



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #1

Introduction

Anyone who wants to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to know how to use the Bible. Jesus and the prophets taught that the Bible is the Word of God. It is the final authority for everything we believe and teach about Jesus Christ. Jesus' apostle Peter speaks of the Bible **"as a light that shines in a dark place"** (2 Peter 1:19). Yet Peter also wrote in the same letter: **"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 3:15-16).

From this we learn that the Bible clearly shows us the way to salvation in Jesus Christ. But at the same time the words of the Bible can be twisted to mean something different from what they say. Some sections of the Bible are harder to understand than others. It is these parts of the Bible that are most easily twisted by persons who are untaught and unstable. The devil himself likes to misuse the words of the Bible for his own evil purposes. He even tried to use the Bible to get Jesus to sin, as we learn from Matthew 4:5-6. But Jesus defeated the devil's plan by quoting another Bible passage that proved that the devil was misusing the Bible.

In the same way pastors and preachers today need to know how to correct wrong interpretations of the Bible by a correct use and understanding of the Bible. For this reason, those who are studying to be pastors should know to understand and interpret the Bible correctly. The Bible interprets itself. This means that clear passages explain and help us understand the more difficult passages.

Questions

1. What did the apostle Peter say about the Bible in the first chapter of his second letter? Read the whole chapter.
2. What did Peter say about some of the writings of the apostle Paul?
3. How did the devil use the Bible in his temptation of Jesus? (Mathew 4:1-10) How did Jesus respond?
4. Why is it important for Christians preachers to know how to correctly interpret the Bible?



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Lesson #2

Why the Bible Is Sometimes Hard to Understand

The true author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit. He gave the prophets and apostles the words that they wrote. But the Bible says: **“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 2:14). Therefore no one who is still an unbeliever can really understand the Bible. Even true Christians still have their sinful flesh, which always fights against the new man in the Christian. We learn this from Galatians 5:17: **“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.”**

Many teachers of the Bible introduce their own ideas that come from the flesh into their explanations of the Bible. This misleads those who hear these explanations. If a person has been taught to understand a Bible passage in a wrong, it is sometimes difficult to correct wrong understanding. For this reason, the devil tries to get Bible teachers to inject their own ideas into their teaching, so that he can mislead both the teacher and his students into error.

The Holy Spirit gave the prophets and apostles the words they wrote in the languages of Hebrew and Greek. It is good for teachers of the Bible learn these ancient languages well, so that they can compare the translations they use with the original text. Translators need to know the original languages as well as the language into which they are translating the Bible. This is a rare skill, and some translators are not as gifted as others. They can make mistakes. Some Bible passages are hard to understand because a translator did not correctly understand the original text or because the translation is not a good translation. If you are unable to read Greek and Hebrew, you should read the passage in different translations (and languages you may know). This can help make sure you are not misunderstanding the text by focusing on just one translation.

The Bible is written in many different styles. Some of it is factual history. Some of it is poetry. The Bible uses various figures of speech, such as comparisons, questions, personifications. When we do not correctly understand the style of a section, we can misunderstand what the Bible says. For example, Genesis 1-11 is a clearly historical section. A very serious misunderstanding occurs when someone understands these chapters to be a myth or to be poetry. Likewise, we misunderstand the Bible when we understand symbolic language in a literal way. This is especially true with much of the book of Revelation.

The writings of the Old Testament prophets are sometimes hard to understand because occasionally there is an abrupt change in subject matter or an abrupt change in the speaker.

Another thing that can make the Bible difficult to understand is that neither Greek nor Hebrew have quotation marks. It is sometimes difficult to know when a quotation comes to an end. An example of this is John 3:10-21. Did Jesus Himself speak all the words recorded in John 3:10-21, or did He only speak the first few verses and the rest are John’s comment on what Jesus said? In this particular case, it makes little difference whether Jesus spoke the words Himself, or some of the later verses are John’s commentary. Whether Jesus said the words or John wrote them, they are all still the Word of God.

Another reason the Bible can be difficult to understand is that people in the Bible lived in a culture different from our own. We are separated from them by hundreds of years. Things that they

understood clearly because they knew their own culture and time are not so easily understood by us. Their way of living, their customs, their daily lives may be quite different from the way we live and from our customs today.

The two main teachings of the Bible are Law and Gospel. The Law includes all those words of God in which He tells us what we must do; the Gospel includes those words of God in which He tells us what He has done for us. If we confuse the two, we will misunderstand what God is saying to us.

Questions

1. Why are unbelievers unable to understand the Bible?
2. What are the two forces that fight against each other in the believers?
3. How does the devil make use of false teachers?
4. Why is knowledge of Hebrew and Greek so important for the Bible teacher?
5. How can one determine whether a translation of the Bible is in error?
6. List some of the various styles in which the Bible is written.
7. What makes the writings of the prophets difficult to understand?
8. Give an example of a Law statement in the Bible.
9. Give an example of a Gospel statement in the Bible.



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics) Lesson #3

How to Overcome Our Difficulties in Understanding the Bible

The most important point to remember is that God Himself is our Teacher. Only He can give us the right understanding of the Bible. Since God speaks to us in the Bible, we understand the Bible better the more we read it and study it and think about it. Just as babies must begin by drinking milk, so new Christians need to begin with the simplest and plainest teachings of the Bible before going on to the meatier portions that are harder to understand. Our Lord has supplied His Church with pastors and teachers to help us grow in our understanding of Scripture. For example, God used Philip to help a traveler from Ethiopia understand a passage from the book of Isaiah (Acts 8: 26-39).

