



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

# Reading and Understanding Scripture

How to Read the Bible Faithfully, Understand What It Means, and Apply God's Word to Your Life

## The Short Answer

The Bible was given to be read, understood, believed, and lived. You do not need a theology degree, Hebrew or Greek, or a shelf full of commentaries to begin. Open the Bible. Read carefully. Ask questions. Pay attention to context. Ask what the writer was communicating. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Ask God for wisdom. Then respond faithfully to what you learn. Before asking, 'What does this verse mean to me?' ask, 'What does this verse mean?'

## 2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work.

## Opening Memory Anchor

Before asking: 'What does this verse mean to me?' ask: 'What does this verse mean?'

# PART ONE

## BEGINNER GUIDE

### 1 WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is a collection of books written across many centuries by different human authors. Yet Christians believe Scripture ultimately comes from God. Read 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21. The human writers were not robots: their personalities, vocabulary, styles, and circumstances remain visible. God worked through real human authors to communicate His Word.

### 2 WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS READ THE BIBLE?

Scripture reveals who God is, what He has done, what humanity is, what sin is, what God desires and promises, who Jesus is, what Jesus accomplished, how salvation comes, how God's people should live, and where history is going. Most importantly, Scripture leads us toward Jesus. Read John 5:39. The goal is not merely to know Bible facts, but to know the God who has revealed Himself through His Word.

### 3 CAN ORDINARY PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

Yes. Some passages are remarkably simple; others are difficult. Even Peter acknowledged that some of Paul's writings were hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16). Difficulty does not mean failure. It means: keep studying.

#### Memory Anchor

You do not have to understand everything in the Bible before you can understand anything in the Bible.

### 4 WHERE SHOULD A BEGINNER START?

There is no wrong place to begin, but some books are easier starting points. Consider John, Mark, Luke, or Matthew; then Acts, Genesis, Ephesians, Philippians, James, Psalms, or Proverbs. Eventually read the whole Bible, but you do not have to understand everything immediately.

### 5 WHAT BIBLE TRANSLATION SHOULD I USE?

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with some Aramaic; the New Testament in Greek. Reliable translations include ESV, NASB, CSB, NIV, NLT, NKJV, BSB, and others. Choose a reliable translation you can understand. For deeper study, compare several translations.

### 6 DO I NEED THE BEST TRANSLATION?

Do not become so anxious about choosing the perfect Bible that you stop reading. A readable, reliable translation you actually read is enormously valuable. When translations differ, ask why: translation philosophy, grammar, word meaning, or sometimes manuscript differences.

### 7 WHAT DO I DO WHEN I OPEN MY BIBLE?

Start simply: PRAY. READ. OBSERVE. UNDERSTAND. RESPOND. Read enough to understand what is happening. Ask who is speaking, who is addressed, what comes before and after, what seems important, what it means, and finally how you should respond.

### 8 OBSERVATION

Observation asks: WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY? Before interpreting, look carefully. Who is present? What happened? What repeats? What is emphasized? Good interpretation begins with careful observation.

### 9 INTERPRETATION

Interpretation asks: WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN? Ask what the author intended to communicate, what the original audience would have understood, how the surrounding passage clarifies the meaning, and how it fits within the book and the rest of Scripture.

### 10 APPLICATION

Application asks: HOW SHOULD I RESPOND? A passage may call us to believe, stop, start, remember, confess, trust, worship, encourage, forgive, or stand amazed at who God is. Application comes after interpretation.

#### Foundational Principle

A passage cannot mean whatever we want it to mean. Meaning comes from the text. Application flows from that meaning.

### 11 THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN BIBLE STUDY: CONTEXT

Context means what surrounds something. The same words can mean very different things in different conversations. Scripture works the same way. Context determines meaning.

### 12 READ THE VERSES AROUND IT

One of the easiest ways to misunderstand Scripture is to isolate one verse. Read the paragraph before it, the paragraph containing it, and the paragraph after it. Often the surrounding verses immediately clarify the meaning.

### 13 READ THE WHOLE CHAPTER

Chapter divisions were added later to help readers locate passages. An argument can begin in one chapter and continue into the next. Do not assume a chapter number marks a change in thought.

## **14 READ THE WHOLE BOOK**

A paragraph from a letter makes more sense when you read the entire letter. New Testament letters work similarly. If you are studying Philippians 4, read Philippians. The whole book gives context to the smaller passage.

## **15 ASK WHO WROTE IT**

Knowing the writer can illuminate vocabulary, themes, circumstances, and purpose. Paul, Luke, David, Moses, and John wrote in recognizably different ways.

## **16 ASK WHO RECEIVED IT**

Romans was written to believers in Rome; Galatians to churches facing gospel confusion; Corinthians to a troubled church; many prophets addressed Israel or Judah. All Scripture is for our instruction, but not every statement was originally addressed to us.

### **Memory Anchor**

The Bible was written FOR us. But not every passage was written directly TO us.

## **17 ASK WHY IT WAS WRITTEN**

Biblical writers often state particular purposes. Read John 20:30-31 and Luke 1:1-4. Understanding purpose helps us interpret individual passages.

## **18 WHAT WAS HAPPENING?**

Historical context can matter: empire, church problems, cultural practices, covenant setting, and preceding events. Good historical information can illuminate Scripture, but it should help explain the text, not replace it.

## **19 WHAT KIND OF WRITING AM I READING?**

This is genre. Scripture contains narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic literature. Genre helps us know what kinds of questions to ask.

## **20 NARRATIVE**

Narrative tells what happened. Something happening in a story does not automatically mean Christians should do it. The Bible can describe something without prescribing it.

