

# How to Understand the Bible

HOLY BIBLE



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# Introduction

**T**he Bible is the world's best-selling book. Year after year millions of copies are sold or given away. Although most ancient books have disappeared from memory, the Bible continues to be printed more than any other book and is available in more than 2,000 languages. It has helped form the basis for Western society and has shaped much of its religious, economic and social outlook.

Yet in spite of the Bible's popularity, it has also rightly been described as the world's most *misunderstood*

book. Although millions of people are Bible readers, many find it hard to understand. Some even give up trying, thinking it is too confusing.

Possibly you have been one of those who have found the Bible difficult to comprehend. Perhaps you wish you knew how to better apply its timeless principles and use it to build a right relationship with its author, your Creator.

How can you become one of those who *do* understand what the Scriptures say?

Let's look to the Bible itself for the answer. It reveals ways to better grasp its message to



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mankind. Throughout its pages are principles that, when applied, can help your comprehension. Let's now explore a number of important keys that will help open up this Book of books to your understanding.

# Approach the Bible With a Proper Attitude

Curiously enough, we find that the Bible is not a book that everyone can readily understand. Many find it puzzling, difficult to figure out. How, then, can we come to understand it?

The first set of keys to comprehension can be grouped under the umbrella of *the right approach we must have* at the outset of our reading and study.

We must come to the Bible with the right attitude and perspective—looking with profound respect and reverence to the divine Author behind its pages, willing to believe and follow what He says.

Without this approach, we may be able to discern certain biblical truths on at least some level, but we will suffer profound blind spots regarding major aspects of scriptural revelation—blind spots that will seriously impair our overall understanding.

To get the big picture, we need to approach Scripture *with the right frame of mind*.

## Going to the Source

Our first step is prayer, to humbly ask God for His help. This is the first vital key to understanding His Word.

God describes the kind of attitude and approach He respects: “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite [i.e., repentant] spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2).

Understanding God’s Word is not a matter of superior intellect. God looks on the heart, our attitude and approach, to determine whether to give us understanding. The apostle Peter tells us: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.

But in every nation *whoever fears*

*Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him*” (Acts 10:34-35, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus Christ thanked God the Father for the way He chose whom to give spiritual understanding: “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

## Keys to Understanding

**1 Pray for understanding.** *Before you even begin to study, ask God to guide and show you His will. Remember that it is the Creator who gives true understanding through His Word. You cannot gain it on your own (Psalm 119:33-40; Proverbs 3:5-8; Jeremiah 9:23-24).*

that *You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes . . .* No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and *the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him*” (Luke 10:21-22).

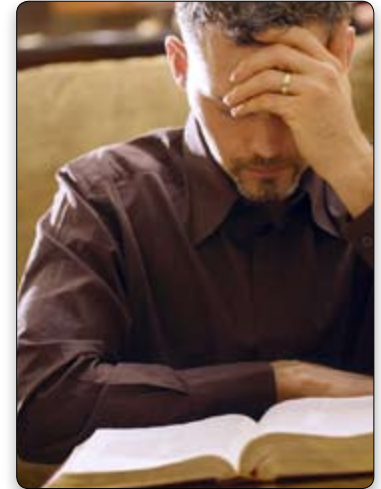
God reserves the right to choose those to whom He will reveal spiritual understanding. Sometimes one whom God so chooses may initially hold to views that oppose the truth, as did the apostle Paul. God miraculously called this man who had vigorously persecuted the early Christians, then opened his mind and used him as a powerful tool to reveal a wealth of spiritual truth and write much of what we know as the New Testament.

Notice the importance of God’s involvement in our understanding of the Bible. Christ said to His disciples: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me. *And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures*” (Luke 24:44-45). It was not their intellect that let them grasp the meaning; *God had to open their minds*.

Most overlook this point in studying the Bible. Even though we might possess the world’s brightest minds, if God does not act to open our minds, the Bible will remain closed to us. As the apostle Paul explained: “These things [God’s Word] we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing *spiritual* things with spiritual. *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Corinthians 2:13-14).

Because God inspired the Bible, it follows that it is not a mere book that takes only a measure of intellectual effort to understand. God reserves the right to grant an understanding of His precious truths to whomever He will.

Furthermore, we must realize that *our motivation* for reading and studying the Bible is important. If we feel compelled to read it simply to please others or pore over it only as a religious duty, God likely will not open the



*Our first step is prayer, to humbly ask God for His help. This is the first vital key to understanding His Word.*

Scriptures' true meaning to us. His truths will remain hidden. How, then, can we discover these truths?

As we have seen, the first key to understanding Scripture is to *ask for God's help with a right attitude*. In Jeremiah 29:13, He tells us, "You

will seek Me and find Me, *when you search for Me with all your heart.*"

### Keys to Understanding

**2 Keep an open mind.**  
*Be willing to admit when you are wrong and change, even if it means letting go of a long-held belief or tradition. If you can successfully apply this one principle, you will be far ahead in the search for spiritual truth (Acts 17:11; Isaiah 8:20).*

Why is attitude so important? Paul reveals the answer: "Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that

no one can ever boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29, New Living Translation).

*No one* will be able to boast that he was able to rightly understand God's spiritual truths with only his intelligence, his education and his own effort!

On the other hand, once a person humbly asks God for help and is committed to obeying what he learns, he is on the right path to understanding. Jesus Christ explained this to His disciples: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever *humbles himself* as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).

No matter how intelligent we may be, *if we don't humble ourselves and become teachable* like a small child, God will not help us to grasp His Word.

God promises that He will faithfully answer a humble request for understanding from those with whom He is working. The apostle James writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

All through the Bible we see examples of people who asked humbly for godly wisdom and were rewarded. Among them are David, Solomon, Daniel, Esther and Jesus' first disciples.

On the other hand, others are prime examples of those who relied on their own ability and were subsequently humiliated, such as Adam and Eve's son Cain, the Egyptian pharaoh during the time of the Exodus, Israel's King Saul, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the religious teachers

who opposed Jesus, and Herod Agrippa, the Judean ruler who persecuted members of the New Testament Church.

An example of a proper, humble, godly approach is that of the Bereans, mentioned in Acts 17:10-12: They "were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, *for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day* to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing" (New Revised Standard Version).

Unlike others, the Bereans did not immediately reject what Paul was saying, even though many things they heard contradicted their own long-held beliefs. They carefully reviewed the Scriptures with an open mind and saw that what Paul had said made sense. Then, after diligently searching the Scriptures, they verified that what he taught was indeed the truth, and they humbly accepted his teachings.

Similarly, if we want to understand the Bible, we need the attitude of the Bereans. We need to carefully review the Scriptures, not taking our beliefs for granted, because, as the Bereans found, our own ideas can be wrong.

Furthermore, God wants us to have a *submissive, teachable attitude* as we read His Word and hear it preached to us. Indeed, we must embrace it as a guide for living and follow it accordingly.

James compared God's law revealed in Scripture to a sort of spiritual mirror that can reveal aspects of our character when we look into it—often problematic thoughts, habits and behaviors that we should strive with God's help to change.

As James stated: "Do not merely *listen* to the word, and so deceive yourselves. *Do what it says.* Any one who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, *but doing it*—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22-25, New International Version).

An attitude of prayerfully, humbly seeking help from God so we can learn, leading to *putting into practice* what we *do* learn, is critical to

### Keys to Understanding

**3 Humbly seek instruction and correction.**

*Approach the Bible with a teachable, humble attitude. The Word of God judges our innermost thoughts. It can show us who we really are. It can reveal every flaw in our character. So be ready to heed its correction (Jeremiah 10:23-24; Isaiah 66:1-2, 5; Romans 8:6-9; Matthew 5:48).*

## In Their Own Words: Great Men and Women Who Highly Respected the Bible

Historically, the Bible has been held in the highest esteem by many great men and women—presidents, prime ministers, monarchs, scholars, scientists, philosophers and more. Following are what some of them have said about the Bible.

**Sir Francis Bacon** (1561-1626), known as the father of the scientific method, wrote, “There are two books laid before us to study, to prevent our falling into error; first, the volume of Scriptures, which reveal the will of God, then the volume of the Creatures [Creation], which express His power.”

**John Locke** (1632-1704), the noted English philosopher, wrote: “The Bible is one of the greatest blessings bestowed by God on the children of men. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture for its matter. It is all pure, all sincere; nothing too much; nothing wanting.”

The noted French writer and philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778) wrote: “The majesty of the Scriptures strikes me with



*“There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane [secular] history.”*  
—Isaac Newton (1643-1727), father of modern physics and astronomy

admiration, as the purity of the Gospel has its influence on my heart. Peruse the works of our philosophers; with all their pomp of diction, how mean, how contemptible, are they, compared with the Scriptures! Is it possible that a Book at once so simple and sublime should be merely the work of man?”

The brilliant German scholar and philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) said: “The existence of the Bible, as a book for the people, is the greatest benefit which the human race has

ever experienced. Every attempt to belittle it is a crime against humanity.”