Every skill is improved by continued practice. No one becomes a skilled physician without long training under able instructors. So also, a better understanding of the Bible comes through prolonged and patient study of the very words of God in the Bible. Accurate translations of the Bible are also the Word of God, and it is essential that we first study the Bible in our own native language. Those to whom God gives the special gift of languages should learn the original Bible languages of Hebrew and Greek. **“Blessed is the man”** whose **“delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night”** (Psalm 1:1-2).

Martin Luther once said that the only way to become a Bible teacher is through prayer, meditation, and temptation or struggle. The basis for Luther’s statement is the longest psalm, Psalm 119. In this psalm these three elements appear again and again. For example, we have *prayer* in Psalm 119:26-27: **“Teach me Your statutes. Make me understand the way of Your precepts.”** *Meditation* is mentioned in Psalm 119:15: **“I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways.”** *Temptation and struggle* arrive in various ways and drives us to God’s Word: **“Trouble and anguish have overtaken me, yet Your commandments are my delights”** (Psalm 119:143).

The more we read and study the Bible, the better will we be able to let the Bible interpret the Bible. When we come to a difficult passage, we will not be led to misinterpret that passage if we already know a clear Bible passage that helps us to understand the difficult one. For example, we will not think there are two physical resurrections of the dead in Revelation 20 when we remember that Jesus clearly taught that there is only one in John 5:28-29: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”**

Questions

1. In what way is God Himself our Bible teacher?
2. What gifts has God given to His Church to help us understand the Bible?
3. How soon should we expect to become good Bible teachers?
4. Read Psalm 119 carefully and find as many references as you can to prayer, meditation, and temptation/struggle.
5. What do we mean when we say that the Bible interprets the Bible?



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Lesson #4

Matthias Flacius (1520-1575) was a student of Martin Luther. We will first look at twelve rules given by Matthias Flacius in his book *The Key to Sacred Scripture*. These rules summarize some of the main points to remember as we try to learn how to understand and interpret the Bible.

Some Rules the Bible Itself Teaches to Help Us Understand the Bible

Rule One: We must ask God to give us understanding:

- **“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law”** (Psalm 119:18).
- **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God”** (James 1:5).

Rule Two: Jesus Christ opened up the Scriptures for His disciples. The better we know Christ and the more we trust in Him, the better we will be able to understand His teachings.

- **“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”** (Luke 24:27).
- **“And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures”** (Luke 24:45).

Rule Three: We must at all times remember that the true author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit, and that in this way the Bible differs from every other book in the world, because it is in all its parts the Word of God.

- **“Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”** (2 Peter 1:21).
- Jesus said to His apostles: **“When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth”** (John 16:13).

Rule Four: Christ Himself is God’s last and final word to man. We should not seek any new revelation that goes beyond Him or supersedes Him, such as the supposed revelations given to Muhammad (the *Quran*) and to Joseph Smith (*The Book of Mormon*), or additional teachings revealed to the pope (for example: the assumption and the immaculate conception of Mary).

- **“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son”** (Hebrews 1: 1-2).
- **“In whom (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (Colossians 2:3).

Rule Five: It is important that those who study the Bible and teach others are themselves walking in the ways of the Lord. Those who are disobedient to what the Lord says will be led by the devil to interpret the Bible in a way that excuses or minimizes their sin. For example, those who are committing adultery will be tempted to misinterpret what the Bible says about adultery in an attempt to make their sin less sinful.

- **“For the ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them”** (Hosea 14:9).

Rule Six: It is important to remember that every word and every part of every word in the Bible is the Word of God.

- When He argued with some Jewish leaders, Jesus pointed to just one word from Psalm 82 to prove His point and then said: **“The Scripture cannot be broken”** (John 10:35).
- In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: **“One jot or one tittle¹ will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 5:18-19).

Questions

1. What book are we going to use to help us learn how to understand the Bible?
2. What is the very first thing we should do as we begin to read the Bible?
3. How did Jesus open the understanding of His disciples after His resurrection?
4. How can we know that the Holy Spirit is the Author of Old and New Testaments?
5. Why must we reject the *Quran*, *The Book of Mormon*, and Mary’s sinlessness?
6. Why is it important that we not only study the Bible but follow the Bible?
7. Why is every single word in the Bible important?

¹ Jots and tittles are little parts of the letters in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament.



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Lesson #5

Some Rules the Bible Itself Teaches to Help Us Understand the Bible

Rule Seven: We must not be led astray by persons who claim that the Holy Spirit speaks to them directly and tells them what they should do and what they should teach. God's way of teaching us and working in our hearts is through His Word.

- **"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God"** (Romans 10:17).
- **"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Rule Eight: It is important to remember that, because of our sinful flesh, we may easily be led away from the ways of the Lord, both in our faith and in our actions. If we try to avoid an error on the left side of the road, we can easily go too far to the opposite side. For example, in an attempt to avoid sexual sin, which we ought to avoid, some have taught that sex within marriage is sinful. This is going too far on the other side.

- God's chosen prophet Moses told the Israelites: **"You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left"** (Deuteronomy 5:32).
- Moses' chosen successor Joshua repeated these same instructions: **"Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left"** (Joshua 1:7).

Rule Nine: Most Jews were unable to understand their own Bible because they did not find Christ in it. Those who cannot find Christ as their Savior in the Bible do not understand the Bible.

- Jesus said to them: **"You do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life"** (John 5:38-40).
- The apostle Paul said about the Jews of his time: **"Even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away"** (2 Corinthians 3:15-16).

Rule Ten: It is particularly in times of distress and difficulty that the words of the Bible become more meaningful to us and we meditate on them more intensely. This is what Martin Luther meant by *temptation or struggle*.

- **"It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes"** (Psalm 119:71).