### **Memory Anchor**

The Bible can describe something without prescribing it.

## **21 LAW**

Large sections of Exodus through Deuteronomy contain laws given to Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. They reveal God's holiness, justice, the seriousness of sin, and covenant life, but Christians interpret Old Testament law through Christ and the New Covenant.

## **22 POETRY**

Poetry uses imagery, parallelism, metaphor, hyperbole, and emotional expression. Psalm 98:8 says rivers clap their hands. Reading Scripture literally means reading language according to the way it is being used, not pretending figures of speech do not exist.

## **23 WISDOM LITERATURE**

Proverbs contains wisdom. Proverbs generally express patterns of wise living rather than mechanical guarantees. Proverbs 22:6 should not automatically be treated as an unconditional promise. A worked example appears later.

## **24 PROPHECY**

Prophets spoke God's message: warning, judgment, encouragement, calls to repentance, future events, and promises. Prophecy often uses vivid imagery and can address an immediate historical situation while pointing beyond it.

## **25 THE GOSPELS**

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are theological historical narratives about Jesus. Each writer selects and arranges material for particular purposes. Different emphases do not automatically equal contradiction.

## **26 NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS**

Romans through Jude contain letters to churches, groups of churches, and individuals. They contain doctrine, correction, encouragement, ethical instruction, and responses to real situations. Reading the whole letter is especially important.

## **27 APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

Parts of Daniel and Revelation use symbols, visions, numbers, strange creatures, cosmic imagery, and Old Testament echoes. Interpret carefully, compare Scripture with Scripture, and hold disputed details with humility.

## **28 IS EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE A COMMAND?**

No. Passages may be commands, promises, warnings, descriptions, songs, prayers, prophecies, wisdom, genealogies, visions, or historical reports. Before obeying a sentence as a command, ask whether it actually is one.

## **29 IS EVERY PROMISE IN THE BIBLE A PROMISE TO ME?**

No. God made specific promises to specific people in specific covenant settings. All God's promises reveal something true about Him, but determine who received the promise, under what circumstances, and whether Scripture extends it generally.

## **30 WHAT ABOUT JEREMIAH 29:11?**

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Jeremiah writes to Jewish exiles in Babylon, who are told they will remain there seventy years before restoration. The verse reveals God's faithfulness; it was not originally a personalized guarantee of immediate prosperity.

## **31 WHAT ABOUT PHILIPPIANS 4:13?**

Read Philippians 4:10-13. Paul is talking about contentment in plenty and need. Christ strengthens believers to remain faithful in circumstances they would not necessarily choose.

## **32 WHAT IS PROOF-TEXTING?**

Proof-texting pulls a verse from context and uses it to support an idea the passage was not teaching. A good question whenever someone quotes Scripture is: Can we read the surrounding passage?

## **33 CAN I HIGHLIGHT OR WRITE IN MY BIBLE?**

Yes. Some prefer not to; others use highlights, underlining, notes, symbols, cross-references, or questions. Use whatever helps you engage Scripture carefully.

## **34 SHOULD I JOURNAL?**

You may. Journaling can record questions, observations, prayers, connections, applications, and things to investigate. It is a tool, not a requirement.

## **35 WHAT IF I DON'T UNDERSTAND SOMETHING?**

Read it again. Read the surrounding passage. Compare translations. Look for cross-references. Read the whole book. Write down the question. Consult a reliable resource. Ask a mature Christian. Sometimes leave the question open. You are allowed to say: I don't know yet.

## **36 WHAT IF CHRISTIANS DISAGREE ABOUT A PASSAGE?**

Faithful Christians sometimes disagree about baptism, Communion, spiritual gifts, church government, end-times details, predestination and human freedom, and other subjects. Ask what the text says, which interpretation best explains the evidence, how it fits Scripture, what assumptions you bring, and whether you can fairly explain the other view.

## **37 ASK GOD FOR WISDOM**

Bible study is intellectual but not merely intellectual. Read Psalm 119:18 and James 1:5. The Holy Spirit helps believers understand God's truth, but this does not eliminate careful study. Prayer and study belong together.

## **38 WHAT IF GOD SHOWED ME SOMETHING?**

Be grateful for insight, then test it. The Holy Spirit inspired Scripture and will not teach something through Scripture that contradicts what Scripture actually says. An impression does not override context.

### **Memory Anchor**

The Holy Spirit helps us understand Scripture. He does not give Scripture a new meaning that contradicts the meaning He inspired.

## **39 READ TO KNOW GOD**

Bible study can become merely academic. Jesus confronted people who searched the Scriptures yet refused to come to Him (John 5:39-40). Study carefully, but never forget why: Scripture reveals God.

## **40 BEGINNER REVIEW**

1. Before asking what a verse means to me, ask what the verse means.
2. Observation asks: What does the text say?
3. Interpretation asks: What does the text mean?
4. Application asks how we should respond.
5. One of the most important principles in Bible study is context.
6. The Bible was written for us, but not every passage was written directly to us.

7. Narrative can describe something without prescribing it.
8. Not every biblical promise was originally made directly to me or us.
9. The Holy Spirit helps believers understand Scripture.
10. When we do not understand something, it is okay to say: I do not know yet.

#### **Beginner Summary**

You can read the Bible. You can understand the Bible. You will not understand everything immediately. Start with the text. Read the context. Ask questions. Notice the genre. Ask what the author was communicating. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Ask God for wisdom. Use helpful resources when needed. Then respond to what you learn. Do not become so afraid of interpreting Scripture incorrectly that you stop reading it. God gave His Word to His people. Open it.