*“It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.”*

—George Washington (1732-1799), first president of the United States

The brilliant German writer, poet and thinker **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749-1832) said: “Belief in the Bible, the fruit of deep meditation, has served me as the guide of my moral and literary life. I have found it a capital safely invested, and richly productive of interest.”

The great Scottish novelist and poet **Sir Walter Scott** (1771-1832) wrote: “The most learned, acute, and diligent student cannot, in the longest life, obtain an entire knowledge of this one Volume. The most deeply he works the mine, the richer and more abundant he finds the ore; new light continually beams from this source of heavenly knowledge to direct the conduct, and illustrate the work of God and the ways of men; and he will at last leave the world confessing that the more he studied the Scriptures the fuller conviction he had of his own ignorance, and of their inestimable value.”

**Daniel Webster** (1782-1852), American statesman and political leader, said, “If we abide by the principles taught by the Bible, our country will go on prospering.”

**Horace Greeley** (1811-1872), the famous 18th-century newspaper editor and reformer, stated, “It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a Bible-reading people.”

**William Gladstone** (1809-1898), famous 19th-century British prime minister, said: “I have known 95 of the world’s great men in my time, and of these, 87 were followers of the Bible. The Bible is stamped with a Speciality of Origin, and

an immeasurable distance separates it from all its competitors.”

**Sir Winston Churchill** (1874-1965), the great British Prime Minister, statesman, historian and author, said: “We reject with scorn all these learned and labored myths that Moses was but a legendary figure. We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally.”

**Wernher von Braun** (1912-1977), regarded as the father of the American space program, wrote, “In this age of space flight, when we use the modern tools of science to advance into new regions of human activity, the Bible—this grandiose, stirring history of the gradual revelation and unfolding of the moral law—remains in every way an up-to-date book.”

Many American presidents have affirmed their confidence in the Bible. **Thomas Jefferson** (1743-1826), third U.S. president, stated: “I have always said and always will say that the studious perusal of the Sacred Volume will make better citizens, better fathers, better husbands . . . the Bible makes the best people in the world.”

**John Quincy Adams** (1767-1848), sixth U.S. president, wrote, “So great is my veneration of the Bible that the earlier my children begin to



*“That Book [the Bible] accounts for the supremacy of England.”*

—Queen Victoria (1819-1901), longest-reigning monarch in British history

read it the more confident will be my hope that they will prove useful citizens of their country.” He also stated: “My custom is to read four or five chapters of the Bible every morning immediately after rising . . . It seems to me the most suitable manner of beginning the day . . . It is an

invaluable and inexhaustible mine of knowledge and virtue.”

**Andrew Jackson** (1767-1845), seventh U.S. president, said, “The Bible is the rock on which our republic rests.”

**Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865), 16th U.S. president, stated: “I believe the Bible is the best



*“A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.”*

—Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), 26th U.S. president

book God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this book.”

**Woodrow Wilson** (1856-1924), 28th U.S. president, stated: “I have a very simple thing to ask of you. I ask every man and woman in this audience that from this day on they will realize that part of the destiny of America lies in their daily perusal of this great Book [the Bible].”

**Harry Truman** (1884-1972), 33rd U.S. president, said: “The fundamental basis of this nation’s law was given to Moses on the Mount. The fundamental basis of our Bill of Rights comes from the teaching we get from Exodus and St. Matthew, from Isaiah and St. Paul. I don’t think we emphasize that enough these days. If we don’t have the proper fundamental moral background, we will finally end up with a totalitarian government which does not believe in the right for anybody except the state.”

**Ronald Reagan** (1911-2004), 40th U.S. president, said, “Within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all the problems men face.” He also stated, “Of the many influences that have shaped the United States into a distinctive nation and people, none may be said to be more fundamental and enduring than the Bible.”

understanding God's truths in the Bible. You can put this principle to work by asking God to enlighten, teach, instruct and correct you from His Word and lead you in understanding it.

We will delve more into the importance of applying the truths we learn from Scripture at the end of this booklet.

### All Scripture is inspired

Another vital factor in how we approach the Bible involves the way we view it. We must recognize that the Bible is indeed *the Word of God*. To understand the Scriptures, we must accept the authority over us of *all* the Bible (Matthew 4:4). All the books of the Bible—in both the Old and New Testaments—are inspired by God.

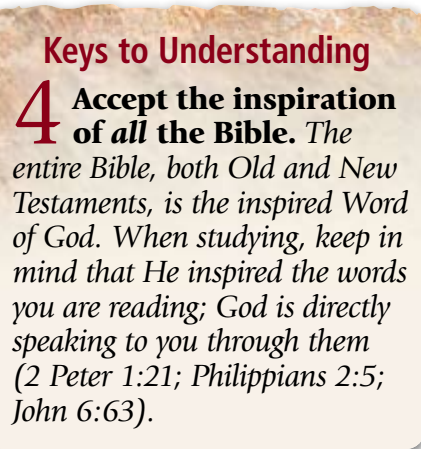
God assures us that we can absolutely trust the Holy Scriptures. “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,*” wrote Paul, “and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This is a powerful statement. It means we can confidently accept the Bible, as originally written, as the inspired and infallible Word of God.

However, the various versions and differing translations that have been handed down to us are not free of occasional human error. Therefore, a comparison among the versions is helpful, as we will consider further later. But we can rest assured that the differences are minimal among the major versions that are faithfully based on the Hebrew and Greek texts. Many ancient copies have been used to search out almost all mistakes introduced through copying the text by hand over the centuries. The Bible's basic truths are faithfully preserved.

What evidence do we have that *all* the Bible is inspired by God? That's an important question. If the Bible were just another religious book written thousands of years ago, why would we need it? After all, we have plenty of those already available, and new books on religion appear almost every day. What makes the Bible one of a kind is its *consistency*. Its underlying principles never changed throughout the 1,500 years of its creation.

Some 40 authors composed the various books of the Bible over the



centuries, and only a few of its writers personally knew any of the others. Yet an unbroken unity of thought is obvious in their writings. The religious writings that form the basis for other religions and philosophies are imperfect. They contain both easily identifiable doctrinal and historical errors and inconsistencies.

Only the Bible has held up under centuries of scrutiny from historians, critics and the archaeologist's spade. Unparalleled in the history of literature, the Bible has proved reliable in ways unmatched by other books. (To learn more, request or download our free booklet *Is the Bible True?*)

Not only is the Bible historically accurate, but its unifying principles are found from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures. Faith, for example, is one of those unifying principles. Back in Genesis 4, at the beginning of human history, we see the faith of Abel, who paid for his faith with his life. Throughout the centuries of the biblical record, this same faith is to be found in the trials of Noah, Abraham, Moses and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself, the apostles and the members of the early Church.

One New Testament chapter in particular, Hebrews 11, shows that for thousands of years a unity of thought was based on the principle of faith. Therefore, when reading the Bible we need to keep in mind the unity of its spiritual principles.

Whether we're studying a narrative, a psalm, an apostolic letter or the four Gospels, we find that all are connected to the same underlying principles inspired by God. If left to the devices of fallible men, the contradictions in its principles would long ago have been exposed—as they have been in most of man's writings. Many views and interpretations about what the Bible says are contradictory. But none of these human opinions affects the integrity of *the Scriptures themselves*.

God's commandments are another example of a unifying principle. His laws form the backbone of Scripture, the basis for His relationship with mankind. They begin in Genesis, where basic principles are revealed, and are expanded on throughout the rest of the Bible. And finally, in the last chapter of the Bible's last book, Revelation, we read, “Blessed are those who *do His commandments*, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (22:14).

God's commandments do not change from the beginning to the end of the Bible, even though they are amplified in the New Testament. The same Author, God, inspired *all* of the Scriptures.

Jesus Christ mentioned the principle that Scripture is built on the framework of the commandments of God. He explained in Matthew 22:37-40 the two greatest scriptural and spiritual principles. One covers the First through the Fourth Commandments, and the second deals with the Fifth through the Tenth.



## Does the Bible Contain Errors?

Does the Bible contain errors? Often the answer depends on the eye of the beholder. For those determined to undermine Scripture, yes, it does contain errors and no answer will satisfy them. For others, though, careful study and patience usually resolve any problems.

As noted author Josh McDowell explains regarding the Bible: “It is a mistake for the critic to assume . . . that what has not yet been explained never will be explained. When a scientist comes upon an anomaly in nature, he does not give up further scientific exploration. Rather, he uses the unexplained as a motivation to find an explanation . . .

“Likewise, the Christian scholar approaches the Bible with the same presumption that what is thus far unexplained is not therefore unexplainable. He or she does not assume that discrepancies are contradictions. And when he encounters something for which he has no explanation, he simply continues to do research, believing that one will eventually be found . . .

“Like his scientific counterpart, the Bible student has been rewarded for his faith and research. Many difficulties for which scholars once had no answer have yielded to the relentless pursuit of answers through history, archaeology, linguistics, and other disciplines. For example, critics once proposed that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Bible because there was no writing in Moses’ day. Now we know that writing existed a couple of thousand years or more before Moses.

