluttered and unfiltered manner, letting all the images and pronouncements impact us. But then we ought to avail ourselves of the best tools to understand the details.

The exile is tragedy, but it is matched by the hopeful story of the return of God's people to the land described in Ezra and Nehemiah, and in the last three

books of the Old Testament, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Even before the destruction of Israel and the exile of Judah happened, the prophets spoke of eventual restoration.

Indeed, some 70 years after Jerusalem was emptied and the temple was destroyed, the leader of a new dominant empire, Cyrus of Persia, decreed that Jews be allowed to return to their land and begin a process of reconstruction. The book of Nehemiah documents reconstruction of the city; the book of Ezra, the reconstruction of the spiritual life of the people. This is different from most history. In the story of the return of the Jews, we see the central importance of worship as the people begin sacrificing again on the site of the old temple, the importance of the word of God as Ezra reads the book of the Law in the hearing of all the people, the importance of moral leadership.

We also see in the return the unchanging covenant of God, the central theme of the Old Testament. Through Ezra and others, the people rediscover the Book of God, and through it they remember the God of creation, of the covenant with Abram, of the deliverance in the exodus, of the land. And all of this in spite of the disobedience and unfaithfulness of the people. This is God then, and God now.



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Part III UNDERSTANDING THE  
NEW TESTAMENT

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## 15 What Should We Understand About the World of the New Testament?

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When we turn the page from Malachi to Matthew, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from Ezra the scribe and Haggai the prophet to John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, we enter an entirely different world—and we must understand it. The gap between the testaments, known as the intertestamental period, is 400 years, but what happened during those centuries set the stage upon which everything in the life of Jesus and the expansive mission of his followers would take place.

Galatians 4:4-5 says: “When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.” Other translations use the phrase “in the fullness of time.” We’re told that the life of Jesus, the coming of Messiah, occurred just when God intended. And what a time it was.

Read just a few chapters in one of the Gospels and you'll encounter Romans and Herodians, Jews and Gentiles, Pharisees and Sadducees, teachers of the law and ordinary country folk, and many others. We need to understand who these people were in order to understand the role they played in the great drama that is the New Testament. Turning to a good one-volume Bible dictionary is an excellent way to quickly look up a name, a group, a movement, a place, or anything else. Reading one article on "The Pharisees" will greatly help you understand the Gospels.

The world of the New Testament includes the land of Israel, of course, but the book of Acts and the letters of Paul launch us out into the wider Greco-Roman world surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus' entire life and ministry took place in the tight geographical stretch from the hills of Judea to the fertile plains and lakeside villages of Galilee. When he was in Jerusalem, Jesus had tense encounters with Jewish religious officials and Roman authorities. When he was in Galilee, near his hometown, his interactions were with ordinary people. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, traveled by boat and caravan and on foot into Syria, Asia Minor, Crete, Greece, and Italy. The epic story of his life included chains, prison, and trials in front of magistrates that turned into sermons.

The world of the New Testament was a clashing and blending of Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures.

The exiles who returned from captivity in Babylonia in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah gradually rebuilt Judea, a much smaller entity than what Israel was at its zenith. In 330 B.C., 200 years after the start of the return, Alexander the Great rolled across Judea with his formidable army and began a long and decisive domination of the Jews. Greek (or Hellenistic) culture was hard to resist. The Greek language was dominant, and that is why all the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek. More than two centuries before Jesus' birth, the Old Testament had been translated into Greek (the Septuagint). This "Greek Old Testament" was used by many of the New Testament authors and of generations of Christians thereafter who did not know a bit of Hebrew.

Alexander's successors split his empire, and the division known as the Seleucids were the next power to dominate Judea. One of their kings, Antiochus Epiphanes (who reigned from 175–164 B.C.), decided to defile the temple of the Jews and to establish an idolatrous religion there. This outrage led eventually to a heroic Jewish revolt under the Maccabees, and eventually Jewish independence that lasted for about 100 years, starting in 166 B.C.

Then came the Romans. General Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., and in 37 B.C. Herod

the Great was made king of the Jews by the Roman Senate. But the Romans dominated Judea, occupying it with its army and taxing everyone they could. In the Gospel accounts, many times Jesus' detractors tried to get him to make politically risky comments, as when they asked him whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. Most people who were looking for the Messiah were expecting a strong leader who would repel the Romans from Judea.

In the world of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, we run into two important religious sects or orders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were social movements going back to the days of Jewish independence a century and a half before Jesus. Their original purpose was noble: to preserve Jewish identity, including its spiritual integrity, by faithful obedience to the law and the rites. By the time of Jesus, however, far too many Pharisees had become misshapen by the diseases of self-righteousness, legalism, and spiritual blindness.

"When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son" (Gal. 4:4a). The world of the New Testament is a varied and confusing mass of religions, philosophies, political parties, religious groups, and ethnicities. There were many gods in the Greco-Roman world; but, as always, people were waiting for a truth that rose above all of that—which is exactly what they found in the gospel of Jesus.

What Should We Understand About the World of the New Testament?

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## 16 What Are the Gospels?

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**B**elievers do not sit passively waiting to hear the voice of God. They long to hear it. They believe God has not left humanity in silence, but has spoken loudly and clearly through “the Word” that is Holy Scripture and “the Word” that is Jesus the Christ. The opening words of the book of Hebrews confirms that this is true:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Heb. 1:1-3)

## What Are the Gospels?

This is the big picture. God did not leave humanity in desperate silence. He spoke through men called prophets, and then he decisively spoke to humanity through his Son, Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is not just the word of God, but is also the embodiment of God's glory and very being. Jesus the Christ is the central theme of all of Scripture because his life, death, and resurrection provided a way of redemption.

Jesus takes the stage in the four biblical documents called "the Gospels." Nothing could be more important in our reading of Scripture than understanding the meaning and message of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It would be easy to think these books are historical narratives because they tell the events of Jesus' life. But they are more than that. The Gospels are also more than biography—the telling of one person's story. The Gospels are a unique kind of literature because their purpose is to proclaim the truth that the Son of God appeared in Judea and Galilee, was authenticated by great miracles, was killed, and rose from death in final victory over sin, Satan, and death itself.

The Gospels are proclamation. Their authors are evangelists. So they do not read like modern historical accounts. Their authors were true believers, not just historians. Given the emphasis on truth in their writings, they can be taken as honest and truthful witnesses.

The first time I read through the New Testament, I remember being somewhat puzzled about why there are four Gospels. The simple answer is that four different people had their own reasons to write the true story of Jesus. Mark's Gospel was written first, and much of his content appears in Matthew and Luke. Matthew tells more of the story and has a special interest in explaining the story of Jesus to first-century Jews. Luke, on the other hand, is trying to help a Gentile audience, and he says right at the start that he wants to offer "an orderly account" in order to bolster certainty in the faith.