Rule Eleven: God Himself tells us the main purpose of the Bible and how we should use it. It is not intended as a textbook on science or mathematics. The apostle Paul wrote to his younger assistant Timothy:

- **"From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (literally, breathed out by God), 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 3:15-17).

Rule Twelve: A good understanding of the Bible does not come quickly or easily. It requires diligence and persistence.

- **“His delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night”** (Psalm 1:2). The congregation at Berea, which Paul visited on his second mission journey, has given us a good example.
- **“They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”** (Acts 17:11).

Questions

1. What means does the Holy Spirit invariably use in doing His work?
2. Give some examples of how a teacher may go too far on one side in order to avoid a danger on the other side.
3. Name some groups that do not understand the Bible because they do not find Christ in it.
4. In what way does God use affliction to give us a better understanding of His Word?
5. What is God’s purpose in giving us the Bible?
6. How much time are you able and willing to give to the study of the Bible?



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #6

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

We turn now from the rules of Matthias Flacius for understanding the Bible to the six principles of Bible interpretation laid down by David Kuske, a retired Lutheran seminary professor. These principles come from his 1995 book, *Biblical Interpretation – The Only Right Way*.

Principle One: The Only Books That Are God's Word Are the Canonical Books of the Bible

The Bibles that we use in our work are Bibles that contain 66 books: 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books. These are the canonical books of the Bible. We believe and teach that these books are in their entirety the Word of God. They were breathed out by the Holy Spirit during the course of many centuries. They begin with the writings of Moses and end with the writings of Jesus' apostle John.

The Old Testament used by the Jewish people at the time of Christ contained these 39 books. It had three divisions: the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. Jesus put His stamp of approval on these books in Luke 24:44-45: **"Then He said to them, '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."**

Jesus included the whole Hebrew Bible from the first book to the last when He told the Jewish leaders **"that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple"** (Luke 11:50-51). Abel is mentioned in the first book, Genesis, and Zechariah is mentioned in the last book, Second Chronicles.

The Greek New Testament was assembled after Jesus completed His work on earth. But while He was still with His apostles, Jesus told them:

- **The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you** (John 14:26).
- **When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me** (John 15:26).
- **When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you"** (John 16:13-14).

These promises of Jesus were fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus' apostles and gave them the words they used in their teaching. Over and over again the apostles and their assistants who wrote the New Testament books claimed that the words they were writing came to them from God. For example, the apostle Paul wrote:

- **Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches** (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

In the same way, Peter put the writings of the apostles on the same level as the Old Testament prophets when he wrote:

- **Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle...that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior** (2 Peter 3:1-2).
- **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 3:15-16).

So also, the apostle Paul said that the believers in Christ are **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone”** (Ephesians 2:20).

As the apostles and their assistants wrote the words given to them by the Holy Spirit, these writings were gradually put together into one book, which we call the New Testament.

Other writings were being circulated also, but the early Christians tested these writings in order to determine if these writings were really written by the apostles or if they were written by others. Jesus Himself commended the congregation in Ephesus for doing this testing:

- **You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars** (Revelation 2:2).

As a result of this testing, the books of the New Testament were assembled under the direction of the apostles. Most of the books of the New Testament were accepted by all. The books that were accepted by everyone are: Matthew Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, First Peter, and 1 John.

A few of the books were not accepted by everyone. A few of the Christians at that time had some reservations about including these books in the New Testament. These books include: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Today almost all Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit is the true Author of Scripture are convinced that the Holy Spirit is also the Author of these books as well.

The Roman Catholic Church has included other books in its Old Testament. These are the so-called apocryphal books. These books were not written in the Hebrew language and they were not quoted by Jesus or the apostles as God’s word. Some of these books even teach things that disagree with the genuine Scriptures. These books may be helpful for understanding the history between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but there is no reason for believe that these writings are the work of the Holy Spirit.

It has become popular in our times for false teachers to claim that some of the writings that were condemned by the early Christians should be considered equal with the New Testament books. Two examples of these false writings are the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas. These books are clearly unscriptural and false because of their content. None of them are authentic apostolic writings breathed out by the Holy Spirit.

Questions

1. Which are the canonical books of the Old and the New Testaments?
2. Which are the three divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament?
3. What did Jesus say about these three divisions?
4. What did Jesus promise to His apostles while He was still on earth?
5. How was this promise fulfilled?
6. How can we be sure that the New Testament is just as much God's word as the Old Testament?
7. What did Peter say about the writings of Paul?
8. What is the difference between books like Matthew, Mark, 1 Peter and books like 2 Peter, Hebrews, James, and Revelation?
9. Why do we say that the apocryphal books are not part of the Bible?



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics) Lesson #7

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Two: The Only Worldview of Scripture Is the Supernatural

A person cannot understand the Bible correctly if he does not believe there is a spirit world beyond what we can see with our eyes and hear with our ears. The Bible says that God Himself is spirit, and that there are spiritual beings, both good and evil. These spirit beings are generally called angels (both good and evil), and the evil angels are also called demons or devils. God is the Creator and Preserver of all created things. He can at any time do things that are beyond human understanding and beyond all scientific explanation.

The Bible is full of supernatural miracles that should not be explained away but be accepted as events and actions that really took place in time and space. Since God is omniscient (all-knowing), God knows the future perfectly and so He can therefore prophesy any future event at any time He chooses to do so. He also can control events in the world in such a way as to make the events that have been prophesied happen exactly as He foretold in His Word.

- **“I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure’”** (Isaiah 46:9-90).