“Likewise, critics once believed that the Bible was wrong in speaking of the Hittite people, since they were totally unknown to historians. Now historians know of their existence by way of a Hittite library found in Turkey. This gives us confidence to believe that biblical difficulties not yet explained do have an explanation, and we need not assume

that there is a mistake in the Bible” (*The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 1999, pp. 46-47).

### Contradictions in the Gospels?

As an example of resolving supposed contradictions, let’s consider how the four Gospels record the words that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, ordered to be placed above Jesus’ head at His crucifixion.

Matthew 27:37 reads, “*This is Jesus the king of the Jews.*”

Mark 15:26 says, “*The king of the Jews.*”

Luke 23:38 reads, “*This is the king of the Jews.*”

John 19:19 states, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.*”

At first glance, it might appear that none of the authors copied the words on the sign properly. But when we read each account, we find every one adds a bit more information to the rest. From John we find that Pilate composed the message. From Luke we have additional information as to why these words are different: The inscription was originally written in three languages, Greek, Latin and Hebrew (Luke 23:38).

So the variation of the wordings logically would have to do with the three languages used as well as the different point of view of each biographer, stressing slightly different aspects of Christ’s life and ministry. Adding up the wording of the different accounts, we see that the complete message recorded by the signs was “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.”

None of the Gospel accounts *contradicts* the others; they simply *complement* each other to provide increased understanding. A helpful tool for studying Christ’s life and ministry is a harmony of the Gospels, such as that by A.T. Robertson, which provides all four Gospel accounts side by side in chronological order.

Other seeming contradictions in the Bible are related to times and dates. One example of this is that Israel used both a civil and a sacred calendar. The civil year began in the autumn with the month of Tishri, while the sacred year began in the spring with the month of Nisan or Abib. When two writers seem to disagree regarding the timing of a particular event, the seeming discrepancy can be clarified by determining which of the two calendars they are using.

In another matter of timing, John 19:14 seems to disagree with Matthew 27:45. John described events that occurred *before* the crucifixion and says that they took place at about the “sixth hour.” Matthew agrees with Mark 15:33 and Luke 23:44 when he says darkness covered the land *after* the crucifixion from the sixth to the ninth hours. Is there a real discrepancy between these accounts?

No. The answer lies in the fact that the Jewish state was then under Roman control and John used the Roman reckoning of time, which began at midnight. The “sixth hour” in John’s reckoning was 6 in the morning. However, the Jewish method of timekeeping started from that time of the morning, counting it as the first hour of the day. So the sixth hour of the day according to Jewish reckoning was noon.

The crucifixion occurred between the sixth and ninth hours of the day—Jewish time. Thus, the four Gospel accounts do not contradict; instead they complement each other.

### Answers may not be readily apparent

What about other scriptural passages that contain apparent discrepancies? Some of these are the result of faulty translations; some Bible translations are simply more accurate than others in rendering particular verses. With other passages the difficulties may be more substantial.

In any case, we should not be alarmed at what appear to be errors in the Bible. There are answers and solutions to these passages that may not be readily apparent. As noted Bible scholar Gleason Archer writes:

“As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology, or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself—or else by objective archaeological information . . .

“There is a good and sufficient answer in Scripture itself to refute every charge that has ever been leveled against it. But this is only to be expected from the kind of book the Bible asserts itself to be, the inscripturation of the infallible, inerrant Word of the Living God” (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 1982, p. 12).

The Bible *is* the Word of God, and we can depend on it as the Book that illuminates the pathway to salvation. It is reliable. The apostle Paul wrote that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). Jesus said that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

This is a promise from Jesus Christ on which we can rely and in which we can place our complete confidence. So, when we read the Bible, let us be assured that we are indeed reading a book that is divinely inspired and contains the full backing of the Eternal and Almighty God, who desires to give us the salvation the book promises us.

A little research with commentaries and other Bible helps can usually resolve Bible difficulties.

Quoting the Old Testament, Jesus said: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” These two great principles, said Jesus, form the foundation of all of God’s laws.

Another example of biblical unity of thought is found in the genealogies listed throughout the Bible. Some think they are only a remnant of history and of little worth. Yet these genealogies, in Genesis 5 and 10 and 1 Chronicles 1 through 9, form the basis for the lineage of New Testament figures, including Jesus Christ in Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

These genealogical records present Christ not as a legendary figure, but as descended from Old Testament personalities whose existence can be verified. Historical and archaeological evidence has confirmed the existence of several people in these genealogical lists, giving credence to the prophecies about Jesus’ descent from Abraham (Genesis 12:7; Galatians 3:16) and King David (Matthew 1:1). Genealogies thus serve as historical guideposts for the existence of Jesus Christ.

Although many Bible writers lived centuries apart and didn’t necessarily realize they were writing words that would become part of Scripture, God saw to it that their writings fit with the rest of the Bible, carefully intertwined according to His will and purpose.

Yes, the Bible contains history, genealogies, poetry, letters, prophecies and symbols, but they were all inspired by the same infallible God, and each section is a part of a greater whole. Christ Himself said that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). God does not contradict Himself.

This is one of the main reasons, in spite of countless attempts to destroy it, that the Bible is still with us after several thousands of years. It will survive as long as mankind is on earth, and it is intended for our reading and understanding. As Paul tells us, “For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures *might have hope*” (Romans 15:4). Christ stated that His words in the Bible would be preserved: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35, NIV).

The principle of the inspiration of the Bible means that our beliefs must be brought in line with and conform to Scripture, which consistently conforms to its own principles. God does not make mistakes; He does not contradict Himself. We see in the Bible an intricate interweaving of God’s truths and the revelation of His plan from beginning to end.

The apostle Peter said of the inspiration of the Hebrew prophets: “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you . . . To them it was revealed

that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into” (1 Peter 1:10-12). All Scripture is unified, clearly manifesting divine inspiration.

Peter explains further, in 2 Peter 1:20-21, that “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” God’s Spirit is the guiding force behind the Scriptures.

As early as Peter’s time some were already twisting parts of the Old and New Testament writings to their own folly. “Therefore, beloved,” he warned, “. . . be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:14-16).

When Paul explained in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 that all Scripture is inspired and is important to righteous living, this was before the books of the New Testament had been canonized or portions of it had even been written. So the “Scripture” to which Paul referred was the Hebrew Bible, what we commonly call the Old Testament. For several decades in the early Church, this was the only “Bible” available. Later, as we saw in 2 Peter 3:14-16, the apostle Peter referred to Paul’s writings as Scripture also.

Accepting only a part of the Scriptures as a basis for faith has resulted in literally hundreds of denominations professing to be Christian, but holding contradictory beliefs. Yet if we do justice to what the Bible says, *all Scripture* should be respected and believed, from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus plainly told us to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). We should rely on Scripture, and not man’s ideas, to explain God’s truths.

It’s one thing to view the Bible as a mere collection of stories. It’s quite another to accept it as an inspired body of unified and related instructions, history and illustrations. The Bible is full of examples of people like us whose lives demonstrate their obedience or disobedience to the principles of God.

The right approach is to accept Scripture for what it is—God’s revealed Word—and to prayerfully and humbly embrace and follow its teachings. With that crucial background and attitude we are ready to embark on learning what the Bible has to tell us.

# Actively Read and Study the Bible

**H**aving considered the proper mindset for approaching the Bible, let's proceed to delving into it.

For too many people the Bible is largely a decorative or forgotten item sitting on a shelf gathering dust. Of course, you can never even begin to understand the Bible *without actually reading what it says* (or having it read to you if you are unable to for some reason).

Moreover, it's not enough to just read excerpts scattered here and there. As large as the Bible is, there's a lot of ground to cover. We must read a great deal—and carefully consider and study what we read.

In the words of the apostle Paul, “Study earnestly to present yourself approved to God, a workman that does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, Modern King James Version). “Rightly dividing” can also be literally translated as “cutting straight” (Analytical-Literal Translation). The idea is to keep right to the line—to adhere exactly to the Bible's teachings. The New American Standard Bible has “accurately handling.” Again, that requires a lot of reading and study. The word “workman” here implies considerable and careful effort.

How, then, do we go about this important task? And how are we to properly understand what we read?

## The Bible explains what it means

The Bible contains a huge amount of information—presented in many different ways. Sometimes the material is straightforward historical narrative. Sometimes it's poetry. Sometimes it's meant to be taken literally. Sometimes it uses

figurative language, employing metaphors and symbols.

One vital key we must come to understand is that *the Bible interprets itself*. We must be careful not to force our own interpretations onto it.

Regrettably, many approach the Bible with preconceived notions and attempt to inject these into Scripture—wrongly reading meaning *into* the text instead of honestly deriving the meaning *out of* it.

Related to this is the mistake many make of drawing conclusions from just one or a few verses in isolation. Remember that the Bible is a package

deal—and we must think of it in that way in discerning what any part of it has to tell us.

In letting the Bible interpret itself, we must always do two things: *consider the context* and *look at all the scriptures on a subject*. Let's see why these are important.