John's Gospel includes many actions not reported in the other Gospels. It also includes more of Jesus' teaching, much of it in long discourses. The opening prologue of the Gospel gives a cosmic perspective:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind (John 1:1-4).

New Testament scholar Leon Morris said the Gospel of John is shallow enough for a child to wade in, yet deep enough for an elephant to swim in. All the Gospels, not just John, require deep reflection and

study over a lifetime to appreciate their meaning. Be careful if you think you understand “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), or “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38), or “your kingdom come, your will be done” (Matt. 6:10). We may understand at one level, but the impact of the sayings of Jesus will always have greater impact on us the longer we study them. They take a lifetime to comprehend and apply. The greatness and the grace of Jesus’ teachings expand toward every horizon of life.

One last point: It is very easy to read the words of Jesus as if he were speaking directly to us, yet there is some risk in doing that. His teaching certainly is for us, and its meaning will transform our lives. But we still need to understand his teaching in its original context, as the Jewish Messiah speaking to his varied audience—disciples, followers, the curious, and enemies. And then we can explore how his truth applies to us.

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## 17 How Should We Understand the Teachings of Jesus?

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If someone asked you who your favorite teacher was when you were growing up, chances are someone specific would come to mind. And chances are you still respect that person today not because he or she was a fantastic lecturer, or had a superior knowledge of the subject matter, or had a memorable voice. Our favorite teachers—the ones who influenced not just our thinking, but our lives—are usually those people who taught us about life. And it wasn't just with their words. Their own lives were distinctive.

Jesus is widely considered the greatest teacher of all time. But we will only understand him in this capacity if we consider setting and context. Jesus was not a college lecturer or a mystical philosopher. Those who were under the teaching of Jesus were following him on foot, from one village to the next. They heard a parable when he walked into a field of grain, a discourse on being the bread sent from heaven after he

fed a multitude, and debriefings with his disciples after many argumentative flareups with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. At a Jewish festival where water was used, he stood and said in a loud voice: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Jesus' teaching was dynamic and interactive. It spoke into both the practicalities of everyday life, and into cosmic, eternal issues.

No wonder people were amazed.

We'll best appreciate the Gospels if we understand the forms of Jesus' teaching and the main themes of his teaching. One form was exaggeration or hyperbole. Few believers have ripped out their eyes or cut off their hands because Jesus said in Matthew 5:29-30 that it would be better to do that than end up in eternal condemnation. We understand Jesus' point, made through a shocking statement.

When Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter God's kingdom, his point was that it is extremely difficult for a self-sufficient person to admit their insufficiency. There is an often-repeated interpretation that in Jerusalem there was a small gate in the wall that necessitated a camel to go to its knees to enter. The problem is, there is no archaeological or epigraphical evidence that any such gate ever existed. Unfortunately, there are many interpretations of

Scripture that have been repeated countless times but were never based in fact.

Jesus used similes and metaphors. "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5). "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). These have immediate impact, and they are memorable. Some of his most powerful metaphors explained the kingdom of God. The kingdom is like a mustard seed, leaven, a net, a man who finds a treasure, the sprouting of seed from the soil. These require careful reading. For instance, Jesus did not say the kingdom is like treasure, but it's like what happens when a man finds a treasure and does everything to get it.

Jesus also spoke in short, memorable aphorisms or proverbs. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). "Do not judge, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37). "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:50). Jesus acknowledged that he spoke figuratively for effect: "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father" (John 16:25).

Jesus spoke in riddles and he used irony. He used almost every kind of verbal method you could imagine, including parables (which we'll come to in the next chapter). But the power of Jesus' teaching for

his original hearers and for us is not in the method. There was a ring of truth, a veracity, and a power in his teaching. For example, Matthew tells us, “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt. 7:28-29). We would have been amazed too.

As with every other kind of text in Scripture, we need to take time to study the context of any given teaching of Jesus. To whom was he speaking? What were the circumstances? Were there any special cultural details? Even in the teaching of Jesus, Scripture means something specific to us that is based in what it meant to Jesus’ original audience. That is where we’ll find the true meaning, and thus, the authority.

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## 18 What Was Jesus Teaching in the Parables?

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For most of us, the parables of Jesus naturally lodge themselves in our memories. The parable of the good Samaritan, for instance, is not only a memorable parable, but it has become embedded in our culture—as in “Good Samaritan laws” that protect people who come to the assistance of others. The parable of the prodigal son—where a foolish young man squanders his inheritance, only to find that his loving father welcomes him back with mercy and grace—is the gospel in a single picture and a simple message: You can come home to God. The lost sheep. The hidden treasure. The wise and foolish virgins. The talents. They are all like pictures on the walls in our homes, memorable scenes that are windows into reality.

Jesus sometimes taught in parables because these vivid stories engage us in thought, emotion, and sensation. They impact us. They force us to go away and ponder, struggling with the meaning perhaps,

feeling struck by the truthful and accurate perspective on life they offer. You could say the parables are subversive because they embed themselves in our minds. We cannot escape their message. Jesus said parables unlock mysteries for those who believe, but they remain enigmatic riddles to those who do not have “ears to hear” (Luke 8:8-10). This is one more indication for us that reading Scripture with faith is entirely different from reading it like we read any other book.

We will avoid much frustration and confusion if we remember this: Most parables have one main point. Most of the time the details in the story do not have specific symbolic meaning. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10), for instance, Jesus did not assign a symbolic meaning to the robbers, the man’s wounds, the donkey, the innkeeper, the two silver coins, Jerusalem, or Jericho. Yet that has not prevented Christian thinkers over the centuries from assigning meanings to the details. The problem is, if the meanings are not indicated in the text, such allegorical interpretations are purely arbitrary.

Over the years different people have assigned entirely different meanings to the two coins given to the innkeeper, for instance: they are God the Father and the Son, or they are the Old and New Testaments, or they are the promise of this life and the life to come, etc. But why?

Here again, the simplest and most natural explanation of a biblical text is always the best. The parable of the good Samaritan is Jesus' answer to the question: "Who is my neighbor?" At the end Jesus makes it obvious what his point was:

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

Parables are not abstract teachings. They almost always call people to a certain response.

Now, if Jesus *did* assign specific meanings to the details in a parable, then of course we must include these in our understanding. In the parable of the sower, for instance, the four landing places of the seed—the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, and the good soil—have specific meanings which Jesus himself indicated (Matt. 13:18-23). The same thing is true of the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43). Nevertheless, even in parables with detailed meaning, we should not lose sight of the forest for the trees. The parable will impact us best if we look for the main point.

As we read the parables, it is also important that we take the time to understand the cultural and

## What Was Jesus Teaching in the Parables?

geographical settings of the stories. A good commentary, for instance, will describe the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, which is the setting for the good Samaritan story. The “road” is a dusty path winding upwards into the Judean hills through an arid wilderness. It is a lonely and desolate place, where thieves would take advantage of someone. All the parables with agricultural settings are best understood if we understand the life of the farmer in the first century. And shepherding in Jesus’ day (as in David’s day) is utterly different from ranching today.