## PART TWO

### WANT TO GO DEEPER?

#### INSPIRATION, ILLUMINATION, AND THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

##### 41 WHAT DOES GOD-BREATHED MEAN?

The Greek word commonly translated God-breathed is theopneustos. Inspiration refers to God's work in giving Scripture through human authors. Illumination refers to the Holy Spirit helping readers understand and receive truth already revealed.

##### 42 INSPIRATION IS NOT ILLUMINATION

Inspiration gave us Scripture. Illumination helps us understand Scripture. Illumination does not create new Scripture or guarantee every sincere interpretation is correct.

##### Memory Anchor

Inspiration gave us Scripture. Illumination helps us understand and obey Scripture.

##### 43 WHAT IS VERBAL PLENARY INSPIRATION?

Verbal emphasizes that inspiration extends to the words through which the biblical writers communicated; plenary means full or complete. This does not require passive dictation. God worked through real human authors whose personalities, vocabularies, and circumstances remain visible.

##### 44 WHAT DOES INERRANT MEAN?

Many evangelical Protestants use inerrant to mean that Scripture, rightly understood according to what its authors intended to affirm, does not teach error. This does not require treating poetry as science, approximation as mathematical precision, or figures of speech as literal description.

##### 45 WHAT DOES INFALLIBLE MEAN?

Christians sometimes use inerrancy and infallibility almost interchangeably; others distinguish them. Definitions vary. The central point is that Scripture is trustworthy because the God who gave it is trustworthy.

##### 46 DO ALL CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS EXPLAIN THIS IDENTICALLY?

No. Evangelical Protestants commonly use verbal plenary inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions also affirm divine inspiration and truth while locating Scripture within a somewhat different understanding of Church, Tradition, and authority. Ask what people actually mean by their terms.

##### Memory Anchor

God gave Scripture through real human authors. Human authorship does not cancel divine authorship. Divine authorship does not erase human authorship.

#### AUTHORIAL INTENT AND FULLER MEANING

##### 47 AUTHORIAL INTENT

Ask what the author was communicating through these words. Readers bring experiences and questions to Scripture, but readers do not create the text's meaning.

##### 48 CAN A PASSAGE HAVE MORE THAN ONE APPLICATION?

Yes. One meaning can produce many faithful applications. A command against lying may apply differently at work, in relationships, or online while retaining the same meaning.

##### Memory Anchor

One meaning can produce many faithful applications.

##### 49 CAN SCRIPTURE HAVE A FULLER DIVINE MEANING?

Because Scripture has both human authors and a divine Author, later revelation sometimes reveals significance earlier human participants may not have fully understood. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12. Fuller significance should be established by Scripture itself, not invented by readers.

#### WHY THESE BOOKS? THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

##### 50 WHAT IS THE CANON?

Canon refers to the collection of books recognized as Scripture. The biblical canon developed and was recognized over time. The earliest Christians already had Israel's Scriptures, while apostolic writings circulated among churches. Colossians 4:16 and 2 Peter 3:15-16 show early circulation and recognition.

## 51 HOW WERE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS RECOGNIZED?

There was no single mechanical checklist, but important considerations included apostolic connection, consistency with the received faith, widespread church use, and reception as authoritative Scripture. Recognition was not identical in every region at every moment. Later lists and church decisions confirmed and formalized an increasingly broad consensus rather than manufacturing a collection from nothing.

## 52 DID THE CHURCH CREATE THE BIBLE?

Traditions answer the authority question somewhat differently. Protestants commonly emphasize recognition rather than creation of authority; Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians place greater emphasis on the historic Church and Sacred Tradition in receiving and identifying the canon. All share the same twenty-seven-book New Testament.

## 53 DO ALL CHRISTIANS HAVE EXACTLY THE SAME OLD TESTAMENT?

No. Protestant Bibles normally contain thirty-nine Old Testament books. Roman Catholic Bibles include additional Deuterocanonical books. Orthodox canons also include additional books, with some variation. This should not make beginners afraid to read Scripture; the shared books tell the enormous biblical story centered in God's saving work through Christ.

### Memory Anchor

The canon was not created because someone suddenly decided which books sounded spiritual. The recognition of Scripture developed within the historical community of God's people.

## SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

### 54 USE CLEAR PASSAGES TO HELP WITH DIFFICULT ONES

When one obscure or disputed statement seems to conflict with many clear passages, proceed cautiously. Interpret the obscure passage in light of clearer teaching.

#### House Interpretive Principle

When Scripture gives us one obscure or disputed statement and many clearer passages, interpret the obscure passage cautiously in light of the clearer teaching.

### 55 BUILD DOCTRINE FROM THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF SCRIPTURE

Read Acts 20:27. Major Christian doctrine should not rest entirely upon one isolated verse. Study all relevant passages, contexts, genres, and how they fit together.

### 56 CROSS-REFERENCES

Cross-references can point to similar words, related ideas, quotations, prophecies, or parallel events. They are study aids added by editors, not inspired Scripture. Examine whether each suggested connection is relevant.

## PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

### 57 GOD REVEALED HIS PLAN OVER TIME

God did not reveal the entire biblical story at once. Later Scripture often provides greater clarity about earlier revelation. This is progressive revelation.

### 58 AN EXAMPLE: THE SERPENT

Genesis 3:15 introduces conflict between the serpent and the woman's offspring. Revelation 12:9 explicitly identifies the ancient serpent with the devil and Satan. Later revelation helps illuminate earlier revelation.

### 59 AN EXAMPLE: SACRIFICE

Animal sacrifice appears throughout the Old Testament. Hebrews 9-10 explains Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. The earlier system becomes clearer in light of Christ.