Today, however, there are many so-called Bible “scholars” who try to interpret the Bible without sharing this view of the supernatural. Therefore, they try to explain miracles and prophecies in ways that deny the supernatural. This, of course, leads to a rejection of many Bible teachings and events, as well as a rejection of the verbal (word-for-word) inspiration of the Bible.

The Bible teaches that God is in control of everything in His creation and that He is working all things together for good to those who believe in Him and love Him, that is, for the good the Holy Christian Church. We read in:

- **“And He (God) put all things under His (Christ’s) feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body.”** Ephesians 1:22-23
- **“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”** Romans 8:28

Many of the Psalms talk about God’s rule over all nations, for example Psalms 2, 33, and 46. When the apostle Paul addressed the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13), he showed them God’s control of their history and God’s fulfillment of His ancient prophecies. God has directed history in the past, and He still controls all things in the present in accordance with His purposes.

God has chosen to work through miracles at certain times in history more than at other times. God did many miracles through Moses and Joshua when He led the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt to the promised land and gave the Israelites victory over the heathen Canaanites in Palestine. God did mighty miracles in the days of His prophets Elijah and Elisha in order to show that He is the only true God. And the ministry of Jesus and His apostles is filled with miracles to show the world that Jesus is true God and that His apostles were sent by Him to preach the Gospel.

On Pentecost Peter addressed a large crowd in Jerusalem and told them:

- **“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know”** (Acts 2:22).

Even Jesus’ enemies had to admit that His apostles were doing miracles in His name. After Peter and John had healed a crippled man, the Jewish leaders met together and said: **“What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it”** (Acts 4:16).

If miracles are impossible and did not happen, we would not be able to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that He was born without sin, or that He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. And if He did not do those things, then we have no reason to believe that He will come again as the Judge of the living and the dead or that He will raise the dead on the Last Day. The apostle Paul tells us what would be true if miracles were impossible:

- **“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty”** (1 Corinthians 15:13-14)
- **“If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished”** (1 Corinthians 15:17-18).

Although God usually chooses to work through natural means, this does not mean that the miracles described in the Bible did not really take place. Without supernatural miracles we would not exist and we would have no salvation. No one can understand the Bible correctly if he cannot accept the supernatural.

Questions

1. What is meant by the supernatural as opposed to the natural?
2. What does fulfilled prophecy teach us about God?
3. List ten miracles described in the Bible.
4. During what three periods in history did God accomplish many things through miracles?
5. Why did Jesus do so many miracles?
6. Why did God give Jesus’ apostles the power to do miracles?
7. What parts of the Apostles’ Creed would have to be omitted if miracles are impossible?
8. How would this change to the Apostles’ Creed affect our Christian faith?



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Lesson #8

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Three: The Only Text That Is Determinative Is the Original

The prophets wrote the Old Testament in Hebrew and the apostles wrote the New Testament in Greek. The original copies that they no longer exist. God has chosen to give us His Word through copies of the original texts that many different scribes have copied by hand through the hundreds of years since the original texts were written. Some people argue that since we do not have the original texts, we no longer have the Word of God. But this is not true, for it is written: **“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever”** (Isaiah 40:8).

Our God, who gave us the words of Scripture, is also able to preserve the words of Scripture for us. We can be sure that the Bible we have is truly the Word of God. Jesus did not have the original texts of the Hebrew Bible. He had flawless copies of the original, like we do. So, Jesus quoted Scripture and said: **“The scriptures cannot be broken”** (John 10:35). The apostle Paul also said: **“To them (the Jews) were committed the oracles of God”** (Romans 3:2).

The Jewish scribes were very careful when they made copies of Scripture. They even counted the letters to make sure they copied every one. There are some small variations in the copies we have, but none of these differences change any teaching found in the Bible.

We do not have the autographs (original copies) of the books of the New Testament either. But we have many very old copies, and many copies of copies. We have translations of the original into other languages. In the writings of the church fathers we have many quotations from the Scriptures. With all of this evidence it is quite possible in almost all cases to determine what the original text of Scripture must be. There are no variations that affect the meaning substantially or alter any Bible teachings. David Kuske summarizes: “In the passages of the one percent of the text that require a study of variants, none of the passages are ones which affect any doctrine of Scripture. So no matter which wording in a variant retains the autograph, no doctrine of Scripture is changed or altered in any way” (p. 49).

Most Christians cannot read Hebrew or the Greek. We depend on translations of the Bible into languages that we can understand. Some of the Bible translations are almost as old as the Bible itself, like the Syriac. The work of translating the Bible into modern languages continues even today. The most famous English translation of the Bible was published in 1611 and is known as the King James Version. Since language changes during the course of years, the King James Version is no longer the easiest translation to understand. Confessional Lutherans today usually use one of three English translations: the New King James Version - NKJV (this is what is being used in this Bible study); the New International Version – NIV; or the English Standard Version – ESV.

Other famous translations include the Latin *Vulgate* of the church father Jerome and the translation into the German language made by Martin Luther and his associates at the time of the Reformation.

Translators have a difficult job. They want to follow the original language in meaning as much as possible and, at the same time, write in a way that is easy to understand for the modern reader. It is preferable that translators use the Hebrew and Greek texts as the basis for their translation. When

there is a question as to how something should be translated, it is always best to go back to the original text. That is why we say that the original text is the determinative text, that is, the text that represents the final authority for what God's word says and means. But an accurate translation is also the Word of God.

Questions

1. What has happened to the original texts written by the prophets and apostles?
2. How has God preserved His Word for us living today?
3. Why can we still trust the Bible, even though we see some differences in the copies of the original Greek and Hebrew that we have today?
4. How can we be sure that the meaning of the Bible has never been changed?
5. Why is it so important to translate the Bible into different languages?
6. Why is translation a very difficult task?
7. Which translation of the Bible do you use for your Bible reading?
8. What is the final authority for what the Bible says and means?