The ending is very important. The takeaway from any given parable typically comes in the punch line at the end. The extended parable of the wheat and the weeds, for instance, ends with the day of judgment where truth and falsehood are finally distinguished. In the meantime, we live in the mixture.

The parables of Jesus are God’s gift to us who are mere mortals, unable to find truth on our own, and quite lost in interpreting the meaning of life.

“I will open my mouth in parables,  
I will utter things hidden since the creation of the  
world.” (Matt. 13:35)

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## 19 What Place Does the Acts of the Apostles Play in the New Testament?

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How shall we describe the amazing narrative we know as The Acts of the Apostles? Fast-paced, expansive, sweeping, intense, surprising, gripping, poignant, compelling, epic? All such descriptions would apply, and more. We have not read Acts rightly if we've just noted a string of historical details. Acts is unique in Scripture, yet it is a continuation of what its Gentile author, Luke, started in his Gospel when he set out to write "an orderly account" for someone named Theophilus so that he "may know the certainty of the things [he had] been taught" (Luke 1:3-4). Acts opens with:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (Acts 1:1-2)

## What Place Does the Acts of the Apostles Play in the New Testament?

Right away Luke tells us the main characters of this narrative are the apostles (including Paul) and the Holy Spirit. From beginning to end, Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit inspiring, empowering, and guiding the followers of Jesus on a world-changing mission.

To read Acts rightly, we need to keep in mind Luke's purpose: to tell the story of how the gospel of Jesus the Christ broke out of the limitations of Judea and Galilee and spread across the Mediterranean world, crossing the barrier between Jew and Gentile and becoming a truly universal spiritual movement. Acts is about gospel and mission and Spirit. It is not a biography about the lives of Peter or John or even the apostle Paul. The focus is on the spread of the message about Jesus, and the dramatic ways people either accepted it or rejected it.

Acts has frequently been read in the past as a description of how the Christian church is supposed to operate. This is understandable, as Christian leaders desire to base today's forms of ministry on a scriptural foundation. Only some of this is possible, however, because Luke clearly did not set out to write a manual on church life or church policy. Yes, it is true that Acts 2 gives a picture of healthy spiritual devotion: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v. 42). But a couple of verses later, it says that the

believers were selling their property and possessions in order to give to others, that they met in the temple courts every day, and that they ate together in each other's homes (vv. 45-46). Churches today do not follow this pattern detail by detail. We don't sell our cars, there is no temple to meet in every single day, and we don't ring the doorbells of each other's houses every night to share supper. Nor does Acts say these practices were then followed in the churches founded in Asia Minor or Greece or Rome.

Acts tells us what happened, which is not the same thing as telling us what should happen today. There were no church buildings in Acts; no pianos, guitars, or drums for worship. We have descriptions of the baptisms of only first-generation believers, and the method of baptism varied: in the name of Jesus; in the name of Father, Son and Spirit; in bodies of water; in a jail in Philippi; and in the desert along the Gaza road. The leadership structure of the early churches evolved over time, and we are not given a definition of how often the Lord's Supper should take place in our churches today.

Acts is not a list of policies and formulae—it is something more wonderful—an account of the dynamic and oftentimes unpredictable movement of the Spirit of God in the era of the apostles, which puts us in the posture of expecting the unexpected today.

Perhaps there is a lesson in this for us. The vitality of the church will always come from the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit as believers become part of a dynamic movement. This is not to downplay the importance of church structure, but perhaps keep it in perspective.

There are a dizzying number of incidents reported in Acts, each of which is worthy of our contemplation. We ought to put ourselves in Paul's place as he is chased out of a town, or shipwrecked, or plodding through two years of teaching in Ephesus. We need to imagine what it would have been like for Peter, commanded in a dream to enter the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and witness the unthinkable: the gospel spreading beyond the Jews. We need the maps at the back of our Bibles to have a sense of the geography of this movement.

The structure of Acts can be summed up this way: ever outward. First, there is Jerusalem and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the empowering of the apostles. The gospel crosses the line into the Gentile world with Cornelius. Peter is front and center in these early chapters. Then comes the conversion of the hostile Pharisee Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the apostle. The story proceeds with three great missionary journeys crossing one barrier after another until it eventually comes to the seat of the Roman Empire.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

The Gospels give the gospel, and Acts, the mission of the gospel. And today in the 21st century, we see the cycle of proclamation, persecution, and expansion repeating. It is important for believers to understand that we have been here before and what it all means.

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## 20 How Should We Read the Epistles of the New Testament?

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I was just eight years old at the time, but I still remember the day an irritated elderly lady came storming out of her house to yell at me. I was walking home from our three-room rural elementary school, goofing off with a couple of friends, when I opened the street-side mailbox at a random house and pretended to rifle through my mail—except it wasn't my mail. It was the elderly lady's mail. And she did not think my antics were one bit amusing.

Has it ever occurred to you while reading one of the epistles (letters) in the New Testament that you're reading someone else's mail? In a way we are, and in a way we aren't. For two millennia Christians have read the 20 New Testament epistles as Holy Scripture, as the word of God for us. At the same time, the epistles were personal writings produced for specific people or groups of people, often responding to their particular

needs. So we cannot understand the epistles unless we take the effort to discover what lies behind the words.

Some letters read like highly crafted treatises, like the magisterial epistle to the Romans. Others, like 1 and 2 Corinthians, are intricately connected with the needs of a particular group, the believers in the church in Corinth. They had evidently written the apostle Paul and asked specific questions, because he says in 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Now for the matters you wrote about..." and then goes on at some length, responding point by point. Earlier in that same letter, Paul was responding to certain oral reports he'd gotten about what was going on in that complicated and troubled church.

A wide range of circumstances prompted the writing of the epistles. Disorder in a church, the threat of false teaching, trepidation about the end of the world, confusion about death, controversy over religious practices, ambiguity about ethics, weakness in leadership. Some epistles were meant as a word of encouragement or just a way of reconnecting. The books of Hebrews and Romans offer an expansive theological perspective. Some letters focus on a particular theological point: grace in the case of Galatians, Christ in the case of Colossians, the church in the case of Ephesians. Taken as a whole, these 20 letters add to the Canon of Holy Scripture a

multifaceted, real-life description of both faith and behavior.

If you're going to linger in a particular epistle, you will benefit from reading the article about that particular New Testament book in a good Bible dictionary or in the introduction of a commentary. You will get the essential features: who wrote it, to whom it was written, the occasion of its writing, the date, etc. If you are reading an epistle more quickly, the notes in a good study Bible will give you the important facts in brief.