## Consider the context

Keeping in mind the *context* of the examples and teachings in the Bible can help us avoid misunderstandings. In fact, most misunderstandings of Scripture come from taking verses out of their context. Reading in context simply means to carefully consider the verses before and after the text being studied. “Out of context” means trying to understand the verses with little or no regard for the surrounding subject matter.

Studying the context includes analyzing the verses within the framework of the paragraph, chapter and book, and in a larger sense the entirety of the author's writings and the Bible as a whole.

For example, we read in Genesis 3:4 that “you will not surely die.” From this verse people could infer that man already possesses immortality, that the soul already has eternal life. But such an interpretation would contradict other plain scriptures (compare 1 Timothy 6:14-16; Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53). Yet the context of the paragraph explains that it was Satan the devil, in the form of a serpent, who told this lie, saying that man would not die. The correct teaching was related by God a few verses earlier: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17).

We see that it's not enough to quote an isolated scripture; we must keep in mind its setting. In this case the point is resolved by reviewing the entire passage. We can avoid much confusion by applying this important context principle.

Sometimes only by reading whole chapters can we correctly understand the subject. For example, some quote Mark 7:18-19 to argue that meats the

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**6** **Let the Bible interpret itself.** *If something seems confusing or even contradictory, let clear biblical passages shed light on those you find difficult to understand. Scriptures do not contradict each another; they complement each other. Also, to properly understand a verse in the Bible, don't force your personal point of view into it. Instead use the context and other relevant scriptures to find the correct meaning (2 Peter 1:20; John 10:35; 17:17; Isaiah 28:9-10).*

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**5** **Plan time for regular study.** *It's easy to let everyday concerns interfere, so schedule study time and try to maintain it. Over time you will look forward to this daily experience (Ephesians 5:15-17).*

Bible declares unfit for human consumption in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 may now be eaten. Christ asked: “Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from the outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?”

Yet the context of the chapter reveals the true meaning: “Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread *with unwashed hands?*’” (Mark 7:5).

The question was not whether particular foods should be eaten, but the *manner* in which His disciples were eating. The Pharisees were criticizing them for eating without going through the meticulous handwashing ritual the Pharisees carried out before eating. Christ answered: “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do” (Mark 7:8).

In Matthew 15 the same incident is mentioned, but in more detail: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies [all are violations of the Ten Commandments and thus sin]. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands *does not defile* a man” (verses 19-20).

Taking Christ’s exhortation in context, we see that all misunderstanding is cleared up. Jesus was not repealing God-given laws; He was stating that tiny amounts of dirt that might come from handling food with ritually unwashed hands will be eliminated through the body’s digestive process.

At other times it is necessary to consider the context of the book itself. A prime example is Paul’s use of the word *law* in Romans. Sometimes he used the term negatively to mean the legalistic concept of law as a means to earn salvation, which he rejected: “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law” (Romans 9:30-32).

Yet in other places Paul used *law* in a positive way: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not!” (Romans 7:12-13). Here we see in the same book the word used in an entirely different way in a different context. It is a mistake to generalize on what the word means when taken out of its proper context. We should be able to see, then, that first considering the context throughout the Scriptures will help avoid many wrong interpretations.

### Look at all the scriptures on the subject

Also vital to understanding is taking the time to look up all the related verses on a subject before coming to a conclusion. The apostle Paul set an

admirable example in this regard when he taught certain truths about Jesus by referring to many passages in the Bible of his day—the Hebrew Scriptures or what we know as the Old Testament:

“So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening” (Acts 28:23). To prove his point, Paul carefully expounded the scriptures that dealt with Christ as the Messiah.

We see from Paul’s example that to properly understand a subject, we must take *all* related scriptures into account. This is the principle of “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). The *spiritual* nature of the Bible is described in Ephesians 6:17 as “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Comparing various verses on the same subject can clarify our understanding of biblical teachings. Often we will find that different verses complement each other, with each verse telling part of the story.

For example, many people believe, based on John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”—that simply believing in Jesus is all we need to do to inherit eternal life.

But is this the whole story? Clearly not, for James 2:19 tells us that “even the demons believe—and tremble!” Certainly more than simple belief is required. We must look at other scriptures to understand more fully what God expects—and requires—of us.

Certainly salvation is God’s wonderful gift to us. But gifts can have conditions. And the Bible shows in several places that God *sets certain conditions* for receiving salvation. Some conditions *enable us* to receive that gift, and other conditions *disqualify us* from receiving it.

Since Jesus is the author of our salvation, let’s examine a few of His statements that tell us what we must do to receive the gift of eternal life in God’s Kingdom.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but *he who does the will of My Father in heaven.*” Christ made it clear that merely acknowledging Him as Lord and Master—saying “Lord, Lord”—is not sufficient. To inherit the Kingdom, we must *do something*. We must *do the will of the Father*, as He clearly stated. Our conviction that He is our Savior must be more than just a warm, comforting thought or intellectual concept. Jesus warns that simply calling on His name or recognizing Him as “Lord” is not enough.

At one point a wealthy young man asked Jesus how he could receive eternal life. “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” the man asked (Matthew 19:16). Christ’s reply, in verse 17,

might shock some who think obedience to God's law is unnecessary. Jesus responded, "If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments.*"

Jesus didn't answer that nothing is required other than believing in Him. He told the young man that he must *obey the commandments of God* to receive the gift of eternal life.

Jesus gave another condition for God's gift of eternal life in Mark 16:16: "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*" Water baptism—by full immersion—is a symbolic act representing the death of our old self and the beginning of a new life of serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23).

Baptism is also followed by the laying on of hands by God's ministry, which allows us to receive God's Holy Spirit and truly belong to Him (see Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as instructed, we fail to meet His requirements for receiving His gift of salvation.

In Matthew 10:22 Jesus listed another condition we must meet to receive God's gift of salvation: "He who endures to the end will be saved." We can lose out on salvation if we fail to endure to the end (see also Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:4-8; 10:26-31). Once we have committed ourselves to obeying God and surrendering ourselves to Him, we must stay the course to the end and not look back (Luke 9:62; 1 Corinthians 9:27).

We see from this example that we need to look at far more than one isolated verse to understand the Bible's teaching on a subject. Only by looking at all the relevant scriptures do we get a full and complete picture.

With this important consideration—carefully comparing all related passages before determining what is meant on a particular subject—we

can avoid confusion and error. This simple principle alone also resolves most situations where people assume the Bible contradicts itself. The Bible does not contradict itself; its writers complement each other. (For more on this, see "Does the Bible Contain Errors?" beginning on page 12.)

### Gaining an overview

For the broad overview necessary to understand the Bible in its particu-

lar verses, it is crucial that we read through it—topic by topic as well as book by book.

A topical approach to reading Scripture will help us to see all that God's Word has to say on a given subject. Effectively studying this way requires other study tools such as a concordance or a topical index. We will address these and other Bible helps momentarily.

Book-by-book reading is rather straightforward. A great deal of Scripture is presented simply as a story. The beginning of the first book, Genesis, gives us an account of God's creation of the heavens and the earth and all physical life, including mankind. It proceeds with the story of the first man and woman and follows their descendants down to the time of a great worldwide flood.

It then relates the beginnings of civilization in Babylon and focuses in on a great man of faith, Abraham; his son Isaac; Isaac's son Jacob or Israel; and Israel's children. The next book, Exodus, takes up the story of the deliverance of the descendants of Israel from Egyptian slavery. And on the story goes from there—following the history of the nation of Israel. The New Testament gives us the story of Jesus Christ in the four Gospel accounts and the early years of His Church in the book of Acts.

Of course, some books require more depth of study to understand—such as those giving the legal requirements of the law of Moses; those that are poetic, including collections of songs (Psalms) and of wise sayings (Proverbs); and those that prophesy events to follow (some already fulfilled and some still to be fulfilled in the future).

The New Testament gives us epistles or letters of exhortation and doctrinal instruction that Christ's apostles wrote to individuals or various congregations of the Church. These can be somewhat complex in places, especially where the passage of time has obscured the exact issues being addressed.

In any case, reading through the whole Bible will ensure that you see all that the Bible says on any and every given topic. In a topical study you may miss relevant passages. But in reading through the entire Bible you miss nothing—except what you forget, of course. And as you certainly will forget some things, it's important to read the Bible again and again—in its

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**8** **Read the whole Bible.** *Go through the Bible from cover to cover. By reading every section of the Bible, you give yourself a broad familiarity and perspective that will help you shed preconceived ideas about doctrinal subjects. Our Bible Reading Program (available at [www.ucg.org/brp](http://www.ucg.org/brp)) provides a convenient schedule for accomplishing this and other goals.*

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**7** **Study topics.** *Concentrate, at various times, on one subject, doctrine or book. Use a concordance or other study aid to put together all the scriptures relevant to a subject. This will allow you to see all that God has to say about a particular topic (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV). For help getting started, send for our free Bible Study Course.*

## Seven Scriptural Threads for More Complete Understanding

Many people are unaware of several basic threads running through Scripture that, when recognized, open our understanding. Following are seven threads vital to piecing together a more complete understanding of the Bible.