## OLD COVENANT AND NEW COVENANT

### 60 WHY COVENANT MATTERS

A covenant is a binding relationship established with promises and obligations. Major biblical covenants include Noah, Abraham, Israel through Moses, David, and the New Covenant established through Christ. Covenant context helps prevent treating every command as if given under identical circumstances.

### 61 ARE CHRISTIANS UNDER THE MOSAIC LAW?

Christians disagree about exactly how Old Testament law should be categorized and applied, but the New Testament teaches that believers relate to the Mosaic Covenant differently because of Christ. See Romans 6:14, Galatians 3, Hebrews 8, and Matthew 5:17.

### 62 CEREMONIAL, CIVIL, AND MORAL LAW

Christian theologians often categorize Mosaic laws as moral, ceremonial, and civil. The framework can be helpful, but the Bible itself does not explicitly label every Mosaic law within these three categories. Use the framework as a tool, not as the text itself.

## READING SCRIPTURE CHRISTOCENTRICALLY

### 63 JESUS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Luke 24:25-27 and 24:44 show Jesus explaining how the Scriptures concern Him. The Old Testament participates in the story fulfilled in Christ.

### 64 DOES EVERY VERSE DIRECTLY PREDICT JESUS?

No. Jesus is the center and fulfillment of Scripture's redemptive story, but not every object or detail is a secret symbol. Christ-centered interpretation is not imaginative free association.

### 65 WHAT IS TYPOLOGY?

A type is a real person, event, institution, or pattern that anticipates a greater fulfillment. Scripture itself establishes strong examples: Adam and Christ, Passover and Christ, the bronze serpent and Christ, Jonah and Jesus.

#### Memory Anchor

Find Jesus where Scripture reveals Him. Do not manufacture Jesus-symbols from every detail.

## LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

### 66 WHAT DOES READ THE BIBLE LITERALLY MEAN?

Read Scripture according to its intended literary sense: history as history, poetry as poetry, metaphor as metaphor, apocalyptic imagery as imagery. Literal interpretation does not mean pretending figurative language is physically literal.

### 67 HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is deliberate exaggeration for emphasis. Jesus' instruction about gouging out an eye in Matthew 5:29 stresses radical action against sin; it does not establish routine bodily mutilation.

### 68 IDIOMS

Languages contain expressions that cannot be understood by wooden word substitution. Biblical languages are no exception. Historical and linguistic study can help identify idioms.

## HEBREW AND GREEK

### 69 DO I NEED HEBREW OR GREEK?

No. Reliable translations communicate the central message of Scripture. Biblical languages can deepen study but are not required for faithful Bible reading.

### 70 THE DANGER OF AMATEUR WORD STUDIES

A word does not mean everything it could possibly mean every time it appears. Context determines which sense applies, just as English bank can mean different things.

### 71 THE ROOT-WORD FALLACY

A word's historical origin does not automatically determine its meaning in a passage. Understanding butter and fly does not explain butterfly. Do not build theology merely by breaking words into roots.

### 72 USE LANGUAGE TOOLS CAREFULLY

Lexicons, interlinears, concordances, grammars, and language databases can help, but tools do not eliminate context. Knowing how to click a Greek word does not make someone a Greek scholar.

## TRANSLATIONS AND TEXTUAL VARIANTS

### 73 WHY DO BIBLE TRANSLATIONS DIFFER?

Differences can result from translation philosophy, grammar, word choice, idioms, interpretive decisions, and occasionally manuscript differences. This should encourage careful study, not panic.

### 74 WHAT IS A TEXTUAL VARIANT?

Ancient manuscripts were copied by hand. Small differences among copies are textual variants. Many involve spelling, word order, or minor wording; some are more substantial.

### 75 DOES THIS MEAN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE BIBLE SAID?

No. Abundant manuscript evidence allows scholars to compare copies and identify variations. Modern translations frequently identify significant variants in footnotes, including Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11.

## 76 DO TEXTUAL VARIANTS DESTROY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE?

No central Christian doctrine depends entirely upon a disputed textual variant. Textual criticism is the disciplined study of manuscript evidence in an effort to determine the earliest recoverable wording of the text.

### APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS

## 77 WHAT IF TWO PASSAGES SEEM TO CONTRADICT?

Do not panic or pretend the difficulty does not exist. Ask whether the writers discuss the same event from the same perspective, whether words are used in the same sense, whether one gives more detail, whether chronology is assumed, and whether both statements could be true.

## 78 DIFFERENCE DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEAN CONTRADICTION

One person may say Christine went to the store while another says Christine and Wayne went to the store. The statements differ without necessarily contradicting. Gospel writers can select different details in the same way.

## 79 DO WE HAVE TO SOLVE EVERY DIFFICULTY?

No. Some proposed solutions are strong, others possible or speculative. Intellectual honesty allows: Several explanations are possible, but I am not certain which is correct.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

## 80 WHY BACKGROUND CAN HELP

First-century Judaism, Roman government, ancient customs, agriculture, geography, temple practices, and other historical realities can illuminate passages and recover assumptions original audiences already understood.

## 81 THE DANGER OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Interesting background claims are often repeated in sermons, devotionals, and social media without good sourcing. Ask how we know, what the source is, and whether an interpretation depends entirely on the claim. The text should not become hostage to an unverifiable cultural story.

### USING STUDY TOOLS

## 82 STUDY BIBLES

Study Bibles may provide introductions, maps, background, cross-references, doctrinal notes, and explanations. The biblical text is Scripture; the study notes are not.

## 83 COMMENTARIES

Commentaries can help with language, history, theology, interpretive options, and difficult passages. Read the biblical passage first, make your own observations, then consult commentaries.