It's best to mediate on some parts of the epistles. For instance, the amazing songs and creeds and prayers embedded in some of them. Other parts of the epistles have complicated details that require the help of Bible linguists, historians, archaeologists, and the like, which we will find in Bible commentaries. If we get the help to understand what "food sacrificed to idols" means in 1 Corinthians 8, we'll be able to learn the lesson there about Christian conscience and freedom. And we cannot understand the epistle of Philemon unless we learn something about slavery in the first century.

Epistles are one genre of Scripture that are best read in long form. Ignore the chapter and verse numbers, which were added to the biblical text in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Reading an epistle straight through is an entirely different experience from

reading a few verses at a time. Think of it this way: If you went to your mailbox today and received a multiple-page letter from a beloved relative, you'd read it straight through. You wouldn't read one paragraph today, another tomorrow, and so on. When someone asks you, "Did you get my email yesterday?" try saying, "Yes, and I'm savoring it by reading one sentence a day," and see what response you get. No, we read letters well when we read them naturally.

Reading Scripture in context is a sign of respect for God as much as reading a letter from your mother straight through is a sign of love. The reason, of course, is comprehension. Details at the conclusion of the epistle of Hebrews make the most sense if the start of the epistle is still rattling around in your mind.

The epistles of the New Testament may not have been addressed to us, but they are for us. And we will cherish them as much as—and more than—any letter of love or encouragement a friend ever sent to us.

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## 21 Who Was Paul, and How Should We Understand His Epistles?

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Besides Jesus, no single figure was more influential in the beginnings of Christianity than the apostle Paul. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, 13 are attributed to Paul. Take a look at a Bible map showing the missionary journeys of Paul, and you will be astonished to see the territory he covered—not just geographically, but culturally as well.

He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, and he became an impassioned member of the Pharisees (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:4-5; Acts 23:6). He came from the city of Tarsus, grew up in the midst of Greco-Roman culture, and was a Roman citizen. This remarkable background meant he was able to speak the gospel into urban settings. He was comfortable in Jerusalem, but also capable of moving into places like Crete, Greece, and Rome. His adaptability was amazing. He spoke with magistrates and philosophers and tradespeople.

His strong views about faith in Christ were most certainly tempered by his dramatic conversion. In the New Testament there is no more radical story of personal change than the story of the young man who was drafted by his fellow Pharisees to actively investigate and prosecute the early followers of Jesus. He stood by as the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death. But while traveling to Damascus in Syria to find and arrest more of Jesus' followers, he had a supernatural encounter with Jesus and would soon undergo the utter change of mind and heart, which in his epistles he describes as conversion or repentance.

It wasn't easy for the other apostles to accept this persecutor in their midst, much less endorse him as a teacher. But with the passing of years, Paul eventually set out on his first great journey with a few close companions in tow.

There is quite some variation in the epistles of Paul. Four are called his "prison epistles" because he wrote them from prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). The stress of being in prison comes through at points. For instance, while writing the epistle to his dear friends at Philippi, he believes he may be close to execution.

Of these four, one is written to one person about a runaway slave (Philemon), whereas another, Ephesians, seems to have been written for a whole region of churches.

Three of the epistles, written very late, are usually called “the pastoral epistles” because they contain instructions to Paul’s companions Timothy and Titus on how to protect order, harmony, and correct teaching in their churches. Not surprisingly, these are epistles that church leaders look to in shaping ministry roles in congregations. The qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1), for instance, describe essential leadership character and are easily applied in our own churches today.

Romans is a powerful, comprehensive description of the whole of the gospel. It covers creation, sin, redemption, and eventual restoration. The special issue of righteousness and grace is emphasized in Romans, as it also is in the epistle of Galatians. First and 2 Corinthians offer great insight into an apostle trying his best to respond to tensions in a troubled church, to challenge bad values, and to call people to action. There is a special poignancy in 2 Corinthians as Paul describes his own hurt through the efforts of those trying to discredit him, and his anxiety about his relationship with the Corinthian church. Here we see the humility of Paul, even as he describes himself as unimpressive in physical appearance and unremarkable as a public speaker. Now that is astonishing to read! The apostle Paul, a so-so preacher.

What should we bear in mind as we read and try to comprehend the epistles of Paul?

In order to understand the epistles of the New Testament, we must begin with context. Every epistle was written to a specific audience and for a specific purpose. If we dig around, we can figure out what false teaching the book of Colossians is countering, what slavery looked like, what family life was like, what the features of the culture were at the time. Then we can ask: “What universal and timeless truths is the author drawing on, truths that apply to us today?”

We may not “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16) today, but Christian grace and civility still apply. First Peter 3:3 recommends not wearing gold jewelry because in that culture it was ostentatious to do so. Today, avoiding ostentatiousness still applies, though having a gold ring or a gold cross does not rise to that same level. Having elders oversee the ministry of churches today still applies, although having one man appoint them (as Paul instructed Timothy to do) isn’t typically the method of selection that is used.

The epistles extend the richness of Holy Scripture, and they remind us once again that the word of God is truth in relationship.

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## 22 What Is Unique About the Books of James and Hebrews?

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We continue to find astonishing variety in the Scriptures when we look at two New Testament books: James, a book of Christian wisdom, and Hebrews, which explains the complicated connections between the old covenant and the new. Both of these books are not addressed to a particular Christian group. They are sometimes called “general epistles.”

The epistle of James, which was probably written by the James who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15), focuses on the practicalities of personal and community life. There is nothing in James about the nature of God, the plan of redemption, or the atonement; and Jesus is mentioned only twice. James is almost like the book of Proverbs for the New Testament. Wisdom is not an elite and specialized knowledge, it is everyday practical lifestyle rooted in values that come “from heaven.”

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (James 3:13-17)

This is straightforward and challenging. It is a call to action. If today’s leaders would take James’ description of wisdom as their paradigm of leadership, our communities would look entirely different. James is also known for the challenge to put faith into action (James 2:14-24). “What good is it... if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?” (2:14). James confronts favoritism, greed, and destructive talk. James gives some perspective for those going through trials or who are teetering on the edge of temptation. James challenges us to be patient, respectful, and peace-loving.

The greatest challenge in reading the epistle of James is not so much understanding what it means, but living what it prescribes.

## What Is Unique About the Books of James and Hebrews?

The book of Hebrews is long for an epistle. It is steeped in details about the Old Testament sacrificial system and explanations of how the plan of redemption has been fulfilled in Jesus. It is a mystery who authored this book. “To the Hebrews,” means it was written for Jewish Christians who especially needed a theological explanation of how faith in Christ fulfilled the Old Testament law.

The first 10 chapters describe how Christ and faith in Christ has superseded the old covenant, has surpassed the accomplishments of Moses and Joshua, and has replaced the priesthood and the sacrificial system.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)

The book of Hebrews provides a key to unlocking challenging questions about the story of God in which he works for centuries in and through a special

covenant people, starting with Abraham, but then does something entirely new in Jesus. It is not that the terms of a relationship with God have changed, which always was and always will be faith based on grace. But the scope of God's grace now expands to the whole world with the atonement in Jesus.