- **The true gospel:** Many people reduce the gospel to a message *about* Jesus Christ. Yet it is mainly about the coming Kingdom of God and how one can be a part of it through Him. This is a powerful message of God's plan for all humankind, first encompassing individuals who surrender to God and become part of His Church, to be followed by far more in the world tomorrow.

The true gospel proclaims vital truths. It prophetically reveals events and will continue to do so up until and after Christ returns. Be sure to request or download your free copy of our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom* to learn more.

- **The purpose of salvation is a new creation:** Salvation is the goal, the culmination of God's plan set in motion with the creation of the first man and woman. The creation was not finished with the events of Genesis 1; those were just the first physical phase of God's creation process. God's creation will continue far into the future.

Man was created a physical being. While he has a spiritual component that gives him intellect, the human spirit, there is no consciousness apart from the body (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). Man is mortal, not immortal. He has the opportunity to receive God's Spirit so he can develop spiritual character and eventually be transformed into a perfect spiritual creation. For more details, download or request your free copies of the booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *The Road to Eternal Life*.

- **The Bible's interpretation of symbols:** Many of the prophetic truths of the Bible have been expressed by God through the use of symbols. The book of Daniel, for instance, is replete with various symbols—images and animals, some real, some fantastic, some explained, some left unexplained. Some symbols were used, not to make the meaning clearer, but to hide the mes-

sage until God reveals their meaning at or near the time of the end (Daniel 12:8-9).

For centuries men have tried to interpret these symbols according to their own ideas, resulting mostly in chaos and confusion. An important key to understanding biblical prophecy is that these symbols must be plainly interpreted in the Bible itself, in the immediate context or elsewhere. Strictly human interpretations are of no value. We must seek out and rely on God's interpretation, not our own. To learn more, request the free booklets *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.

- **God's dual method:** Throughout Scripture we can see the principle of duality repeatedly revealed. The physical creation in Genesis 1 leads to the spiritual creation described in Revelation 21 and 22. The first Adam, of physical matter, of the earth, prefigured the second Adam, Jesus Christ, of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:47-49).

Duality also appears in Bible prophecy. Sometimes there may be a preliminary fulfillment, a forerunner of a later or final fulfillment, usually at the end time.

- **God's annual festivals:** God gave seven annual feasts or festivals as guideposts to remember and reveal key aspects of His plan of salvation. These are listed together in Leviticus 23. Each one pictures a step in this process for individuals and, ultimately, for all humanity.

*Passover* pictures the death of Jesus Christ for our sins and the opportunity God gives us, on repentance, to have our sins forgiven.

*The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasts seven days*, shows that repentant people are to live spiritually pure lives after having sin's penalty removed by the sacrifice of Jesus. Christians are to reject sin (symbolized by putting out physical leaven) and live a new life patterned after Christ's and characterized by sincerity and truth.

*The Feast of Pentecost* represents the receiving of God's Spirit, through which God's people become one Church, the unified Body of Christ.

Also known as the Feast of Firstfruits, it depicts the first harvest of those who will receive salvation according to God's plan.

*The Feast of Trumpets* symbolizes the triumphant return of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. At the same time Christians will be given eternal life in the first resurrection.

*The Day of Atonement* represents God's binding of Satan for 1,000 years after Christ's return and the reconciliation of mankind with God that will then be possible.

*The Feast of Tabernacles, lasting seven days*, pictures the first 1,000 years of Christ's reign on earth. With Satan's destructive, deceitful influence removed, humanity can at last learn God's ways and truth and be restored to a right relationship with God. During this time, many more will receive God's gift of salvation.

Finally, *the Eighth Day, immediately following the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles*, depicts a time after the Millennium when the dead who were not brought back to life in the first resurrection and never had a chance to receive God's Spirit will be resurrected to live again. They will be given an opportunity, over time, to know God, understand His truths, repent and receive His Spirit. It is their opportunity to choose to become part of the Kingdom of God, to receive salvation.

For greater understanding of the significance of these God-ordained observances, request or download your free copies of the booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

- **The identity of Israel:** Most people do not know that the ancient nation of Israel was divided after the death of King Solomon. The kingdom of Israel, comprising 10 of the original 12 tribes of Israel, later was taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire and disappeared from the pages of history, becoming known as "the lost 10 tribes."

The two tribes forming the kingdom of Judah were also taken into captivity but largely managed to retain their identity. Today their descendants,

the Jews, are spread throughout the world and the modern state of Israel.

But what happened to the missing 10 tribes? They still exist, although unaware of their biblical identity. Be sure to request our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for evidence of who these people are. Many prophecies will take on greater meaning and significance when we understand this vital key.

- **God's seventh-day Sabbath:** The fourth of the Ten Commandments requires that we keep holy the seventh day of the week—sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. It is sometimes called the *test* commandment, since God referred to it as such when He presented it to ancient Israel in Exodus 16 (see verse 4). Indeed, it remains a test of our commitment to obeying God. This is the commandment that those who are only "professing" Christians will almost always refuse to obey.

Obeying this command often brings tests of faith, requiring sincere reliance on God. But it also supplies great blessings to those who keep it. It is a vital key to understanding God's Word, because "a good understanding have all those who *do* His commandments" (Psalm 111:10).

The Bible calls the Sabbath an identifying sign of God and His people (Exodus 31:16-17). It has enabled many Jews, descendants of the kingdom of Judah, to retain their identity. The "lost 10 tribes," on the other hand, neglected and rejected God's Sabbath, which proved to be a major factor in the loss of their true identity. To better understand this important commandment, be sure to download or request your free copy of the booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.

Awareness of these threads running through the Bible will open the way to a better overall understanding of God's Word. Because traditional churches have lost sight of so many of these, it's no wonder they have fragmented into so many denominations, each holding a different view of what the Bible says and all the while failing to understand much of its true message.

parts and as a whole—to familiarize yourself with its content. This is a lifelong endeavor.

### Different translations and other Bible helps

Can we understand all aspects of Scripture from the Bible alone? Certainly a good grasp of the Bible is possible through applying the keys discussed earlier. However, our understanding can be enhanced by taking advantage of the work of scholars who have studied culture, language, history and archaeology as they relate to biblical events and characters.

We live 2,000 to 3,500 years removed from the time the Scriptures were originally written. The Bible's authors wrote in the languages and settings of their times. Culture and language were different from today's culture and language. Since the original languages of Scripture (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) are so different from our modern languages, Bible helps are useful to enable us to better grasp the Scriptures as they were written and understood.

Remember again Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 2:15 to be a diligent workman in handling Scripture. As a craftsman makes use of a tool kit, we can use proper tools to help us better understand the Bible.

Besides often quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, on occasion the apostles quoted other sources to drive their points home. For example, Paul used a quote from a Sicilian poet, Aratus, to convey to the Athenian philosophers a principle about God (see Acts 17:28). Likewise, the apostle Jude quoted from a prophecy of the early patriarch Enoch not found in the Bible (Jude 14-15). Besides the Scriptures themselves, these men sometimes quoted other sources to help the brethren in their understanding of the Word of God.

What are some of the biblical tools at our disposal? Here are a few.

- **Other Bible versions:** The most helpful tool for Bible study is, not surprisingly, a Bible—or, more properly, several Bible versions, among which you can compare wording.

People will often seek to find the translation that is most accurate, most literal or easiest to read. However, no single translation fits all these requirements. More than 60 English versions of the Bible are available. We can divide them into three broad types: word-for-word, meaning-to-meaning (also called thought-for-thought) and paraphrased. Usually a particular Bible version will explain, on its introductory pages, which approach was used in preparing it.

The word-for-word versions most accurately follow the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Generally speaking, the King James Version and its modern counterpart, the New King James Version, are word-for-word translations. They are readily found in most bookstores or on the Internet.

How trustworthy is the King James or the New King James Bible we

have today? Other manuscripts discovered since the King James Version was translated show it to be extremely reliable. For example, when the King James Version is compared with the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, “the King James Bible is 98.33 percent pure” (Norman Geisler and William

Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 1974, p. 263).

In the New Testament the sheer bulk of thousands of texts (4,500 Greek manuscripts) means that many minor variations among the manuscripts will be found. The King James Version, for example, is based on the majority of the authoritative Greek texts.

About 98 percent of the known Greek manuscripts agree with the basic text of the King James Bible. Even the variations that do exist rarely affect the basic meaning in the remaining 2 percent of those manuscripts. The text of Scripture has been preserved and transmitted over the centuries remarkably well.

The Old Testament books are equally trustworthy. Although a few textual errors are to be found in some of the manuscripts used

in translating the King James Bible, comparisons with other Bible versions can easily clarify most problems.

As an expert on textual criticism remarked: “If any book from ancient times has descended to us without substantial loss or alteration, it is the Bible. The Bible is the best-attested book from the ancient world! This has prompted Sir Frederic Kenyon to say: ‘The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world’” (Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 1963, p. 120).