## 84 BIBLE DICTIONARIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS

These resources can explain people, places, customs, historical events, objects, and theological terms.

## 85 CONCORDANCES

Concordances help locate words and trace themes, repeated terms, and related passages.

## 86 USE MORE THAN ONE RESOURCE

No teacher, commentary, denomination, 3Nails study, or AI tool is infallible. When an issue matters, read Scripture, compare responsible sources, and verify claims.

### AI AND BIBLE STUDY

## 87 CAN AI HELP ME STUDY THE BIBLE?

Yes. AI can organize information, summarize arguments, compare interpretations, identify cross-references, explain terminology, generate study questions, and point toward resources. It can also make mistakes, invent citations, misquote sources, confuse traditions, or overstate disputed claims.

## 88 SHOULD AI INTERPRET THE BIBLE FOR ME?

AI should be a tool, not your authority. Ask it to show relevant passages, explain major interpretations, identify evidence, and point to verification. Then open the Bible. A good resource sends you back to Scripture rather than making you dependent on the resource.

### TEACHERS, SERMONS, DEVOTIONALS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

## 89 TEST WHAT YOU HEAR

Acts 17:10-12 describes Bereans receiving teaching eagerly and examining the Scriptures daily. Practice both eagerness and verification.

## 90 A CHARISMATIC TEACHER IS NOT AUTOMATICALLY CORRECT

Confidence, humor, emotion, popularity, eloquence, or persuasion do not prove an interpretation. Ask whether the passage is in context, whether the conclusion follows, whether information is omitted, and whether the teaching fits the whole counsel of Scripture.

## **91 THE GREEK REALLY SAYS...**

Language study can add nuance, but sensational claims that your English Bible is wrong should be verified carefully, especially if they overturn what virtually every major translation says.

## **92 VIRAL BIBLE CLAIMS**

Social media rewards surprise, controversy, novelty, and certainty. Good interpretation often requires context, patience, nuance, and humility. Fascinating does not equal true.

## **INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS**

### **93 DO ALL CHRISTIANS APPROACH INTERPRETATION THE SAME WAY?**

No. Traditions differ regarding the relationship between Scripture, church tradition, church authority, reason, and individual interpretation.

### **94 PROTESTANT APPROACHES**

Historic Protestant theology emphasizes sola Scriptura: Scripture alone is the final infallible authority for doctrine. This does not mean no teachers, church, creeds, or history; those authorities remain subordinate to Scripture.

### **95 ROMAN CATHOLIC APPROACH**

Roman Catholic theology understands Scripture and Sacred Tradition within the teaching authority of the Church. The Magisterium serves an authoritative interpretive role.

### **96 EASTERN ORTHODOX APPROACH**

Eastern Orthodox Christianity understands Scripture within Holy Tradition and the worshiping life of the Church, not as separate from the historic community in which it is received and proclaimed.

### **97 WHY KNOWING THESE DIFFERENCES HELPS**

These differences explain why Christians may approach the same question differently even when all quote Scripture. Before criticizing a tradition, understand what it actually teaches.

## **THINGS IN YOUR BIBLE THAT ARE NOT THE INSPIRED TEXT**

### **98 CHAPTER NUMBERS**

Chapter numbers were added later. They are useful but not inspired.

### **99 VERSE NUMBERS**

Verse numbers were also added later. They help locate passages but can encourage isolated verse reading. Read paragraphs, not merely numbered sentences.

### **100 SECTION HEADINGS**

Headings such as The Prodigal Son or Spiritual Gifts are publisher or translator additions. Helpful, but not Scripture.

### **101 FOOTNOTES**

Translation footnotes may identify alternate translations, manuscript differences, or textual questions. They are useful but not inspired.

### **102 RED LETTERS**

Some Bibles print Jesus' words in red. Useful, but the black letters are Scripture too. All Scripture is God-breathed.

## **A COMPLETE WORKED EXAMPLE - PHILIPPIANS 4:13**

### **103 STEP ONE: OBSERVATION**

Read Philippians 4:10-13. Paul speaks about circumstances, need, plenty, hunger, abundance, and contentment. Then he says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him.

### **104 STEP TWO: CONTEXT**

Paul is not discussing athletic achievement, career success, or accomplishing dreams. He is discussing contentment under changing circumstances.

### **105 STEP THREE: INTERPRETATION**

Paul has learned that Christ gives him strength to remain faithful whether circumstances involve abundance or need. 'All things' belongs to that context.

## 106 STEP FOUR: COMPARE SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 and 12:7-10 show Paul experiencing hardship. He did not believe faith guaranteed comfortable circumstances.

## 107 STEP FIVE: APPLICATION

In financial uncertainty, illness, difficult relationships, loss, unexpected change, or abundance, Christ can strengthen believers to remain faithful in circumstances they did not choose. That application flows from the meaning.

### Memory Anchor

Observation. Context. Interpretation. Application. In that order.

## ANOTHER WORKED EXAMPLE - PROVERBS 22:6

## 108 WHY USE ANOTHER EXAMPLE?

Philippians came from a New Testament letter. Proverbs 22:6 gives a wisdom example and is sometimes treated as an unconditional guarantee about a child's future choices.

## 109 STEP ONE: OBSERVATION

The verse speaks about training, a child, a way of life, and what may characterize that child later.

## 110 STEP TWO: IDENTIFY THE GENRE

Proverbs is wisdom literature. Proverbs generally describe how life ordinarily works according to God's wisdom and should not automatically be interpreted as unconditional promises. See also Section 23 - Wisdom Literature.