The book of Hebrews also warns believers about falling away from the faith, and challenges them to persevere in difficult circumstances, remaining faithful to the new covenant. Hebrews 11 is a stunning description of how faith and hope across the ages have been the distinguishing characteristics of God's people, beginning with Abraham. "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for" (Heb. 11:1-2). The followers of Jesus have, in his sacrifice, the power to overcome sin and to persevere:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

## What Is Unique About the Books of James and Hebrews?

To understand Hebrews, we have to look backwards into the Old Testament, seeing how spiritual realities are anticipated and then fulfilled. When we do that, we will be stunned by the wide scope of biblical truth in the great narrative that stretches from a covenant with Bedouin shepherds from Mesopotamia to the entire world. And Hebrews lets us know that taking the long view—of persevering and plodding, of believing and behaving rightly—always has been the way of God with men and women.

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## 23 How Should We Understand the Book of Revelation?

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If we did not realize already that it takes a lifetime to understand the Bible (and that's a good thing), the point is driven home when we get to the last book in the Bible—Revelation. It starts out simply enough, it is a “revelation (in Greek, *apocalypse*) from Jesus Christ,” it is a “prophecy,” and it comes as a letter to seven churches. Fair enough, but then come the angels, beasts, earthquakes, horses and riders, wars, thrones, and much more. What are we to make of all this?

Here are two unhelpful approaches to Revelation. One is to think it is such an incomprehensible book of enigmas and riddles that we avoid it. The second is to uncritically follow someone else's arbitrary interpretation of all the details and hidden meanings of its passages. Revelation is not too hard to comprehend, and we should benefit from it. But first we need to understand the big picture.

## How Should We Understand the Book of Revelation?

Revelation never describes itself as a symbolic code of future events plotted on a timeline, though it does guide us regarding the future. Like the books of prophecy in the Old Testament, Revelation proclaims a message. In Revelation the message is that God is coming to judge and to redeem, and that the powers of evil and empires will clash before God establishes the fullness of his kingdom. That central message gives people two things: *warnings* and *comfort*, just as the Old Testament books of prophecy did.

If we keep our eyes on this central message and the intended effects, we will be less likely to get bogged down when we get into details in the book.

The book of Revelation is similar to other literature of the time that's called "apocalyptic," which typically includes visions, global clashes, end-of-the-world warnings, and many, many symbols. It is, of course, the cryptic symbolism of Revelation that makes it challenging to understand. But when we connect many of the symbols with elements that appear earlier in the Old Testament Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, the message emerges from the details.

A commentary that many have found very helpful is *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*, by Michael Wilcock (part of *The Bible Speaks Today* series). Like the other commentaries in this series, the focus is on the message of the book. Here is how Wilcock outlines the flow of Revelation:

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

1:1-8	The Prologue
1:9–3:22	Scene 1: The Church in the World
4:1–8:1	Scene 2: Suffering for the Church
8:2–11:18	Scene 3: Warning for the World
11:19–15:4	Scene 4: The Drama of History
15:5–16:21	Scene 5: Punishment for the World
17:1–19:10	Scene 6: Babylon the Whore
19:11–21:8	Scene 7: The Drama Behind History
21:9–22:19	Scene 8: Jerusalem the Bride
22:20–21	The Epilogue

The number seven appears many times in the book, 54 times altogether, and it is obvious that most of the book is organized around cycles of seven. Seven proclamations to seven churches (chapters 2–3), and three sets of seven-part visionary narratives: the seven seals (4:1–8:1), the seven trumpets (8:2–11:18), and the seven bowls (15:5–16:21).

Nothing in the book of Revelation suggests that its sequence of symbols and visions are to be plotted along a chronological timeline, all related strictly to the very end of human history. Christians in the first few generations saw the descriptions of persecution against God’s people as exactly what they were experiencing, for instance, at the end of the first century during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian. Christians today who experience the spiritual battles of persecution,

sometimes at the hands of national, totalitarian powers, read Revelation as a letter to them.

The three sets of seven (seals, trumpets, bowls) may best be read as three great cycles of bloody conflict and victory, each rising to a higher level of intensity. Here Revelation is not just describing what will happen in the future, but what does happen in history and will continue happening until the end.

The end of the story is an astonishing description of a new creation, including symbols of a new city, a new temple, and a new people. The message is this: God will prevail. A day is coming when “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (21:4). The ultimate victory of God is a closeness and a communion with his people.

What can we do to understand the book of Revelation? Reading it straight through in one, two, or three settings is very helpful because you will see connections. Read it in different translations. And sometime read it alongside one of the better commentaries.



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## Part IV INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

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## 24 What Is the Most Natural Way to Read the Bible?

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I shudder to think how close I came to giving up on the Bible. Like many people, I tried for years to read Scripture in ways that were doomed to fail. My way of reading made the Bible hard to understand, and it made me think this book was perhaps too inscrutable or too out of date for me to pay attention to it. Yes, it was convenient when other people picked out the good bits and made juicy quotes just perfect for a bumper sticker: “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1), “Do not worry about tomorrow” (Matt. 6:34), “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4).

And then there is, “God helps those who help themselves.” Oops! That’s not actually in the Bible. But like many biblically illiterate people, I thought it was.

This was dangerous. I was missing the word of God. Worst, I was misinterpreting the word of God because when we quote a verse out of context, we

usually twist its true meaning and use it to reinforce our preconceptions. The solution is to read Scripture on its own terms. To read it widely and repeatedly. To accept the fact that these are ancient documents written in a time and place far removed, and so it takes patience and work to understand. But as any gold miner knows, it is worth as much time and effort as it takes to get gold out of the mine.

What is the most natural way to read the Bible?

**1. *We need to learn the context of the particular biblical book we are reading.*** We read Jeremiah differently than we read Ephesians or Revelation. These are all the word of God, but given to us through the words of three very different men in different circumstances. If you have a good study Bible, all you need to do is carefully read the introduction at the start of the book, where the biblical scholars will outline the author, circumstances, and content. Look up the biblical book in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, and you will get much more information—and more yet if you read the introduction in a commentary.

**2. *Read the translation that you can understand and that motivates you to keep reading.*** Remember, the best translation for you is the one you'll actually read. There have been times in my life when reading a thought-by-thought translation was the best thing to do (see chapter 4 on translations), and other times

reading a word-for-word translation. It is best to settle into one version you'll typically read and reread.

**3. *Read at a reasonable pace and try to ignore the chapter and verse numbers.*** We would all understand the Bible much better if we read it freely and naturally, rather than like a step-by-step instruction manual. When you get a letter from a friend or relative, you just sit down and read it through because that is the best way to understand his or her message. No one watches movies in five-minute installments, and no one would say that after viewing still photos of a movie, you have seen that movie. Yet reading a "verse of the day" is very popular. If you take 20 minutes instead of 5 to read a biblical book, you will get through Romans in three sittings, Genesis in about six sittings, and many biblical books, like the epistles, in single sittings. Reading for comprehension is all about synthesis—connecting all the small ideas with the large controlling ideas. The payoff is enormous.