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #9

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Four: The Only Valid Literary Criticism Is the External Kind: The Historical Setting

For a clear understanding of what a Bible passage means it is necessary to understand the history behind the passage. Almost the entire Bible is connected to events, people, and places in history. There are many who seem to think that the Bible is simply a collection of random thoughts and they put everything on the same level. But the statements in the Bible fit into a historical sequence from the beginning to the end. The Bible begins with the factual history of God's creation of the world. Creation really happened at a certain time and place. In the same way, the flood actually happened. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob truly lived on this earth at a certain time and place. We understand the Psalms and Proverbs much better if we know something about the life and times of David and Solomon. The writings of the prophets become clearer when we put them into the historical situation supplied by 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The New Testament has its own historical background. Luke, in his Gospel and in the book of Acts, is very careful to place the events he describes in their historical setting. The letters of the apostle Paul were writing during the history presented by the book of Acts. Paul's letters help us understand what is written in Acts and Acts helps us understand Paul's letters. We need to acquaint ourselves with the historical background that Scripture itself supplies. It is information that God Himself supplies about His Word. It is part of the inspired record.

Besides the history provided by Scripture itself, we today have access to much historical information from sources outside of the Bible. When we use these resources, however, we have to be careful that we do not alter or change what the Bible says based on information from outside the Bible. The Bible is God's Word and, therefore, it is infallible and without error. Other historical resources are not infallible. Nevertheless, secular historians and students of archaeology can provide information that helps us understand the customs, expressions, and historical figures mentioned in the Bible. For example, the Bible gives us some information about the various men named Herod who ruled over Palestine during the days of Jesus and His apostles. But the historical records of that time from outside the Bible reveal many more details of the lives of these different men named Herod. This additional information gives us a better picture of the kind of rulers these men were.

When reading the Bible, it is particularly important to pay close attention to who is speaking and whom is being spoken to. In the book of Job, for example, we must carefully distinguish between God's words to the devil and Job, the devil's words to God, Job's words, the words of Job's three friends, and the words of Elihu, the young man who spoke after the three friends had stopped talking. We will not be able to understand the book of Job if we fail to keep in mind the speaker and the person being addressed.

In order to understand correctly Jesus' words recorded in the Gospels, we must consider to whom He is speaking. Is He talking to individuals, His disciples, His enemies, or to the general public? For example, Jesus said this to a rich young ruler: **"Sell whatever you have and give to the poor"** (Mark 9:21). Jesus did not say this to every one of His followers. The spiritual condition of the persons whom Jesus addressed determined whether He would speak Law or Gospel. In this example, Jesus words

were law address only to this rich young ruler who had made an idol out of his wealth. It is highly important that we notice the difference.

Another important thing to remember is that the Old Testament laws were given only to the Israelites. They were not give to us Christians today. They were written for our learning, and we should study them, but we do not need to obey them. God's moral law, however, which is written in man's hearts from the beginning, still applies to us today. This moral law is repeated in the New Testament. For example, every one of the Ten Commandments is repeated in the New Testament except for the Third Commandment: **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work"** (Exodus 20:8-10). The apostle Paul shows us that we no longer need to worship on a certain day in his letter to the Colossians: **"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ"** (Colossians 2:16-17).

The most important background information for understanding the Bible is found in the Bible itself. But it is also helpful to study history, geography, economics, agriculture, politics, social customs, culture, etc. These can help us better understand the Bible. Nevertheless, the Bible, as God's Word, always has the last and final word if there is any disagreement between what the Bible says and what secular sources say. Do not forget that the devil's original question was intended to make Eve doubt God's word: **"Has God indeed said?"** (Genesis 3:1). If what man says contradicts God's word, we should trust what God says rather than man.

Questions

1. What are some of the statements in Genesis 1-11 that show that it is actual factual history, not myth or legend?
2. What can help us better understand the Old Testament prophets?
3. Which Gospel writer pays special attention to the history of what he writes?
4. What can we learn about the rulers named Herod from non-Bible sources?
5. Give an example that show why it is important to know who is speaking in a Bible passage.
6. What is one wrong way to use non-Biblical resources?
7. Why is it important to distinguish between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
8. What makes the Bible different from all other books in the world?
9. Why does the Bible include so many references to time and place?



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #10

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Five: The Only Meaning of the Words Is the Simple, Plain Meaning

The Meaning of Words

The Bible was not written in code or a secret language. The words that the Holy Spirit breathed into the writers of Scripture are meant to be understood in the way that we commonly understand them. In other words, there is not a hidden meaning to the words of Scripture but only their obvious meaning. If we think that what God says to us means something different from what the words obviously say, then we are putting a different meaning into the words than what God intended.

Some Bible students have tried to find hidden meanings in Scripture. This is called allegorizing, that is, understanding words to mean something different from their ordinary meaning. For example, Genesis 24 says that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well. If we wanted to allegorize, we could say that Abraham's servant represents the Christian, Rebekah represents Christ, and the well represents the Word of God. In telling us that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well, what God is really saying to us is that we meet Christ through the Word of God. This may be true, but it certainly is not what the words say in their obvious meaning. The obvious meaning, and the only true meaning, is that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well. In other words, it happened just as the words say, and this is the meaning God wanted to convey to us with these words. There is not deeper, hidden meaning.

Allegorizing is dangerous. Using allegory, one can make the Bible mean just about anything one wants it to mean. But then the Bible cannot be the light that guides our way. The Bible would not be clear and understandable. But the apostle Paul told Timothy: **"From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"** (2Timothy 3:15). Only clear and simple understand of the words are able to make a child wise, therefore Paul says the Bible speaks clearly.