## 111 STEP THREE: CONTEXT

Surrounding Proverbs address work, money, speech, parenting, friendship, discipline, foolishness, and wisdom. They describe patterns for wise living rather than contractual guarantees.

## 112 STEP FOUR: COMPARE SCRIPTURE

Scripture teaches that people make real moral choices. Faithful parents can raise children wisely while those children later make sinful choices. We should be cautious about reading Proverbs 22:6 as a promise of parental control over every adult decision.

## 113 STEP FIVE: INTERPRETATION

Faithful formation matters. Parents should intentionally teach and train children in wisdom. Early patterns can exert lasting influence. The truth remains powerful without converting it into an unconditional guarantee.

## 114 STEP SIX: APPLICATION

A parent may intentionally teach God's ways; a grandparent may reinforce wisdom; a Christian carrying guilt over an adult child may realize the verse does not make every adult decision a verdict on parental faithfulness.

## 115 WHY THIS EXAMPLE MATTERS

Philippians 4:13 required following the argument of a letter. Proverbs 22:6 requires understanding wisdom literature. Same interpretive process, different genre.

### Memory Anchor

Before asking what a verse promises, ask what kind of literature you are reading.

## DEVOTIONAL READING AND DEEP STUDY

## 116 ARE THEY THE SAME THING?

Not exactly. Devotional reading may involve slow reading, reflection, prayer, and relationship with God. Deep study may involve historical research, language tools, cross-references, commentaries, and detailed analysis. Christians benefit from both.

## 117 DO NOT TURN EVERY QUIET TIME INTO A RESEARCH PROJECT

Sometimes you need to investigate. Sometimes you need to sit with Psalm 23. Not every reading session requires six commentaries, three lexicons, and fourteen browser tabs.

## 118 DO NOT USE DEVOTIONAL AS PERMISSION TO IGNORE CONTEXT

Personal reflection still needs faithful interpretation. A beautiful application built on a false interpretation is still a false interpretation.

## READING BROADLY AND STUDYING DEEPLY

## 119 HOW MUCH OF THE BIBLE SHOULD I READ AT ONCE?

There is no single correct amount. Sometimes read broadly to see the story, argument, repeated themes, and big picture. Other times study deeply: a chapter, paragraph, theme, or difficult question. Breadth helps you see the forest; depth helps you examine the trees.

#### 120 WHAT ABOUT READING PLANS?

Reading plans can move canonically, chronologically, through selected books, combine Old and New Testament readings, or follow themes. A reading plan is a tool, not a spiritual scoreboard. Missing Tuesday does not mean you failed God. Open the Bible again.

#### 121 WHAT IS THE BEST READING PLAN?

The one that helps you consistently engage Scripture faithfully. Some seasons allow several chapters; others one chapter or a short passage. The goal is not to finish the plan at all costs, but to know God through His Word.

#### 122 A SIMPLE SUSTAINABLE RHYTHM

Read one book at a time. Read a manageable section. Follow the author's thought. Mark questions. Notice repeated ideas. Pray about what you read. Slow down when something deserves deeper study. When you finish the book, start another.

##### Memory Anchor

Some days: read farther. Some days: dig deeper. But keep opening the Bible.

### MEDITATION AND MEMORIZATION

#### 123 WHAT IS BIBLICAL MEDITATION?

Psalms 1:1-3 presents meditation as dwelling thoughtfully on God's truth. It is not primarily emptying the mind; it is filling the mind with Scripture. Read. Repeat. Think. Pray. Respond.

#### 124 WHY MEMORIZE SCRIPTURE?

Psalms 119:11 speaks of hiding God's Word in the heart. Start small: one verse, paragraph, or Psalm. Consistency matters more than quantity.

### READING SCRIPTURE WITH THE CHURCH

#### 125 BIBLE READING IS PERSONAL BUT NOT MERELY PRIVATE

God gave Scripture to His people. Colossians 4:16 and 1 Timothy 4:13 show public reading and shared reception. Individual reading is wonderful, but Christianity was never intended to become just me, my Bible, and nobody else.

#### 126 LEARN FROM OTHER BELIEVERS

Ephesians 4:11-16 describes teachers given to the church. Pastors, scholars, Christians from other centuries, and believers from other cultures can help. Receiving help is not weakness; dependence upon human teachers instead of Scripture is the danger.

### DIFFICULT PASSAGES

#### 127 WHAT ABOUT PASSAGES THAT TROUBLE ME?

Some passages raise difficult moral, historical, or theological questions involving war, judgment, slavery, sexual ethics, imprecatory Psalms, Old Testament penalties, women and church leadership, hell, divine sovereignty, or other subjects. Do not pretend difficult passages are easy, and do not assume they have no reasonable explanation. Ask what the passage says, its historical and covenant context, genre, surrounding text, how the rest of Scripture addresses the subject, how progressive revelation matters, how it fits the story fulfilled in Christ, what serious interpretations exist, and what you still do not know. Some difficult passages deserve an entire study. See also: Progressive Revelation; Old Covenant and New Covenant; Reading Scripture Christocentrically; Scripture Interprets Scripture.

##### Memory Anchor

A difficult passage is an invitation to careful study - not permission to ignore the text or invent an easy answer.

### WHEN INTERPRETATION REMAINS DIFFICULT

#### 128 HOLD CLEAR TRUTHS FIRMLY

Some teachings are central and clear: God exists; humanity is sinful; Jesus is Lord; Jesus died for sins and rose bodily; salvation comes through Christ; God calls His people to holiness; Christ will return.

#### 129 HOLD SOME DETAILS WITH HUMILITY

Faithful Christians may disagree about end-times timing, the millennium, certain spiritual gifts, church government, baptism details, and other secondary questions. Humility is not theological weakness.