**4. *Follow a reading plan.*** No one wants to open the Bible randomly each day and read what is there. There are many excellent reading plans that organize a comprehensive reading of Scripture. Some go from Genesis to Revelation, but many help the reader by moving about the Bible, going back and forth in the Old and New Testaments, for instance. Many offer a way to read the whole Bible in a year. This is not too difficult. It takes only 15 minutes a day.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

However, this is the key: Don't get bogged down when you're doing that 15 minutes of reading and you are having a hard time understanding it. This is why most people give up. Just keep reading. Read if you understand and read if you're in a passage you do not understand. If you are reading the word of God as a lifestyle, you'll come back to that passage again and again. It may be that you'll understand it the fourth time you read it, or you'll understand it when you get to the end of the book. If you have doubts you'll be able to be committed to reading 15 minutes a day, then choose a two-year reading plan, which takes just seven minutes a day.

Look at it this way: God is there for you for your whole life. On good days and bad days. And the word of God is there for you for your whole life. Just read. Just read. Just read.

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## 25 How Can We Hear God's Voice in Scripture?

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Some years back, I did a survey of our church's congregation with the simple question: "If you could ask God one thing, what would it be?" I was not surprised that the most frequent response had to do with the problem of evil in the world, but I was struck by the next most common question: "How can I hear the voice of God?" The various wording people used indicated some were facing important decisions, others wanted to know if their lives were "on track" with God, some were in crisis, and still others expressed feelings of spiritual isolation and just wanted to "hear" from God.

There is a long history and many debates about how God "speaks" to us. Our concern in this chapter is how God speaks in and through Holy Scripture. This must be the believer's major conviction, that we find the voice of God in Scripture, and that the authority of the Bible trumps all other claims about hearing God.

Throughout Scripture, God is talking. Creation took place at the verbal command of God. The Hebrews became a nation when they met their God at Mount Sinai and he spoke to them through Moses. The prophets' oracles often began with: "This is what the LORD says."

And the Gospels proclaim a whole new form of the voice of God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Or, as the opening words of the book of Hebrews puts it: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Whenever we find ourselves longing to hear the voice of God—wanting to know if we're doing the right thing, or yearning to know that we are not alone—we must remember this: We have in Scripture thousands and thousands of expressions of the will and the ways of God. We have an analysis of life that is complex and refined, giving us concrete moral instruction and wisdom-based ethics. We have "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). We have the "wisdom from above" (James 3:17 ESV). We have "Spirit-taught words" (1 Cor. 2:13). Do you want to hear God's voice? Then take in what he says in his Word. Drink deeply. Study well. Meditate slowly. Keep starting over.

## How Can We Hear God's Voice in Scripture?

It may be that the most relevant question for us is not "Where can we find the voice of God?" but "What prevents us from taking in the voice of God?" Many biblical passages speak to that.

Listening to the voice of God is risky. At Mount Sinai the people said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (Ex. 20:19). Moses replied that the fear of God would be good for them; it would keep them from sinning, although it will sting at times.

There are many passages that say we resist listening to God because we know obedience is the next step. In the parable of the soils, Jesus analyzes why the word of God (the seed) does not take root. Shallow acceptance (the rocky ground), and the competition of worries and money (the thorny soil) get in the way. But simple lack of understanding (the path) thwarts a person's spiritual life.

How can we hear God's voice in Scripture? It isn't really complicated. We need to read it. We need to do the work to understand it (which is the point of this whole book). And we need to have the right heart attitude, which is more challenging than anything else. We have to honestly admit that we will resist being obedient to God, and that we will be tempted to make the Bible mean what we want it to mean. That prospect should terrify us. Putting our words into the mouth of God is the height of arrogance.

Here is a caution. For years I sat in Bible studies where the leader read a passage and then asked the group: “What does this mean to you?” Only much later did I learn (and it made perfect sense when I did) that the meaning of Scripture does not flow from the subjective experience of the believer. The question is not “What does this mean to me?” but rather “What does this mean?”

When the apostle Paul said, “I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin” (Rom. 7:25), he meant something specific. It is our obligation to dig and dig until we learn what he meant, and then talk about how it applies to us.

There is only one way to receive the pure and powerful truth of God—and that is to seek to understand what the Bible meant so we can apply what it means to our lives today.

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## 26 What Are the Proper Ways to Apply Scripture to Life Today?

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It is dangerous to understand the Bible better. It is all too easy for us to feel just a bit of pride about pulling out the meaning of biblical texts, as if we were beginning to master the Scriptures when, of course, exactly the opposite is the whole point. The temptation may come from the power we may feel from having “spiritual knowledge,” which can move us from insecurity to superiority. Or we may want to put ourselves over Scripture so we don’t need to obey it. As Paul says, “knowledge puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1).

Here are a few of the reasons why many biblical authors charge us with not just *knowing* the word of God, but *practicing* it.

God (through Moses):

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds;  
tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 11:18-20)

Jesus:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt. 7:24-27)

Paul:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

## What Are the Proper Ways to Apply Scripture to Life Today?

And using a mirror for a wonderful analogy, James charges us:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. (James 1:22-25)

These and many other passages suggest that applying Scripture begins with assimilating its content. Reading, meditating, discussing, practicing, praying, and memorizing are all ways for the biblical text to form the spiritual muscle tissue of our lives. This is not about having a list of verses rattling around in our heads, but having the shape and motion of our lives formed by biblical truth.

Much of this book has been about personal reading and comprehension of Scripture, but this is a good place to mention the power of group or community Bible discussion. It is enormously formative to discuss the meaning and application of Scripture in some kind of group. We see new things through the eyes of other

people, especially those brave enough to share how their life's difficulties connect or clash with biblical truths.

It is possible for a Bible group to wallow in ignorance if the mode of operation is to read a biblical text and throw it open to the group with the question: "What does this mean to you?" No! A biblical text means something specific, intended by the original author. Someone in a group Bible study needs to take responsibility to study these things ahead of time and dig out the meaning.

In the group setting, the question can and should be: "How do you see this applying to your life?" A biblical text means something specific, but it may be applied in many different directions, as long as the application is really connected with the meaning.

That raises another question: Can a biblical text motivate someone, even if the meaning and application don't seem to be connected? The story can be told many times over, for instance, of someone reading one of the great missionary texts in Acts and believing God told him, through the text, to pack his bags and go overseas. It certainly is possible that the Holy Spirit guides someone through the words or sentiment of a biblical text—even if the text isn't properly applied to everyone in that specific way. Such experiences are not about the meaning of a biblical text, nor its typical

## What Are the Proper Ways to Apply Scripture to Life Today?

application, but a unique guidance of the Spirit for a particular person.