In order to correctly understand the Bible, one must know the correct meaning of the words the Bible uses. In order to determine the meaning of words, it is helpful to compare all the different places that particular word is used in the Bible and in other writings written in the same era as the Bible. Sometimes words change in meaning over time. We should study how the words were used when the Bible was written or when the translation we use was made.

Let us consider the meaning of the Greek word *baptizo* (βαπτίζω). This word is generally translated by the English word "baptize". In the centuries before the writing of the New Testament, the word *baptizo* generally meant "to sink under water". But if we study the use of the word *baptizo* as it is used in the New Testament, we realize that that meaning is not always possible. Consider Mark 7:3-4: **"For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they baptisontai. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the baptismous of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches."** Certainly, the Bible is not saying that the Pharisees put themselves under water every time they came from the market, nor that they put cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches under water. The Bible simply means that they applied the water in some special way. Therefore, those who insist in our day that the only correct method of baptism is

immersion (putting someone under water) say something that the Scriptures do not say. That is not the way the word *baptizo* is used in the New Testament.

There are some words that are used rarely, even only once, in the entire Bible. In such cases we can look how the word was used in other writings outside the Bible from the same period. Serious Bible students should learn how to use language tools such as lexicons and concordances. But we have to be cautious in the use of these resources, because many Bible scholars today do not believe that the Bible is God's Word and they are therefore not as careful as they should be in their studies. Unbelieving Bible students may even deliberately mislead Bible students in order to get them to understand the Bible in a wrong way. For example, today scholars who promote feminism or same-sex marriage may try to make the Bible conform to their ideas, instead of accepting and explaining what the Bible really says.

Questions

1. What is meant by allegorizing or code language?
2. How does the use of allegory make the Bible unclear?
3. Why is it important to learn the meaning of individual Bible words?
4. How does the fact that words change meaning over time affect our Bible study?
5. How would you answer someone who insists that immersion is the only proper method of Baptism?
6. What is a lexicon and how is it to be used?
7. What is a concordance and how is it to be used?
8. Why do we need to be careful in the use of these resources?



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics) Lesson #11

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Five: The Only Meaning of the Words Is the Simple, Plain Meaning

Syntax

Syntax refers to the arrangement of words in a sentence, paragraph, or in a longer passage. Every language has its own syntax. In studying the Bible, it is useful to understand the syntax of the language, such as the parts of speech and how they are used, the various forms of verbs and nouns, and the different types of word order that emphasizes different parts of the sentence or passage.

Sometimes there are two or more ways in which a particular sentence can be understood. Each way would be grammatically correct and not contrary to ordinary usage. For example, there are two ways of understanding Jesus' words in John 5:39. The Greek word for "search" may be imperative (a command) or indicative (stating a fact). The King James Version translators understood the form as an imperative and translated: "**Search the Scriptures.**" But the New King James Version translators understood the form as indicative and translated: "**You search the Scriptures.**" Neither understanding is contrary to what the Bible teaches elsewhere. So, we need to ask the question: Which understanding fits the context best? Which wording fits the point that Jesus is trying to make at this time? It seems that the indicative fits the context better than the imperative, but some may disagree. In cases like this, when neither understanding contradicts clear Bible teaching elsewhere, we do not accuse someone of false teaching if he has a different understanding of the grammar.

It is important to carefully study the context of Bible passages and to try to understand the particular point the author is trying to make. This careful study helps us to correct common misunderstandings and to gain a much better grasp of what God is saying to us. The Bible is a big book and a lifetime of serious study is not sufficient to fully understand all of it. At the same time, the Bible is so simple in what it says that a child can comprehend its plain message.

Genre

Genre refers to the type or style of writing. Some examples of genres found in Scriptures are: history, poetry, prophecy, proverb, doctrine, and apocalyptic. It is important to correctly understand the genre of a passage. For example, many false teachers today claim that Genesis 1-11 is poetry rather than history. They claim it is poetry, which is not to be understood literally, in order to deny creation and the flood so that they can accept the man-made theory of evolution. But this is a big mistake. A careful study of these chapters, as well as a comparison with what the Bible says in other passages, shows that they are history and describe what actually happened.

What genre is the book of Revelation? Some insist that we must understand it as a prophecy of future events that will take place in a literal sense. But it is an example of apocalyptic literature. We should not expect to see Jesus with a double-edged sword coming out of His mouth. He will not appear with seven horns and seven eyes, or coming riding a white horse. These are pictures that illustrate certain characteristics of our Savior. We should not take them literally.

Most of the Old Testament and New Testament passages are historical narratives. They simply tell us what happened at a certain place and at a certain time. This is why there are so many references to time and place in the Bible. The fact that Jesus suffered “under Pontius Pilate” reminds us that what the Bible tells us about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is all factual history. The flood in Genesis, the plagues in Egypt, the battles in the book of Joshua (including the sun standing still for a day) are all events that really happened. It would be wrong for us to call it pious fiction.

In most cases, the Bible itself clearly indicates what genre a certain section is. The way other portions of the Bible refer to a certain section can also help us to know the genre of the section. For example, Jesus Himself referred to creation, the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the repentance of Nineveh, as well as Jonah’s being swallowed up by a fish as events that took place in history. Peter referred to the speaking of Balaam’s donkey as something that actually happened. These references by Jesus and Peter show us that we should understand these accounts as factual history.

Hebrew poetry is marked by parallelism where the same thing is said in two similar ways or one truth is contrasted with the another. In the prophetic writings, poetry is sometimes intermixed with historical narrative and doctrinal preaching. This parallelism can help us distinguish poetry from the other types of writing. In the epistles we often have historical narrative intermixed with doctrine as well.