#### 130 DISTINGUISH CERTAINTY LEVELS

Use careful language: Scripture clearly teaches... The strongest evidence seems to suggest... Christians disagree about... One possible interpretation is... I don't know. Do not present possibility as certainty.

## 131 DO NOT BE AFRAID OF QUESTIONS

Questions do not threaten God. Study. Ask. Seek. Verify. And keep reading.

### A PRACTICAL BIBLE-READING METHOD

## 132 WHEN YOU OPEN THE BIBLE

PRAY. READ. OBSERVE. CONTEXT. IDENTIFY. GENRE. INTERPRET. COMPARE. VERIFY. APPLY. PRAY AGAIN. Ask God for help, read more than once, notice what is there, follow the surrounding argument, identify author/audience/purpose, recognize genre, determine meaning, compare Scripture, consult resources when needed, respond faithfully, and talk with God about what you learned.

## 133 QUESTIONS TO WRITE IN THE MARGIN

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? What repeats? What surprises me? What does this teach about God? About people? Is there a command, promise, warning, or example? What questions remain? Where is this going in the biblical story? How does this connect to Jesus? How should I respond?

### WHAT THIS STUDY CONCLUDES

## 134 ONE FAITHFUL SUMMARY

1. Scripture is God's Word communicated through human authors.
2. Ordinary Christians can genuinely understand Scripture.
3. Some passages are clearer than others; difficulty should lead to study, not despair.
4. Context is essential.
5. Observation should precede interpretation; interpretation should precede application.
6. Meaning comes from the text rather than the reader; one meaning can produce many faithful applications.
7. Original audience, historical setting, and literary genre matter.
8. Narrative may describe behavior without prescribing it.
9. Proverbs generally express wisdom rather than unconditional guarantees.
10. Not every biblical promise was originally addressed directly to every Christian.
11. Proof-texting should be avoided.
12. Scripture should interpret Scripture; clear passages help us approach difficult ones.
13. Major doctrines should be built from the whole counsel of Scripture.
14. Progressive revelation and covenant context matter.
15. The Old Testament should be understood within the redemptive story fulfilled in Christ.
16. Jesus is the center of Scripture's redemptive story, but Christ-centered interpretation does not justify inventing symbols.
17. Figures of speech should be recognized as figures of speech.
18. Hebrew and Greek can enrich study but are not required; word studies must respect context.
19. Translation differences should encourage careful study rather than fear.
20. Textual variants can be studied openly, and no central Christian doctrine depends entirely upon a disputed variant.
21. Apparent contradictions deserve careful examination; differences in detail do not automatically equal contradictions.
22. Historical background can illuminate Scripture, but background claims should be verified.
23. Study Bibles, commentaries, teachers, and AI can help but are not inspired or infallible.
24. The Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture; illumination does not give Scripture a meaning contrary to context.
25. Christians should understand interpretive traditions fairly.
26. Chapter numbers, verse numbers, headings, cross-references, and study notes are helpful additions but are not inspired text.
27. Devotional reading and deep study both have value.
28. Biblical meditation fills the mind with God's truth.
29. Scripture should be read personally and within the Christian community.
30. Distinguish clear doctrine, probable interpretation, disputed interpretation, and speculation.
31. I don't know can be a faithful answer.
32. Bible study should lead toward obedience, worship, and knowing God.
33. A good Bible-study resource should make readers more confident opening Scripture themselves.
34. The biblical canon was recognized over time within the historical community of God's people.
35. Christians share the same twenty-seven-book New Testament, while Old Testament canons differ among Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions.
36. Inspiration describes God's work in giving Scripture through human authors.
37. Divine authorship does not erase human personalities, vocabulary, styles, or historical circumstances.
38. Terms such as verbal plenary inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility should be understood carefully.
39. Genre significantly affects interpretation; wisdom literature should not automatically be converted into unconditional promises.
40. Broad Bible reading and deep passage study are both valuable.

41. Reading plans are tools rather than measures of spiritual worth.
42. Difficult passages deserve careful investigation rather than denial, panic, or simplistic answers.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

Why read Scripture? Not merely to become knowledgeable, win theological arguments, complete a reading plan, or collect interesting facts. Read Scripture because God has revealed Himself. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells one enormous story: Creation. Fall. Promise. Covenant. Israel. Messiah. Cross. Resurrection. Church. Restoration. At the center stands Jesus. Read Luke 24:27 and John 20:31. The Bible is not the destination. God is. Scripture brings us God's trustworthy revelation so that we may know Him, believe Him, trust Him, obey Him, worship Him, and recognize His Son.

Open the Bible expecting to learn. Open it willing to be corrected. Open it willing to change. Open it asking: 'God, what have You actually said?' And then listen.

### RELATED 3NAILS STUDIES

The Gospel; What Is Salvation?; What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?; The Holy Spirit; Prayer and Access to God; Identity in Christ; Adoption Into God's Family; Archaeology and the Bible; What the Bible Never Says.

### CONTINUE STUDYING

Read slowly: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 8:1-10; Joshua 1:1-9; Psalm 1; Psalm 19; Psalm 23; Psalm 119; Proverbs 1:1-7; Proverbs 22; Isaiah 55:8-11; Jeremiah 23:23-32; Matthew 4:1-11; Matthew 5-7; Matthew 22:23-33; Luke 1:1-4; Luke 24:13-49; John 5:31-47; John 20:30-31; Acts 8:26-40; Acts 17:10-12; Acts 20:17-32; Romans 15:1-6; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Galatians 3; Ephesians 1:15-23; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 2:14-19; 2 Timothy 3:10-17; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Hebrews 1:1-4; Hebrews 4:12-13; James 1:19-27; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:16-21; 2 Peter 3:14-18; 1 John 4:1-6; Revelation 1:1-3.