So the norm is this: biblical text first, original meaning next, and finally, present-day application. In this process we learn and relearn “Your word, LORD, is eternal” (Ps. 119:89).

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## 27 How Can We Refine Our Understanding of Biblical Theology?

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Theology is not limited to the work of professors and clergy. Any serious Christian who has invested time in reading and studying Scripture is doing the work of theology, because theology (from the Greek words *theos*, meaning “God,” and *logia*, meaning “utterance, speech, reasoning”) is simply seeking ways to understand and speak about God, and all else in life as God defines it.

This is one of the enormous blessings of being a lifetime reader of Scripture. We are learning God. And learning everything God has said about everything else that really matters in life. *What is a person? Why are people violent? What does a good marriage look like? What is our relationship with the animal kingdom? What happens after we die? How can we find peace and prosperity in life? Why does money become a source of tension? Where can we find justice?*

What Scripture offers us, in its totality, is a comprehensive knowledge about God and life. This knowledge is not unlimited, for mysteries remain. Believers should not be frustrated by that. The Bible should never be criticized for not being what it never claims to be. It is not a comprehensive textbook of science. It does not address all areas of economics and government. The Bible is not a documentary of all the details of the historical periods it addresses, but rather, the telling of the story of God's interaction with humanity.

So how do we, in our quest to reason about and speak about God, refine a "biblical theology"? First, we should not rely on the longstanding method of searching for verses, producing a list, and pretending that this produces a coherent and true doctrine or theology. It is easy, of course, to use a concordance or a computer program or an online lookup function to put in front of our eyeballs all of the biblical verses that use the words *heaven*, *sin*, *Christ*, *baptism*, *money*, or *violence*. While this can be a helpful exercise, creating such lists does not render overarching, rational concepts. If we are trying to figure out what the Bible says about violence, we will have to find the passages that offer major insights, and those passages may not even use the word *violence* at all—for instance, Cain murdering Abel (Gen. 4:8). It is helpful to do word searches, but

only as part of a larger strategy of refining your understanding of biblical theology.

Theology is all about synthesis, which is to take many ideas and discover their connections, leading to an overall theory or system. We sometimes talk about our “belief system,” which is what theology leads to, and it is a wonderful thing. Biblically knowledgeable believers are not shocked when people lie, steal, and cheat. When wars break out. When people are used as slaves. We understand these harsh realities because the word of God describes the causes and development of sin—and our understanding is our “theology.” This understanding does not come from looking up the word *sin* online. Rather, as we read all of Scripture as a lifestyle, we discover and synthesize thousands of places where “sin” is described as transgression, stumbling, iniquity, wandering, crookedness, trespass, impiety, lawlessness, injustice, and more. The Psalms talk about brokenness. Jesus teaches about blindness. Revelation points to evil. Read Scripture as a lifestyle and you lose your naiveté—and that is a good thing.

Maturity is all about synthesis—putting together what you learned years ago, with what you learned months ago, with what you learned today. You see patterns of life. Lessons that are cumulative. So it is with refining a biblical theology. The most important thing we do is read Scripture regularly, widely (not just the parts we like), and for a lifetime. Synthesis happens

in our minds automatically. You read along and your mind is picking up bits and pieces of the truth about love, and righteousness, and temptation, and angels, and God, and a thousand other ideas. In the back of your mind, connections are forming. Every time you come back to a certain biblical book, you see things you never did before, but the connections get stronger. You understand Jeremiah's "new covenant" because you recall the prior covenants with Abraham, Moses, and others, and you remember Jesus and the book of Hebrews' teaching about the "new covenant." And so it is with hundreds of other big ideas.

So the main commitment we need to make for the big payoff of gaining a substantial "belief system" is the faithful and thoughtful reading of all of Scripture. The synthesis will happen in our minds. But to ensure that we are reading with understanding and effect, we need to read with concentration. Taking notes is extremely helpful. Just have pen and paper nearby when you read. Note a verse that strikes you, a question that comes to mind, a connection or contrast with another passage, something you want to remember, a thought you want to tell someone else. Do that as a lifestyle and the synthesis will go deeper. Review your notes months later, and you will make connections that are just waiting to happen.

Truth is too good to be viewed as a list. The word of God offers a faithful description of reality. The

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

difference between a flourishing and a failing life frequently hinges on where we have made the effort to discover and live in reality. This is why we want to understand Scripture.

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## 28 How Can We Know if Someone Is Giving False Teaching?

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When I was young in the faith, I had a deep hunger to find the truth of God because I had tasted it, it was deeply satisfying, and I sensed that my soul was just waiting to be revived from some kind of hibernation. So I sought out different Christian teachers and preachers, read some best-selling books, and sampled Christian radio teaching. But I was unsettled by the feeling I sometimes had that the Bible teaching I was hearing seemed only loosely linked with the biblical text, and it was peculiar, out of sync, and did not have the “ring of truth” I experienced when reading Scripture itself.

Some years later, I came to the conclusion that the “smell test” needs to be taken seriously. If we are exposed to teaching that just doesn’t “smell” right, then we ought to proceed carefully. Maybe the teaching is sound and we just need to get in sync with it, or it

may be that our “noses” are all right and we’re hearing that most dangerous thing—false teaching.

The Bible itself speaks of “false teaching.” There is a difference between truth and falsehood, and when it comes to Bible interpretation, there is a lot of teaching that is garbage—and it smells that way.

So how can we know if someone is giving false teaching from the Bible?

First, we need to watch out for *opportunists*. Teachers who gain illicitly from their teaching need to be avoided. It is amazing, really, how many masses of people will follow someone who is manipulative, grossly greedy, and dishonest. They promise prosperity if others make them prosperous, and they laugh all the way to the bank. The short epistle of Jude offers a stark analysis of this kind of false teaching:

These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever. ... These people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves

and flatter others for their own advantage. (Jude 12-13, 16)

This is a stunning description of the destructive effects of “shepherds who feed only themselves.” The passage indicates that we must watch out for the selfishness, fruitlessness, chaos, and arrogance of certain people. They gain influence via their sheer conceit. Ironically, we give them credence on the basis of their pride, the character flaw that most disqualifies them. When we realize we have been sucked in by this kind of false teacher, we need to do some soul-searching to figure out why.

Another kind of false teaching is *ill-founded speculation*. Some people make a career out of spouting details of topics like spiritual life or prophesy or cosmology, which go way beyond what Scripture actually teaches. There are no controls on such speculation. Sometimes the motive is manipulation—esoteric knowledge can be a power tactic. The last sentence of 1 Timothy is this plea:

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. (1 Tim. 6:20-21 ESV)

Second Timothy contains a similar warning:

Charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. (2 Tim. 2:14-17 ESV)

A third kind of false teaching is *legalism*. Jesus confronted this distortion of the truth of God when he exposed the corrupt side of sectarianism: “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God” (Luke 11:42). First Timothy 4:3 warns about teachers who “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.”