Questions

1. What are some of the elements involved in syntax?
2. Do you think the context of John 5:39 favors “search” as an imperative or as an indicative?
3. What are some of the different genres in which the Bible has been written?
4. Why is it important to know the genre of a passage?
5. Why is it wrong to claim that Genesis 1-11 is poetry?
6. What mistake is made by many with regard to the book of Revelation?
7. If you have a concordance, list Jesus’ references to creation and the flood.
8. Give an example of parallelism in the Psalms.



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics) Lesson #12

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Five: The Only Meaning of the Words Is the Simple, Plain Meaning

Figurative language

There are two main ways of understanding a Bible passage: literally or figuratively. For example, in Luke 13:31-32 we read that the Pharisees told Jesus: **"Herod wants to kill you."** In reply Jesus said to them: **"Go, tell that fox, 'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow.'"** Jesus called Herod a fox. Should we understand this literally or figuratively? Of course, King Herod was not actually the animal we call a fox, but Jesus called him a fox because he had certain qualities of a fox.

What the Pharisees said to Jesus, however, must be understood literally. Even if Herod did not really want to kill Jesus, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to believe that Herod did want to kill Him so that he would leave their region. But Jesus' statement calling Herod a fox was clearly not to be understood literally. In most cases the context will make it easy for us to determine whether we should understand something literally or figuratively.

As a general rule, we must always start with the literal meaning. If there is no reason to understand the passage figuratively, we should understand it in a literal sense.

The Bible uses figurative language to help make the truth more vivid and memorable. For example, Jesus could have said to His disciples: "Only I can make you live a godly life." But instead, He used figurative language and said: **"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"** (John 15:5).

Psalms 23 pictures the Lord as our Shepherd. There are other passages that speak of believers in Jesus as being His sheep. This picture may not mean very much to someone who has never seen a sheep or been around a shepherd. In the same way, there are some pictures and comparisons in the Bible that we do not easily understand because we are no longer familiar with the customs of those times.

It is important to remember that when the Bible makes a comparison, there is usually only one point of comparison. This is true of the comparisons we make as well. If we say that someone is as tall as a tree, we are only talking about his height. We do not mean that he looks like a tree in appearance. We must be careful not to stretch the comparisons we find in the Bible beyond the one point of the comparison.

Jesus told many parables about earthly things in order to explain spiritual things. It is important that we do not attempt to interpret every detail in a parable, but limit ourselves to the point of comparison that Jesus is making. For example, in Jesus' parable of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13), there is one point of comparison. These virgins were to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom at any time. This shows us that we also are to be ready for the coming of our Lord on the last day. We should not, however, try to find meaning in the fact that five were wise and five were foolish. We cannot say, for example, that this means that half the population on the last day will be watchful and prepared, and the other half will not be ready. This is not the point of the parable. We can be led to many false ideas if we try to interpret every detail. There are a few times, however, when Jesus Himself explains the details of His parables to His disciples. We can trust the interpretation of these details because God Himself has given us the explanation.

To better understand of the Bible, it is helpful to become acquainted with common figures of speech, for example: simile (comparison), metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and personification. The Bible writers use of all of these figures of speech in their writings. Jesus Himself loved to use picture language, so He often taught in parables. There is only one allegory in the Bible. It is clearly labeled as **“symbolic.”** Paul compares the law and the Gospel by using the example of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and their two wives (Galatians 4:21-31).

The Bible also uses type and antitype. A type is a person, item, or event that is a picture of something to come in the future. The fulfillment of the type is called the antitype. For example, the lamb that was killed by the Israelites on the day of the Passover was a type of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Jesus is therefore the antitype. The blood of the Passover lamb that was smeared on the Israelite doors saved them from death. That was a picture of the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, which saves us from sin, death, and the devil. We can be sure that the Passover Lamb was a type of Christ, because the apostle Paul writes: **“Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”** (1 Corinthians 5:7). We stand on safe ground when we teach the types of Christ that are specifically mentioned as such in the Bible, although God may have intended other things to be types of Christ as well, even though they are not specifically mentioned as such.

These are just a few of the important points of language and grammar that are helpful in understanding the Bible. The best way to gain a better understanding of the Bible is to read it and study it diligently and to ask the Holy Spirit to open our understanding. If it is possible for you to become familiar with the Bible languages of Hebrew and Greek, you should make the effort, even though it requires time and persistence and the blessing of God to become skilled in your knowledge. Even more important however, is it that we remain humbly faithful and obedient to everything that the Bible teaches us.

Questions

1. What is the difference between a literal and a figurative understanding of a Bible passage?
2. What is the danger of understanding a literal passage figuratively?
3. What is the danger of understanding a figurative passage literally?
4. Why is it important to find the point of comparison in a parable?
5. What is meant by type and antitype?
6. Try to find examples of simile and metaphor in the Bible.
7. Choose a parable of Jesus and state the point of comparison.
8. Is it possible to become an expert in the Bible languages without being a believer in Jesus? Explain your answer.



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How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #13

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Six: The Only Safe and True Interpreter of Scripture Is Scripture Itself

In the Roman Catholic Church, the ultimate interpreter of Scripture is the Roman Catholic Church under the authority of the pope. The Lord Jesus and His apostles have warned us, however, that it is dangerous and sometimes even fatal to put our confidence in human beings. Jesus said: **“False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”** (Matthew 24:24). The apostle Paul told the pastors of Ephesus: **“From among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”** (Acts 20:30). The apostle Peter wrote: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies”** (2 Peter 2:1). The apostle John said: **“As you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come”** (1 John 2:18).