As you study, ask: What does the passage actually say? Who wrote it and who received it? Why was it written? What is happening historically? What genre is it? What comes before and after? What does the whole book emphasize? Is this describing or commanding? Is a promise universal or covenant-specific? Is wisdom describing a normal pattern? Is the language literal, poetic, metaphorical, hyperbolic, or symbolic? How does later revelation clarify it? How does it fit the covenants, the whole story, and Jesus? Am I importing a modern assumption? Am I relying on an unverifiable cultural claim? Am I confusing a study note with Scripture? Am I building doctrine from one obscure verse? How certain should I be? What does this reveal about God? How should I respond?

### FURTHER VERIFICATION AND STUDY

Scripture is the primary authority for this study. Because interpretation involves language, history, manuscripts, canon, theology, tradition, and literary context, responsible Bible study benefits from reliable resources while keeping them subordinate to Scripture.

#### Scripture's Own Teaching About Scripture

Psalm 19; Psalm 119; Matthew 5:17-20; Luke 24:25-49; John 5:39-47; John 10:35; John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12-13; 2 Peter 1:16-21; 2 Peter 3:15-16.

#### Canon Formation

Study the Scriptures recognized within ancient Judaism, early Christian use of apostolic writings, early canonical lists, regional differences, and later church affirmations. Distinguish recognition of authority from later formal listing or affirmation, and distinguish the New Testament canon from Old Testament differences among traditions.

#### Textual Criticism

Compare textual footnotes in reliable modern translations, especially Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11. Distinguish the existence of textual variants from the claim that Scripture cannot be reliably known.

#### Translation Comparison

Compare the same passage in several reliable translations. Ask whether differences involve style, clarity, grammar, interpretation, or manuscript evidence.

#### Early Christian Interpretation

Historical interpretation can identify ancient questions, long-standing interpretations, doctrinal controversies, and modern assumptions. Church history is useful evidence but does not replace Scripture's authority.

#### Roman Catholic Approach

Consult the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Dei Verbum for primary-source teaching on Scripture, Tradition, canon, revelation, and interpretation.

#### Eastern Orthodox Approach

Consult Orthodox sources themselves for Scripture within Holy Tradition and the life of the Church rather than relying exclusively on outside descriptions.

#### Protestant Approach

Investigate sola Scriptura, inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility, perspicuity, analogy of faith, and the relationship between Scripture and creeds/confessions. Useful sources include the Augsburg Confession, Westminster Confession of Faith, Thirty-Nine Articles, and historic Baptist confessions.

#### A Good Research Habit

When someone says, 'The Bible clearly says...' ask: Where? Can I read the passage? What is the context? Who was addressed? What genre is it? Does the conclusion follow? What does the rest of Scripture say? Are other interpretations reasonable? Is a background or language claim verifiable? If AI supplied it, can I verify it independently? Never be afraid to check.

## SCRIPTURE AND QUOTATION NOTE

Scripture is the final authority for this study. Scripture quotations in the published 3Nails study should follow the established 3Nails translation and quotation standard identified in the final publication version. Where wording is summarized or paraphrased rather than directly quoted, it should not be treated as a verbatim Bible quotation. Readers are encouraged to read every cited passage in context in a complete Bible. Where translation choices affect interpretation, compare several reliable translations and, where helpful, responsible Hebrew or Greek resources. Study notes, section headings, chapter numbers, verse numbers, cross-references, commentary notes, and other editorial additions should not be confused with the inspired biblical text.

## FINAL REFLECTION

The Bible can feel intimidating: sixty-six books, ancient cultures, strange names, genealogies, laws, poetry, prophecy, letters, visions, and passages Christians have debated for centuries. You may think, 'I don't know enough to understand this.' Open it anyway. You do not need to understand everything today. Read one passage. Ask what it says, what it means, what it shows about God, and how you should respond. Then tomorrow, do it again.

Some days read farther; other days dig deeper. Write down questions. Check context. Verify dramatic claims. Learn from study notes without confusing them with Scripture. When commentators disagree, examine the evidence. When you discover you misunderstood something, change your mind. That is not failure. That is learning. When a passage is difficult, do not run from it or invent an answer. When a passage is beautiful, do not rush through it. When it is familiar, read it again.

Above all, look for God. The goal is not Bible trivia, winning arguments, or impressing people with Greek words. The goal is to hear God's Word faithfully and increasingly know the God who gave it. Scripture tells the story of the God who created, humanity that rebelled, promises God made, rescue God prepared, the Son God sent, the cross where Jesus died, the tomb He left empty, the people He redeemed, and the kingdom that is coming. Gradually you stop opening the Bible thinking, I could never understand this, and begin opening it thinking: Let's see what God has said.

### Final Memory Anchor

Read the text. Read the context. Identify the genre. Understand the meaning. Respond faithfully. Read broadly. Study deeply. Ask questions. Use good tools. Verify what you are taught. Let clear passages help with difficult passages. Recognize when Christians disagree. Distinguish certainty from possibility. Do not be afraid to say: I don't know yet. Keep Jesus at the center of Scripture's redemptive story. Never let a Bible-study resource become a substitute for opening the Bible yourself. The purpose of this study is not to make you dependent upon 3Nails. It is to help you become increasingly confident reading God's Word. OPEN YOUR BIBLE. READ CAREFULLY. ASK GOD FOR WISDOM. KEEP LEARNING. AND KEEP READING.

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