These and other forms of false teaching all have causes, and sometimes we will avoid spiritual collisions if we see them ahead of time. False teaching can come from naiveté, arrogance, or selfish gain. The problem we face today is that it isn't hard to grab a microphone, create a webpage, or even self-publish a book. We must make careful choices about whom we

## How Can We Know if Someone Is Giving False Teaching?

listen to, and have the strength to turn away when a suspicious teacher is tickling our ears and offering false comfort.

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## 29 What Are Some Good Plans and Disciplines for Reading Scripture?

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I still cherish my boyhood memories of going fishing with my grandfather. It seems like it was yesterday. One day while I was sorting through the wide variety of tackle I had collected, fidgeting with lures and sinkers and bobbers and the rest in my fancy tackle box, my grandfather looked at me and said: “Mel, you won’t catch a thing unless your hook is in the water.” Of course, he was right. His hook was always in the water, and he had much more to show for it.

The main principle of reading Scripture for a lifetime of spiritual growth is: just read it. Don’t spend too much time looking for the “just right” study Bible, or other helps. Don’t neglect reading Scripture because you are in a period when you are having a hard time understanding it. And don’t slow down because you have not found a plan that is right for you. Put your hook in the water. Something will happen.

## What Are Some Good Plans and Disciplines for Reading Scripture?

Here are some guidelines for a lifestyle of fruitful Bible reading.

### **1. Follow a plan, but vary the plan year by year.**

There are plans that are structured for reading the whole Bible in a year, or two years. The plan may go from Genesis to Revelation, but some plans have you read an Old Testament portion, a New Testament portion, and a Psalm every day, for instance. One very ambitious plan has you reading the whole Bible in 90 days. I like doing that every couple of years. It takes me about a half-hour of reading a day. One plan gets you through the four Gospels in 40 days. Another goes through just the New Testament in a year. There are holiday reading plans for Lent or Advent which really help us focus on the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. You can find verse-of-the-day devotions, but they are of limited worth because you do not get the broad scope of the story of Scripture. [BibleGateway.com](http://BibleGateway.com) is a good place to find a wide variety of plans.

**2. Do not give up.** If you start a reading plan in January and falter in March, getting hopelessly behind the plan, just choose another plan for the year. Keep your hook in the water. If all else fails, just read a chapter a day. Consider a day incomplete unless you read *something* in Scripture.

**3. Use a simple tool for a schedule.** I like printing out a plan on a single sheet of paper and having it

tucked in the back of my Bible. You can use an online scheduling function on your computer or mobile device, but make sure it is a function that is easy to use and easy to access.

**4. *Decide whether you will make notes or not.***

Writing your thoughts and questions down as you read helps with comprehension, and many people do it faithfully. I have generally preferred not doing that, however, because I know I will keep reading every day if it is just me and the Bible in my hand. It is different when I am studying Scripture for a group I am in or a teaching I am preparing in which case I take careful notes. You should figure out what works best for you. If taking notes does not bog you down, do it. You will have an accumulating treasure.

**5. *Know the time of day that is best for you, and set a pattern.*** This is really important. Lifestyle is about regularity. Most people eat and sleep on a preferred pattern that works for them. So it is with reading Scripture as a lifestyle. I like the early morning when it is quiet in the house and my to-do list isn't pressing in on my mind. Others find a lunch break or the evening better.

**6. *Read introductions to Bible books.*** If you've gotten through Numbers and are ready to dive into Deuteronomy, don't just plow ahead. Take a few minutes to read an introduction which will orient you to the context, circumstances, date, themes, and author

of what you are about to read. Study Bibles, for instance, have concise introductions that are no more than a page. But you can get longer introductions in Bible dictionaries or handbooks.

**7. Allow time for reflection.** In today's hectic world this gets squeezed out, but it is essential. This may mean shutting your Bible, closing your eyes for five minutes and thinking about what you're read, speaking to God a word of thanks or frustration or inquiry. I find taking a walk after reading to be an excellent way to let the thoughts circulate around in my mind. If there is a single verse, or even just a phrase or a single word, that strikes you powerfully, take some time to ponder it. God the Holy Spirit may be placing a marker in your mind which will be important at some later point in your life. Commit to this: read *and* reflect.

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## 30 A Final Word About Faith

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One day some religious people, a group known as the Sadducees, tried to draw Jesus into a theological trap on a speculative question about the afterlife. Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus said: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” That was a shocking confrontation. These people knew the Hebrew Scriptures very well. It was their profession and their preoccupation. But because they were using the word of God instead of trusting it, Jesus told them they quite simply didn’t “know” it.

This book is called *How to Understand the Bible*, but it could have been called *How to Understand the Bible in a Way that is Accurate According to the Standards of Language and that is Faithful According to God’s Intent*. (In prior centuries book titles were sometimes that long!)

In order to get out of Scripture all that is there for us, we have to read it both as an ordinary text, and an extraordinary one. This is not a contradiction. We must

follow the rules that apply to ordinary language because this word of God came to us in the ordinary forms of letters and oracles, poetry and proverb, simile and metaphor, and all the other ordinary ways ordinary words work. We must read Scripture naturally, in other words, and not by some artificial assumptions about the words of the Bible. It is all-important, for instance, for us to read portions of Scripture in their context because words have meaning only in context. We expect other people to understand what we say in context out of fairness, not quoting us in a way that misrepresents us. We should show God the same respect. We like to quote individual Bible verses as answers to complex problems, but our application of a verse is only as good as our understanding the verse in context. No prophet or apostle would have ever conceived of his oracle or epistle chopped up into such tiny bits.

We must also read Scripture with eyes of faith as a body of extraordinary texts. Not everybody who reads the Bible considers it the Holy Bible or the word of God. But if you do, that will shape your understanding.

The Christian thinker Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) famously said: "I believe in order that I may understand" (*Credo ut intelligam*). The principle is otherwise known as "faith seeking understanding," as

it was expressed by Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century.

Putting it simply, these leading thinkers and many others have said it is when our lives are connected with our Creator, when our minds and hearts are awakened to his power and presence, when we are “believers,” that we will begin to understand the way things really are.

Knowing the Bible is not the ultimate objective. Knowing God is. Really knowing God. And knowing God via the revelation God has given of himself, not our imaginary constructs. This is exciting! When we commit ourselves to knowing the Scriptures, we are truly embarking on a life-transforming experience. And the real beginning is when we say, “I believe...”

For more resources, including downloadable group discussion guide...

[www.WordWay.org](http://www.WordWay.org)

Spanish version of *How to Understand the Bible*:

[\*Cómo Entender La Biblia\*](#)

Also:

[\*Prayers for Our Lives: 95 Lifelines to God for Everyday Circumstances\*](#)