The accuracy of a version is obviously of utmost importance. Although the King James Version contains some mistakes (see “Are There Mistakes in the King James Version of the Bible?” beginning on page 26), to establish sound doctrines the first choice of versions should be a more literal

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**9 Compare different translations.** *The Bible was written in ancient languages, and scholars sometimes differ on how certain verses should be translated today. A literal rendering is often preferred, but a thought-for-thought translation or paraphrase is sometimes better at capturing the intent of ancient figures of speech. We must also be aware that doctrinal bias can influence translation. Comparing Bible versions will inform us on disagreements in translation and help us to sort through such issues.*

edition such as the New King James Version.

What about the meaning-to-meaning versions? Because grammar, syntax and thought patterns differ between languages, cultures and time periods, word-for-word translations at times can be awkward and have difficulty expressing the original author's thought and intent. For this reason meaning-to-meaning or thought-for-thought versions can be valuable in putting the Scriptures into more understandable wording.

For example, the New King James Version of Hebrews 2:17-18, describing why Jesus Christ came to live among mankind as a flesh-and-blood human being, reads:

“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”

The New International Version, a meaning-to-meaning translation, has: “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

The latter explains the point more clearly for most readers today, although the former is a more direct translation of the original language. So, when the text is not clear, many times a modern meaning-to-meaning translation can help. The Revised English Bible, Good News Bible and New Living Translation are other popular meaning-to-meaning translations.

A meaning-to-meaning translation is also helpful in conveying the point of ancient figures of speech—idioms—that would not make sense to us in modern language. Consider the modern American idiom “kick the bucket.” This phrase may not be around centuries from now and someone translating it then might need to use the word “die” instead—a meaning-to-meaning rendering rather than a literal one. Ancient Hebrew and Greek had such expressions as well, and in such cases a meaning-to-meaning translation is very helpful.

In general, meaning-to-meaning versions use more up-to-date language and thus are easier to understand—although, again, they are not the best choice for establishing doctrine because they at times involve some interpretation of what the original writers intended to say.

Paraphrased Bibles, such as *The Living Bible* or *The Message*, also can be useful. Their goal is to make the Bible even easier to read in modern language. We should be cautious in working with these, however, because the authors exercised considerable “poetic license” in interpreting biblical terms and passages according to their own personal religious ideas.

Paraphrased versions can be consulted to better grasp the story flow but should not be used to establish doctrine. They should be considered inadequate sources for accurately determining the meaning of any text.

Which version of the Bible should you buy? The King James Version, although both accurate and popular, is increasingly difficult to understand simply because the English language has evolved considerably over the 400 years since its publication.

The meanings of some of its words have changed over time. Many

## Are There Mistakes in the King James Version of the Bible?

**A**lthough the original texts of the Bible were inspired by God and are without error, the same cannot be said for later copies of the texts or translations made from them. Translators are human, and many have allowed their own religious biases to influence their work. Usually such mistranslations are relatively minor, but in some cases they are major blunders and promote erroneous teachings and doctrines.

One such blatant error, made by translators of the King James Version, is found in Acts 12:4, where the word *Easter* is used. In the original Greek, this word is *pascha* and refers to *Passover*, not Easter. Passover is a biblical festival mentioned in Exodus 12:11, Leviticus 23:5, Matthew

26:2, 17 and elsewhere in the Scriptures. In the New Testament *pascha* is used 18 times and is translated correctly in the King James Bible as “Passover,” except in Acts 12:4, where the error was made. The New King James Version, and virtually all other translations, correct this mistake.

Another serious mistake in the King James and New King James versions is in 1 John 5:7-8. The latter part of verse 7 and first part of verse 8 did not appear in the Greek texts for the first 1,000 years after the Scriptures were completed. Around the year 500 this portion appeared in the Latin version known as the Vulgate. Apparently the insertion was an attempt to

bolster the then-controversial belief in the Trinity. The words added are as follows: “in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth.”

None of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament up to the year 1300 contain these words. “The textual evidence is all against 1 John 5:7. Of all the Greek manuscripts, there are only two which contain it. These two manuscripts are of very late dates, one from the fourteenth or fifteenth century and the other from the sixteenth century. Both clearly show this verse to be translated from the Latin” (Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 1963, pp. 57-58).

Apparently monks who copied the Greek New Testament text in the 14th or 15th century added this verse from the Vulgate. Even the Catholic Jerusalem Bible admits this verse is not authentic and has left it out. Notes in the Jerusalem Bible explain that this was a marginal note in one of the copies of the Vulgate that was added to the late Greek manuscripts already mentioned.

The verse from 1 John 5 should read, as hundreds of the oldest Greek texts and most modern translations read: “In fact there are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three are in agreement” (Revised English Bible). This refers to the witness of Jesus Christ being the Son of God (verse 5).



readers find the archaic language distracting and difficult to follow. For this reason material produced by the United Church of God, publisher of this booklet, most often uses the New King James Version. This version, while retaining much of the beauty of the original King James wording, is more readable and is still usually faithful to the original text.

Modern translations like those mentioned above are helpful for comparing and clarifying the meaning. Many people find a parallel Bible, which contains two or more versions side by side on the same pages, to be helpful. Another type of Bible useful for simply reading and helping understand the story flow is a chronological Bible, which arranges scriptural passages according to time order—though this same arrangement makes it difficult to use for topical or other types of study. (To learn more about various versions, download or request our free article reprint “Which Bible Translation Should I Use?”)

Regardless of the Bible version you choose, the most important factor is that you *actually use it*. A Bible should be considered an investment in which a little more expense up front will pay off in the long run. Consider buying a version with wide margins that will allow you to add notes from your personal study over the coming years (more on this in a moment). Although more expensive, a higher-quality leather-bound Bible will last years longer than a hardbound or paperback volume and should become a lifelong companion.

Many Bible versions are now available as part of Bible software packages or for free viewing on various Internet sites (see “Bible Study Software and Online Resources” beginning on page 30). With these, you can compare between different versions nearly instantaneously.

• **Word study and topical helps:** In importance, certainly the first basic Bible help is a means to search for specific Bible words, phrases or verses. For example, a concordance is a compilation of many or all of the verses pertaining to a specific word as it is used throughout the Bible. Each word appears in alphabetical order, starting where it is first used, followed by many or all of the verses with that word in it, until its last use in the Bible.

By looking for a particular word, you can quickly locate nearly any verse in the Bible. Because a concordance lists every use of a given word, it is extremely helpful for compiling, examining and comparing all the scriptures on a given topic, enabling you to gain an overall view of nearly any subject.

The three most popular printed concordances are *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, *Young’s Analytical Concordance* and *Cruden’s Complete Concordance*. *Cruden’s* is smaller, less expensive and easier to use. *Strong’s* and *Young’s* are massive books, but give brief explanations of the original Hebrew and Greek words and so are suitable for more detailed study.

Although most concordances are compiled from the King James Version of the Bible, others based on other versions are available.

If you have Bible software or can access online Bibles on the Internet, word searches in any available version are a snap—eliminating the time-consuming task of flipping back and forth in a massive concordance.

Other word-study tools are also available. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* often includes a lexicon in the back—a dictionary of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek words used in the Bible. You can also obtain expository dictionaries that offer more detailed analysis of biblical words. *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* is a good starting point.

**Keys to Understanding**  
**10 Use study aids properly.** *Many Bible study aids are quite helpful. They can provide valuable historical background or point you to other scriptures that add clarity to what you are reading. Aids include concordances, lexicons, dictionaries, maps and commentaries. However, always keep in mind that such resources are not Scripture and can be wrong.*

Another invaluable tool for looking up all the Bible has to say on particular subjects is a topical Bible, such as *Nave’s Topical Bible*, in which verses are listed by subject rather than individual words. Or you can simply use a topical index like *Where to Find It in the Bible: The Ultimate A to Z Resource* by Ken Anderson. Helpful topical indexes are also printed in some Bibles, such as *The New Open Bible*.

• **Bible encyclopedias or dictionaries:** Next in importance is a Bible encyclopedia or dictionary. This kind of reference explains a given subject or what a word meant in Bible times. Be prepared for an enormous variety, from simple one-volume editions to works containing four, five or a dozen or more volumes. For a start, a current one-volume dictionary or short encyclopedia written by conservative authors should provide good, basic meanings for biblical words and subjects. The *New Bible Dictionary* and *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* are such works.

Be aware, however, that many such works exhibit the author’s bias when discussing theological issues, so they are often not a reliable guide in doctrinal matters. Conservative authors tend to be more accurate because they generally believe the Bible is divinely inspired and thus trust what it says. Some other authors treat the Bible as just a combination of historical and mythological ethnic literature.

• **Bible commentaries and study Bibles:** A commentary is another potentially valuable Bible help. It’s just what the name implies: The writer

comments on the verses covered in that particular volume.