An antichrist is someone who opposes Christ. Every false teacher is an antichrist. There is, however, one main Antichrist in particular that the apostle Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. This Antichrist is one **“who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God”** (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This is a perfect description of the Roman pope, who claims to be the head of Christ’s Church and the infallible interpreter of Holy Scripture. Instead of submitting to Scripture as the Word of God and to Christ as the head of the Church, he claims to be the rightful head of Christ’s Church on earth. He claims that there is no one who can call into question any decision or interpretation that he makes. That is why the confessional Lutheran Church has declared, as part of its confession, that the papacy is the Antichrist foretold by the Lord and His apostles. We cannot let the pope tell us what the meaning of the Scripture is.

Most Protestant churches claim that the Scripture is their final authority. With regard to certain doctrines, however, it becomes clear that the Bible is not their final authority. Rather it is their own reason that stands in judgment over the Bible and determines what the Bible must mean. For example, most Protestant churches cannot understand how the washing of water in baptism can forgive sins. They therefore teach that baptism does not actually forgive sins but is only a *picture* of the forgiveness of sins. The Bible, however, declares in several places that baptism is **“for the remission of sins”** (Acts 2:38). Since God, in Scripture, is the highest authority, it was right for Martin Luther to teach in his *Small Catechism* that baptism *“works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promises of God declare”* (The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Question 2).

The pope, human reason, or any other earthly consideration cannot serve as the ultimate interpreter of the Bible’s meaning. The ultimate interpreter of the Scripture is God Himself, speaking to us through the words of Scripture. Scripture interprets Scripture. What this means is that unclear passages must be interpreted in order to agree with those passages that are clear on the same subject. We must use the clear passages to help us understand the passages that are less clear.

There is one God and one Holy Spirit. He does not disagree with Himself. If two clear passages seem to contradict one another, we must let them both stand as correct, even if we cannot explain how they

can both be true. God is always right, whether we can figure Him out or not. This is what all teachers in Christ's Church must remember. **"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God"** (1 Peter 4:11). **"He who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully"** (Jeremiah 23:28).

There are Bible teachers today who say that the Old Testament and the New Testament contradict each other. Some claim that Paul disagrees with James, that John disagrees with Peter, or that one of the four Gospels contradicts the other Gospels. Since we believe that the Holy Spirit is the One who gave the words to all the Bible's writers, we cannot accept the point of view that there are contradictions and differences between the various human authors of Scripture. These *apparent* contradictions usually have an easy explanation when we study them more carefully. If we cannot understand or explain some differences, we must let God's Word stand as it is, because God is wiser than we are.

Apparent differences can usually be explained by the fact that the circumstances under which the passages were written are different from one to the other. The way of salvation in the Old Testament is the same as the way of salvation in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament God's people were living under a code of laws that no longer apply to us in the New Testament. These laws no longer apply because Christ and His work fulfilled these laws. The Old Testament was shadow; the New Testament is substance (Colossians 2:16-23).

Sometimes apparent differences can be explained by the difference between the law and the Gospel. One case demands God's condemning law, whereas another case demands the comforting words of the Gospel. When Paul and James talk about justification, they are addressing people with different problems, and so what they write seems to be contradictory. James says: **"A man is justified by works, and not by faith only"** (James 2:24). Paul seems to say the opposite: **"A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ"** (Galatians 2:16). Even Martin Luther was at first troubled by this apparent contradiction. But a careful study of the context in both cases will reveal that they are not saying two opposing things, but the same thing, with a different emphasis in each case.

When we quote individual Bible passages to prove a point, it is important that we know the context of the Bible passage. The devil also likes to quote the Scripture, so we need to be on our guard. By context we mean the setting of the passage in the Bible. We need to read and study the entire chapter or section where it is found, so that we can be sure that we are correctly understanding the point of the individual passage. We should ask:

1. To whom is this Word addressed?
2. What problem is the passage dealing with?
3. Is it a *description* of the way things were being done, or is it *instruction* for us as to how we ought to do thing?

It is easy to quote a Bible passage out of context to try to make it say something we would like it to say rather than what it actually says in its context. As we gain a more complete knowledge of the all Bible we will be less likely to use a Bible passage out of context.

If someone points out to us that we have misunderstood a certain passage of Scripture and have used it incorrectly, we should be humble enough to admit that we could have made a mistake. We should make a more complete study of the passage to determine if we did misunderstand it. We should not stubbornly defend something we have said just because we said it or because we do not want to admit we might be wrong. Even Peter once had to be corrected by Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Jesus often had to correct His disciples when they misunderstood what He was saying. We cannot, however, give in to criticism when a Bible passage is clear about what it teaches and other teachers whom we trust agree that we have the right understanding. We must lovingly hold to the truth of what God's Word says.

The most important thing you can do to become a Bible teacher is to be like Mary of Bethany and sit at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:38-42). Listen to His teaching, not just once or twice, but throughout your life. **"You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen"** (2 Peter 3:17-18).

Questions

1. How do we know that not all teachers who call themselves "Christian" are true teachers of the Bible?
2. How does the papacy show itself to be the Antichrist foretold in the Bible?
3. What causes most Protestants to be led astray in their interpretation of the Bible?
4. Who is the only one who can interpret the Scriptures? How does he do it?
5. How does the Old Testament differ from the New Testament?
6. Why can there not be any actual contradictions in the Bible?
7. What is meant by quoting the Bible out of context?
8. Why is it important to know who the speaker is and to whom he is speaking?
9. How should we respond to someone tries to correct our explanation of a Bible passage?
10. What makes Mary of Bethany such a good example for us to follow?