The contents vary greatly, from one-volume to multiple-volume works, some by one author and some by several. Keep in mind the backgrounds and biases of the authors. They can range from conservative scholars who believe in the inspiration of the Bible to liberal theologians who regard much of Scripture as uninspired and mere human literature. Naturally, their comments vary considerably from those of the conservative authors and frequently contradict them.

For this reason we should never establish biblical doctrine by what these authors write in these Bible helps. Only by “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13) can true doctrine be established. We should never put men’s writings on the same level as Scripture. Bible helps are just that—limited resources to *help* us understand the ancient setting of the Scriptures through geography, language, culture and history.

Many recent study Bibles now have commentary printed along with the scriptural text, providing immediate access to further information during

Bible reading. As with any commentary, we must be circumspect in evaluating this material.

Just as with Bible versions and helps, many commentaries are also available as computer software or over the Internet. As mentioned, such electronic material generally offers more thorough and faster study and searching abilities than is possible with traditional printed materials.

Computer software packages usually include a host of Bible helps. Such products generally include several versions of the Bible, dictionaries, concordances, atlases and commentaries—virtually entire Bible reference libraries—at prices only a small fraction of what you would pay for the printed versions. In fact, several good packages are now available for free. The disadvantage of the free packages is that the included Bible helps are usually older works for which the copyright has expired, so some of the content may be quite dated.

You can find software Bible helps through Internet searches, in Bible bookstores and advertised in many religious magazines. They save quite

## Bible Study Software and Online Resources

### Bible Study Software and Online Resources

If you have access to a personal computer with a CD or DVD drive or an Internet connection, you can make use of Bible helps that would normally cost thousands of dollars for only a few hundred or less. Or even better, some are available free or at minimal cost through software providers and online services.

These resources—which include up to dozens of Bible versions, dictionaries, lexicons, encyclopedias, commentaries, maps and more—allow you to perform Bible research more quickly and easily than ever.

Such resources are not only inexpensive, but efficient. A package on a CD or DVD can contain virtually an entire library of Bible study helps that would equal tens of thousands of pages, weigh hundreds of pounds and cost thousands of dollars in printed form. Yet it can instantly search dozens of Bible versions and helps for the particular word or topic you seek.

Most software providers offer a range of products costing anywhere from less than \$20 to

more than \$1,000, priced generally according to the number of Bible versions and helps included. Among the more popular software packages are BibleWorks ([www.bibleworks.com](http://www.bibleworks.com)), Bible Explorer ([www.bible-explorer.com](http://www.bible-explorer.com)), Logos Bible Software ([www.logos.com](http://www.logos.com)) and PC Study Bible ([www.biblesoft.com](http://www.biblesoft.com)). Some of these also offer Mac versions or will run on more recent Mac computers. An excellent all-around value is The Bible Library by Talicor, currently available for less than \$30 from several sellers. You can even find Bible software for handheld palmtop computers.

A highly regarded free Bible program for Windows is e-Sword ([www.e-sword.net](http://www.e-sword.net)), which also provides dozens of free downloadable public domain Bible versions and helps, plus other more recent Bible helps for prices comparable to printed versions. Windows and Mac users can also download the free Online Bible software ([www.onlinebible.net](http://www.onlinebible.net)), which likewise offers dozens of free downloadable public domain Bible versions and helps. The Online Bible software is also available on CD with a helpful library of dozens of Bible versions, commentaries, dictionaries,

lexicons, maps and more for \$89.95 (Mac) and \$44.95 (Windows, with fewer resources).

A number of Web sites offer free access or



links to many of the same kinds of resources. Since the number of features and resources they provide is so large, we encourage interested readers to explore sites like the following at their own pace to see what each has to offer.

[www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)  
[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)  
[www.biblecrosswalk.com](http://www.biblecrosswalk.com)  
[www.biblesway.com](http://www.biblesway.com)  
[www.biblos.com](http://www.biblos.com)  
[www.biblestudytools.net](http://www.biblestudytools.net)

Designpics

[www.studylight.org](http://www.studylight.org)  
[www.searchgodsworld.org](http://www.searchgodsworld.org)  
[www.crosswire.org/study/index.jsp](http://www.crosswire.org/study/index.jsp)  
[www.livingweb.com/library/220\\_71.htm](http://www.livingweb.com/library/220_71.htm)

This does not mean we endorse all materials found on these sites; we mention such sites only because of their large numbers of free Bible versions and study tools.

The United Church of God, publisher of this booklet, offers an abundance of free Bible study materials at the following sites:

[www.ucg.org/brp](http://www.ucg.org/brp) (online Bible reading program and detailed commentary).  
[www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets) (dozens of free booklets on Bible teachings and Christian living).  
[www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org) (free subscription to and previously published articles from *The Good News* magazine).  
[www.wnponline.org](http://www.wnponline.org) (materials covering news and current events in light of Bible prophecy)  
[www.ucg.org/bible-faq](http://www.ucg.org/bible-faq) (answers to frequently asked Bible questions).  
[www.beyondtoday.tv](http://www.beyondtoday.tv) (TV programs covering many topics from a biblical perspective).  
[www.verticalthought.org](http://www.verticalthought.org) (free subscription

a bit of money and space if you have the necessary computer hardware available to you. (For more on this, see “Bible Study Software and Online Resources” beginning on page 30).

### Seeking guidance

All the biblical keys and helps in the world are no substitute for the guidance of qualified teachers in our quest for Bible truths. A faithful servant of God can help us tremendously in properly understanding the Scriptures.

Notice what happened in the book of Acts when God sent Christ’s disciple Philip to meet an official from the royal court of Ethiopia:

“So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

“And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’” (Acts 8:30-31).

Philip then explained the passage the Ethiopian was reading as a prophecy of Jesus—after which the Ethiopian was baptized (verses 32-39).

Clearly, then, seeking help from God’s servants in trying to understand His Word is a biblical model.

As Paul asks: “And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’” (Romans 10:14-15).

Christ said He would build His Church, “and the gates of Hades [the grave, or death] shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). He instructed His followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . *teaching them* to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Note here that the Church has the responsibility to *teach* God’s truth from Scripture. But that also means that all of us individually have a responsibility to *hear and heed* what the Church teaches.

And just what is the Church? The Bible describes it not as a building or physical organization, but as *people led by God’s Spirit*. Fellowship with these people can help us learn these spiritual truths spoken of by Jesus Christ.

God tells us to “test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We have a part to do, but He has provided His Church, which is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). He has provided faithful teachers in His Church to teach God’s Word without distorting it.

Paul instructed Titus: “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you . . . Since an overseer [elder] is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless . . . He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:5-9, NIV).

Christ forewarned that deceivers would use His name and claim to represent Him: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits . . . Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*’” (Matthew 7:15-16, 22-23).

### Keys to Understanding

**11** **Seek guidance from God’s Church.** *It is always best to seek help from qualified people in any field of study. God has commissioned His servants to guide people into a fuller understanding of His Word. If you have questions, feel free to contact us. We offer free publications and resources on a wide variety of biblical subjects (Proverbs 11:14; Nehemiah 8:8; Acts 8:30-31; 18:26; Romans 10:14-15).*

A minister must faithfully teach and obey God’s laws. As Scripture states: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, *it is because there is no light in them*” (Isaiah 8:20).

We need to consider how the Bible describes God’s Church and His ministers so we can discern who they are.

One major characteristic of the Church is that it is obedient to God’s laws (not perfectly yet, but striving to obey with Christ’s help). The people of God are pictured in Revelation 14:12 as “those who *keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.*”

Furthermore, God’s Church, as described in Scripture, is not a large and popular organization or denomination. Christ said of those who would make up His Church, “Do not fear, *little flock*, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). They are also described as following a narrow and difficult way of life that few are willing to follow in this present evil age (Matthew 7:13-14).

The apostle James warned his readers throughout the ages not to succumb to the world’s values when its values are not in harmony with God’s commandments: “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

As a consequence of not following the ways of this world—which is in reality *Satan’s world* (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19)—the Church will ultimately be persecuted and forced to flee before the return of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:13-17). (You can learn much more in our free booklet *The Church Jesus Built.*)

Again, such descriptions should help us in identifying members of God's Church. May God help you in your quest to understand the Scriptures and, through the indicators He has given, find His faithful and obedient followers.

To learn more about the United Church of God, publisher of this booklet, request your free copy of *This Is the United Church of God*. To help you in your studies of God's Word, we offer *The Good News* magazine and many booklets covering virtually all the foundational doctrines of the Bible—all free of charge.

Moreover, we also offer our free *Bible Study Course* and online Bible Reading Program, which is designed to help you read the Bible over a few years with detailed scriptural commentary and explanation. Our Web site also offers many printed, audio and video sermons and commentaries covering hundreds of biblical subjects, teachings and personalities. We also have ministers around the world available for counseling or just to answer any questions you may have. Feel free to contact us. We are glad to be of help.

### Become a student of the Word

The followers of Jesus were known as His disciples—essentially His *students*—a common way of designating the followers of a rabbinic teacher of that day. As already noted, the Church was given the commission of proclaiming Christ's gospel to all nations and making more disciples of those who would respond (Matthew 28:19-20).

Thus, we today are to be disciples, *students* of God the Father and Jesus Christ. Our principal textbook in our lifelong course of study is God's revelation to us, the Holy Bible.

Just as in any class of learning, it will be helpful at times to take notes to keep track of information—perhaps even to jot down notes and highlight words right in our textbook.

The Bible looks formidable, with its hundreds of pages of small print. However, the Bible

is a book *intended to be used*. To familiarize yourself with key verses, it can be helpful to mark your Bible to help you more easily find particular passages. The methods used by students of the Bible range from one color

**Keys to Understanding**  
**12** **Take notes.** *Jot down notes and explanatory comments in your Bible, a notebook or computer. This will help you remember key ideas or related scriptures. Some people use a marking system, with colors or symbols, to keep track of key verses by categories (doctrine, correction, prophecy, etc.). This can help you save time when looking for a particular section of Scripture.*

to elaborate color keys, arrows, notes and brackets and the underlining of words, phrases and sentences.

Anyone who goes through the process of marking his Bible will appreciate the need for simplicity. After a while a Bible can end up looking like a messy coloring book. A few guidelines will help you avoid overmarking your Bible.

Use colors to highlight only important words or phrases. Be sure to select a pen or marker that will not run, smear or bleed through the page. When underlining phrases, use a straight edge, such as a ruler, bookmark or index card. With a proper mark, an important word or phrase should instantly let you know what the subject matter is.

Marking your Bible will help you get a feel of where you are in a particular page. It will save much time trying to locate key scriptures.

Many computerized Bible study programs will allow you to type your own notes (or import them from other electronic text files) and attach them to specific verses, letting you create your own personal commentaries and studies (see "Bible Study Software and Online Resources" beginning on page 30). This method allows a virtually unlimited amount of space for your personal notes and comments while keeping them neat and orderly. Such electronic notes can later be edited, expanded or deleted much more easily than handwritten notes in a printed Bible.

Once you have studied into a particular subject, do what a good student in any class would do—*review* what you've covered. Look back over any notes you've taken. Take time to *meditate on the subject*—to think it over—so it can settle into your brain. Come back to it a little later for further meditation and review to better fix it in your long-term memory.

Strive to put energy into actually reading and studying God's Word. As a general life principle the Bible tells us, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Wouldn't that especially apply to delving into the Bible itself? Of course!

So with the right, humble approach, strive to become a dedicated student of the Word of God. Your understanding will grow by leaps and bounds. It is then a matter of *applying* what you learn—as we will look at next.

### Keys to Understanding

**13** **Review and meditate.** *Take time to ponder what you have been learning. If something seems hard to understand, take some time to consider its meaning, using what you have already learned as the starting point. Reflect on what the Bible is saying and on how you can apply the verses in everyday life (Psalm 1:1-3; 119:97-99; 139:17-18).*

## Live What You Learn

**J**ust because a person begins with a humble attitude and proceeds to reading and studying the Scriptures intently doesn't mean he will continue this approach and gain the understanding he seeks.

The Bible shows that some who come to an understanding of certain basic revealed spiritual truths will *lose* that comprehension because they do not *act* on them. By rejecting knowledge revealed by God, they choose to exalt their own point of view over that of their Creator. They no longer allow the mirror of God's Word to show them what they need to change (James 1:22-25).

On the other hand, those who faithfully persist in the right approach and remain dedicated to learning from Scripture will continue to grow spiritually and will be richly blessed in the end.

### Understanding and obedience reinforce each other

As we saw up front, we must approach God with a prayerful, humble attitude—one desiring to learn and heed His instructions. This right attitude leads to obedience of His laws, which form much of the foundation of the Bible.

Psalm 119:34 expresses this proper motivation: "Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law; indeed I shall observe it with my whole heart."

We see, then, that applying what we learn from God's Word is necessary, along with a humble approach. In fact, we must begin to *live what we learn* for God to grant us continued understanding.

If we refuse to accept the understanding God reveals to us, He ceases to give us more of it. God explains this principle: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. *Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you . . .*" (Hosea 4:6).

For us to understand the Bible, we must first learn about and respect God's law. We see a summary of this principle in Psalm 111:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who *do* His commandments." So if we really *want* to come to better understand the Bible, we need to *heed and follow what we already understand*—and change our ways accordingly as we learn more.

Paul emphasizes this point in Romans 2:13: "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the *doers* of the law will be justified." If a person studies the Bible just to hear what it says, but not to *do* what it commands, he is not pleasing God and cannot expect His help. After all, why should God reveal greater understanding to a person who has demonstrated that he won't follow what God has already shown him?

Sadly, many think Jesus Christ came to do away with the law, but He denied this in the strongest terms. "Do *not* think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets," He warned. "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, *till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Jesus did not mean He would obey the law so we wouldn't have to, as

some think. Rather, His teaching and personal example would fill up the meaning of God's laws—showing their full spiritual intent—beyond the mere letter. In the same message, Christ showed that God's laws are binding on even our *thoughts*—not just our actions. His "fulfilling" of the law—filling it up to its fullest intent—was to show us what the law truly requires of us.

To those who followed Him, but did not obey God's laws, He said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, *but he who does the will of My Father in heaven*" (Matthew 7:21). Christ expected His followers to deeply respect God's commandments, just as *He* always respected and obeyed them. His view was clear: "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10). Christ's teachings *uphold* God's commandments. They do not do away with them.



*If we really want to come to better understand the Bible, we need to heed and follow what we already understand.*

The apostle Peter said this of people who desire to receive the Holy Spirit, a requirement for more fully understanding the Scriptures: "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given *to those who obey Him*" (Acts 5:32).

Therefore, to understand revealed spiritual truths requires the vital key of *faithful obedience* to God's perfect laws and instruction as shown in Holy Scripture.

Though obedience is necessary for continued spiritual understanding, this does not mean that obedience *entitles* us to salvation. God alone, through His grace and mercy, forgives sin, grants us help to overcome and offers salvation as a gift. However, God does expect us to do our part while He fulfills the rest. James emphasized this principle: "Was not Abraham

our father justified by works when he [as an act of obedience] offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith *was made perfect*?" (James 2:21-22).

The many benefits of obedience will quickly manifest themselves to the doer. "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good," wrote King David (Psalm 34:8). Jesus Christ said, "Whoever chooses to do the will of God will know whether my teaching comes from him or is merely my own" (John 7:17, Revised English Bible). Following through with humble, willing obedience is the litmus test!

#### Holding on to what we learn

Finally, we must hold fast to what God reveals to us. Proverbs 23:23 tells us, "Buy the truth, and do not sell it [away]." The New Century Version renders this as "Learn the truth and never reject it." The idea here is to expend our resources and efforts in learning

truth—and once we've learned it to not let anything entice or compel us to part with it.

Jesus illustrated, in His explanation of the parable of the sower, why some will understand while others will not: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'

"Now the parable is this: The *seed* is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.

"Now the ones that fell among *thorns* are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring *no fruit* to maturity. But the ones that fell on the *good ground* are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:10-15).

In Christ's words, these are some of the reasons people fail to grow in spiritual understanding. Most do not persevere in God's Word because of

negligence, lack of faith or a self-centered rather than godly outlook.

We must develop an enduring love for the truth of God as revealed in Scripture—a love that will drive us to always study and follow it.

Warning of an apostasy—a defection from truth—to come in the future, in which many would follow a false religious figure, the apostle Paul spoke of "unrighteous deception among those who perish, *because they did not receive the love of the truth* . . . And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).

He then exhorted the Church, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (verse 15).

This is exactly what we must do—faithfully stick to the teachings of God's Word. That means loving the truth enough to deeply study and internalize it—and, of course, to follow it. With God's help, we can persevere and make it a deeply ingrained part of our lives.

What about you? Are you prepared to humble yourself before God and seek His will as revealed in the Bible? Are you willing to commit to lifelong learning from its pages? And will you embrace what you learn and continue to ask God's help in holding on to what is right and true?

Those of us in the United Church of God are here to help you in any way we can. It is our heartfelt desire that you come to really know "the Holy Scriptures, *which are able to make you wise for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

Like Paul said in Colossians 1:9-10, we "do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, *being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*"

Use these keys to biblical understanding to be fruitful and increase in the priceless knowledge of God!

### Keys to Understanding

## 14 Obey God's Word and prove it right.

*Put God's Word to the test by practicing the things you are learning. Acknowledge how His ways bring positive change in your life. The best way to determine that God's commands and teachings bring true peace and blessings is by living them (Psalm 111:10; 1 John 3:22; John 10:10; 8:31-32; Malachi 3:10).*

### Keys to Understanding

**15 Hold fast.** *Once you have proven something to be true, don't allow yourself to be lightly convinced out of it. While new evidence may overturn your previous conclusion, this must be the product of serious study in God's Word. And always beware, because false teachers can lead you astray. Ask God to help you remain true to His teachings (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Timothy 3:13-15; Colossians 1:22-23; Psalm 119:10-16).*

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